Children of the Prophecy (English version)

by Kendrix

Summary

My basic plan with this is to take the good old time loop idea... and play it for horror, endless eight style. For once, Shinji is not the culprit - but he's the one who can fix it, leaving us with more or less the same problem. ENGLISH Version, translation of the original German one.

Notes

Hello, everyone, welcome to Kenny's newest fanfic that isn't so new at all… I'm glad that I finally got around to start translating it. Thanks everybody for taking your time to read this, and greetings to everyone who knows me from evageeks, animexx or elsewhere.

English is not my mother tongue, so if you speak German, I'd really recommend that you read the original version. Nonetheless, I'm gonna try my best – if you spot any language mistakes, don't hesitate to tell me.

My basic plan with this is to take the good old time loop idea... and play it for horror, endless eight style. For once, Shinji is not the culprit - but he's the one who can fix it, leaving us with more or less the same problem.

Or, more conceptually: Most of us know timeloop or "alternate outcome/branching timeline" fics, most are fun, catharsis-inducing and give you a chance to do some real interpretation work on the canon events. Also, you sort of have to do this if you want to write in the setting most of the show takes place (which will be your natural instinct after, well, watching the show and seeing that setting get fleshed out) in since it is more or less
completely obliterated by the end. But a downside is that with many (certainly not all, and even then, I don't mean to be bitchy or elitist, again, I mostly enjoy time loops/alternates) of those fics, it either soon becomes apparent that the writer didn't exactly get the ending or has a very cynical interpretation of it and the arguably positive messages it's trying to convey, and/or b), which annoys be significantly more since the apocalypse interpretation can at least be seen as a necessary justification for the time travel: It all turns into one giant Shinji hate fest, one way or another, if they don't flat out replace him with a self-insert, a gary stu, or a vaguely similar-looking Gary Stu that is also a self-insert.

But if you're just complaining, you're part of the problem, right? So what I thought I'd do was(TM), I'll try to write my own timeloop fic/ the sort I'd like to read, try to make it original and see if other people would like to read that sort of fic, too!

That, and to create a long love letter to the entirety of this fascinating frachise that has changed so many lives, including mine.

Warning: This will partially follow the original story, but also Rebuild and later, the ideas of my own sick brain as well. Expect characters from the video games, a few OCs (only in minor roles, though, don't worry), Rebuild spoilers, and all the sort of nasty stuff the original series also has. As for the pairings, well, Shinji's entire harem shows up (I'm not letting a drama source as good as a love dodecahedron slip through my hands), but if you wanna know whom he'll ultimately end up with, you'll have to read this. No all-too disturbing crack pairings or OC pairings, though, so rest assured.

Oh, and another thing: If you think that Shinji, in either classic series or the Rebuild movies, is a) "a whiny gay pussy who should man up" or b) "A selfish, ingrateful toddler who only thinks of his own gratification, no better than his 2D-Disney-villain-father" or c) "A closet misantrope who secretly craves the obliteration of all life on earth from the depths of his heart" (Yes, this exists), this fic probably isn't for you. Don't worry, there are plenty of other fics out there! How about "Shinji and Warhammer 40k" or something like that?

But anyway, I've babbled enough. You guys came for the story, didn't you? So okay, here it is:
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh I am growing tired
Of allowing you to steal
Everything I have
You're making me feel
Like I was born to service you
But I am growing by the hour
You left us far behind
So we all discard our souls
And blaze through your skies
So unafraid to die
'Cause I was born to destroy you
And I am growing by the hour
And getting strong in every way
You led me on

- Muse, 'Hate this and I'll love you'

Prologue: 00: [Da Capo]

The music that could occasionally be heard from that spacious manor no longer surprised anyone;

Every day, if not always at the same time, someone in there would play a western Cello for about half an hour. The manor was large enough, being the property of a man who earned his living as a private teacher for the children of rich parents; The neighbors wouldn't have heard it unless they happened to be in the right corner of their Garden at the right time, and even then, only if they were listening closely enough.

The ones who were most likely to hear it were probably the few old grannies who would sometimes slowly cross the piece of sidewalk next to the during the moment in question, manor aided by their walking frames, although they would rarely think more of it than "Oh, it's the Cello again", assuming they had spent enough time in this small village that appeared to have been randomly thrown between the edgy mountains of Japan to have heard the instrument before; The melodies of the string instrument could have been heard for many years, and if someone had ever bothered to take their time to listen in regular intervals, they would have noticed that the unseen musician had steadily improved.
Of course, nobody actually had the time for such a thing as the sound of classical music that seemed to be randomly coming from a teacher's house. "Perhaps some of these rich kids is getting Cello lessons" a few might think, supposing they had both knowledge of the manor's owner and the capacity of identifying the instrument as such, with the keywords being "a few"; Even in this isolated, insignificant town that had been barely grazed by the night apocalyptic consequences of the second impact, these hectic, uncertain times had left everyone busy with their own worries, barring them of any time to listen to mediocre cello music.

Now and then, someone would ask, a young child, a curious stranger.

"I…I don't know."

"That's where that private teacher lives, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think it is."

"Oh, yes… One of my husband's friends has a friend who knows him. That's got to be that kid…"

"What kid? I didn't know he had any children."

"It's not his. I think he's the son of some filthy rich government official who left the kid in his care."

"Official? I thought he was a scientist…"

"Wasn't he in the military?"

"Why isn't that guy looking after his son himself, anyway? That's quite some neglectful father…"

"But… that boy is bound to have a mother. Why isn't she taking care of him?"

"Because she can't. As far as I know, she's been dead for quite a while now."

"She died? How come?"

"I don't really know, but…"

"What?"

"There is… something like a crazy rumor. As the story goes, this so-called father used his own wife as a guinea pig."

"What? He murdered his wife and then abandoned his own child, on top of that? What a goddamn bastard!"

Sure enough, the populace hardly saw anything of that official-slash-scientist-slash-bastard's son, save for the cello music. His guardian, being a private teacher, tutored him at home, which was probably what he was paid for in the first place.

Even if the residents had spotted him when he went to buy groceries or something like that, there was nothing to him that would make the eyes of the busy, hurried crowd cling to him or betray him as the mysterious cellist from the neighborhood.

He was a nondescript boy who walked around in simple, loose-fitting trousers and even simpler T-shirts, sometimes white, sometimes blue, nothing that stood out in particular. He wasn't exactly an especially impressive individual, not too tall, not too short, not fat, but not muscular either, with
plain vanilla dark brown hair worn in a plain vanilla haircut.

The only thing about him that might have merited a glance were his eyes.

They presented themselves to the world in a deep, pure blue that was usually found in foreigners alone, the color the oceans had before second impact, when they still contained life of which we knew less than about the depths of outer space; blue like the skies, like that which was separated from all things earthly and material.

Nevertheless, no one ever noticed these eyes of his, for that would have required for the observer to take a closer look at his face, and as stated before, there wasn't much to him that could have served as motivation to do that.

Everyone was busy talking about the ongoing restoration of the oceans, the irresponsible spending of tax money, these strange serial murders in the new capital of Tokyo-3, while no one knew why it was supposed to become the capital at all since they already had Tokyo-2, or why ridiculous sums were spent to build fortifications over there, so no one even took notice of one mostly inconspicuous boy when he went to buy something, showed himself at public events (which he only did because his teacher told him) or just went to get the mail.

Getting the mail… that was exactly what he had been supposed to do on that fateful day. To get the mail and put it on the table so his teacher could read it later. It was his teacher who read the mail – all of it.

No one ever wrote the boy any letters, neither that scientist-father of his nor anyone else. How was anyone supposed to write to him, anyway, there was hardly anyone who even knew that he was here.

No one had ever written him a letter.

Until now.

Until the day when this, along with an infinite number of other things, changed forever… on the day where his life took a 180-degree turn.

The day on which he opened the mailbox and read a word that some part of him had always waited for, even when his mind had long since understood that it was futile.

This was the day where he found, addressed at none other than himself, the single word

"Come"

Chapter End Notes

(1) Hi, welcome to the annotations! Here, I will supply you with multiple trivia over the course of the story. I'm happy if anyone reads this garbage at all, but remember that reviews are gestures of LOVE and always very motivating

(2) "Da Capo" is an instruction found on music sheets which means repeating the song from the beginning. Some times people use it as a compliment/cheer after watching a play in a theater - It's like saying the play is so good that they'd like to see it all over again.
(3) The Evangelion franchise is owned by Khara/Gainax, and I'm not earning a single Euro with this.

(4) The next, or more accurately, the first proper chapter will be called 01: [Cracks in a Wall] Don't worry, stuff will be significantly longer than this from now on.
Act I: Exposition: [You are (not) alone] 01: [Cracks In A Wall]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Down on your knees, you'll be left behind
This is the beginning
Watch what you think, they can read your mind
This is the beginning
I got my mark, see it in my eyes
This is the beginning
Well, my reflection I don't recognize
This is the beginning

We think we've climbed so high,
On all the backs we've condemned
We fave our consequence,
This is the beginning of the end

You wait your time, you'll be last in line
This is the beginning
Get out of the way, 'cause I'm getting mine
This is the beginning
God helps the ones that can help themselves
It may be too late as far as I can tell

We think we've come so far,
On all the lies we depend
We've seen our consequence
This is the beginning of the end

-Nine inch Nails, 'The Beginning of the end'.

It all started with a crack in a pane of glass.

An inconsiderable, small line that couldn't have been noticed unless you spent a while glancing into the glass at just the right angle. The dim, red light of this place did not help either, much like glass panel's dimensions. Any person who might have entered the not exactly small hall was far more likely to direct their attention at the many strange contraptions, laboratory tables and glass tubes that filled the room to bother inspecting the glass panel that formed it northern wall for cracks.

But just that it was hard to notice did not mean that the crack wasn't there; quite the opposite, there was more and more of it, since it offered the pressure of the yellowishly-reddish-orange liquid behind it a working point, thus growing steadily; It spread, slowly but continuously, like a bud opening itself. At first, one would have had to look away and come back after a while to as much as notice a change, but it didn't stop, and it kept happening faster and faster with every new crack and every time they branched and connected, until their expansion reached the point where it could have been heard if anyone had been present in this place at that time; there was a progression crescendo of creaking and clangor as the glass inexorably cracked and burst.
No one was present to hear the noise, not to speak of counteracting its source; And yet, there were two small, pale hands ready to press themselves against the snowflake- or spider-web-like epicenter of the cracks to make the wall of glass shatter for good.

"Protein walls four to seventeen, clear."

"One to three are clear as well."

"Initializing MAGI self-diagnosis-subroutines in five, four, three, two…"

As one could effortlessly tell by the voices of the personnel and the typing noises produced by their owners, the main complex of the Central Dogma was brimming with buzzing activity; Strings of Numbers hurried across the large screen that had claimed almost an entire wall of the huge hall as its territory, and the various, multi-layered holographic images that appeared to be floating in front of it also appeared to be in plenty of motion; The bulk of the 'action', however, took place on the various platforms above and around the hardware of the supercomputers which ultimately administrated all of this enormous city.

Neo-Tokyo 3 – A monument of many things, first and foremost for humanity, be it for its fear, its progress or its allegedly indomitable will to live.

The proud heart piece of this bastion of technology, this steel-plated fortress, was the MAGI-System, an array of three biological supercomputers – the first, if no longer the only ones of their kind.

And atop the physical components of these machines, sat several platforms where, more or less ordered by rank by the altitude of their workplaces, the various employees of NERV could be found in their mostly beige-colored, tight-fitting uniforms, eagerly maltreating their keyboards, going about their work and, now and then, holding small conversations.

Now, a routine system check-up like this didn't demand for the presence of the Commander or even the department heads; The highest platform that was still occupied was the workspace of the three technicians Shigeru Aoba, Makoto Hyuuga and Maya Ibuki.

The latter, a young woman with a short haircut, had apparently just finished with something and was now leaning back a little in her chair, apparently somewhat exhausted.

"MAGI-Selfdiagnosis-checkup completed. No anomalies detected. All systems seem to be functioning perfectly fine."

"Good." Commented Aoba, a tall, long-haired man. "But don't forget that all defense-related systems must be checked twice."

"Checking, checking, checking…” repeated Hyuuga, a bespectacled male with large, dark eyes, as he initialized a level-two-diagnosis of the afore-mentioned parts by hitting a few buttons on his console. "Everything's gotta be checked double and triple, it's like that's all we ever do nowadays… Before the accident, we'd at least get to analyze some test data from unit zero from time to time, but now…”

With a sigh, Hyuuga turned back to his diagnosis program.

"Oh, please, don't even remind the accident…” asked Ibuki, seemingly feeling a little disturbed at the mere thought. "I still can't believe what happened there… The laboratory in question is still completely in ruins, our only pilot is still in intensive care, and the Commander is still wearing
those thick bandages on his hands…"

"Well, at least some of us have something to do now… we've spent the last few months doing little but testing the equipment, and even the EVAs aren't doing much more than catching dust…” replied Hyuuga. "I wonder how much longer we'll have to wait for an actual deployment…"

"In your place, I'd be careful with my wishes, since they might come true pretty soon…" Aoba stated.

"How come…?" inquired Ibuki, sounding mildly uneasy.

"Well, they seem to have sent the head of the tactical operations department here after she had been stationed in Germany for years… As far as I know, she will be arriving tomorrow. Her Name is Katsuragi Misato."

"Katsuragi, hm…” Maya mused. "I think I've heard Dr. Akagi mention that name before…"

"Oh, so the two know each other?"

"Yes, I do. She's an old friend from my college Days."

Ibuki, much like Hyuuga, who hadn't expected such an answer to his question, quickly turned around as she heard her superior's voice behind herself, while Aoba also turned his head towards the thirty-year-old woman who had just stepped onto the platform.

If one had to describe Dr. Akagi's looks with a single word, it would have been "professional", especially when she appeared in her white lab coat with a notepad in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other like she did now.

Her hair was light blond and ended just above her shoulders, but her eyebrows revealed that this was not its natural color. Furthermore, she was wearing a black, tubular miniskirt and a light-blue top made from some glossy material closed with a zipper that was adorned with a large, ring-like ornament to make it easier to open. A single birthmark sat under one of her green eyes, emblazoning it.

"Good afternoon." She greeted, taking a sip out of her NERV-logo-enhanced cup. "How is it going…?"

"We just finished the level-two diagnosis." Reported Maya.

"Very Well. Let me see." After Maya had moved both herself and her chair aside, Dr. Akagi bent forward to enter a few short function commands into her console and leave the space free again after pressing the enter-button.

"So far, everything seems to be as it should. Continue with level three."

Just as the head of the technical department was about to take her leave to devote herself to some of the other numerous part of her broad spectrum of work, when she perceived a beeping noise from one of the consoles – it was the internal phone line.

As Hyuuga immediately picked up the phone, Dr. Akagi narrowed her eyes – There weren't any more messages to be expected today, at least none that would be relayed here, but apparently, something was happening, since her underling gave off a quite startled impression.

"Dr. Akagi…” he began after he had hung up the phone.
"There was an error prompt…"

"During the MAGI's checks?"

"No, it's coming from… Terminal Dogma, block four, section C…"

For Hyuuga, that was nothing more than the designation of a place beyond his security clearance; He had never been down there, but since he, like everybody in this institution, knew of Lillith and the self-destruction system, it wasn't a far leap to assume that whatever was down there had to be somehow important, thus explaining his visible perturbation;

Dr. Akagi, on the other hand, knew exactly what was down there… and why it technically shouldn't be possible to get an error prompt from there. As for the objects that were kept in that laboratory, she could only say that she despised them. But that's all that room was: The place where some of them were kept. From time to time, she would experiment on one of these things or cut them apart, but most of the time, the majority of them did nothing but float through a huge tank.

Even if there were a multitude of utile uses planned for them in the future, right now, only one of these things served any sort of function, and that particular exemplar wasn't even down there.

Dr. Akagi couldn't imagine what sort of error might have occurred with these things, as they were, as mentioned before, merely being stored.

So, whatever was happening there was worrying her all the more… because she didn't have the faintest idea of what it could be.

"Maya, could you and the others please proceed without me?"

After receiving a few uncertain nods from her co-workers, the leader of project E immediately put herself into motion, emptied her cup in a single gulp, deposited it on a console and promptly departed. As little as she liked it, those things, weren't exactly unimportant for the commander's plans – much like herself, as she mentally added with a bitter smile which she only allowed herself when her colleagues could only have seen it if they had been capable of gazing through the back of her skull.

Hurriedly, she paced through the corridors of the NERV-Headquarters, on her way to the Elevator that should lead her to her destination.

On one of the lower levels, she left it in favor of a dimly lit, darkly-lined hallway; Next, she'd have to follow it to another, special elevator for authorized personnel only which could only be made to move with her security card, her fingerprints, her iris- and voice scan, or alternatively, with those of a similarity high-ranked NERV-employee.

But she didn't even come that far.

Just after she had left several of these dark corridors behind her and finally closed in on her destination, she was made to witness a noise which she could only describe as a spine-chilling scream.

Even with NERV being a military organization with its Lieutenants, Captains and Commanders, the scientist had never thought that she would ever actually pull the gun which she had only ever carried because the directives had demanded it out of her lab coat's pocket, not to speak of taking its safety off.

But she still did it – Fortunately, as she should later conclude after stepping onto the scene that
awaited her beyond the corridor's next curve.

It was a sight capable of freezing even the hardy scientist into a pillar of salt: It almost bore a resemblance to some grotesque work of art, with all the red spots, sprinkles and splatters in the corners and edges of the hallway and the large, irregularly-shaped stains on the floor.

And the stench… the stink, the smell of Blood. She ought to be used to it after working with LCL for so many years, but in combination with the images that could be perceived within the cone of light flowing from the wide open elevator's doors, it did not fail to take its effect for once in a very long time.

On the floor, there was a man in a NERV-Uniform… without any head.

A co-worker of his could be found next to the left wall from the hips downwards, and from there upwards, next to the right wall, his midsection having been severed as smoothly as with a guillotine.

The fellow in the elevator had been completely reduced to bits and pieces, with part of his leg lying in the doorframe, thus keeping the elevator's doors from shutting.

And as if all of this hadn't been enough, there was a shivering, dark-haired NERV-employee cowering next to the right wall, aghast, staring at her superior.

"Why did you have to come here… Run, oh my god, RUN!"

Without waiting for the fake blonde's reaction, the thoroughly terrified young woman used her own gun to fire multiple bullets at something beyond the light cone from the open elevator doors – She never hit anything. It wasn't that she hadn't aimed well enough, oh no, nothing that simple: The bullets appeared to have… ricocheted? And what was with that flash of light?

When the young woman ultimately lost her nerves and, still firing, charged the mysterious something in the corner, Dr. Akagi was instantly able to tell what it was.

That pattern of concentric octagons, like an almost invisible Wall in the air…

An… AT-Field? There was something with an AT-Field in this room…?

An… Angel? In here?

The young woman kept shooting and shooting, but before Dr. Akagi got any chance to say anything to make her retreat, the arms of the dark-haired employee were already lying at her feet along with her pistol, leaving her with two madly-bleeding stumps and severed arteries, which apparently hadn't been enough; The woman's wild screaming was only ended by her decapitation, after which her body simply sunk to the ground, expanding the "panorama" with yet another pool of blood.

There had been that… light again, the AT-Field… An AT-Field… used as offensive weapon, like an ultimate knife… The being probably activated it in such a manner that it would materialize where it wanted to cut, completely severing what lie on its inside from its outside, thus cutting through anything on that edge…

Fascinating…

Akagi felt nausea rising within herself. Some part of her usually dominant logical mind that still happened to be functioning urged her to turn around and run for her life, but her knees were as warm butter and her feet were glued to the ground, held in place by utmost horror, but also by a
certain curiosity, for whatever caused this massacre was now showing itself.

At first, something like a … child's foot stepped from the darkness, then, the entire thing.

The head of the technical department swallowed hard.

This… this was impossible. That which she was seeing right now simply could not be.

Without intricate preparation, these things weren't even stable enough to withstand contact with air without immediately beginning to disintegrate – so far, humanity had yet to become nature's equal in the discipline of keeping meat fresh.

This thing couldn't… be here, it absolutely shouldn't be in any condition to project an AT-Field, much less to use it intelligently…

It shouldn't even be able to move, not to speak of …escaping in any way.

It… it wasn't supposed to have a soul, dammit!

And yet, there it stood. An yet incomplete exemplar, whose outer form resembled a nine- to ten-year-old human female, with the head of a NERV-Employee in its hand, and a thin, inhuman smile on its lips. And it was directly looking at her.

Still in the process of realizing that the entity had been fixating her, she immediately turned around and ran for her life at a numbing speed that she wouldn't have thought herself capable of.

Somehow, she managed to pull herself past the next curve without dying, immediately smashing a panel of glass that was integrated into the wall with a yellow-black frame around it, pushing the red button beneath far down.

In front of her eyes, an emergency hatch closed, sealing the corridor she had come from.

The scientist immediately let her gun sink into her lab coat's pocket to pull out her cellphone instead.

"Akagi here. Locate my mobile and send me section 2 ASAP… And put me through to the commander's office…"

Chapter End Notes

(1) I'm partially following after Rebuild here, where Misato and most the NERV-staff know about Lillith and a related self-destruct-mechanism. I'm doing it this way because I'd like to use certain scenes.

(2) Of course, everything will be explained in due time, but as in the series, you'll have to wait until the later parts…

(3) Look forward to the next chapter: 02: [The Thing That Should Not Be]
"How is that even possible?"

"I don't know either, subcommander. That is precisely what I am trying to find out."

"Then do it fast." Ikari's deep voice ultimately interjected. "...It needs to be terminated at any cost. Once you are finished with that, I expect that you immediately dissect it and inspect the rest."

"Understood, Sir."

"And don't let any Information seep through. We will present the incident as the work of well-prepared terrorists."

The Silhouettes of the two men, along with that of the desk in their vicinity, were all that could be seen in the vast room that was mostly formed by large glass walls.

Roof and floor were covered in complicated patterns.

"Ikari..." began the elder of the two men who was standing next to his sitting colleague.

"How on earth does this fit into our scenario? This incident is too close... too close to the time of the prophecy..."

When the emergency hatch opened again – an Interface panel that was half torn out of the wall explained why – the child found itself confronted with an entire corridor full of armed men.

A few were surprised at the appearance of their targets, perhaps recognized familiar features in its face or wondered why they were facing a child, but as soon as the first of them began shooting, the rest of them followed suit.

There was something about the being's expression that seemed... off, not... quite right, that awakened the desire to shoot it into Swiss cheese.

The only things that actually got filled with holes, however, were the walls and the floor, perhaps even the ceiling; The thing succeeded in repelling all projectiles with its AT-Field.

It didn't twitch, it didn't budge, it failed to show the smallest sign of being scared by the gunfire, it just stood there and stared, without even blinking.

"Go on, Fire! Fire!"

"We... We don't have any ammunition left, chief..."

That was the moment in which the being resumed walking. It simply strode through the corridor, without even acknowledging the men's desperate tries to safe themselves by throwing their pistol or similar reckless moves.

They burst around it like balloons, leaving only smithereens in this world.
In a similar manner to the emergency hatch, elevator doors opened for it, the doors of an elevator which it had defaced with the blood of two ordinary NERV-employees. They shot and shot, but in the end, none of them remained.

A couple which seemed to have heard the evacuation order for this section too late stumbled across the corner.

The entity's leer widened.

"All personnel is being advised to stay in their respective workplaces and evacuate the public areas as fast as possible. In addition to that, the following sections are no longer to be entered:

"I-I told you! Something has to have happened… " Ibuki anxiously told her co-workers while looking at the ceiling as if she wanted to stare at the announcements that could be heard above their heads.

"No, that's no good. We'll only end up wasting ammunition and personnel. The readings show that the AT-Field isn't active at all times. So, the thing only projects it when it consciously wants that. Try shooting it from behind or from the side while it's distracted."

Dr. Akagi, who had sought out a quiet spot for herself and her laptop, was phoning the security men from some dark corner of the HQ. "And I'd recommend that you neither miss nor let you be spotted. That's not the sort of enemy that will leave you any second chances."

She typed something while she listened to the person at the other end of the line.

"No. I'd prefer it if you sent me the Data from the surveillance systems. What is that thing doing?"

When the picture on her screen showed her the way which the being had taken so far, Dr. Akagi was perplexed.

The thing… didn't seem to be heading downwards.

"Of course. After all, it was down in Terminal Dogma to begin with. If it had displayed the behavioral patterns of an angel, all of us would no longer…"

She couldn't believe it.

"But what's it doing? It… It's moving upwards. But that way it's taking… those sections it's crossing… It's almost like it wants to…"

And then, the door opened, and it stood directly before Fuyutsuki, marking the floor of the sheer endless-seeming office with its naked, blood-smeared feet, undeviatedly headed towards the two men.

The naked, immature body wouldn't have amounted to more than a pale, flesh-colored streak if observed from afar, if not for the still wet hair clinging to its face, covering its head like a helmet.

The scent of LCL was deeply inwrought into its substance, intensified by the fresh splatters of blood.

Red sprinkles on white flesh – and the head of an unfortunate security staff member, whose eyes were still opened to their widest even though there was nothing but the whites to be seen in them,
gripped at the hair by the entity's delicate-looking hands.

The tiny feet's improbably sure firm steps created a low, splatting noise, courtesy of the liquid sticking to them;

Technically, it ought to be unable to walk, regardless of its ability to acquire a mind or lack thereof; when they had activated the last clone, they had to pump it full with a multitude of chemicals to make the untouched muscles usable, and even that would have been impossible if they hadn't stored the clones in a basin with the very source of life as their preservative agent; Under normal circumstances, unused muscles tended to deteriorate and regress to an absolute minimum.

But there it stood.

Not just standing, but walking towards them.

The thing that should not be.

Fuyutsuki instinctively backed off;

Unlike Ikari.

The commander just stood there, without the slightest change in his expression.

He displayed neither fear nor disgust, not for the blood, and neither for the severed head; After he had managed to get used to staring into an entire tank filled with such perversions on regular basis without feeling nausea, there was nothing left that could possibly unsettle him, not even the thought of having sold his own body to two certain ladies in exchange for their loyalty.

In the first place, it hadn't been the nature or the state of these objects that had initially affected him, but the fact that he had personally wrapped each and every of their skulls in his wife's face.

But he'd managed it. He'd managed to reply that Yui would have understood, every single time his subordinate had stated that she would have been horrified.

She would have done the same for him. She, too, would have endured the sight of these clones, sold her body, burned the earth and torn the sky asunder.

She would have done the same for him. Of that, he was completely certain.

He just knew that she would have done the same for him.

Oh god, he hoped that she would have done the same for him.

Despite his subordinate's worried glances, Ikari stood in his place without batting an eyelash, and stared at the Perversion.

And the Perversion lifted the head it had left almost neglectfully lowered until now, and stared right back with its crimson eyes, twisting the corners of its mouth into some mutation of a smirk.

So, it actually seemed to possess intelligence, just as Dr. Akagi had said earlier.

"What do you want?"

Ikari's deep, coarse voice echoed through the room.

He was already well aware of the danger posed by the entity, but if it was actually intelligent,
attempting to communicate with it might delay it long enough for the security to arrive; At very least, it might increase his chances of finding a suitable opportunity to shoot it stone dead.

And as a matter of fact, he succeeded: It did not kill him.

It answered, it communicated, defying the multitude of reasons why it should be far from being capable of such; not before receiving sufficient "programming" beforehand. Where on earth could it have gotten any concept of human communication, much less knowledge of their language?

Still, as impossible as it was, it spoke.

The thing that should not be spoke words that should not be:

{{I want you.}}

No matter how inconceivable it seemed that the thing was talking at all, or what it was talking about, the single most astonishing thing was how it talked.

It wasn't the first being to have stolen the gentle, ethereal voice of Ikari's wife, but each of its words seemed to be steeped in reverberance.

Not immediately, but relatively fast, he realized why.

He heard the words that were coming from its mouth… but he could also hear it inside of his head, as some sort of resonance beyond the deepest layers of his self, where there hadn't been anything left but rot in a very long time now, as if it was something he knew very, very well, and also something that knew him very well.

It was as if it could touch his innermost without having to penetrate his skin… a bad premonition scurried through his mind.

Could it be…?

The child made one more step forwards.

Their eyes met.

{{We meet at last… Man from beyond the glass…}}

Ikari could hear his subordinate breathe a silent "…What on earth…". This degree of consciousness was indeed worrying, especially with the thing possessing memories of events that had transpired before it had acquired this sudden intelligence.

Was this the result of a longer process?

Would… others follow? Given what he had intended to do with these things, the existence of this being had the potential to blow a torpedo through all of his plans, if not cost him his position…

So shortly before the promised time, before his only chance to see her again… He would not.

He would not allow this.

Ikari's hand was firmly gripping the fireacrm in his jacket's pocket.

{{I have come to show you my gratitude. Thank you.}}
Before Ikari had any chance to make sense of these words, the silence inside the office ripped to shreds by a deafening sound while its origin blew part of the glass wall behind him, but first and foremost the escaped test subject's head to the tiniest of smithereens, generously spraying Ikari with blood since he hadn't even put his arms up to cover his face.

He wasted no time with things such as staring into the air in shock, instead sending a scrutinizing glance between the blood splatters on his glasses, all the way down to the being.

It was only when he had made sure that it had stopped moving and had a steadily spreading blood stain beneath its crushed skull, that he turned in the direction from which the shot had come.

The one standing in front of him was none other than Dr. Akagi, atypically equipped with a large gun which she carried with the aid of a large strap that she wore on top of her lab coat – She'd been farsighted enough to use heavy, armor-piercing projectiles to make sure to eradicate the enemy on her first try.

"Looks like I saved your life." She stated, almost a little amused, before she quickly puller her phone from her pocket and flipped it open, again completely serious.

"It's me. Disruptive factor eliminated. Handle the "cleanup" as I detailed earlier. And send me a code blue quarantine vessel to the commander's office." 

After she had closed her communication device again, a few instants of silence followed, in which everyone involved stepped closer to the small body on the floor to inspect it closer.

In the end, Fuyutsuki was the first to ask the big question: "What do you think …was the cause?"

"That's what I hope to find out by analyzing the body…"

"Then, I want those tests carried out without delay." Ikari ordered. "But at first, I want you to check all remaining clones for anomalies and terminate all recently created specimens. That is going to cost us some time, but it is better than risking another incident like this one."

"Understood." The woman confirmed. "Does the order to check all remaining clones extend to the currently active one?"

Ikari didn't get to reply to that question. Something else captured his attention.

At first, there was only a minute twitching that might have been lost to a less alert person, but at very least when the hair sprang forth, everyone present had clearly understood that the being at their feet wasn't as dead as they'd like it to be.

Of all sudden, the entity's hair seemed to have hit a sudden growth spurt; New, wet, light blue hair presented itself to the light.

And that wasn't to be the last transformation.

It goes without saying that Ikari immediately pulled his gun and fired, but this time, the being was prepared and effortlessly deflected the bullet with its AT-Field.

Watching the octagonal patterns fade again, none of the tree people in this room could stop the entity from rising again.

But it wasn't just standing up, it changed as it did so.
The entire body appeared to be soft like half-molten butter, as if the arms could elongate themselves just by hanging down against gravity, as if the legs could first shrink and then stretch just because they moved from a crouched into a standing position.

Whatever was in this body appeared to be capable of shaping it to suit its wishes.

And not only that: The flesh on its chest and head appeared to be flowing as fell, smoothening and filling up its wounds, reforming the eye which the blond scientist's shot had blown away, using it to stare at them before the eyeball had been framed by flesh and made to share a center of focus with the other one.

When the being stood upright, it was fully regenerated and had taken the form of a seven- or eighteen year old young woman with long, blue hair.

One could still see trances of the original pageboy haircut, like the bangs hanging into the forehead or the strands adorning the cheeks, with those continuing much further downwards now.

The thing did not leave the scientists any chance to hold it back in any way, but immediately charged the hole which Dr. Akagi had created in the glass walls earlier.

The following analysis yielded absolutely no results.

None at all.

Calling their states normal wouldn't have been right, but no test results beyond the expected parameters could be found, neither in the First Child, whose bodily functions had been under meticulous surveillance, as well as constantly being recorded in the NERV hospital's intensive care section, nor in any other of the clones. Absolutely nothing had changed.

What hadn't been found either, however, was the escaped subject's corpse.

After the events that had transpired the possibility of the being having survived falling out of the window and rolling off a majority of the pyramid was a very real danger, even if the following lack of cut-up corpses seemed to disprove it.

Dr. Akagi's opinion on the matter was that it must have disintegrated before it could be found.

Since the total damage amounted to a broken glass tube and, what was much less of a problem at NERV than it would have been everywhere else, the lives of 23 employees, and none of the many components needed for the even greater multitude of plans, the commander and his deputy decided to just carry on with the scenario, and since the time of the prophecy hadn't come yet, they had little problems at selling their terrorist-attack cover-up story to their superiors – soon, everything seemed to be going its usual way.

It was only much later that those involved would learn what sort of shadow had just fallen on this world…

"Then you have…already sent for him, Ikari?"

"Yes. Captain Katsuragi is going to pick him up."

"I suppose that means…"
"Yes, Fuyutsuki, it won't be long now… It's time."

"Whaaat?" the German girl in the yellow dress complained, placing her hands onto her hips.

"Why did it have to happen in Japan of all places? That's like, on the other side of the world! You're not being serious, are you, Kaji-san?"

"Unfortunately, I am." The unshaven young man answered, his slight grin suggesting that he was somewhat better informed than his young companion. "Looks like it's time."

"Well, if that's the case, then I fear that our chances of survival are really, really slim, with the only properly trained pilot on this planet being stuck over here while some clueless amateurs are being sent out in unreliable prototypes!"

"It it ti-ime, it is ti-ime…"

The surprisingly blithe twin-tailed, glasses-wearing girl's strange sing-song blended into the wild mix of English and Russian words, flowing from the silent corner she was standing in.

"Yes, I know, Mr. Lorenz. "stated the broadly smiling boy with his seemingly perpetually joy-drenched tenor. "It's time, isn't it? Somehow, the thought of returning to that place feels strange to me now…"

He leant out of the window to savor the cool, nocturne air, before directing his gaze at the moon.

The silver orb's light fell over the completely flat heathlands of northern Germany that seemed to go on forever beyond the large mansion which had been built with the rusty-red bricks typical for this region.

Although, it probably didn't quite go on that far; The salty scent which the wind would occasionally blow over her betrayed that the Baltic sea wasn't all too far.

As a semi-enclosed body of water high on the northern hemisphere and thus far away from Antarctica, the contamination it had suffered compared to most others was relatively mild, tough it had still taken the massive filtration sites which had been erected somewhere between Denmark and Scandinavia (aided by many smaller institutions on the coasts of all adjacent countries) until the present day to return a fair part of it to its original blue color, at least close to the coasts. The water still didn't provide any suitable habitat for much more than plankton, microorganisms and very few particularly tough mussels and jellyfish; For the fish, some of which were still being preserved in special aquaria, ever to return, was still going to take quite a while.

"I think I am going to miss it…" the boy commented.

"I mean… the fragrance of the seashore."

Chapter End Notes

(1) This will be continued in the next chapter 03: [Angel attack], where we shall finally meet (or well, rejoin) our charming protagonist! From now on, the chapters
will, save for a few exceptions, be considerably larger, so I ask for your patience. University tends to keep me quite busy. Also, before I can translate this, I need to actually write it and the ppl on the German site I originally published this on are also waiting for the next chapter...
One Day, you see a strange little girl look at you

One Day, you see a strange little girl feeling blue

Tori Amos, 'Strange Little Girl'

Normally, one would picture a city as the domain of brisk activity.

People created noise, and accordingly, where many people lived, corresponding quantities of noise were to be expected.

But not in this city.

There were no people left living here at all.

The tall buildings that had once stood upright piercing the sky now lay aslope and half-sunken within the deep-red waters; there wasn't a single window that hadn't been shattered.

The ruins, as well as parts of the ground, whenever a sufficiently low tide allowed them to be seen, were thoroughly covered in the red goop that had invariably replaced the once deeply blue ocean.

Everything was smeared with it, resembling the inside of a bloody wound, a comparison which could be unscrupulously extended to the pungent stench of that literal dead sea.

Since the garish-red, opaque surface didn't offer as much as a proper place to stand, the last time some lost soul had strayed far enough from their path to wind up in this desolate wasteland had been years ago.

Once, this had been the blooming capital city of Old Tokyo, the most populous city in the world, and now, it was completely deserted.

There was a certain depressing quality to it. Sure, an empty city was always a depressing sight, but one that also tended to convey a sense of danger. It was deathly silent, as if not even sound waves dared to go there… And yet there was a silent, naked figure with long, odd-colored hair standing on some half-destroyed building's rooftop, watching as something set the red water into motion.

Something huge.

Solid, bright red as a firefighter's car, the surface's lack of transparency didn't allow for as much as a blurry outline to be seen, but whatever it was, it existed, and its movements left a wake trailing it.

It proceeded like a juggernaut, on and on, unrelenting, sliding between the remains of the sunken city.

The being's trail formed one perfect, straight line, not once was it forced to turn to evade an obstacle, simply moving just past everything, sending its call into the world.

Of course, those calls were not to be compared with human communication – that was something
this existence had no need of. Nor did it use such a simple carrier as noise, neither did it transfer words, information or any sort of knowledge.

The fourth messenger's voice was much closer to a domineering, overwhelming presence, resembling the low yet loud ringing of a bronze bell, a vibration, infecting the air, inviting resonance.

Closing on the shore as a pioneer tentatively treading on new land would have done, it presented the beings beyond it with the riddle of determining whether "Life form" would have been an appropriate appellation for the being that traveling through the depths, for it existed in a very different manner than any of the creatures beyond the water's surface.

It was as foreign to this world as this world was foreign to itself – It was a remnant of a world that could have been, that should have been, if only it hadn't been forestalled by the advent of this world.

Left on its own, it strived to come and get the land that had been promised unto it.

Then again, it wasn't all alone – The being on the rooftop could perceive the messenger's calls, even reach into its plane of existence, but it chose not to make itself known to the diving giant.

Its soul was hardly any different from those of the beings that had robbed it of its birthright, but unlike them, its soul's dominion wasn't limited to one simple, brittle form, as little as a creature with wings was bound to the ground beneath its feet.

It had cast off that form a long, long time ago.

So it came that the patterns of the walls that encompassed all of that could be summarized as "Sachiel, Angel of Water" reflected but one single proclamation, needing but one heavy, lithic word to express what the dwellers of the city would have needed six for:

…..I AM COMING…..TO GET YOU…

On the shore, where both the steady burbling of the waves and the unnerving, ever-present chirping of the cicadas announced the starting point of a very different world, the UN's tanks formed an orderly line, long since ready to fight, waiting for the unidentified high-energy object which had recently been spotted by satellite to reveal itself at last.

Alone the fact that both sides were under the assumption that they would be fighting simple monsters was enough to show how little the nearing battle would have to do with virtues, ideals, honor, or even 'right' and 'wrong': It was a fight for stark survival, governed by the animalistic, egotistic drive towards self-preservation that was inherent in all forms of life.

Intelligent beings possessed the freedom to defy it, but whenever the choice was "a stranger's life or my own" most would find themselves lacking in noble motivations to keep their minds from placing itself in the service of their lower impulses.

Because there was no other function left to it.

Because there was no peaceful solution to be found, no practicable coexistence to be attained.

One would be mistaken to think that the territory of silence had its borders next to those of the abandoned city – If the announcement reverberating from a multitude of speakers at every major concentration of intact buildings was to be believed, the entire region was in a state of emergency,
and thus in the process of being evacuated.

The announcement and the wind were about the only things out here that seemed to be making any sort of sound. The only things in the entire metropolis.

No one was driving cars, no one was playing music, and no one was indulging in a multitude of mostly trivial conversations. All shops were closed, as were all blinds, each and every security lattice was in place, and occasionally, even barricaded doors and windows could be seen.

Of all sudden, the populace's unending thirst to sell each other about anything they could think of seemed to be fully quenched.

And that in a city this huge…

Empty cities were a depressing sight.

Even the train station, usually a hectic place of coming and going, now bore serious resemblance to a Ghost town straight out of a clichéd western – The trains were exactly where they were supposed to be, but none of them was moving a single millimeter. The only advice the numerous displays could offer was that both every single incoming and all departing trains were canceled without exception.

Again, everything seemed completely deserted, which posed the question of "why".

Sure, the style of the writing on the various displays and advertising posters suggested that this city was located somewhere in Japan, where earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and the like were no rarity.

Except – The earth wasn't trembling. There were no streams of lava to be seen, no deluge, no blazing inferno, no thunderous tornado.

The afternoon sun drenched the station in an intense white as the tracks lay covered in complete silence.

Complete silence, except for the steadily repeating announcements, the chirping of the cicadas, and the hurried steps of a lone boy.

His hasty movements made it easy to see that this unexpected situation positively unnerved him; Again and again, he stopped to check his surroundings uneasily.

His unassuming, unimposing form would have betrayed his nervousness to any observer's first glance; He was carrying a large, plain brown bag, obediently wearing his school uniform even though nothing resembling a day in class was awaiting him here.

The uniform in question consisted on some unadorned trousers made of black fabric, and a loose-fitting, white, short-sleeved shirt which its owner had neatly tucked into the latter; underneath, part of his indigo undershirt could be glimpsed.

Even his orderly, yet mostly inconspicuous hairstyle didn't seem to have any real characteristics, almost as if he had asked his hairdresser to give him a cut which would kindly ask any potential observers very nicely to please, please ignore him.

Doubtlessly, no one would have spared him a glance if he hadn't been the only human being in this place – and so, the dark blue color of his eyes which was highly unusual for this particular patch of land would have gone unnoticed once again.
His posture alone was enough to tell that he really, really wanted to be just about anywhere else now; every little ever so little hair on the surface of his body showed his tension.

Of course, no one could blame a fourteen-year-old teenager for being nervous at the prospect of finding himself in some godforsaken place where a computer voice was unceasingly warning of some unidentified danger, but this was... more than just that.

In the hand that wasn't blocked by his bag's carrying strap, he held a piece of paper – no, a picture, which he had gripped on one of its corners with this Thumb and Index finger alone, afraid that he might damage it with the sweat on his fingers.

Once in a while, he would hold it properly to look up some of the writing on it as he wandered the train station.

It seemed like it was really deserted.

"She... she probably couldn't make it..." a high, boyish voice spoke, apparently addressing the air molecules in front of his nose.

Once again, he scanned the writing on the back of the photo. There was a complete description of the route he was supposed to take, complete with instructions about which trains to get on, which rails they would be arriving on and a phone number in case something should intervene with his arrival.

Originally, he hadn't been planning bother anyone with his probably stupid questions that would only be a nuisance anyway, especially not now where something really big appeared to have happened here, and he wasn't even really sure what he was doing here, but there it was, black on white: "Call in case of unforeseen occurrence."

There might as well be someone waiting for his call right now.

Great. So he hadn't even met that woman who was supposed to pick him up, and he'd already made a bad impression.

He... he had to phone her.

The big question here however was how on earth he was supposed to do that.

As if the situation wasn't already bad enough, fate seemed to have malliciously steppen on his fingers once again: He didn't have a mobile.

Sure, nowadays, just about everyone seemed to have one, and his teacher had offered to buy him one often enough, but his answer had always been "No thanks."

He hadn't seen a reason to further inconvenience a person who had already gone through the trouble of looking after someone else's offspring, and even if he had, what would he use a phone for? It's not like there was ever anyone he could have called.

All he ever was was a nuisance... someone who was in the way, who always got sent away.

He probably should have stayed home. Probably, that woman was now searching for him, and he had once again caused someone needless trouble.

Since the train station's main building was completely barred, he ran right past it, accelerated by the omnipresent warnings, and set out to search for some sort of public telephone.
In a city as large as this one, there had to be at least some – Or had they been foregone in the process of reconstruction since everybody had cellphones nowadays?

He didn't have the faintest idea what to do. There wasn't anyone he could ask for directions.

He seemed to be somewhere in the periphery of the city, where all sort of plant life crept up between the buildings and spread over them like a cancerous growth.

There were power lines, but that was the best he could say.

There weren't even tramway rails in the streets.

Or, less poetically: He was in the middle of nowhere.

But luckily, he then found out that in the 21st century, even the middle of nowhere was full of phones: Just a few mere meters away from his current position, there was small, green phone innocently hanging beneath a plastic covering which probably served to protect it from rain.

Without wasting any time, he quickly approached the long awaited piece of technology and hesitantly picked up the earpiece. But just as he was going to type in the number, he was met with yet another off-putting revelation:

Right out of the earpiece, which he still kept dejectedly looking at after finding that out, came another of these security messages.

"It's not working…" he stated, sighing, before bending down to pick up the bag he had deposited earlier, after which he proceeded to enumerate the details of his unfortunate situation:

"I knew I shouldn't have come… All the phone lines are down because of the state of emergency… and there's no public transport, either…"

Resigned, he shot a glance at the photo that his contact person had provided him for the sake of recognition. (Which conspicuously showed her in scant summer wardrobe, grinning wide and making a V-sigh at the camera, further decorated by a little text saying "Check this out!" and an arrow pointing at her cleavage. )

"It looks as if our "date" is called off then…" He took a look at his watch which only confirmed his suspicions. "I should probably look for a shelter…"

He would probably have proceeded to turn around and walked away to fight his tears in a corner of the next shelter, alone and abandoned, if something else hadn't captured his attention in this very moment.

He was just turning away from the phone when he saw her.

A girl about his own age, wearing some kind of school uniform.

She stood on the middle of the street, somewhat in the distance, straight as a line, looking in his direction for no reason in particular.

A swarm of white birds, scared away by some danger which the boy had still to find out about, set into flight with a loud fluttering of their wings, leaving the power mast they had previously sat on entirely empty.

Motivated by a sort of curiosity he would have been ashamed out if he'd had the time to
consciously think about it, he chose to divert his attention back to that girl who seemed to be interested in him for some reason.

Only… the street was completely deserted.

The fourteen year-old didn't hide his bewilderment. When did she leave?

Or had she just been a figment of his imagination?

But whatever might have been the correct answer, the boy didn't get very much time to wonder about it, for that which had shooed away the birds that had distracted him from that… apparition didn't keep him waiting for long.

One horrible shockwave waltzed through the small, empty street, causing several blinds, power cables and sadly, the boy's eardrum to vibrate strongly.

As most people, he reacted to the sudden tremor by twitching and covering the any affected body parts – in this case, his ears – with his hands.

Nonetheless, after having overcome his initial shock, he found that the tree-covered hills at the city's borders had a much crazier spectacle waiting for his eyes and yes, his ears at well, whose next ordeal consisted of the buzzing of an entire squadron of combat helicopters, which appeared flying backwards out of the landscape's relief, closely followed by an humongous, stomping thing.

The sheer absurdity of it all was enough to leave the boy in a deeply disturbed state – And on top of that, the flying military now started bombarding the big, green monster… without success, of course.

A few rockets passed our unfortunate misadventurer far too close for his comfort – It was like in one of these second rate action movies: King-Kong, Godzilla, attack of the fifty-foot whatever, that sort of stuff.

He didn't recall taking any psychoactive drugs in the last twenty four hours, but it might as well have been different: The 'big green thing' for once wasn't a reptile, but it didn't seem much more believable: Its shape had a very distant similarity to a human's, the keyword being 'distant': It had discernible claws, but no real head, consisting mostly of a roughly humanoid blob of some dark-green mass.

On its shoulders, it had rubber-like armor, furthermore, some three-layered, rubber-like elements could be found at its extremely angular hips, similar in texture to the thorn-like extensions sticking out of its elbows.

Even its exposed ribs had a stylized, artificial-ish appearance. Instead of protecting a heart or lungs, they covered something that looked like one of the red, ball-like Christmas tree ornaments except for being the size of a van, garnished by the collosal monster's 'face' which could be well mistaken for a mask if the creature didn't blink. Its only feature beyond its black, hole-like eyes was a vaguely avian beak.

The planes' extensive bombardement didn't seem to have caused it the tiniest scratch, nor did it seem to cost it any efforts to shoot one of them down by extending something conspicuously resembling a lightsaber (?) from its hand (?), causing it to come crashing into the ground directly in front of where Shinji was standing, as if to prove that it, and by extension, the thing that had torn it in two and blown it out of the sky, were a real, existing parts of his immediate surroundings.

He could have touched it.
No, that was not quite the point... that plane, or any of the fragments it was falling apart into, had nearly crushed him! He's just barely missed being reduced to some ugly stain on the ground!

As much as the sight had already made him doubt his sanity, the line between "second rate action movie" and "bizzare piece of modern art" was only crossed when the beast actually took flight.

At first, the being was crowned by a ring of energy that a member of Judeo-Christian culture might have likened to a halo, next, the entire space around the thing, if strangely not the thing itself, was flooded with a golden radiance blowing everything away, and then... then it simply began floating, just like that.

And then, as if to eradicate the very last doubts in the boy's head, it had to pick the crashed plane in front of him out of all possible places where it could have landed.

Accompanied by the noise level of ten rock concerts, the thing crushed the flying machine's remains with one flat, toeless foot, offering every bit of leftover kerosene inside of it one last chance to explode all at once.

Stricken by nothing less than unadultered horror, he covered his face with his arms to shield it from the explosion's heat and shrapnel – he didn't need to, though.

At the last second, something that had brought loud braking noises with it blocked the path between his skin and both those none to pleasant things.

Nonetheless, the boy didn't dare to lower his arms and open his eyes before the wind, the light and the shockwave caused by the detonation had all subsided.

As it would seem, he owed his life to a small blue car and its driver, who quickly opened the door, apparently intending to take him with her.

Behind the vehicle's wheel sat an attractive, shapely built somewhat tanned woman in a black minidress that didn't hide much of her legs – not that she had any reason to hide them.

Even if the fact that she was casually smiling at him when they could be trampled to death by a big, green abomination at any moment was quite enough to evoke an association with the word "cool", she wore many little accessories that helped to strengthen that impression, some being her reddisch fingerless gloves, her round, golden earrings that resembled a work of modern art, the cross-shaped pendant she was wearing around her neck, the long, black hair that she wore with her bangs parted in the middle, or the sunglasses in the middle of her face – the face itself, on the other hand, gave him the distinct impression that he wasn't seeing it for the first time – She was his contact person!

"Sorry for being late!"

While the fourteen-year old quickly climbed into the car, forcefully closing the door behind him, the attack on the beast continued above the head, with the monster itself remaining relatively unimpressed. One might almost think that it had slightly turned its head and asked itself if it had been bitten by a mosquito.

In any case, it remained completely unaffected despite the near constant shelling, and continued on its path, not caring the slightest about the possibility that it might step on something, like, for example a little blue car with a fourteen-year old boy and a pretty, scantily clad woman inside of it.

That, however, was something which said beauty, who was a lot more competent that common stereotypes might lead one to believe, knew to counter by fumbling the shift lever much faster than
her young companion's eyes could follow, hastily turning back to evade the abomination's foot, which had been showing the pavement little mercy so far by going into reverse and, last but not least, hurtling off into the distance by giving the gas pedal a heartfelt kick.

Behind them, the explosions never seemed to stop; the planes kept incessantly battling the skyscraper-sized entity, while the woman seemed driven to maximize the number of kilometers between herself and the aberration as fast as humanly possible.

Her 'guest' had used the meantime to put on his seatbelt – In the face of being on the run from a creature of giant fruit gum and the streets being mostly empty anyway, his companion could hardly be criticized for ignoring each and every speed limit and traffic rule, but if they were going to drive into something, he'd like to be prepared.

Making the tires squeal in protest, the sunglass-woman didn't stop her vehicle until they were both already out in the green, where she proceeded to shove the boy entrusted to her aside in a manner that was pretty embarrassing for him to observe the green beast from a safe distance using binoculars.

Ostensibly alarmed when she saw the planes pulling back, she shifted her position, inadvertently gifting the boy with the bittersweet privilege to get to know her breasts a little better.

However, she didn't leave him the time to blush: "They've got to be kidding… They're gonna use an N²! GET DOWN!"

Even if he didn't have the slightest clue what an 'N²' was supposed to be, the resident expert's worry proved to be enough to leave him frozen with shock, forcing her to grab him and ruggedly pull him down to their seats along with herself.

Nevertheless, the N² didn't need much time to speak for itself and teach him what exactly it was: The glistening light that fell through the windows was so intense that he could see its brightness through his eyelids, and it was promptly followed by a shockwave: At first, the car was only shaking, as if it had been exposed to strong winds, then, it was blown away from its place, and the boy found himself extremely grateful for his seatbelt: The car overturned, several hard, unpleasant impacts shook the inside of the vehicle whose driver had protectively clasped the boy as they were both thrown about the landscape.

"Are you allright…?" the woman asked her young companion after they had managed to climb out of their lopsided car after freeing themselves from the… entanglement that had resulted from their bumpy landing.

She had been… warm and soft, and he preferred not to think about it any further right now.

"Yeah, it's… just that my mouth is full of sand…" the fourteen-year old answered truthfully.

Since most of their immediate surroundings had been reduced to a field of ash resembling the surface of the moon, that was a fairly encouraging damage report, even if their car now made for a rather… dented sight.

"So, let's get started! When I count three!"

The odd couple then immediately proceeded to return the car to a vertical position through their concerted effort.

After some tiring exercise, they ultimately succeeded in moving the battered jalopy, even if the
somewhat jumpy 'gentleman' had his problems with the noise the vehicle created when it landed back on the ground.

"Thanks a lot!" The lady with the sunglasses finally said, contently placing her hands on her hips after finishing her work. "I don't think I would have managed without you."

Despite having been hit by the explosion of a bomb that certainly wasn't to be underestimated, her smile hadn't faded.

Motivated by her words, the circumstance that she had just saved his life several times in a row and her general kindness, he let himself get carried away to a small, tentative smile.

Her name. If he only knew her name. Hadn't it been on one of the papers he sent her?

"N-No, it's me who has to thank you, Katsuragi-san.

She just smiled and took off her glasses, revealing trustworthy-looking, friendly brown eyes.

"Just call me Misato." She requested. "It's nice to meet you, Ikari Shinji-kun."

"Y-Yeah…"

After Misato had used both spare parts which she had "confiscated by the government's orders" (or, as Shinji called it, "stolen") and astronomic lengths of duct tape to patch the car back together, their journey quickly resumed.

Tough Misato had tried to instigate some Small Talk along the way, she had, much to her annoyance, been forced to conclude that Shinji didn't exactly belong to the talkative half of the population.

The closer they came to their destination, the more the boy's thoughts appeared to circle around something completely unrelated to his revealingly clothed companion.

He gave off an increasingly nervous, uneasy air; at very least since they had driven into a tunnel secured by a special bar after which the entrance door to some sort of car-conveyor closed behind them, it had become painfully obvious that something was deeply troubling him, as much as he tried to conceal it.

The door that had closed behind them, thus leaving them with a dim, red lamp as their only source of light did manage to detract him from his brooding, if only because it created a connection between this place and the reason for his tenseness.

It wasn't really the door itself, even if it had substantially more in common with the setting of a James-Bond-Movie than with the entrance to a parking deck or any other equally mundane alternatives, but the symbol that had been lacquered on it in a bloody-red color.

It was half a leaf, perhaps maple, accompanied by some English slogan, quote or saying, but what really drew his recognitions where the four large letters directly bordering on the leaf's image.

"Nerv…?" he read out loud with an inquiring tone. "Is that some sort of secret service?"

Everything in here really did look like something out of all these secret-agent-movies, the technology, the hidden elevators in innocent-looking tunnels, the ridiculously competent, barely clothed women… Naturally, all of that sounded totally ridiculous, but it still made significantly
more sense than the ginormous monster that had just barely missed stepping on him.

Then again, its secrecy status wasn't the part of this place that really held his interest…

Misato had leant back a bit since she didn't really have to drive at the moment.

"Let's say secret organization. We're part of the UN."

"Is that also the organization… my father is part of?"

"Yeah." The woman answered with a casual legerity that failed to do justice to the deep implications that her statement had for Shinji. All of this was just too crazy.

Again and Again, he wondered why he had even bothered to come here.

It would have been easier to name the things in this place that didn't stir his fears.

"So, how much do you know about your father's work?" Misato asked with a friendliness and positivity that Shinji found to be grossly unfitting.

By now, the light had turned itself back on and the buzzing all around them signaled that the machines which were supposed to transport them were slowly coming to life.

Shinji evaded her eyes. "My teacher used to tell me… that my father's job is to save humanity… Where ever we are going… am I going to… meet my father there?"

That mere thought was enough to make Shinji's face lose the visual equivalent of an octave in color over the course of an instant.

With an expression of absolute helplessness, he stared ahead distraughtly.

"Yeah, sure." Misato confirmed parenthetically as she checked the state of her make up in a small folding mirror.

Shinji grew even paler.

Like air bubbles in midnight-black coca cola, unpleasant memories kept inexorably pressing towards the surface.

"Father…"

Never would he forget that moment, that one scene that had burnt itself into the sulci and gyri of his brain as one of his first memories.

It had been exactly the kind of bag he was carrying now, not the small, green satchel he had put the light luggage in, but like the large handle back, except that it had been blue, carelessly dumped in front of his feet, as he, still a small, tiny pile of misery in a striped shirt that was far too large, just stood there, bawling his eyes out, waiting for his train, for that one ride in that sunlight-filled wagon, that had meant the end of the world to him.

When that huge, dark silhouette had turned away from him, the steps trailing off in the distance, he had gotten a pretty good idea of what it must feel like to be banished to hell, even though he could not recall what his "life" had been like before that.

"Oh yeah…" Misato began in an inquiring tone that once again pulled the teenager from his
deliberations. "Did your father send you an ID?"

"Uh, yeah." Immediately, he began searching his bag for the paper in question, which had come along with the letter with the two words on it and Misato's card. Upon finding it, he handed it to her.

"Thanks." Misato replied, giving the document a scrutinizing look.

"Then go on and read this thoroughly."

But the boy's joy at getting handed a little booklet titled "Nerv – for your eyes only" was pretty understated, not to say nonexistent.

Strictly speaking, what was building up in his face was closer to thinly veiled, partially suppressed anger. "Nerv? Does that mean… that I'm going to have something to do with my father's work?"

As soon as he had finished speaking those words, Shinji had already begun to reprimant himself internally. Oh no, he thought to himself, he had once again allowed himself unrealistic expectations and foolish, childish hopes. He had known that he shouldn't have come.

"I… can't say I'm surprised… He would never write to me if he didn't need me for something…"

"Oh, I see…" Misato answered, examining her car's dented ceiling. "You don't really get along with your father, do you? I guess that's something we both have in common."

Shinji properly looked at the dissonantly good-humored woman for the first time since their conversation had begun, this time with great bewilderment, if not outright shock.

How could she say such a thing just like that, as if it didn't bother her at all?

When the dark walls were replaced by transparent plating, Shinji was confronted with a completely different input which he had to process first: Beyond the glass, he was awaited by the shining facades of skyscrapers which seemed to be growing out of the ceiling like stalactites, shrouded in surreal, orange light.

"U-Unbelievable!"

Even someone as quiet and reserved as Shinji couldn't help but marvel at this sight: He had just found himself in a gigantic, subterranean cavity which just seemed to go on and on in every direction.

It was enormous; He hadn't seen a cavity this large in all of his life.

Of course it was different from having the sky spread out above him, which only served to make it even more breathtaking.

The yellowish-orange, artificial sunlight coming from those giant lamps on the ceiling with its color resembling, but by no means equaling daylight made it seem like a whole, different world.

What struck Shinji as even more abstruse was that such an expanse could have entire lakes, trees and even buildings inside of it.

A cave was, in itself, something close to indoors, so putting further buildings inside of it was simply too surreal.

The building in the approximate middle of this place, some sort of pyramid with an illuminated,
inverse-pyramid shaped lake right next to it, didn't make it any better.

At tremendous speed, they were venturing deeper and deeper into this unreal-seeming establishment, always following a spiral-shaped path.

"A… real Geofront!" Shinji beamed, showing that he was, in spite of everything else, a male teenager that would react to "cool" stuff.

"Yes. " Misato confirmed. "This is our secret base, Nerv-Headquarters. The Fundament for our new Beginning."

The strange pyramid was, as he soon found out, merely the tip of the iceberg; Nerv's actual headquarters was an enormous labyrinth-like complex reaching far into the depths of the earth.

With emphasis on labyrinth.

The bizarre architecture itself was confusing, if impressive enough on its own.

Right now, Misato were riding one of these conveyor-belt-like moving paths often found in airports, on one of the many thin balks bridging a deep chasm separating two parts of the complex.

"Strange… I thought this was the right way at last…" Misato mused as the air flow set her hair in motion and sabotaged her efforts to make sense of her map.

"I really should start wearing trousers… Where on earth is Ritsuko when you need her? Sorry, it's just that I'm new here myself…"

"That certainly explains why I feel that we've been here before…" Shinji commented while trying to read the booklet with the information.

Misato reacted with a sigh, but didn't need all too long to regain her good mood: "But don't worry! After all, all systems were built to be used…"

Shortly afterwards, Misato had grabbed the next communications facility, issued a "maximum priority" announcement and placed herself in front of the next best elevator with a somewhat uncertain-looking Shinji in tow, probably because it was right next to the panel which had revealed the cryptic designation of this part of the complex, which seemed to consist of completely arbitrary numbers and letter.

Marginally later, Misato's grinning face on the reflective elevator doors was replaced by the aggravated visage of a woman whose fake blonde hair went just below her chin.

Aside from her stern look whose effect she couldn't possibly have topped with anything short of writing the words "not amused" across her forehead, the lady could be characterized by her purple, rhombus-shaped earrings, her green eyes and the mole she had beneath the left one.

If her glare was intended to make Misato uncomfortable, then its mission had been carried out successfully.

"H-hi, Ritsuko!" she greeted, somewhat intimidated.

The blonde wasted no time on trivialities, and immediately proceeded to step out of the elevator, which actually made the normally dauntless Misato back off as soon as she felt her colleague's
haunting eyes on herself.

At this point, it should be mentioned that all she was wearing beneath her lab coat was a light blue swimsuit – apparently, the 'urgent announcement' had reached her ears in a particularly impractical moment, which was probably accountable for the "joyful reunion" which Shinji just witnessed.

The scientist immediately addressed the issue: "Captain Katsuragi. We don't have the time or the personnel for this."

After she had finished complaining, she diverted her glance at Shinji who had begun to feel somewhat forgotten, even if he did have the manual to keep himself busy.

"So he's the one?" She asked, now that her initial Anger had subsided.

"Yep." Misato replied. "…According to the Marduk-Institute's latest report, he's the Third Child."

"Hello. I'm the leading scientist on Project E, Dr. Akagi Ritsuko. It's nice to meet you."

Third What? Shinji didn't have the faintest idea what they were talking about. He was what?

Insecurely, he closed his booklet and cautiously eyes the fake blonde.

It was only then that he realized that she had just introduced herself, and that, until now, he had only 'returned' the courtesy by staring at her without displaying the slightest sign of manners.

"Y-Yeah, I'm… pleased, too…" he answered in a low voice.

Misato just sighed. "Looks like he takes after his father… He's got exactly the same gloomy eyes."

A little later, Shinji had followed the two women onto an elevator-like platform, where he was still reading the instructions as it traveled along the transparent wall of what appeared to be some sort of large tank.

All that could be seen inside was dim, red light which barely illuminated more than their silhouettes.

In the distance, further announcements could be heard instructing the personnel to assume 'battle stations'. But for what sort of battle? Against that Monster, perhaps?

If so, how did they have the time to go pick some kid up and, on top of that, have their… – what did she call herself? Leading scientist? – introduce herself to him. Whatever she was, it was hard to believe that she would have any time for the likes of him.

As the two conversed abut some technological things that not even the information in the booklet could help him understand, he began to ask himself more and more what he was even doing in this bizarre place.

"Do you hear that?"

"Yeah, seems like the situation is about to get serious."

"Now that we're at it, what's the status of unit one?"

"It has already been fitted with B-Equipment and is now being cooled."
"...Are you really going to activate it? As far as I know, there has never been a successful test before…"

"The odds for a successful activation are at 0, 000000001%. We also call it the nine-zero system."

"So you're saying it's not going to work?"

"My, my, I didn't say it was zero."

"Yeah, but that's just a theoretical chance… But apparently, "Sorry, that's impossible." is considered a lazy excuse here."

Soon after, they had reached the top of the large chamber which turned out to be, as Shinji had correctly guessed, a tank filled with liquid.

There was some large, green-violet thing with a striking resemblance to an Arm attached to the wall, but after all the crazy things he had seen today, he merely considered it a slightly odd choice for decoration.

Departing from the basin's edge, the journey continued via rubber boat, and later by climbing two stories' worth of stairs which then led into a metal-plated passageway up to the center of one large, dark hall.

At first, the light streaming from the open door allowed him to see at least a small streak of the metal floor, but as the entrance closed automatically, they were left in complete Darkness.

"Ikari Shinji-kun… We have something we want to show you."

"But… its pitch black…" Shinji commented, stating the obvious.

Acknowledging her newest coworker's complaint, Dr. Akagi produced some sort of device from her pocket – or at least, that's what he thought she did, since he couldn't exactly see it – and used it to turn on the light.

The next thing Shinji found right in front of his eyes made him wince in shock.

He stood directly in front of some humongous, metallic violet something.

And gaped.

He felt everything around him starting to spin.

"A-a face…

A giant robot!"

Completely overwhelmed, a state that could be forgiven given that he had just been confronted with gigantic monsters, secret organizations, subterranean hideouts and now, Mechas over the course of a few dozens of Minutes, he began wildly searching the booklet that he still hadn't managed to finish reading despite his efforts, but Dr. Akagi gestured to make him stop.

"You won't find anything about this in the manual."

"Heh…?" even more confused, Shinji turned towards the scientist, who swiftly continued with her explanation: "What you see before you now is a multi-purpose weapon in humanoid shape, a so
called "Evangelion." This is EVA 01. It was built in strict secrecy, and may now be humanity's last chance."

"So this… is my father's work…?"

"Exactly."

Chapter End Notes

(1) Uff… translating this is much more work than I thought it would be… Tough that isn't the only reason it took so long. I've been rather busy, real-life wise.

(2) As you have seen, this follow episode one or the corresponding part in 1.X pretty closely. This is going to keep being the case for the next chapters, but the full scope of my evil plan shall become apparent soon enough.

(3) Look forward to the next Chapter, 04: [GARUDA], where the fated reunion between father and son will take place…
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Siehst du mich
Hörst du mich
Was hab ich dir getan
Warum zerstörst du mich
Fühlst du mich
Spürst du mich
Wenn du mich nicht mehr liebst
warum berührst du mich
Brauchst du mich
Sag glaubst du nicht
Dass es besser ist
du lebst dein Leben ohne mich
Erkennst du mich
Verstehst du nicht
Warum bist du überhaupt noch hier
Was willst du noch von mir
[..]
Du weißt nicht was du willst
Du weißt nicht wo du stehst
weißt nicht woher du kommst
wohin du gehst
Du weißt nicht was dich treibt
was am Ende für dich bleibt
Warum bist du
so blass
so kalt
so herzlos
Du weißt nicht was du tust
weißt nicht woran du glaubst
Sag mir wozu und ob
du mich noch brauchst
Wenn's einfach nicht mehr passt
Wenn du mich wirklich nur noch hasst
Warum bist du noch hier
Wofür
Was willst du noch von mir
Siehst du mich
Erkennst du mich
Ganz tief in meinem Herz
ist noch ein Platz für dich
Ich suche dich
Ich sehne mich
nach dem was ich geliebt hab
doch ich find es nicht
Augen auf
Wer sieht versteht
wie gnadenlos die Zeit vergeht
wie sich der Zeiger dreht
unentwegt
Er steht nie still
Viel zu lange
Viel zu spät
Sturm geerntet
Wind gesät
Do you see me?
Do you hear me?
What have I done to you,
Why are you destroying me?
Do you feel me?
Do you feel me?
If you don't love me anymore,
Why are you touching me?
Do you need me?
Don't you think
That it's better if you live your life without me?
Do you recognize me?
Don't you understand?
Why are you even still here?
What do you want from me?
[...]
You don't know what you want,
You don't know where you're standing,
You don't know where you come from and where you're going,
You don't know what drives you, what will be left for you in the end
Why are you
So pale,
So cold,
So heartless?
You don't know what you're doing
You don't know what you believe in
Tell me if you still need me and what for
If it just doesn't fit anymore,
If you really don't have anything but hate left for me,
Why are you still here?
What for?
What do you want from me?
Do you see me?
Do you recognize me?
Deep down in my heart, there's still a place for you
I'm searching for you
I long for
What I once loved, but I can't find it
Open your eyes,
Who can see can understand,
How merciless time goes by,
How the pointer rotates ceaselessly,
It never stands still
Far too long
Far too late
Reaped storm,
Sown wind,
Time goes by ceaselessly,
It never stands still
-Megaherz,'Fifth of March'

"Exactly."

When he recognized the voice, Shinji's heart failed to beat for a few instants.
The mere sound of that deep, coarse voice was enough to send him into incontrollable shivers,
made his knees grow weak and firmly convinced him that he was never to feel happiness ever again, if only for the brief moments in which he heard its sound.

Unable to produce as much as the ghost of a coherent thought, Shinji followed the long, sleek horn of the war machine before his eyes as if he were in a state of trance, up to the small pulpit on the ceiling.

And up there, high above him, as an eagle targeting the filthy, slithering serpents below, planning to devour them upon his descent, there he stood, glaring down at him, cold, pale and heartless, as much as Shinji tried to convince himself of something else.

The man in the pulpit was in a state of decay;

It wasn't his age that deserved the blame; In spite of being anything but far from the big fifty, time had been merciful on him: His face hardly showed any significant wrinkles, and his hair was still where it belonged, still possessing its original, dark brown color.

And yet, it was that very hair which betrayed him; The only reason he still cut it short was probably to pass its chaotic state for a modern hairstyle. In turn, his facial hair had been allowed to pullulate as it pleased, framing his face with a wild beard.

The face itself could be described as 'edgy' at best and as 'gaunt' at worst, and his eyes, dark blue as the sky during in the last breaths of a dying day, after the red of the evening sun and even the last glimmer of violet had disappeared past the horizon, minutes away from disappearing into blackness, where hidden behind inornate, cheap-looking sunglasses.

His uniform jacket, black as spilled ink save for some green ornaments, was carelessly slipped over him and not even zipped; beneath, he wore a bloody-red turtleneck regardless of the constantly estival temperatures that had become the norm after second impact.

His hands, covered in white gloves, were kept hidden within his pockets.

Every single detail of his powerful appearance compelled Shinji to feel the untamable wish to turn around, run away and shrink into a corner to cry, wither and die there, but his feet refused to carry him.

"It's been a long time." was the commander's dry greeting.

"F-Father…"

Unable to stand the icy glance any longer, Shinji averted his eyes.

The older Ikari's only comment was a low 'hmph', after which he addressed his son with both a thin smile or smirk and an order: "Move out."

"M-Move out?" Misato retorted in disbelief. "But Unit Zero is still in cryostasis!"

But as she thought about where exactly she was, and with whom, the issue quickly became much clearer to her: "You… You're not planning on using Unit 01, are you?"

"We don't have a choice." Akagi explained.

"B-but Rei isn't in any shape to do it! We don't have any pilots!"

The scientist was quick to contradict her: "One just arrived." She turned towards the still
intimidated-looking boy. "Ikari Shiji?"

"Yes?"

"You will be the pilot."

"But… even Ayanami Rei needed seven months to synchronize herself with her EVA! He just arrived! How is that supposed to work?"

The boy still standing in between the women did indeed not appear to be coping with the news all too well.

"We just want him to try sitting in it. We're not expecting any more than that."

"But…!"

"At the moment, our main concern is to stop the angel. If there is a chance that he will be able to move the EVA on his first attempt, however slight it might be, then we at least have to try it!" Akadi demanded. "We have run out of other options. Do you understand that, captain Katsuragi?"

"You… You're probably right…" Misato conceded hesitantly, although she still didn't see very convinced. She didn't like this situation in the slightest, especially when she looked at that despondent boy over there.

It all reminded her far too much of things that she's prefer to forget, and she felt much more compelled to side with Shinji than what would have been reconcilable with her duty.

Shinji himself had spent all these long Minutes which Misato and Dr. Akagi had been arguing about that crazy situation which he found himself believing less and less of scratching together the valor to speak for himself.

All of this talk about angels and synchronization was besides the point. That wasn't what he had wanted to hear.

"Father… Why did you call me here…?"

"You have already been told." the dark silhouette before him answered, without the slightest shred of feeling.

Every single thing about this was just too ludicrous.

What did they thought he was, a magical girl?

Grotesque, that's what it was! Shinji no longer even tried to conceal his discontentment: "Then you seriously want me to climb into that thing and fight that monster I saw on the way here?"

"Yes." The commander answered, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to climb into absurd robots to fight creatures made of green fruit gum.

He… he couldn't be serious about this.

Shinji had finally reached his breaking point: He could no longer stop the warm, salty fluid from pooling beneath his eyes. "I won't! Why are you saying all this this of all sudden? I thought you didn't want me!"

"I called you because I needed you." Ikari answered, still not showing much of a reaction to his
son's emotional state.

"And why did it have to be me?" Shinji asked despondently, hanging his head on all of the multiple screens the older Ikari was standing next to.

"Because no one else will do."

"But I won't, either!" Shinji countered, his voice quaking. As helpless as he felt, they might as well have pulled the ground out of underneath his feet. Why was his father so thoroughly convinced that he had any chance at doing anything remotely expedient with that huge robot thing?

"I have never seen or even heard of that thing in my life! What makes you think I can do this?"

"I'll explain it to you if you want me to."

But Shinji wasn't even really listening anymore. "No… that's enough! I can't! I just can't do it, okay?"

Unfortunately, the Commander seemed to be nearing the end of his tether as well: "Either you try it now, or you leave."

The callousness that last word was spoken with earned Shinji the pitying looks of Misato and probably roughly half of the present technicians, but the being which Dr. Akagi has referred to as "the Angel" was notably less tactful: An impetuous succussion interrupted the admittedly rather fruitless father-son-talk.

"It found us." The former noted, understandably less than pleased.

But that had only been a warning shot: The next, significantly more powerful shockwave followed immediately.

The first damage reports began to arrive over the speakers.

"Shinji-kun, we're out of time." Ritsuko spoke, in one last effort to convince the (if understandably) uncooperative potential Pilot.

Beseeking, he turned to Misato, but she, too, urged him to climb into the metal monstrosity before his eyes.

Shinji hung his head. He felt like the entire World had turned against him now.

He couldn't take it… oh, why wouldn't it stop!

"This is ridiculous…" he kept protesting, his voice much weaker and more resigned than before.

"I... I didn't come for something like this…"

"Shinji-kun…" Misato bent down to look into his eyes, fixating them with her own still warm, but serious brown ones. "Then tell me, what else did you come here for?"

He evaded her gaze.

The answer to this question was something he himself did not want to hear; He had already sufficiently understood how foolish and naïve he had been.

Regardless, Misato followed his eyes' elopement and kept talking at his face in further attempts to
get through to him: "You mustn't run away, Shinji-kun. Neither from your father, nor from yourself..."

By now, it almost took an acrobatic feat to avoid her eyes. So it was all that psychobabble once again, the classic good advice... Did she really think that he hadn't already heard all this from his teacher?

How on earth was that related to the fact that he had never seen one of these robot things before?

None of it had ever been any help. What good was it to say that a glass was one millionth full if there were only a few lonely water molecules left in it?

"I know, I know! But that doesn't change that I still can't do this!"

After he his voice had fallen silent, EVA 01's cage was left with nothing but frosty quiet to fill itself.

Misato put herself back into an upright position.

For a few instants, the Commander's gaze abided on his son, but then he was forced to concede that there was no further sense in it.

He had never meant for Shinji to get involved with all of this anyway, or for him to be kept anywhere but far away from him.

But now that Rei had gotten injured in that accident, he was the only one who could pilot unit one... the only one who could fill the role of the "Third Child" mentioned in the prophecies, the only one of whom the older Ikari could be certain that EVA 01 was sure to accept him.

Oh, and just how sure he was of that!

He couldn't do significantly more than trying to explain the situation – attempting to embellish what was awaiting his son would be futile anyway.

He did not seem to be able to as much as talk to Shinji without making him cry.

This wasn't like politics or a scientific experiment, where specific processes could be set in motion by certain actions.

He'd never understood this kind of things – If only Yui had been here, she would have been able to explain all of this much better. She had always found just the right thing to say, Yui with her gentle, ethereal voice and her warm, well-meaning words...

Somehow, Ikari had always known that it would come to this.

His plan was already firmly set in stone and left little space for further alterations; the moment that Shinji would have set foot in that entry plug, there would have been no turning back.

Still, the alternative he was now forced to resort to didn't please the last vestiges of these low, always reprehensive voices in the back of his head, whom he had never really listened to much more.

The reflective surface of the commander's glasses hid the expression in his eyes as he turned them towards the screen-covered wall next to him.

"Fuyutsuki."
The image of tall man in his late fifties appeared on one of the screens. In contrast to his superior, he kept his already greyed hair neatly combed back, wore his uniform in due form, and displayed an appropriate level of concern on his wrinkled face.

"What is it?"

"…We have to wake Rei."

"But… what about her state?"

"She isn't dead, is she?"

As much as Ikari appreciated the older man's skills, at times, he tended to be much too sentimental. Couldn't he see that he had already tried each and every possible alternative?

"As you will."

He didn't seem pleased about it, but the subcommander's face was soon replaced either way, its place being taken by a white screen with the words "Sound only" written in its center.

"Rei?"

"Yes, Sir?" a high, fragile voice answered.

"Your replacement is useless." He reported. "You know what that means."

"Yes, Sir."

For once, there was complete silence.

But not for long.

"Understood." Dr. Agaki confirmed to her superior, before beginning to give various orders over the Intercom, amongst them that EVA 01 be reconfigured to R-O-parameters and lisatened how some subordinate of hers who was probably sitting in some sort of command center right now relayed the state of various complicated technologic processes to her.

Even Misato was walking away, leaving Shinji just standing her after just one short glance back at him, just like his father had just left him, like so many others.

No one really seemed to take notice of the fact that he was still in the room.

The bustle just went on without him, everything had to get finished as quickly as possible, after all, they had some big green monster to defeat.

Shaken by his fear, his helplessness but also, most surprising to even himself, a good portion of anger, he hung his head even lower. He would have broken down in Tears if he hadn't been frightened of the sharp voice of the person who was bound to complain about the noise that would cause.

"I knew that it was going to perfectly work without me…"he silently thought to himself. "I'm useless, after all… All I can do is bothering everyone around me…"

Just as he was going to turn around and go look for some dark, lonesome corner where he wouldn't be in anyone's way, the entrance door was opened before he had any opportunity do so himself.
As it opened, the door revealed a doctor and two nurses, who were wheeling a metal hospital bed into the room, complete with pure-white bedding and an intravenous drip.

Being a nice guy at the bottom of his heart, Shinji was unable to maintain any other expression that one of commiseration and sympathy as the medical personnel pushed their patient past the spot he was standing on.

The very first impulse the sight of her stirred within him was the imperative drive to do something – anything – to help her somehow.

The poor thing, who seemed to be about Shinji's age, was tightly packaged in bandages from head to toe – There were some around her head, combined with a piece of gauze held in place by various plasters which covered one of her eyes. Heaven knew if there even still was anything remotely resembling an eye beneath it. And it didn't stop just there: The drip was lodged in her elbow crease, and just a little further down, more bandages began. The other elbow crease was buried deep beneath a thick plaster cast, as was, in fact, the majority of the arm in question, and even on her torso, more bandages could be spotted, although they were partially hidden beneath her clothing.

And why did she have to be so alarmingly pale on top of that? Why didn't she use her remaining eye for something other than staring into the air apathetically?

She looked so impossibly weak and fragile, as if the slightest touch or even a loud noise would be enough to make her burst into a thousand pieces.

The strange, skin-tight costume they had stuffed her into, as far as he could tell, some sort of full-body rubber suit with a few plastic elements on it, didn't make it any better: Not only did it leave little of her small, but firm and round breasts to the imagination, it was also white as bone, which, firstly, was quite demonstrative at illustrating just how minute the difference beneath the color of her skin and that of a sheet of paper was, and secondly, happened to be a fairly cold and sterile color which only served to fuel the protective instinct that Shinji never knew he had.

He had the strange feeling that he had seen her somewhere before, tough he couldn't say where nor when. It might have been a déjà vu, after all, he surely wouldn't forget it if he'd ever seen a girl with bluish-white hair and crimson eyes.

He wondered if she could be an albino, but weren't those supposed to have blue eyes whose faint coloration occasionally allowed the blood vessels on the retina to shine through? The girl's eye color was far too intense for that, not fitting the rest of her otherwise faint, pale appearance.

Red and blue were, after all, the colors that lay the furthest apart in the visible spectrum, and the blue tint that was missing from her eyes had inexplicably found its way into her hair. Yes, he'd heard of people with blue-black hair, but this was something else entirely…

The nurses detached the intravenous drip from its holder, presumably to give the girl some more freedom of movement.

Exuding heart wrenching sounds of anguish – her voice sounded soft, high and fragile as glass – the girl sat up, whimpering, her breathing labored as she forced tremendous exertion and even greater suffering onto her mangled body.

She tried to raise her arm to grab her beds metal frame next to the end where her head had just been to support herself while standing up, but she had to stop to gasp for air. Every ever so tiny movement appeared to be torture for her, and yet, she didn't even seem to be as much as considering lying down, no matter how self-evident her dire need for just that should have been for
anyone with healthy eyes and ears.

Shinji's discomfort was obvious.

What was it his father just said? "Your replacement is useless?"

Did that mean that he'd been called here to... take that girl's place?

Impossible.

Where they... actually going to force that poor, fragile being... into that Robot...?

Then, another shockwave came.

Another of the Angel's shots, this time, substantially more successful.

The entire complex trembled; even the lamps on the ceiling shook dangerously.

Shinji was thrown to the ground and even that poor, severely injured girl slid off her bed before she had any time to react, expelling one breathless, pained scream from her colorless lips.

When the building came to a rest, her bed lay on the ground with all the associated medical utensils scattered around it.

The girl herself had also fallen to the ground – and she wasn't standing up.

She was just lying there, trembling, not even able to correct her strangely bent position which was hardly a surprise, considering that she was struggling for each and every shallow, labored breath, barely capable of drawing the smallest tidbits of air into her limp form and probably even limited in her capacity to process the little oxygen she could manage to inhale.

The sounds of her agony had grown considerably fainter.

What if her wounds had reopened or even been joined by new ones?

Wasn't anyone going to tend to her?

The older Ikari's face was twisted into a strange mixture of a cringe of worry and a "Just as planned."-grin as he watched his son rush to the injured girl's side without a moment's hesitation.

"Hey you, are you all right?"

Without even thinking about it, he gently took her into his Arms, as if he were handling a box of raw eggs. However, not even all of his diligence was enough to stop her from producing a sharp, pained sound as soon as he had gripped her, only to continue gasping for air immediately.

Cradling the poor girl who was trembling all over her body in his arms, he looked at the large, purple robot thing, followed by another glance at the girl.

They weren't seriously going to put her in there, were they?

Before he could think any further, Shinji felt something warm on his hand.

He brought it before his eyes, exclusively supporting the girl in white with the other.

It was blood.
Actual, bright-red blood.

It was the smell of human blood that was beginning to fill his nose.

Aghast, he stared at his hand, and then, past it, straight at the girl.

She had been dragged out of her safe, clean hospital bed for the sole reason that he had refused to get into this stupid robot… and now, she was probably still going to be cooped into it, bleeding and wheezing and all that, where even more wounds and therefore, certain death were waiting for her.

No. There was no way that he could allow this to happen and then keep calling himself a man afterwards. If this miserable, harried girl could muster the courage to challenge that abomination, then so could he.

If he only had that kind of willpower…

Unable to accept any more of his own cowardice, squeezed his eyes shut.

I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away…

"I'll do it!" he proclaimed, holding his head upright for the first time since the beginning of this conversation. "I'll pilot that thing!"

In the shape of numerous miniature waterfalls, the coolant was flushed out of the "Cage", as the technicians called the basin the giant robot was being kept in.

Shinji wasn't quite sure if he remembered the meaning of that English word correctly –

It made little sense, didn't it? Wouldn't you call a depository for a Robot "garage" or "armory"?

Normally, only living things like dogs or birds got put into cages, to prevent them from escaping.

How on earth was a robot supposed to run away?

Now, that the liquid was gradually receding, he got a proper idea of just how enormous the steely colossus that was now a few meters beneath him, held in place by various contraptions and lock bolts, really was.

One part of the many constructions arranged around the Evangelion was the small platform Shinji was currently standing on – and its flooring and handrail made of simple steel grate failed to provide him with any feeling of safety.

Shinji gulped; He should probably avoid looking down, especially now where the liquid's surface was sinking further and further.

Directly in front of him, held in midair by further retaining brackets, was a long, torpedo-shaped object the size of a large bus which was marked by black letters spelling 'EVA-01' – judging by what he had been told, this was a so-called "Entry Plug", which more or less translated to "cockpit".

As far as he knew, he was supposed to climb in there, after which it would be automatically inserted into the robot, or "Evangelion" as its makers preferred to call it. Needless to say, Shinji didn't particularly enjoy the prospect of being propelled through absurd altitudes by some crane.

Still, it was already far too late to turn back now; the platform he was standing on had already been
moved to where he was supposed to leave it, far away from the stairway he had used to enter it.

Of course, he could still have asked them to drive it back and let him go, but… no. Just no.

They wouldn't do that, not when they were in this kind of hurry. They would him into doing this one way or the other.

Or at least that was what he was trying to believe. They were forcing him, yes, he was being forced.

It had to be that way. He had to convince himself of that so that he couldn't possibly think of coping out now.

He had already traded his bags for a so called "Interface-Headset" that was technically too short to be an actual headset – it reminded him more of an hair circlet for girls, except that the thin, black Material probably wouldn't stand out much amongst his hair, unlike the triangular, white devices at its ends which would probably stick out of it like tiny horns.

Dr. Akagi had called them "nerve clips", which sounded a bit too painful for Shinji's comfort.

Reportedly, these should help him 'connect' with the robot. Connect? What did they think he was, an USB-Stick, perhaps?

At least the instructions for use were relatively simple: He was to put it on like a hairband, press the little buttons on the side, press it onto his head and let go.

That was allegedly all it took to put it on, and since some of the mostly indecipherable technobabble which could be heard all around them suggested that they were just about to insert this 'Entry Plug', he figured that it was probably about time for him to do just that.

As a matter of fact, they were indeed easy to put on, stayed in place and really didn't hurt or anything like that, but it still felt somewhat …strange to wear them, as much on his cranium as in his hands when he touched them carefully. They just didn't… belong there.

At least their horn-like design fit very well with the design of the Robot beneath him, even if it was merely equipped with one decorative horn instead of two.

In this very Moment, the hatch to his new workplace opened, revealing… not much at all.

Just an instant before, he had been wondering how he could possibly manage all the buttons and levers that one would expect at the helm of such a complex robot (Shinji's reflexes had never been all too fast) but now, he was wondering what exactly he was supposed to do in there.

It was nothing but a large tube that was plated with yellowish metal on the inside.

Within, there was little more than a seat fixed on what looked like a skid, which seemed to be built to support half sitting, half laying position, but also allowed for the pilot to sit normally.

There was a pair of levers to "entertain" the hands, but not much more.

Somewhat uncertain, Shinji jumped into the capsule, taking a shot look at the darkness before him, down in the depths of the plug, before trying to work out where exactly he was supposed to put his legs.

Just when he had succeeded, the hatch closed above him.
Sure, this wasn't suited for people with claustrophobia, but it at least, the seat was actually pretty comfy, even though the buzzing of the crane and the other mechanisms outside did little to calm him… he kept imagining what would happen to him if this metal contraption he was sitting in was to tumble into the depths of the cage below.

Then, the Plug's movements came to an abrupt halt, and some sort of clicking noise could be heard from the outside, as if something had just clicked into place, followed by a fast, smooth, almost organic movement which was probably the Plug sliding into the EVA's innermost, and at last, another click as the hatch above it closed, accompanied by the Plug finally coming to a rest in its intended position.

By then, he was already beginning to sense it. Somehow, he was feeling… really strange.

Not exactly 'tingly', but a bit like he had just washed himself or put on new clothing. Sensitized, perceiving everything on a much more conscious level, but also… refreshed, not really hemmed in anymore.

At first, it was only a minute sensation, barely noticeable, especially when he was busy processing just what he had just agreed to.

The sensation of being constricted was just one of his many worries, so that he barely registered its disappearance. He was much more concerned with what the technicians were saying, which he was probably hearing over some sort of intercom system now that he was inside EVA 01.

"Begin contact."

He could not see the eyes of the purple behemoth lighting up, but he did feel something.

"Entry Plug is being filled."

Surprised about that report and a sudden noise that followed it, he looked down, only to see that it was already in the process of submerging his hands and feet, 'it' being an orange-red liquid that appeared to be a bit thicker than water and was rapidly filling the capsule.

"H-Hey, what is this?"

If the process had been slower, the substance's particular stench or its pleasant temperature reminiscent of what the water inside a bath tub would ideally be like might have caught his attention, but right now; his only concern was to hold his breath as fast as he could before the fluid would cover his head.

"Don't worry." He heard Dr. Akagi's voice coming from the command center. "The LCL surrounding you will supply you with Oxygen, so just breathe it in.

That was much easier said than done, given that any human's basic instinct dictated them not to let anything liquid enter their lungs.

On the other hand, the reflex to breathe was strong as well, so that Shinji couldn't help but release that swarm of air bubbles much earlier than he would have preferred, unwillingly trading it for a lungful of the sticky liquid around him. Nonetheless, those very same instincts instantly insisted on getting rid of that very substance, leaving him to fight his coughing- and gaging reflexes for a few very unpleasant moments. "I think I'm going to throw up…" he stated, looking bad enough to support his claim.

In the meantime, the technicians outside were busy removing more and more of these security
restraints, working to get the EVA online as fast as they could.

More and more, he felt himself becoming aware of that… strange Sensation, as he heard some opaque technobabble concerning something called "contact phases.".

What happened next left him speechless for two reasons: Firstly, these was again that refreshing, pleasant feeling, but this time much stronger, more intense, as if something had opened and liberated him somehow.

It was, as if some sort of Gate had opened in the back of his mind, letting its contents flow into a vast expanse, but also… letting something flow into him. At first, it felt somewhat uncomfortable, but then he noticed that it wasn't anything bad that was reaching him there, surrounding his very being like a warm embrace…

Of course, he wasn't really given the time or the peace to consciously register or reflect on this alien sensation – not with that spectacle playing out in front of his eyes.

At first, the inside of the Plug simply lit up, which was more comforting than anything else, but that was just the beginning, it didn't stop there.

There was a light, coming from its far end, like a wave, and the next thing he knew was finding himself in a sheer endless, featureless red expanse.

The entire walls, save for his sleigh-like sitting arrangements, were just gone.

Next, there was…a glistening, a spiral of black and white, a pattern inviting him to follow it to its radiant center.

Then there was even more light, even more red, and blue, in an almost honeycomb-like pattern…

This and much more rushed past his eyes in a matter of seconds and then… then his sight was clear.

Shinji blinked in disbelief.

He could… really see, as if there were some metal frames, and beyond them, not even glass or screens, but just… sight, as if he were seeing through the EVA's eyes.

All the talk coming from Dr. Akagi and her co-workers suggested that this meant… something good, or at least, they all sounded pleasantly surprised.

"Plug depth stable at 180, and synch ratio… at 41,3%!" a young female technician – Ibuki Maya, as he would later learn – remarkably impressed, as if she had just witnessed a miracle.

Her superior seemed to agree. "And he's not even wearing a plug suit!"

"The harmonix-values are all normal, everything's ready!"

"All right then!" he heard Misato say. "Prepare for launch!"

The last restraints holding the EVA, including entire walls started to move away, amongst them the small bridge Shinji had been standing on earlier. Last, but not least, the entire thing started moving, the entire platform the EVA's were standing on moving towards the launch pad, past numerous platforms, contraptions and, of course, countless uniformed Nerv employees.

With a spark of determination on his features, Shinji witnessed the platform the EVA was on
reaching the facilities that were probably intended to propel it to the surface.

A few bolts clicked into place, some hatches opened up, and then, everything was in place.

"All systems ready for launch." Dr. Akagi reported.

"Understood." Misato answered, turning towards her superior, who had returned to Central Dogma in the meantime, taking his place on a platform that stood somewhat higher than the one Misato, Dr. Akagi and their three industrious subordinates.

He sat there, bowed forward a little, supporting his elbows on the table and his face on his entwined fingers.

"May I give the order?"

"Of course." The Commander affirmed dryly. "As long as the Angels aren't defeated, none of us has a future."

But his subordinate, standing next to him on the very same platform, didn't seem to be able to shake off his doubts. "Ikari… are we doing the right thing?"

He didn't get any answer, but the thin smile that Ikari hid beneath his gloved hands said more than a thousand words.

"And Launch!"

Whoever was responsible of pressing the button that started the EVA did his job swiftly, making the EVA shoot towards the surface immediately as its pilot was pressed into his seat by the g-forces.

Back on the surface, the angel kept moving through the city with its thundering steps, occasionally glancing around as if it were searching for something.

Originally, it had been intending to just walk past this huge street as it didn't hold any meaning to it, but then, it appeared to notice something and stopped, and for a good reason, as evidenced by EVA 01 surfacing on this very spot.

The neon green markings on its armor glowing in the dark made for an impressive spectacle as the two combatants finally faced each other amidst the skyscrapers of neo Tokyo-3.

"Are you ready, Shinji-kun?"

"Yeah…"

"Remove the last safeties! EVA 01, LIFT OFF!"

One last bolt next to the purple titan's feet unlocked, as did one close to its shoulders; The great war machine finally stood on its own feet.

"Shinji-kun, just imagine yourself walking." Dr. Akagi explained.

The late revelation that this thing was apparently thought-controlled explained this strange interface, but did little to alleviate Shinji's growing nervousness.

Agreeing to sit inside of this was one thing.
Actually using it to fight a monster was another.

It was all up to him now, and he had never done anything like that in his life…

"…Walking…"

EVA 01 actually, if a bit heavy-handedly, began to move, and it weren't just the legs that budged, either – there was also an accompanying motion of the arms.

Nonetheless, Shinji still failed to control the purple titan's full strength – His first, somewhat awkward step demolished a phone booth, amongst other things.

Regardless of that, the command center still filled itself with sounds of wonder.

"It works!" Dr. Akagi said, subsuming the many expressions of pleasant surprise.

Not that any of it served to calm Shinji – quite the opposite; he would have preferred it if they wouldn't assume that he was any good at this.

"Walking…"

He placed the second foot far too close to the first one, shifted the giant's immense weight far too early, and was rewarded by falling first to his knees and then, flat on his face.

Wait a minute, his face?

It was the EVA that had fallen, but somehow, Shinji was the one frantically clutching his face, trying to pry off a metal mask that simply wasn't there – all his fingers could find was cold sweat, and the amount increased substantially when he realized that he'd fallen directly before the feet of the monster he'd seen this afternoon.

In the meantime, the Angel had grown a new, mask like face with a slightly shorter "beak" even though the – notably battered – old one was still hanging besides it. It might owe that injury to the very same bomb that had introduced him to Misato's sizeable bust, who (Misato, not her bust) was now urging him to stand up. But that was much easier said than done.

He wasn't sure whether to blame it on the sheer shock of having really felt (and, in fact, still feeling) the pain of having tumbled to the ground, on the angel's remarkable speed or to admit the simple old panic that horrible, reality-defying thing evoked in him, but before he was remotely capable of producing a reaction, the angel had eyed him with what bizarrely resembled a suspecting glance, gripped his face as if it was some sort of doorknob, pulled him into the air and decided that it really, really disliked him.

A shot of pure, unadulterated horror shot through Shinji's veins as the thing appeared to stare straight into his eyes.

…..PERVERSION…BLASPHEMY….

(?)

That state only lasted for a few seconds, after which the Angel gripped Shinji's Arm and decided to pull on his opponent like it was a rubber chicken.

"Calm down, Shinji-kun! That's not your Arm!"

Right. And what the Angel had just gripped and lifted hadn't been his face either. It was that of
EVA 01.

But… this pain… this pain… just how was this possible? Was it because the Eva was thought-controlled? It was so horrible!

Shinji grabbed his own Arm and squeezed, but he couldn't make the pain stop, couldn't stop the Angel from pulling. There were several reports coming from the command center, but they hardly even got through to his conscious self anymore. The angel kept pulling and squeezing and-

KRACK.

The Evangelion's arm dangled downwards in an unnatural angle.

Shinji couldn't even scream.

Of course, his own bone was perfectly intact and directly under his nose, but at this point, he could hardly differentiate where he stopped and the Eva began. It was simply far too overwhelming for his weak and unprepared mind, all that flow, that noise, the pain, the borders of this enormous form that wasn't his but threatened to become his, and there wasn't a single thing he could do to stop this.

He couldn't stop the Angel as it lifted its enemy high into the air after having tired of it, loading some sort of energy weapon that was prepared in a way that involved a column of light on the beast's elbow.

The last thing the third Child got to see was a light building up between the creature's claws that held 'his' skull in their tight, deadly grip.

"Shinji-kun, escape!"

But the Angel didn't leave him any chance to.

BAM. BAM. BAM.

At point-blank range. Again and again. Straight into the face. Shinji kept frantically clutching his eye and the part of his skull that felt like it could burst apart at any moment… he could practically hear it crack – or was it that of Unit One?

He couldn't even think about it anymore, overcome so much pain, agony and suffering that he felt like he might just explode from the inside at any moment, tortured by a foreign object in parts of his skull that felt perfectly intact to his fingers – or had they just cracked open under the pressure from the Angel's steady bombardment?

With his feet hanging over the ground and his hands seemingly both hanging down uselessly and pressed to his skull, there wasn't anything he could do, and even if there were, the unending torment hardly left him any time to think.

If only someone would help him.

Oh, how he longed for someone to take him into their arms and tell him that everything was all right.

But such a person didn't exist. He was all alone in this thing and he knew all too well that no one was coming to save him.
The angel mercilessly continued its assault, and its efforts were rewarded: After many fruitless attempts, it had succeeded in piercing the skull on the EVA, its attack bursting through the other side, throwing the violet giant against a building.

Without resistance, the EVA instantly slumped down, motionless save for the fountain of blood spraying from both holes in the biological machine's head.

But even that didn't last forever, leaving the many instruments connected to the control center to pick up only one single thing as they scanned EVA 01: Complete silence.

Chapter End Notes

(1) "Garuda" is an eagle-like being from Hindu mythology. When someone gets dealt a severe defeat in any myths or legends, that's often likened to Garuda swooping down on snakes. The title was chosen for various reasons: a) That's also what the song was called which I was listening to while writing part of this, a really badass-sounding instrumental piece from a Game called "Devil Survivor". It should be available on YouTube. I haven't played the game, tough, it's my brother who introduced me to the music. b) Sachiel is vaguely bird-like, and he effortlessly trashes Shinji in this. c) Shinji probably feels like some scared little animal being targeted by a huge bird of prey whenever Gendo stares down at him like he does in the Cage scene.

(2) Any further quotes/Songs that aren't English will, of course, have a translation beneath them as well.

(3) Look forward to the next chapter, 05: [Long Dream], for the resolution of that evil cliffhanger and a closer look at the world our (anti-)hero now lives in, not necessarily in that order.
Every day streets are crowded with people
Every night streets are jammed with these noises
Things are so strange, are they real or a dream?
Where am I now, trapped in city of illusion?
Feel the people, hear the voices
They are reaching out to catch you
Feel the rhythms, hear the noises
You are beating all the visions
Is it angels, is it devils
Whispering in my ears?
Is it emotions, is it illusions?
I need to be with you
Every day noises are killing these people
Every night noises are waiting for me, but
Don't run away, we've got no time left to fear
Where are you now, still it's showing me illusions
Feel the people, hear the voices
They are reaching out to catch you
Feel the rhythms, hear the noises
You are beating all the visions
In this long dream, can you find me?
Want you to you call my name
In this hazard, chance of survival
I need to be with you

Makiko Noda, 'The world ends with you (Long Dream)'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
There was something warm ascending, a gentle blending, a soft, warm, pleasant place, a familiar scent, a simple feeling of security.

It was mostly dark, but he could feel some light falling inside.

Somehow, it was as if he were sitting in that train again, the train to hell, the train were those who weren't good enough got sent to, those who had failed to behave properly, those who hadn't been useful… It was, as if he were hearing his father's voice.

Yet paradoxically, nothing in this place seemed to be threatening, and even in the deepest recesses of his heart, he felt neither fear nor despair.

Quite on the contrary, being here felt soothing and agreeable, like floating in water, except that the liquid's warmth seemed to surround him entirely, a sensation of complete peace which he had only known from the most distant of his memories.

"So, have you made your decision?"

"Shinji for a boy, and Rei for a girl."

"Shinji, Rei… Shinji…"

She laughed. Apparently, she liked the name.

Who was she?

He didn't know.

But she was warm.

She was the very voice of the warmth surrounding him.

She was the glistening spots of light on a surface of water seen from below, the glistening on the warm sun on warm water.

A familiar warmth.

She was something familiar… yes, that's just it, something familiar…

He thought she was something like family.

"Shinji…"

"Ayanami." There was something cold and foreign breaking the flow, something repulsive, something that was horribly wrong. He could still feel that warmth, but now, it was more sloshing around or running in circles than it was flowing to him, he kept a part of her, but within himself, almost like a memory.

A memory of a time… before his time.

A memory of heaven.

"Shinji… Rei…"

There was a memory of things he didn't completely understand, but nonetheless, he was somehow starting to process it.
"Rei…? Ikari Rei?"

"No. Ayanami Rei."

And as if that word were some deadly insult, a sacrilege, as if he had just named all seven deadly sins by their Latin titles, he was abandoned by the light and the warmth, leaving him inside the cold darkness.

What was it, anyway, this… premonition?

"Rei!"

And there she came, that naked, distorted crime against nature, speeding towards him and piecing his very soul with its monstrous, empty eyes wide open.

By the time Shinji had opened his eyes, he was no longer able to say what sort of fright had made him do so, only that he had been petrified with fear.

That was to say, he… couldn't really remember.

But it would definitely make a lot of sense: Every cubic centimeter of his body felt like terror had torn just its way right through it, like his adrenaline levels had only just been given the chance to recede.

Moreover, both his heartbeat and his breathing also appeared to be in the process of calming down…

It was truly strange… somehow, he felt… naked, as if he had been pulled out of warm water or away from a soft blanket, but he couldn't recall any reason for him to be missing anything warm, for whatever place he'd ended up in was filled with the same heat that had become this world's daily torment ever since the day of second impact. On top of that, he was lying in a bed, in a room that was so flooded with what he first mistook for daylight, that all the colors around him appeared unnaturally faded and wan.

Indecisively, Shinji sat up.

The entire wall he was facing consisted of nothing but large windows. So that's where all that light was coming from.

It looked like…

This seemed to be… some sort of hospital. The nightgown he was wearing at the moment which was soft, clean, yet nonetheless devoid of any characteristic, familiar scents certainly supported that theory. Apparently, he'd been given a single room.

Perturbed, Shinji noticed that the liquid that was sticking to his forehead and attaching the backside of his nightgown to his body was in fact cold sweat.

And there was yet another alien sensation, perhaps a remnant of some sort of emotion, that clung to his skin even more than the sweat did.

Shinji let himself fall back on his pillow, just lying there, letting both the light and that strange afterglow take their effects.

This room even had a lamp, as if the architect had aimed for a deliberate overkill as far as
illumination was concerned.

He'd never seen that sort of lamp with those neon tubes beneath a plastic covering – There had been no such lamp in his teacher's house, and he knew that better than anyone – over the years, he had memorized every ever so small detail on all ceilings in that mansion, most of all, the one in his own room.

But this relatively new, still immaculate white roughcast that didn't leave any features for the observer's eye to rest on was completely foreign to his eyes. It was…

"…An unknown ceiling…"

Elsewhere, the much-needed cleanup efforts had already begun.

The new morning's light fell on a large crater right in the middle of the city, not to speak of the buildings that were broken apart, slumped over like oversized domino bricks and the thick, red liquid that covered it all.

"The advent of the fourth angel and its annihilation, the emergence of the long awaited Third Child, and the successful activation of EVA unit one… everything is developing as we have foreseen it."

"…except for the enormous repair costs for unit one…"

"And those are still minor compared to the budget for the prototype which is still inactive!"

"The salvage operation has been completed." Ibuki reported as she worked the buttons and levers on some kind of machine. Hers was only one of the many forms standing on yesterday's battlefield, almost indistinguishable from each other in their orange hazard suits.

"EVA 01 is already in cage six – inspection and repair work will probably take several days…"

"What about the data recorder?" Another such orange-clad figure asked, scanning her surroundings with her binoculars.

"It's blank. There were no values measured at all."

"So, we don't even know why it went out of control. And that means…” Misato removed the binoculars to reveal an expression that was somewhere between worry and suspicion. "…that we can't vouch for its reliability without lying."

"Minor malfunctions are acceptable; as long as you make sure that it is fit for battle when the fifth angel arrives."

"Do not worry." Ikari assured them matter-of-factly, again supporting his face with his entwined fingers. "Unit one isn't our only weapon. In Germany, they have already begun the final test stage of unit two and its pilot."

"…but don't forget that the completion of unit three must also be advanced!"

"We have left both Nerv and the EVAs in your hands! Don't disappoint us!"
"I concur! The destruction of the angels is only a part of our covenant with Lillith! The human instrumentality project is to be treated with the highest priority. It is the focus of all our attention!"

"I am aware of that." The Commander confirmed. "Everything will follow SEELE’s scenario."

In the meantime, Misato and her co-workers had retreated beneath a small pavilion from where the entire data analysis and decontamination processes were being overseen.

Its equipment included a TV in front of which Misato had placed herself, where she was now, after having removed her helmet, zapping through the channels – not that it did any good: There was the same thing being broadcasted on every single one of them.

"Scenario B-22." She commented as she provided herself some cool with a little fan. She had tied her hair up for today's inspection, presumably to keep it from blocking the rather small view in her helmet. "Seems like the public is being kept in the dark once again…"

Dr. Akagi, who was still working on the analysis of the samples she had taken, appeared to have a much more relaxed view of the issue: "At least the public relations department is happy that they finally got some work to do."

"Everyone seems to be fairly optimistic here, don't they…?"

"Well, the truth is all of us are afraid."

"Of course…"

Beyond the fingers of his own hand and the thick glass it was touching, Shinji spotted some real, forest-covered hills. The brightness shining down from above was virtually indistinguishable from real daylight. The Third Child still had trouble believing just how large this entire cave had to be; he couldn't begin to fathom how they could possibly have built this.

To be honest, he was surprised that it existed at all.

After all the crazy things he had witnessed here, he had been half expecting to wake up in his familiar little room with its familiar little ceiling if he just let himself sink back into his pillow, but so far, his waiting for that to occur had been in vain.

He was here, all alone, on his own, and all those crazy events had actually taken place.

He felt like he had been thrown into a completely foreign world, like a space station or something like that; everything was somehow filled to the brim with Science-Fiction-movie-like levels of advanced technology, if not just downright surreal like, underground trees for example.

He had been awake for a while and no one had come to check on him, so he had simply stood up and left his room, beyond which he had found a similarly light-filled hallway waiting for him.

He still felt a little… washed out, that strange sensation was still clinging to his skin, refused to let go and left him with a feeling of numbness that only seemed to support his conclusion that all of this was bound to be some sort of dream.

He could feel the cold metal of the window frame beneath his fingers, but it didn't feel real, the sensations were… delayed as if he'd only been told that he was currently touching metal.
His sense of hearing appeared to be the least affected by that strange state; the chirping of the cicadas, the twittering of birds, it all reached him in all of its details, filling his head, feeling almost too real.

Hence, the first outside stimulus to get a proper reaction out of him was the clamant rattling of an opening door. At first, he felt like he had been shaken awake, but as the source of the noise, a metal hospital bed, was being wheeled past him, subsequently instigating him to turn around, he still felt as if he were watching this from a long distance or through a screen, from where it wouldn't have any consequences for him to stop and stare shamelessly.

Fascinated, he observed the bed, the instruments and IVs attached to it, and most of all, the patient.

Still wrapped into her bandages as tightly as the day before, the porcelain girl slid through his field of vision without the slightest motion.

With her arms and head still partially shrouded in cast and gauze, she looked just as fragile, and even less real as the brightness within the corridor muted her sparse colors even more.

This time, her strange rubber clothing had been replaced by a white, loose-fitting nightgown much like the one currently covering his body. It only left vague hints to trace the shape of her breasts, but that left him the allure of the unknown, the knowledge that every tiny shifting of the fabric could reveal something new, just a little more of these tempting elevations that were currently left to fantasy, which had always been known to produce more pristine constructs than reality.

If the impossible red of her single, uncovered eye hadn't been pretty much the only color in his field of vision that hadn't had any intensity choked out of it by this place's light, he might have begun to wonder if she was a figment of his imagination, and in stark contrast to their first meeting, those very eyes were focusing on him and him alone.

Nonetheless, Shinji couldn't bring himself to do or say anything, and so he continued to just stand there, with all these overflowing doubts and questions still bubbling inside of him as she disappeared around the corner.

Shinji lowered his gaze.

The least he should have done was to say hello and ask for her name.

What had his father and Misato called her yesterday?

Rei? Ayanami Rei?

In the meantime, Misato, Ibuki and Dr. Akagi had boarded a small plane that was supposed to bring them from their outpost in the blood-stained crater back to headquarters. By then, the three of them had all discarded their hazard suits in favor of their usual outfits.

"So that's the result of an Angel's AT-Field collapsing upon its destruction…" the young technician commented, with notable hints of discomfort in her voice. "It looks like a Sea of blood… Almost like right after Second Impact… The very thought of it still makes me shiver…"

"Our EVA has defeated the Angel." Stated Misato, her eyes locked onto her cross-shaped pendant which she apparently hadn't put on yet. "And that means… that humanity might still have a sparkle of hope left."

"So you really think we have a Chance?"
"Well, hope is part of human existence, don't you think so as well?"

"Your optimism is consoling if nothing else… And by the way, the pilot those hopes rest on has just woken up." Dr Akagi reported, putting down the earpiece of the phone over which she had supplied her with that information.

Nearly instantly, Misato appeared to have forgotten her own musing and shifted into a straighter position that would allow her to look into her friend's face more comfortably.

"…How badly is he injured?"

"Physically? Not at all. But his memory is somewhat jumbled."

"Are you saying that he's suffered a mental contamination?"

"Nothing quite that dramatic." The blonde assured.

Misato just sighed and lent back in her seat, obviously relieved.

"Yeah, you're probably right… It's probably just that it all happened so fast…"

"It's hardly a surprise. His nervous system was put under some serious strain…"

"Don't you mean his soul?"

After a while, Shinji was noticed by one of the nurses and brought before the physician who was currently on duty to be examined.

Shinji had meekly complied and endured it all uncomplainingly.

He answered the medic's questions by nodding, shaking his head, or, when it couldn't be avoided, as little words as possible, and followed every instruction without protest.

The tests were quite thorough and very extensive: When they were done with him, there wasn't any ever so insignificant part of his body that hadn't been checked at least twice, supposedly as a mere precaution, since he was the first person to ever synchronize with an EVA without long preparations and months of training, not to mention the tremendous strain which being sent into a traumatic battle without any time to adapt and the 'unpredicted malfunctions' must have put on him – He was, after all, the only pilot that was currently available to this installation.

Ultimately, he was told that he hadn't incurred any permanent damage, and given back his clothes which had been washed and cleansed of the sticky liquid from within the entry plug in the meantime, after was, for some unfathomable reason, asked for his measurements and his favorite color.

"…blue..." was his apathetic answer.

After he had gotten dressed, he was led into the medical department's waiting room which thanks to some large, triangular windows was also drenched in light.

Those strange sensations had begun to fade, but he could still feel them, right beneath his skin. Deeply perturbed, he stared at his arm.

Somehow he still couldn't believe that he wasn't injured in the slightest.
Still, he did cease his observation of his forearm when he heard the sound of nearing steps.

It was only when they had ceased that the boy chose to look up.

It was Misato.

"So, how are you?"

"I... I can't really say... the Doctor says I'm going to be fine, though."

"I've already been informed. That's good."

"...Misato-san?"

"...What is it?"

"...What's going to happen to me now, Misato-san?"

The woman could practically smell just how lost the boy had to be feeling, and she didn't like it one bit. Perhaps because those feelings of his were something she could relate to all too well.

"Well, I... I'm sorry to tell you that, but the thing is, that creature you fought... we call it an 'Angel'. And we have reason to think that more of them are going to attack." She explained with a serious expression. "...and since only very few people in the world have the ability to control an Evangelion... We're going to have to keep you here in Tokyo 3.

For the safety of us all."

"I see..."

Misato failed to hide her irritation. After his initial categorical refusal to get into the EVA and all the suffering he'd been put through inside of it... he just said yes?

It wasn't that she hadn't wanted him to – She certainly wanted the Angels destroyed for various reasons many of which were very much her own, personal motivations, and she had already thought up numerous arguments to persuade him to stay, but she had expected to need every single one of them and now, they had all remained unused.

She just couldn't make sense of the boy... any blind cripple would have been able to see how much he longed to be anywhere but here.

"So then let's go so you can move into your new home as soon as possible!" Misato offered in a fruitless attempt to brighten his mood, her enthusiasm not entirely genuine.

Alas, he didn't seem to feel like being cheered up.

Nevertheless, he still followed her instructions and left alongside her, so that they soon found themselves waiting for one of the countless Elevators in Nerv HQ.

So far, Shinji had gotten the impression that you couldn't even take a trip to the bathroom in this building without riding at least three lifts.

However, his gratitude for the elevator's swift arrival lasted only as long as it took for its reddish doors to confess that it already harbored a passenger.

Before them stood the upright, broad-shouldered form of Ikari Gendo, without doubt, one brilliant
politician, scientist and strategist, but as far as pedagogics were concerned, it was Misato who had some advice to offer to her superior. For example, it would really help if he wasn't staring at the boy like a senior citizen eying some newfangled apparatus.

At first, Misato thought that he might have come to get his son, but the longer the frosty silence between the two Ikaris lasted, the more she was convinced that whatever errand the older man had come here for was at best very peripherally related to Shinji.

The latter didn't do much except evading his father's gaze, thus letting the elevator doors close again without anybody getting inside it.

Misato didn't know what she was supposed to say – especially because the whole situation felt so uncomfortably familiar to her.

Even as they reached the escalator, she maintained her distance to that boy who seemed so similar and, at the same time, so different from herself.

"Oh, Commander Ikari, I wasn't expecting you!" The physician, a curly-haired young man, turned around in surprise. "If you came to see your son, I'm sorry to report that you just missed him, Sir."

"There is no problem with that. If I had wished to see him, I would have called in advance." The Commander answered dryly as he carefully removed his white gloves, revealing the thin bandages he still wore beneath.

"Change this." Ikari ordered, holding his disfigured hands out to the medic.

The younger man swiftly donned a pair of disposable rubber gloves, went to collect a few utensils such as new bandages and a reddish salve and begun to change his superior's bandages under his vigilant eyes, handling him with a degree of care that one would use with the boss of one's boss' boss.

"It should be fully healed soon." He reported as he threw the old bandages into a bin reserved for such disposals. "Starting with next week, it will probably be enough if you just put that salve on once in a while. I fear that these scars are permanent, though. I don't think much can be done, but if you want, I'll recommend you some good plastic surgeon."

"That won't be necessary." Ikari stated in a businesslike fashion. "What's the status of the pilots?"

"I've already discharged your son. He wasn't injured, it's just that his nervous system needed to time to snap back to 'business as usual' after being put under such stress. It's probably just because he started out with such a high synch rate. I'd recommend to leave him be for today, but technically, he's fit to begin his training at any time."

"Very well. And what about Rei?"

"The worst is over. Today, we were able to transfer her from intensive care to a regular room. Her state has stabilized since yesterday, but… she really shouldn't have been standing up. Her injuries were severe… to the point that the broken bones are the least thing to worry about… You have seen for yourself how hot that entry plug was… Her plug suit protected her from external burns, but since she was breathing the overheated LCL, she suffered numerous internal injuries… Her wounds were healing badly and slowly to begin with, and now, half of them have reopened. It doesn't help that she is a …special case."

"…There wasn't any other available pilot at the time. It was fortunate that sending her into battle
could be avoided." The Commander stated matter-of-factly. "When can she be used?"

"Not for a while. It will probably take even longer now… If there aren't any new complications, we will be discharging her in about twenty days, but it will take an entire month before she's back to full health."

"I see. Keep Doctor Akagi informed about her state."

"Yes, Sir."

"…can I see her?"

The young physician reacted with slight irritation.

Until now, he'd gotten the impression that the Commander's visit here was of strictly professional nature. He hadn't even asked for his own son and his concern about the pilots only seemed to extend as far as their "usability", and now, he wanted to pay the First Child a visit?

Sure, the papers listed him as her guardian, but if he didn't even ask for his own flesh and blood….

Well, in any case, it didn't concern him and the Commander was waiting for an answer.

"Of course. She is right over here."

Ikari put his gloves back on, stepped into her hospital room and, contrary to the young physician's expectations, the usually notoriously busy Commander of NERV remained in there for several full minutes.

Chapter End Notes

1) As you might have seen, I mostly used the Rebuild variant of the dialogue, tough I tried to insert "missing" bits from the original series. It suited my plan.

(2) If you'd like to see how our lovely protagonist finds a place to stay (or the conclusion of the battle) stay tunes for Chapter 06:[Home Sweet Home]
When there's nowhere else to run
Is there room for one more son?

One more son
If you can hold on

Hold on
I want to stand up, I want to let go
You know, you know - no you don't, you don't

I want to shine on in the hearts of men
I want a meaning from the back of my broken hand

Another head aches, another heart breaks
I am so much older than I can take
And my affection, well it comes and goes
I need direction to perfection, no no no no

Help me out
Yeah, you know you got to help me out
Yeah, oh don't you put me on the backburner

You know you got to help me out
And when there's nowhere else to run
Is there room for one more son
These changes ain't changing me
The cold-hearted boy I used to be

Help me out
Yeah, you know you got to help me out
Yeah, oh don't you put me on the backburner
"Is it really okay for them to live apart?"

"Most certainly. For Commander Ikari and his son, it's the most normal thing in the world to be separate from each other."

"...and living together would feel unnatural to them?"

"What...? All alone?"

"Exactly. His new room will be here, in block six. Our colleagues from security should be arriving shortly to escort him there. Do you have any further questions?"

"No, I don't."

Once again, there wasn't a single complain where there should have been dozens.

"Are you sure about that, Shinji-kun?"

The fourteen year old just stood there, regarding her with a broken smile and speaking with almost
unsettling nonchalance: "It's all right. I don't mind being alone. After all, I've always been alone until now."

That was enough. She couldn't and wouldn't accept this any longer.

Misato had hoped to find the Commander in his office – In truth, she spent a few minutes waiting in that gigantic, empty room for the arrival of its owner.

The drawings on ceiling and flooring were enough to keep her eyes busy for a while, but Misato still reached the conclusion that the interior designer they'd employed when they built this place must've been utterly clueless – the desk was practically standing in the middle of a huge void. Putting a few potted plants around it certainly wouldn't have done any harm.

But what she had planned to discuss with the commander when he ultimately returned from wherever he had been was not his taste in furniture – She would be damned if she allowed herself to act the tiniest bit less than professional in this sort of situation.

"...Captain Katsuragi?" Her employer asked as soon as he had stepped through the doorframe. "I have been told that you have requested an urgent meeting. So tell me, what is so important that you couldn't wait for an appointment?"

"I have a request. One that concerns the only pilot we currently have. If I remember rightly, the Third Child is to be accommodated on his own."

"That is correct."

"Well, as head of the operations department, it is my responsibility to maximize the efficiency of the Evangelions, part of which is the operational readiness of the pilots, which is also what worries me, particularly in the case of the Third Child. Just getting him to cooperate with us at all took a great deal of persuasion. I am of course aware that he, as all the pilots, will be placed under constant surveillance, however, for the sake of monitoring him even more efficiently and to ensure his motivation, I would propose to assign him a supervisor. To avoid unnecessary security risks, I am prepared to take that role myself.

Therefore, I ask to be given custody of the Third Child with all associated duties and responsibilities for the duration of the angel threat."

Ikari's expression remained unchanging as he answered, not taking as much as a second to ponder her thoughts.

"Your proposition does indeed seem expedient. I allow it. You are dismissed."

Misato struggled to hide her surprise.

He actually agreed…?

Just like that?

Sure, she had come because she wanted him to agree, but what sort of person would just hand over guardianship over their own child without a moment's hesitation, at that, to someone they barely knew from work?

Of course, she didn't know of the words that had gotten stuck in her superior's throat: "Do what I cannot do."
"You WHAT?"

"No, no, you got that right. Shinji-kun is going to be staying at my place from now on. My apartment is big enough and his father has already agreed to it. – Don't worry, I'm not planning on taking his virginity."

The reaction to the last comment produced such ghastly noises on the other end of the line that Misato was forced to hold the phone as far from her ear as her arm's length allowed it to protect her eardrums.

"Some people just don't have a sense of humor…"

Not long after this, Misato and her dented blue car were on their way through the tunnels leading to the surface. Shinji, who had allowed himself to be dragged along without comments, was next to her in the front seat, with a thick brown envelope containing his documents on his lap. He still looked a bit lost.

"So, tonight is party time, then!"

"Uhm… a party…?" he asked as if he was struggling to remember a foreign word for a vocabulary test.

"Of course! You're supposed to hold a welcome party when someone moves in with you."

Part of the preparations for that allegedly indispensable party was a short stop at the local supermarket.

Enthusiastically, Misato grabbed some instant food, packet soup, beverage cans, various nibbles and, perhaps the icing on the cage, multiple packages of one-way chopsticks.

Shinji meekly followed after her, and did as she said whenever she asked him to get something.

This was only a relatively small supermarket that probably earned most of its income with the immediate residents of the area. The shelves stood closely together and yet, the boy found a variety of products unseen in the small village shops next to his teacher's house.

These 'Dorritos' were imported, right…?

In any case, many little details, amongst them the cold light of the supermarket's neon tubes added much to his already strong feeling of being out of place.

He had come with this woman because he hadn't wanted to cause anyone any further trouble and because he hadn't seen a reason not to follow her, but he didn't know if he really had any business being with her.

Was she doing this… because of him, or rather… to make sure that he'd be ready to willingly step into that metal abomination at any given moment?

Sooner or later, her way led them to the checkout, which, in turn, was in the proximity of the exit. Since the shop was, as mentioned before, rather small, he could understand every single word of
what these two women who were currently in the process of leaving this establishment were conversing about.

"So you're planning on moving away as well?"

"Yes, as quickly as possible. Who could have thought that this city could become a battlefield?"

"My husband says that at least the children and I should leave for a safer place."

"I've heard that only today, over a hundred people have left the city."

"That doesn't surprise me at all. This city might be a fortress, but these people from Nerv aren't exactly reliable…"

"Who are you telling that…"

Shinji tried his hardest not to look at the pair as they walked past him.

Yes, what exactly was he doing here? Until now, he had been trying to convince himself that even if no one could possibly want him as a person, most people here wanted him as their champion. But not even that appeared to be true.

Why was he in this place if he wasn't even wanted here?

If no one had the slightest bit of faith in him?

However, Misato hadn't failed to hear that conversation, either.

She knew that it would always remain impossible to stop people from gossiping, heck, she could even understand where those two were coming from, but she would have still distinctly preferred it if they had just shut up.

It was just plain counterproductive for Shinji to be forced to hear such things after all he had been through. She had seen for herself just how much the boy had struggled with himself, so that what he was now most likely experiencing struck her as unspeakably ungrateful.

She had to do something about it.

Before long, Misato's car was driving through the outskirts of the mountains that seemed to surround the city, somewhere close to the borders of Tokyo-3.

There might have been a more direct way to her house, but there was something she absolutely had to do here. She owed it to the boy.

At first, she hadn't really thought about it that way because it was part of her job and as such, something she regarded from the bird's eye perspective, looking at the grand schemes and big pictures, but it was a fact that this boy had saved her very own life by contributing to the Angel's defeat, and she had yet to do anything to show her gratitude.

"I hope you don't mind a little detour." She asked her new ward, whose lap she's just used to deposit her bag of groceries.

"It depends…" he answered, hesitantly.

Misato smiled at him warmly. "I think you'll like it."
Said and done: Soon after, the much abused blue car was parked next to a small viewing platform which was equipped with a guardrail and one of these binocular-like things for tourists one could use by inserting some coins.

The complexes of Tokyo-3 lay outstretched before them, streets and tall buildings resplendent in the evening sun. It was quite gigantic a city, completely filling the valley it had been built in.

Given its size, there was surprisingly little ruckus being produced down there. Even the *cicadas* seemed to make more noise than what was supposed the home of millions of people.

In addition, there were those huge, flat, seemingly empty platforms which only added to Shinji's irritation.

"The place looks completely deserted…" But Misato didn't seem particularly concerned about the criticisms her chosen destination had received, confidently checking her watch instead.

"Any moment now."

And she hadn't promised too much: Mere instants after she finished speaking, a shrill klaxon echoed through the city, so loud that it could still be heard up here.

What changed Shinji's somber expression into one of great wonder, however, was what happened next: All those conspicuous empty spots, all these metal plains suddenly opened up like doors or hatches, and out of them, they soon sprouted into the air like mushrooms: skyscrapers! Ginormous skyscrapers with all the cables and antennas they brought with them, dwarfing all the tall buildings Shinji had seen on his way here, as huge as those had already been.

Everything looked so gigantic, so overwhelming…

It was impossible… and yet, there they were, real, proper buildings shining in the sunlight.

"Terrific… The buildings are growing out of the ground!"

Misato just smiled at him in her typical, friendly way.

"Now you know why the city is called a fortress. This is Neo Tokyo 3, our city. And… the city you saved."

Shinji didn't allow himself to indulge that sentiment for long but for the duration of about half a second, but for the first time in his life, he felt like he was right where he was supposed to be.

For most people, this would have been a reason to smile, a sign of betterment, but Shinji was the sort of person who didn't know to grasp happiness when it appeared before him.

Much like he would always keep skipping back to track 25 on his cassette player by the time the next song finished playing, he never could follow one successful step forward or the opening of a new path before him by taking the next step and taking the initiative.

He just didn't dare to believe that this moment was real.

The next and last destination of their little tour was relatively unspectacular compared to the view of the fortress city: A flat in the upper stories of an apartment complex on the edge of the city.

And yet, the reaction it had managed to evoke in Shinji was just as intense, even if said reaction was, by no means on of wonder, but rather more of a crippling awkwardness.
This here was… the private residence of Katsuragi Misato.

She had actually taken him home with her.

Although he had only just met her yesterday.

Knowing neither how to process nor how to cope with nearly everything he'd been exposed to over the past few days, he uncertainly followed her through the dark corridor.

At last, she used her keycard to open the door and release a ray of golden light into the darkness.

Shinji felt the tugs longing to escape from this gloom, into a place where some actual living took place, the first real place he had gotten to see today.

But…

This was yet another location he was foreign to.

"Hey! Looks your stuff has already been brought here!" she stated, her tone as bright as the light she simultaneously stepped into.

It was only natural for her to walk right inside – After all, she lived here.

"Yeah, looks like it. Actually, I just moved in here myself."

He hadn't really had the time to properly notice the multiple cardboard boxes that were waiting for him right next to be door, but he did see the light from within the apartment illuminating them.

She invited him with a smile: "Come on in!"

Sheepishly, Shinji clutched the grocery bag he was still carrying.

"B-But only if I'm… not a bother or anything…"

"Shinji-kun, this is your home now!" She declared in an almost scolding tone. "So drop all that square politeness!"

She… seemed to be serious.

Hesitantly, Shinji placed his feet beyond the automatic door's metal threshold and addressed his hostess, no, flat mate, with an awkward smile: "Uh, here I am."

"Welcome home!"

And the door closed behind him, shutting out the gloom of the night.

"I must admit, it is as teensy bit untidy here, but I hope you don't mind!"

A teensy bit untidy? A teensy bit untidy?

He certainly hadn't expected the home of the cool, professional Captain Katsuragi to look like this, not after he had seen her taking in someone else's kid, pester him with all sorts of advice and fearlessly blazing steadfastly through the streets because she had a job to do, giant monster or no giant monster.

Okay, his expectations of finding this supremely tidy and polished to shine might've been
unrealistic, but it wasn't just that his impression hadn't been correct – He was faced with the diametrical opposite here: Wherever he looked, empty coffee cans, beer cans, bottles of liquor!

En masse! Mountains of them!

The table, covered in empty wrappings and dishes, even a pizza box, half-emptied packing cases between trash bags, piles of paper and articles of clothing, leaving something of value like files or duct tape to be seen here and there, without really standing out from the surrounding chaos.

Not even the floor was spared by the avalanches of filth, being, in places, completely sunken under them just like everything else.

"…She calls this… a teensy bit…?"

"Sorry!" could be heard from the room next door, to where the origin of this tohubohu had retreated to for the purpose of changing into something more comfortable.

"Just stuff the groceries in the fridge, okay?"

"A-Alright…"

Still somewhat perplexed, Shinji decided that it would be best to just follow her request. The apartment seemed too big for one person – There was a joint living- cooking- and dining are with an European-style table in it and a nice calendar on the wall (and, as mentioned before, lots of garbage), a spacious bathroom and what was probably Misato's room… and two other, completely unused rooms one of which was probably going to become his. At least, the place was rather commodious, which made it even more of a feat that Misato had managed to flood it all with junk.

But first, he should probably find the refrigerator, which he promptly did – It was huge, apparently, Nerv paid its employees well – but when he opened it, he couldn't help but gape at the contents.

"…Ice?"

"…Relishes?"

"…And gallons of beer? This can't possibly be all she lives on…" he commented, peeking through a hole in the wall of beer cans, looking distinctly uneasy, if not borderline traumatized.

After a few minutes which he used to carry his boxes inside while she spent them fumbling with her microwave oven, he got a first-hand proof that she did live on instant food alone.

The table was laid – with a colorful salmagundi of all possible and impossible kinds of instant food and every imaginable mutation of canned food.

And the creator of this grotesque masterpiece sat right in front of him, cheerfully slurping the contents of a beer can.

Somehow, he had imagine that she would be… distinctly cooler.

She was so …direct, and he didn't really know how to handle it.

After emptying the beer can in a single gulp, she emitted a high-pitched sound of ecstasy, accompanied by a lopsided grin and perhaps even a few tears of joy.

"Aaaah, moments like these make life worth living!"
And he thought the things he'd seen yesterday were mad.

"Aren't you hungry? You haven't touched your food. Yeah, I know, it's only instant stuff, but believe me, it's really good!"

"I... It's just that... that I'm not used... to having a meal like that..."

It wasn't as much the meal itself as it was the stream of words that accompanied it, that cheerfulness of hers and everything else about her, for that matter, he felt... somewhat intimidated by it all.... Not that he was complaining or anything, after all, he didn't have any right to tell her how to act in her own house...

If only she were a little less... in his face with everything she did.

Alright, that was probably a stupid metaphor, but he really didn't know how-

As if she had just read his mind, Misato put down her beer can for added emphasis and bowed all the way forward over the table.

"Don't be so picky!"

Shinji was forced to back down to avoid her head, including the two strands of hair hanging down from her temples.

Her loud, semi-furious voice hadn't been the only thing to motivate him to withdraw – she was currently closer to kneeling on her chair than she was to sitting on it, which meant that she had come close... closer that anyone else had ever come, not to mention that her casual clothes, consisting of a top and some jeans-hot pants that looked like part of them had been ripped off to make them even shorter, were rather... revealing.

She was probably getting some very good look at the blush on his face, which was there in the first place because his view of the... feminine masses barely hidden beneath her top was just as good, since they were practically hanging into his face.

He could only wonder whether her buttocks were similarly partially visible at the other hand, but that only served to make it all worse.

Her slightly scary tone of voice was probably the main reason, though.

Shinji didn't dare to exhibit the slightest counter reaction, mumbled something close to "Sorry, that wasn't what I meant.", but any defense mechanisms were ultimately unneeded when the expression Misato's still uncomfortably close face changed into a smile.

"I get it. You're just not used to having company while you eat, are you?"

Oh boy, that lady was really well-endowed.

"Y-yeah..."

After a while, Shinji emerged from below the table and listened as Misato explained a few formalities to him, all while she kept building towers of empty beer cans too occupy her hands. A few rounds of Rock-Paper-Scissors (which once again made Shinji wonder what he could have done to anger the goddess of fortune) later, she had made sure that the household chores were "fairly distributed".
"Allright, Shinji-kun, just don't forget that this is your home here, so feel free to use everything here at your leisure…" she ultimately summarized her explanation.

"Apart from myself, of course."

Somehow, Shinji didn't really get the joke of that statement, as much as she fidgeted with her index finger to accentuate it.

"Uh, yes, yes…" he answered, hoping that getting an answer would satisfy her.

Alas, it turned out to have pretty much the opposite effect:

"Hey! Won't you quit saying "Yes" to everything? You're a man and not some gloomy doormat, aren't you?"

Yeah. She had climbed on the table yet again, this time, apparently driven by a burning desire to mess up Shinji's hair. Or to snap his neck and smash in his skull, it was hard to tell.

Now that he was thoroughly confused as to what it was that she wanted from him, he hesitantly offered an uncertain "…Yes?", only releasing himself from his odd-looking posture when she let go of him with a sigh.

"All right, I give up… I think I know the solution to our little problem: Go take a nice bath and just wash your worries away!"

Somehow, she managed half a jump of excitation despite being seated, somewhat resembling a five-year-old blowing out the candles on her birthday cake.

Again, she displayed her dreaded happy-happy-go-lucky index finger.

"A nice bath cleans both body and soul!"

Well, actually, his soul didn't really feel any cleaner by the time its owner found him somewhat self-consciously gazing at the underwear which Misato had hung up to dry in the small room next to the bathroom itself.

Most of it was downright salacious, with frills, lace, semitransparent parts and all sorts of "yummy" colors like deep blue, mysterious black and a rich dark red.

Until now, he'd never seen women's underwear up close except in shop windows and television ads, and much like Misato's "light" casual clothes and pretty much her entire behavior, it made him feel a little… overloaded.

It didn't necessarily take an EVA-battle to expose his nerves to much more stimuli than his puny little brain could process at a time. To escape the feelings of embarrassment this sight subjected him to, Shinji decided to hurry up and enter the bathroom – if only he had known that the next unpleasant surprise was already awaiting him there….

"AAAAHHH! M-Mi-Mi-Mi-Misato-san!" he called, panicked, hastily pulling the curtain between him and the living room aside.

The apartment's owner who had, in the meantime, made herself comfortable by sitting cross-legged on her chair as she occupied herself with yet another can of beer (She had to have built up quite some tolerance over the years) just looked at him with her large, brown eyes, appearing a little puzzled.
"…What's the matter…?"

"There's an… an… an animal in the bathroom!" he spluttered as the critter in question, some sort of big, black-and-white bird with a strange backpack and a couple of red feathers on its head nonchalantly waddled into the room.

"Ah, you mean him." Misato answered blithely, as if it were the most normal thing in the world for outlandish birds to be waddling through the homes of single women and opening a refrigerator's door by pressing a button. (So that's what the extra fridge was for)

To make it all even madder, the bird seemed to have an entire miniature apartment in there, including a TV and a little lamp.

After giving Shinji a look that seemed to be intending to say something among the lines of "C'mon, it's not that much of a big deal." the peculiar little animal withdrew to its habitat.

Shinji, who hadn't thought that anything could shock him after the events of the last two days, kept staring into the creature's direction, his expression bordering on the aftermath of a freshly-acquired trauma.

"I-I've never seen such a weird bird in my life!"

"They were quite common fifteen years ago." Misato explained without a care in the world. "He's a penguin, one of these mutated hot-springs-penguins, to be exact. He also lives here."

If Shinji had known that his sharply dressed flat mate was currently reading a newspaper, he probably would have snapped once and for all, but even as it was, he had come to the conclusion that this old anecdote about how pets would always bear some uncanny resemblance to their owners did have some truth to it.

So much for strange ducks.

In the meantime, Misato had picked up her beer can once again.

"But say, aren't you gonna… cover the front?"

At first, Shinji didn't quite get what she meant, but then, he was forced to realize that there was some little detail he had kind of overlooked when he had stormed right out of the bathroom: He was stark naked and had probably been presenting the full frontal view to Misato for almost a minute.

Not that there was much to present: The youngest scion of the Ikari family tree still had a rather boyish, delicate-looking build, the amount of visible muscle mass being puny at best.

Hastily covering his "parts" with his hands, he did his best to toddle off as fast as he could, the color of his face bearing resemblance to a ripe tomato.

"Don't overdo the cheerful façade…" Misato thought to herself, averting her eyes as her previous hyperactivity revealed itself as a desperate attempts to reach out to the silent, inaccessible youngster.

"Unless you want him to be the one who sees through you…"

By then, Shinji had already relocated himself to the one place where naked people usually belonged: The bathroom.
There, he followed his favorite pastime of staring at the ceiling and brooding, this time in a large bathtub filled with warm water that had been tinted red by the bathing additive he'd put in.

The ceiling of Misato's bathroom had a simple, round lamp hanging from it without many further details to it.

So there he was now, in the bathroom of his new… superior's house.

It was as the world had begun to spin in another direction yesterday.

The eternally monotonous days of his life, the few familiar rooms he'd existed in, it all seemed to be infinitely far away now.

The only thing had had given this foreign world any sort of center or something for him to hold on to was this complete stranger…

"Misato Katsuragi…" he mumbled, lost in thought.

"She doesn't seem to be a bad person…"

Yes, she had been nice to him so far, but her attitude was just a bit too much for him.

Then again, it would've been easier to list the things in this place that weren't.

He had just allowed himself to be dragged along, and simply done what everyone else had asked of him – that tended to lower the odds that someone would get angry at him or that he himself would get into trouble, but actually, none of this had anything to do with him or what he wanted.

He'd never wanted to come here in the first place.

Misato might've told him that bathing was cleaning for both body and soul, but as far as he was concerned, he couldn't shake off the impression that the silence and solitude of the bathroom gave his darker thoughts the fertilizer they needed to bloom as they pleased, thoughts of the horrors of that battle and his father's rejection… or that injured girl that his trains of thought seemed to come back to over and over again.

There was something about her that just wouldn't let him go, some realization that was practically spitting itself onto his face, a sense of recognition that was always there like a slight overlap of another face over hers, a face whose owner he still couldn't name.

"So, how is Rei? You visited her at the hospital today, didn't you?"

With a clipboard and several documents in her hands, Dr. Ritsuko Akagi was standing a few steps behind commander Ikari in the ruins of a devastated control room, in front of shattered glass panes behind which the sparsely illuminated silhouette of a colossal giant could be glimpsed. Evoking the image of Gulliver as he was tied down by the Lilliputians, the colossal Cyclops was held by a multitude of restraints: The classic handcuffs were complimented by some sort of muzzle and, last but not least, the long, green cross-like structure sticking out of the titan's back.

"There is no problem." Ikari answered to his co-worker's question, his hands placed in his pockets and his gaze transfixed on the orange monster.

"The only thing that counts is that EVA 00 is reactivated as soon as possible. I'll get a permit from the committee immediately."
"And what about your son? He seems to be mentally unstable..." Dr. Akagi added, showing some worry after all.

"That won't be a problem. His state gives us an excellent justification to reactive Unit Zero."

"All right... Let's hope that Captain Katsuragi will have a positive influence in him..."

"Ah, Ikari, there you are." Fuyutsuki commented, seemingly considering the few documents on his orderly desk something to be concerned about.

"...did you speak with Akagi?"

"Yes. Everything will continue just as planned."

"I wouldn't call the possibility of an escaped test subject roaming the streets 'just as planned'. These reports about a possible series killer disconcert me. Do you think...?"

Ikari displayed no visible change of expression.

"The killing method fits, but the behavior pattern doesn't. The defective clone slaughtered almost every human it came across; this killer of yours seeks out his victims in their houses and operates with stealth. It's no surprise for such delinquents to exist in a society that only just rebuilt from a collapse never really recovered from. People like to blame scapegoats or search for preventable reasons to 'explain' such individuals, because they fear that just about any human has the capacity for such behavior. Their fear to admit the fragility of their existence leads them to create the delusion that there is a way to protect themselves... humans really are sad, sad creatures."

"But theoretically speaking, there's nothing to prove that it isn't our defective close, is there? We've already begun to enact our scenario... we can't risk any more unforeseen occurrences, Ikari."

"There won't be any. It can't affect our plan just by going on a killing spree in the city. If it is the clone, we'll have it caught soon enough."

"Are you really sure about that, Ikari?"

In any case, I've looked through the transfer requests. Since this installation is to be our main front, it's only natural that the bulk of our personnel is being transferred here, but these four files are all the relevant ones... even if the first two are pure formality. They're the official transfer requests for Inspector Kaji Ryoji and the Second Child."

"They're approved, of course. What about the others...?"

"First, we have a certain Mitsurugi Minoru who wants to be transferred here from Bethany Bay."

"Mitsurugi? The one who was involved with designing the Cocytus- containment systems? Wasn't he supposed to stay in Archeron? They do have Unit Five, but judging from the Data we have been given so far..."

"It's half under construction, I know. Mitsurugi lists "personal reasons" as the cause for his request... he has technically finished his work, Japan is his home, and the Arctic isn't exactly the ideal place to live..."

"In the end, most people value their own interest the most... let him come here, his presence here will be beneficial to our plan and we will undoubtedly find a way to put his abilities to good use."
What about the fourth request…?

"It is from a certain Asahina Najiko from the security division who currently works in the United States."

"And how is she relevant?"

"I think that might be one of those occasions where a picture says more than a thousand words…"

Several hundreds of meters above his father's office, the younger Ikari lay in what was to be his bed from now on, in a room that had been labeled 'Shin-chan's room' with a provisional piece of paper, some duct tape and a little heart which Misato had drawn on the former.

With his trusty Walkman in his hand which he had painstakingly dug for in the many cardboard boxes which filled the chaotic-looking and, most of all, unfinished-looking room, he lay underneath this unfamiliar blanket which kept the warmth beneath it from leaving, but hadn't yet reached a particularly cozy temperature itself.

He had stuffed the earpieces into his ears and closed his eyes to retreat from that crazy, foreign world that had done all it could to expose him to much more than he could take, at least for a while.

One could close one's eyes, but without technological aid, sounds and noises were something one was constantly subjected to, the racket and gossiping and complaining of the people around him never ceased to torment him. He guessed that it was a survival thing, since people needed to wake up when something noisy and dangerous came their way, but right now, all he wanted was a little peace and quiet which he couldn't have unless he kept his ears busy with something other than his surroundings.

So he lay there, always listening to the same song, sometimes the next one, but never the one after that. At very last when Track 26 was over, he would press the rewind button.

After a while, it got hard to keep his eyes shut, since he wasn't really tired and thinking to hardly about it (And how could he be tired already? It had only been a few hours since he had awakened in the hospital. ) and so, he gazed at the small green satchel he'd brought with him and placed right next to the door directly after his arrival with one half-opened blue eye.

The music tape ran and ran and ran, and he stared and stared and stared.

"Yes, it quite the traumatic experience for him… To be honest, I don't think that he'll ever agree to do it again…"

"But you know that it is part of your job to make sure that he's usable, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm afraid that I'm not really getting through to him…"

"You're already complaining? It was only today that you dramatically announced that you would take him in…"

"Oh, just shut up!" Misato snapped back at here, ending the phone call at the push of a button and placing the gadget in a safe distance from the bathtub she was currently sitting in, strangely with her hair still tied up.
The not really that genuine anger soon made way to an expression of deep thought.

"At first, even I must've seen Shinji-kun as some tool for us to use… I'm becoming just like Ritsuko…

But still, it all just fits too perfectly… First, they find the third child of all sudden without mentioning it in any report whatsoever, and then, the fourth angel shows up, as if to respond to that, not to mention that commander Ikari's own son has been chosen to pilot the EVA… Somehow, it all just reeks of conspiracies…

And that's not the only thing that's strange…" the NERV-employee commented in her thoughts, staring up at the ceiling as if her young ward had already rubbed off on her.

"I've dedicated by life to battling the Angels… and this was our first great victory… so why… am I not enjoying it?"

In the interim, Shinji had turned onto his back, but hadn't done much else. Most of his attention was, rather like his new guardian's, reserved for the ceiling above his head.

It was a pretty simple, unadorned rectangular ceiling with a small lamp hanging down in the middle, once again radically different from the one he'd gotten used to in his teacher's mansion.

"Another unfamiliar ceiling…" he mumbled pensively, putting the thoughts that had haunted him for those last two day that had seemed like a single, bizarre long dream to him, into words.

"It's only natural, I guess… after all, there isn't a single place in this whole city that I know…"

Why should he expect to find a familiar ceiling in a foreign city? There were millions of people living in this city and he was only one of them, alone in this strange, unfamiliar place he hardly belonged to.

Misato had said that this was supposed to be his home now, but to be honest, he felt just as out of place here as he did everywhere else.

"Why am I here?"

His thoughts and worries, that had already been washed out of their hiding places in the ridges of his brain would no longer let themselves be suppressed or pushed aside in the room's silent darkness, so that just one Image of EVA 01, thought up amongst his deliberations about his reason to be here, showed itself to be enough to shatter the inner Wall he had erected around yesterday's memories.

Not those of his arrival, his father's icy welcome and that Ayanami Rei girl who kept dancing through his thoughts, he saw those clearly before him.

It was other, special memories…

Horrible memories which eclipsed everything else he'd been put through.

Memories of a battle, of loud, hammering noises and ponding pain, rhythmical shots that threatened to drive his skull apart…

He could still here the reverberation of their echo, as if they were here and now.

BAM. BAM. BAM.
BAM. BAM. BAM.

At point-blank range. Again and again. Straight into the face. Shinji kept frantically clutching his eye and the part of his skull that felt like it could burst apart at any moment… he could practically hear it crack – or was it that of Unit One?

He couldn't even think about it anymore, overcome so much pain, agony and suffering that he felt like he might just explode from the inside at any moment, tortured by a foreign object in parts of his skull that felt perfectly intact to his fingers – or had they just cracked open under the pressure from the Angel's steady bombardment?

With his feet hanging over the ground and his hands seemingly both hanging down uselessly and pressed to his skull, there wasn't anything he could do, and even if there were, the unending torment hardly left him any time to think.

If only someone would help him.

Oh, how he longed for someone to take him into their arms and tell him that everything was all right.

But such a person didn't exist. He was all alone in this thing and he knew all too well that no one was coming to save him.

The angel mercilessly continued its assault, and its efforts were rewarded: After many fruitless attempts, it had succeeded in piercing the skull on the EVA, its attack bursting through the other side, throwing the violet giant against a building.

Without resistance, the EVA instantly slumped down, motionless save for the fountain of blood spraying from both holes in the biological machine's head.

But even that didn't last forever, leaving the many instruments connected to the control center to pick up only one single thing as they scanned EVA 01: Complete silence.

Now, if one were to define Silence as the absence of words rather than that of sound, if one were to restrict the meaning of the word to a lack of information exchange, then it could be said that the inside of Shinji's head was silent as well. His thoughts failed to take the shape of words, all that filled his skull was an absolute mental outcry that didn't leave the blackness of the entry plug through the pilot's mouth, but very much through the evangelion's thought interface.

The pain that reached Shinji through the link was reflected back as a chilling cry of pain after it had traversed each and every fiber of the fourteen-year-old pilot.

The rapid stream of agony was so powerful that many of the barriers that had hindered the flow of thoughts, sensations and emotions between man and the alleged machine until now were mercilessly torn down.

The wish to be heard, to be delivered from that horrific suffering was just too strong for Shinji to care that the usually so tightly shut barriers of his being were ripped open, revealing his innermost to the monstrous human creation.

He was just that desperate, his wish for his screaming not to go unheard was just that strong.

And his prayers were answered.

There was a response.
Somewhere in the depths of the vast emptiness inside the Evangelion that Shinji had filled with his fears and wishes, there was a stirring, a presence that had been scattered for a long time, floating within itself, was recognizing something that convinced the sparks of its existence to piece it back together, to awaken, to spread its arms and to call his name like a distant heartbeat, much like that of a mother must sound to her unborn child.

And then, it all happened incredibly fast. He felt is coming over him, at first like a gentle embrace from behind, but then, like an entire torrent, flowing inside him, a vast stream of something he could only describe as "stimuli" for he couldn't tell whether it was pressure, warmth, cold, pain, arousal or just all at once.

With eyes wide open, he felt his innermost being flooded by that faraway heartbeat that seemed to follow his own like an echo.

Heart and heart, soul and soul in perfect unison.

A flawless trinity of a boy that wanted to be saved, a beast that wanted to preserve itself and this brilliant surge of pleasant warmth, those arms he was unconditionally welcomed into, a harmonious concord that had melted into one single will that nothing could any longer oppose.

From this point onwards, he could no longer say which actions were his own, which ones were Unit One's and which had come from her.

He honestly couldn't tell the difference anymore.

The light returned to the violet beast's eyes.

Now liberated from the limitations of its incomplete existence, the unified entity was quick to dispose of the pathetic restraints holding its jaws together, unleashing a spine-chilling, inhuman scream that lay somewhere between the roar of a beast and the sound of an engine powering up.

And that was just the beginning.

The flowing, organic movement which the creature used to catapult itself 50 meters through the air bore little resemblance to the younger Ikari's ill-fated attempts at walking.

Fueled by the most ancient of instincts, the drive to preserve oneself and one's progeny, the entity was a being of brute force: Violently throwing the enemy to the ground with the sheer force of its impact, the howling predator attacked immediately, hitting and pulling on the overpowered angel's mask-like face, finding more than enough time to disfigure it, break it and even pull some bits off in the time that it took for the angel to recover from what bore striking resemblance to a state of shock and throw the attacker away with its powerful arms.

All the same, the manmade abomination landed on its feet like a cunning feline, and immediately turned back to its victim, charging it like a berserker, barred of traits that would have allowed it restraint or hesitation.

"We have won." Fuyutsuki commented in the command center.

And indeed, the violet colossus didn't leave the overwhelmed angel the chance to erect is massive green upper body.

The son of Adam, however, didn't give up so easily: Exuding an avian cry of exertion, he managed to twist himself back forward, and even if he was forced to support himself with his arms at first, his efforts were enough: enough to pull up the wall of his self between himself and his enemy to
ward it off.

The unified entity ran into a wall.

With something that could very well be labeled as determination, the heavenly messenger's glowing red eyes stared through its wall, down at the human creation.

But the horned giant was far from defeated.

Like a muscular sailor pulling up his sleeves for a brawl to expose his tattoos, the unified being simply decided that it would need both its hands to deal with this particular enemy.

With almost sickening ease, the being regenerated its arm and grunted demonstratively into the angel's direction, who realized, to his utmost shock, that this perversion which the lilim had crafted from the desecrated body of their own ancient mother, having defiled it further by forcing it into this misshapen form that resembled both their own, pathetic form and that of the angel's own honored father, (that alone was more than enough to the creation of this monster wrong and blasphemous in the angel's eyes) was actually capable of projecting the wall of its self, just like one of his own kind!

After one or two lillim had sacrificed their souls to feed the hollow aberration, that is.

And this living sin, this twisted mockery of all creation, was actually able to grab Sachiel's wall and tear it apart without much of an effort.

It would come. It didn't fail to announce this intention with another animalistic war cry.

Sachiel wasted no time and sent a preemptive strike consisting of a laser beam from his eyes towards the enemy, a mighty, destructive discharge whose cross-shaped fire pulled down any bizarre creations of lilim origin that crossed its path.

Buildings and other results of the fruit of knowledge weren't something that he could assign a meaning and a purpose; The concept of shelter was alien to a creature that was gifted with unlimited energy by the fruit of life, something abstract that Sachiel, who had mostly acted as an attacker and a seeker, hadn't really concerned himself with.

His goals were to find Adam and destroy this perversion...

But it was all for naught.

His energy beam hadn't as much as scratched the gigantic cyborg.

Unfazed, it grabbed one of the angel's hands after the other, as if it were picking up some garbage, and broke them apart like wooden sticks.

It made sure to squeeze every last drop of blood out of them, perhaps as a revenge for the broken arm earlier.

EVA 01 didn't leave the angel any respite; the cracking of his arms was directly followed by a devastating kick that sent the messenger skidding across the city's rough ground until the collision with a particularly tall skyscraper brought it to a halt.

But Unit One knew no mercy: The biomechanical construct charged the enemy of the world like a madman with an axe, making him and the few buildings behind him slide several blocks just with the sheer impact force of jumping on him with its whole body.
The helpless, battered angel's torment, however, was far from over: Unswerving, EVA 01 rose anew. Being itself a celestial being or a least closely related to them, Unit One instinctively recognized the meaning of the red sphere in the angel's center.

It was a partially transparent, crystalline structure with an uncertain glow coming from its inside, the part of the angel's body that, comparable to and yet very different from a human brain served as the vessel of the soul.

In other words, it was the part of the body whose integrity had to be violated to end the angel's life. A fragile being such as a human would die if one were to stop their brain's supply of oxygen by otherwise damaging the rest of their body, but a being carrying the fruit of life was independent of things such as food or oxygen, only more "direct" measures would suffice to destroy the core. Such as brute force.

Two merciless punches hit the angel's crystalline heart, shifting it within the already damaged body, until the Evangelion decided that it was no use and resolved to put one of the ribs that were conveniently sticking out of Sachiel's body to an unorthodox use.

The EVA pulled at both sides of the EVA's ribcage, partially dislocating the core from its place within the angel's green, rubber-like flesh by tearing part of it free.

Causing further bleeding, it managed to rip out one of his ribs, using it to stab at the very core it was once supposed to protect, screaming in mad bloodlust.

The very first blow yielded cracks, and Unit One kept going at it.

In his desperation, Sachiel gathered the strength to raise its half-crumbled head, but it was already too late. The human creation had already taken the upper hand, and the messenger knew that this injury to its core was a wound he would never recover from.

But if reaching his father was impossible, then he could at least serve him by blowing this horrifying perversion off the face of his planet.

The angel wrapped his limbs around the enemy and turned himself inside-out, forming a firm, dark sphere around the Evangelion's upper body.

Sachiel's voice that was more of an extension of its still overwhelming, alien presence that invited resonance was still as steely as it had been in the beginning, perhaps a last gesture of defiance and pride.

....YOU.....COME...WITH.....ME...

And then, he was no longer able to hold the barriers of his self and its body swelled until it burst into fireworks of blood, dwarfed by a huge, cross-shaped explosion that followed the core's ultimate destruction which leveled a sizeable portion of the city and catapulted particles of the angel's liquefied corpse high into the atmosphere where they refracted the starlight to form the covenant's seven-colored emblem, the double rainbow, as they already began to return to the newly-formed crater as thick, viscous drops, almost like a rain of blood and gore.

And yet, the sacrifice was for naught: As soon as the smoke began to clear, the Evangelion could be seen wading through the bloody rain, completely intact, with its green fluorescent ornaments evoking the image of a savage warrior's war paint.

Evangelion Unit 01 had been victorious.
The giant's steps didn't come to a stop before it had reached the still cooling, but nonetheless standing parts of the city, just outside the crater, its lone eye still glowing like a beacon.

It was only now that it would have made any sense to speak of a separate, independently acting being with the designation "Ikari Shinji" with the body inside the entry plug as his borders, regarding the interface through his own eyes.

He still sat there with his eyes wide open, still feeling those foreign emotions "hanging" inside him, still mixing with his own in a way that made it hard to tell them apart as he was still deeply connected to the system.

But what he was also connected to once again was, at least judging by the technicians' reports he was now hearing, NERV headquarters.

This mind-numbing experience, however, had left whatever parts of him were responsible for processing information threadbare, so that the flush of words coming from the intercom barely even reached his consciousness.

The knowledge about the events that just transpired was still lingering in his mind, like any extraordinary memory would, but he couldn't put it into words.

It was penned in a language of simple feelings and sensations that a more or less rational consciousness could hardly access, in a way resembling recollections of one's early childhood.

And yet, that information still managed to "occupy" him somehow, blocking his thoughts.

The next stimulus to truly reach him and wake him from his dream-like in-between-state was the loud noise of an armor plate crashing into the ground.

Even if he tentatively glanced down, half dazed and half bashful, he did it out of some sort of habit, for he didn't need to do so in order to tell that it was the half of EVA 01's head armor that had been previously thoroughly demolished by the now deceased angel. To him, it felt like it was his very own cheek the metal had slid off from.

But… if that metal sliding off had felt like… some sort of helmet being removed, then… just what was beneath?

Next to him was a building with a reflective glass façade, and even though it was night, the explosion's afterglow provided more than enough light for him to see… to he could technically take a look.

Yet somehow, he felt uneasy, almost as if he shouldn't look.

Still… a boy has got to be allowed to glance at the cool technologic insides of his own combat robot, shouldn't he?

So he turned his head to get a good view of his robot…

Except… it wasn't a robot.

What he saw was, in spite of all the cybernetic accessories squeezing it into place, deformed FLESH, a grotesquely warped face with nostrils and an ugly hole where its eye should be.

Speechless at first, he then gave off a soft sound of mortification staring at the brownish, mangled flesh of Evangelion Unit One… until it began to bestir itself.
It was the eye.

The EYE.

Oh God, the EYE.

Fresh meat bubbled from the black hole in the EVAs face, swiftly straightening itself out, only to slit open again to reveal new, pink flesh from which a green eye that was covered will all too little skin sprung, immediately turning in what appeared to be his direction.

Shinji stared.

Unit One stared back.

He saw Unit One through its own eyes, and its eyes moved so that their reflection would look like it was looking at him...and in spite of all physical laws, barriers and plates of armor, it saw him...

And he saw that.

He saw himself through the eyes of the beast, through its thoughts and perceptions...

All things considered, what he'd been forced to witness was just so grotesque that he couldn't think of any suitable reaction other than to keep screaming until his throat failed to produce any more sound.

Deeply disturbed, Shinji stared at the ceiling with his eyes wide open, incapable of handling the memories' sudden return.

Shaken to the core, he rolled onto his side and curled into a ball, his stare now directed at the wall rather than the ceiling.

In the following half hour, he moved exactly once, to cover himself with a blanket.

Even when someone knocked on the door, he failed to react, in the same way that a computer with a blue screen would ignore any of its user's attempt to move the mouse around or try out any repertoire of key combinations.

"Shinji-kun...? May I come in?" Misato asked, her voice serious and heavy, purged of the almost hyperactive cheerfulness she had worn for the rest of the day.

He only noticed that she eventually entered on her own accord when no reply came because of the light that fell in from the hallway through the door she had opened.

"I have... forgotten to tell you something..." she began, honest and forthright.

Right now, it wouldn't have been an overstatement to say that he was frankly incapable of turning around to face her, but the tone of her voice practically carried a warm smile with it.

He hadn't thought that she could sound like this, neither the 'cool' head of the operations department nor the sloppy beer appreciator.

She sounded so... honest and... caring and warm...

Her voice... touched something inside of him, her words gave him something that he had forgotten about a long time ago, something he'd nonetheless missed bitterly all along.
It might have been attention or affection, perhaps of the maternal kind, or just simple old love, in any case, Shinji hadn't received it for so long that he could no longer as much as name it.

All he could do was to keep listening to Misato's melodious sentences:

"You did a very praiseworthy thing yesterday.
You were very brave… and everyone here is deeply in your debt…
You have all the right to be proud of yourself.
Sweet Dreams, Shinji-kun."

Yes, he thought that he'd once known this feeling, a long, long time ago… Maybe… maybe he should just… give this place a try, maybe… something would really change if he just… gave all of this a go…

"Hang in there."

Yes, maybe.

He could still feel the chill that had been left by the horrors he'd witnessed yesterday deep within his bones, and those terrifying experiences alone should have been enough of a reason for him to leave this strange, frightening place behind him as quickly as possible, to get away from all those new people that he felt so insecure around.

But what Misato had just said had made him feel… supported, if only just a little.

She was still a complete stranger, but she seemed to… know the way.

He… he didn't know what to think of her yet.

Maybe he was just imagining things, or maybe she was just trying to deceive him because of her job…

Or maybe, that little bit of support was all he'd been needing all this time…

Was it genuine emotions, foolish illusions or overblown hopes that left him behind with this feeling of ambivalence?

What gave him that impression that he wasn't sure if he wanted to leave this place or not?

What was it that left him full of this emptiness that pulled at the torn remains of his inner universe?

As it was, he was here, and in this strange, unreal place… Misato was the closest to a "safe" person he could cling to, the only real human in this city, the only one to offer him as much as a spark of warmth…

In any case, he would stay here… at least, for the time being.

At that time, Shinji couldn't have known yet that he wasn't the only one who had made himself at home that evening.

If throwing a flat into total disarray, knocking over the couch, ripping the curtains apart, plundering the fridge like an animal, leaving its contents scattered at over the place with bite marks on them,
leaving the door open and reducing the previous owners to a bloody pile in a corner deserved that label, that is. It certainly wasn't everyone's ideal vision of how to move into a new home.

The corpus delicti, a huge kitchen knife, was still stuck in a woman's corpse when the perpetrator emerged from the shower, stark naked.

Her long, blue hair was still damp and as such, still partially clinging to her impossible body.

At first, one may have thought that she was on her way to one of the bedrooms, but then, her steps stopped abruptly before the previous owners' corpses as she turned towards them.

Eying them with a scrutinizing glance, the escaped test subject extended her arm towards them, and if to answer her, a motion seemed to pass through the corpses, a sudden jolt as if they had somehow been activated.

The dismembered bodies twitched a little before they practically exploded, soiling the floor that had already been sullied with their blood with the reddish-orange liquid their murderer's might had reduced them to.

But the entity skeptically narrowed her eyes; Only the heads and torsos had properly exploded, and they had still left something of a crust, with the limbs appearing virtually untouched.

"This will have to improve… significantly."

Chapter End Notes

(1) I'm not comfortable referring to sentient beings such as the Angels as "it", (After all, a number of them displays curiosity or attempt communication and one even goes as far as romancing the main character) but I figured that I sort of had to do so as long as I was writing from the perspective of the human characters. The pronoun flip is supposed to coincide with a flip in perspective, an interesting narrative technique I wanted to try out after seeing it in Naruto (Kyuubi vs. Pein) and Bleach (Ulquiorra vs. Tranformed!Ichigo) of all places, a situation where the party you were initially supposed to root for becomes something so inhuman that it's the antagonist, (usually the sort of antagonist that is ruthless but not monstrous /can still be reasoned with), who makes a better PoV character and thus gets the thought bubbles… of course here, where the audience knows the outcome, you don't get that effect that the reader wonders whom they actually want to win, but the point I wanted to get across is that between Sachiel and a berserking EVA 01, Sachiel is the least terrifying of the two. As for which pronouns I'll use with the remaining Angels, should the need arise, I freely admit that I am guessing. Of course, "it" isn't that accurate for Unit One, either, but again, perspective, neither Sachiel nor our poor traumatized Shin-chan know that (yet.)

(2) Yes, I personally support the theory that the pilot is, at least partially involved in a Berserk, for various reasons that I'll detail if you want me to. Everyone puts their own interpretations into their FFs, never stopped me from reading any.

(3) As for the much debated subject of Adam as a mother/father, I'm going with that Anno interview in "Shinzo/parano" where he talks of all the oedipal constructs within the series and names Adam as a paternal figure in the background.
(4) This Chapter also saw the first mentions of my OCs Mitsurugi and Asahina. Don't worry; they're intended as minor characters, so feel free to tell me if they ever get annoying. I introduced them to explore certain themes and fill some blank spots we know some unseen NERV and/or SEELE personnel must've filled, and to bring about certain situations with the main Characters… Mitsurugi, in particular (who also has a son who will be playing a role of his own), is intended as a foil/contrast for Gendo, which means he has some virtues Gendo lacks… and, as it will turn out much later, he lacks some of Gendo's virtues.

(5) This is about the average chapter size, I think.

(6) If neither of this has turned you off, you might look forward to Chapter 05: [Judgement]
07: [Judgment]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If you wouldn't mind, I would like it blew
And If you wouldn't mind, I would like it loose
And If you wouldn't care, I would like to leave
And If you wouldn't mind, I would like to breathe
Is there another reason for your stain?
Could you believe who we knew was stress and strain?
Here is another word that rhymes with shame
You could do anything
-Nirvana, 'Blew'

Excerpt from a composition by highschool student Suzuhara Touji:

"My little sister was injured in the incident. She's only in second grade! And the worst is, it wasn't even the enemy that caused her injuries, it was that crazy purple robot that was supposed to be on our side! I can't believe this ridiculous story any more than I can forgive it!

If I ever meet any of those useless fuckwads who built the robot, I swear I'm gonna make them feel my anger and my sister's pain!"

It all began when he moved in.

In the first nights after his arrival at the Katsuragi residence, Shinji's dreams had been more vibrant than ever before; His time of rest had been filled with wild, intense visions which, at times, had seemed much more real than the fast, ridiculous mind-numbing moments that he called his waking hours and trudged through like a sleepwalker, nothing more than a small, unimportant detail in background of a larger stage setting, the kind that could be left out without anybody noticing.

He supposed that it made sense – His teacher had once told him that dreams were a byproduct of the subconscious processing the events of the day, and frankly, the most recent happenings had left Shinji with a lot to process, prompting his brain to produce an according variety of ejecta:

There were gruesome nightmares filled with angels, evangelions and excruciating pain; Distorted scraps of his early childhood that managed to terrify him to no end when he was asleep, but refused to make any sort of sense when he wasn't, the sort of dreams which were to be expected of an at least physically healthy 14-year-old, mostly involving a certain sparsely dressed enthusiastic beer-consumer whose assets he'd already been in, uh…. contact with a couple of times as the starring role, and, most likely the worst, those dreams that were filled to the brim with his father's dark, broad-shouldered silhouette, his stone face and the reflective surface of his glasses.
Over and over again, this girl, this Ayanami Rei or whatever she was called would turn up in those
dreams, in all sorts of different contexts and places, like his mind was an old, derelict mansion or
castle and she was the ghost haunting it.

And then, there was that dream.

A certain, very specific dream that kept returning, always leaving him with the feeling of having it
seen countless times, kept dancing through his consciousness, even as all the other dreams receded
to an almost normal level within the first two weeks or so.

Even when he had it for the first time – that is, the first time he could remember – there had been
this uncomfortable sense of familiarity.

The dreams weren't always identical, but always followed a similar pattern and never came without
that strong sense of déjà-vu.

At first, there was the distant sound of ocean surf as it was usually heard on a beach.

Sometimes, this was all there was, an endless shoreline stretching through an endless white
expanse like it belonged to some minimalistic dawning, just waves meeting nonexistent land for
half an eternity until he finally woke up.

But from time to time, there would be more, like a pungent stench in the air or the feel of the
ground beneath his body, allowing him to discern that he wasn't just seeing this scenery from some
kind of bird's eye view like he was watching a movie, but actually physically involved.

He was wearing his usual school uniform, the black pants, the tightly-strapped belt, the white shirt
that was partially stuffed into the afore mentioned pants, his ugly, white trainers and the blue
undershirt – and for some reason, each and every of those articles of clothing was completely
drenched in some warm liquid which spread more of that scent that seemed to dominate this entire
setting… It was almost… like blood.

Often, this would be the part where he woke up, but when he didn't, this was usually when his
dream-self began to stir and open his eyes.

Above him was the infinite, jet-black canopy with a gargantuan red streak stretching across. It
seemed to be in the process of dispersing, like a drop of paint sprayed into a glass of water.

Shinji turned his head just a little; before him lay the most surreal of sights: Humongous, grey,
cross-shaped monoliths were sticking out of the landscape without any particular pattern to them,
surrounded by the dented, battered remains of buildings and metal structures; the last scraps of
civilization.

Even the very ground and the few clouds that could be glimpsed appeared to be burnt and, perhaps
the single most bizarre thing… wasn't that a woman's forearm on the horizon?

Shinji sat up, taking more of his blasted surroundings into his field of vision.

He didn't even know what to think.

It was as if he'd been thrown into one of Dali's paintings while he had been asleep.

The only thing he recognized was the crimson, stinking ocean, but that did nothing to detract from
the desolation of this scenery.
Shinji kept looking around, but the one and only living thing in close proximity appeared to be himself.

Hesitantly, he rose to his feet, inhaling the suffocating stench of his surroundings.

He was now standing on his own two legs, but how did that even help him in a place like this?

There was nothing for him to walk towards, no place that could bring him any sort of advantage if he should manage to reach it.

It occurred to him to search for someone, but given the desolation out here, he might as well save himself the effort, as it was very likely to go to waste, Shinji was still unable to spot anything living and neither did he mistake himself for someone with the capacity to seek it out.

He didn't even really know who to search for, anyways, maybe his father?

Yeah sure, as if the ever busy commander of Nerv had any reason to be in a place like this… it's not like he was going to come looking for his son.

He didn't think that there was a single person in this world who viewed him as important enough for him or her to enter this lifeless wasteland just to search for him.

And even if his father were here, would he really do much but go about his way without even turning to check whether his son was following him or not?

How would that really be different from being all alone? Wasn't it pretty much the same, except without the addition of having to constantly feel his father's rejection?

No, it was probably for the better that his father wasn't here.

Being alone was better.

And still, he could not help but task himself the same questions all over again as he let himself sink back into the sand in resignation:

What in the world could he possibly have done to end up in such an empty, desolate, horrible place?

Why wasn't anyone… with him?

And whenever Shinji awoke from this particular dream, some part of his existence would be deeply convinced that he had witnessed this particular scene thousands of times, over and over again. But not enough with that, even the ceiling above him which he'd only just gotten used to would appear oddly familiar after finishing the dream, as if he'd spent sheer eternities staring at it.

His room in Misato's apartment, Misato's voice intruding from some other corner of the house, it all seemed so… not wrong to him, he was almost tempted to say that there was another voice missing.

But he would always dismiss those addle impressions as his imagination, possibly amplified by the aftereffects of the latest synch tests, and he never mentioned it to anyone, as they would always subside within moments of his awakening.

Déjà vu was a fairly common phenomenon, after all.
"So, did you get the latest surveillance reports on the Third Child?" Dr. Akagi asked her colleague from the operations division.

The conversation came to brief halt as the ski-lift-like construction which was currently transporting the two women to a section of their base that currently consisted of little more than frameworks produced something of a screeching sound.

It was only when the contraption had quieted down again that Misato replied:

"Yes, I did."

"Let me guess: They're lying somewhere beneath your mountains of junk, still unread."

"Very funny."

"So it's true?"

"Of course not! At least not exactly… I did skim through them, but I don't think reading them properly is even necessary. Shinji-kun hardly spends any time outside his room, anyway… And in any case, I don't think his private life is really any of our business… Maybe we should keep out of it as much as we can…"

"You're his guardian and ensuring his operational readiness is part of your job. Wasn't this exactly how you justified this to the commander?"

"Yeah, I know but somehow I… imagined this would be easier. I can't really seem to get through to him…"

"So much for "I can totally handle the boy."…"

"I kind of thought that he… just needs a hug… - Not a literal one, of course, before you get that kind of thoughts again…"

"I wasn't getting any sort of thoughts before you made that remark. " the head of the science department replied poisedly.

Misato sighed. "In any case, I thought he was simply lonely and that a little bit attention and company would fix him, but it seems like it's not that simple at all…"

"How's school?" the scientist asked. "Has he gotten used to his new classmates yet?"

"Well, he says that there's no problem so far, but personally, I'm not really convinced… I don't think he got any calls yet."

"Calls?" Dr. Akagi raised an eyebrow.

"For obvious reasons, I got him a cellphone when he first moved in, but so far, I haven't seen him using it, and I haven't heard anyone calling, either. I'm afraid that he might not have any friends at all… and he won't even talk about it…"

"If you ask me, I don't think any of this is your fault… Shinji-kun just doesn't seem the type to forge new bonds easily… have you ever heard of the hedgehogs's dilemma?"

"Hedgehogs? Those thorny ones?"

"Well, if two hedgehogs have the desire to get close to each other, they get something of a
problem. The closer they come together, the more they'll hurt each other with their thorns…

I think that Shinji-kun is this introverted because he's simply afraid of being hurt…"

"Yeah but… someday he's going to have to understand that one can only learn how to keep the proper distance by opening oneself up from time to time, even if that involves risking to be hurt… it's just another part of growing up…

Oh, and Ritsuko?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have any clue if we're going to get the money to properly renovate the b-wing anytime soon?"

The fake blonde took another drag on her cigarette, amused about the sudden turning away from the philosophic topics.

"Well, right now, all the money's being put into the maintenance and armament of the EVAs. Everything else will have to wait."

"Tell that to my freezing butt…"

By now, the iridescent flicker of colors of the activation sequence failed to yield as much as a wink from Shinji.

For the last weeks, he had been seeing them almost every other day.

They had left him to rest on the day after the battle, and Misato had been able to enforce that he'd be left alone on the next day after as well, on the grounds that it was of utmost importance to make sure that his nervous system had fully recovered, given that he was currently the only available pilot.

The same reason, however, was used to escort him back to headquarters on the very next day afterwards – As they were currently forced to rely on him, it was imperative to make sure that he was actually reliable, that is, to begin his training.

And since his first attempt to move the Eva had ended with him inelegantly falling flat on his face, Misato hadn't disagreed.

Before he knew, he found himself permanently squeezed into the role of EVA 01’s designated pilot without anyone really asking him.

Admittedly, it wasn't as if had really done much protesting against it, but even if he had complained, what did the odds of anyone seriously giving a damn about it really look like?

In addition to that, there was that little, naïve part of him that hoped that his staying here would actually make a difference and wished to somehow participate in the lives of both Misato and his father.

Not that he would ever dare to as much as think those foolish hopes out loud.

That would only damn him a feeling of bitter disappointment when he made the first of his inevitable mistakes.
In any case, his training had begun on the third day of his stay in Tokyo-3, even if the word "training" was little more than the official designation at first – initially, his trips to Nerv headquarters had mostly numerous physical examinations and tests waiting for him.

Those hadn't bothered him that much; he was even allowed to keep listening to his music half the time.

It was only later that they began connecting him to the Eva on a regular basis, be it directly or indirectly through test chambers or simulation bodies.

At first, the primary purpose of those exercises was to get him used to synching with the violet titan and increase his performance to an usable level, though Dr. Akagi claimed that they might as well have skipped that part of the test phase in his case.

Plug Depht, Harmonix, Synchronization ratio… To be honest, Shinji couldn't even begin to make sense of all those scientific terms, and as long as they didn't give anyone a reason to complain or send him away, he couldn't care less what they meant.

What he did notice, though, was the connection with Unit 01 no longer overwhelmed him the way it had the first time, and that he'd no longer felt any notable aftereffects after the third or fourth try at synchronization.

For whatever that was worth.

Even a kid like him could tell that the level of strain that just sitting inside that thing put on him couldn't even be compared to what actually fighting in it or, heaven forbid, having it go berserk with him inside once again, would do to him.

Curiously, the berserk itself had been good luck within bad luck for Nerv's scientists – as it seemed, they hadn't known much more about the most effective methods to send an angel straight to nirvana than Shinji did.

On the other hand, just one battle proved enough for Dr. Akagi and her co-workers to collect sufficient data to present him with detailed battle simulations, which, of course, had been placed right after the acclimatization phase in Shinji's training schedule.

Incidentally, Shinji had also come to find out why he'd been asked for his measurements and favorite color: Apparently, there was a special uniform or duty apparel for Eva pilots, which was, called a 'plug suit', in keeping with naming of those strange cockpit capsules.

For example, that strange, form-fitting rubber costume which that Ayanami girl had been wearing on the day of his arrival had been one of these plug suits, if, naturally, one conceived for female pilots. His own looked somewhat differently.

Those contraptions on the front were a bit more pronounced, rather than a zero, there was a big one on the back and the color scheme was clearly divided in two. Much like Rei's suit, his has some black elements on the sides, but while the rest of hers was almost entirely solid white, his was dark blue from the waist down, while the upper part was kept in the same very light blue as his interface headset, and, much like Rei's, clung closely to his skin once he'd properly put it on.

His first thoughts were that he might as well have been told to publicly walk around in nothing but socks and underwear, but once he'd gotten over his initial disconcertedness, he had to admit that it was a pretty comfortable piece of clothing, almost like a second skin – which of course wasn't the only reason why that outfit had been recommended to him.
At first there were, of course, the practical aspects of it – The entry plug would usually be filled with LCL, and who'd really like to wash the sticky substance out of their clothes every other day, not to speak of the multiple nooks and crannies of their own body?

In addition to that, those plug suits were stuffed to the brim with all kinds of life support functionalities to complement those of the EVA itself, including thermic isolation, a defibrillator and numerous electrodes to measure various bodily functions – the very thought that he might actually need these anytime soon was enough to make his blood run cold.

Lastly, the plug suit also helped to enhance synchronization by minimizing outside interferences and making sure that every bit of his skin was sensing the same texture, making it easier to concentrate on the sensations coming from the EVA. There were extra interface connections spread throughout it, too.

All in all, it was a fairly useful multipurpose outfit, but then again, Shinji was fine with just about anything that created a physical barrier between him and his surroundings.

"Hello, Shinji-kun. How are you today?" Ritsuko asked.

There was already a certain routine to it.

"I'm fine…" he replied, silently passively surrendering himself to the procedures just like he'd done the last day and on the day before that, too, his eyes downcast.

"I've gotten used to it…" That was the truth, at least as far as the experiments went – as much as it was actually possible to get used to something like this.

"All right. Have you memorized the locations of power cables and spare weapons?"

"Yes." He confirmed, almost mechanically.

"Okay… We'll be doing some more practice in induction mode, just like yesterday. Today, we're going to simulate the case of a battle with a time limit. As you know, the EVA is normally supplied with energy through the umbilical cable. If the cable should get cut, you'll still have the batteries, but those will only last a minute on maximum performance, and five minutes at most. In such a situation, you'll be forced to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible."

By pressing some keys, Dr. Akagi made a virtual image of both his Eva and a simulated Angel, molded after the one he fought some weeks ago, materialize before Shinji's eyes.

"Every angel possesses a so called core. Destroying it is the only reliable way to destroy them. So, aim for the center of the target and pull the trigger."

"Aim for the center of the target… and pull the trigger…” Shinji repeated, pointing the virtual rifle at the enemy.

His face appeared completely impassive, apathetic even, but the margin by which he missed his target betrayed his nervousness.

Nobody could tell him just how soon he might be facing an actual monster in a fight to the death….

"Concentrate." Dr. Akagi reprimanded.

Shinji fired another shot – and hit.
The simulated angel exploded.

"Very well. You're doing fine." Ritsuko commented, not taking her ever-watchful eyes off her screens.

Separated from them by a thick glass wall, the fourteen-year-old continued his practice inside the simulation body, a huge construct bizarrely resembling a spitfire pilot's helmet, with bits and pieces of organic matter occasionally peeking through the metal.

"I'm surprised that Shinji-kun agreed so easily to continue after all he's been through in the first battle..." Lt Ibuki commented, sitting in front of a terminal evaluating the data, not far from her superior.

"Looks like he always does exactly as he's told..." Dr. Akagi explained, her voice devoid of the worry that might have been appropriate. "I guess that's also a way to cope with life."

There was something about that very idea that rubbed Misato, who was standing in the back of the room with her arms crossed, in a very wrong way. There it was again, that passivity, that boy's all-too transparent pretense of indifference.

She'd had her own share of problems and ordeals, too, and was she perhaps painting herself in the role of the victim for the convenience of shifting all the blame to others?

No, it was probably that same similarity to her own situation, to what she'd almost become, to what she dearly hoped she hadn't become which enraged her so much.

Aside from strange dreams of apocalyptic landscapes and battle training in ginormous biomechanical mechas, there was yet another thing that Shinji had gotten used to by now: His new school.

"Getting used to it", however, didn't mean much more than that he had no more trouble finding the correct rooms and had managed to memorize the names of the teachers.

While he had been tutored privately up until now, that was mostly because his father had lots of money and no intention to bother with him – it wasn't like he really required individual attention, he didn't have any exceptional talents, debilitating learning disabilities or any other characteristics that would've merited diligent attention or made him unsuited for a normal public school.

Not that the school in question was completely ordinary – Allegedly, it had been built specifically for the children of Nerv employees and was thus more or less owned by the organization, which had the advantage that it was close to an entrance to the geofront in case of emergency and that the money for school books, uniforms and other materials would be reimbursed to him. It also made surveillance easier, whatever Dr. Akagi had meant by that.

Shinji himself didn't particularly care.

He didn't really bother with school, after all, it wasn't like anyone would praise him for earning good grades.

As long as they weren't too bad, there would be no scolding, and as long as there was no scolding, Shinji was fine with the state of affairs.

He just went there, sat down, kept quiet, did what the teachers told him to do and went back home.
Usually, this was all there ever was.

When he rose from his sleep and put on his clothes this morning, he certainly hadn't expected any significant deviations from that routine, and that suited him just fine.

He hoped that nothing would happen, that he would be spared of new opportunities to screw things up.

Still, that little voice that kept bugging him with the possibility that things just *might* turn out the right way for once refused to shut up, and he was sick and tired of hearing it.

Yes, good outcomes were possible, but that didn't mean they *had* to happen, and much less to him.

But that was old news; it was okay, he already knew about that.

After all, what had he really done to deserve any luck? All he wanted was to be left in peace, he was perfectly content with that.

Silently, Shinji stuffed his books into his school bag, his thoughts busy with convincing himself that he wasn't disappointed to be confronted with nothing but dreary everyday life after he'd come all the way here, after he'd allowed himself to feel something like hope for once in his life.

Sighing, he put on his backpack and silently moved to the kitchen to make himself something to eat, stopping by at Misato's door along the way, again, without any high hopes; It hadn't taken him too long to notice that Katsuragi Misato was …not a morning person, especially if she'd been on the night shift the day before.

After he'd quietly prepared himself some lunch, he left the apartment, carrying a garbage bag which he'd planned to dispose of on the way.

It was probably enough to state that the layers of trash in the Katsuragi household had melted down at an exponential rate.

The housekeeping work gave Shinji the feeling that he was at least a little useful around here, even if he would have preferred it if Misato weren't already taking it for granted.

In any case, once the garbage was taken care of, he clapped the dust from his hands, plugged in his headphones and headed for the school building.

He hardly took note of his surroundings anymore; He'd gotten used to all the flashy technology and everything else he could possibly have glimpsed here would probably do little to improve his mood.

Therefore, he chose to concentrate on his music and the patch of ground directly in front of his feet.

The closer he came to the school, the more students walking the same path as him could be seen – the uniform usually gave them away.

Regardless, Shinji kept a safe distance from them, not daring to talk to them or to even graze their fields of vision, lest it occur to them to talk to *him* –

He would surely be end up being a nuisance or say something wrong, and ultimately get shouted at one way or another…

Crossing the doorstep of the school building, Shinji still had his headphones plugged into his ears,
and his gaze was still lowered; He only saw the faucets and shoe cupboards, the walls and floors of
the building, or the many legs of his fellow students that filled the corridors before him, eventually
thinning out as they distributed themselves amongst the classrooms.

When he finally reached his own, little notice was taken; The other students were all caught up in
their own little worlds, mostly minding their own business: While some preferred to use the time
before the teacher's arrival for a nice nap, the girls were mostly assembled in groups of three or
four, having lively chats about the big topics of the day and here and there, in the second-to-last
row, you'd even find one of them rereading her notes on the last lesson, but she appeared to be an
unique case – the only thing anyone in the rest of the class bothered to read were various mangas.

In the back of the classroom, some boy was trying to impress his classmates by using a large ruler
that was probably intended for use on the blackboard as an air guitar, and that alone should have
been enough to draw all attention away from a silent, nondescript boy walking over to his desk.

He couldn't understand what they were speaking of, but they all seemed relaxed and, save for very
few exceptions, were all standing together in small groups.

The only person who seemed to be just as alone as he was sat amongst numerous unused tables that
were no longer a rarity in this room, right next to the window, perpetually gazing through it, turned
away from the noise and activity in the remainder of the classroom.

It was the injured girl from the cage.

The stranger who didn't cease to fascinate him.

Ayanami Rei.

It had only been two days since she first stopped going to school again and even now that she had
been discharged from the hospital, she still looked rather worse for the wear.

She was still wearing bandages around her head and a not-quite-so-thick-anymore cast around her
arm, and her eye was still hidden beneath.

That extremely unhealthy-looking skin tone had stayed, too – Shinji had still not quite come to
terms with the thought that this was, in fact, her normal skin color.

She still appeared so very, very weak and fragile, compelling Shinji to talk to her or at least be
there for her in some shape or form… After all, he knew very well what it felt like to be all alone
when everybody else was happily interacting, and to see that poor, injured girl sitting there, all
lonesome and abandoned like a lost child, seemed just plain wrong to him.

But what he knew even better was that he could never possibly work up the courage to approach
her.

And so, he just sat down, tearing his glance from her in resignation.

A few rows of seats further back, a boy with longish, light-brown hair was occupied with
something completely different.

While he certainly wasn't the only one in this room who had brought a little something to entertain
himself, most would probably have regarded bringing a whole camcorder as a bit of overkill there
– especially since it was being used to film little plastic warplane while their owner enthusiastically
supplied the sound effects himself.
He was wearing the same school uniform as Shinji, except that he had a red undershirt beneath it and didn't seem to have bothered to stuff his shirt into his trousers.

Aside from his glasses, his face was also adorned with a fair amount of freckles, a small, knobby nose and two huge, hazel eyes – that last bit, however, was not exactly apparent at the moment as he had one eye squeezed shut and the other looking straight into his camcorder.

Alas, he was soon forced to remove his trusty electronic friend from his face when the blurred form of a girl's uniform appeared behind his plastic plane.

The uniform in question consisted of a short blue dress whose lower half resembled a pleated skirt, and some sort of white blouse that was supposed to be decorated with a red ribbon at the collar, but currently couldn't be seen in its entirety because its owner was holding a folder that was in turn blocking part of it from view.

They both belonged to a freckled girl of average build whose brown hair was molded into two pigtails by a pair of hair ties augmented with pearl-like purple ornaments.

Her dark eyes were shooting the boy with the camcorder a scolding look.

"What's the matter, class rep?" he asked, still oblivious of what he could have done to draw the ire of the resident figure of authority.

"…did you take care of yesterday's printouts?"

The camera boy's subsequent 'Ehh…?' made him sound very much like a four-year-old caught with his hand in the cookie box.

"Er, the thing is…" he began, making one last attempt to distract the girl long enough for him to bury the positively un-delivered documents under his desk between his other possessions. "…no matter how often I tried, no one would open the door. Looks like there wasn't anyone at Touji's place."

The class representative obviously didn't buy his hasty excuse and followed his words with the mandatory lecture: "Aida-kun, you're Suzuhara's friend, aren't you? Aren't you worried at all?"

"I don't know, he may have been injured." was Aida's retort.

"What? You don't mean during that robot battle, do you?" the class representative inquired, surprised. "But they said on TV that no one was hurt!"

"And how would that be possible? You've seen the resulting crater yourself. Not only Iruma and Komatsu, no, they even had to send units from Misawa and Kyushu!

I'm pretty sure that at least ten, if not twenty people must've been hurt. There might even have been causalities…"

The conversation between the two was interrupted by the noise of the classroom's door opening to reveal a swarthy teenager around their age who was quite obviously in a very rotten mood. He wore his black hair in a short, modern style, appeared to have eschewed the school's dress code in favor of a dark blue tracksuit, and had brown eyes that, not unlike the rest of his face, clearly signalized that the foot he'd risen out of bed with today was most definitely not the correct one.

"Touji!"
"Suzuhara!"

The two were rather surprised to see the topic of their conversation standing before them of all sudden – his camcorder-toting friend had even forgotten to remove the afore mentioned device from his face as he turned his head toward his newly-arrived friend.

The greeting, however, did not seem to significantly improve the taller boy's mood, who proceeded to angrily throw his bag onto the table next to his friends, greet him with a curt "Hi!" and take a look around the rather empty classroom.

"Looks like the number of students here has been decreasing drastically!"

"Evacuations, evacuations…" the bespectacled youth explained. "Lots of people have been transferred after the whole incident. It's not much a surprise when you consider that there was a real battle in the middle of the city."

"You're just about the only one who's happy about that…"

"Yeah, probably. And then there's that serial killer, too…"

"Don't tell me they still haven't caught that bastard…"

"Not yet. It was only the day before yesterday that they found some more corpses in an apartment building. That guy's methods are getting crazier by the day. At first, the victims were practically chopped to bits and no one could explain how he managed to sever their heads and limbs with such clean cuts… But since a few weeks, they've also been finding victims that look like their bodies practically melted, all they find are bits and pieces of flesh in puddles of sticky goo… And the creepiest part is, it seems as if the perp kept living in the victims' houses for quite a while after he'd offed them. They're pretty sure by now – showers were used and, in the first few cases, just left running, fridges were found plundered as if some wild animal had rummaged through them – the last victims even had some of their clothes stolen… And on top of that comes the robot battle. Of course people are fleeing the city. I've heard that another hundred left just yesterday… But that aside, what about you?

You've been absent for quite a while – Were you hurt in the battle?"

"Not me", Touji answered gruffly, revealing the reason for his frustrations: "Sakura. My little sister. She was buried under a pile of rubble. She survived, but she's been in hospital ever since, and since both my father and my grandfather work at the institute and can't really quit right now, I was the only one left – If I hadn't stayed with her, she would have been all alone…"

His voice betrayed his worry quite overtly.

"In any case, I'd really like to know what sort of moron they put behind the controls of that robot so that fucking coward can show his damned face to me! Our own robot blows up the city! What on earth was that dumbass doing?!"

Touji's friend interjected at this point: "…did you hear the rumor about the transferee?"

"Transferee? What transferee?"

"That one over there!" The well-informed bestacled boy subtly gestured his friend towards a silent boy who was sitting at his desk two rows away from theirs.

And truthfully, Touji really couldn't remember having seen the back of this particular head
anywhere before – It looked fairly non-threatening, actually.

"He transferred to our school while you were away." The boy with the camcorder explained.

"So what? Wouldn't that make him a bit too late to be our serial killer?" Touji retorted, apparently not taking this all too seriously.

"Well that's true, but think. He arrived right after the robot battle! Don't you think that's totally suspicious?"

Before the two had any chance to finish their conversation, the door opened up again, which even Shinji didn't fail to notice, headphones or no.

It was a short, elderly man with thick dark-rimmed glasses – the teacher.

"Rise! Bow! Sit down!"

What had once begun as an ordinary, innocent math class soon took the same path south that many others had taken before it as the old teacher had again managed to somehow derail the topic to once again bore the students with yet another endless lecture about Second Impact.

If this were a history lesson, it may still have been somewhat understandable, but this old geezer never seemed to waste an excuse to begin spamming the class with more of his anecdotes, regardless of what subject he was supposed to be teaching, even if it was something like a math problem just happening to have the number '2000' as a solution.

It was inevitably followed by the same old balderdash they'd all heard a thousand times, about that one fateful meteor, the tilting of earth's axis, the following weather anomalies and wars, the state of the oceans, and so on…

Shinji had spent most of that lecture staring unhappily at the air as he had long since despaired over the math problem on his laptop's screen.

He was all the more surprised when, all of a sudden, a shining icon on said screen informed him that he had just received a message on the internal school network.

Shinji was unable to explain this. Until now, he had barely spoken to anyone here and couldn't understand how someone would possibly go through the trouble of writing him a message.

Hungering for the first bite of attention that he'd been given in a very long time, he swiftly pressed the keys to get the message displayed to him as quickly as possible.

"Is it true that you're that robot's pilot? Y/N?"

Shinji's eyes widened.

How could they possibly know that?

Exited, he took a look around the classroom – a smiling girl from in the back of the classroom waved to him. The one next to her began typing.

"It's true, isn't it? Y/N?"

Shinji wondered.
He wasn't sure if he was actually allowed to say that, but…

That was the first time that others around his age had ever shown interest in him, and if he were to say 'no' right now…

Of course, that was only because of the evangelion and not really because of him, but this might just be the very best that a loser like him could possibly attain…

But was it really right to take advantage of his position like this…?

"Yes." Shinji typed, quickly pressing the 'enter' key before he'd have any time to change his mind and resist the temptation after all.

A collective "WHAT?!" echoed through the classroom, some of the girls just flat out jumped out of their chairs.

Ironically, the old teacher seemed to be the one to take the least note of the emergent ruckus, and the class representative's attempts to enthuse her peers about the concept of discipline were completely fruitless, not counting the few cries of "You're such a killjoy!" that it earned her.

Aside from Ayanami, who hadn't shown any real reaction and kept looking out of the window, hardly anyone had remained on their seats – instead, they had formed a thick knot of students centered on the quite overwhelmed EVA-pilot.

"Uhm… er…"

"Hey, how were you chosen?" one girl asked.

"Did you have to take some sort of test?"

"Weren't you afraid?"

"What does the cockpit look like?"

Shinji was mostly preoccupied with backing off slightly whenever someone came remotely close and struggled to even react to the many questions. He wasn't used to being the center of attention and simply didn't know how to handle any of this.

"Uh, I… I… I'm not sure if I'm even allowed to talk about it…" he hesitantly scrambled together.

"Does that robot have a name?"

"I-I'm not really sure, but everyone calls it 'EVA' or 'Unit One'…"

"EVA?"

Aida Kensuke, now sans camcorder, was one of the few to have remained on their seats. The foothills of the crowd almost reached his seat. Instead of participating, he adjusted his glasses in suspicion and listened from afar to the transferee's bumbling tattle – and then, he began to write down every single word.

"And what's its secret trump card?" asked a boy for a change.

"It… It's got that… knife-thing with, uh, vibrations and stuff, like… ultrasound or something…"

"This is great! He's really the pride of our school, isn't he?"
"Just how awesome is this!"

By the time the school bell announced the end of the term, the teacher still hadn't finished his ramblings and was surprised to find that no one had been listening to him in a very long time.

"Rise! Bow! …C'mon, at least do it properly at the end!"

Undisturbed by teacher, school bell or class representative, Shinji's little interview went on and on. But that wasn't to say that his classmates only held feelings of awe for the Third Child – Suzuhara Touji, in particular, appeared significantly less than pleased…

WHAM.

The fist hit hard, dead on target and without any sort of remorse.

Shinji was thrown to the ground like a piece of paper blown away by the wind – Effortlessly.

Suzuhara Touji's fist was still shaking, as if some of the anger he had just converted into kinetic energy and released into the environment were still sticking to it.

To be frank, he was extremely pissed off that the person who had nearly murdered his poor little sister actually had the audacity to flaunt it, and one simple punch was hardly enough to discharge the wrath that had accumulated over the past few weeks where had had been forced to see his usually so energetic, lively little sister tied to the white sheets of a hospital bed.

"Sorry, dude, I certainly don't welcome every transferee like this, but I couldn't be satisfied until I'd kicked your ass!" came his halfhearted apology, before he turned around, leaving the young Ikari lying on the ground like some used tissue.

Which was pretty much what he felt like right now.

Everyone would be grateful, his ass! Shinji would laugh out loud if he didn't feel like bawling. He'd be grateful if he wasn't beaten up for his trouble…

Touji’s four-eyed buddy – Aida Kensuke? – hadn't been able to follow his friend fast enough to deter him, but unlike his friend, didn't think it beneath him to actually lower himself to Shinji's face.

He may have been smiling, but it might as well have been a smirk of contempt, and considering that not even his own father seemed to be able to think of a reason to be friendly with him, the latter looked a lot more realistic to him.

But he was mistaken: "Please don't blame him. His little sister was hurt in the battle. Or well, at least that's his excuse."

He stood up straight and followed his friend.

Some people might have put Kensuke's name on the list of potential friends after this, since he appeared to be sympathetic to Shinji despite being associated with Touji instead of participating in the bullying out of dumb herd instinct, but Shinji's inner reaction to these words was restricted to feeling conned.
These guys had it easy.

It's not like Shinji has asked to be squeezed into the Entry Plug – He hadn't wanted any of this, either. Exactly, he had been forced. Blackmailed in the most despicable manner. All but shanghaied!

No one would ever have shown him any interest gain if he hadn't agreed to it…

For most of the battle, he hadn't even been capable to think of things like collateral damage.

It wasn't as if he hadn't spent the night afterwards in a hospital bed himself, not to speak of those horrible experiences he had been forced to make and had yet to fully process.

"Do you really think..." Shinji started, tentative at first, then more and more intense "...that I'm that thing's pilot of my own free will?"

With that, he had crossed the line.

No, not quite. He had danced back and forth on it to a conga beat, told the line to go fuck itself, got its mother pregnant and aborted the resulting baby.

After everything else, that guy was actually trying to deny his responsibility!

Without thinking a second time, Touji brusquely showed his friend aside, picked Shinji up from the ground like a piece of garbage and threw him right back onto the ground with one last, fulminant punch.

Shinji didn't even bother to sit back up or even wipe the blood off his lips.

The dirt surrounding him was probably just good enough for something like him.

Perhaps he deserved lo lie down here after all.

His lips still bloody, his arm used to half-heartedly shield his eyes from the sun, he expressionlessly looked up to the azure sky, and wished in some corner of his dented soul that some merciful deity might throw some meteor or perhaps a wayward satellite down from the skies, so it could shatter his body and carry him all the way up there, away from this world full of classmates who hated him, EVAs that terrified him and a father who didn't care if he lived or died.

The bleeding on his lips had stopped surprisingly fast, but they were still swollen.

The metallic taste of his own blood still stuck to the inside of his mouth, and Shinji found himself wondering how he even knew what "metallic" was supposed to be if he's never actually put any metal into his mouth.

Shinji didn't come to finish that deliberation as something happened to block his view of the sky in that exact moment.

No satellite, not the meteor he had hoped for, but something of exactly the same color as the canopy concealed behind it – the hair of Ayanami Rei, as he concluded when he slightly tilted his head to get a better look.

He hadn't heard her coming at all.

It was as if she had only just materialized at his side like some ghostly apparition, in her school uniform and her bandages, with a gentle breeze playing with her nineties-style-pageboy cut, still
white and fragile like porcelain, looking down at him with these inhuman red eyes.

He hastily wiped the blood of his face. Somehow, he didn't want her to see him like this, in all his wretched glory.

"There is… another emergency." She spoke, barely audible.

"I will… be going ahead."

Chapter End Notes

(1) In regards to Q, I'm going to say that what you're gonna see here will look more like what we saw in the original trailer from 2.0/ the original series, for various reasons: a) because that was my original plan, b) because I want to comment on the original series as well and the two storylines have grown so widely apart that my best efforts can't blend them anymore and c) because I haven't quite processed Q yet. I will, however, probably use bits and pieces from it, and I'm thinking (still uncertainly, but I feel like I need this out of my system at some point – I feel like I must'n run away from it, in a sense) about inserting the plot of Q at a later point (those "in the know" may already suspect where), but if I ever do, there will, of course, be an explicit spoiler warning. In any case, it's still far away so you can safely keep reading without getting spoiled - Even in the original German version of this, I'm not even past the action arc yet (I have lengthened it significantly, though. I'd say the fanfic as a whole is 31% complete so far, with about 8% existing in english.)

(2) Sorry that it took so long – but I guess you can't have honors like memetic status, discussion in forums or a TV-tropes article unless you publish stuff in English so yeah… I should get back to work.

(3) So, what about that new emergency and how will our protagonist handle his first proper combat experience? Find out in the next chapter: 08: [Toy Soldier]
You say
You're not gonna fight,
'Cause no one will fight for you
And you think
There's not enough love
And no one to give it to
And you're sure
You've hurt for so long,
You've got nothing left to lose
So you say
You're not gonna fight
'Cause no one will fight for you
You say
The weight of the world
Has kept you from letting go
And you think
Compassion's a flaw
And you'll never let it show
And you're sure
You've hurt in a way
That no one will ever know
But some day
The weight of the world
Will give you the strength to go
Hold on,
The weight of the world
Will give you the strength to go
So hold on
The weight of the world
Will give you the strength to go
So hold on
The weight of the world
Will give you the strength to go
Just hold on,
The weight of the world
Will give you the strength to go
-Linkin Park,'Robot Boy'

Excerpt from the personal diary of Horaki Hikari:

"Since we had been doing evacuation drills for years, this was almost an everyday occurrence to us – I don't think we really realized the situation we were in. The boys were all being noisy and horsing around like we were on some sort of road trip, but we girls weren't afraid either."

Central Dogma was already brimming with activity.

Before the actual battle could even begin, they were left with a very short time frame to evacuate the civilian population, move the central complexes down to the geofront, informing various authorities and activating the city's intercept systems.

The reason for all this was currently floating across the landscape, and, by extension, the monitors of NERV HQ, still a good distance away from the capital:

The next messenger had arrived, a longish, salmon-colored being whose clunky body that, despite her apparent heaviness, floated effortlessly over the ground.

Her head, a massive chunk of flesh distantly resembling the head of a squid or an octopus had a spot on each of its sides that may have been mistaken for eyes on first glance.

Those peculiar spots were white at the edges, but their middles displayed an almost uncanny glow reminiscent of the colors of a flickering flame.

But whatever purpose those markings may serve, the angel's actual eyes were in her face which much like that of her predecessor's, resembled the mask of a medieval plague-doctor.

Another similarity was the deep red core, which she, too, had embedded between her ribs, with the difference that this specimen had notably more of them, some of which wiggled about like insect legs.
The messenger also possessed two misshapen, rudimentary-looking protrusions that could be equated with arms – That the 'hands', if those shapeless lumps of flesh qualified for that appellation, appeared to be folded for prayer as she soared above the scenery, was no mere given of her anatomy or a position taken for comfort, but a deliberate, defiant taunt, a declaration of intent, an open, pompous gesture of ridicule that the massive mountain of meat indulged in as she majestically marched across the skies.

She was showing the Lillim beneath her for what exact purpose she had left the red waters of the ocean: To serve.

And the Lillim knew exactly, what this service encompassed, what it consisted of.

They knew that she would wash them off the surface of this planet like nothing more than a particularly persistent stain of dirt, to finally claim the Promised Land for her own kind after such a long, long time.

Unlike her predecessor, Shamshel, the angel of the day, did not come as a pioneer, but as a conqueror.

Her calls were still heard by the entity just the same, but she didn't do more than look up, directly at her right through all those many buildings between them, briefly acknowledge Shamshel's presence and then proceed to mind her own business, carrying the naked male corpse she had thrown over her shoulder, carrying it with ease despite her seemingly petite build through the already evacuated fortress city.

To worry because of Adam's pitiful spawn was only giving them more credit than they were due.

Now, it remained to be mentioned that while the corpse that the blue-haired woman was carrying was nude, the entity herself was not. Even with the use of multiple belts, she had only been able to fasten the far too loose, far too long trousers in a very haphazard manner; Her victim's shirt, which she had also taken, didn't fit all too well either and it didn't seem to have occurred to her to close it, baring the space between her breasts and a varying fraction of the mammarys themselves, depending on her posture.

The long, blue hair was messily stuffed into bonnet, with various strands sticking out.

The entity was beginning to learn.

Obviously, the personnel in central dogma were far less relaxed about the angel's arrival.

This was the second deployment, and not only for their pilot – last time, they had been caught off their guards only to be saved by an unpredictable freak accident, but this next trial would prove whether this organization and its facilities could live up to their all-but trivial task.

Considering the stakes left no more consideration for the circumstances that almost everyone here was a beginner.

Not even if the beginners in question were fourteen year-olds on top of that.

"…and of course, the fifth angel has to turn up just when Commander Ikari is away on a business trip… I had expected that we'd have more time…"

"The last one left us fifteen years to prepare…" Hyuuga agreed.

"This time, there were only three weeks of respite."
"They never think about our circumstances, don't they?" Misato commented. "That's exactly the sort of bastards that we women hate the most!"

In the meantime, the images on the various screens followed the angel as the many ordnances of the fortress city emptied themselves into her direction – As expected, to little avail.

"That's just a waste of tax money." Fuyutsuki opined.

"Economic interests." Misato concluded. "I'd bet that someone would get into trouble if we don't waste enough ammunition."

Meanwhile, Aoba had finished the call he'd just taken.

"The government demands that we deploy an Evangelion again."

"They're annoying!" Misato complained. "As if we need their approval for that."

By now, the civilians were, without exception, in safe bunkers.

Including two certain boys.

Not, that they were particularly happy about it – At least Kensuke, who was fiddling with his camcorder's antenna while eying its small screen disappointedly, seemed rather bummed that he wasn't somewhere else right now.

"Cripes!" he complained, holding the camcorder in front of his friend's face so he could see as well. Said friend had already taken off his shoes, tied them together by the laces and hung them over his neck.

"Let me guess: Just tickers and letters on the screen, again?" Touji asked, knowing his sidekick well enough to tell that just from his expression without having to glance at the small screen first.

"They've issued a press embargo." Kensuke muttered. "We civilians are being kept in the dark once again. For once, something interesting actually happens, and we're missing it as we speak!"

Someone who certainly wasn't going to miss anything at all was Shinji, who had already put on his plugsuit and boarded his EVA.

Shinji suffered the filling of the entryplug and the colorfull lights upon activation without a sound, barely registering how his mind opened itself to the Evangelion.

Once again, the asked himself his usual questions, deep in thought: What was he actually doing here? Why was he even piloting this thing?

His father wasn't even here to watch him…

He never had any real reasons to do this… by now, he even had solid reasons not to do it.

For once, he wouldn't get beaten up for it anymore.

But to get out of here this late, he'd have to open his mouth and say it… but then, everyone would try to convince him and they would probably hate him even more than they probably already did…
At that same moment, the reason for the young pilot's discontentment was occupied with staring at the air, positively looking somewhat pensive.

While he didn't look the part, Suzuhara Touji had always possessed a very strong sense of justice, which was also why he couldn't suffer the guy who did those things to his sister getting off scot free.

But that was when he had been seething with anger, and in part, frustrated with his own inability to help his sister in any significant way.

Now that he had his steam had been vented off and the passage of time had given him some time to cool off, however, his head was clear again and as far as he made his thoughts wander, they always kept circling back to that pitiful image of the transferee beaten to the ground, not even attempting to resist in any way as Touji had generously wiped the floor with him.

The shockwaves coming through from the surface didn't make it any better, either – at least, judging by his use of that half-whispered tone usually reserves for planning and conspiracy, they seemed to have given Kensuke some sort of stupid idea: "Hey, you got a moment? I have something to talk to you about…"

"So what's the deal?" Touji replied.

"It's confidential." the military otaku whispered.

Touji, who already knew from experience what he was expected to do whenever the need for such a 'confidential' conversation should arrive, (It was something like a 'secret code word' between the two of them, or at least, that's what Kensuke liked to call it) just grinned, confirmed that he'd understood and went to look for the class representative who was, a few picnic blankets to the left, engaged in a conversation with another girl.

"Hey, class rep!" he called out casually, trying to grab the supposed authority figure's attention.

"What's the matter?"

"I gotta take a leak. And Kensuke here, too."

"What, now?" Hikari retorted in disgust, eying them like a pair of naughty kindergarteners.

"Alright, but hurry up, will you?"

And so, Touji and Kensuke got to continue their conversation in the peace and quiet of a room full of urinals, and, now that they were here anyway, took the opportunity to empty their bladders.

"So, what's the matter?"

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance! I can't possibly miss this!"

"What? The battle up there? Kensuke… You can't be serious…"

"Of course! Who knows just when the enemy will strike the next time? Even you can't tell me that you don't want to see a proper battle with your own eyes, at least once! This may be our only chance…

Help me to break the gates open!"

"Kensuke, this is dangerous…"
"No one knows whether we're safe here, so we might as well go up there!"

"You Dummy. What do you think NERV is for?"

"Yeah, but think! What's NERV's most important weapon? The transfee's robot! Last time, he protected us, but you hit him. Twice, at that. What if he no longer feels like piloting that robot? We'd all be goners. It's practically your moral duty to go out there and cheer him on!"

Kensuke. That sneaky bastard.

By now, he knew very well what exact buttons he had to press with Touji, and he wasn't even embarrassed to resort to dirty tricks like this one.

"Alright, alright! I'm coming. I know you well enough to know that you won't shut up until you get what you want…"

The military geek's answer consisted solely of a silent, knowing smile.

"So, Shinji-kun, are you ready?" Misato asked over the intercom.

"Yeah…" Shinji replied, toneless like an automaton.

In some corner of his mind, he asked himself if it was even possible to be ready for something like this.

As far as he could tell, he was, at least, properly connected to the Evangelion. There was some sort of 'data flow' taking place, he could practically feel his own nervouness seeping into the violet fiend, and there was something flowing back, as well.

Presumably, his orders would take that same route – and soon, the pain as well, as much as he tried not to think of that yet.

"Remember your training. Just aim for the core, and fire at it as much and as quickly as you can.” Dr. Akagi explained one last time.

And by then, it was already beginning; all parties involved were taking their places.

Misato gave the launch order, the angel unfolded her arms and brought herself into an upright position, revealing her bizarre thorax with its wriggling ribs and parts of her exposed spine. Her hands, too, little more than roughly triangular clumps, turned to move into what the angel probably defined as her 'battle formation', proudly displaying her form's full height like a peacock brandishing its tail feathers.

Her head, however, stayed horizontal, possibly due to the placement of its sensory organs.

In the meantime, Touji and Kensuke has successfully escaped their shelter and were running up some large stairs that were carved into the mountainside leading to a small shrine at the top of the mountain under which the shelter had been built, hoping to get a better view from there.

Inseparable from Kensuke was, of course, his camcorder, which he pointed at the battlefield the very moment he reached the top, zooming past the smaller of the city's skyscrapers which, unlike their taller cousins, had not been retracted to safety.

Touji was only one step behind him, incredulously eying the plump, alien creature before them.
It looked like some surrealist painter's attempt to sketch a crossbreed between a dildo and a giant squid.

Until now, he had only heard about these beings and their unparalleled destructive force, but this was the first time seeing one with his own eyes.

Conversely, Kensuke didn't seem shocked at all, but brimming with excitement.

Of course. After all, these battles had yet to get one of his relatives flattened.

"This is the moment I've been waiting for all of my life!" he exclaimed, fevered. "There! It's coming to the surface! Any moment now!"

And sure enough, it did come.

Somewhere roughly in the direction Kensuke had pointed his trusted his electronic gadget towards, an entire building started moving, parts of it began sliding sideways and in the end, a whole wall got pulled upwards and folded together like a giant sun-blind, revealing, just as Kensuke predicted, Evangelion Unit 01, or more precisely, the spot where it soon emerged from the ground.

Touji secretly wondered just how his nerdish friend was always so very well informed.

But then, his attention was drawn by the purple colossus as its last lock bolts were released.

"There it is!" Kensuke commented, stating the obvious while he was marveling at the EVA through his camcorder.

At that Moment, the person actually piloting the humanoid war machine was facing fairly different worries;

The last battle, and with it, the way he had helplessly stumbled before the enemy's feet was still fresh in his memory.

He may have had some training in the meantime, but none of that changed that he was stuck in a goddamn life-and-death battle, and that no one was coming to help him if he should fail.

And failing appeared to be the one single thing he was honestly good at.

Feeling his panic rising, he clung to the few words of guidance he had been left with by the people who had stuffed him into this thing in the first place.

"Hang in there, Shinji-kun." They had said.

"Remember your training, Shinji-kun." They had said.

Yes, exactly, the training, the training…

He did not think that those few simulations had been enough to prepare an absolute good-for-nothing like himself for a proper battle, but his training contained orders.

Clear instructions he could follow, simple actions he could execute.

He just had to aim for that red thingamabob in the middle and pull the trigger, right?

The EVA was even supposed to have a computerized route guidance system…
Aim for the center of the target and pull the trigger.

"Aim for the center of the target… and pull the trigger…"

"Aim for the center of the target… and pull the trigger…"

"Aim for the center of the target… and pull the trigger…"

"Aim for the center of the target… and pull the trigger…"

After repeating those words to himself again and again, as if to ascertain their meaning, he jumped out of his cover and, accelerated by mortal fear, aimed his gun directly at the red monster.

He immediately began shooting as fast as his fingers let him, but some unwritten law of nature seemed to dictate that Ikari Shinji was not allowed to get anything right.

"You're providing the angel cover with all that smoke, you idiot!" he heard Misato scolding him over the intercom. But Shinji did not stop. He simply didn't know what else he could do right now. It was the only accessible tactic his brain had to offer after any higher thinking processes had been brought to a grinding halt by his paralyzing fear.

He fired, fired and fired, shooting bullets huge enough for their rapidly dropping shells to smash cars, resorting to what video game enthusiast might refer to as the classic spray-and-pray-maneuver.

Except… eventually, his ammunition ran out.

Shinji gave his breathing some time to normalize and eyed the wall of smoke with mixed expectations, waiting for it to dissipate so he could see whether that thing was defeated or not – but he didn't have to wait that long to find out.

Of all sudden, he saw something speeding out of the smolder – It looked like some sort of whip, actually, two of those, but their glow bore some resemblance to Star Wars-style light sabers.

Whatever it was, since actuallyducking would have required a certain measure of coordination and conscious thought for an unathletic person such as himself, Shinji's ensuing movement was closer to letting himself, or rather, the Evangelion, (he always had to remind himself to separate that) fall backwards against gravity, a spur-of-the-moment, panic-driven reaction that probably saved his life – The building he had just been standing next to was now neatly cut in half.

He could feel the vibrations as the upper half came crushing down.

"What the… That guy already lost!" Touji commented back at his lookout point, still not really able or willing to summon up any sympathy for his new classmate. Kensuke, who had a somewhat different view of things, i.e., was rooting for Shinji, just replied that he was bound to stand up again.

But it wasn't that easy.

The pilot of EVA 01 barely took notice of Misato's order to get the replacement rifle or its emergence from one of the nearby buildings.

That huge, gigantic monster… had just barely failed to kill him.

And here he was, once again, lying completely defenseless before the (this time purely proverbial)
feet of the enemy.

Shinji couldn't even pull himself together far enough to properly grip the control yokes. His hands were trembling.

Ah, to hell with that, all of him was trembling.

Not even Misato's continuous inquiries managed to get through to the fear-stricken boy.

They had just stuffed him into some huge… thing and expected him to fight a ginormous monster with laser… knife… whip… things…

That hadn't been part of his training.

He was completely helpless, unable to even form one single clear thought.

Accordingly, EVA 01 didn't budge a single millimeter from where it was.

"Holy shit, looks like being punched in the face affected him more than I thought." Kensuke remarked with feigned nonchalance, yet another step in his insidious plot to make Touji regret his earlier actions.

He hated it when Kensuke pulled employed that sort of psychological warfare – especially when he was armed with the truth. "Oh, just shut up!" Touji snapped, both at Kensuke and the imaginary little Disney-angel on his right shoulder.

At that same moment, Shinji was utterly incapable of doing anything else than to helplessly stare up at the angel as she erected herself before him, almost playfully swinging her light whips around, boisterous like a huge, fat cat toying with her prey.

....THIS.....IS…TOO….EASY….

This was followed with an oscillation-like fluctuation in her AT-Field that Shinji could barely withstand or neutralize – He had yet to learn how to properly use his own, he was closer to passively asking something within the beast he was sitting in to take care of it in his stead than he was to actively controlling it himself.

The messenger briefly made the strength and intensity of her own flare up; It was not like she could hold that higher level for extended periods of time, but rather a gesture of showing off, a form of ridicule, perhaps her equivalent of laughter.

All this happened in a timeframe too short for Shinji to properly process or interpret those sensations, he just felt yet another sudden wave of terror and intimidation washing over him.

Finally, the grand huntress decided to finish her prey and stove to sever the source of its life, but Shinji managed to jump to the side at the last second, unable to explain that with anything other than the adrenaline or the EVAs superhuman strength.

But his escape did not bother the massive red creature in the slightest; her enemy was just running from her, unable to even scramble to his shaky feet.

She was almost beginning to enjoy this.

How could her predecessor possibly have fallen to this incomplete, twisted creature?

....TOO…EASY....
Shinji managed another dodge, narrowly escaping oblivion, but it was no use –

That thing kept following him faster and faster, advancing by the second, coming closer and closer, shredding the tall buildings around him left and right like they were nothing but toothpicks.

Snip! Snap! Snippety snip!

There was not even time to even think of counterattacking.

All he could do was run away, always a hair's breadth away from losing his life.

He managed to find temporary shelter behind a front of somewhat sturdier buildings, only to be forced to conclude, to his utmost shock, that his pursuer had hacked his power cable in twain.

The clock was already ticking.

He didn't even have as much as five minutes left to come up with some sort of strategy to fight back or at least think of his next hiding place, but before he got the chance to do either, he was forced to realize that his enemy had already finished mowing down all the buildings between herself and her adversary.

The instant he noticed the tentacle constricting around his foot, he was already flying through the air.

…..SUCH….. A….DODDLE.....

Exactly. The angel, still certain of her victory, gleefully enacting her dominance over her prey by making it her plaything, spontaneously decided to try herself at the discipline of EVA-throwing, hurling unit one all across the landscape.

He didn't think that anything in this world would still be able to trump all the abstruse things that had happened to him until now, and yet, he had to concede that this was by far the craziest of them all.

He probably would have laughed out loud if he wasn't busy screaming his lungs out because he was, y'know, BEING CATAPULTED SEVERAL KILOMETERS THROUGH THE AIR.

EVA 01 hammered down on the mountain like a stone, the force of the impact was simply colossal and flooded the boy's nervous system with pain.

"Shinji-kun? Shinji-kun? Are you all right? Say something!"

It was no use.

Even Misato could see that. "Damage report!"

"-Nothing mayor. He can do it."

Yes, maybe he would still have been able to defeat the angel without further ado, if it wasn't for that one, tiny little detail.

Or rather, two details, pretty much the first thing he noticed once he had picked himself together enough to raise his head and check his surroundings.

There, directly between the Evangelion's purple fingers that had avoided smashing them by chance alone, they stood, quaking with fear, trembling with tears in their eyes.
The two boys from earlier.

Aida Kensuke and Suzuhara Touji.

The kind boy with the camcorder and… the one who beat him up.

The one whose younger sister had nearly been killed because of Shinji’s uselessness.

Okay. The universe had to be out of ideas for absurd coincidences by now, at least. The two looked so tiny compared to the Evangelion, and the sheer thought that he could squash them like insects with but a single, wrong move pumped pure ice through his veins.

And that was the least of his worries – the angel had caught up to him and he could see her readying her laser tentacles – normally he would jump away now, but he couldn't risk to send those through whirling through the air, or worse, crush them.

There was no way he could possibly go on living with that kind of guilt…

So, he made a desperate move.

He himself couldn't say how he came up with it, but while he couldn't dodge those things, they had to be solid to a degree and did not cut things by default; after all, he had been thrown with them.

Nah, when he really thought about it in hindsight, he had to admit that he had been acting on the simple, primal instinct to keep the dangerous things away from his face.

It was dumb luck that his hands weren't shredded to minced meat right there and then, and now, they were on the best way to a promising career as barbecue.

Those light whips weren't something one could touch just like that – they were, after all, brimming with energy, as demanded by their purpose.

Shinji felt like he was touching the molten core of the earth, if not the fires of hell; And those whips were strong, pressing against his own hands and burning them simultaneously.

All he could do was to keep holding on without a single clue of how he could possibly escape this terrible situation.

Just the pain, that torrid, horrific pain that he could only bear with his teeth firmly clenched, and that wasn't even the worst of it; Just any moment now, he could die, or worse, kill someone!

It was so dreadful, so horrendous, fear like he'd never known before. What should he do; what should he do, just what should he do…

"Why doesn't he just stand up and fight back?"

"Because we're here, don't you get it?" Kensuke shouted, dropping the subtile methods in the face of the dire situation and saying what he really thought instead: "…He can't move freely because he doesn't want to flatten us! He's trying to protect us!"

Then, the heavens opened up and out came the light of salvation, clad in Misato's voice over the intercom. She could no longer stand to watch this and the pressure of this situation had squeezed a creative solution out of her: "Move, quickly! Let the two of them into the cockpit!"

"Captain Katsuragi! Do you really think that civillians are allowed into the entry plug without authorization?" Akagi protested.
"I will authorize it."

"And you are sure that you aren't overstepping your authority there?"

"Do it."

And so, the two boys were presented with their rescue by way of a rope-ladder and a voice of the intercom that urged them to hurry up and climb inside – An order that no remotely reasonable human being would have had to be given twice.

What they found inside the entry plug, however, was not quite what they expected.

"Is that… water? M-My camera! My camera!"

But the two quickly noticed that they weren't dealing with water, if not for anything else, then because they were able to breathe it.

Descending further down, they could see the – now somewhat shaky – interface materializing before their eyes that offered them an uncomfortably close view of the monster.

And even further down, they found the transferee, sitting in some metal contraption, wearing strange, skin-tight clothing, with his teeth clenched and signs of great exertion in his face.

There were surprisingly little control devices in the cockpit. Instead, that fluid was steadily, noticeably heating up and getting into motion…

"We have abnormal synapse readings!"

"It's hardly a surprise, we have two foreign presences in the matrix, and we can't exactly isolate their nerve pulses…"

Shinji could not take this pain for much longer, the batteries would be empty at any moment and the layers of the EVA's armor were melting like ice in the sunshine, one after another.

He had to end this.

Right now.

Now that these two were here… Now that these two were watching… he couldn't afford to fail.

In his desperation, Shinji yanked the angel closer to himself, only to hurtle her away by her own arms, exploiting the Evangelion's raw strength.

"Well done! Now, retreat!" Misato ordered.

But once again, the order did not reach its intended recipient.

Hesitantly, Unit One rose from the ground.

The armor on the hands had all but disintegrated, and what had come to light from beneath them bore an absurd resemblance to normal, human hands, complete with fingernails…

To severely burned human hands.

While Kensuke was still mourning his camcorder, Touji was reminding his new classmate that he had orders to retreat, but even he could no longer get through to him.
Most likely, Shinji himself couldn't have described just what exactly got the better of him that moment.

The ticking clock, no, the icy certainty, that an useless person like him wouldn't make it to a safe place in time, that he would just plain fail to save those two and receive even more blame for it, the unthinkable notion of turning his back to this thing to flee from her, the pain still simmering in his palms, the need to prove to these two that he wasn't a bad person, or just the bare horror that every further second inside this thing was to him.

He just knew that he wanted this unbearable situation to end already.

He wanted it to stop!

He wanted out of here!

Again, he clung to a simple sentence, this time one that had helped him before.

"I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, imustnrunaway, imustntrunaway, imustntrunaway, imustntrunawayimustnrunawayi mustntrunaway…"

He activated the prog-knife.

And then, neither orders nor appeals to rationality could stop him.

Shinji expulsed one bloodcurdling war cry, as if he had released a piece of his damned soul through his mouth directly into the heavens, and charged the angel like a berserker, let himself slide down the mountainside with the knife in his hands and tears of pure fear in his eyes, running, because he was terrified too far out of his mind to stop, driving his knife deeply into the angel's core.

The angel's light whips impaled the Evangelion's abdomen, lacerating whatever was inside.

The pain was so intense that Shinji could not find the air to scream.

He had failed.

But he mustn't fail, he couldn't afford to fail, not now, not like this…

The clock was ticking and, damn it, he had mere seconds left.

Sparks flew, the core cracked, but it still wasn't enough.

He couldn't allow himself to just slump down right now, so he tried to somehow canalize the pain into the battle, pushed at one of the control levers with both hands, pushed this knife deeper inside with every fiber of his being, while the Evangelion, the interface and his own body appeared to be falling to pieces all around him.

And then, it was over.

Finished.

The interface vanished, leaving the three boys in the darkness of the entry plug.

The fifth angel was defeated. Liquefied, like her predecessor. Only the hardened light whips remained, still embedded within the Evangelion's body.
Again, the rain of blood created a rainbow, and soon, it was joined by actual rain.

But these sounds did not even penetrate the walls of the entry plug.

Its inside was completely silent – save for Ikari Shinji’s uncontrollable sobbing and whimpering.

His lament had no end, his face reddened beneath the never ending streams of tears and the snot that came with them, the pitiful, repulsing image of a thoroughly broken human being.

He just couldn't make himself stop – and Touji could no longer deny that he had done him an injustice…

"But let's forget Shinji-kun and Captain Katsuragi for once… What on earth were those two boys thinking?"

"They probably weren't thinking at all, Maya. They're in the middle of puberty." Akagi commented, squeezing her cigarette out against a corner of her ashtray as she directed another glance at the diagrams and numeric values on the papers held in her other hand.

"...but it's interesting that they were able to cause this much interferences without even an interface-headset – and that Shinji-kun was still able to operate the EVA regardless of that… Those two might as well be the most promising of our candidates…"

"What candidates… and for what?"

"For nothing, forget it. Let's continue with the damage evaluation…"

A usual day in class II-A.

The boys were goofing off, the girls were chatting, Rei was staring out of the window, where there was, for once, actually something to be seen – namely a heavy, overcast sky and the downpour falling out of it – and Kensuke was keeping himself busy with some rather… unique activity, precisely, the rendering of a 3-D-model of the most recent heavenly attacker.

There was just one thing missing…

Yes, exactly. Those goofing boys were lacking their respected war chief in their epic struggle against the organizing force of the class representative – Suzuhara Touji.

It was not that he was absent from class again, no, he was sitting on his desk.

Or rather, more like sulking over it, a condition which had become his default state for these last few days.

"It has been three days now…"

"Since we got the lecture of a lifetime?" Kensuke offered.

"No… since the transferee stopped coming to school…"

"My, my, you really are stubborn. If you had apologized to him right away, you could have saved yourself three days of moping."

Touji's mood seemed rotten enough to keep him from coming up with any sort of cheeky retort.
Kensuke typed something into his laptop and then proceeded to scribble something unto a piece of paper.

"Here. I've got you the transferee's phone number. If you're worried about him, just call him."

Touji did take the paper and retreated into the hallway where through lucky circumstance, a public phone happened to be situated relatively close to their classroom.

Glancing sideways at the paper to check again and again, Touji pressed the first few keys…

And stopped at the last one.

He could talk big, no doubt there, but an actual apology…

He did not know how to really express that.

No, Kensuke hadn't 'tenderized' him just yet.

Right now, he just wasn't… ready for this.

And thus, Shinji's new cellphone remained just as unused as before.

Chapter End Notes

(1) The angel ordinals will follow Rebuild at first, mainly because I couldn't imagine a world without Mari vs. Tunnel angel, but this will include classic angels that weren't in Rebuild, extracanonical angels and perhaps even creations of my own. As you have seen, I've used Shamshel's Rebuild-Design because I think it looks creepier. You can also expect Rebuild!Ramiel, but this isn't a general rule. I much prefer Bardiel as a white slime thing and I liked it when the dummy plug was solid red.

(2) The designer of Shamshel apparently considered her female and depicted her as such in a comic strip. Yes. I know. My first guess would've been "male", too, I actually had to go back and correct this chapter when I found out.

(3) So yeah, OUCH. The battle is won, but at what price? What adverse effects will this horrible trauma have on the tender soul of unfortunate protagonist? Find out in the next Chapter, 09: [So Close]
I've spent so much time
throwing rocks at your window
That I never even knocked
on the front door
I walk by statues
never even made one chip
but if i could leave a mark on the monument of the heart
I just might lay myself down
with little more hope than I had
the last day
Wait a time
and spare these lies
we tell ourselves
These days have come and gone
But this time is sweeter than honey
Evanescence, 'So Close'

Excerpt from the second interim-report about the first battle in Neo-Tokyo-3 by the leader of the operations division and thus, the person responsible for the operation, Captain Katsuragi Misato: "Even if we were victorious, lots of damage was caused, and for us from the operations division, this battle was a trial that exposed many miscalculations and showed us that there is still much to improve. Regardless, it is to be commended that Ikari Shinji, a completely untrained, unprepared boy succeeded in carrying out the operation, no, that he even agreed to participate in it."

In the time the NERV personnel needed to reach the battlefield, retrieve the EVA, relocate it onto a transportation framework, remove the Entry Plug and open it as the last step just before transporting it back to HQ, Ikari Shinji had been weeping incessantly.

Neither Touji nor Kensuke dared to address him in that state, even less after having witnessed the suffering he had just gone through with their very own eyes.
Shinji didn't even release himself from his position, keeping his hands and arms pressed against the control lever and his head hanging in between them.

He had no strength left to move from this spot, let alone subject himself to the judgment of his classmates or even look them in the eyes.

All he could do was cry.

Sure, his sobs of lament got quieter over time, but when the NERV technicians opened the main hatch of the entry plug after it had been extracted and the bulk of the LCL had been expelled, they still found him in that exact same posture.

However, when he was asked to come out, he rose from his seat and complied almost mechanically, wordlessly walking over to one area that had been previously encircled with curtain-like partition screens, where a short, medical checkup was to take place, right past Touji and Kensuke whose concerned looks he did not seem to register.

The two were already being expected by several security employees in black and soon marshaled somewhere different, presumably to get thoroughly chewed out.

Shinji, on the other hand, was asked by a somewhat elderly physician to sit down on an examination couch which had also been set up there and to remove his plug suit from the waist up. He followed all instructions like a robot and wordlessly sat through the procedures.

It quickly became apparent that he had escaped completely unscathed this time – physically, that is.

After he had thus been discharged fairly fast, he passively let himself be escorted back to headquarters, flat out incapable to independently do or say anything – Any and all 'processing capacity' in his skull was far too busy with futile attempts to come to terms with the events of the last five minutes – It was hard to believe that it really had been this short.

One might as well have asked a cheap calculator to compute the exact value of \( \pi \).

Once they arrived at HQ, Shinji was left in a room with multiple showers in it – Shinji had been here before, quite often, mostly after his training, but never after a battle – the first one had left him incapable of leaving the EVA on his own two feet.

On one of the two benches which were also present in the room, he was being awaited by a pile of neatly folded clothes and a cold drink in a paper cup, complete with a straw, and the first thing he did was to take a deep gulp out of the latter to calm himself and soothe his throat after all of that panicked screaming.

After that first gulp, however, he decided to shower before anything else – less because of any thoughts that someone might be expecting him somewhere, than because of his wish to rid himself of the plug suit and the remaining LCL sticking to him as quickly as he could, since both of these things kept reminding him of the battle.

Peripherally, he wondered why in the world there were so many showers here.

Right now, both they and the closely situated, similarly large locker room were frequented by him alone. Sure, there was still Ayanami who was currently out of commission because of her injuries, but this room seemed too big for even two people.
From the looks of it, he would have guessed that it had been intended for significantly more users.

But Shinji was far too enervated to think about it for all too long – Ever since he had moved to Tokyo-3, his life had ceased to make sense anyway.

Thus, he quickly shed his plug suit, occupied one of the showers and gave his body a thorough scrubbing, as if he were hoping to wash off those horrible memories along with the LCL.

That didn't quite work, but at least the hot water did him good.

After he'd rubbed himself dry with a towel that had also been provided to him, he hung it over the saloon-door-like flaps that served as entrance to the individual shower he was in and presumably to shield the user's private parts from the other occupants if this shower room should ever come to be frequented by more people than just him, and put on the clothes – among them loose black trousers and a blue t-shirt – in no particular order.

And since he hadn't been given any further orders, he just sat down on one of the benches, grabbed his drink, and waited.

For a while, he was left alone, left waiting in his silent darkness, without being subjected to further demands or expectations.

But then, the door opened, and some entered.

Shinji didn't have the heart to even look up.

"...why did you disobey my order?"

It was Misato's voice. She sounded positively cross.

Of course… of course there would be no kind words.

The organization didn't give a damn about the hell he just went through.

They had taken it for granted that he would win.

All he was to them was a glorified extension cable to rely their orders to the EVA, they expected him to function, and that was all.

"I'm sorry." He answered quietly. That was what they wanted to hear from him right now, wasn't it?

That's why she had come.

Wasn't it that what he had to say so they would be nice to him again?

"You are aware that I'm responsible for you and this operation, aren't you?"

"Yeah…"

"And this means that you have to do exactly as I tell you. Do you understand what this means?"

"Yeah…"

"So, this will never happen again?"
"Yeah…"

By then, Misato had had enough. Did that child really think that the problem would just go away if he played the poor, beleaguered victim and recited a few apologies to placate her?

"Are you sure that you're even listening to me?"

"Yeah…"

"Damnit, Shinji-kun! This isn't about you saying yes to everything, you need to understand!"

"Yeah… I do understand, Misato-san. But the important part is that we won, isn't it? If you need me to pilot the EVA again… just tell me…"

And now that unnerving feigned calm. That was the last thing she needed right now.

So, she marched over to where he was and leaned forward, hoping that she may have better chances at getting through to him if she was at eye level with him.

"Listen up, you may think that's it's easier to go with the flow than to take responsibility for your actions, but if you pilot the EVA with that sort of attitude, you will die!"

"Who cares? I don't, and I know no one else does."

The worst was that he never stopped presenting her that false, defiant smile, even when saying something like this.

"If you expected me to applaud you for your so-called heroism, you thought wrong. I won't do any such thing."

"I don't care about that." Shinji lied. "After all, I'm the only one who can pilot Unit one, right?"

That went too far.

Misato could no longer bear to look at that poorly-faked farce of resignation.

Why couldn't he just tell her to her face what the hell he had been thinking? How was she supposed to help him otherwise, heh?!

Irate, she grabbed the fourteen-year-old by the seam of his shirt and pulled him upwards, as if she wanted to force him to look her straight in the eyes.

In the process, his drink found its way to the floor – he didn't seem to have expected this.

Still, he seemed neither impressed nor intimidated.

And he still wasn't looking into her eyes.

It was simply no use.

So, she let go of him.

"Enough with this. You better go home… and rest."

It was only after the boy had left the shower room with his head hanging in defeat that Misato became fully aware of what she had just done.
She could have slapped herself right then and there – and to be honest, she did.

That boy irritated her to no end…

Of course he did, he was a fourteen-year-old teenager in the middle of puberty, no trained soldier.

A fourteen-year-old teenager who had just been through a life-or-death battle against a gigantic abomination – and then, he'd even been yelled-at for his trouble, by none other than her.

If there was a prize for counter-productiveness, she had probably just won it.

Excerpt from observation protocol Number 42, Subject: Code Third Child, penned by Captain Katsuragi Misato: "Today, we were attacked by the fifth angel, completely out of the blue. It was successfully defeated and destroyed by Unit One."

"Ikari? Ikari Shinji? He only just transferred and he's already missing? Whatever, looks like he'll have to repeat this little surprise test then!"

Collective moaning.

Shinji was wasting away.

He felt like death warmed over.

For days, he hadn't left his bed for anything but short trips to the fridge or the bathroom. For days, he hadn't ceased to stare at the ceiling, waiting for his life to start being just a little less horrible.

He didn't understand.

He didn't understand this at all.

He had done what they all asked of him, hadn't he?

He had let himself be stuffed into the EVA, even though he'd been beaten up for it, he'd fought the angel despite the mind-numbing agony he had been forced to endure.

He had even won, but apparently, that wasn't enough.

Not enough to earn himself anything resembling kind words…

But if those were beyond his reach, if he couldn't expect any sort of affection, not even from Misato, if nothing he did would please them…

Then what was he even doing here?

Right, what was he doing here?

There was a door.

A new morning rose over Tokyo-3.

The dawning of a new day.
The dawning of a *shitty* day.

If the intrusive ringing of her alarm clock wasn't the first thing to tell her so, then it was the distant sound of the pouring rain that convinced Misato that she would have nothing to laugh about today.

After she had shut up the troublesome clock with her right foot, which had been the closest to it of all of her limbs, she stretched herself a little and finally sat up.

It was so very apparent that she *really* didn't feel like leaving her bed today, but it couldn't be helped.

So, she dragged herself to the bathroom, in her blue pajamas, with her hair in a state of total chaos, using one foot to scratch the other as she morosely brushed her teeth.

Her disheveled reflection wasn't exactly motivating as was the prospect of having to eat breakfast alone – for the fifth time in a row.

Ever since the incident with the fifth angel, Shinji had shut himself in his room to brood – Not that she wasn't partially to blame for this, but this had gone on long enough.

She hoped that she would at least be able to convince him to go to back to school today.

Not that her expectations were particularly high.

By now, the provisional nametag on his room's door had been replaced by a proper, metal one whose heart-shaped surface was now announcing to the world that this was 'Shin-chan's room', but 'Shin-chan' himself wasn't showing the slightest reaction to Misato's knocking.

She gave it another try, this time, accompanied by words:

"Shinji-kun, come on! Just how long do you intend to keep skipping school? You haven't left your bed for five days already!"

No reaction.

"They've even finished repairing Unit One by now, but without its pilot, all it does it catch dust uselessly! Shinji-kun!"

No, it did not look like she was achieving anything besides wasting her breath.

All right.

Maybe he was more likely to listen if she entered his room.

But when Misato opened the door, only a crack wide a first, just to check what he was doing, she found an unpleasant surprise waiting for her:

He was gone.

And not just him;

The cupboards were emptied out, his clothes were missing, much like his sparse belongings, like all sighs that anyone had ever lived in here.

He had even tidied the place up and made his bed.
The only things he'd left behind were his NERV ID-card and a little piece of paper:

'Farewell.'

Great. Apparently, he shared his father's enthusiasm for very short letters.

But that was beside the point.

"He ran away… Why does this even surprise me…"

Damnit.

She had to report this to headquarters.

So she hurriedly grabbed her hairbrush and organized the bird's nest on her head. Next were her clothes, which she pulled over herself at an abnormal speed – lucky for her, as it turned out when the doorbell happened to ring as soon as she had finished putting on her shirt. Hastily donning her uniform jacket on the way, she raced to the entrance of her apartment and manually pulled the door open, too worried to wait for the electronics.

"SHINJI-KUN, WHERE HAVE YOU-

Wait. No.

Instead of revealing the missing EVA pilot, the door exposed Misato to two now understandably confused-looking boys that somehow looked vaguely familiar to her.

The one on the left was notably taller than his buddy, was wearing a dark blue tracksuit and had brown eyes, relatively tan skin and close-cropped black hair that had been molded into a modern-looking style, possibly with the aid of hair gel.

His companion had a somewhat lighter complexion, freckles, longer, light brown hair and a pair of glasses on his roundish-looking nose.

Unlike his friend, he was present in his uniform.

The taller of the two seemed somewhat… impressed.

"F-Forgive us, Miss…!" Much more wouldn't leave his lips.

But that was apparently why he'd brought his friend: "We're Aida and Suzuhara."

"Aida-kun and… Suzuhara-kun?"

"Yes, uh, I'm Suzuhara." Touji added to prevent confusion in advance.

"Hey, wait…" Misato finally remembered where exactly she'd seen those faces before: "Weren't you the two who were in the entry plug with Shinji-kun?"

"Yes-

"Yes and we're very sorry."

"We're here because-

"We're here because Ikari-kun hasn't come to school ever since." Touji finished, continuously
taking the words out of Kensuke's mouth.

"We got worried and wanted to check if he's all right."

"Yeah, yes he is." Misato lied with the best sugar-doll-smile she could muster at the moment. "He's just really busy with his pilot training at the moment."

"Yeah, we get it."

"Here's the mountain of paper that's been accumulating on his desk…" Kensuke added, handing Misato the printouts in question.

"That's very kind of you."

"Okay, we'll be going then." Touji stated.

"Please say hi to Ikari-kun for us!" Kensuke amended.

"I will! See you soon!"

Misato waved goodbye and closed the door.

She feared that her act had been rather transparent towards the end.

But the boys' attention had been focused somewhere slightly lower than her face.

"That didn't turn out the way we expected…"

"That was one seriously hot babe…"

Regardless of her temperature, Misato was, first and foremost really, really miffed.

At last someone was coming to visit him, someone seemed to have begun to consider him a friend, and where was he?

Right.

Up, up and away!

Exasperated, Misato turned away from the door, just to spin right back a second later and vent her frustrations through a fierce kick against that poor, innocent, pitiable door that had never done anything to harm her.

"SHINJI, YOU IDIOT!"

"...you… Idiot..."

The second time, the insult had lost its vigor.

Presumably, because he may just have gone back to school if he had still been here to meet those two...

"Today was another rainy day, the last four days have been one single downpour. Even the analysis of the angel's remains had to be postponed because of this."
At first, the tram had seemed to be the fastest way to get as far away as possible, but he hadn't thought much further than that.

It wasn't as if he had any sort of destination he wanted to reach.

He was drifting like a ship that had been untied from the rope binding it to the port, and then left to itself and the waves.

He just sat there, with the headphones in his ears, his head hung low, immersing himself in the buckling of the tram;

His surroundings were bustling with activity, the busy conversations of an average weekday he was trying to block out.

No one took notice of the inconspicuous fourteen-year-old sitting on the bench right next to the exit, silent and alone; They all had their own business to think off, people, that accompanied them on their personal journeys.

Outside, the deluge went out without cease, and even when it did subside for a short while, it would always continue pretty soon afterwards. At times, the tram would traverse a tunnel, constantly emptying and filling with new, different people:

Schoolgirls chatting with each other, businesswomen in their blazers, students, mothers with children, either sleeping right next to them or looking out of the widow.

But none of them stayed in this wagon for particularly long, they all had a station to arrive to, a place they were awaited at, a goal to reach.

Shinji had no such place, no place to arrive at, and so, he simply didn't leave the wagon at all.

Thus, his path bit its own tail and became a circle, always going round and round and round, always following the orbital railway.

When he entered here, he had simply picked the first tram that had arrived at the station closest to Misato's apartment, but there was nothing stopping him from leaving and boarding another tram, one that would certainly lead him far, far away from here.

Nothing but the thought of finding himself alone in the darkness of the night, far away from the artificial lights of civilization or anything else to suggest a path for him to continue upon, which just scared him more the harder he thought about it.

He found the mere idea to horrifying that he turned up the volume, hoping for the music to wash it out of his skull, but what he'd feared the most about that possibility was the boundless feeling of solitude such a situation would entail… and just how was it any different from the loneliness that was plaguing him right here, right now, even here amongst all these people…?

Then again, even their numbers was steadily decreasing, since it must have been getting really, really late, more and more were leaving at every single station, and each time the tram stopped, Shinji wondered whether he, too, should leave here, yet in the end, nothing ever came of it; He simply kept listening to his music.

Track 25, Track 26, Track 25.
He thought he had found something like a home, a source of acknowledgement, but he should have expected that no one could possibly want him for his own merits.

No one could possibly want someone like him.

Someone like him who just couldn't do anything right.

For every step he took forward, he always went one back.

One step forwards… and one step back.

One step forwards… and one step back.

For each step forward, another that brought him right back to where he started.

And it was getting darker and emptier around him, the people were disappearing one by one, until the crowd was reduced to a single old man who had fallen asleep under his newspaper, and in the end, even he left.

When the tram finally came to a halt, not even the wet footprints the many people had left behind had remained to keep Shinji company.

According to the automatic announcement coming from the speakers, this was the final destination.

He could no longer stay here.

Shinji raised his head, taking an upright position for what had to be the first time in ages.

"I need to get back!"

He skipped to Track 26.

One step forward…

…and one step back.

By the time Track 26 had finished playing, that fickle little flame of determination that had shortly flared up there had already been extinguished.

He had wanted to get back, yes, but how was he supposed to get back from here?

It had barely been a month since he moved to this city, and most of that time had been spent in his room or at NERV HQ.
Of course, he could have asked someone for the way, but by the time he arrived at that thought, his motivation had already fully seeped out of him, so he kept wandering the streets aimlessly, never separating himself too far from the crowds.

He found himself in some dirty, godforsaken corner of the inner city, judging by the scraps of conversation he picked up around him, maybe even the red-light-district, but he didn't care, he just tuned up the volume of his music to he wouldn't have to listen to other people enjoying themselves while he was all alone.

With his bag as his only company, he silently waded through the forest of city lights, people and advertisements, just another shadow in a large, dark crowd at the feet of the tall, enormous buildings.

He happened across a cinema that had one old, bad, cheesy movie about Second Impact running, one that just about everyone would have seen on TV already.

Correspondingly few people had turned up at this ungodly hour to see it; In fact, most of the people who had found their way here didn't seem to be motivated by the movie at all: In the front row, there was a drunk sleeping off his intoxication, somewhere in the middle rows, a homeless man was snoring to himself, having apparently considered this cinema a fine shelter for the night.

Technically, Shinji himself was now homeless as well.

He, too, did not particularly care for what was flickering across the screen; He was here because you could usually buy food at cinemas, but mostly because he had simply felt like having something other than his music washing over him.

Completely apathetic, he stared forwards, not really at the screen, but simply into nothingness, until something else grabbed his attention:

A few rows in front of him, there was a couple, whispering words of love into each other's ears, covering each other in their arms and kisses, and, ultimately, beginning to have Sex.

Shinji blocked out the movie and began observing those two instead, partially disturbed, partially resenting the fact that he didn't have anyone to give himself to…

This was the first time that he woke up with the same funereal train of thought he'd gone to bed with still going on; It hadn't ever happened to him before that battle. Until now, his experience had always shown this gap, that interruption of his consciousness to be at least a momentary distraction, a partial reset after which the world would just continue going on.

Then again, calling this "going to bed" was a massive overstatement, all he had was a bench in the cinema's lobby – There didn't seem to be anyone left here who could have noticed his presence – his bag as a pillow (There were things inside whose outline he could clearly feel through the fabric, but it was better than nothing) and no blanket to shield himself from the slight cool of the night.

Everything here was foreign, cold, dirty and open, the lights of the vending machines couldn't be turned off, and the toilet here had been dominated by a horrible stench; He could hardly name them all, all those little sources of discomfort, each of which may have seemed trivial, but the sum of them left him downright languished.

He was already the type to have the most niggling neuroses about the smallest little things, he had little to no tolerance for regular unfamiliar places, this here was straight up unbearable.
After a long, long time, he ultimately did fall into a state at least reminiscent of sleep, if only because he no longer had the strength to sustain his "wakefulness" any longer, but not before distantly wondering what it was that he had hoped to find out here.

The next dawn came enveloped in a cloak of deep red.

The clouds, the buildings, the landscape, it was all tinted in an all-encompassing vermillion by the rising sun.

Shinji had left his little alleyway behind and continued his erratic meandering in the outskirts of the city, finally daring to stray from the most frequented parts of the city now that it was no longer dark.

He was circling the borders of Tokyo-3, following those little dirt tracks that led him into the woods surrounding the metropolis.

Bit by bit, the colossal skyscrapers were being supplanted by sleeker, smaller buildings, many of which were still quite large Apartment buildings.

One of these many distant towers glistening in the reddish light might be Misato’s apartment.

Maybe he should…

But the moment he had taken the first step into the corresponding direction, he could already hear it.

He had already noticed its beginnings on his way here, the way it was steadily getting louder and louder, but now, it was beginning to come over him like a rising storm.

This may have been a forest, but this was just too much.

This continuous buzzing, droning and chirping of the innumerable insects rang in his ears like a bizarre, alien, far too disharmonic orchestra, surging to a booming crescendo through the participation of more and more animals.

Shinji covered his ears as best as he could and ran as fast as his legs would carry him, following the street, away from the forest, away from the insects, away from the apartment buildings, just away.

Most of the day was over by the time he came back to his senses.

His only proof for the passage of time was the battery gauge on his cassette player which seemed a great deal emptier now – He distantly wondered where he would be when it had finally ran out.

In the end, he ended up making himself an improvised, makeshift resting place out of old, discarded cardboard boxes, somewhere in a dark alleyway otherwise populated by stay cats only, which, by virtue of bordering on a larger street lined with city lights, bars and pubs were drunk, cheery people were celebrating until the dawn brought them rest, at least wasn't silent.

When he thought that he must have hit rock bottom with last night's so-called accommodations, this cruel world must've taken it as an implicit challenge to prove him wrong – He should have known his fall into this infinite, black hole would go on and on and on, that this downward spiral would keep spinning and spinning and spinning…
He hadn't been able to find a better spot to sleep, not here, in this area that was completely foreign
and opaque to him, and if he'd brought enough money with him to rent a room in a hotel, he
would've done so yesterday. And even if he had the cash, what should he do if someone asked him
what he was doing here all alone?

Actually, he didn't have a clue how much a night in a hotel would cost – he had been standing in
front of one for a while, wondering what it would be like to step inside, but the moment it seemed
like someone was coming to address him, he shied away.

Even if he had been willing to explain himself, he couldn't have done it; He was lost to his leaden
speechlessness.

Before coming here, he had tried a parking lot and a train station, but he had no luck – Both times,
he had been found by a security guard, and he couldn't say which experience had been worse, the
brusqueness and lack of empathy with which he had been thrown out of the parking deck with a
few "colorful" words thrown after him, or the man from the train station, who had planned to drag
him away, intending to call the police and hand him over.

He escaped the guards both times – just the initial, sudden, fast movement was enough to send him
back to the battlefield, facing that colossus of red flesh, its tentacles of light snatching at him at the
speed of a bullet, just one particularly loud noise, and he'd be back in EVA 01, fighting for his life
–

If he tried to think of how he had left that place and wound up here, his memory gave him no
answer – The only clear thought in his head had been "Away from here!", his innermost filled to
the brim with the gruesome images of the battle that were bubbling up like the carbon dioxide in a
bottle of coke that had been viciously kicked across the room, bursting under the sudden pressure
from the inside, and you could very well imagine his mind in the role of the bottle, all, that was left
were the fear, the pain and the endless tears, his complete and utter inability to cope with being
immediately responsible for two other lives, for everything that might have happened…

He completely lost himself, and when he found himself again, he was here, curled up in this
wretched hole.

Around him were numerous bins and bags filled with garbage; There was a nauseating stench, but
he was far too worn out to search for another place to stay.

Actually, this might be exactly where he was supposed to be, what was he, if not just another piece
of useless garbage that not even his own father considered worth his time.

He couldn't stop his trembling; In the silent darkness, the fear kept reverberating through his being
as if some metaphysical little homunculi somewhere in his cerebral gyri had forgotten to turn it off,
and the thin layers of cardboard and cloth weren't enough to keep the cold of the night from
creeping into the pathetic shell of his being.

He almost couldn't believe this despair, it just wouldn't dissipate, as if something in his inner
clockworks had just gotten stuck in this state, permanently crushed by the angel's tentacles and the
thundering stomps of the EVA.

That battle had very much done him in, left him hollowed out – that he had even needed this long to
arrive at this conclusion, that he hadn't been able to do that until now was all proof he'd ever need
of that, and of another truth he had finally arrived at: That he was afraid to have lost a part of him
that he would never get back.
"Today, we could finally see the sun again, even if it was still a mostly cloudy day.

Other than that there is nothing more worth mentioning."

A method that was much more effective at putting as many kilometers as possible between himself and Misato than simple running could ever be was, as it turned out, to simply board a bus.

The particular bus that Shinji had taken eventually dropped him off somewhere in the mountains that surrounded Neo-Tokyo-3.

It might as well be the very same mountain where the battle took place more than a week ago – he no longer cared.

He just continued walking, all the way across the landscape, whereever his feet would carry him.

It was all the same to him.

He just kept marching forward, his head downcast, taking his time.

Idleness was a luxury that those without goal or purpose could very well allow themselves.

The sky was blue, the birds were chirping, but it didn't matter to him in the slightest;

Nothing really impressed him: Idyllic country roads, shining, clear lakes, enormous fields full of vibrant sunflowers.

The sun polished all of nature to shine in its brightest colors, so that one may have felt like they had just stepped into one of Van Gogh's paintings, not just because of the flowers.

But the scenery lacked the fast strokes of the brush, the menacing, washed-out elements – But Shinji’s mind took care of inserting these on its own, unable to find joy even when surrounded by such splendor.

What he did readily stop for were the daunting mountains of his homeland, with their woods, their terraced cliffs and their unforgiving, icy winds that chased clouds and mist past them.

Tokyo-3 could be seen from up here, where the distance alone reduced the fortress city to a small, silver spot surrounded by ancient stone that only served to demonstrate him how insignificant and small he really was.

And those same winds played with the boy's hair as his deep blue eyes scanned the scenery devoid of any hopes or expectations.

With his hair in motion, he looked more like the fragile, delicate being he really was.

Shinji silently dedicated quite some time just to standing there, right next to the abyss, on the wrong side of the fence at the very edge of the rock, where a particularly strong gust of wind or even a single, clumsy movement would be enough for him to plummet into oblivion.

He couldn't think of a single, convincing reason to keep his distance from the precipice…

(One step forward)

…but neither did he feel particularly compelled to jump.
(One step backwards)

Or maybe he was just too much of a coward to go through with it.

(So, he sat down on that very spot and remained there for what must have been half an eternity, unable to make the final step.)

"He's only fourteen… Just how is he supposed to cope with having to shoulder the literal weight of the world?"

"He has to. As a matter of fact, only children his age can be used as pilots for the Evangelions… Has Shinji-kun phoned you or done anything else to contact you?"

"MhMh…" Misato replied, sullenly leaning against the wall while her blonde coworker went through the First Child's examination results on the monitors before her nose, while the girl herself, currently naked save for simple, white panties and a mountain load of bandages, was being subjected to an extensive screening.

"You haven't heard from him at all?" Dr. Akagi prodded as she scribbled down something pertaining to this week's dose of Rei's medication onto a piece of paper lying right next to her mouse pad.

"No, not at all. And I don't think he's ever come back, either…"

"So what do you plan to do about that?"

"Nothing at all." Misato admitted in resignation. "It's probably for the best if he doesn't return…"

"Why do you say that…?"

Misato proceeded to detail that one, fateful, and very much failed conversation between Shinji and herself.

"…and then, I realized that he's just a child. It's only natural that it's all too much for him, it's only natural that he doesn't follow our every order… We're expecting him to… function however we want to, and, we have to, I mean, all of our lives are at stake, but Shinji isn't an automaton that we can just turn on whenever we feel like it, that we expect to "perform flawlessly"… You should have seen that, just how… how wrong it was…"

There he goes and tells me to my face that he doesn't care whether he lives or dies… with a smile on his face, but it was very apparent that he was at the end of his tether… and I hardly made it any better…"

Misato sighed.

"I see." The scientist glanced at her second monitor.

"We shouldn't ask him to do something that causes him this much pain…" Misato concluded. "It will destroy him."

"But… we do need pilots."

Misato didn't quite know what to reply to this.
"DADADADADADA!"

"AAAAHHH"

"Captain, you're hurt!"

"Go on without me, Aida!"

"But… I can't just leave you here, Sir! I'll stay at your side!"

"That was an order!"

"OUCH!"

What might have sounded like an epic battle was the work of a single schoolboy who was playing all the roles himself, only aided by a fairly realistic plastic riflle and clothes covered in a camouflage pattern. But right now, he was allowing himself a little rest after his stunning performance of punching himself in the face.

From his point of view on the ground, it seemed as if both the steadily darkened evening sky and the orange-ish clouds travelling across it were surrounded by a frame formed by the individual spikes of the high grass surrounding him, which some of them protruding into the "picture".

However, the moment that he sat up, presumably to continue his adorable little war games in some shape or form, he became aware of a solitary boy who was wandering down a nearby dirt track.

Wait a second, that school uniform, that haircut, that posture and the ostensibly depressed state it implied…

Hadn't he seen him somewhere before?

"Hey, Ikari!"

And sure enough, the other boy stopped and turned to face Kensuke, visibly surprised.

He hadn't expected to see any familiar faces in this kind of place, much less to be called by his name – As a matter of fact, Kensuke's was the first remotely familiar face he had seen in the last two days.

In the time the two boys had needed to make their way to the spot where Kensuke had pitched his tent, the night had caught up to them, along with the cold that tended to follow its every step, presenting Kensuke with a chance to demonstrate some special American-boy-scout flint stone trick to ignite a small campfire to chase the cold and the dark away.

Shinji hadn't disclosed what he was doing here, but shook his head at Kensuke's question as to whether he was being expected anywhere, silently agreeing to follow the military otaku and allowing him to wrap him in his jacket.

It was only when he felt the green and brown piece of clothing covering his skin that he became aware that his arms and fingers had grown numb from the cold, having been exposed to the mountain's freezing winds in nothing but his thin, short-sleeved school uniform.

Eternal summer or not, every summer had its cooler, rainier days, and with the absence of seasons, the influence of the increasing altitude could be felt all the more.
While he hadn't managed to kick off a conversation on the way to the tent, Kensuke decided to use the cozy atmosphere around the campfire for yet another try, for he had something to say that had been needing to be said for quite a while now, even if a certain friend of his had not yet managed to swallow his stubborn pride to a sufficient degree: "Touji is really sorry that he beat you up. In the end, he got scolded by his little sister of all people! She said that you and your robot saved our lives. Must be quite embarrassing to get scolded by an elementary school student, right?" Kensuke reported, poking around in the fire with a wooden stick.

Unfortunately, he was forced to conclude that striking up a conversation with the involuntary EVA pilot was a daunting task – That last battle must have affected him profoundly, which meant that the entire robot business – as much as it enticed his curiosity – was probably off the menu.

So, Kensuke tried something else: "I like coming here at night, when those cicadas don't make such a ruckus. Until recently, it used to be bearable during the day as well, but lately, those things have been mating like rabbits…"

Even Kensuke himself was actually a little startled when Shinji actually replied, speaking for the first time in days: "Misato-san says… that it's a sign that the ecosystem is slowly recovering…"

Kensuke grinned.

Yet another successfully accomplished mission for his list of achievements. And Shinji had even steered the conversation back to the more interesting topics, all by himself.

"Misato-san, you say? Man, I'm really envious. You get to live with such a gorgeous lady, and on top of that, you get to pilot the Evangelion! If I could do that only once, my heart would be content… I'd show these monsters who's boss!" Kensuke gushed, accentuating his fantasies with a few gestures of high entertainment value.

But Shinji had a significantly more disenchanted view of his job: "Be glad that you don't have to. Your mother would be worried…"

"I don't think so. I don't even have one. I'm the same as you."

That prompted the first visible reaction is the Third Child's face. He even straightened himself up, properly looking his companion in the eyes for once.

But before Shinji could ask how Kensuke had known this – maybe he had deduced it from the fact that he was basically living with his superior, or perhaps he could tell from the way he'd said that last sentence? – the latter announced that their dinner must be ready by now, and the two of them had their meal together.

Apparently, Shinji liked it; in any case, he complimented the food with a few sparse words and apologized for imposing on Kensuke.

It was probably a positive sign that he was the one to start their next conversation once they had retreated into the tent and hidden away under their blankets:

"Do you do this kind of thing often?"

"Yeah, sort of." Kensuke admitted.

"Is that supposed to be training for some sort of guerilla-warfare?"

"With a plastic gun? Not really. I just do this for fun."
One step forward…

…and one step back.

The sun didn't grant the next morning as much vibrant colors as the last one – Or who knows, maybe the sun was secretly doing its best and shining as brightly as it could, it's not like there was any way to prove the opposite with these thick layers of mist in the way.

But the singing of the early birds wasn't the only sound to greet the dawning of the next day; What awakened Kensuke from his slumber were the steps of a nearing group of people.

Alarmed by their sounds, he quickly put on his glasses and moved over to the entrance of the tent, ready to face the newcomers.

He much preferred to reveal himself by his own choice, with the safety of the tent behind his back to them being the ones to pull the fabric of the entrance aside and "catch" him in a small enclosed space.

But as soon as the military otaku took a glance outside, it became apparent that his "strategy" didn't matter one way or another – he already had been surrounded to begin with.

In each of the four directions, there was one well-built man in a black suit and dark sunglasses, led by a woman who was standing directly in front of the tent.

She, too, was wearing sunglasses and black clothes, in her case, a blazer and a tube-like skirt that ended just above her knees.

Kensuke knew enough about this kind of things to recognize them as trained security personnel at first glance.

Normally, this would have instantly activated his inner fan boy and bombarded them with questions, excited to actually meet people like that in real life, but today, he knew that there was only one possible reason for them to be here…

The Third Child.

And with that being the case, this lady and her companions meant trouble before anything else, as impressed as Kensuke was to find a woman working in such a job.

Now, one may have wrongly gotten the impression that he was currently being presented with a nice view, considering that he had just crawled out of a tent to find a woman in a short skirt looking down at him, but she was wearing rather opaque, black stockings and high, black boot without any heels to hinder her.

She had long, jet black hair that was bound into a high ponytail on the back of her head, and it would have been wrong to say that she didn't possess above-average physical beauty, but she completely lacked any sort of aura of attractiveness or magnetic charisma; Yes, she wasn't ugly, but there was nothing about her looks, posture or gestures inviting you to find that out and make your eyes linger. You would only have noticed her beauty if you were looking for it, if you used your fantasy to fill in what the nondescript cut of her clothes wouldn't reveal to you.

She wasn't a drool-inducing diva like Misato where your first or second association would be the word "Hot!", but more of a small light.
"Are you… Ikari Shinji-kun?"

The sentence sounded experienced, matter-of-factly and businesslike, like you'd expect it of a computer, or well, a professional, but there had been that strange pause in her speech, as if it cost her some effort to bring herself to use the boy's name.

Kensuke was, at first, a little stunned by all this.

"No, I'm… I'm Aida Kensuke, a classmate of his… b-but he's here. Wait a moment, I'll go get him…"

Since he wanted to avoid being accused trying any sort of tricks by these ‘Gentlemen' (All that trouble after last week's incident had been more than enough for him and he didn't feel like getting arrested or anything) he slipped back inside his tent as swiftly as he could – but in the end, he might as well have spared himself the trouble: The spot that, until recently, had been occupied by a certain EVA pilot was now filled with various items that had been lying around in the tent, arranged under a blanket by the missing pilot himself so that his disappearance wouldn't become apparent right away.

Touji heard the story the next morning, just after arriving in his classroom.

"And you would have told them where he is? Just like that?" Touji bristled at Kensuke's account of the events.

"That's easy for you to say, but those were pros from NERV's security section. They are… trained in close combat."

"Don't you have any balls at all?"

A group of girls in the background expressed their disapproval at Touji's choice of words.

"Only a fool would fight when they cannot win. My balls have nothing to do with it. If he'd still been there, they would have found out one way or another, and then they'd arrest me, too. I don't know about you, but being put through the meat grinder once was more than enough for me…"

"Still, I wonder what the hell he was doing there to have those security gorillas chasing after him…"

"He probably ran away." Kensuke speculated. "He didn't explicitly say so, but given all that happened, it's the most obvious conclusion…"

"Damn it!" Touji slammed his first onto his desk. "Just what is he thinking!"

He sounded furious, but his anger wasn't directed at Shinji and Kensuke as much as at himself and own contributions to the current state of affairs; He couldn't stop his worry from seeping through.

Kensuke and the security personnel might still have found Shinji in that tent if he hadn't woken up a little earlier through pure coincidence; Shinji himself couldn't quite say why exactly he had stolen off on his own.

He had been offered warmth and security and kindness, all the things he had been missing and needing so much after the last battle.
But was that so unusual of a beginning? It had been the same with Misato, she had only bothered to be nice at first, but then, sooner or later, came the demands or at least the questions.

Questions that he hadn't felt like answering, both right now and just after the battle, because he was so very ashamed of the truth.

It was quite possible that Kensuke would've woken up, stretched himself a little and the immediately proceeded to ask a question that would have pressured Shinji, even without meaning to, something amongst the lines of casually asking what he was doing here and whether he wasn't missing any of his 'uber cool pilot training'.

So far, the other boy had always been kind to Shinji and he was sure that he meant well, but his enthusiasm pertaining to that whole EVA thing only served to feed Shinji's uncertainty.

He didn't want anything to do with it anymore, and he had suffered so much in that horrid biomechanical contraption that any praising of its alleged "coolness" was nothing but scoff to his ears, and he had to remind himself that it hadn't been Kensuke's intention to deride him.

Also, he wondered if the military otaku would even talk to him if he didn't happen to be that thing's pilot.

Probably not.

It wasn't as if there was anything about Shinji himself that would be worth it.

Before he had become an EVA pilot… no one had ever paid him any heed at all.

His teacher didn't count, after all, he'd gotten a big, fat payroll from his father for bothering with him.

Even if he had stayed, Kensuke probably would have lost interest in him quickly enough as soon as he noticed that Shinji wasn't the cool superhero he probably believed him to be.

And he no longer was an EVA pilot, anyway.

He couldn't stand that fear and that uncertainty.

So, he ran away.

So, he kept meandering across the mountainside.

Shinji's long, aimless roaming eventually led him to a small source, where cool, clear water gushed out of the mountain in the middle of the forest.

It had to be an absolute coincidence; After fleeing Kensuke's tent, he had even given up on following any sort of ways or paths, and simply followed his nose regardless of what lay in front of it.

It was less surprising that he had wound up in the middle of a forest, which was, according to what his teacher always told him, supposed to be a place that was filled to the brim with many diverse life forms – For all Shinji cared, he might just as well be walking through a wide, white salt desert devoid of any distinguishing features;

There was nothing here at all that meant anything to him, nothing that was enough to prompt any kind of real reaction from him, beyond reminding him of his own insignificance, much like the
mountains they were growing on.

But at least they provided him with some fresh oxygen.

He had stopped once or twice to deeply inhale the pure forest air, but it hadn't brought him much of a lasting comfort.

It was little surprising, then, that not even happening across that little source managed to make his expression change, but he did stop for what he intended to be a short rest.

His feet were sore and ached from all the running, and this was a nice opportunity to remove his shoes and did them into some cold water to alleviate that.

The temperature was unpleasant at first, but quite refreshing and invigorating after a few instants of getting used to it.

He took some of the water and used it to wash his face.

It may still have been misty and cool in the morning, but by now, the sun was back to its usual merciless bombardment, and now that the rainclouds that has obscured it for the past week had fully dissipated, the heat of the eternal summer could be felt at full strength once again.

The trees may have shielded him from the direct path of the unforgiving rays, but the evaporative heat loss on his face was still very welcome.

Since he was in the middle of nowhere anyway, he let himself be tempted to stay and observe for a while, to watch as the water broke out of the depths of the earth and formed a newborn creek as he soaked his feet in it – He had nothing else to do…at least until he suddenly noticed a red tint in the water. Sure, he had seen a lot of red water in his life, but this wasn't the sea, just a little brook… and the discoloration didn't seem to be starting directly at the source, anyway.

Shinji got the answers to his emerging questions when he saw a few drops of red liquid falling past him.

Perturbed, he turned around – and, to his horror, was forced to conclude that someone had been standing right behind him for quite a while without him noticing.

But that wasn't what made him pale like a piece of paper.

Before him stood something that resembled a woman of eighteen or seventeen years, wearing men's clothes that were far too large, even more disheveled than he was, and – this being the particular detail that made his heartbeat cease for an instant – covered in bloodstains.

Even her face and the cap that covered almost all of her hair were generously splattered with red stains.

The worst, however, was the source of the red droplets, a woman's headless corpse that was being carried by that unbelievable apparition.

And it was currently less than a few centimeters away from Shinji's face.

Absurd giant robots? Okay.

Humongous monsters attacking? Yeah.

All that other surreal stuff? It hadn't killed him yet.
But something this close, this real without the Evangelion's plate armor in between…

Something as *mundane* as a psychopathic killer…

That was the last straw.

Shinji just started screaming uncontrollably, and recoiled, skidding backwards, even if he had to move into the stream's cold water for that, but before long, he felt something on his back that didn't belong to the opposite back of the little creek, something like a solid, invisible wall, a complete barrier that caused him strange sensations wherever he made contact with it, as if every touch contained something like a call.

The woman nonchalantly dropped the corpse into the brook, leaving its blood to pour into it in a much more direct manner, and raised her head which had been lowered until now, so that Shinji wasn't spared from seeing the murderous leer on her face.

Her strangely familiar face.

Shinji's screaming just grew louder and wilder, he released unprocessed noise from his lungs, began kicking around, and hit the invisible barrier behind him with his fists, still not convinced of its existence.

This was simply far too much… why did it have to be him, why was it always *him*?

He wanted all of this to stop, it was supposed to stop!

He wanted out of here. Why wouldn't all of this just *stop*?

Why couldn't he just wake up to find himself beneath Misato's ceiling, and find out that all of this was just some crazy nightmare, being beaten up at school, the battle, the chew-out that followed, all of this, all of it, one single nightmare!

As far as he could tell, this situation had been far beyond fixing for a long time.

On top of that, this… this thing was now closing in on him, one step or another.

It was only when Shinji was pressed against her wall in panic, and she herself mere centimeters away from where he sat, that she began to speak, providing him with fresh reasons to abuse his vocal cords.

"Divine child." Her lips formed.

{{Ikari Shinji}} was what reverberated inside his head.

He clutched the fabric of his shirt in panic.

It was as if he could hear her speak from the depths of his very being, deep, deep within his innermost, betwixt all the dirt and filth he kept in the repugnant core of all that he was, straight from the festering darkness he was trying to separate himself from.

Just by speaking to him, she forced him to look inside, where he *never* looked, where he never *wanted* to look.

Her voice – not just its simple sound, but some abstract, metaphysical essence of it, the sheer substance of the words, accompanied by something subtle and immaterial that resembled the sound of a tuning fork.
Overwhelmed, he pressed his hands against his ears, quickly gave that up, and clasped his head instead, shaking it wildly as he screamed.

He gave up on covering his ears because it had been fruitless; Even then, he could still feel her from within, loud and perfectly clear.

He shrank away from that wall, for it, too, was something of hers, filled with her reverberation, reflected that eldritch sound and passed it on to his very bones and innards from wherever he touched it.

That was the instant when the realization that this being before him could not be human hit him with its full force.

The aura of strength that could be felt heavy in the air, that corona of resonance reminded him of his encounter with the last angel, yet at the same time, he sensed that this was something fundamentally different.

It didn't have the suffocating heaviness of an angel's presence, it felt different, completely different, something stealthier and subtler, and yet much, much mightier;

The greatest contrast was perhaps that she wasn't just emanating her presence in all directions, she was really speaking to him, almost like… like a human would.

Like a human that he knew very well…

And like a human that knew him just as well…

He knew her, he could hear her inside his head, and she was really speaking to him alone, to him in particular.

She had said his name.

His very own name.

How on earth did this …thing know his goddamn name?

He felt like he was about to burst apart, just from sitting this close to where she stood.

{{Ikari Shinji.}} the being repeated.

{{Ikari Shinji, third of the chosen ones.}}

"Wha-wha-what do you want from me?! What did I do?!!" he ultimately managed before breaking down in helpless, desperate sobs.

{{I'm sorry.}}

"H-Heh?!"

{{I'm sorry. No mother likes to bring harm to one of her children.}}

"M-Mother?!"

{{But rest assured…}}

She placed her hand in the middle of his face, marking him with the warm, sticky blood that clung
to it and, in spite of all his attempts to somehow evade, moved it all the way up to his hairline, where she actually stopped to stroke his head.

Shinji felt the trail of blood she had left on him trickling over and dripping down from his face.

Resting assured was the last thing on his mind right now.

{{Do you see that?}}

She did not have to point at it with her fingers, rather, she somehow transferred that meant the headless corpse that was currently bleeding into the water.

{{I'm doing all of this for you.}}

His heartbeat was frenzied, his breathing fast and loud.

"For… for me?! I haven't seen you before in all of my life!" he wailed. He had already resigned himself to the fact that would most likely lose his life in the next few minutes. He didn't expect to be missed.

"A-And you k-killed someone, too…" he added, in tears.

"Something this horrible… something like this…"

{{What are you afraid of?}} her words came, simultaneously emerging from her lips and the depths of Shinji's spirit.

That was the first time that a trace of actual human emotion, more precisely, surprise became visible on her face, but he couldn't shake off that feeling that it wasn't really her emotion from her own heart, that she was only wearing one of his.

But he was quick to assume that it must have been coming from her and the ringing of her unearthly presence, because the only thing he was feeling right now was abject fear.

That thing before him terrified him enough to leave every ounce of blood in his body frozen solid. And now, she was bending forward to look him in the eye.

Her next sentence sent him into another screaming fit that was only ended when he eventually broke down in sobs – Her sentence, and the uncanny, almost maternal tone that came with it: {{I am only trying to bring about what you wished for.}} She whispered close to his ear, either oblivious to his panic or deliberately ignoring it. {{You should be happy.}}

She knelt down next to him and stayed there, regardless of how much he kicked and screamed, how much he tried to push her away, to just get as far away as the narrow room between her and her invisible wall allowed it.

"Why would I want anyone to die?" he cried, his face reddened and awash in tears. "And why me? Why me of all people?"

That was the very question that had been vexing him for a very long time now, in many different contexts. "How does it matter what I wish for? Because I just… happened across this place or- I'm… I'm not… particularly wise or important or-

"Hehehehe…. Hihihihii…" she laughed, one abhorrent, eerie snicker barely resembling human vocalizations, but it was easily
outshined by the correspondent pendant that manifested directly in Shinji’s head, a metallic screech mated with the shrill shriek of chalk scratching down a blackboard that appeared to be scraping against his very soul, refusing to be expressed by any sort of phonetic spelling.

{{Ikari Shinji…}} She pressed her hand to his forehead and distanced herself again, rising to her feet, but never letting go of him, eventually standing there with her fully outstretched arm reaching down to his face. {{You might just be the most important human being in all of creation…}}

Had he finally lost it for good?

He wanted it all to stop…. stop… stop… he couldn't stand any more of this… he couldn't take any more of this… He didn't want any more of this…

{{…and this is why…}}

Her eyes narrowed.

{{…you will have to die now…}}

**SPLOTCH**

Shinji didn't even have the time to shield his face with his arms.

The headshot was followed by several further shots to the center of the mass, riddling the whole torso with enough holes to make a Swiss cheese envious.

The woman, no, the creature collapsed without the slightest resistance, falling right past Shinji, over the corpse she brought with her, landing face down in the waters of the small stream.

As she fell, her cap, now with a new hole in it, came undone, releasing a torrent of long, sky-blue hair to cover her form like a shroud after she had fallen.

It hardly needed saying that Shinji got splattered in her blood.

But that was only one of many reasons for his subsequent scream.

Until now, he had only met a single person with this strange hair color that he'd classified as 'azure blonde' for lack of a better term.

And hadn't this thing's face looked so very familiar…?

No, no, this… this couldn't be, he was just making weird, unhinged associations…

Eventually, what snapped Shinji out of his almost trance-like state of absolute shock was the sound of nearing footsteps.

The shooter.

Of course. The bullets that had probably saved his life had to have come from somewhere.

Hesitantly, he turned his eyes into the direction the steps could be heard from, and his gaze came to meet with four men in black.

The woman walking ahead of them – presumably their leader – was still holding her gun.

It was probably her that he had to thank for the fact that his head was still on his shoulders.
But… these people… they didn't really have any reason to be here in the middle of the forest… and they looked like security personnel.

Like NERV's section two, for example.

They had come for him.

"Step away." The gun-toting woman ordered without much emotion.

"E-eh?"

He rose to his feet, his clothes still dripping wet.

"Away from the corpses."

Now, he understood.

He took one step backwards, out of the water.

And another.

And then he turned and ran as fast as he could.

He wanted out of here, away from here, away from all of it, away from NERV and away from that thing, from all the violence and the grotesque absurdities.

"Asahina-san?"

One of her colleagues turned to face the woman in black an inquiring look.

"…follow him and keep him under close observation, but don't retrieve him yet." Asahina ordered in a businesslike fashion. "I need to clarify this situation with headquarters first. I'll send you reinforcements if necessary."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The four men in black departed.

Their steps quickly vanished into the forest – after all, they had been trained to move without arousing suspicion.

In contrast, their leader let her glance wander to her 'prey' lying in the creek, at first only from the corner of her eyes.

Blue hair.

Then she turned, walked over to the bank of the steam, knelt down there and grabbed the fresher of the two corpses by the shoulder to inspect its face.

In reaction to the sight of it, Asahina's expression went through a series of distinct states, beginning with shock, continuing with wrath, all the way to a thin, cold smile and back to her previous, cool, professional, nondescript expression.

And just as cold and professionally, she took her weapon and emptied it into the being's skull, leaving its face looking like the crater-ridden surface of the moon when she rose up again.
He took her phone from her pocket, but it was only her second call that went back to NERV HQ.

Shinji kept running until he had long since found his way out of the forest, being forced to slow down by the fact that he was completely out of breath, having forced every cell in his drained, used up body to its outermost limits.

The splatters of blood had found the time to dry on both his clothes and his skin, much like his tears.

Not that the absence of these now brownish stains would have made that much of a difference, he had been wearing that same uniform for god knows how long, and by now, it was swathed in filth. What little money he had taken with himself for the sake of buying provisions had long since run out, and because he had been forced to leave his shoes next to the source, his feet were covered in bruises and scratches.

And now, on top of all that, it was getting dark, and he was out here on his own, with nothing to protect himself from the cold of the night.

He had run away from a place and a life where there was nothing but pain, because there was nothing good at all.

But out here, in the middle of nowhere… he wasn't terribly far from becoming a snack for the rats, he felt like he might just let himself collapse onto the ground and wait patiently for the warmth to seep out of him, to just go belly up here, unseen and forgotten.

Shinji was thoroughly worn down and, frankly spoken, feeling goddamn awful.

He may or may not have let himself sink into the mud if the meadows he had currently been wading through with his trouser legs turned up hadn't been parted by a highway, a sight that awakening a pale glimmer of hope in him, as dim as it may have been.

A highway!

A real, asphalted, marked, illuminated highway.

A road that was bound to lead somewhere.

Walking on the concrete was a lot more comfortable than the ground of the forest or the meadow, as long as he made sure not to step on any of these sharp little stones.

Maybe he would be able to find shelter for the night if he just kept following this road.

He kept walking on and on, but he wasn't passed by a single car.

Later, he came across several orange traffic cones and what looked like the a roadblock minus all the waiting cars, but he wasn't deterred, even if he distantly wondered which this highway was blocked at all.

The single car that was surrounded by further traffic cones at the edge of the street may just have broken down.

But where had its owners gone?

Shinji's journey continued, this time, through a tunnel.
Someone had left their bicycle lying around there, and the resulting image looked desolate beyond words.

But after glancing at it for a short while, even Shinji walked past it and left it behind, continuing his lonesome stride towards the exit of the tunnel.

When he finally traversed it, however, he found a discouraging revelation waiting for him.

With wide eyes, Shinji stared at the road in front of him, or rather, the lack thereof.

On this side of the tunnel, the highway continued for a little, held up by the pillars beneath it, but a few dozens of meters further ahead, two large chunks of it were missing, leaving the middle part between them standing like a little bridge without a proper ending or beginning, defiantly remaining in the landscape for no purpose beyond its own vanity.

Yes, it was just as useless as Shinji himself, and yet, it was there.

As for the Third Child himself, he was standing before an absolute abyss: There was no way forward, nothing at his sides, and nothing to turn back to, either, not anymore.

End of the line.

The most ironic thing was that Shinji could easily conclude just what had cut his path short – The humongous footprints before and after the behind the crushed bridge told him all.

If it had been last month's angel, the repairs would at least have started by now, and the one last week didn't have any feet to speak of, which narrowed the circle of suspects down to a single possible culprit: EVA 01. He must have cut off his own way out back when he charged the angel like a madman.

He couldn't go on any longer.

It was over.

If he really thought about it, this entire little "road trip" had been over the moment it began; How far could he possibly have come, a mere, unknowing child like him, without any goal for him to reach?

Besides… that security lady may have saved his life, but… there was no way they could've possibly found him in the middle of that forest, which implied that they must have been following him for quite a while…

They were probably still following him.

Of course. They had to be.

They needed to know exactly where he was at any time so they could drag him off to stuff him into his Evangelion if one of these monsters should show up.

He never really escaped them, and he should have expected that one child alone wouldn't be capable to escape from such a huge organization…

It had all been for naught.

Shinji felt resignation spreading through his being, but also, terrific wrath directed at his own powerlessness.
He clenched his fists.

"Enough! In the end, you're gonna bring me back to Misato-san anyway, aren't you?"

The moment he turned around, Shinji was forced to narrow his eyes to shield them from the blinding brightness of many lights that appeared mainly from above the tunnel.

Once his eyes had grown accustomed to the brightness, his suspicions were confirmed: There were men in black all around him and the woman from earlier had already pulled out her phone, probably to organize his retrieval.

He let himself be dragged away without uttering a single word.

"What?!" Misato shouted into her phone, obliviously pouring the contents of her electric kettle straight onto her countertop, missing the cup on instant noodles that had once been the intended target by a notable margin.

PenPen briefly commented it all with an puzzled blink before he continued to waddle his own way.

"You... You're saying they found him?"

Leaving her kettle where it was, Misato had raced back to NERV headquarters in a frenzy, most likely breaking over a dozen traffic rules in the process.

She didn't care.

She had other worries right now.

Naturally, she did want to see Shinji and make sure that he was all right, but she couldn't have said whether she was really happy about his return. She feared that the entire EVA business was bound to run him into the ground sooner or later, but she wasn't doing him a favor by allowing him to run away from responsibility.

She hadn't even heard about the circumstances of his retrieval yet, but in either case, she concluded that the best way of action would be to ask him what he wanted, straight to his face.

During her trip to headquarters, she kept replaying the words she had prepared for their meeting in her head, over and over again... She had to get to the security wing, where thebullpens were situated.

Cell number 1-0-1, she had been told.

The corridor next to them was narrow and, in Misatos opinion, could have done with better lighting; Not the sort of place she would she would spend extended periods of time in if she could help it, but probably just about right for a prison.

Since she didn't come here often, the numeric designations of the cells were her only orientation – One would think that a cell with a number like '1-0-1' would be easy to find.

Then, a sparkle of hope.

A woman in dark shades, a black blazer and a matching skirt was standing before one of the doors, ostensibly guarding someone or waiting for her superiors.
If that wasn't Shinji's cell behind her, she would at least be able to show her the way.

"Hey you there! Excuse me, but could you please tell me where to find cell 1-0-1?"

The woman only slightly tilted her head in Misato's direction.

"Are you Captain Katsuragi?" she asked, frankly and businesslike, as if her tone was meant to shame Misato for her own, rather informal tone.

The woman in red straightened herself and made an effort to produce a serious expression.

"Yes, I am. I assume that the Third Child is in here?"

The security lady nodded. "He surrendered to us of his own, free will and has been cooperative ever since."

He surrendered? Misato didn't know whether to be worried or relieved.

Of course it wouldn't have been good if he had been dragged here kicking and screaming all the way, but she could also picture the alternative very clearly: Shinji, with his head lowered as usual, and an expression of deep, repressed sorrow on his face, not even bothering to resist because he didn't have the courage, and that image did not make her happy.

"How is he?"

"He's not injured, if that's what you mean. But he could probably do with a bath and a warm meal. But there is something else I am to inform you of."

"…Something… else…?"

"My colleagues and I were able to avert it, but today… there was an attempt on the Third Child's life."

Misato wondered how that woman could state such a thing like it was an everyday occurrence to her. "An… attempt on his life?!"

That wasn't good. That wasn't good at all… Okay, Shinji had survived, but that he was forced to live through something like this on top of everything else…

"Correct." The woman in black confirmed. "I have personally terminated the perpetrator, so there is no reason for further worry."

"Who… who was it?"

"We believe that it was what the media currently refers to as the Tokyo-3-serial killer."

"The serial killer? The one that always does those weird things with the corpses?"

"Correct."

"And you got them? Then you're the one who saved Shinji-kun's life… What's your name?"

"Asahina. Asahina Najiko."

"Then, thank you very much, Asahina-san. Can I see him now?"
"Go ahead. I will be leaving you to your personal space."

As Asahina's steps trailed off in the passageway, Misato took a moment to gather her thoughts and order the words she was planning to say one last time.

She may not have shown it much before Asahina, but she was really not amused, and she wasn't planning on pampering Shinji, either.

But she would ask him what he wanted.

So, she pressed the button that would open the door.

The cell was dark and spacious, with NERVs insignia on one of the walls.

And Shinji was slumped on a little plastic chair and avoided looking at her if he could help it.

"It's been a while."

No comment.

"So, did you gain any great insights from bumming around for three days, Shinji-kun?"

"Dunno."

"They've finished repairing the EVA. Are you going to pilot it… or not?"

Splendid! He had only just returned, and already, it was all about that terrifying purple abomination! If anything, it was just another confirmation that he shouldn't have expected to find anything good in this place.

"You… you're not going to scold me, are you?"

…Of course not, after all, it's not like we're related…

If I say that I don't want to pilot Unit One anymore, what will you do?"

"Make Rei do it instead."

Of course. Rei.

"It seems unrealistic for you to force it all on her…"

Then again, hadn't his father almost gone through with it already?

The thought that that poor, injured girl would have to shoulder all of these horrible battles on her own did make him feel a sting somewhere in his heart.

"…but don't worry, I'll pilot it."

"But you don't really want to, right?"

"Of course not. I'm not cut out for it, either. But that doesn't matter, does it? It's not like anyone actually cares what I think. I have to pilot the EVA, that's the only reason my father called me here to begin with… So who cares? I'll do it, if that's what everyone expects of me…"

After all, they had just gone through the trouble of dragging him back here. There was no way that they were just going to let him go, right? The point of this whole speech was most likely to get a
"yes" out of him that sounded honest enough to them.

He had already agreed to do as they say, so what else did they want?

They couldn't honestly expect him to enjoy or want the ordeals they planned to push him through!

"Yeah, but aside from all that, what do you want?"

"I… I just don't think that I can do this…" Shinji admitted. "And I don't think any of you really believe that, either…"

It was a simple, unshakeable truth that he wasn't any sort of valiant superhero with nerves of steel. He couldn't just turn off his fears by pressing a button, and much less did he understand why he of all people had to be chosen for this. His father may have said that he was the only one who could do it, but… no, he could not. He wasn't capable of handling all this in the least. To name an example, both Touji and Kensuke could be said to have significantly more heroic personalities than he did, not that he would wish any of this horrible suffering on them.

But it couldn't be helped.

It was him they asked this of, it was him whom they forced into this.

"…but Ayanami is injured, and this is why you, my father, and Ritsuko-san want me to-"

Misato had enough. Why couldn't that boy give her a single straight, honest answer?

"Don't always bend yourself to what you think others want!" she shouted, furious, but very much tinted with desperation.

"Don't you get it? We have no use for unwilling pilots!"

Whether you want to pilot the EVA or not is something that only you can decide. If you don't want to, no one's going to stop you from leaving! Forget everything about us and the EVAs, and just go back where you came from! It's your choice."

After leaving him with those words, she immediately shut the door without leaving him any chance for further questions or comments.

Shinji stared helplessly into the dark. He had nothing to hold on to, nothing to show him the way, no way to tell what he was supposed to do.

She just left him hanging in thin air.

Chapter End Notes

(1) I couldn't quite decide what version of Shinji's "retrieval" to use. On the one hand, I'm one of Kensuke's few fans and really missed the tent scene from episode 4, but on the other hand, the "end of the road"-scene from Rebuild was such a powerful visual metaphor, and the way he "surrenders" there perfectly encapsulates one of the main points of that particular part of the story, his powerlessness before those huge organizations… So I looked for a way to include both.
A "Fugue" is a baroque type of music, characterized by increased repetitions of a few motifs – Like anything baroque, they were internally strictly ordered, but since I checked some of them out, out of curiosity after hearing so much about it in school, I've always thought that the combination of the many melodies at times sounds increasingly chaotic and intense (depending on the exact piece), like someone slowly going mad… maybe it's just my layman's ears that aren't accustomed to classical music. You may have heard of Beethoven's Great Fugue. Bach, Mozart and various Baroque artists also made some cool ones... But the allusions to a number of similar terms are, of course, fully intentional. As is the invocation of the common associations to the word "baroque". And yes, it comes from the Latin word for "flight" or "escape."

So yeah, there's Asahina's introduction and sufficient hints at all you need to know about her… have fun speculating.

For clarification, the "invisible wall" mentioned in the middle part was escaped-experiment-chans AT-Field. Shinji just didn't recognize it as such.

Shouldn't Shinji's neck hurt from the way he's always staring downwards? I only really noticed how much he does that (especially in the prologue arc) once I tried to get his body language written down. And was his Japanese voice always this… acoustic equivalent of a "please-hug-me"-sign? *gives Shinji a huge teddy bear and hugs both him and the teddy* So, and now, smile a little, will ya? Looking at you like this hurts my freakin' soul…

So much for "Evangelion" meets "Catcher in the Rye". Now, onto the next chapter! Will he stay or will he go? And will he recover? This and more will be revealed in the next chapter, 10: [Home at last]
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You don't really wanna stay

But you don't really wanna go

-Katy Perry, 'Hot 'n Cold'

"You do know that the Third Child will be leaving Neo-Tokyo-3 today, right?"

"This is why we have to reconfigure Unit One for Rei as soon as possible." Ikari replied matter-of-factly. His voice sounded astonishingly nonchalant considering that this was his own son they were talking about, but Dr. Akagi had known him long enough to notice that his posture seemed marginally stiffer and more tense than usual.

The two of them were traversing one of NERVs many escalators, accompanied by Rei herself, who was still tightly wrapped in bandages.

"But…"

"Regardless of what happened with Unit Zero last time, we need to continue with Unit One right away."

Dr. Akagi snuck a glance at the girl in question. She still looked battered, but in spite of the fact that her future was being decided right in front of her, there was not a single muscle moving in her face.

"The Second Child is still in Germany, and according to the last report from the Marduk-Institute, the Fourth Child has yet to be found."

That was one big, fat lie – The institute did not exist and the Fourth Child was already stationed in Bethany Base – But thanks to the situation with the Third Angel, she would have to stay there for now, at least until he found a convenient opportunity to sabotage the projects that were being carried out there.

Even if her information was incorrect, Dr. Akagi's conclusion was still very valid: "And that means that we currently don't have a replacement for the Third Child. And that's not our only worry. The escaped test subject was briefly caught, but it escaped on the way here… At least we can now be certain that it was indeed acting as the 'serial killer'… and it was wearing clothes. That's a human concept. How it could possibly understand that baffles me. I've come to think that something must have… taken over the clone and modified it for its own purpose…"

"That would explain why shooting it didn't work. But it raises much more questions than it answers."

"I'm working on it. But what should we do about that woman? If she saw this, then…"

"Then she has probably already alerted the old men, yes. But they won't take action until they have solid evidence. If we can dispose of the problem before they can snoop around any further, this
should be of little consequence."

"If she is going to snoop around, wouldn't it be better to eliminate her?"

"She knows that she can't fool us with hair dye and colored lenses, and the old men know that they can only provoke us so much. They probably have another spy. That woman is only a decoy."

"Another spy, you say…?"

The Third Child himself was already sitting in the car that was supposed to take him to the train station and waited for the security personnel to finish pulling his security card through the shredder.

His fingers were clawed into the fabric of his trousers.

He had firmly decided that he was going to leave.

This time for real. He would go back to his old teacher's place where there would be no more horrifying battles and no more torturous agony. So why did he feel this uncertainty raising through his being?

Somehow, he felt like he was about to miss or to lose something, as if he were wasting a chance…

He would never see any of them ever again… Touji, Kensuke, his Father, Dr. Akagi, Ayanami, Misato… oh, Misato.

He knew that she had no reason to come and see him now that he had decided to leave, but the way she had just left had upset him enough to prevent him from finding any rest during the last night, though having to spend it in a bullpen did not help.

He just didn't want them to… part on bad terms.

Yesterday he felt that she was being unfair to her, but now that he had time to think about what it meant to never see her again, he couldn't help but remember that she did try to offer him something like a home.

It was his fault that it hadn't worked out. Because he simply wasn't the strong-willed, heroic kind of person that was suited for such things.

He was the useless piece of dirt that had fled with his tail between his legs, and he was about to do it again, even after he had decided that he wouldn't run away ever again…

Damn. Why was he beginning to feel bad for leaving now? He shouldn't have to, right? He had been forced to be here, and now, they were finally letting him go…

Maybe because useless people like him deserved to feel bad.

It wasn't like he was good enough to stay here, anyway.

He would be unable to bear it one way or another.

The card was shredded, the one who had shredded it boarded the car, and they departed.

The noise from the car wasn't enough to drown out the doubts germinating in his head.
To shut them up, he allowed himself one more question, one last step backwards: "...Where is Misato-san? I would... like to say goodbye..."

"You are no longer a member of NERV, so we can't tell you anything."

He did not protest any further. Yes, there was this sense of disappointment, but he probably deserved it. It was him who had chosen to leave this all behind him.

His journey continued, and soon, they reached the train station.

Shinji recognized it, the power pole, the roofing, everything: It was the same train station he had arrived at, that fateful day when his father sent him that letter.

His father... He probably wasn't going to see him ever again.

Their work at NERV had been the only thing they'd had in common.

The car was parked, and one of the security workers opened the door for him.

But then, something that he wouldn't have expected in a thousand years took place right there and then:

"Ikari, here's all the stuff you forgot at school!"

The bag that was thrown at him from the side was precisely aimed, but Shinji still only barely managed to catch it.

Once he had it firm in his hands, he followed its trajectory with his eyes and saw the impossible.

Touji and Kensuke.

For a few moments, Shinji just stood there, completely speechless.

After he'd caused those two so much hardship, they had actually taken the trouble to come all the way here, solely to bid him farewell?

They had come... because of him?

He didn't think that anyone would as much as notice his departure, much less that he was in any way worth being missed, but here they were.

In flesh, blood and three dimensions.

"Uh, could I please have a moment to say goodbye?" Shinji asked quietly, hoping that the answer would be 'Yes'. He wouldn't like to walk right past them after they had bothered to come all the way.

One of the men in black nodded.

Tentatively, Shinji brought himself to walk over to them, no knowing what to say. The bag, right, the bag! He should probably thank them for the bag.

"Uh... thank you..." he managed.

Again, it was silent save for the constant chirping in the background.
The tall, tracksuit-wearing boy, however, had begun to tense up a little.

But fortunately, he had Kensuke with him: "Come on, say it!" he urged, giving his friend the little push he couldn't give himself – in the most literal form of a small nudge.

Touji stood up straight and looked Shinji in the eye, his expression suddenly serious.

"Ikari, I'm sorry for beating you up. As compensation, I want you to punch me now."

"B-but I can't do such a thing…" Shinji replied, notably uncertain.

He was pretty much overwhelmed by all this.

"I insist on it. I won't be satisfied otherwise."

"Come on, just punch him already so he shuts up." Kensuke added, his smile confirming that doing this would be okay.

"B-but…"

"Hurry up!" Touji demanded, ostensibly serious about what he just said. "You don't have all day!"

As a matter of fact, the men in black were already checking their watches.

"A-Alright, but only once…” Shinji finally yielded.

"Then come on! Do it already!"

Now sufficiently convinced to somehow go through with this, Shinji put down his bag and aimed his blow.

"WAIT! Don't you dare hold back!"

All right, if he… kept saying it like that… After all that had already happened between them, Shinji didn't want to disappoint him any further, and so, he moved to strike him, this time for real.

OUCH.

That scrawny little Ikari boy was a lot stronger than he looked.

Even Shinji himself seemed a little nonplussed about the effect of his punch.

"Ouch, that hit home." Kensuke commented.

Both of them smiled at Shinji once more.

And then, that silence was back.

Things to talk about, things to talk about…

"Uh, how did you know…"

"What train station you would be departing from?" Kensuke offered. "It was a hunch. We've seen dozens of classmates of lately…"

That did leave an affected expression on Shinji's face.
"Since you're leaving, the two of us will also have to leave this city someday." Touji stated, his voice void of the anger or disappointment that Shinji had been expecting ever since the word 'evacuation' had been mentioned. But it was his next sentence that turned all of Shinji's expectations on their heads, shocking him to his very core: "...but we don't have the right to judge you for that. We saw you suffering inside the EVA... And if anyone blames you, I'll kick their ass!" Touji announced, brandishing his fist.

Shinji felt his hands trembling.

This... this was wrong.

It was just wrong, as a matter of principle!

Touji's little sister had been injured because of his incompetence...

Those two would probably be forced to part with each other and have to watch as their friends scattered across the map...

They shouldn't be... nice to him, or talk about *not having the right* to judge him or anything...

They weren't supposed to have come at all, not for someone as worthless as him...

This... just wasn't right...

"Don't make such a face." Touji suggested.

"Yeah, cheer up!" Kensuke agreed. "And hang in there."

Shinji was just about to break down in tears.

He didn't deserve this, not any of it, not at all.

"I..."

"Time's up." The security worker behind him declared, grabbing him by the shoulder to lead him to the train.

Away from here, away from these two, away from his duties...

The injustice of it all reverberated in his head, it just wouldn't stop, growing louder and louder, the certainty that he did not deserve this.

He lowered his head and grabbed his bag.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, all of it, wrong...

The two even followed after him to observe as the men in black lead him to the train platform...

It was just plain wrong!

"I'm the one who deserves to be punched!" he called out to the two of them, straining against the hold of the security personnel, squeezing himself back through to face his now former classmates.

His tears had finally refused to be held back any longer.

"I'm a coward! A shirker! Dishonest... and weak..."
And then, he let himself be dragged away, leaving two visible shocked boys.

They hadn't expected… hadn't known just how deeply all of this had troubled their newest friend…

Meanwhile, back in NERV headquarters, Eva 01 was currently being reconfigured.

Misato and Dr. Akagi once again stood on that one bridge where they once tried to persuade Shinji to board the violet titan for the first time.

"He left." was Dr. Akagi's laconic summary of the most recent developments. "Do you still think that this is for the best?"

"You said it yourself…" Misato stated with an unmistakable tinge of sadness to her voice. "The closer we come to each other, the more we hurt each other… like two hedgehogs."

Yes, beyond the whole ethical question and the boy's age, the boy had simply grown on her and she felt compelled to be there for him and to help him. She had suffered a neglectful father herself and wanted to provide him the support she never had.

But she was not the kind of support that he needed.

So far, she had only succeeded in making everything worse.

So, it was probably for the best to let him go.

Him, that boy who just said yes to everything and allowed himself to be subjected to just about anything, who just clung to what others told him no matter how bitterly unhappy that made him.

It was just beyond him – He was flat out incapable to say what he really wanted or what he really wished for. He probably didn't even know what he wanted or wished for.

But it was always much easier to recognize a problem than to solve it, it was much easier to say what you didn't want than to figure out what you want, it was simpler to cease doing something than to start with it.

This complete refusal… was probably the only way in which a boy who could not bring himself to make an honest complaint to make others aware of the pain in his heart, the only way in which he could rebel like any other kid his age.

Yes.

"…but on the other hand, I've realized… that he can't express his feelings in any other way…"

So there it was.

The train.

It came to a halt and opened its doors, the one last threshold Shinji would have to cross for all of this to be over.

He stood right before it, with his head lowered and his bag held in front of his body.

All he needed to do was to make one single step forward.
One single step through this doorframe and everything would go back to the way it was.

Just one single step, and he would be rid of them forever, the fear, the battles, the pain…

One single step, and he would never see them again... Misato… Touji… Kensuke… Dr. Akagi… Ayanami Rei… his father…

Just one single step, and he would finally have escaped this nightmarish place…

Except… not everything had been painful…

("Hang in there.")

On this side of the threshold, there were a thousand and one sources of pain and suffering waiting for him, and on the other, not a single source of happiness.

Even after she had squeezed the last bit of juice out of her accelerator, in spite of all the red traffic lights she ignored, even if she only barely avoided smashing her car into two certain boys in her attempts to park it as far as possible, by the time Misato arrived at the train station, the train that her young ward was supposed to board was long gone.

She was too late.

And to be honest, she should have saved herself the trouble of coming all the way here to begin with – In the end, all she could have accomplished was to force him into yet another situation he did not want to be in.

Giving up entirely, Misato let out a deep, resigned sigh and gave the air molecules in front of her face a depressed look.

Most likely, it just hadn't been meant to be to begin with…

She was already turning to leave when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye – a solitary figure standing on the platform.

She… she had come.

Even though she wasn't supposed to have anything to do with him anymore, now that she was no longer his superior.

She had come, just how he had secretly hoped somewhere deep inside.

The train was gone and she was here.

For half an eternity, the two of them stared each other in the eyes, struggling to believe what their own eyes showed then because it broke multiple laws of their inner universes.
She looked at him, who had stayed even though he didn't have to, and he looked at her, who had come here without having any reason to do so.

Or rather, there was exactly one reason why Misato could have come here:

Because of him.

Just because of him.

Because of him as a person.

All this time.

All this time, they had tried to get closer to each other by giving the other minute hints, to defy one another in the futile hope that the other would be able to deduce the contents of their own heart just from that, when they could simply have shown their true feelings to each other all along.

Shinji still didn't believe that he had what it takes to save the world, or that anything about him was worthy of love. But if he had managed to leave a mark on the hearts of just one or two people, if Misato and him really were more than just coworkers, and if Touji and Kensuke were interested in just a little bit more than his position as an EVA pilot...

If they had really come because of him alone...

Then he may just begin to allow himself a little bit more hope than he did the day before.

Yes, they exist, these small moments where we stop lying to ourselves.

Most of the time, they ended just as quickly as they came, but they were sweeter then honey.

And so, it was Shinji of all people whose expression of bewilderment first melted into a smile as he found just the right words for the first time in his life: "...Here I am..."

"Welcome home."

"The Third Child's poor condition could, first and foremost, be attributed to his mental and physical exhaustion. He was given a few days of leave and has since made a complete recovery. There are no further problems."

Misato held her sigh back until she had turned the voice recorder off and put it down, opening the uppermost drawer in her desk in the meantime, which she soon made the device disappear into, resisting the urge to throw it against a wall or at least to stuff it in the already cramped trash bin – she always kept imagining just how he would react if he ever found any of this, and she could picture it rather well now that the most recent events had provided her with an ample supply of inspiration. Penning these surveillance reports always felt like a breach of trust to her, and she had little doubt that he would see it the same way, frequently catching herself being deliberately half-hearted in her documentation of his state and his activities, as if to diminish her sin.

Nonetheless, the regulations made their demands – what she tried to convince herself of was: This was a condition she had to meet to be able to help him at all, a job that would be done by someone else, someone less benevolent, if she didn't take it upon herself.

But to find this, to see this, and to think what he would inevitably think if he ever found this was the last thing he needed right now.
Thus, she would have to produce satisfying reports, and she would have to make sure he never found out. The lie justified itself through good intentions…

If these words were at least sufficient to say everything, to do it justice, if the superiors that were going to read them would even give as much of a rat's ass about *everything*…

That everything appeared to have worked out in the end was true, but so was the first part of her laconic little report – The very fact that he had been physically affected at all was in itself the most obvious sign of how much that battle had wrecked this boy – she tried to remember their first meeting. Even back then, it hadn't taken her long to notice that he was carrying some serious baggage with him, but he had unusually been pretty fast to complain about her "borrowed" car batteries and even got a little cheeky – but what did she even know about what was "usual" for him?

No, the truth was that she had to way to measure just how much damage, *permanent* damage had already accumulated, just from the two very first battles. It didn't seem unreasonable to guess that he would never be the same again…

And so far, she wasn't convinced that she had done anything to mitigate that in any significant way.

There was no way she could not have noticed – Soon after the immediate tension of the moment had dissolved into relief, the resulting sensation of warmth began to dissipate with the passage of time, giving way to the more practical, physical concerns of their reality, and part of that was that he had not been taking care of himself lately – Not just in the three days and three nights in which he had been wandering the streets of Tokyo-3, but also in the time before that, when he had shut himself in his room at first.

The ugly truth stung her as early as when she had lead him to her car to take him home, in the form of a slight but noticeable limp – It wasn't as bad as it could have been, the explanation was tame enough, and she could deduce it herself: Since he had been retrieved without shoes for some reason, the soles of his feet had been covered in scrapes, and those hadn't healed in a single night. But the occasional grazes he had accumulated here and there were the least of the problems.

One of the first things she tried was to try and convince him to wash himself – that was very much overdue, but it would have to wait, for the very first thing he did as soon as they arrived at her, no, their apartment, was to let himself sink into his bed, where he instantly fell into a deep slumber from which he didn't wake until the next day's evening.

Gently, and careful not to sound too demanding, she finally made him discard the uniform he hadn't changed out for God knows how long (The pant legs, in particular, were covered in mud – She didn't even bother to take any of it to the dry cleaner's, and instead threw everything he had been wearing at that moment straight into the garbage chute – Even if there had still been any hope for that thing, she just didn't want to see it ever again, and she would lose all hope for him if he didn't share that sentiment.) and finally got him to go and wash himself – She couldn't convince him to take a bath and she didn't think it would be too productive to insist on it as long as he agreed to any contact with hot water at all, everything else could wait. An extensive shower would have to be enough.

If any of his less material burdens had followed the layers of dirt into the drain, his expression didn't reveal it.

Getting him to eat something was a little trickier – he didn't even answer when she asked him what he wanted. Misato proceeded to search her collection of canned soups for whatever seemed to have the most vitamins in it (by the standards of her kitchen, that is) and claimed that she would leave it
in his room just in case he felt like trying it. At first, it seemed like he wasn't going to touch it, but next time she returned to check on him, she found the bowl neatly emptied out – She could picture him listlessly trying a spoonful at first, mostly so she wouldn't be disappointed, only to realize just how long it had been since his last proper meal.

In the meantime, he had put a new battery into his cassette player and immersed himself in his music – Misato did not know whether to count this as a positive sign or not, but he did remove his earplugs when he saw her coming.

She did not immediately realize that he wanted to ask her something, it was more through coincidence than through attentiveness that she caught one more glimpse of him when she bent forward to pick up the bowl, when he hadn't expected her to look at him and thus made less of an effort to hide that he was observing her, scrutinizing every minute detail, every ever so tiny gesture or nonverbal cue, sucking it with empty eyes like black holes, and last few residual doubts in his heart – By then, Misato was already aware that she was being tested: In other words, if he opened his mouth now, what would she do to him? How would she react? Would she scold him, but still grudgingly give him what he wanted, more out of a sense of duty than anything else, or just so he would shut up and leave her alone?

Was he an annoyance? Was he unwanted? Was he a burden?

That what he was he was cautiously trying to probe her about, glance after glance, second after second, as if he were warily treading on thin ice – Her presence on that train station had made it conceivable for him that the answer could indeed be "No", that he may actually have found a place of warmth and refuge, but his scarred heart was far too accustomed to disappointment to believe it this easily.

That he might want seconds was just a lucky guess, but as minimal as it may have been, she did not fail to notice his nod, and the long silhouette that, according to his experience so far, should have disappeared back into the light emanating from the doorway stayed with him, even after she had brought him the second bowl.

She playfully warned him not to choke on it, but she may have rejoiced to soon – despite his initial enthusiasm, he only ate half of it (It may have been too much at once, after several days of only vending machine snacks) and then asked to be left alone.

Less than two hours after he'd woken up, he was back in the arms of Morpheus, still wearing his earphones – She removed them, turned off his cassette player and put it on his nightstand, lest he damage the cable tangle by turning around in his sleep.

It was about noon when he first left his room the next day, and by then, it had become apparent that he must've caught some nasty bug in the cold of these rainy nights, and when she saw him lying there, weakened and afflicted, it became increasingly clear to her that this was serious, that this entire piloting business could really be the end of him, one way or another, and for one short instant, she cursed him for having stayed – Perhaps Dr. Akagi had been right with her cynical assessment that it was less a question of whether he would recover, and more one of how long he could hold out.

Even now, she stayed at his side, brought her paperwork with her and made herself comfortable at the edge of his bed, abusing an old folder as a blotter pad, taking a little reading lamp with her and even some drinks and snacks, giving him a half-joking warning to stay away from her beer whenever she absolutely couldn't avoid leaving the room.

She had even taken her phone with her , although its first bout of clamant ringing forced her to
admit, rather sheepishly, that it might have been a lot more productive if she had set it to vibrate right away. "Yes? Hyuuga-kun? No, I can't come today, you'll just have to do it without me."

Since there was neither a battle nor any mayor experiment taking place right now, she had resolved to stay here to look after Shinji and do today's paperwork at home.

That the boy was very relevant to her superiors was, at very least, a pretty good excuse. She did not envy all the single mothers who did not have this privilege.

But now that she thought about it, she wondered who had stayed at his side whenever he was sick before he had come here, especially when he was younger… who had consoled him whenever he had unpleasant dreams, who had been there for him in all those little moments of weakness that were part of life, growing up and its different stages and anyway-

"…Please… stay with me…"

"Uh, I'm… right here."

"Please don't… leave me all alone… I don't wanna… be alone, not now…"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"…please, someone… anyone… stay with me…"

With comprehending disillusionment, Misato was forced to conclude that these words of despair hadn't been addressed at her in the first place – He was muttering to himself, in his sleep. Must be the fever. They could really do without that, too. It shouldn't surprise her.

"I… I'm right here." She whispered to him regardless of that, hoping that her words would still trickle through somehow and change that dream in so far that it would deviate from whatever bitter memory it was probably based on, most notably through the retroactive insertion of a source of warmth and comfort – If Ritsuko were here, she would probably explain in detail why that didn't work like this, but Misato didn't care.

His mumbling was no longer intelligible, but there was still an understated stirring, and then a sudden, unpredictable movement, he just turned around and the next moment, his head was on her lap, leaving her no chance to keep doing her paperwork or removing herself from this place without waking him.

That, however, did the trick, her presence, her warmth, her smell or all of it together: From then onwards, he remained as he was, silent and calm, like a peaceful little baroque putto.

Sure, Misato could understand why he'd like this, but she herself could only comment this awkward situation with a notably self-ironic grin.

Nonetheless, she did tentatively pat his head.

"It's okay, I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere…"

Later that day (The leader of the operations division had eventually escaped the unscheduled cuddling session) there was a knock on the front door, and once again, Misato was met with the faces of two particular boys – The two who had been in the entry plug, Aida and Suzuhara, carrying yet another pile of printouts with them.

Of course, she had to tell them that the Third Child was in no shape to see them, but this time at
least, she would make sure that he was well aware of their visit.

The next time she found him mostly awake, she demonstratively pulled the door wide open and ceremonially dumped the papers on his desk, not caring whether she had gone overboard with the enthusiasm in her voice or not. She wanted to communicate this to him, and if this required the subtlety of a cartoonish anvil hitting him on the head, then so be it! Extreme situations required extreme measures, and this included talking in a silly singsong: "Oh, Shin-chaaaan, here are your printouts for schoool! Aida-kun and Suzuhaaaara-kun just dropped by to bring them to you!"

Misato could hardly believe his expression when he heard that.

He was happy.

Boy, what was he happy, blissful even, in a tired and bittersweet manner, like a dying man's last smile.

It seemed like too much, almost morbid to feel such joy about such a relatively small thing – She guessed that he, too, wouldn't have been able to explain himself if she had asked him why he was smiling like this, and why it was followed by a sudden, final liberations of both pent-up tears and something else that he had held back for a long, long time, the greatest lump having been there ever since the battle, but there were also older, deeper things coming loose, sediments and crusts of emotions, nourished over a long time by a constant suffering like some sort of gallstone.

It was the sort of smile that came with a certain finality, that formed when nothing else would do the situation justice.

It was now when she saw the healing process set it, pullulating from beneath like something wild and foreign, raw and soft, almost a little unpleasant in the way it broke through layers of hardened scabs, that she really understood that he must have lost something irreplaceable here, somewhere over the course of his stay here in Tokyo-3.

The person who arrived in this city roughly a month ago would never leave it, and she wondered if he was aware of that, or if he only saw his current self that was silently smiling before her, defined only through that arcane source from which his very thoughts sprang forth through unfathomable processes, new as the day, fleeting like the moment.

When she looked at the person lying in that bed right now, she saw someone battle scarred.

It was apparent that he felt the pain of it, but he was too young to understand what it truly meant to have his innocence ripped from him like that – But she knew it all the better, and the next thing she knew, she found her hand unconsciously sliding over her chest, where she had once been marked – He didn't have such an obvious, telltale mark on him, whatever the EVA and the angel had done with his nerves and his soul, the cruel hands of fate had passed through the upper layers of his skin like ghosts, leaving them untouched in appearance, and because he could not yet understand nor cry for this loss, she would do it for him and feel it for them both.

Maybe the knowledge that these two had come to see him was all it took, there were all sorts of stories about placebo effect, the psychological components of recovery and little miracles – or it might just be a coincidence, Misato didn't really care.

Either way, by the next morning, the fever was gone and he sat up, asking her to open the windows, pull aside the drapes and let in some daylight and fresh air.

After she'd brought him his breakfast, he already seemed to feel like engaging in proper activities
other than lying in his bed and staring at the ceiling.

"So what would you like to do?" she asked, noticing that his cassette player was still untouched on his nightstand.

"I… I don't really know, I just want to… do something again, just something…"

Because he could not think of anything else, he just grabbed his blanket, made himself comfortable on the couch and turned the TV on.

She didn't know what to think of his way of absorbing the various TV shows without expression, only to listlessly switch from one channel to the next after a seemingly arbitrary amount of time had passed, as if he were some sort of stranger only peripherally related to the many facets of humanity displayed on these screens.

Still, she had work to do.

After a while, PenPen, who had gloriously slept in today waddled into the living room, and spontaneously decided that he also felt like situating himself on the couch in front of the good old goggle box, and as Shinji made room for the bird, he already seemed capable to comment this with a thin smile, and since he hadn't bothered to put on his socks, Misato could see that those scrapes on his feet had mostly already vanished by then.

On this day, she decided to go back to work, since the Third Child appeared to be doing better – After all, she couldn't leave all her duties to the poor Hyuuga-kun, if she was honest with herself, she probably took advantage of him far too often. She had been intending to make it up to him for what felt like an eternity, but she already knew that something would always end up getting in the way, that those little favors she owed him would accumulate until she gave up on her plans – Leaving Shinji on his own this soon also tugged a little on her conscience, but as soon as she had gone back to work and inspected the many piles of paper that had accumulated on her desk, her routine took over and before long, there was a moment where she ceased to have the thought that she had a "situation" to take care of constantly present in her head – As soon as her level of worry fell below a certain threshold that made it an urgent, acute thing that required immediate attention, her laziness seemed to overturn all of her resolutions… How did this happen?

When she came home, she halfheartedly tried to keep Shinji from doing any housework, telling him to wait until he had properly recovered, but she couldn't make herself sound all too convincing – Over the past few weeks, she had learned to appreciate the advantages of a clean home where she didn't have to spend twenty minutes searching for her things, and at the end of the day, it was him who carried a nicely decorated tablet into her room and put it on her desk as she typed away on her laptop – If she was honest, she hadn't even turned around to face him, and just casually mumbled a few short words of thanks – Some guardian she was…

She had planned to eat breakfast with him, too, at very least the next day, if not for anything else then to strengthen that newly blooming, developing feeling of belonging, or at least of being home so that it might tie him to this place, even if she could not quite agree with herself whether that was a gesture of care or a cheap psychological trick used on a helpless victim – either way, her inner conflict was rendered moot by a disadvantageous combination of her vespertine beer dosage and staying up way past bed time.

By the time she woke up she found her apartment flooded with sunlight, her breakfast lovingly prepared and ready to be eaten, complete with a can of beer waiting right next to her plate, and, once again, absolutely no trace of the Third Child.
It did sting, the situation and how it stirred her memories of the last time he had disappeared from this house – but this time, it took no detective work to figure out where he had gone – His school bag was missing from his room, and so was the school uniform he had prepared a long time ago, not knowing what the next day would hold for him, leaving only an unused hanger.

"And…? How is your flat mate?"

"Well enough, I think. I guess the entire event has knitted us together a little… and not just us. He's been going to school again and ever since, he's been inseparable from that chaos duo from the incident. They phone him, they invite him to spend their free time together… Even if I still don't always grasp what exactly he is thinking…"

"I'd think that you'd have him figured out by now, after all, it's not like it's your first time living together with a man."

"This isn't really comparable to eight years ago. There's no romance involved…"

"I wouldn't be sure of that. If you ask me, Shinji-kun probably stayed because of you."

"No, you're wrong… the real reason… is his father. I think he'd do just about anything for a few words of praise or a pat on the shoulder from him… He's just lonely and longing for affection…"

"…that he won't be getting from his father. You're very alike…"

"I just wonder why commander Ikari acts so cold towards his own son. He's a lot friendlier around Rei. That doesn't seem fair at all…"

"That's just what men are like, egoistic and uncaring… Believe me, I'm speaking from experience…"

"It's tough to be a woman nowadays, isn't it?"

"Anyway, it's time. We need to go back."

"Always the worker bee, hm? Oh, by the way, would you like to stop by for dinner tomorrow?"

"I'll pass. I've still got a few 'fond' memories of your culinary 'skills'…"

"Aw, come on!"

"Alright, but there are important experiments scheduled for tomorrow… what about the day after?"

"Deal."

"Your son's behavior is exactly as we predicted it…"

"Yeah. Next, we'll have to bring him and Rei closer together. Everything is going according to plan."

"After a plan that was crafted 14 years ago, a plan that predetermines the entire lives of mere teenagers… It's a cruel plan."
Chapter End Notes

(1) I assumed that Gendo & co were not yet aware of Kaworu's existence at this point. Mari was classified as Fourth Child by principle of exclusion/because that's the number between three and five, but I think a recently translated bit of CR confirmed her as such. This does not mean that Touji can't get another designation. Har Har.

(2) …so, will we be finding out something about that mysterious blue haired girl that has been lurking in Shinji's vicinity until now? Of course we will! Team blue, rejoice! Look forward to chapter 11: [The Commander's Smile]
11: [The Commander's Smile]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the middle of a house
In the middle of nowhere
Bodies glide from room to room
I hate these walls
They speak to me:
"Hey, skin like a doll
You're no friend
Of the family"
Catch that light
It falls in subtle patterns
Crawls in
And tells them when their time is up
And when it's over
He takes her hand
and he kisses her cheek
She's a doll, oh yeah,
She's his
Spitting image
Where have you gone?
You're still a part of me
Hey, skin like a doll
You're no friend
Of the family
-The Toadies, 'Dollskin'

Rather relieved to see Shinji back at school when they did, Touji and Kensuke wasted little time to
fully accept him as one of their own, and before long, they had agreed to walk to school together on a regular basis, and found themselves on the schoolyard discussing the specifics of when and where to meet… completely oblivious to the silent blue-haired girl watching them from within the building, her lone red eye unwaveringly transfixed on them while her other one was still hidden beneath a patch.

Once again, there was this dream.

While the overall number of his subconscious effusions had more or less normalized by now, that one dream never ceased to pursue him. No three days passed in which his attempts to find nocturnal rest did not land him on that beach at least once.

Each and every time, he’d have the certain feeling that he’d found himself here innumerable times, even if he could never remember when that had been, other than in these dreams themselves.

How could he, anyway? The red streak in the sky, the extent of the destruction, that *dismembered female corpse* the size of a *continent*, and on top of it all, these monoliths…

As much as Shinji's definition of impossible had already been stretched by recent events, the odds of such a surreal place really existing were rather… insignificant.

Regardless of whatever this place was, he was certain that it was the loneliest, most desolate place he ever witnessed.

Not just because of the images themselves, but much more the emotions that inevitably came with them, like the background music of a movie scene; He had no idea what had caused the feelings to stir, it was as if he had suddenly sipped to the end of a film of which he had neither seen the rest not the prequels, and yet, it was unmistakably the end, the images spoke for themselves, even without that doubtless premonition that he would always be completely alone, no matter how many times he awakened here, a single, insignificant dot of life amidst a boundless, empty world that had been returned to its primal, lifeless state, as if the complete planet itself with everything that used to sprout and crawl on its surface had simply croaked like an upside-down goldfish in a poorly maintained aquarium, as if that same eternal cycle of life that had endlessly found a way to renew itself through the ages, and even found a way to recuperate after the hell of second impact, however decimated it had been left, had simply ground to a halt once and for all.

At first, he could make little sense of these feelings, but now, after having stood here countless times, after having *felt* them countless times, he had come to take them as a sign that he would never see any of all these people he had met, not ever again.

Over and over, he wondered what on earth he must have done to deserve this cruel a punishment, why only he had been left behind here.

Rather strange, wasn't it?

This was a dream, right? So obviously, he was here because he had gone to bed last night, at most, this might be a reason to question the quality of his supper. Dreams had never needed much in the way of logical reasons for the bizarre sights they provided, and ultimately, they weren't real, so did it really matter that much what exactly he was doing here, if it was just a dream?

The point may have been that somehow, this did not *feel* like 'just' a dream…

And that this may have been the reason why he kept being plagued by the same storm of questions that would have haunted him if he had actually woken up in such a place without any prior
warning.

A few nights ago, he had noticed that those large, cross-shaped monoliths bore a distinct similarity to Evangelions. They had separate legs, albeit held closely together, and those recognizable armor plates on their lower chest and stomach.

What was definitely missing, however, were these pylons on the shoulders that the knives were usually stored in. In addition to that, they were completely white or gray, so for once, unit one couldn't be amongst them.

Still, could it be his connection to the Evangelions that had landed him in this godforsaken wasteland?

Until now, they had served to connect him to people rather than separate him, but what… if he should lose? What if it all blew up in his face…?

Was that what had happened? Had he failed?

Was that the reason he was all one?

Deserted, because he hadn't been good enough?

Just like when his father had deserted him?

That notion… seems rather probable.

He still didn't think that he could really do this…

But, if everything had ended, why was he still here?

Questions, endless questions, amongst them the question as to whether there still was any point in opening his eyes and looking at his surroundings – After all, he had seen this particular dreamscape innumerable times, and what awaited him there rarely ever changed.

It was always the same – He was always alone, always asking himself, why there was nobody here to find him, even if he already knew very well that no one was coming.

Why would anyone ever come here for his sake, anyway?

He just wasn't worth it…

But… hadn't there once been an instance where someone actually did come for him and him alone, such a long, long time ago? He wasn't sure, it felt like eternities had passed since then, like it might have been in another lifetime altogether, or just a long-faded dream.

Maybe… maybe there was someone here.

Perhaps somewhere in this empty world, there was someone who had followed him when he had been cast out to this desert.

Not that he ever meant enough to anyone for them to choose this hell for his sake; Not that he would actually deserve it if all of this devastation was indeed his fault.

For that, the person in question would have to love him beyond the boundaries of sanity, and there wasn't anything about him that was particularly deserving of love.
He didn't dare open his eyes, for he was already certain that there was only disappointment for them to discover, but even then, that could not keep his fingers from feeling around the tiniest bit with their searching tips.

He allowed himself to wish, like he had never done it in any of the previous iterations of the dream. If only someone was here… if only someone was here with him… He didn't care who it was as long as he no longer would have to be alone in this horrible place, as long as there was anyone who could love him...

He knew that he didn't deserve it, but after all that had happened, he could no longer deny that he desired it with every fiber of his being.

That was the reason he couldn't bring himself to give up this possibility;

That was why he hadn't left Tokyo-3 after all.

That's why he kept searching, feeling his way until he actually felt something other than the ground.

He couldn't believe it.

Here, in this lonely, empty world.

Here, within the minuscule reach of his halfheartedly searching hand.

Something warm.

It couldn't be, could it?

That would be far too crazy a coincidence? This close to him?

That would have to mean that someone deliberately sought him out, that they were here because of him, and would have to have placed themselves this close to him by their own choice.

No matter how he looked at it, there was a human hand, there was a source of human warmth.

Someone who had come to him because they needed him.

Somebody who loved him.

Immediately, he seized the delicate, petite fingers with his own, squeezing them into all of the little lines and gaps of his flesh.

He could have broken down in tears right there and then.

This… this wasn't possible, this couldn't be, he didn't deserve this, there was no way this was anything other than a misunderstanding…

He wondered who exactly followed him here.

Who was the person who had missed him, the one who had loved him?

Well, it certainly wasn't his father, the fingers were too slim, too small to be his; Most likely, they were a girl's.
A girl who loved him.

A girl… who could that be?

Because of his young age and timid personality, Shinji had yet to acquire any significant experiences with the opposite sex…

Even still, that cue caused his consciousness to produce countless images of one Ayanami Rei.

Why Rei? Because she was the first girl around his age he could think of? Because of that habit of hers to show up in his dreams without explanation?

It could have been just that simple, but it wasn't. There was more, an entire deluge of pent-up feelings whose origin was unknown to him.

Feelings that made him have these thoughts of Rei.

Rei in her plugsuit, covered in bandages, breathing heavily in his arms.

Rei, all alone in a corner of their classroom, staring out of the window.

Rei in the schoolyard, looking down at him as she spoke.

Rei, completely alone and lost in the middle of an abandoned street – When was that again? He couldn't quite remember.

Rei, Rei, Rei, memories of Rei, images, that he shouldn't have seen yet – All of his being was filled to the brim with Rei, and he was nearing the point of bursting.

Could it be her?

Could she be the one who had come here to find him?

No… that would be far too perfect to be true – and therefore, it wasn't.

The very moment Shinji had overcome his fear of the unavoidable emptiness and loneliness of this place, he was forced to realize that there was no one lying next to him, and that there had never been anyone to begin with.

He had been clinging to a single, severed arm.

He couldn't even summon up the energy to react with disgust and let go of the lone limb.

It just wasn't fair.

He was so very, very alone…

And the fault was his own.

His fault.

Yes, now he remembered.

His fault.

It had been him.
He was the one who had created this empty, wasted world and then possessed the audacity to come back.

He couldn't say how in the name of god he had done it, or what had driven him to this desperate measure, but he was sure that all he was seeing here was the result of his very own actions.

It was hardly a secret that there wasn't anyone else here with him.

He was nothing but an egotistical, weak, dishonest coward.

He deserves this, every bit of this, this and nothing else.

And he didn't even have the energy to run away anymore.

"I see." Shinji's pendant from this dream said, surrendering to his fate in complete and utter resignation, weighed down by endless losses his current self could not even begin to comprehend.

"I guess I'll never see them again… but now that I'm here, I might as well keep on living…"

When Shinji finally opened his eyes, he found his whole body drenched in sweat. He'd had quite a share of nightmares in his life, especially since he had come here, be they about the battles, about his father and, most recently, about that attempt on his life, but this had most definitely been the most awful of them all.

That overwhelming feeling of loneliness… just thinking of it gave him chills.

The ceiling above him has long since turned into a familiar sight even without the aftereffects of those dreams, but that had only made that once fleeting impression that he was supposed to be hearing a girl's voice somewhere in this house all the more persistent.

By the time Shinji had sat up, all of it had more or less passed, and the rapidly fading memory of the dream was no longer coherent anymore for him to make sense of the reaction it caused, but that in itself was enough to make Shinji wonder just how much crazier his life was going to get.

He had yet to speak a single word about this woman… no, this thing he had encountered near that spring.

But much like the dream, even that event led his thoughts back to the person they had been circling ever since he moved here: Ayanami Rei.

The more he considered it, the more absurdly random it seemed to him that she of all people had appeared to him within that nightmare.

After all, when he really thought about it, they had hardly exchanged a handful of sentences ever since he moves to Tokyo-3.

True as it was, that conclusion felt rather dissuading, if not disappointing to him.

Even if he felt like she had been part of his life for eternities, the truth was that she was barely more than a complete stranger to him. Why was that? The former part, not just the latter. Because he'd thought about her so much?

But what did that really mean, to think about her?

Yes, he had been thinking of her a lot, but not really about her in the shape of concrete facts and reflections about them – for that, he would have needed to know such facts first, but all he really
knew was her name, and that she was supposed to be an EVA pilot just like him.

He was suddenly hit by the sobering conclusion that he didn't really have a clue about her, and couldn't really claim to have any substantial connection to her, and it washed over him like a cold shower.

Somehow he had always counted her amongst his new social circle, always watched her from the distance, observing as the amount of bandages on her body slowly, but steadily diminished.

She was the reason he was here.

His father had called him here because she was injured and unfit for duty.

Because he hadn't wanted to send her into battle like that.

And Shinji didn't even know the reason for her injuries.

After Shinji had gotten dressed, made breakfast, and packed a lunch for himself, he was getting ready to leave for school as he usually did. Misato had left the house earlier today, stating that she had something urgent to take care of at NERV, some sort of security concern, apparently.

He had a distinct feeling that it had to be related to the newspaper article he found lying on the kitchen table – allegedly, the Tokyo-3-serial killer had struck again. And that worried Shinji more than the average citizen of this town – because he was very damn sure that this security lady had riddled that thing with bullets before his very eyes. Then again, who knew if such a… being could actually be stopped with bullets at all? The implications of this train of thoughts were so frightening and mind-numbing that Shinji frantically pressed them into some remote corner of his consciousness to concentrate on some of the more…. bearable aspect of his waking hours.

This thing had only walked into him by chance, hadn't it? So far, it appeared to have been choosing its victims at random, so there was no reason to suspect that it was after him in particular, was there?

If it was really after him, there would have been plenty of opportunities to kill him in the past week, right? But nothing of that sort had happened.

While it was true that his life had been getting crazier and crazier as of late, the last week hadn't been that much of a prime example – in fact, aside from the strange dreams, it had been surprisingly normal, if not almost… pleasant.

By now, he'd been beginning to get the gist of how to make sense of Misato's moods and begun to talk to her a little more freely, not about the big questions of life or his innermost worries, but at least about whatever normal, everyday things he may have done that day, and getting to just relax a little and getting to know each other bit by bit by conversing about a bit of trivia from time to time was not really all that bad.

Of course, there were still moments in which he felt isolated and found himself questioning whether this went anywhere beyond superficial pleasantries, well aware that it was only a matter of time before he would be forced into another of this horrible, terrifying battles when the next angel inevitably arrived, but he no longer felt that way all the time, especially not at school.

Ever since last week, he would often encounter Touji and Kensuke at some point of his way to school, where he would usually turn off his SDAT-player and join them – honestly smiling from the bottom of his heart and deeply grateful for the first two proper friends he ever had.
They would talk to him during recess and in-between periods, made jokes about the old teacher or the stuffy class representative, and generally attempted to drag him into various sorts of 'boys stuff'.

He could hardly believe how naturally it had happened – At first, he had needed to get used to be in a 'conversation-situation' that often, and even without warning, but after the first few of Touji's jokes, Shinji had gotten over his initial nervousness, and before he knew, he had reached the point where he was more or less freely interacting with them without having to think about every single word and carefully weigh their possible reactions against each other, as if it was the most obvious thing imaginable, something he had always been meant to do this every day, and only hindered by a string of adverse circumstances until now.

On the second day, Touji and Kensuke had received the first praise the class representative had given them in what could have been centuries for 'successfully integrating the new kid into their class', and after that, even all the others seemed to accept the sight of the three of them hanging out together as the new status quo.

And even Touji and Kensuke themselves appeared completely used to welcoming Shinji with an amicable greeting when he entered the classroom in the morning, as if it never had been any different. Today was no exception.

"Hi, Ikari!" they called, waving in his direction –

Perhaps Shinji himself was the only one who still wasn't completely used to it.

Hesitantly returning their wave, he removed his headphones and walked over to them, becoming part of one of these little groups he had only walked past before.

"Hello, you two." He tentatively returned their greeting. "It's, uh, nice to see you."

"The pleasure's all ours." Touji replied. "But do tell, where did you disappear to yesterday?"

"I uh… I was at NERV. Did I miss something important?"

"No, not really." Touji admitted. "We just did some repetitions in math class, and as for the history period, there was nothing but the usual lecture on second impact."

"What exactly were you doing at NERV, anyway?" asked Kensuke, eager to know. "Some more Pilot-training?"

"Something like that." Shinji confirmed. "Ritsuko-san from the technical Branch and her co-workers came up with some new battle simulations they wanted me to try…"

"Wow! Real battle simulations! With holodecks and stuff? I can't believe how lucky you are! That sure sounds a lot more fun that sitting around at school."

"It… it wasn't really that exciting…" Shinji answered. "In the end, it was just simple target practice… Although that's only natural, considering that I've never really handled actual guns or knives before, so it's probably a good thing that I have to do this considering that… the next enemy… could show up at any moment…"

Towards the end of that sentence, the young EVA pilot had begun to sound increasingly uncomfortable, and Touji could easily imagine why. Thus, he decided to change the topic before Kensuke could ask further questions. "$\text{Oh, and Ikari, did you know that you've officially lost the right to the title of 'New kid'?$}"
"Uh… why?"

"Because we've got a… newer new kid now." The boy in the tracksuit announced.

"Ah… really?"

"Yeah, really. He arrived yesterday while you were away. The one back there, with that bandage thing around his head. I think the name's Mitsurugi. Mitsurugi… Nanao?"

"Nagato." Kensuke corrected. "But you were close enough."

Indeed, Shinji was able to spot a new face at the back of the classroom.

The newcomer was a slender, tall boy who, matching Touji's description, was wearing a cast around his head, under which a bob of chin-length, midnight-black hair sprung forth.

Both his hair color, and the black undershirt he appeared to be wearing beneath his orderly, nigh-immaculate uniform did their part to underline his already pale-ish skin tone, though it was far from matching the pallor of one particular girl.

His steely-grey eyes were transfixed on a small mechanical puzzle he was using to keep his fingers busy until the teacher arrived.

"Looks rather painful." Kensuke commented. "I wonder what happened to him."

But Shinji was hardly listening anymore. His thoughts were already focused on something else, for as he had directed his gaze at Mitsurugi's bandages, he'd noticed something just past him, or rather, someone whom he was, for the very first time, seeing without bandages: Sitting two seats in front of Mitsurugi… was Ayanami Rei.

As she was currently just looking out of the window as she usually did, Shinji could once again see little more than the blue locks covering the back of her head, but it was sufficient to verify that the last of the bandages were indeed gone, including that string that had been holding that patch above her eye in place – As it seemed, her second eye appeared to be intact (again?), despite Shinji's earlier pessimistic guesses.

He'd been worrying for quite some time that she may have lost it permanently, but at least that particular worry appeared to have been unfounded.

Lately, he had been forced to get used to the idea that she was always this pale by default. Her skin was hardly any darker than the white parts of her simple school uniform – with or without bandages, she still looked like she might faint and die at any given moment.

Her delicate, petite build and the ghostly color of her hair in the sunlight might have also played their parts in it.

He couldn't shake off that urge to grab her, take her into his arms and tuck her into a nice, warm bed where she would be safe and sound and wouldn't in danger of being as much as poked.

"Hey, Ikari, are you even listening?"

It was Touji's slightly annoyed voice that broke Shinji out of his further contemplations about that one girl who had held him under her inexplicable spell for the past weeks.

"Uh… what were you saying again?"
"That it's rather unusual for us to get a new classmate." Kensuke explained.

"Uh, why is that?"

"Well, look around you. It's gotten rather spacious here lately, hasn't it?" the military otaku continued. "Before the first battle, most classrooms here were bursting at the seams since Tokyo-3 was supposed to become the new capital, but for some reason, our class was always mostly spared of that rush. And now that everybody is fleeing the city because of the battles, we're the ones getting two new students, counting you. Before the battles, the only transferee we ever got was Ayanami."

"Ayanami, hm?"

Before Shinji could ask further questions, the old teacher appeared in the door, prompting the class representative to promptly assume her usual post and begin barking out orders:

"Rise! Bow! Sit down!"

The following lesson turned out to be exactly as 'interesting' as many before it, so that the majority of the students were very relieved when the heavens finally took pity on them and made the school bell ring.

After stuffing his belongings into his bag, he risked a glance to the latter rows, observing quietly as Ayanami unceremoniously gathered her things in comparable silence before walking right out of his field of vision.

Somehow, even watching her do trivial things like gathering her school utensils had a strangely captivating quality to it, a constant aura of strange familiarity and recognition was sewn to her footsteps.

When she left, she revealed the transferee behind her, who was hastily scribbling something unto a piece of paper – some forgotten homework, perhaps?

Shinji could only guess.

In any case, he was sitting all alone on his desk, which was hardly any surprise considering that he'd only just transferred yesterday. Shinji still remembered all too well what his first few weeks in this school had been like…

He had Touji and Kensuke now, but that didn't mean that he had forgotten what that solitude had felt like, enough to worry about whether this Mitsurugi had been able to make any friends yet.

Admittedly, it was only his second day here, but Shinji felt tempted to just spare that boy all that trouble and talk to him him… even if nothing would come of it.

Hesitantly, Shinji approached his new classmate – upon closer inspection, the papers Mitsurugi had been occupying himself with had sudokus and crossword puzzles on them, which he was steadily filling, apparently indifferent to the fact that the bell had long since rung.

His eyes were transfixed on those alone, and Shinji didn't think that the transferee had even noticed him yet, which wasn't all bad since it left the choice of the first words to Shinji.

Except that he couldn't really think of what to say.
And as it happened far too often, his luck left him as soon as his courage: Sooner or later, the black-haired transferee would have to peer beyond his sudokus, and the variant that destiny chose to pick was 'sooner.'

So it came to pass that Shinji suddenly became aware that Mitsurugi appeared to have been looking up towards him for quite some time now, probably waiting for him to say something.

Notably hindered by his disconcertment, Shinji's brain went through a list of possible conversation topics… oh right, he hadn't even introduced himself yet; Introductions were a good place to start.

"G-Good morning, Mitsurugi…-san… I… I'm, uh, Ikari Shinji. I just thought I should introduce myself since I was, uh, absent yesterday."

Mitsurugi's expression didn't reveal much about his inner reactions, if any.

"Thank you. I wish you a good morning as well, Ikari-san." He stated, polite, yet dry. "The others mentioned you a lot. You're the 'old' 'new kid', aren't you?"

"E-Exactly!" Shinji answered with a hectic nod.

After that, he fell silent, at a loss for words which was exasperated by Mitsurugi looking at him without any words of his own.

He figured that all of this might have been a lot easier if either of them had been of the talkative kind that asks lots of questions.

Shinji wondered just what the others had said about him.

But first, he had to think about something else to talk about, preferably before recess was over.

"I think we have, uh… PE next." It spontaneously occurred to him.

"Would you like me to show you the way to the gym…? Or… do you think you can find it on your own?"

Mitsurugi shook his head.

"Thank you for your offer, but you don't have to bother yourself with that…"

"I really don't mind at all!" Shinji assured.

"That's not what I meant. I'm not going."

And then, it hit him quite bluntly.

Of course. Whatever had demolished this boy's head to the point that he would need that cast probably hadn't left him in any state to participate in any sort of sports.

It was rather depressing to notice just how 'gloriously' he'd dropped that huge a brick this early in this conversation. "I'm, uh, very sorry, what I meant was… er… in any case I'm really sorry."

"Hey, Ikari!" Time was already up.

That was Touji's voice, and when Shinji slightly turned to face him, he saw that he also had Kensuke with him, both of them armed with their PE bags. Kensuke's was, of course, covered in a
"...what are you standing around here for? The class rep's gonna give us hell if we're late!"

"We can, ehm, leave right away!" Shinji answered, having taken his bag with him when he left his desk.

"And we wouldn't mind you coming with us either if you want to." Kensuke told Mitsurgi. But the transferee just shook his head again.

"He isn't going." Shinji explained.

"I see." Touji answered. "Did you give the class rep some medical attestation stating that you can't participate?"

"You mean Horaki-san? No, I... haven't, I'm afraid I've neglected to do that..." the bandaged boy admitted. "But I do have an attestation."

"Then you should give it to her ASAP. She's the one who handles the class register and all that other organizational stuff, and believe me, she can be a real pain in the ass when she wants to."

"Or wait. What if we give it to her?" Kensuke proposed. "I doubt we can catch up to her before she reaches the sports grounds, but we can at least give it to her on the way back before she gets a chance to chew you out."

"That would be very kind of you. You have my earnest gratitude." Mitsurugi replied, fairly matter-of-factly and accompanied by a small nod, before handing the three of them a paper which Kensuke was quick to pouch before rushing after Touji, who had already departed by the beginning of the second sentence, optimistically following some futile hope of reaching the locker room in time.

Shinji left the 'new new kid' a few sparse parting words before hurrying after his friends.

"I feel kind of sorry for the transferee." Touji told his friends as they caught up with him. "He's missing PE, the only time at school where they actually give you good grades for having fun."

"That depends on whether you actually consider sports to be fun." Kensuke objected.

"I just end up falling on my face. But I guess most people tend to enjoy the kind of things they're good at."

"What about you, Ikari?" Touji asked the newest member of their small group. "Do you enjoy sports?"

"I... don't really know..."

That he never really had the heart to ask the other children in his small village to let him play with them was something he chose to keep to himself at this point. "I... I just hope I won't end up getting hit in the face by a ball..."

"You won't have to worry about that for a while – They're making us run laps for today, not that this is particularly comforting considering the sheer heat outside..." Kensuke admitted. "The girls got lucky today, they get to go swimming while we're forced to bake in the sun..."

But Touji had a more relaxed view of the situation: "Well, at least we'll have a nice view of the camouflage pattern.
pool from the sports grounds – something else poor Mitsurugi is going to miss." He explained, adorning his scheming with a telltale grin that made the… indecent nature of his thoughts fairly obvious. While Kensuke was soon 'infected' by similar… thought material, Shinji's deliberations had gone into a whole different direction.

He was easily able to picture quite well that couldn't be all too pleasant to stay behind in the classroom by oneself, while everyone else was enjoying themselves under the sun, thought it wasn't primarily Mitsurugi he was thinking of – It was only his second day here, there was no good reason why he couldn't acquire himself a sizeable group of friends within this week.

But there was someone else.

Someone who had spent the last weeks alone in that classroom, regardless of whether the others had gym class or not.

He'd never seen her with someone else; In all the time he's spent in this classroom, he hadn't seen her talking with anybody at all, not even once.

There was simply no way he could have overlooked the only person who had been every bit as alone as he had been: Ayanami Rei.

But now, he had Touji and Kensuke.

He was no longer alone, at least not always –

But Rei still was.

And she had been all along.

He couldn't say why, but by now, he was more than certain.

That poor girl...

Knowing the hell of solitude well enough, he could only perceive the very thought that this brave, yet fragile girl might be enduring a similar suffering as the kind of injustice that ought to cry out to the heavens.

The dimensions of the track forced the teachers to divide the boys of the class II-A into two groups, which would then subsequently granted the questionable privilege to spend twelve minutes jogging in the blazing sun one after the other.

While the first group was already enduring its ordeal, the second one was still waiting for its cruel fate – among them, one Ikari Shinji.

Most of the boys were passing the time before the exercise with looking up towards the pool on the roof of the adjacent building, where the girls were practicing aquatic sports in their black school-issue swimsuits.

But Shinji’s gaze went past all of the tanned beauties and their opulent bodies made of splendorous curves.

All of the girls were pretty, but he could hardly apart, couldn't name the differences between them. In the end, his eyes ended up scorning them all in favor of the sickly-looking, short-haired girl in the corner, who stood out like an oasis in an endless desert. His undivided attention rested solely on
this pale, frail being who was sitting all alone in a corner, with her legs drawn close to her body like some sort of lost, forgotten child.

Something about the sight depressed him beyond words…

But Shinji had forgotten that he wasn't the only one letting his gaze drift to these scantily clad females – more than enough for them to ineluctably notice:

"Hey, could you please give me my towel?" one of them asked. "The boys are staring at us again."

"Suzuhara is the worst of them!"

"But Ikari is quite cute, isn't he? …HEY! IKARI-KUN!"

Blatant as they may have been, those gestures of flattery did not really enter Shinji's perception, as little the somewhat "indecent" comments of his currently rather entertained friends did – Too deeply had he allowed himself to get lost in his deliberations about the subject of his own deliberations.

But even this did not go unnoticed for long – After the class representative and her friends had hidden their thighs beneath their towels, Touji decided out of spontaneous curiosity to check out whatever his friends were looking at. Since Kensuke appeared to have had the same idea as him, Touji could assume that the person whose butt his friend had been ogling had either covered herself or reached her turn to jump into the pool.

Shinji, by contrast, was still firmly gazing into one and the same direction, as if he had completely forgotten all of the world surrounding him.

"Hey, Sir, what'cha lookin' at so intently?" Touji inquired with a huge grin on his face.

"U-Uh, nowhere in particular…" Shinji stammered nervously, suddenly aware that his observations carried a sizeable risk for misunderstandings.

But it was already too late: Kensuke, who had now leaned backward to addresses the two of them, had easily spotted where, or rather, who Shinji's looks had been directed at, and didn't seem adverse to sharing his conclusion: "Ayanami, by any chance?"

"What would make you think that?" Shinji asked in a desperate attempt to avoid a significant misunderstanding – he certainly hadn't been looking at her... like that…

But the damage was already done, and denying it any further would probably just serve as a confirmation to his friends: "I've been looking at you!" Kensuke declared. "You've been undressing her with your eyes!"

"While you were dreaming of her shapely boobies!" Touji added. "…of her soft thighs and especially… of WHAT'S IN BETWEEN THEM!"

That last bit had more or less been chanted in unison as they had come uncomfortably close to Shinji's face, causing him to retreat a bit after they were done speaking.

"It really wasn't like that…" he tried again, not really believing that he could still escape being branded as a lecher.

"Why were you looking at her, then?" Kensuke replied, more as a rhetoric question than anything else. "Because you were looking, don't even bother denying it!"
Averting his brooding face from his friends, Shinji finally revealed the truth: "I was just wondering… why she's always all alone…"

Kensuke and Touji, who hadn't been expecting such a serious answer, brought themselves back into mostly normal positions.

None of them had ever really thought about that.

"Hm… I don't know either." Touji admitted.

"But what you say is true… I don't think she's made a single friend since she transferred to this school last year…"

"Well, it's not like she ever talks to anyone." Kensuke added. "She's just sitting there quietly and staring into the air…"

"She just doesn't seem approachable…"

"She might have a bad personality, and that's why no one wants to hang around with her."

"Or maybe she's just a little bit retarded or something…"

Shinji had to admit that he had never looked at it like this – If he was honest, he really couldn't recall any instance where she had as much as tried to speak or socialize with anyone, or even really looked at them.

While Shinji thought that it was a stretch to immediately jump to such conclusions as her being a bad person, or even 'retarded', (Or perhaps he was in disbelief that it could be something this… common?) there was no denying that Rei must have partially caused her isolation herself, or, at least, hadn't managed to actively counteract it.

But none of these scenarios seemed like a complete master theory to explain every single detail of the situation, and it wasn't like he knew her well enough to just go and draw any conclusions about her. It wouldn't be fair to judge her without having ever talked to her properly – and as often as he had thought about it and imagined in his head what turns a conversation with her could possibly take, he didn't thing that he would ever work up the courage to approach her…

It was rather disheartening.

Still, before Shinji had any chance to tax his thinking organ any further, the teacher's whistle could be heard – A certain sign that his friends and he could no longer escape the horrors of the twelve-minute-walk.

Not that Shinji cared any longer; he had long since slipped out of the suitable mood for this sort of half-serious complaint.

There was something very different that occupied his inside in its entirety, and let everything on the outside just drift past him:

The enigma of Ayanami Rei.

"…but… isn't she an EVA pilot just like you?" Kensuke asked, already in motion. "Shouldn't you know her better than any of us?"

"That's right…" Touji agreed.
But that hardly helped to relieve Shinji of his rotten mood, or the ocean of questions swirling around in his head.

It only confirmed the sad realization that he'd already arrived at by himself: Despite their shared fate, and what might soon become a shared suffering as well, Rei and him didn't really have anything to do with each other.

"It's true…" Shinji finally admitted, resigned. "…but we still hardly talk to each other…"

That afternoon, NERV's schedule involved yet another harmonix-test, this time one that would be carried out directly in the cages, so Shinji would actually be sitting in his Evangelion – but he wouldn't be alone.

For the first time since the incident that had caused her wounds, Ayanami was to participate in the experiments once against.

Nonetheless, there was yet another appointment on the Third Child's timetable before the test itself – Misato had offered Dr. Akagi to meet her at the grounds on which the last battle, so that she could be informed about the current state of the research and investigation taking place here – Like her predecessor, the fifth angel had almost instantly disintegrated into red, viscous goo upon her defeat, but unlike him, she had left something behind in this world: Her now congealed tentacles of light that had still been embedded in Unit One's abdomen at the time of her death.

Now, long after they had been salvaged and covered in enormous tents and pavilions, NERV's scientists were having the time of their lives as they gathered and analyzed samples from the material.

In his memories, those whips had been fast, flexible, deadly and bright as a magnesium flame; Now, he was standing in front of colossal, rigid, concrete grey structures of monumental dimensions which had been significantly less apparent from within the Evangelion, considering that its own size was not exactly shabby.

The dully-colored matter bore little resemblance to the weapons which had pierced him, or rather, EVA 01, to the point where he probably wouldn't have recognized them if he hadn't received an explanations beforehand; At its edges, the substance appeared affected by a strange kind of decay that left its borders looking somewhat blurred, or perhaps like a fading picture on an old photograph in the process of crumbling away.

Most of the pool of blood which had resulted from the creature's explosion had already been disposed of, even if the liquid's characteristic stench still lingered in the air, enough to be perceived clearly if you concentrated on it and perhaps to irritate the occasional subconscious.

Seeing it like this certainly did present Shinji with a wholly different way to see and perceive the enemy than facing it in battle did; When he was fighting it, struggling against the force and vehemence of an enormous monster that seemed determined to put the fear of God into him, he was, first and foremost concerned with destroying the enemy so that he might survive – that left to time to spend wondering about things like the enemy's nature and composition.

"It's a strange feeling to see the enemy up close…" Shinji remarked, summarizing his impressions so far.

He and Misato had finally managed to find Dr. Akagi, who was awaiting them on some sort of scaffolding, turning towards their direction with a clipboard in one of her hands.
"Well done, Shinji-kun!" she commended from up there. "I don't know how exactly you did it, but somehow, this angel just liquefied right away instead of exploding in the process, so the damage to the surrounding area was minimal, and these crystalized 'arms' of its were left almost completely intact. Now we finally have some proper samples to do research on… and it's all thanks to you!"

Shinji didn't really know what to do with that praise – He certainly hadn't spent any second of the battle wondering whether the angel would make a good research subject afterwards, and this fortunate coincidence made it only harder for him to gauge whether any of the NERV personnel still resented him for what they could only have seen as an insubordination.

"And..?" Misato asked right away. "When will we have the first results?"

The first results were promptly shown to them in one of the quieter corners of the huge pavilion, one that was reserved for computer terminals: They consisted of exactly three digits: 6-0-1.

"And what exactly does that mean?" Misato asked.

"That's the standard error message for 'unable to analyze'…"

"So we still don't have a clue what we're up against?!"

"I'm afraid so. All we know is that the angels are composed of a form of matter that shows characteristics of both waves and particles – like solid light." the scientist reported, casually sipping at her coffee.

Misato and Shinji, who had been administered beverages of their own upon arrival, quickly followed her lead, but in their cases, the consumption of liquid was primarily intended to help the digestion of the bizarre new information.

"But you'd think that it should at least have been possible to isolate the source of that insane power of theirs…"

"Unfortunately not. Aside from these crystalized fragments here, the Angel's body has completely dissolved, along with all of its secrets…"

"Does that mean that the Angel's remains cannot give us any answers at all?"

"Not exactly…" Dr. Akagi replied, rising from her chair. "…but for every answer it gives us, it opens up ten more questions… For example, look at its wave patterns…"

The scientist quickly typed something into the keyboard and then stepped aside for Misato's and Shinji's curious eyes as they leant forward to watch a sequence of letters be replaced by a similarly labeled collection of figures and diagrams.

Unlike her ward, Misato understood their significance right away: "Is this for real?"

"Yes. Even though the tissue is composed of a form of matter that is foreign to us, it contains structures that are highly similar to human DNA. The sequences are over 99% identical. A comparison: We share over 98% with a chimpanzee and about 99,5 with a Neanderthal."

"This says 99,89…" Misato stated, astonished.

"This means that we are once again forced to acknowledge that there are still many things out there that we don't understand."
While Shinji was initially eying the monitor in a rather clueless manner, he was soon distracted by the sound of nearby steps as the two women were still speaking.

When he turned his head towards the two passing men, it was simple, casual curiosity that motivated him, but the emotions that made his eyes stay on them were of a very different nature.

They were Vice-Commander Fuyutsuki Kozo… and Commander Ikari Gendo.

Most likely, they didn't even take notice of Shinji's presence as they were marching towards a group of scientists who were busying themselves with a compact-car-sized shard of the angel's whip arms, while some of their colleagues were working on the area which that piece had been cut from.

They were received by a tall man in his mid-thirties who wore his jet-black hair way past his shoulders despite his age. Underneath his lab coat, he was wearing a NERV uniform much like the one Hyuuga and Aoba tended to wear, and as he saw his superiors approach, he reached for the clipboard he'd put away later to use his hands to hold tools, and greeted them with a rather informal wave.

"Hello Commander! And hello, Subcommander, as well! I presume you've come to ask about the progress of our analysis?"

"Indeed." Fuyutsuki confirmed.

"So? Have you been able to find any remains of the power source?"

"I'm afraid not, Sir."

"And what about the rest?"

"The rest is rather homogenous and hardly shows any discernible structures or organs… and as you see, it's decaying quite fast. I don't think that it will be of much use for us…"

"That's not a problem. Have the rest disposed of." The Commander ordered.

"Is there anything that you'd like to inspect personally before that?"

Apparently, there was. Shinji had been following the conversation intently, even if it's topic had little to do with him, or, for that matter, anything he had a basic understanding of. His father's involvement alone was enough to keep Shinji's eyes transfixed.

He had never really gotten to know that strict, cold man and hardly knew anything about him. Even now that he was living in Tokyo-3 and working at NERV, he still had little involvement with the elder Ikari, and hardly ever spoke to him at all, especially not about personal matters.

Somehow he wanted to know just what exactly it was about this work of his that had been so much more interesting to him than Shinji himself has ever been.

That even the hope of finally getting to understand his father was beginning to mingle with his cocktail of emotions was something that he initially tried to suppress, lest he end up setting himself up for disappointment with empty hopes.

Shinji was about to follow on that thought and avert his gaze when a small, trivial gesture confronted him with a completely new piece of information without any sort of prior warning:
Apparently rather interested in personally inspecting the angel's tissue, Ikari Gendo parted with the white gloves that usually accompanied him everywhere he went, and let his bare hands wander over the sample's fading surface, shaking loose a few luminous, flake-like particles as he stared into it at a particular angle, as if he were expecting profound revelations from it.

He paused to issue a few orders that may or may not be based on any conclusions he might have drawn before putting his gloves back on and leaving it to Fuyutsuki to actually skim through the fine-print of the actual reports on the researcher's clipboard.

The white accessories had only left their place for a few minutes at most, but it was enough. Shinji could not possibly have missed why his father hardly separated from his gloves – His entire palms, extending to the lowest phalanges of his fingers were covered in disfiguring, leathery burn scars.

Shinji was at a loss.

He didn't have the slightest clue where his father could have gotten these burns.

He couldn't even say when these injuries could have been acquired. His memories of the time before his father had given him away were nebulous at best and simply insufficient to tell if he'd already had the scars back then, or whether he'd gotten them in that eternally long time in which "infrequent" would have been a rather euphemistic word to describe the amount of contact they had – or those last, long three years of complete silence between them, during most of which Shinji had not actually expected to ever see his father again – He might as well have crashed his car into a tree and died without Shinji ever learning of it, never mind getting this scarring.

Then again, he might very well have gotten them after Shinji's arrival, it's not like he would have been told – If he was honest, the only way in which the distance between them had decreased since his move to Tokyo-3 was in the form that could be measured in kilometers – seen from any other angle, they were just every bit as far apart as they had been for the last ten years.

"What's the matter?" Misato asked, brusquely jolting her ward out of his musings.

Shinji felt rather red-handed in a self-conscious way, having been swayed by the illusion that she was too busy with Dr. Akagi to notice the wanderings of his gaze – he must have been eying the distance all too long, and far too intently.

"I-it's nothing…" Shinji lied.

He didn't want to talk about it right now.

But it was exactly this very resignation that never ceased to fuel his guardian's ire, and the only response she had for the averting of his eyes was the drawing of her index finger. "Listen up kid, there's nothing more conspicuous than someone trying too hard to be inconspicuous! If you say 'it's nothing' with this kind of face, you leave me no choice but to ask more questions! So what IS the matter, anyway?"

Since it was obvious that Misato was not going to let him off the hook without getting a proper answer, and he actually wanted one, he finally caved in and spilled the truth: "I was just… I only just noticed… that my father's got those horrible burns on his palms…"

"Burns?" For once, Misato appeared somewhat relieved that he'd been chewing on a relatively 'harmless' question, on the other hand, it was quite obviously the first time she ever heard of those scars.

"…and I was wondering… just what happened to him…"
"I have no clue." Misato admitted, aiming a quizzical look at her friend.

"Do you know anything about that?"

"It happened two months ago, before you arrived here." Dr. Akagi explained.

"At the time of the activation experiment during which EVA 00 went out of control… You have heard of it, haven't you?"

Although he didn't have the slightest idea, Shinji nodded, simply wanting to hear the rest of the story without further delays, deeply upset by the thought that having these things that he and Rei were being stuffed into going out of control didn't seem to be all that uncommon an occurrence.

"It was horrible…" the scientist continued. "The pilot was trapped inside her entry plug."

"Ayanami Rei, right?" Shinji asked, requesting denial or confirmation. "The pilot at the time… must have been her, right?"

It had to be. Now, it was all starting to make sense.

Of course – as far as he knew, there hadn't been any other pilots before his arrival, right? So it could only have been her. That must be where her injuries came from! What any of this had to do with his father, though, didn't really occur to him, but Dr. Akagi was quick to enlighten him about the connection: "Yes. And Commander Ikari was the one who saved her life. He opened the overheated escape hatch with his bare hands…"

The Commander had already had an air of tension about him when he first ordered the beginning of the experiment, all the while pushing his glasses back up – not the reflective, tinted specimen that Shinji had seen him with ever since his arrival, but one with thick, clear lenses and a cheap and used looking plastic frame that almost seemed too big for his face.

Everywhere around him, the wild sound of typing into plastic keyboards resounded, as did the voices of the technicians as they were reporting to him how unit zero was slowly being activated, little by little.

The orange behemoth raised its cyclopean head, one by one, the lights on its head and arms lit up with color and brightness, as if the beast were going through the first stirrings of rising from a far too long sleep.

Standing between Fuyutsuki and Dr. Akagi, Ikari was observing the process, his expression dead serious.

So far, everything seemed to be to be going well… but not any further.

Shortly before reaching the absolute borderline, there was an error in the activation process – the error messages swarmed the screens faster than the technicians could report them – Most average citizens would probably have been unable to make any sense of words like "impulse feedback" or "uncontrolled increase of plug depth", but at very least when the orange titan began to move and strain against the contraptions that held it shackled to the wall, it was very obvious that something had gone terribly wrong.

Evangelion Unit 00 broke free of its chains; The machinery that had been designed to hold it in place was ripped out of the walls along with its moving limbs with the utmost ease.
Expulsing an acherontic screech, the beast started advancing through the chamber – but it wasn't a straight, directed march that the manmade titan was performing; It staggered, squirmed and grabbed its head that was so disproportionally small when compared to its body's overall proportion, bizarrely resembling a human being in the throes of a tortured dance of madness. But this did not mean that its haphazard movements were completely without a goal: It was very much aiming for the small window through which its creators were observing it, and it struggled desperately to keep its lone eye focused on it, over and over again, until it was able to send its fist flying straight into its target, shattering glass and bending the walls, leaving huge indentations with each of its strikes.

In spite of the shards of glass flying all around him, the ever persistent blows of the giant's fist, and the increasingly pleading warnings of the blonde scientist, Ikari Gendo remained right where he was, showing an outright unsettling lack of reaction.

But there was something else that very much did make him react – The one thing about this Evangelion that still functioned as it was supposed to: The entry plug’s auto-eject mechanism.

Unfortunately, it was never intended for indoor use.

"Damnit!" Ikari exclaimed, apparently honestly schocked – and not without reason. The very function that, in a normal battle, would have catapulted the pilot far away from the battlefield and thus from potential sources of danger, was now doing little more than make sure that the plug would be colliding with the roof of the experimentation chamber at its full speed, and the rockets that should have buffered its fall exhausted themselves as the plug scraped all the way across the roof of the experimentation chamber, screeching and emitting a fireworks of sparks, until it reached an unquiet stop in a corner, where it could no longer advance, letting it fall dead to the floor without anything left to cushion its fall.

"REI!" Ikari called, completely aghast, having lost all control over his usually tightly governed features.

It was hardly a surprise – the control rooms looked similar enough, almost the same situation, almost the same face…

But there was no helping it – The plug impacted the floor with a jarring screech of metal, actually bounced, and only came to a permanent rest un the occasion of its second meeting with the floor.

Unit Zero had, in the meantime, resorted to bashing its head against the wall panels, again and again, until it finally stopped only because its power cable had been removed and its legs had been sprayed with bakelite that was now hardening into a solid block.

Most of the people in the control room breathed out long held-in sighs of relief once it was apparent that the EVA had gone completely silent, but Ikari wasn't among them – As far as he was concerned, that only meant the removal of one obstacle that was keeping him from dealing with the true object of his worries.

Now that his path was cleared, he instantly set into motion, as if something inside him had clicked into place after having been severed for a long time… as if he was back on that fateful day, still able to keep its disastrous events from unfolding.

"Not again." He felt it ring through his skull that felt emptied of everything else.

"At least not Rei."
At first, he sped over to the broken windows, leaning forward while holding on to the frames – The test chamber went down for at least sixty meters, he could forget about jumping.

As much as he wanted to indulge in the deceptive reassurance of a straight line, life had taught him very well how useful curves and meanders could often be to accomplish one's goal.

So he turned around without addressing a single word at anyone present, and rushed out of the room, leaving both Fuyutsuki and Akagi behind like some toys he'd lost interest in.

The latter could not help feeling a little wounded as she peeked at the entry plug below the arch of the giant's body, knowing all too well what was driving him right now.

She could hardly believe that he'd actually considered jumping all the way down, and she could tell that he wouldn't have minded twisting an ankle in the process if it had been a survivable height – it was downright frightening, to see the usually stoic and in-control commander seized by the kind of impulse that made the whole body ebb and flow like the stormy sea, and it kept away any thoughts of following and approaching him.

As for Ikari himself, he had since pressed the next elevator-button, but ended up storming down the nearby stairs anyway as it took too long to arrive.

He kept speeding along his way, without any real awareness of his surroundings – he ended up using a maintenance entrance that he hasn't set foot in in his life, pretty inferring the quickest route and reading the signs on the way on autopilot.

He only learned that he'd broken down a door along the way when Fuyutsuki mentioned it a few days later.

His mind wasn't even saving information about it, or about that time he'd let go of his security card as he was trying to pull it through the matching slot next to the final armored door leading to the test chamber, so that he had to frantically gather it up from the floor, that's just how upset he was, that's how foolishly he'd surrendered himself to the illusion that this would somehow allow him to make something up to the wife and son he had failed so long ago.

When the door finale opened, he immediately started running, frenzied, almost tripping over his own feet, until he reached the entry plug, and immediately went for the emergency escape hatch – which was just about hot enough to very much cook the upper layers of his skin before the very instant he'd touched them had turned from present into past.

With a sharp grunt of pain, Ikari instinctively recoiled, inadvertently sending his glasses flying to the floor in the process.

But that little bit of heat was by far not enough to make him hesitate – Without ever stopping to move, he forced his tortured fingers back to the burning hot metal through sheer force of will, and, through great pains and even greater exertion, turned the opening mechanism until the hatch was finally unlocked and the LLC streamed out onto the floor of the experimentation chamber.

Without allowing himself even a moment of respite, he forced the hatch open and leaned forward into the narrow, cylindrical plug.

"Rei? Are you alright? REI!"

The girl was still in her seat, weak, trembling, frightened, and judging by the rivulets of blood running down her face, injured as well, barely managing to turn in his direction and nod.
Ikari smiled.

"…thank goodness…"

It was only now that he took the time for a deep breath – As much as the heated air within the plug reeked of LCL, to him, it might as well have been a gentle sea breeze.

She was alive.

After a second's rest, the leader of NERV lifted his… subordinate? Wife? Tool? Memento? Creation? Prisoner? Daughter? out of the entry plug, with a care and gentleness that no one would expect of such a strict and pragmatic man.

He stood there for a moment, holding her, before turning around to carry her out of the experimentation chamber, slowly, steadily, giving his breathing and his heartbeat the time to revert to a normal pace.

He was almost back in the control room, he met up with the emergency team that Akagi must have called at some earlier moment, handing them the girl and ending up being whisked away along with her on Akagi's insistence when both she and the paramedics noticed the state of his hands, which he had almost forgotten as the adrenaline hat yet to wear of.

It was only when the pain finally began setting in that he became aware of the absence of his glasses and the fact that he must have left them in the experimentation chamber – not that they would have been of much use to him.

The cheap plastic of their frame had melted slightly out of shape due to the heat from the LCL, and the lenses had cracked under the resulting tension.

"My father did that?!!" Shinji asked in disbelief.

Never in a hundred years would he have thought it possible that his father even had the capacity to get himself injured for the sake of a mere underling. He had a hard time reconciling the man in this account with the huge, dark silhouette that had left him helplessly crying on that train station ten years ago.

It just refused to match…

"Yes. That's where he got his burns." Dr. Akagi confirmed once more, contradicting all the logic of Shinji's inner world.

He spent the rest of that conversation listening in silence as he struggled to process what he had just been told.

"It's hard to believe that all of this really happened…" Misato commented, looking everything but content. That the weapon that carried all of her hopes, her plans for revenge, her wish for release had turned out to be something this unreliable tempted her uncomfortable thoughts.

"Of course, all record were deleted and the official report says something else, but that's what happened." Dr. Akagi concluded, distinctly more nonchalantly than Misato would have liked her to.

"Did you ever find out why the EVA went out of control?" She inquired, hoping for something that could soothe her worries.
"Nothing certain, but we suspect that there was a mental instability in the pilot, and that this was the primary trigger."

"A mental instability? In Rei?"

"Yes. She may have been a lot more stressed than we expected."

"...but for what reason?"

"I don't know, but... possibly..."

Possibly, something in some corner of this perverse, unnatural abomination retained some memory of the person who had once ended its life, and decided to take a shot at crushing her daughter...

Oh no. Now she was starting to think like her.

Dr. Akagi could have slapped herself for even thinking of something like that.

"Possibly what?"

"Forget it. That cannot be."

"Either way, if no one really knows what exactly went wrong with the experiment, then why is EVA 00 being reactivated? Isn't that a bit imprudent?"

"The angels have returned, and unfortunately, the Evangelions are our only effective weapons."

"I know that, but..."

"It's not like was our first experiment with Rei and Unit Zero. We've already had countless of successful synchronizations. As soon as the neuronal interface is completely repaired..."

"She'll be sent into battle as well. I know..."

Even if there were good chances of the next activation experiment being a success, she just couldn't be happy about the fact that pretty soon, another mere teenager would be forced into being a soldier for the fate of the human race – with an evidentially unreliable weapon, at that.

"If everything goes well, we might already be able to deploy her against the next angel. She will be under your command, just like Shinji-kun. Here are her files."

Misato grabbed the folder and left.

Rei Ayanami.

Fourteen years old.

The first qualified candidate the Marduk institute was able to find.

The First Child, exclusive pilot of EVA 00, but also designated as backup pilot for EVA 01.

Unusually constant synchronization rate that was well within the borders of what could be used efficiently, but not particularly high compared to that of the Third or Second Children.

That was all.
No blood type, no family, no psychological profiles, no backstory, no information on the circumstances of her recruitment, not even a goddamn date of birth!

Compared to the thick bundles of paper that Misato had been given about Shinji and the Second Child, the file that Ritsuko had just handed her was decidedly thin. Until now, all she had seen of Rei was synchronization data she’d been sent for the sake of comparison with the other two children, and she had been curious about the contents of her personnel files for quite some time… at first, she had been honestly surprised that they would suddenly be allowed access to the papers just like that, but now that she had seen them, she could see why they had let her see them – they simply didn't contain any significant new information whatsoever.

That is, except for one crucial detail that only deepened the mystery: Her birth parents weren't even given names, but listed as her current legal guardian was no one other than Commander Ikari himself.

Misato felt an unfathomable something taking shape in the back of her head… First, the Commander's own son gets recruited to pilot Unit One, and now, it turns out that his foster daughter has already been in the program for years…

Wasn't that somehow… nepotism? And either way…

Spontaneous heroism notwithstanding, she found it rather unlikely that someone who'd deserted his own flesh and blood would take in a little girl out of pristine altruism alone.

But Misato had nothing tangible, no concrete evidence to prove that all of this wasn't just a huge, spontaneous agglomeration of coincidences with relatively simple explanations.

According to these papers, Rei had been accommodated on her own, just like they had initially planned to do with Shinji – They weren't exactly living together, so perhaps she was only listed under the Commander's guardianship for the sake of formalities… never mind that this organization was her only way of reclaiming her peace…

"Hey, Shinji-kun." She asked the pensive boy with a feigned tone of mild, casual interest.

She didn't really expect him to know anything, but it was worth a try.

"Have you, by any chance, ever met Rei or anyone in her family before you arrived here? Are the Ayanamis perhaps… distant relatives of yours, or friends of the family…"

"Why are you asking me that?" he replied, still seeming somewhat absent from the here and now – Misato could imagine all too well that the story about his father must have been occupying most of his capacity for thought – and her suspicious were not too far off the mark.

Of course he was pondering that account of his father's unprecedented heroism, the like of which his own son had not once witnessed before, but there was also the one name that was, once again, at the center of everything, and still left him no rest – Ayanami Rei.

She was the girl whom his father had saved. A stranger. A complete stranger had been significant enough to him to get the skin burned off his hands, but Shinji, his own son, wasn't worth a speck of his attention…

And despite knowing all of this, Misato honestly thought he would be the one to ask if she wanted to hear anything about Rei and his father's connections?!

To her credit, she quickly picked up on her young ward's disgruntlement.
"...I was asking just in case... It's not any sort of problem if you don't know anything..."

"...so you were already expecting me to be completely clueless... Sure... How could it be any different? It's not like my father and I have anything to do with each other..."

"That's not... what I meant..."

"It's alright..." he said, in a tone that made it quite obvious that he was everything but.

Misato fought back the urge to let out a deep sigh, if only to desist from troubling him any further.

And to think that he had appeared fairly content this morning...

But, as having to deal with this boy had forced for acknowledge by now, it just wasn't all that simple, and the fact that he'd spent the last few days in a relatively good mood was no reason to declare victory on all of his problems.

Even if he'd appeared more stable since he went back to school, it didn't take all too much to throw him off his wafer-thin semblance of balance; Overall, he still remained a very fragile boy.

After all, he had come here for the purpose of getting closer to his father – and now, he had been brutally reminded of just how little progress he had made in that direction thus far.

"I don't know... of any friends of the family." was his quiet reply.

His voice just sounded depressed, but his anger found another way out as fingers had clawed themselves into the fabric of his pants. He didn't say it out loud, but Misato might as well have looked into his skull and read the unsaid words that were still burning to be heard.

He didn't know of any friends of the family, nor that his father and him had ever been anything resembling a family in the first place.

That was what he still wanted to say.

After a long drive most of which Shinji spent staring at the roof of the automobile, while Misato silently whacker her brains over both Shinji's frame of mind and the papers she had been handed, the two of them finally arrived at NERV HQ where Shinji was, as mentioned before, being expected for a test – And in the time he needed to change into his plug suit, walk to the cage, and be inserted into his Evangelion, Dr. Akagi, the last missing participant, had also arrived just in time to get started, still having had some data left to sort through at the grounds of the last battle.

With everything ready, they wasted no time to activate the EVA and connect it to Shinji who, once again, kept his turbid thoughts to himself and meekly followed along with everything that was asked of him – the moment the interface inside the plug activated was also the first time Shinji got a good look at Unit Zero which was fixated in the same room. Both EVAs were about half submerged in coolant; Rei had apparently arrived before him, so he hadn't gotten to see her before the experiment started, as she had already been sitting inside her plug at the time he had been climbing into his own. Much like his own EVA, the one-eyed bio-machine bore an undeniable resemblance to the mythological demons of old, as much as the layout of the armor plates and the structure of the head were distinctly different from those of the violet giant that he still couldn't comfortably think of as "his", especially since both EVAs appeared to have at least one thing in common: Their history of going out of control. Until now, he'd at least felt somewhat safe during these tests, but now he knew that these things were even liable to go berserk during a routine experiment...
At this point, he decided to lean back and try thinking of something else – nervous, chaotic thoughts were hardly going to help his synch ratio.

So he closed his eyes and made an effort to breathe slowly and deliberately, as Dr. Akagi had advised him during his training, but it didn't seem to be working.

Relaxing was just not something that Ikari Shinji had any talent for.

It just wasn't possible for him, not when he felt it all around him, not air, but a warm liquid with a slight tint of an unnerving scent to it, it just didn't allow him for forget a moment where exactly he was, not in a test plug, not in a simulation body, but the real deal, the actual, physical Evangelion…

Right now, everything about the connection to the EVA felt like it usually did, but how would he know if it wasn't just the same for Ayanami until the very moment Unit Zero went out of control? Yes, exactly. Ayanami was here, too, not too far away, deep within her own EVA. She had sustained all these horrible injuries in the last incident… For now, they appeared to have completely healed, but soon, she was going to be sent into battle… and that was a thought that Shinji didn't like at all… he could still see her before him, being wheeled past him on a gurney, weak, broken, struggling for breath…

Just the thought that this fragile, unfortunate girl would be sent into the kinds of battles he'd had to endure so far, and suffer just as he had… Barely touching that particular rotten cluster of memory was enough to send shivers down his neck… and if he combined that with imagining Rei, trembling, bleeding and whimpering in pain, as she had been during their first meeting, and him, too, both their bodies broken on the ground… he just didn't want this, he flat out refused to imagine this any further.

Just like back then, he felt compelled to take her into his arms and protect her from all that, but for that, he would have needed strength. He would have needed to be a good fighter… and he didn't know how that would be possible for him. As useless as he was now, it was very much unavoidable that she would end up being deployed, and thus, inevitably injured once again.

His measly amount of "strength" and "courage" wasn't even enough to even talk to her.

Much like his father, Ayanami Rei would probably always remain a faraway existence for him…

Ayanami… Rei…

Her name was also what finally brought Shinji's thoughts back to the here and now. No, not her name, her designation. The First Child.

She was mentioned in one of the many announcements that were often heard over the numerous speakers in NERV headquarters. They were currently… transferring the First Child's test data to the Magi? What, it was already over?

Well, not quite, it was only over for Rei, which made sense she had been present here a little earlier, but still, he must have dozed off quite a while ago.

How on earth he had managed that in his tense and anxious state was a mystery to him, but it might be related to the fact the it was so… warm and cozy inside the Evangelion, as grotesque as it seemed to describe this horrifying abomination of modern science with that kind of adjectives. But that wasn't all. After his unscheduled little nap, he felt strangely at ease, not just disproportionally well-rested for the amount of time, but somehow… invigorated to the microscopic level, as if he'd been to some warm, comfortable place where someone soft and caring had consoled gently
consoled him… but now that he was awake, the mere concept of having such associations for the stuff of his nightmares left him creeped out to the point of nausea, and the sticky, stinking quality of the LCL everywhere on him and inside him didn't help in the slightest, sending his brain into overdrive in search of some logical explanation for this other than the possibility that he was slowly going stark raving mad.

Perhaps he had dreamt of something that he could no longer remember clearly, something that explained this. Perhaps he had confused this place for something else in his half-conscious state. But now he couldn't help being wide awake, and noted, amongst other things, that Rei had already been let out of her EVA – at very least, her entry plug had already been withdrawn from Unit Zero…

In a spur of spontaneous curiosity, he made the interface zoom in without thinking too much about what he was doing.

And there she was.

He found her on that catwalk-like contraption in-front of her EVA.

She had bent down to get something from a small compartment that served as a deposit for the pilot's belongings, then went back to her plug and squatted down to get something else.

By implication, she was wearing her plugsuit.

While it certainly wasn't the first time that he'd seen it on her, but it was not quite the same sort of impression when she wore it covered in bandages without the parts corresponding to the arms, and couldn't really move around in it like she could now. That said, the full suit with its stark white color was not much less effective than the bandages in making her appear like an unspeakably fragile porcelain doll.

With this clothing pressed this tightly to the surface of her skin, she looked as if the slightest touch, or even sound could make her pop out of existence like a soap-bubble.

Lost in fascination, his eyes unwaveringly followed the every motion of her petite body.

Once again, his thoughts circled around the reasons for her seemingly constant solitude… until he noticed that, for once, she was not alone at all.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shinji noticed the approaching, daunting silhouette of a tall man in a dark uniform.

Wait, that was… that couldn't be, could it?

But it was.

His Father!

What in the world was his father doing there, right on this metal catwalk thing?

That's the place where you would expect some simple maintenance technician to show up, not, well, their big boss guy.

As soon as Ayanami noticed his presence, she eagerly turned around and excitedly skipped towards him with an almost playful elegance that Shinji had never noticed at school, just like a little girl rushing to welcome her beloved Daddy after a long day of work.
Yes, she actually *jumped* to bridge a small height difference between the contraption right next to the plug and the main catwalk, and soon, she was standing right in front of him, generously accompanying the apparent steam of her words with gracile hand gestures.

Shinji was quickly taken by a wave of disbelief, but her actions simply eschewed any other description, it just contradicted everything he had seen of this girl so far.

That alone would have been enough to seriously confuse the young EVA pilot, but what happened next honestly shocked him to the bone – She smiled. She seemed downright elated, the expression of delight just wouldn't disappear from her lips as they kept forming new words with increasing enthusiasm.

And the craziest thing of it all was… his father actually *smiled back*.

There it was, before his very eyes, a most impossible thing: Ikari Gendo, looking another person firmly in the eye with a pleased, if not outright *proud* smile on his edgy, worn face.

Shinji felt as if the ground had just been pulled out from underneath him, flailing, tumbling down like a leaf in the wind, a footloose tatter on an inevitable downward spiral he had absolutely no say over.

In the sudden, vicious grip of this paralyzing helplessness, he could not stop to watch from afar through his interface how these two appeared to get along splendidly, cut off from their happy, harmonious world he was not allowed into.

He could not hear what they were saying, but their faces spoke whole encyclopedias.

They were smiling, not just a little, but, as far as it was within his abilities to tell, moved by genuine pleasance, displayed for everyone to see.

Ultimately, his father's eyes ended up taking up a gentle, almost devoted expression, which immediately resulted in Rei positively *beaming* like a newborn star.

By then, it had become all but obvious.

They were not just smiling, they were smiling *together*.

Rei… and his father.

Shinji couldn't think of a time where he'd seen *either* of them smiling before this very day…

Of course Commander Ikari Gendo wasn't the type of person who'd get himself burned for some random subordinate.

But Rei wasn't just a subordinate;

He was.

He, Shinji, was the stranger, the forgotten distant relative, the random subordinate. *He* was the one who didn't belong, the leftover spare, the "other" child.

He was the one who wasn't a friend of the family.

Shinji let himself sink back into his seat in resignation.
What point was there in any of this, again?

If he was honest with himself, hadn't he stayed here out of the naïve hope that maybe, just maybe, his father would finally acknowledge him and let him take his rightful place as his only son? Well, right now, that spot appeared to be quite taken, his father did not look like someone who would have any use or need or reason to miss another Child.

This just wasn't fair. That man was supposed to be his father, damnit, and as small a comfort as he may have been, he was the only family that Shinji had left on this world.

HE was supposed to be his son, HE should be the one getting that appreciative smile…

How could he smile at HER when he had abandoned his own flesh and blood like some bag of trash?

It was not like could ever have been capable to resent or even hate Rei on the basis of something like jealous feelings – if his thought were to as much as stray in that direction, he would see her bandaged on the ground again, together with the associated memory of feeling that urge help her somehow, and a whole new icing of deep shame.

What sort of scum could even consider resenting a person capable of such bravery as attempting to fight a giant monster in such a pitiable state? It's not like any of this was her fault.

Still, Shinji couldn't help but feel like he had been slapped in the face.

If this girl over there was Ikari Gendo's precious child…

Then who was Shinji?

Then what was he doing on this world?

What was he doing here?

Soon after, he was told that the experiment was over and allowed to leave his entry plug.

When he stepped onto the catwalk right outside the plug, he was all alone, there was no one, no one waiting for him.

He hurried to get to wherever he had left his SDAT player, or at least to Misato.

He didn't really care either way, right now, he would be fine with anything that would make enough noise to chase away the thoughts of what he had just witnessed.

Although Misato did her best to coax some sort of conversation out of him on the ride back home, his contributions consisted entirely of one-liners, and once they arrived, he went straight for his room and remained cooped up in there for the remainder of the day. Even the resident house-penguin appeared somewhat concerned and attempted to cheer him up, but unfortunately, PenPen's effort remained equally fruitless.

In the end, both the bird and its owner decided to call it a day, concede their defeat, and hope that Shinji's friends would be able to cheer him up tomorrow. And if that didn't help, Misato would try teasing him a bit, he was bound to stop brooding eventually and get all flustered as he was forced into the defensive position.

After all, Ritsuko would be coming over tomorrow, and along with her, countless of potential ways
to distract the boy.

Sighing, she opened the can of beer she had just gotten from her fridge.

She would have thought that after all this time, she would at least have developed something of a gut feeling for how to get through to that kid, but she was already suspecting that it probably just didn't work that way.

Either that, or it was simply proof that she wasn't his real mother after all.

There were people on this world who could feel down when they hid away under their blankets, and see the world an entirely different way when they jumped out of bed the next day… but Shinji wasn't one of them.

He'd marched off to school on time, but that was already the best she could say about – he'd served her breakfast, but barely even touched his own and held his sweet little head downcast the entire time in his usual way.

By now, Misato had wondered whether there had been any concrete incident that she didn't know about. He'd been somewhat melancholy since yesterday morning, but if she really thought about it, his mood had not quite hit freezing temperatures until after the synch test.

Even with someone like him, there had to be some sort of cause for this sort of shift – or had she just significant underestimated his lability? Never mind the pesky little problem that no one knew when the next angel might attack…

She hadn't made peace with the thought of sending him into battle like that…

Once again, the sought solace in a nice can of cold beer.

All of this would probably be significantly less frustrating if there were some sort of measuring instrument to gauge her success or lack thereof.

In the meantime, Shinji was walking to school as he pondered once again was he was even doing here, what it was that he came to search for, and what point there was in staying here.

His father and Ayanami.

Their smiling faces just wouldn't disappear from his mind, no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on the pavement before his feet.

His father had only needed him because Rei had been injured, right?

She had recovered by now – So what was he still doing here?

It was quite possible that his father would soon lose all interest in him and just send him away again without anything between them having changed- no, even if he were to stay here, the chances of anything changing were looking less existent by the day.

As he was going his way, Shinji noticed a familiar voice – no, 'familiar' would probably have been an overstatement, given that he'd only met it its owner yesterday, but he did recognized.

It was Mitsurugi, alongside an adult male with unusually long, dark hair who was leaning on a car that was parked by the roadside. Shinji recognized him as well – wasn't he that technician that his
father had spoken with yesterday?

Shinji might not have recognized the man if he hadn't been wearing that same combination of a beige NERV uniform and a lab coat.

"Excuse me if I ask, but… Won't you be running late for work?" Mitsurugi asked, hesitantly. The man, who was appeared significantly more carefree, just shook his head. "Nope. Don't you worry, Nagato, there's an access route right next to your school, after all it's the same one the Children are enrolled in… You're in the same class, aren't you?"

"Yes… they are…" he confirmed, without much of a tone to his voice.

"And? What are they like? I don't mean to tattle, but I do feel somewhat obligated to show some interest in the people who are saving the gluteii maximi of everyone in this city on a regular basis, including yours and mine…" The long-haired technician chuckled softly.

"I… briefly spoke with Ikari-san the other day." Mitsurugi replied quietly.

"He appears to be a nice person, if somewhat sparse with words…"

"Sparse with words, heh? Sounds like his old man. You see, the Commander isn't exactly the most frisky person on the planet either… But then again, the higher-ups are all quite gifted at the art of poker faces. You should see the leader of the operations division… not the mention the boss of mine, our dear Dr. Akagi… They're quite a collection of hardcore workaholics… But I guess that's how they got to be the head honchos to begin with… Seriously, it's like the only normal person is subcommander Fuyutsuki, but I don't really work with him that much…"

If only they knew. Misato's 'professionalism' was something that she discarded along with her uniform when she went home. Not that these two had any way of knowing that.

Only now did Shinji realize that he had stopped in his tracks when he'd realized that they had been talking about him.

He was still a sizeable distance away from them, though.

"My impression was that Ikari-san… I mean, the younger Ikari-san, is just shy more than anything else…"

"Just shy?" The technician raised an eyebrow. "Well, in that case, the family resemblance does seem to be a bit more limited than I thought… But I guess the two of us should probably be quiet in that regard, we're not a prime example of family resemblance either. Either way, I expect you to be nice to our Third Child…" The older Mitsurugi playfully presented his index finger.

"He's the only son of the guy who decides my salary!"

"I… I will, father."

Mitsurugi's father laughed.

"Don't take everything so dead serious, Nagato… And I'd really appreciate it if you finally came up with some more… pleasant way to refer to me. How about calling me 'Papa', 'Daddy' or anything like that? I could even live with that newfangled 'Old Man', but please, spare me that high and mighty 'father'.

…and let's get going already, or the both of us might really wind up arriving too late…"
Oh, and Nagato? Did you meet the First Child as well? You know, the girl?"

Shinji stayed where he was and didn't budge an inch until the Mitsurgis had vanished into the distance.

He didn't want to spend the rest of the way being reminded that he would probably never have this kind of conversation with his own father.

These two had been smiling to each other as well… just like Rei and his own male parent.

For a little while, he just stood there, deciding whether he even still felt like going to school, but he didn't feel like going back and facing Misato's disappointment, so he continued walking in the end.

When he eventually reached his classroom, he already found both Mitsurugi and – as usual – Ayanami alone at their desks. The former was spending the time before the first period like he had spent most of his breaks yesterday, mostly alone, solving sudokus when he wasn't reading through his schoolwork. Shinji had already noticed that he often participated in class and had a pretty solid grip on the subject matter, which was significantly more than the Third Child could claim for himself.

Shinji made no further attempts to talk to him today – he just couldn't summon up the energy to do it, and he was certain that he would only end up blowing it, since the bitter aftertaste of witnessing his conversation with his father left him feeling rather awkward if he as much as thought about his newest classmate.

Needless to say, he didn't talk to Rei either. Not today, not today of all days. Today, if that was possible, he felt even less up to it than he usually did.

He did watch her, though. Drawn in by some sort of higher power, like a moth that could never hope to understand the chemical reactions that gave birth to flames, he found his eyes circling around the back of her head, her face averted from all of the classroom and all that took place within it.

And he didn't feel like anything was going to change between him and her anymore that between him and his father. He would never find the courage to talk to her.

He never thought that there would ever be a day when he would be grateful for the history teacher's usual boring speech, but now, it had come.

The endless droning about Second Impact did at least create some sort of background noise to drown out those gloomy thoughts, he no longer wanted, and whatever hijinks Touji and Kensuke were plotting while the old teacher wasn't looking only added to the convenient distractions, but the two of them did not fail to notice that their newest friend was notably sparse in his participation: "Hey, Ikari! What's the matter with you today? You look like you'll summon one of these cartoon clouds at any minute…" Touji commented.

"I… do…?"

"Yep. Don't bother with denying it, it's quite obvious." Kensuke stated, deliberately wording it in a more casual tone, in the hope that perhaps it would rub off on Shinji. But he and Touji had personally witnessed quite enough to have reasons to be genuinely worried. Still, Kensuke chose to downplay that for now. "So… you're some uber cool elite combat pilot, you live with Misato-san and half the girls in our class have the hots for you. What could possibly bad enough for you to show up here with such a long face."
"I don't think any of that is as great as you probably imagine…"

"What, including having the girls fawn over you?"

"Why would anyone be fawning over me of all people? There's nothing interesting about me, apart from being an EVA pilot… at least you have some muscles… and Aida is smart and always seems to know lots of things…"

"An innocent lamb, white like snow…" Touji remarked. "You really are clueless, Ikari."

"This judgmental society tends to see our hobbies as rather girl-repelling." Kensuke added as an explanation of sorts.

"Our hobbies?"

"Oh, right. In your case, it's your big potty mouth."

"WHAT did you just say…? Never mind. Anyway, Ikari, just in case you haven't noticed, you do seem to have some popularity with the ladies. Just not with all ladies, right?" Touji eyed him with a wide grin.

"What… do you mean by that?"

Kensuke promptly elaborated on Touji's hypothesis: "You're experiencing a little bit of lovesickness, aren't you?"

"N-No, that's… not it…" Shinji answered, somewhat rattled.

It shouldn't surprise him that those two would blame his melancholy on such a "mundane" explanation, but…

"Oh yes it is! Did you really think that we didn't notice where you were staring whenever one of us stops speaking for as much as half a second? Looks like Ayanami's boobies really did a number on you, man."

"A-Ayanami? I- It's not like this! …really not…"

But Touji didn't even leave Shinji the time to come up with any excuses: "Nah. We might have bought that story yesterday, but you've had your head permanently pointing into her general direction ever since. You can be honest with us, you know? I admit, she's definitely not by type, but she's not that bad. I mean, she does have a nice butt. If you're lucky, it might turn out that she isn't weird or antisocial at all, just…uhm… really shy."

"Really, really shy." Kensuke added, not really believing in that possibility. "But come hell or high water, as your friends, we totally respect your choice (and personal taste), and feel obliged to help you in any way we can."

"It really isn't that way!" Shinji insisted, beginning to look somewhat helpless.

"Then what IS the matter?" they both demanded to know in unison.

"I… I don't want to talk about it right now…"

At that, the two of them decided to let sleeping dogs lie – The odds of Shinji actually spilling the beans did not look particularly high anymore, anyway – and decided to shift the topic of conversation to "mathematics", since the teacher in question had this pesky habit of subjecting one
or two unlucky student to an impromptu interrogation at the beginning of the period, apparently to motivate the students to do more studying.

Touji had not really quite grasped just what exactly the teacher had spent the last lesson babbling about, and Kensuke, who usually tended to be decidedly better with all this school work, was just as clueless since he'd been busy assembling a plastic facsimile of a war plane that day, leaving it to Shinji to try and explain the new topic to them, although his rather muddleheaded attempts to do so only seemed to deepen their confusion.

Thankfully the teacher ended up picking someone else that day – Ayanami and Mitsurugi, to be exact – rendering all the fuss moot. The one listed first here was also the first one to be called to the blackboard by the teacher. She just walked to the front without a sound, picked up a piece of chalk, turned her back to everyone else in this room, took a short look at the equation and then proceeded to solve it, without providing the teacher or the rest of the class with any sort of explanation for what she was doing.

After she was done with the equations, she scribbled a minimalistic diagram beneath them, on which she represented time with the y-coordinate instead of the usual x.

As a matter of course, Shinji was observing each of her movements.

The teacher notably needed a little time to inspect the numbers that now filled most of the blackboard and retrace everything she had done, but after that, he seemed surprised.

"Now look at this! You can do this after all… How come you never raise your hand during the lessons if you're this good at it?"

The teacher did not really appear to have been expecting an answer, nor did he leave the blue-haired girl any time to formulate one. "Well, anyway. Good job, Ayanami-san. Please return to your seat. Mitsurugi-kun? You're next. Could you please solve the third problem on page 66?"

Unlike Ayanami, Mitsurugi did provide ample explanations and made an effort to turn to look at his classmates once in a while, but it was noticeably something he had to consciously remind himself of. Standing in front of a crowd didn't come to him naturally, and for the most part, he still didn't show his spectators much aside from the back of his bandaged head.

He scribbled the equations unto the table without having to pause and think as much as once, and was able to answer any and all questions the teacher directed at him.

What this event also revealed, however, was that Mitsurugi had notably bad handwriting – Even the teacher needed a while to decipher the small writing which appeared to be squeezing itself into a corner of the blackboard, but in the end, he was very pleased with the results, and proceeded to dismiss Mitsurugi and start the lesson.

The rest of the school day passed in a blur and very soon, it was time for Shinji to head home – he at least wanted to dust the apartment off before Dr. Akagi arrived for her visit – Leaving it to Misato was futile.

At times, he felt like he was her guardian, and not the other way around… At least he wouldn't be alone with her this afternoon, so she would have someone else to pour her exaggerated happy-go-lucky attitude.

It wasn't that he didn't like her, but right now, he just wasn't in the right mood to deal with her. It was certainly her good right to act as cheerful as she wanted inside her own four walls, but the last
thing Shinji wanted to be confronted with when he was feeling drained and depressed was a drunk, scantily-clad woman trying to "cheer him up", all the while reminding him all the more that he had absolutely nothing to cheer about, despite her good intentions. Those only made him feel guilty for thinking about her like that, that almost sounded like he'd prefer her to be just as miserable as he was, or that was at least what he had feared it could be mistaken for.

Or perhaps, he was the one making that mistake, or a different one.

"What IS this?" Dr. Akagi demanded to know.

"Curry." Shinji answered as he distributed the untrustworthy-looking substance onto the plates of everyone present.

The fake blonde, for once without her lab coat or bright, ruby-red lipstick, had known her old friend long enough to mistrust her culinary skills, but the shapeless paste she had just been served deserved to be revered as its very own kind of evil.

There was nothing on this table that hadn't been wrapped in plastic shortly before.

"Are you still living off that instant garbage?" she asked in disbelief.

But Misato's perception appeared to have its unique filters and mechanisms that apparently allowed her to completely tune out her colleague's advice whenever she pleased.

"Guests aren't supposed to complain." was her only retort, and even that was half-serious at best; With that out of the way, she turned to Shinji who was already leaning toward her general direction with the curry bowl and the ladle in his hands.

"...Misato-san?"

"Just put it in here." Misato instructed, removing the plastic plate she'd used as an improvised covering for a bowl on instant noodles that she'd already treated to a dose of hot water minutes before, before taking the entire bowl and proceeding to present it to Shinji with both her hands.

Although there was still some steam rising out of the cup, the brick-like shape initially formed by the noodles had already dissolved, so they looked just about ready to be eaten.

Obviously confused, Shinji blinked at his guardian. She wanted him to put the curry… into the noodle cup? If she said so, it should be okay enough for her, but he was not quite sure whether she was actually serious.

"A-Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am! Why shouldn't I be? This tastes great!" she claimed with a big smile on her face.

Shinji decided to humor her and give her what she wanted, saving any attempts of making sense of it for some point in the indeterminate future.

"You see, you can't have that kind of flavor with a cup-a-noodle alone." Misato commented, perhaps in an attempt to justify herself to her commensals without having to remove her aggressively-enthusiastic smile.

"My secret tip is to only use half as much water as it says on the packaging!"

After stirring the witches' cauldron of a noodle cup one last time, she contently began stuffing her
'creation' into her mouth.

Despite, or perhaps exactly *because* of her apparently blissful facial expression, both Shinji and Dr. Akagi began to feel rather apprehensive about trying their own portions – and not without reason, as they soon learned.

"Misato cooked this, didn't she?"

"Oh, you noticed?" Misato answered with her mouth still full, either fully missing or deliberately ignoring the evident overtone of frustration in her friend's voice.

It took all of the scientist's self-control to maintain the smile she had put on for the sake of politeness and refraining from spitting it all out right then and there.

Distantly, she asked herself whether the currently known laws of physics even allowed for the possibility of *instant food* getting this horribly screwed up.

"Next time you invite me, please do it when it's Shinji-kun's turn to cook."

In the face of that sheer shower of 'praise' it was receiving, the third Member of the Katsuragi household pondered whether he should even touch the contents of his food bowl.

Just in the next room, the hot-springs penguin was eying the beer can and curry-topped rice he had been left with with a somewhat uncertain glance.

Did his Mistress really expect him to eat this?

Well, PenPen decided to be considerate and just give it a chance, not knowing that the first beakfull would already suffice to send him on a roadtrip to the land of dreams.

Sadly, this epic battle of Curry versus Bird remained unknown to future generations and forgotten by this cruel, ungrateful world. The only sign of it to ever reach the three humans in the living room was the soft 'thud' of an unsung hero's defeat, which only Shinji – a kindred spirit – ever took note of, and quickly dismissed as his imagination, concluding that his strained nerves must be playing tricks on him lately.

"Living with her must be hard. You might want to look into finding another place to stay…" Dr. Akagi advised, appearing to feel somewhat sorry for the young pilot.

"I've gotten used to it by now…" Shinji replied in a neutral tone, opting for a 'diplomatic' answer.

"Exactly!" Misato added, noticeably irked. "You should never underestimate a human's ability to adapt to new situations! Besides, if he did move-" She paused briefly for a small gesture that both Dr. Akagi and Shinji, its intended recipient, easily recognized as a request for another beer. "-he'd have to go through a lot of bothersome formalities, given that he only just got his new security card."

That particular cue distinctly got a specific reaction out of Dr. Akagi.

"Speaking of which…"

She reached into her handbag.

"I have a little favor to ask of you, Shinji-kun."

"Uhm… what do you need?" the boy in question asked as he handed Misato another can of her
favorite alcoholic beverage.

"This is Rei's new security card." The scientists explained as she handed Shinji the small plastic rectangle. "I forgot to give it to her earlier. Could you stop by at her place on the way to headquarters and give it to her?"

That wasn't exactly the truth, but since the excuse was so ordinary and inconspicuous, and the truth so unlikely, Misato was not likely to even consider the possibility of foul play.

Not even Akagi herself could fathom why the commander had asked her to find some arbitrary pretext to bring Shinji in contact with Rei.

He had mentioned it rather casually at the end of a longer conversation about current next courses of action, but unfortunately, she had long since been forced to learn that Ikari never did anything without a reason. If it was any other man, one could have suspected some explanation as harmless and innocent as that he was worried about the respectively rather modest and nonexistent social circles of his son and foster daughter and aimed to catch to birds with one stone, or that he simply thought they should meet since they would soon be working together, and that it would only be natural for them to form some relationship, given Rei's... identity.

But not if the one ordering this was Ikari Gendo, oh no. Dr. Akagi could only guess what he might have in mind, but it could be nothing less than to stir the wheels of fate.

"That's a very pretty picture of Rei, isn't it?" In the end, the apartment's owner and her ear-to-ear Cheshire cat grin were the ones to interrupt the thoughts of both Shinji and Dr. Akagi.

In the matter of a split second, the boy who, up until now, had been studying the card, or more accurate, the picture of Rei embedded into it in silence and melancholy, was blushing furiously and more than a bit frantic, mostly about denying the... theory that had just been cooked up one time too many. First Touji and Kensuke, and now Misato, too!

"It's not... like that..."

But now that she had gotten something other than dreary resignation or purely habitual pleasantries out of him, Misato sure wasn't going to let up: "My, my, Shin-chan. Could we be having a little bit of a crush?"

"N-NO!"

Misato giggled. "Then why did you get so flustered? Hey, at least now you have an official excuse to visit her apartment!"

"Please stop teasing me."

"Oh, but I love teasing you." Misato responded. Shinji's complaints had only served to heighten her mood, if anything – if he was actually complaining, and not just retreating into apathy, that little raincloud over his head was probably already dissipating.

"...you're really fun to tease." She added, still fighting the last giggles. "-since you always explode right away."

"Like you?" Akagi countered.

Digging herself, Misato looked anything but amused at that comment, but before she could snap back at her more level-headed friend, Shinji drew the attention of both women to himself when he,
still looking at Rei's picture on the card, finally revealed the reason why he had been doing so in first place: "It's just that I've come to notice that... we barely know anything about each other, even if we are the only two EVA pilots in the world."

That was what he had spent all this time brooding about?

Misato instantly asked herself why he hadn't just asked, but she could pretty much answer herself.

Shinji's question, however, was answered by Dr. Akagi, as she hid her true feelings behind her smile and a hand attached to the fingers she ran through her hair as if to disguise its true feelings: "...She's a nice girl. But unfortunately, she's just like your father... she's just not good at it."

"Not good... at what?"

"Living."

Not good... at living?

Shinji couldn't quite make sense of just what she meant. There were some unspeakable impossibilities that were brought to his consciousness by that phrase, but nothing concrete would make itself assemble. The supposed similarity to his father, counterintuitive as it may have been at first, was far easier to see once he put his mind to it. While he had never quite been able to put a label on the ghostly, disconnected presence in both his mind and NERV HQ, his father was certainly—shamefully—unfortunately—inevitably—to be found in the corners and cellars that negative presences were supposed to swarm and be found it, so it took a while for the thoughts of both of them to come together as something in the same sphere, in the end it was surprisingly, disconcertingly easy to integrate this new and unknown soul from the freshest memories of present that had yet to become past into the blurry, vague, lightless constructions of his childhood, like she always had her secret hideout here whom which she snuck out to show her form where the higher, upper, newer layers of his being were formed enough to properly perceive her; Or maybe, absurd and natural as it sounded at the same time, there was some hidden high speed lane between right now and back then, the diffuse beginning and the tip of his memory where it decayed into countless expectations and possibilities for the future, like a tunnel moving through the center of the earth, straight across that innermost darkness he never dared to touch

But be it through slow path or shortcut, it was possible to imagine those two next to each other; After all, they often were physically seen in each other's company.

He supposed that they were both taciturn, serious people who kept their mysteries to themselves; Their expressions changed about just as often, with Rei probably just barely trumping her guardian, but no other fourteen year old, or even any other female that Shinji could think of right off the bat. Still, none of that seemed anywhere extreme enough to merit that last sentence, especially not in the light of them being involved in a war (He was now involved in a war, too. It hit him bluntly, there. That was not a conclusion he had wanted to draw, nor a thought he wanted to think-) "Not good at living." ...that sounded rather...drastic, didn't it?

Once again, now in the twilight of the hallway of Misato's apartment building, just outside their door, he made a futile attempt to suck out all the answers to the world from that small picture of a single girl. She was staring directly into the camera, with a firm, mechanically serious expression reminiscent of a soldier, unrelenting ready for and determined to face just about everything one could ask of her, and there was something about its stony hardness that indeed reminded him of his father.
He had smiled at her, back when they talked.

Shinji could not recall a single memory of his father smiling at him.

What sort of person was she? What did her crimson eyes so firmly believe in as to be willing to challenge an abomination that had him terrified out of his mind, in a half-dead state, at that?

From where did she take that immense, bottomless strength that he was not merely beyond his own capacity, but far outside the edges of his comprehension?

Who in the world was this girl who had been worthy of the Commander's smile?

Chapter End Notes

(1) This particular version of Shinji's "Third-Impact-Dream" was inspired by "Last B", an alternative draft for the final scene of EoE. I think I speak for all of us when I say that I'm very grateful that Anno chose to use the other one.

(2) If I had the funds etc. to assign him a VA, it would probably be Yuka Nishigaki, also known for doing Yuu in "Guilty Crown". That last line where he goes "I'd like to see… how you resist despair…", that's it. Of course, this just describes the quality/sound of the voice, not it's tone/use, Nagato doesn't actually talk like that, not being the eldritch representation of some evil organization or anything XD His father Minoru would probably have a Crispin-Freeman-Type of voice XD On the subject, Asahina can be imagined as an Atsuko Tanaka type of voice, except perhaps a tad more subdued and less overtly awesome… dunno.

(3) Yes, look it up if you don't believe me, Shamshel's 'Laser arms' remained intact in 1.11. What a great opportunity to include the 'analysis scene', which, after all, is all but trivial.

(4) In the next chapter, Shinji is going to have his very own encounter with the mystery girl we've heard so much about. Of course, with him being the resident cosmic chew toy, that can only mean one thing: There will be slaps and hilarious incidents involving lack of clothes… but not necessarily in the most usual combination. Stay tuned for chapter 12: [A friend of the family]
The neighborhood that Ayanami Rei lived in was… not what Shinji had expected.

The closer he appeared to come to the address Misato had given him, the deeper he had sunk into a jungle of tall, abandoned concrete buildings.

He had never strayed here before, but he recalled the occasional people complaining about how these structures detracted from the general appearance of the city – If Shinji recalled his teacher's unending lectures correctly, the origin of these 'unsightly blemishes' dated back to Second Impact itself – after the calamity, there were hardly any two bricks left on each other – Everything that hadn't been moved down by the Earthquakes had been crushed beneath the tsunamis, billions of people died – and even most of the survivors were rendered homeless or forced to make do with ruins.

When reconstruction finally arrived after a dark age of countless wars and conflicts, it was decided to dispose of the debris that had once been Hakone like dust to be wiped away, for it to be reborn
as Neo Tokyo-3, and as in many other cities, this rebirth had rolled over the land in the shape of a wave of steel and concrete – aesthetic concerns had been of little interests to the then still new and unstable government, at least as long as the streets were still a stew of dirty dissatisfied homeless beggars just waiting to erupt into riots.

The most pressing aim had been to provide the bulk of the survivors with stable roofs and working sanitation at the lowest possible cost.

The appearances of the city districts that still dated back to that chaotic time were merely a reflection of these circumstances: Wide streets framed by seemingly endless rows of identical, rectangular concrete buildings in uniform anthracite grey, disappearing into the horizon like a long row of domino bricks.

The row that Rei was supposed to live in was no different.

Other than the street signs and house numbers, Shinji could hardly make out any differences between the buildings, let alone the individual tiny apartments that made them up, but with the tall, homogenous buildings towering around him, he couldn't shake off those encroaching feelings of insignificance, nor the question of why anyone could possibly chose to live her by their own, free will, especially not here, at the very edge of not just the city, but even this forlorn district itself, in the outermost row of buildings that still remained – By the looks of it, there had been further building rows at a time, but by now, all that testified for their existence were piles of rubble; Now that Tokyo-3 had grown into a blossoming, well-fortified metropolis, those colorless makeshift building bricks had served their purpose and were being demolished at the least sluggish place that the city's perpetually strained finances allowed. In fact, Shinji could hear that very same demolition work produce typical construction noises somewhere in the distance in this very same instant.

Since Misato's apartment was pretty far up, it was usually silent whenever Misato herself wasn't there, but nothing of the sort could be said for this place – The sounds weren't particularly loud, since its source was still a fair bit away, but they were very much incessant and omnipresent.

In all the time Shinji needed to locate the correct building, the grating rhythm didn't seem let up for an instant.

Rei's home itself did not look any better than the rest of the district surrounding it, the frontage was bleak and featureless wherever it wasn't dirty, and many of the doors were just standing open; Shinji could even spot one that had completely fallen out of its frame; The immense majority of any residents this place had ever had seemed too have moved away a long time ago, and anyone who couldn't afford to leave wouldn't have the means to concern themselves with the maintenance of the building, which left the occasional piece of garbage as the only proof that anyone was still living here at all.

The disappearance of the residents was hardly a mystery, considering that, for its many stories, this building didn't have a single elevator. The bleak, colorless staircase only had a few small windows without even actual glass panes in them, and Shinji even noticed one or two broken driprails.

The further he got, the more he wondered what Rei was even doing in such a dreary place. There was simply no solid reason for her to be living here. She was important NERV personnel, a pilot, to be exact, and she seemed to get along with his father – If they were going to offer him a proper apartment all for himself at the drop of a hat, it should go without saying that all Rei would need to do to get proper accommodation was to ask for them… so why was she of all people among the last few to be living in this desolate hole?

Didn't anyone care?
Why didn't she just… complain about this or something?

All this place did was to progressively batten Shinji's uncertainties before he had even set foot in the actual apartment.

As if he wasn't nervous enough – after all, he would be entering the personal living space of the living riddle that had occupied his thoughts ever since his arrival.

The apartment that lay beyond this threshold he had now reached belonged to his father's confidante, not to mention… to a girl.

Yes, he was just about to make his first ever visit to a girl's place, and that alone was enough to tighten his nerves to the fullest.

Alright, he had moved in with Misato before this, but that was something else entirely.

The Katsuragi-residence has since become his personal space as well, but what lay behind this doors was Rei's alone.

There was always something special and intimate about a person's private rooms, in many ways, they could be reliable mirrors of someone's lifestyle and personality.

Of course, the threshold itself hardly seemed to live up to such romanticized language: Before him was a simple plastic door that had probably been white in its best days, stuck into a wall of featureless concrete bricks.

Regardless, the small, greying plastic sign above the door confirmed without a doubt that this was indeed apartment number 402, and that someone called "Ayanami" was living here – This, in defiance of all sense of normalcy, appeared to be the correct place.

Since he had stopped trusting those senses soon after arriving in Tokyo-3, he decided to do the most obvious thing and make use of the horribly cheap looking doorbell-contraption – it, however, chose to honor its cheap looks and failed to produce a sound.

After a few attempts at pressing it, Shinji concluded that it was broken.

Dejected and no less insecure, the Third Child stared at the nondescript plastic door. For the better part of the next few minutes, he just remained standing in front of it without any clue on how to proceed, then, it occurred to him that there apartments probably weren't terribly large, so that she'd probably hear it if he just knocked on the door. But when his knuckles connected with the plastic, he made another disconcerting discovery: It wasn't even locked.

He was very well aware that you weren't actually supposed to just walk into some complete stranger's lodging, but the door was open and… this whole situation was just crazy.

He had been told… he was supposed- He had been ordered to deliver this card to her and take her along for the experiments, so he practically had to go in there, right?

Nothing else was going to accomplish anything.

That was how Shinji ended up opening the door, at first rather tentatively, announcing his presence multiple times to compensate for any deficits in politeness. The worst possible outcome of this was
his lone comrade in this terrible fight getting a wrong impression of him – He couldn't stand the thought of that.

"H-Hello… Excuse me please, is… is anyone home?" Hesitantly, he stepped over the threshold.
"E-Excuse me, it's me, Ikari!"

Shinji grew more disconcerted by the instant – While the unlocked door should have been a sufficiently obvious sign that there was, phrased with the bluntness that could be the only accurate response, something massively weird going on, but after taking a single peek inside the apartment, there was no room left to deny it.

That very door that he'd just closed behind him was equipped with a mail box that was filled to the brim and beyond, spilling over with pamphlets and advertising letters and the like. Even with the excesses of the habitual paper bombardment current companies seemed so fond of taken into account, it was painfully obvious that it hadn't been emptied in a long, long time. Never mind the mailbox – there were piles of letters catching dust on nearby furniture, or even scattered across the floor!

Nonplussed, Shinji stood in the dark apartment, without anyone to tell him what to do next or to give him anything specific to react to.

"Uh, Ayanami, I'm… I'm coming in now…" he stammered into the air.

He was about to proceed further inside, when he noticed that he, probably owing to his initial discomposure, had forgotten to take off his shoes to upon entering as it was customary in this corner of the world, although Shinji quickly came to suspect that this wasn't the usual custom in this particular apartment – The entire floor was covered in dark skid marks.

Trying not to step on any major agglomerations of dirt, Shinji tiptoed forward, but the rest of the apartment didn't seem all too eager to soothe his deepening perturbation:

There was no flooring and no wall papers; All visible inner surfaces of the building were naked concrete. Even in the minimal twilight governing this apartment, the individual concrete blocks making up the walls could be differentiated, much like the many, many footprints, or the layer of dust on the mostly metallic appliances of the kitchenette, none of which looked like they were actually being used.

By contrast, the greying impermeable plastic curtain that separated what was probably the bathroom from the rest of the minuscule domicile looked very time-worn, displaying darker stains where she probably used to grab it to pull it aside, and quite a few broken plastic hooks no longer attached to the corresponding rail on the ceiling.

Everything was submerged into a sea of deep shadows in the manner of a sunken city, with the only illumination being a stray ray of sunlight entering through a tear in the long, heavy nylon curtains that blocked the already small windows somewhere in the next room, separate from the entrance area only through a simple archway, or whatever you'd call a door-shaped hole in a wall that wasn't actually arched.

Irritated, but somehow gripped by a horrible kind of deep yet sudden fascination, Shinji continued to step further inside while avoiding the thought of words that could be used to describe his current actions in an unsavory light.

He felt like he had somehow stepped into a foreign universe that followed very different rules from the ones he had known for most of his life.
The thick curtains were directly attached to some plastic railings glued to the ceiling which was also made up of bare concrete.

The whole place was thickly packed with shadows – there was a lamp, but it was a) off, b) only equipped with two of four possible neon tubes c) didn't even have a covering.

One of the room's upper corners was covered in soot without any evidence that there had ever been an attempt to remove the ugly black stain.

The bed had a frame of black metal bars that made Shinji think of hospital beds; It did, however, feature a reading lamp. The blue sheets were in complete disarray, but they had the components of a girl's uniform corresponding to Shinji's school strewn across them, the first indication that this establishment – Shinji was wary of following his initial impulse to call it a 'hole' – was indeed Rei's domicile.

The pillow was full of blood stains which probably still stemmed from the time in which she had been wearing these thick bandages around her head, and it's covering didn't appear to have been washed or even changed ever since.

It just didn't make any sense… Why would his father allow her to live under such conditions? Why wasn't Ayanami herself doing anything against it?

And where were her parents?

There was hardly enough space for one person, let alone more.

Intoxicated by a numbing concoction of worry about Rei, shock about the state of this place and rapture induced by this paranormal, alien location that was, despite everything, still the inner sanctum of the girl that hardly left Shinji's thoughts and feelings any reprieve since his arrival in Tokyo-3, he let his eyes continue their journey across the room, where they happened across a single, colorless chair that had further articles of clothing draped over it.

On the opposing side of the room, there was a small, white refrigerator only half the height of a person, humming in solitude, and, at the same time, serving as a sort of storage space for all sorts of things that seemed to have its surface as their only designated place; A plastic bag hanging from it seemed to have been repurposed as provisional trash bin and, in its function, had been filled to the brim with all sort of undefinable empty cans, the uppermost of which were identifiable as energy drinks and protein shakes, but there might be vessels for various sorts of canned food further down for as far as he knew – The fact that some of these had spilled onto the floor did not seem to have particularly bothered its owner so far.

On the fridge itself, there was a beaker full of water, right in the path of the only light in the room and its tendency to cause intriguing optical phenomena, in the vicinity of an upside-down cup of transparent plastic and several small jars of distinct kinds of medication, if Shinji was not mistaken. Right next to them were two rolls of fresh bandages – and right next to the fridge, there was an entire cardboard box with used ones, all of them soiled with blood all over – Of course, Shinji was well aware that she had been walking around with a multitude of bandages on her for quite some time, and he understood that this implied changing them on a regular basis, but that didn't make this image any less shocking, the implication that all these pure white bandages whose immaculate outside he had been observing at school had been bright red on the inside all along, continuously being replaced and discarded when the crimson stains reached their surfaces…Quite bluntly, he was forced to realized that her state in all that time she had spent sitting at her desk in solitude because he couldn't bring himself to approach her had been much worse than he ever assumed…

And what was the meaning behind all that medication, anyway? What exactly were they for?
It was obvious enough that just asking her would be a rude thing to do and bound to end in some
type of gaffe that would ruin his chances with her altogether, but there was no way that this sight
could possibly leave him wholly unaffected. Perhaps, he tried telling himself, her use of those pills
had only been a temporary state related to her injuries, but most of those were basically gone by
now, so what if there was... some other reasons?

Ayanami certainly had a general tendency towards a sickly appearance, especially with that
constant deathly pallor of hers... But another implication that didn't just pass Shinji by were that of
the simple factum that he would never have learned any of this if he hadn't come here and taken a
good look at this place... It wasn't exactly any of his business wether she was somehow sick or not.

He had pretty much barged into her private space without her knowledge or permission.

But while this thought alone was enough to tear his eyes from the fridge, this place still contained
many other things capable of capturing his gaze; Behind her bed, there was a metal, ring-like
contraption for the purpose of drying clothes which currently had several pieces of underwear
hanging down from it, a sight that was a remarkably different experience than the occasional
glimpses he had caught of Misato's panties and bras: These small pieces of cloth weren't meant to
charm or to please - they simply took up space and existed, plain, ungarnished and taintless pure
white. Other than that, there was a small dresser with a few books on it, right next to the window.

That. Was. All.

The main component of this accommodation that Shinji was still browsing in disbelief was still
first and foremost empty space.

Shinji didn't quite know what to make of it.

This place had more in common with a... hospital room or laboratory than it did with a girl's room.

It lacked the 'used' smell in the air, the welcoming warmth of a home.

Then, however, Shinji managed to spot one Detail that didn't seem to fit the sterile, impersonal
structure of this room, but didn't defy explanation any less than it would have done if it had fit right
in:

There, on the small dresser with that slightly-open uppermost drawer, next to two thick books
packed with small notes, placed right in the path of the intruding light like some sort of relic,
Shinji's gaze was met with a pair of partially cracked glasses in cheap-looking plastic framing.

"Is that Ayanami's?" he wondered, thinking aloud.

As far as he could recall, he had never seen her with glasses before, not even at school. Kensuke's
appeared to be permanently glued to his knobbly nose, and even the short time that Mitsurugi had
been part of their class had been sufficient for Shinji to notice that he occasionally pulled out a pair
of reading glasses to get a better look at his schoolbook or those magazines of his full with
brainteasers and riddles, but Rei?

In all the time he had spent observing her from afar, he had never noticed her wearing any sort of
eyeglasses.

Then, however, he recalled one more person in his immediate environment who was dependent on
a visual aid.

Ikari Gendo, supreme Commander of NERV.
Didn't Ritsuko's account of that failed experiment include a pair of his glasses breaking? Could these actually be…?

Partially gripped by some kind of desire to see his world as his father saw it, and in part because of this inherent tendency of unused glasses to exude an irresistible desire to put them on, Shinji carefully placed them in his face – at the worst possible moment.

Just as the Third Child had given in to his curiosity, he heard the swift sound of a curtain being pulled aside.

Given the circumstances, the cracked lenses only allowed him to capture a rather blurred image of its source when he hastily turned around with this rising feeling of being caught red-handed – but that was more than enough.

Her flawless, alabaster skin wrapped in deep shadows.

Her posture, the image of honesty and purity, pulled right out of a silent moment of life without any sort of forced, artificial coquetting.

Her hair, unkempt and undisguised, having only just been revealed from underneath the small, brown towel that she was still half-gripping with her hands, that was still hanging over her consummate body like a tunic over the antique marmoreal likeness of a Greek goddess.

Her thin, but elegant calves that invited the eye to follow them upwards, towards the entirety of her naked, absolutely perfect, naked… naked…

(Right. Something was wrong with this picture, wasn't there?

Something about that word… Did he just say 'naked'?)

…NAKED!

SHE WAS NAKED!

Except for her small, brown towel and her simple, black slippers, which weren't exactly improving the situation, she was absolutely BUTT NAKED, clad only in an authentic ACME birthday suit.

Slightly surprised, she lowered her arms, let go of the towel and abruptly directed her gaze at the Third Child without saying a word.

At this point, Shinji was bluntly seized by raw, undignified panic.

"I-I- I didn't-"

But unfortunately, Shinji didn't manage to squeeze anything intelligible past his lips before Rei's silent scan of his person turned up a result that changed her initially mildly puzzled expression to one that was most definitely not amused.

Single-mindedly, she marched right towards Shinji, her still wet feet coming closer and closer.

Shinji immediately recoiled, mainly in fear of immanent retribution, but also driven by secondary factors such as his being very much overwhelmed by this situation, his general intrinsic tendency to respond to these with flight, and last but not lead two further, formidable shaped factors that seemed to wobble and jiggle with each of Rei's movements and were far too close for any sexual inexperienced teenager's comfort, especially since the first Child didn't make the slightest attempts
to cover herself.

But in the end, it didn't help any more hardly understandable "I- I really didn't mean to-", given that there wasn't an infinite amount of space to retreat to: Before long, he was backed against Rei's drawyer by her undeterred advance, and Rei herself boldly put one of her feet between Shinji's and began to extend her slim, pale arms toward his head, showing no inhibitions whatsoever in approaching him with all of her nude, statuesque body as it quaked with breath and motion and residual droplets of water.

But instead of slapping him or grabbing him by the collar, the entire attention of her rounded girlish fingertips was focused on the deformed plastic in Shinji's face.

When she attempted to remove it from his nose, she finally overstepped the limits of what Shinji was able to take in terms of proximity to her naked, female flesh, including all the... special places of her anatomy that were now mere inches from his own. Incapable of clear thoughts, Shinji instinctively attempted a step backwards although there was no more space to recoil into – Already on the tips of his toes, the Third Child lost his balance for good and struggled to shift his weight as to not fall backwards, which only succeeded in sending him on an unintentional voyage forward, which naturally unavoidably caused him to bump into Rei, who, as mentioned before, had been standing at a negligible distance from him.

Fighting to keep their already tangled bodies from falling, both instinctively came up with the idea to hang on to the other at roughly the same instant –

Much later, after they found themselves in a subtly differing but overall similar position in the heart of an ending world, he would come to see this as one of the most obvious sighs of this inherent sense of familiarity he had felt about her from the very beginning, proof that he had intrinsically trusted her to catch his fall – at this very moment, however, he would have been a lot more likely to attribute this action to "Bad Luck" or "Stupidity", based mainly on its immediate consequence: With both of them having the same "glorious" idea, but nothing resembling a firm foothold, the laws of physics left their fumbled attempts to stay afoot with only one possible conclusion:

They fell. Both of them.

As if to add insult to injury, the carrying strap of Shinji's bag ended up getting stock on the half-open drawyer behind him, and just in case the situation wasn't already embarrassing enough, it turned out that she used this particular piece of furniture to store her clothing, more precisely, her underwear.

It was filled with bras and panties, all of which cheerfully joined the two EVA pilots in their flight and descent, scattering all across the room.

Some component of the ensuing confusion even sent the curtain into motion, allowing the light to pass through at a slightly broader angle that allowed its refraction in the slightly stirred contents of the beaker on the refrigerator to become a rainbow.

A rainbow, created by the slightest vibration that would still have sufficed to send even the stillest waters into motion. The same rainbow that Shinji had lately come to associate with defeat over an angel, an ancient symbol for a newly forged bond between a god and humanity, of a contract between the almighty source of all life and its children…

Like a bridge, it stretched across the room and its silence that was only punctuated by the faraway construction sounds, above the two children who didn't dare to move the intertwined twist of flesh that this precarious situation had left their bodies in.
Shinji froze up like a freshly transformed pillar of salt –

He had landed on all fours, but that was the most he could claim;

The towel, which had so far provided at least *a little* covering for Rei's body was now spread out on the ground, and the glasses which had caused this precarious situation in the first place, had remained safely in her hand despite the fall. Her perfect, flawless body was now resting on the ground without the slightest sign of tension, much unlike Shinji – There wasn't a single part of him that wasn't tight with tension and he had all but lost any capacity to produce clear thought.

Mortified, he realized that he had his right knee right between the legs of a naked girl. Sure, his pants were still forming a barrier between them, but the thin layer of fabric wasn't sufficient to block out all sensations.

He didn't even *want* to think about all the possible conclusions that could be drawn from this sight, but the one conclusion that couldn't be evaded was that he was currently on top of a naked girl of whose opinion of him he couldn't even guess at, and just as an extra garnishment, just as the cherry on the cake, he had managed to get this room covered in her entire stack of underwear, including an ill-fated bra that had found his way to his behind through some sort of reverse-miracle.

Silence.

For quite a while, the passage of time was evidenced only by the construction noises coming from outside.

Paralyzed by shock, all he could do was gape at her.

Shinji looked at Rei.

Rei looked at Shinji.

But it wasn't quite the same kind of 'looking', as Shinji began to notice as his initial horror began to ferment into metastasizing uncertainties.

*Ayanami Rei was… completely calm.*

She was *stark naked* amidst her *own underwear*, beneath a boy with whom she had, at best, exchanged one or two sentences in her life, and devoid of the slightest reaction.

No shame, no fear, no 'Get away from me you pervert!', nothing at all.

And this made it even harder for Shinji to process all of this – If she had been angry, he might have defended himself and returned the complaints, if she were embarrassed, he could have tried to calm her down and aided her in covering herself, but like this, he could only continue to stare at this completely impossible girl with wide eyes.

Was this supposed to be some sort of silent treatment strategy? Would she continue her silence until he was begging for the ground to swallow him up in shame…? Why wasn't she *saying* anything?

This… this whole was just wrong.

Fourteen-year-old girls were supposed to *mind* strangers of the opposite sex getting a good look at their birthday suit!
Caught beneath the heavy, pressing silence, Shinji couldn't make himself move, very well aware that every passing second probably made him look like even more of a hopeless pervert, and every moment that Rei spent wordlessly looking at him just made it all worse.

"Could you move?" she finally asked, shattering the silence with her quiet, almost frighteningly nonchalant words.

Shinji gladly complied, although the process of separating himself from her made him aware of one spicy little detail that he had failed to notice until now, which in itself was the best proof of just what kind of panic this whole incident had thrown him into.

Normally, this would have been the first thing he should have noticed, and that was only just beginning to describe the truly shocking part, namely, that his left hand had been resting on Rei's left breast for all of this long, long time, fitting snugly around it.

"AAAH!"

Shinji immediately jolted away, hastily raising his arms into the air as he jumped to his feet.

At this point, his strained nerves were very much giving out on him; this visit could hardly have gone any worse. She was the only other EVA pilot on this godforsaken planet, and now, he had thoroughly convinced her that he was a grope-happy lecher. Just how was he going to face her at school, let alone work with her on a next-to-daily basis? How did he manage to screw this up so fast?

If she didn't begin to hate his guts the moment she stepped out of the shower, she definitely did now.

"I…I…I…" He attempted to stammer, knowing in his heart that it would be futile.

For one more instant, Rei remained motionless on the floor, eying him with a stare that was somewhere between minimally puzzled and blankly uncomprehending, before she started moving wordlessly, as if nothing particularly remarkable had taken place, of course sending further waves of motion through her breasts as well.

One she was standing, she didn't appear to be in any further hurry to get away from him, leaving it to Shinji to do enough frantic recoiling for the both of them, uncomfortable with that much bared, female flesh and still half expecting the punishment that never came.

Instead, Rei simply turned around, still in the nude, still without any apparent sense of modesty, still giving little indication that the graceless carom earlier had actually happened, and walked over to her bed in complete serenity.

Shinji couldn't help but stare after her in perplexion.

Half-consciously, Shinji touched the fingers of his left hand together, as if to recapture the feeling of Rei's body, and the residual warmth she had left on him.

Only now that the panic was waning did it sink in that he'd just had his first direct encounter with the nude chest of a human female.

His first impression of it: Warm, soft, smooth. A rather… characteristic consistence, reminiscent of an ideal pillow, not too hard, not too soft, perfect to cuddle with, somewhat acquiescent to his fingers while still retaining a certain firmness, 'al dente' like a good Italian noodle, snugly filling the dome
of his hand.

He'd even… felt the nipple's distinct shape against the inside of his palm…

Not particularly bothered by the presence of a male stranger in her room, Rei reached for the clothes she had previously placed on her bed without any particular hurry.

Completely magnetized, Shinji observed as she calmly and nonchalantly picked up that little, elastic piece of cloth and slid both of her shapely calves inside it.

That she was behaving every bit as she would if she were unobserved only helped to make the sight more arousing.

Shinji watched, as she straightened up, her shoulder blades, her spine, the whole arch of her back like the roof of a cathedral, her legs like white, immaculate columns of marble, the light flesh of her body, like a statue, not unusually opulent, leaning more towards the petite side, but still possessing enough substance to invite touch, not excessively thin or skinny or otherwise exaggerated, but altogether unflawed, so very much… right, just right.

Apart from her statue-like complexion, her build was more or less… normal, but not in the sense of 'average', but in being so all-around perfect that there were no further deviations from the ideal that Shinji could name, no further adjectives he could find to describe her.

Her calves might have been a little bit on the thinner side, but that wasn't as much of a concern when her torso had everything where it should be, including bits of 'padding'; Somewhere in the back of his head, that particular detail generated the feeling that she might have use for a protector, and that was… all right, he guessed.

She pulled her simple, inornate panties up to her lady bits, casually pulled at it to properly cover her buttocks, and somehow, her lone observer found himself fighting off a much stronger reaction than at the sight of Misato's lacy underwear. He couldn't fully explain it, but he guessed that when you took care to correctly present and package yourself before others, if you bought the sort of underwear that you thought others would like to see, you were, to a degree, playing a part, actively trying to please others, which wasn't a bad thing in itself, but what Rei was doing there served no purpose other than itself, didn't attempt to create any image, and wasn't otherwise directed at his person, it was just beautiful in and of itself without even trying.

Only when she bent down anew to pick up her bra and requested to know the reason for his visit in a strikingly nonchalant manner without the involvement of any great emotions did Shinji become fully aware of what he was doing.

He had been staring… quite unabashedly… peeped as she had gotten dressed… and thought dirty thoughts, to boot! And she had just demanded an explanation for this mess. What was he going to say, just what in the world was he going to say… He should have known that she'd confront him sooner or later, she was a girl after all, it would be highly foolish to assume even for a moment that she might not hate his guts after this.

"I, uhm, I…" Shinji stammered desperately, wrestling his own panic. He lowered his gaze. His mouth opened, air exited his lungs, but the goddamn words refused to let go of his tongue.

In the meantime, Rei, whose absurdly shapely backside now stretched her plain white underpants where it wasn't partially exposed, as around that area where the garment in question only covered that small strip between her legs, had succeeded in correctly positioning her mostly functionally-designed bra and was currently busy slipping her dainty, faultless arms through the straps, a
timeless ideal captured in material shape, much like Botticelli's Venus.

But while her body might be saying 'renaissance', the short, uncomplicated haircut forming a loose bob around her head was closer to saying 'Nineties Sci-Fi haircut'.

The longest reaches of her hair parted around her back of her neck, and every time she moved, they subtly changed their position- Oh no, was he staring again?

Ashamed, Shinji averted his gaze, forcing himself not to look back. Unbelievable. So this was supposed to be his very first, proper birds-and-bees experience with a girl his age – and not just any girl his age! – and he had already thoroughly blown it before he realized what was happening.

What if she told his father about this?

He scrambled for a way to save this situation, if such a thing was indeed still within the realm of possibility.

"I… I'm here because… because I was asked to!" he finally produced, after numerous fruitless attempts. "I, er… what was it again… eh… Your card! Your new security card! Your… card's been renewed and I was, eh, asked to bring it to you!"

By now, Rei was busy buttoning up her uniform blouse.

"Ritsuko-san forgot to give it to you, so I, uhm, I… I… I wanted-" Shinji's words grew progressively quieter and further apart, until he paused entirely, perhaps for an attempt to audibly swallow his mounting sense of complete failure.

Rei herself didn't seem to be paying the slightest attention to his attempted excuses, and just kept putting on her dress without the slightest reaction or comment, landing a critical hit with her full-scale cold shoulder assault.

And right now, Shinji couldn't picture any logical reason for this other than her being every bit as pissed as one would assume her to be.

This entire visit had been a complete and utter failure without the slightest consolatory detail.

So, there he got a pretext to actually talk to the girl he had been whacking his brains about since his arrival, and what did he do? He'd ended up groping and ogling her!

Even now, he struggled to keep his restless gaze in check, mainly because his current, nervous state wouldn't allow it to rest anywhere for too long.

"I'm so, so sorry… I really didn't want to-"

But she wasn't even listening to his fumbled apologies. Her attention remained where it had been all along – on the broken glasses she had carefully placed in the corresponding box, before closing it with a clicking sound.

Unnoticed by Shinji, the faintest of all smiles flowed over the mysterious girl's lips as she regarded the box with a look of certitude, replaying pleasant memories.

What he didn't know was that being unclothed in front of other people, or sterile, lab-like dwellings might as well have been the most normal things in the world to her – The entire turbulent mishap could have been avoided if he had avoided one single mistake: Touching her most cherished possession, those glasses she treasured like a relic ever since the incident.
Having succeeded in protecting it from harm filled her with a warm feeling and made her think of the occasion on which she had acquired her prized memento.

"I-I really didn't know!" Shinji kept stammering, still lost somewhere between dread and helplessness. "I did ring the doorbell, but no one opened up, and the door was unlocked, so…- I really didn't mean to…"

He was still talking when the squeaking of the front door interrupted him, leaving him all alone in the small apartment.

He couldn't believe it.

She really just walked right past him and left…

Since she hadn't even heard him out, Shinji had enough reason to suppose that she had to be significantly angrier than she looked and probably didn't feel like looking at his face right now.

With this axiom in mind, it should be hardly surprising that Shinji spent the whole trip to headquarters without daring to hand her that stupid card.

Once again, he was stuck with observing her from afar.

Unfortunately, he could not avoid being headed into the same direction as her, resulting in him following a couple of meters after the quiet girl as she single-mindedly followed her path through the inner city, lacking the heart to approach her any further.

He didn't want to provoke a gesture of open rejection from her of all people, so he kept his distance, not faring any better during their mutual tram ride to headquarters, which didn't really have anything 'mutual' about it – They were sitting at the opposite of the same Wagon, with a large door in between the benches they were sitting on, and while Shinji might have stolen the occasional downcast glance at her, she didn't deem him worth a single look throughout their journey.

They reached their destination without having exchanged as much as a single word, and before long, they were standing in front of the very gates this accursed security card was supposed to open.

Shinji swallowed hard – it was now, or never.

Rei was already standing before the card reader, slightly raising her head in surprise when it didn't accept her old one.

Her next try wasn't much more effective, but at least it distracted her enough for Shinji to personally swipe her new keycard through the slot and hand it to her with a smile. "This is your new security card. Ritsuko-san asked me to bring it to you."

This was enough to actually make her turn around, appear mildly perplexed for an instant, and then properly face her fellow pilot – only to snatch the card right out of his hand and leaving once again without paying a shred of attention to him, just when he thought he'd finally pulled off the whole prince charming routine with some degree of success.

He really just fucked up any chance he might ever have had with her, didn't he?

In any case, the urge to hide away somewhere and return with a paper bag over his head – or not at
all – was hard to resist. A demanding silence hung between the two of them as they both went down the impossibly long escalator that led them down into the depths of nerv HQ as the stairs of its twin right moved upward right next to them.

As long as he kept quiet, he couldn't say anything wrong.

Still, despite his better judgment, Shinji forced himself to attempt one further apology – He'd already incurred the wrath of the girl he hadn't been able to get out of his head for the last few weeks, and if that wasn't enough, she might just go and tell his father. How much worse could it possibly get?

After swallowing down everything that could have trapped his words in his throat, he once again turned to the silent girl who remained motionless with her back to him, several steps further down.

"Listen, I'm really sorry about what happened…"

"What do you mean?" she asked, still not looking at him.

She wasn't even being sarcastic here, she really, honestly didn't seem to know what he might be apologizing for. Or was she just pretending not to be upset? He couldn't get a clear look at her face, after all. Was it really possible for an adolescent girl to care so little about being seen naked (let alone being groped) by a boy her age, to the point of considering it a complete non-event?

The thought of the mere possibility just seemed overwhelmingly wrong, if not downright eerie.

That way, just anyone could just walk in there and-

He didn't even want to continue this thought, let alone imagine how Touji, Kensuke or his father would comment any of this.

But at least, Rei had replied, with this small, high voice of hers that always sounded like she was on the verge of fainting or something like that.

Now that the chance of a proper conversation had presented itself, he couldn't afford to let it slip by, lest he waste his last chance to somehow correct that rotten first impression.

But for that, he'd need something else to converse about for the rest of the long escalator ride… which was easier said than done when he hardly knew anything about her and whether they had anything in common… but wait. There was one he certainly knew about her, something they surely shared…

The one thing he'd longed to speak about for a long, long time now, with the perhaps only person on this world who could see it from his perspective and understand it on the most immediate level.

"Er, I… I've heard that they want you to do the reactivation experiment today…"

Riding a wave of premature hope Shinji lowered himself onto the escalator's next step, decreasing the physical distance between them by a discrete, measurable amount to match his expectations of making their emotional distance shrink a proportional amount. "I… I'm obviously hoping that everything will be fine this time, but…" he vocalized with surprising ease before reaching the hot topic: "…Aren't you afraid at all? To pilot Unit Zero again, I mean."

"Why should I be?" she asked, at most very mildly surprised, but ostensibly not moved by any sort of major emotion.
Shinji wished her answers were longer so he'd have more to craft replies with. But at least she had answered. For the second time in a row, too… so maybe she really wasn't angry at him! At least, he had yet to spot any sighs of disdain or discontention, and this time, he found that thought relieving.

"It's just that… I've heard that you were badly injured in the last experiment so I was wondering… whether you're all right with doing it again…"

"Yes. I am."

"But… what if your EVA goes berserk again? …Or what if we're killed by an angel!" Shinji asked, voicing his own fears more than anything else. He couldn't fathom how she could simply accept all this, and even less what the purpose behind her next question was supposed to be:

"You are Commander Ikari's son, aren't you?"

"Yes… I am…" Shinji answered hesitantly.

"Then why don't you have any faith… in your father's work?"

Faith? Faith?!

Over the course of an instant, his fingers turned to fists, and his featured hardened as if at the touch of a button. What kind of faith was he supposed to have in the ominous schemes of a man who hadn't deemed it necessary to show his face to his own son for the better part of the last eleven years?

A man who, after all that, still had the nerve to demand of him to climb into this huge, violet thing that could go crazy at any moment, for the explicit purpose of fighting to the death in some bizarre gladiator games?

Faith?! Bah!

Shinji might as well have burst out in laughter, if all of this weren't rousing such anger and desperation that he wound up speaking without thinking first:

"…of course not! He's hardly any father at all! He doesn't deserve any faith!"

Poor Shinji.

When Rei turned around wordlessly of all sudden, he was still hoping that she might have decided to actually face him while they conversed, but at very least when she went up a step, positioned herself directly in front of him and looked him straight into the eye, it was apparent to him that something had gone very wrong.

And he was right. Ayanami Rei may have been a relatively modest, frugal person, but there was one single thing she would insist on, one golden rule that had to be observed in her presence, and Shinji had just broken it:


SLAP

Rei turned away from Shinji without further comments, coldly pointing the back of her head at his general direction.

Meanwhile, Shinji himself was still holding his reddened cheek with an expression of
bewilderment right next to it.

He would never have thought that such a delicate, sickly-looking girl who had been wrapped in bandages from head to toe until recently would be capable of causing such supreme pain – She was either a lot stronger than she looked, or it had been very important to her to get her point across, probably something about him being an asshole.

Either way, if she didn't hate him after the debacle in her apartment, she definitely did now.

At first, the Third Child couldn't explain her reaction – then he recalled seeing them together in the cages… As far as he could tell, they seemed to be rather close… of course she was pissed.

He should have seen this one coming from ten kilometers away, and he'd still successfully managed to put his foot in his mouth in the most disastrous way….

Shinji didn't doubt that he totally deserved that slap.

Still, he was sufficiently confused by the sheer intensity of her reaction, if not anything else – This girl who hadn't as much as flinched when her private space had been violated in the crudest possible way had went and pretty much demolished half his face for speaking ill of her superior. (...and not without reason!)

Shinji just had a hard time grasping what her thoughts and reasons could possibly be – His father was probably the coldest, most hardhearted person he had ever personally interacted with in an immediate, face-to-face fashion, to the point that Shinji sometimes doubted whether he even had feelings. So why would anyone defend him in such a pointed, deliberate manner? Shinji couldn't fathom why Rei, or indeed anyone would have such profound respect for him…

Except that the man who had smiled at her in the cage and personally saved her from her overheated entry plug two months ago bore very little resemblance to the icy, disinterested person Shinji knew as his father.

The Ikari Gendo he knew shouldn't even be capable of anything like this.

But what did Shinji know about that man at all?

He might as well have a very different side to him that Shinji just hadn't witnessed yet…

If Rei was so attached to him then… maybe he wasn't a bad person per se, and Shinji just… didn't understand him, or hadn't proven himself worthy yet…

But the boy suffocated the seeds of hope as soon as they had begun germinating.

Even if his father had something like a 'nicer side', he had still chosen Rei, and not him as the person to place his faith in.

Once again, he wondered just what the exact relationship between the Commander of NERV and his most enigmatic devotee really was.

Silent and thoroughly discouraged, but lacking an aim of his own, he idly followed her from a respectful distance until she disappeared behind the door of the girl's locker room to prepare for her experiment.

Staring at the closed door, he was painfully aware that it was far from being the only gateway that would readily open for her, but never for him. By far not! He might as well be standing before the
tightly closed door to his father's heart – no doubt that it would also be this kind of mechanized thing, and that whatever receiving space had ever existed behind it to begin with was already taken up by Rei. By Rei, who, not too long ago, had been willing to face almost certain death in this man's name, on the day he had first boarded unit one in her place, without a moment's hesitation or the faintest sign of fear.

It was fairly obvious why just about anyone would prefer her to a useless coward like himself.

He was merely an inferior, unsatisfactory replacement – and now that the proper article was nearing a full recovery, it was only a matter of time until he would have outlived the only usefulness he ever had, and he'd go back into the darkness of his unnecessary existence, superfluous to everyone, like some outdated piece of technology, waiting only to be discarded – by Misato, by Dr. Akagi, and most certainly by his father.

For all he might have managed to scrape together for himself since his arrival, there was just no place reserved for him in this world, just an aimless drift from one temporary arrangement to the next, none of which he could permanently take hold of and make it his own. It was just another repeat of what had happened with his teacher, and he should probably start thinking of Misato as just another temporary caretaker to mitigate the inevitable.

It didn't feel right to dismiss the fleeting, novel flickers of new, unprecedented experiences that had come his way here in Tokyo-3, but he would be doing his old teacher an injustice if he claimed that life at his place had been all bad – it had just never been quite his.

Nothing ever was, starting with his own father.

His precious heir and subordinate, the one he showed his smile to was Rei.

And that left very little room for Shinji.

In any case, he didn't play too large a role in Rei's thoughts as she was preoccupied with donning her plugsuit. She briefly pressed the button on her wrist, and immediately, the rubber-like fabric began to tightly envelop her pristine body.

Even now, the reverberation of past words raised a persistent, elated smile from her lips. The incredulous voices of the technicians, who couldn't believe that their Commander would risk permanent burn scars for the sake of the First Child, the audible concern in his voice, even though none of that could have possibly affected the plan, even though he had more than enough 'spare parts' in the basement…

Since Rei had known about the rather slim list detailing the reasons and purposes of her existence from the very beginning, she never saw a reason to expect anything beyond that; For that reason, it had been all the harder to miss that the commander had always treated her… different. Distinct from what the rest of the staff did. He stayed longer, he looked at her more, he always spoke to her more than it was strictly necessary to convey orders or take care of her 'maintenance', and at times, he would even request her presence for no discernible reason other than wanting her in his proximity.

He had been the only one to give her any sort of emotional input and form anything resembling a bond with her – and this bond had shaped her. Not just because he had created her and given her a purpose. She, too, had become a stoic, tight-lipped person, but also devoted and unwavering, unchained by hesitation, most faithful mirror of his image.
Or, to make a long story short: He practically raised her.

One could arguably say that he was the closest thing she ever had to a parent.

Of course she had faith in him.

"Rei? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Sir." She affirmed tonelessly.

After nearly two months, Rei was back in the entry plug of Evangelion Unit Zero.

Ikari took a moment to push his glasses up, as if he wanted his stare to be at its most piercing when he directed it at the cyclopean war machine.

"Begin experiment."

The control room swiftly filled with the typing noises and announcements of various technicians; It was hard to overlook that all of them looked notably stressed – No one wanted a repeat of the incident that had halted all such experiments for the last months.

Even Ikari and Rei had a certain tension about them – which already implied that Misato and Shinji, who were watching the spectacle from a small window in the wall of the test chamber, were far from unaffected: The leader of the operations division kept herself ready for action with a cup of coffee, and the Third Child was leaning forward past the handrail, refusing to take his glance off EVA 00 for as much as a second.

So far, everything seemed to be going well.

As for Rei herself, she had been directing her gaze strictly ahead, paying little mind to the spectacle of flashing lights that came with the activation of the interface, but while the muscles in her face hardly moved at all, it was the expression in her eyes that betrayed her.

Being in this seat should not merit any extraordinary reactions from her, after all, this was what she was created to do – but for some reasons, she couldn't entirely stop her thoughts from going back to the memories of the last experiment.

It wasn't because of the pain, the injuries or anything about the evangelion; All of that was part of her role. This sensation of daunting heaviiness did not stem from the results of the accident, but its cause. There had been this stirring, somewhere in this dark, intangible expanse in the depths of her being, some sort of distorted memory… The last thing she recalled was the sight of Dr. Akagi, Subcommander Fuyutsuki and Commander Ikari in the window to the control room. She must have been shot out of the EVA right after that, leaving her with nothing but wild, confusing visions without coherent pictures behind them and a thick coating of afterglow that made her feel… hollow somehow, like she could just disappear into this nightmare altogether at any given moment, never to wake again, if she hasn't been the dream to begin with, an ephemeral ghost light being sustained by the dreaming of something much, much larger that might just forget her in the blink of an eye, just like everyone else would forget her when they saw her exposed fakeness and grew bewitched by this real and true self existing behind her, taking everything for itself, her life, her flesh, her validity as a consciousness with a story and very own reflections, each and every minute remainder of her existence, absorbed, devoured, swallowed whole by the alien darkness.

She glanced at the Commander's glasses right next to her seat. There it was, a simple, yet undeniable proof that Rei's life so far had been real, that she was real, and that no other possibility
was remotely likely enough to justify detracting her thoughts and attentions from this plane and her
tasks here. She had her purpose and her connections, and she knew those were real. She had her
place in the gears and frameworks of the plan.

She was of all of this, of the things she had done and the people she had been involved with, shaped
and defined by them, most of all by the Commander.

He was her creator, her lynchpin, her anchor in this imitation of a life, so where else could she be,
where else could she possibly belong?

There should be no reason for her to experience any stress.

Indeed, the activation was proceeding smoothly so far, but they were currently nearing the critical
part… The point at which things went horribly wrong last time.

Still visibly depressed, the Third Child immersed himself in the announcements of the technicians,
that is, what little of them he could actually make sense of.

After over a month in this city, and a day that may have contained his best chance to get to know
her properly, he was still where he had started: Watching her from the distance.

He felt quite close to being crushed by the weight of the endless doubts and questions.

Even Misato was dead serious as she observed the experiment in silent suspicion, and judging by
Fuyutsuki's expression, one might think that he was pretty much expecting another fiasco – Merely
Dr. Akagi maintained her composed, professional exterior, and that only as long as she wasn't
glancing at the visibly worried expression on the Commander's typically icy, hard features, which
he either didn't notice or failed to acknowledge, as he kept staring straight ahead through the glass
pane that formed the boundary of the control room.

The countdown continued, the lights on the screens lit up one by one – and nothing happened.

It worked.

Regardless, no change was visible on Rei's visage, even as she announced that she would now
proceed with further tests – but she never got to proceed.

One of the countless telephones built into the various consoles of the control room started ringing,
and Fuyutsuki was the one to pick it up – and as soon as he put the receiver back in its slot, he
immediately turned to his superior: "Ikari. An unidentified object is approaching. I fear the Sixth
Angel has arrived."

"Abort the experiment immediately!" the Commander ordered, slipping back into his usual poker
face in an instant. "All hands to battle stations! Declare red alert immediately."

"Understood." Fuyutsuki confirmed. "Are you going to use Unit Zero?"

"No. It's not ready for battle yet, and neither is Rei. What about Unit One?" he asked, directing the
question in Dr. Akagi's general direction without fully turning around.

"We'll have it prepared in 380 seconds."

"Very well. Take care of it."

"Yes, Sir."
Once Ikari had taken care of that, he directed his undivided attention back to Rei, whom he addressed with a much more neutral, if not almost reassuring tone very different from the forcefully barked out orders reserved for the rest of the rest of the room: "Rei. The experiment was a success. You can come out now."

"Good." she answered quietly while the interface dissolved around her.

Only when the interior of the plug had gone dark again did she finally lean back and exhale a few bubbles of residual air in relief.

Everything had turned out all right.

She would be able to continue fulfilling her purpose.

While Rei was out of the crucible for today, Shinji's ordeal was just about to begin. The Third Child has felt his blood run cold the very instant he heard the world "Angel".

For most of the last week and the peaceful times that had come with it, he had tried his best to forget that a new enemy could appear at their doorstep at any given moment, and bring with it fresh, juicy pain and a new batch of horrible memories…and now, the time had come. It was all up to him again. Everything, everything would be resting in his hands, on his shoulders, balanced on the top of his head, and he knew very well that there was no way he could keep up this cosmic tightrope act indefinitely… until now, he had stumbled through the battles in a blind panic, surviving through a lot of dumb luck, but he still didn't have any idea how to actively precipitate victory in any sort of ordered fashion.

His dread grew with every restraint that was released from the Evangelion's body.

There he was, back in his plug suit, enveloped by LCL, with his interface headset attached to his scalp, so very ready to meet his doom at last.

Why?

Why was he even doing this? This would probably be his last sortie regardless of whether he lived through the battle or not. What difference did that even make? His father probably wouldn't need him for much longer, and if he wasn't needed as an EVA-pilot… he wouldn't be important to anyone at all… Not to Misato, not to Touji, not to Kensuke…

Misato didn't even bother to prepare him with a few soothing words; She was already assuming that he would just go along with this, after all, doing this was his… payment for being allowed to stay here…

And he had chosen to do that, hadn't he?

But that was with the last horrible torment safely in the fading past, not seconds from his present. Much like when he'd first agreed to fight in unit one, all this was a lot easier said than done.

Why had he stayed, in the first place? Because he wanted to stay with Misato? Because he'd hoped for something from his father? To protect Rei from what awaited her if she took his place?

He could still see her right now, on a walkway on the walls of the cage, still in her plug suit, looking in his direction, like she could fixate his eyes all the way through the armor plates of his Evangelion.
He certainly couldn't explain why she would be here – After the unfortunate events of the day, there was little doubt that she probably loathed him by now.

Just another bullet point in the long, long list of things he had managed to screw up in his relatively short life so far.

While EVA 01 shot towards the surface through Tokyo-3's network of launch shafts, Shinji wondered if there was a single thing in his life that he hadn't screwed up…

Chapter End Notes

(1) Rei's very much present sequence of expressions throughout the… unfortunate encounter and the rest of the progression is, for the most part noted as such in the episode 5 script. Despite her naysayers, Rei, or at least the second version, was never "emotionless" to begin with – If such simplifying labels can be applied at all, she was a bona fide Kuudere from the start. I'm aware that this chapter has been rather lacking in terms of new scenes, but with a debut as significant as Rei's, I felt the need to properly establish and elaborate on the initial state before any development can happen. The ep 5 script, BTW, also explicitly states multiple times that Shinji had a hard time tearing his eyes from the… goodies, in case you were, uh, wondering.

(2) I hope Shinji's inner monologues weren't too tiring/frustrating to read, although they were kind of supposed to be. He has his frustrating moments. But he also has this very specific, "closed" way of perceiving the world (esp. in the prologue arc), and it was important for me to get that across/ portray this properly, including the circular aspects of it, especially since the Futagoyama-Incident and the major shift that comes with it is around the corner.

(3) I'm inconsolable. All this after I had promised less waiting… I have to thank all of you who still remembered WTF this was by the time the last chapter came out. Either way, if none of this had deterred you, you may look forward to the next chapter, the conclusion of the battle, and the conclusions that both Shinji and Misato draw based on the earlier… uh, conclusion. Chapter 13: [Operation Yashima]
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Boku no sekai kieru made*

*aenu nara*

*kimi no soba de nemurasete*

(:)

*If I see you once more*

*Before my world ends*

*Let me rest at your side*

*-Utada Hikaru, 'Beautiful world'*

The escaped subject released the fingers on her outstretched arm from the firm first they had been pressed into, looking past them to assess the results of her very own little 'experiment' with a thin, pleased grin.

At her feet were a few intermingling puddles of orange liquid.

The output was notably less viscous this time, completely homogenous to the naked eye and free of any residual meat or bone that could have linked the substance to the remains of the small family that had once owned this lavishly furnished apartment.

This time, the liquefaction had been complete.

The entity looked back at her now splayed fingers, her arm still extended to its full horizontal length.

The experience of power was still pulsing through her being.

She wondered what else she might be capable of.

Instead of the oversized men's clothing she was last seen with, she had now donned a green skirt of fairly adequate fit, accompanied by a camisole of similar coloration. She had, however, stayed faithful to caps, although she was no longer wearing the same one, or bothering to stuff all of her hair inside of it.

One might conclude that her degree of awareness, or at very least her information procession capabilities were steadily developing, much like her abilities.

Now, they were finally mature enough to implement her plan.

Very soon, she would be able to open the gate.

Still.
Somehow, the being felt this persistent notion that something was still missing, something beyond the 'ingredients' she would have to gather and process for the opening of the gate to occur.

But her thoughts were interrupted when she felt new calls infringing on the edges of her consciousness.

She turned to one of the windows of the expensively furnished, yet small apartment, narrowing her eyes in question.

"Another one of yours, Adam?"

In numerous little rivulets, the red water ran down the blue, smooth surface, back to the depths it had come from. No single drop remained stuck to the surface – the sharp-edged shapes of the sixth angel was void of any irregularities for them to cling to.

Ramiel, the Angel of thunder, shot into the sky like a cannonball and then gracefully floated back down, leaving the sea behind to head towards the fortress of the Lillim like his predecessors had done.

The ocean, that lifeless, red goop that had resulted from an incomplete attempt to create a world suitable for beings like himself, had been his refuge for long enough.

Now, it was Ramiel's own turn to finally lead that process to completion and claim the Promised Land for his kind.

Seemingly weightless, the messenger descended, reflecting the sea and the clouds on its surfaces and casting a peculiar shadow on the landscape, one that was only dark and defined on the edges, but yielded to dancing light toward the middle, remainders of sunlight that had fallen into the semitransparent structures of crystalline creature, and revealed the continuous processes taking place inside, where only strange, impossible shapes and bizarre processes of refraction, diffraction and diffusion could be glimpsed, which probably gave the being its color in the same way the ocean and sky had acquired theirs.

While his predecessors had still been vaguely humanoid or at least instantly recognizable as organic structures, Ramiel manifested itself in the pure, abstract shape of a floating octahedron.

But his outward form wasn't the only thing that's different.

If Ramiel had been human and interacted with other humans as such, he might have been described as level-headed, cold, ambitious and analytical in his thoughts; Unlike his siblings, he saw no reasons to just storm the Lillims' fortress and allow himself to hand all control to his instincts afterwards – Instead, he already had a clear plan, a concrete pattern of behavior, a definite algorithm he would follow to gain direct access to his target decreeing how he would react to any given obstacle.

Even his presence was distinct; Not heavy, booming and metallic, but sharp and vitreous, distantly recognizable as poised, even elegant, as he weightlessly floated over the landscape reflected in his surface, not all too long after he first appeared as a glittering dot beyond the shore.

Part of his calls even traversed the spectrum of mechanic vibrations that humans could have sensed acoustically, although that small audible strip would have been a rather poor distortion of the whole and its message, but even if it had been decipherable, communication would still have remained impossible, it was just not in their nature – The messenger's voice wasn't made to transport any kind of information from point A to point B, but radiated from him into all directions, like the light
of a star.

The messenger's steady calls, a sound resembling a chimera of whale song, tuning forks, wine glasses and the acoustic equivalent of an electron's diffraction pattern, accompanied him on his journey over the land he aimed to reclaim.

Shinji felt the acceleration forces as EVA 01 was being propelled towards the surface through the launch shaft, not exactly abiding by the textbook definition of a smooth ride.

He tried his best to brush back his churning emotions and mentally prepare for the battle.

With every meter, he could feel the deadly danger he would be exposing himself to closing in on him, enough to make him fear that it might physically clasp him in its cold arms with the suddenness of a gust of wind and drain him of everything that kept him from losing it right here, right now in an icy vampiric kiss the very moment the enemy would become an undeniable part of his reality.

As much as he might try to keep this specific conclusion out of his thoughts, it was anything but easy.

Dead serious, the pilot EVA 01 felt himself speeding towards his fate – and said fate didn't make him wait.

He had yet to reach the surface when Ramiel's body began to detach from itself along the central edges and gather luminescence within the gap, indicating that he must have recognized and assessed the threat by means other than classic sight.

The technicians in central dogma did notice a sudden energy surge within the enemy, but it was too late.

Misato's order to flee reached Shinji the exact same moment in which his Evangelion reached the surface, and so did the angel's particle beam, split seconds later.

The messenger's crystalline body split into two symmetric tetrahedrons, only for the inner surfaces to part into countless small cubes, amongst which the core gleamed, a crimson sphere amidst azure cubes, almost as if he wanted to peer at his opponent from a safe position, figuratively "look them in the eye" before sending them destruction.

Next, however, the angel proceeded to make quick work of his opponent, right according to plan: His form twisted into numerous intersecting prisms of various sizes, and the halation that had previously formed around the core blasted forth effulging intensity, burned its way through several skyscrapers, leaving the atoms in their liquefied remainders fluorescing in their exited states after a sizeable radius around the relatively compact beam had been fully obliterated, and from there, continued right into the chest plate of EVA 01.

The violent giant's AT-field broke so fast that its existence might have gone completely unnoticed from as much as an ill-timed blink – and before the hypothetical observer would have fully opened their eyes, the spot in question would have been glowing like the sun from that brief fraction of the angel's unyielding assault.

Sparks were flying, bright drops of light, charge and occasionally molten metal, in tandem with the flickering of the interface before the eyes of the pilot, who was hopelessly overwhelmed by the foreign pain, frantically trying to grasp the light beam drilling into his seemingly burning chest in an instinctive attempt to keep it from pressing the LCL out of his lungs and his blood out of his
Patently, there was nothing for Shinji's hands to get hold of; The incandescent beam that kept pumping pure, unfiltered pain into his body was far outside the entry plug.

The indescribable agony prevented any thinking, planning, or even the formation of coherent thought. All he could do was scream.

He could no longer process all these little voices in the control center, deliberating about lowering his synch ratio or deploying an armor plate, although the latter suggestion was barely register when it was actually carried out and resulted in the massive shield successfully blocking the particle beam, leaving Shinji behind in sudden darkness, wildly twitching and barely breathing, with the afterglow of the searing pain that still burned in every fiber of his body as his only company.

He had yet to stop screaming when the angel shifted to a new, cross-like foundation and generated a beam of analogous shape, which proved much more potent than the last, obliterating the shield like ice cream in the sunshine, flinging the molten remainders of the plate against the completely defenseless Evangelion, along with the high-energy particles constituting the beam.

At this point, Captain Katsuragi saw no choice but to abort the operation.

But even the way back seemed lost to them: The launching pad that had only just transported the violet colossus to the surface was reduced to a puddle of molten metal.

The video feed on the main screen which displayed EVA 01's partially glowing, partially molten armor from multiple angels made their situation fairly apparent, and the graphs and figures on the technician's various consoles weren't sugarcoating it either.

But no graph, no string of numbers could have possibly described the infernal torment Shinji was experiencing at that very moment; Vaporized matter ascended from the patch of blinding, horrific mess the beam ended in, telling tales of what was obscured from view by a radiance so bright it made a magnesium flame look like a match compared to the sun.

A huge, red danger notice sat in the middle of the interface that had long since stopped to show anything other than brightness that burns the eye, but one might wonder why. What need was there for error messages in a war machine that made its user feel like his very own skin was in the process of being barbecued? Somehow, Shinji could still smell the Evangelion's charred flesh through the ionized, luminescent air, and what little subconscious part of him was still attempting to process this ordeal couldn't differentiate between the EVA's body and his own.

The boy was screaming ceaselessly, expulsing an unbroken stream of ill-formed, primal sounds from his gaping mouth hole; There was no recognition in his wide open eyes.

The LCL surrounding him, including what he carried in his lungs, was beginning to boil and bubble all around him; The entry plug had turned into a furnace, transmitting its terrific heat to his body's exposed soft tissues, straight through the inner mucous membranes where the suit didn't provide the slightest bit of relief, as if to aid its transmogrification into some other material, and low and behold, the heavenly crucible soon revealed its most appraised product: The burning wish, no, plea, no, prayer that the angel's beam might finally reach the EVA's control unit and blow him all the way to the hereafter, if only that would stop this excruciating torture.

He couldn't escape, he couldn't break free, and it JUST. WOULD. NOT. STOP.

"GET ME OUT!" his raw, desperate screeches reverbed through the command center, sprinkling
the technicians' faces with worry and shock. "I CANT TAKE IT ANY MORE, JUST GET ME OUT OF HERE! GET ME OUT OF HERE, DADDY, JUST GET ME OUT!"

Ikari kept his dead serious glance transfixed on the screens, but didn't as much as flinch otherwise – Not even Shinji's singular use of the 'D'-Word was enough to yield a physical response from him – In sharp contrast to Misato, for whom the never-ending screams were so torturous that she might as well have been the target of the particle beam herself.

She was no longer able to reliably conceal her emotions behind a façade of reliability.

"RECOVERING THE PILOT HAS MAXIMUM PRIORITY! EJECT THE ENTRY PLUG RIGHT NOW!" she shouted, frayed. She had made him climb back into that thing. She had done this to him.

"Cancel that order." Ikari's deep, serious, yet almost unnaturally calm voice resounded from his place behind this lower platform.

Misato whirled around in an instant, half appalled, half fueled by incomprehension, but Dr. Akagi was already standing in her line of sight, prepared to spew justifications: "If the EVA loses its pilot, the AT-field will collapse immediately. We can't afford to lose Unit One right now."

Misato still supplied a small "But…!" , yet ended up averting her eyes from her co-worker when she was forced to realize that she was right. Without its AT-field, EVA 01 would probably be blown away like autumn foliage in a gust of wind, and the rest of humanity – including Shinji, if he could even be safely ejected without the entry plug melting in the comet tail of the EVA's destruction – would follow it swiftly.

Regardless, Misato couldn't deny her repulsion at the thought that Dr. Akagi, Commander Ikari, and ultimately even she were entertaining such clinical calculations to the adorable "background music" of a fourteen-year-old boy screaming his lungs out.

This grotesque performance… had to end right now.

"That's enough!" She called, decisive. "Emergency recovery of the entire sector! Detonate all of the explosive bolts!"

At the touch of a button, several rows of carefully placed explosive capsules ignited beneath the city. Trees shook, trucks tumbled into the emergent abyss.

An entire city block sunk away to unseen depths beneath Ramiel's burning beam.

Realizing that he had been victorious – at least for the time being – he ceased the bombardment and triumphantly folded back into his preferred octahedral form accompanied by a resounding metallic clang.

In short, Shinji's initial reaction amounted to a general mental state of 'Not again!'.
The place seemed more three-dimensional and accessible, more like something a person could actually stand in, but that didn't interest him in the slightest.

Last time he'd seen this, he had been inside the Evangelion, and that was exactly where he didn't want to be right now.

"I don't want to do this anymore." He told the light-drenched emptiness of the wagon, huffishly refusing to partake in the flow of warmth surrounding him.

It tasted of the heat that singed him.

He couldn't take any more of this.

He just couldn't take it!

Yes, he had decided to stay here and keep doing this after the events of last week, but that was because he thought that the worst was already behind them, that things would get better somehow after he survived and recovered from the last ordeal.

But this time, he didn't have a chance at all!

Even in hindsight, he couldn't think of a single thing he might have done… In the end, he had to go through all that suffering all over again, if not significantly worse than even the last time. All of this disgustingly undignified suffering, the pain, the purest distillate of mortal fear…

What for? Just why did he do this to himself?

Because of the one time Misato told him he did something right?

That had relativized itself quite quickly, much like the initial enthusiasm of his classmates.

There were a few incidents where someone said something, usually at the very beginning, but overall…

Overall…

"Hardly anyone really praises me, because they already take it for granted that I'll fight and win anyway. And if I lose, if I do the slightest bit wrong, everyone will hate me…"

That was no childlike oversimplification he'd just convinced himself of, that was a real possibility – He'd spent his life so far as a citizen of a world that had only just pulled itself back from the brink of annihilation, and like survivor of the impact wars, he couldn't be oblivious of what people could be driven to in desperate situations. He had been too young to experience any of this personally enough to really know it (For those born after the catastrophe, it was more something that just happened to be present in the collective consciousness of society, where new individuals being sozialized into it could retrieve it from) but that allowed it to persist as the kind of vague, ominous phantom that could be feared beyond the borders of reason – It was just necessary realism, possibly the bare minimum necessary to live in this day and age. If the catastrophe were to repeat, if people were to lose their houses and livelihoods, their orderly life and their significant others, they would hardly care whether he was a clueless kid at an age that adults commonly associated with a reputation of imminent trouble – especially if they were complete strangers who only knew him as 'That guy who fucked everything up'.

It wasn't even a matter of speculation, there were clear precedents:
Touji hadn't cared. Those ladies from the supermarket hadn't cared. Misato hadn't cared when he acted against her orders.

He had forgiven, but he was unable to forget, as much as he'd like to erase those thoughts and the seeds of doubt that came with them just to be able to interact with people who had now become important to him without that constant baggage in the back of his mind.

In his position as the only pillar holding up the earth ball, he couldn't do much to evade this constant certainly: If he were to lose, if he were to make the slightest mistake, perhaps without even realizing (after all, no one ever told him anything more than the bare minimum about just what he was supposed to be doing here) the survivors themselves would make sure that his head was severed from his shoulders.

"That is, if I'm even alive afterwards…"

Yes.

To be here thinking and feeling things, he would have to have survived… but how long was it since he last felt truly alive?

And all this pain, the endless, excruciating pain…

It must've been a close call.

But did he not already know how dangerous this could be?

Only recently, he'd had the pleasure of welcoming two laser whips into his innards.

And still, he had climbed right back into this thing… so everyone could take it for granted? So he could be beaten up for getting something wrong because he was too busy fighting for his life?

It just wasn't worth it.

Even a pathetic, meek good-for-nothing like him could tell that this equation was unlikely to produce positive values. Which led him right back to the question that had plagued him ever since his arrival:

"What am I even doing here?"

He didn't have any real reason to stay…

So why had he stayed, why did he even come here?

"I hoped that something might change, that something good might happen to me for a change…" he heard the foolish, naïve little boy within him speaking, the side that wanted nothing more than for his father to give him a proud pat on the shoulder. "I didn't expect to be put through hell." His embittered, disappointed present-day-self added.

He looked at himself – heavy with despair, sitting next to a bag that looked much too large for him, just like he did ten years ago.

He was apparently in agreement with himself, then.

He had come here – and stayed – because he had been foolish and naïve, because he hadn't learnt a thing since his father sent him away.
There hadn't been any use in sticking around to begin with…

But just as he was ready to forsake everything, the gloom of this place was broken by a high and clear voice, sent by a wondrous, determined-looking girl that stood upright in the middle of this wagon, whereas he was barely bothering to sit in a way that wasn't notably slumped forward, she, whose radiance had been shining like a distant lighthouse in all the time he had spent wandering through this darkness, never quite vanishing from his thoughts, even now, when she most likely hated him.

Only much later would he come to understand that she'd already begun to give her form to what little shreds of hope there were left in his heart, hope that people were somehow capable of understanding each other at least a little, that Misato and the others were serious about him after all.

The hope that he might still be able to get closer to her, that one day he might be capable of acting without feeling ashamed of his deeds right afterwards, like that one time on the day he protected her, when he climbed into EVA 01 in her stead.

The hope that what he'd built himself here was real and would be lost if he left now. That he might be capable of becoming a better human being.

"So you're going to run away again, like you've always run from unpleasant things?" she asked, leaving it to him to decide whether she hadn't been as accusing as she should have been. "Could you live with that?"

"Live?" Shinji brushed the complaining voices in the back of his head aside, and reacted with a bizarre mixture of petulance and resignation.

What point was there in any of this?

"Why should I want to live at all?!" he shouted into the room, revealing the real question behind most of his previous brooding.

"I don't particularly want to die right now, but when I really look at it, I'm not really important to anyone… Not to my father, and not even to Misato-san. They just need someone – anyone! – to pilot Unit One." He admitted to himself with a progressively growing acerbic quality around his displeasure that he was barely bothering to suppress anymore.

If he hadn't left when he had the chance one week ago, then it had to be because he somehow retained some sort of desire to remain here, but he didn't know if that was… alright. It was true that he feared being extinguished by an angel, but he was just as afraid of vanishing simply because there was no reason for him to exist.

He knew for a fact that he was weak. And as much as he hated himself for that weakness, he just couldn't stand any of this any longer.

"That's why I need to get back into Unit One. If I don't do it, I don't have any right to stay here."

He couldn't stand the thought of everything continuing without him, with his meager contribution fading into insignificance as the future kept expanding and the length of the past stayed the same like any memory must – The thought of Misato, Touji, Kensuke, Ayanami and even his father simply… continuing as if he'd never come here to begin with, that all the suffering he'd already invested in this venture had been for naught, just another dangling end, an aborted endeavor lost in the sands. But neither did he have the strength to continue; His whole being, physically and
mentally, folded under the pain like a house of cards.

He simply lacked the capacity to do this, he flat out didn't have it!

They were the ones who pretty much drafted him into this job to begin with. *They* were the ones asking the impossible of him, offering neither reward nor even compensation. Personal motivations aside, expecting him to not just attempt, but succeed in this had never been a reasonable option to begin with.

And besides-

"What if I *do* go back, and then…"

Halfheartedly closing his eyes as he felt it welling up, Shinji surrendered to what he believed to be his destruction, as its golden waves enveloped him in its blinding radiance, and let himself be swept away by the baked, static-hot taste of hot light, until not even ashes remained.

"EVA 01 has been recovered successfully!"

"I'm going to the cages!" Misato announces hastily, stepping onto the one-person elevator Commander Ikari tended to use. "Take care of the rest!"

"We certainly will." Dr. Akagi assured before turning towards her subordinates, wasting little time in issuing further orders appropriate to the serious nature of the situation: "Keep a rescue team on standby. We need to cool down the LCL without delay!"

"The pilot's brainwaves are unstable. Pulse is very weak!" Hyuuga announced.

"Set all Life support systems to maximum. And defibrillate!"

"Aye!"

A sudden jerk went through the boy's lifeless body that was still floating in the superheated LCL like a mushy vegetable in a boiling cooking pot.

"Pulse confirmed!" Hyuuga reported, although Dr. Akagi knew better than to allow herself sighs of relief yet: "Remove the entry plug! Get rid of the LCL!"

Since the entire Evangelion was still steaming hot – including the half-molten main hatch – the whole control module had to be lifted from the entry plug by a mechanical arm.

Even after the LCL had been expelled, columns of vapor kept rising from each and every of the structures – the rescue team had to show up in heat protection suits to take him away, bleeding profusely from his mouth and both nostrils, his hair and face both sticky with sweat and LCL as they pulled a breathing mask over the latter.

Misato could only watch from behind a thick layer of security glass and quietly whisper his name.

She of all people could impossibly have missed the faint, but recognizable stench of denatured protein that accompanied all other expected components as they finally wheeled him past her, still in his plug suit, but despite the primal, repulsing nature of these stirred memories, she followed until she was stopped by the imposing metal doors of the operating room, forcing her to remain behind while they were cut him out of his suit, covered him in an incomprehensible spaghetti salad
of electrodes and stuck him in a black life support chamber that uncomfortably resembled a coffin.

The leader of the operations division could only think of one appropriate summary for the most recent battle effort: "Damnit."

But she was well aware that she didn't have any time to waste with cursing at her own powerlessness, the angel was still floating high above them and while Misato had yet to be informed of this, it had already begun to implement the next phase of its plan, which involved twisting its lowermost cover into a drill.

She had to think of a way to make sure that this disaster would never repeat itself.

She owed that to the boy who has just risked his life for all of them.

If not for anything else, then because she had gotten him into this.

She got him into this, and it very nearly killed him.

"Kensuke?"

Whatever the boy in question had been doing on the PC in front of him, he was rather quick to close the incriminating window.

"Dad? You're home already?"

"I'm just here for a brief stop. Today's probably going to be a long day, I might be late tonight… what are you doing on my Computer?"

"N-Nothing! I'm just installing a new game on my own, and it's taking pretty long, so I thought-"

"Never mind! In any case, one of your friends just phoned. He wants you to call him back."

"One of my friends…? Which friend? Did he tell you his name? Was it Ikari?"

"It was the tall one with the big ears. Suzuhar-kun, was it?"

"Touji?!"

Kensuke instantly jumped from his chair and stormed towards the nearest phone, right past his somewhat confounded father. He was half finished with typing in the number when he remembered that he wasn't alone in the room.

"Uh… Don't mind me, Dad. Just go get your snack and go back to work, alright?"

"O-Okay…"

"FINALLY! JUST WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?!"

"Calm down first." Kensuke asked, deciding to put a short safety distance between the phone and his ear. "My old man only just told me about your call, and I had to wait 'till he was out of my hair. What's the matter?"

"They let us out of the shelters, but a large chunk of the inner city is still sealed off, and there wasn't any victory announcement. The usual news blackout is still in place. You're the one who's
always suspiciously well informed, so you tell me. What the heck is going on?"

"Well, that's what I was just trying to research!"

"Then spill it already!"

"From the way it looks, they haven't lifted the restrictions because they haven't won the battle yet."

"What are you saying?!"

"As far as I could tell, the newest Angel is still in the restricted area, completely unharmed at that. The reports were pretty complicated, but apparently, that thing turned out to have some insanely powerful weapon much stronger than anything NERV expected it to have. The EVA got pretty much toasted."

"WHAT?!" Touji shouted right into the telephone, subjecting his friend's eardrum to another harsh test.

"What happened to Ikari? Don't tell me-"

"Oh, so now you're openly admitting that you're worried about him?"

"Of course I am! He's one of us now, isn't he? So spill already!"

Kensuke donned a small smile that Touji couldn't see, but still very much heard at his end of the wire, mostly in his friend's pleased tone of voice.

"He's okay."

Touji audibly exhaled.

"Seems like NERV suffered a pretty dramatic defeat and he only just made it out alive, but they seem pretty confident that they can get him patched up in time for round two."

"Somehow that's not as much of a comfort as it should be." Touji then admitted.

"You know what Ikari's like. He won last time, and he was still so upset about it that he almost left the city. If it really was as bad as you say, then… I wouldn't be too surprised if…"

"…if he no longer feels like getting back into the EVA." Kensuke added gravely, completing the sentence.

"Hm…” Touji appeared to be thinking hard.

"We… we need to do something about this. Last time, I was too much of a coward to apologize right away, and because of that, he must have been feeling like he put himself through all of that suffering for zilch. And he's not the only one whom I could have spared some brooding… You were right. Sakura-chan was right, too. This time's gotta be different. This time, we have to show him that he's… not alone anymore…"

Kensuke? Can you look up a few things for me?"

"Aye aye, Sir! What would you like me to look up?"

"Get me a list with the phone numbers of our whole class. Get me Ikari's phone number, too! Not
his private one, I've already got it but I doubt he's taking his cell phone into battle. NERV's gotta have some sort of PR bureau, get me their number.

And… find out when and where he'll be departing for the next battle."

"What for? I didn't think you'd be interested in seeing another battle up close after we nearly got squashed last time…"

"Of course I'm not, only you could be that suicidal! Doesn't mean we can't cheer him on a bit before the actual battle starts. If possible, together with all of our classmates.

And maybe we can persuade Ayanami to show up in a cheerleader-costume, I'm sure our 'great superhero' would appreciate the fanservice…"

Kensuke laughed. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to scratch that last part. She's being deployed as well this time. I can't wait to see her Evangelion! I wonder if it'll be just as cool as Ikari's. Ah, how I wish I could go with them…"

"Kensuke…"

But before the boys would be able to find out any specifics about time and place of the next strike against the angel, those would need to be decided upon – much like the entire rest of the strategy, since the colossal failure of the usual 'neutralize AT-field and hit it until it dies' method had sent the staff of NERV headquarters right back to the drawing boards, which were currently being scribbled on in preparation for an emergency meeting.

There was a specific accommodation prepared for such eventualities, which you might call a conference hall or a war room, where the staff had gathered around a large, luminescent table with integrated screens that Misato had already successfully covered in empty coffee cans of her favorite brand. (Produit Placemènt)

Besides Misato, whose preparations involved an applied hair tie in addition to the caffeine, perhaps to convince herself that the gloves were off now without discarding any actual gloves, the gathering included Dr. Akagi and her assistant Ibuki, furthermore Hyuuga, Aoba, Mitsurugi senior and Rei, who was sitting in a corner a dark corner of the room between the light cones of the various screens, still holding the Commander's glasses.

She appeared to be listening carefully, but neither spoke nor moved from her spot, where she might as well have been overlooked if it wasn't for her unusual hair color and her clothing. She had no changed out of her plug suit so that she might be ready for further orders at any time, and the white enveloping her body gave her the semblance of a ghostly apparition inside the uncertain dark.

A closer look, however, might have revealed the subtlest hints of worry on her features.

"Okay, okay…" Misato opened the meeting, playing with the pen in her hand to make the looming conclusion go away. "Let's have a look at all that Data we collected."

"Judging from the results of our various experiments, we've concluded that the angel attacks and destroys every perceived threat within a defined perimeter with its particle beam…" Mitsurugi summarized.

"So we can basically forget about getting near enough for close-quarters combat…" Misato concluded, far from pleased with her own admission. "What about its AT-field?"
"It's continually active, and judging by the spatial phase shift, it will be very hard to neutralize and... almost impossible to break through." Ibuki explained.

"Bombs and induction cannons should be useless." Hyuuga added.

"So both attack and defense are nearly perfect. That thing's practically a floating fortress... You said no bombs?"

"Well, according to the Magi, breaking through the AT-field would require an N² mine of such explosive force that headquarters would inevitably be destroyed along with it..."

"Magi II in Matsushiro... independently arrived at the same conclusion." Dr. Akagi completed. "Nonetheless, the UN forces are still petitioning for us to give that option sufficient consideration."

"That's easy for them to say if they're not the target... and if this place falls, it's all over either way." Misato, who had been leaning back in her chair until now reverted to an upright position.

"What about that bothersome probe?"

"It has a diameter of about 17.5 meters and since it's deployment, the enemy has steadily been drilling straight towards the geofront, straight through two layers of armored plating," Mitsurugi reported. "It's currently having its way with the third."

"So the enemy has come to attack us directly this time..." Misato concluded. This was getting better by the second.

"If our simulations are correct and the angel maintains its present velocity..." Aoba continued "...we can assume that the angel will have broken through all 22 layers of armor and breached the geofront by tomorrow, zero hours, six minutes and 56 seconds..."

"That means we have less than ten hours..." Misato repeated, accompanied by a conspicuous twitch in the wings of her nose.

They were stuck between Scylla and Charybdis.

"What's the status of Unit One?"

"Still damaged from the battle and not fully operational yet. The complete chest plate and parts of the tertiary armor are hopelessly molten." The fake blonde related. "We are extremely lucky that at least the central control unit remained intact."

"Three seconds longer, and the Eva would have been out of commission." Ibuki elaborated. "There's no way we can replace all these components in less than three hours."

"I see..." Misato replied, anything but pleased. "And Unit Zero?"

"...isn't fully calibrated and hence not fully operational either." Ibuki proceeded to explain. "...the activation test was successful, but we still have that feedback problem... Actual combat should still be..."

"...out of question." Misato completed, taking the words right out of her colleague's mouth. "As for the pilot of unit one... how badly is he injured?"

"Physically? Not at all. His nerve pulses are still 0.8 index points higher than normal, but that's still in the tolerable range."
"We now have nine hours and 55 minutes until the estimated time of breach." Hyuuga reminded them, dispelling any however theoretical improvement in Misato's mood that might have been brought on by the news that the worst had been barely avoided.

"...the outlook isn't particularly rosy, is it?"

"You could very much say that our hands are tied." The leader of the technical division agreed.

"So, should we wave the white flags?" Hyuuga suggested, half serious.

"Not a bad idea..." Misato answered with a devious grin, apparently concocting some sort of idea. "...but there's just one little thing I'd like to try first..."

"You want to destroy the angel with a long-distance sniper attack?"

"Yes. Given the current situation, we have no choice but to break through the AT-field with a high-energy weapon, since we have no way of neutralizing it."

The Commander, on the other hand, was just interested in one thing: "What do the Magi say?"

"According to the vote of our three magi-supercomputers, the plan is feasible, that is, conditionally feasible, with a probability of 8.7%."

"It is the most promising plan we currently have. Do it."

"Yes, Sir."

"That plan of yours is complete lunacy!"

"Lunacy? The operation is completely feasible. If you have a better plan that can be implemented in less than nine hours, go ahead and tell me. I'm all ears."

Dr. Akagi didn't seem particularly convinced.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Our positron rifles aren't designed to withstand such massive energy densities. Even with our best weapons, we could hardly even scratch that AT-field. What do you intend to do about this?"

"Isn't it obvious? If ours is insufficient, we'll just have to borrow one that can handle more power!"

"...borrow? You don't mean-"

"Yes, exactly." Misato turned to face her colleague with a confident grin.

"You have read that secret dossier about that new military prototype as well, haven't you?"

"In accordance with my special authorizations as member of NERV, I hereby confiscate this positron canon for the purpose of national defense!" Misato declared, apparently right in her element as she held a stack of documents into the faces of a rather displeased-looking general and his flock of nonplussed researchers.
The elation on their part was conceivably sparse.

"B-but…"

"We will do our best to return it in mint condition. Thank you for your cooperation." Misato explained with poise, swiftly turning around to give Rei the signal that she could finally take the weapon.

The military's henchmen were appropriately flabbergasted when their hangar's entire roof was pushed aside by a one-eyed giant painted with bright, orange varnish.

"Try to be careful with it." Misato casually advised. "This is delicate equipment."

"But Captain… According to our calculations, we're still going to need at least 180 kilowatts to break through that AT-field…” Hyuuga, who had come along as well cautiously inquired. "Just where are we going to get that much energy?"

Unlikely as it seemed, Misato had already devised an answer for this question. Her confident smirk didn't leave her face for a second: "From everywhere!" she began, allowing herself a dramatic pause before elaborating on her initial laconic proclamation: "From all over our country!"

"We apologize for this interruption. This is a crisis-related broadcast. From 11:30 pm today through early morning tomorrow, a large scale blackout is planned all over Japan. Thank you for your cooperation."

The same message appeared simultaneously on millions of televisions, advertisement screens and other electronic mass media; The announcement echoed in all streets, helicopters carried the news across the entire country to all of its citizens – this included Touji and Kensuke, who had since gathered together for a visit to the local McDonalds followed by a course of video games to fight off the worry and agitation and now found themselves staring at the screen.

"Do you think that's somehow related to… you know…” Touji began to ask once the announcement had begun repeating itself.

"Of… course!" Kensuke replied, initially uncertain, but increasingly convinced by the time he had formed the second word. "I'm sure Misato-san must have come up with some cool plan."

"Ah, Misato-san! It's rare to see such a hot babe having brains in addition to hotness these days!"

"It's a real pity that we can't witness the fruits of her work up close… Say, Touji, can't we-"

"Forget it! Being nearly squashed once is more than enough for me. Besides, your exploits already cost me one month's worth of pocket money. My old man was furious…”

"Still. We do have a plan to implement before they stuff us all back into the shelters, don't we?"

"I guess you're right about that one. Let's go."

Hikari, who had been researching something school-related on her laptop, also found herself turning towards the TV apparatus she hadn't been paying all too much attention to. From the looks of it, a new battle was approaching… she could only hope that nothing would go wrong this time… This time, she'd have to keep a particularly close eye on those two stooges, lest they incur any broken bones.
For Mitsurugi Nagato, the announcement arrived while he was busying himself with some sudokus, having only just finished his homework.

At this point, he already knew that a new battle would be taking place – his father had phoned earlier and explained that he probably wouldn't come home before the first signs of daybreak.

Which probably meant that the two Children would be facing the enemy in the heart of the night. The mere concept still felt surreal to him, that normal kids who had been frequenting the same real, tangible classrooms as him would now be forced to stand and fight in the place of soldiers.

It was just too absurd.

That shy boy who had spoken to him the day before…

Nagato had a hard time imagining him as a warrior.

His ostensible pair of friends had only just called – two rather loud, energetic fellows whose room-filling presence Nagato himself found somewhat intimidating or at least mildly uncomfortable. They looked exactly like the chaotic sort of people capable of coming up with just any crazy, unprecedented idea with little provocation, and he didn't think he could deal with that. He distantly wondered how exactly these two had managed to befriend a serious, tentative figure like Ikari, but in any case, they certainly did seem to be his supporters – they had suggested that the whole class assemble on the school roof to cheer the pilots on, which included not only Ikari, but also that strange girl. Nagato himself had, of course, declined; They were supposed to be in the shelters by then. Things needed to have their order, after all, this city was supposed to be part of a war effort.

And anyways, if he showed up there after declining before, he would just attract strange looks.

It was out of question.

But despite the seemingly obvious situation, Nagato found himself wondering if made the right decision, as certain as he was that any teacher or public worker was sure to tell him "yes".

Sure, he hardly knew anything of that boy, and even less about the girl, but at least the former seemed to have attempted to be nice to him… or at least, that's what he thought.

And, as his father had explained to him often enough, both these children would be defending the whole world tonight.

Fourteen-year-olds as saviors of the world.

He’d been struggling to reconcile that idea with the observable reality around him ever since his father first introduced him to the idea.

And it had to be these particular fourteen year olds, of all possible choices.

Nagato was too well educated to actually comment on it in public, but what sort of parents actually allowed their daughter to completely bleach her hair at this age, much less dye it a bright sky blue of all things.

The girl herself was strange, too.

Nagato guessed that it was none of his business either way.

Sighing, Nagato put his Sudokus aside and rose from his dark wooden desk, proceeding to tug on
the dark, heavy curtains of his room ever so slightly until he could peer outside.

No matter how often he blinked or subtly shook his head, it was still out there, glistening in the setting sun, slowly, but steadily turning on its axis.

An enormous, blue thing, a foreign body of glistening, blank faces in floating geometric shapes in a world made of intricately textured reliefs and details, of things yielding to gravity.

Through a whim of coincidence, the Mitsurugi residence happened to be relatively close to the restricted area. Already incredulous when he heard such unreal accounts from the mouths of his classmates, Nagato had never seen the matters of his father's work outside of seemingly controlled environments, labs, at most.

He could barely accept that this ludicrous thing was really physically there.

"What about our defenses?" Misato asked through the intercom.

"In this short time, we couldn't improvise anything more than a simple shield."

"That is… a shield?" Ibuki asked, uncertain.

Dr. Akagi nodded. "It's a heat shield from the underside of a dismantled space shuttle. It may look bulky and impractically shaped, but it's coated in a special electromagnetic isolator. It should be able to withstand the particle beam for at least 17 seconds. Section 2 guarantees that… is that right?"

Asahina, dressed in black as always, her costume looking somewhat out of place amongst the futuristic layout of the armory hand, was leaning on a handrail without facing the other women.

"By optimistic estimates, it might even last for twenty."

"Very well." Misato concluded. "How is the assembly of the weapon coming along?"

"We're 3,2% behind schedule." A young female Technician by the name of Agano responded. "But we'll most definitely be finished by 23:10!"

"That's good to hear."

"Perhaps." Dr. Akagi chimed in. "But you're still fully dependant on a completely untested weapon and pumping unprecedented amounts of energy into it. There isn't even proper guidance software for that thing, so we're going to need an Evangelion to fire it… I'm not surprised that the UN-Forces are participating in this, but just how in the world did you convince the home affairs ministry and the Japanese self-defense forces to go along with this madness?"

"A few of them… still owed me the occasional favor."

"I guess drastic situations call for drastic measures..."

"Speaking of which, did you already come up with a good firing location?"

At the touch of a button, Hyuuga summoned the image of a map to one of the screens surrounding them.
"There is only one place that has both the right distance to the target and opportune geographic features as well as the necessary infrastructure for the energy supply."

Misato appeared pleased with the image.

"Of course! I should have thought of that myself!

We're firing from the peak of Futagoyama mountain!

How's unit one?"

"It's currently being equipped with universal G-type sniping equipment for nonstandard weaponry! It will be ready to deploy in two more hours."

"Very well. The operation will begin tomorrow at zero hours. From now on, it is codenamed 'Operation Yashima'!" Misato declared. "All that's left now is the pilot!"

"All that's left? You say that like it's some sort of minor afterthought." Dr. Akagi commented. "What are you going to do if he refuses to do it?"

Misato narrowed her eyes.

She would love to trust in this boy who was so much like her, but realistically speaking, the good Doctor's concern was all but misplaced. She had done her part, organized the equipment, crafted the plan… while Akagi and the other technicians had doubtlessly been working with their wondrous little gadgets to make firing this gun as easy as possible; All the little gears were assembling, waiting for their centerpiece to take his painstakingly minimized, but still uniquely crucial role as the heart of the clockworks.

But would that suffice to make Shinji understand what Misato had been trying to get into his head for almost two months now?

Would it be enough to show him that he would not be facing this battle on his own?

Incidentally, that was the very same question Suzuhara Touji was asking himself as he hung up the bright green public phone after having finished his call.

All around him, announcements could be heard, mixed with the steps of a thousand people on their ways to their safe and sturdy shelters.

Hikari, who had been waiting for him to finish to make sure that he (and Kensuke) would be coming with the rest of their class, was standing a bit closer to the waiting group, and – this was the crucial part – starting to get visibly impatient.

"Okay then… let's go." Touji concluded with certain traces of tension in his voice, mostly addressing his nearby friend, who replied with a simple, affirmative sound.

The two were already turning to leave the phones behind when they heard a voice calling from within the nearby crowd of uniformed students: "…Wait a bit!"

It was the new student, this Mitsurugi guy, easily recognizable from the bandage around his head. For a moment, the two suspected a fleeting impression of hesitant reluctance on his features – but only for a moment.

"Excuse me! Excuse me for only saying this now, it wasn't my intention to cause further delays…"
he apologized, relatively formal given the reason for this conversation: "Could I please… as well…?"

Touji and Kensuke blinked in Mitsurugi's general direction, somewhat surprised.

So far, he had given off the impression of being something of a swotter or at least some disinterested loner, at very least, he hadn't shown interested in their little 'excursion' to the launch pads – which made it surprising to see him show interest in or worry about Shinji, even when taking into account the minuscule amount of time they had remotely known each other.

As a consequence, Hikari was the first to compose an answer: "It's all right, Mitsurugi-kun, just go ahead. But please hurry, we don't have all day."

"The pilot of unit one worries me." Fuyutsuki admitted amidst his thoughts, observing the landscape of the geofront beyond the large panorama windows of the commander's office.

By contrast, his superior sat at the core of the darkness, in his unzipped, neglected uniform, hidden away behind his tinted glassed, his back turned to the light of a world in which he'd lost all interest a long,long time ago.

"The Dummy Plug is still in development. Until it is available, we have no choice but to rely on the current pilot."

"And what if he refuses? Brainwashing?"

It didn't occur to Ikari to ask what kind of man his subordinate thought him to be.

He knew very well what everyone inside these walls thought of him, and he knew that there was no point in trying to change it.

So he saved his breath, evaded a direct answer and instead said something that should placate his subordinate's doubts.

"…if things don't work out, we still have Rei."

"…Rei? You want Rei to pilot Unit One now?" Notably alarmed, Fuyutsuki incredulously turned in his superior's direction. "That's far too dangerous."

"…to defeat the remaining angels… we need to utilize all resources available to us."

Fuyutsuki turned back to the glass wall, examining the horizon without real relief.

"There is so much at stake…"

Ikari abstained from further words.

He found them unnecessary.

Of course he was aware of all risks and variables that had been part of their endeavor to begin with – But a large portion of all these events had already been set in stone since time immemorial.

Besides, as far as the Third Child was concerned, he had already… taken certain measures.

The blue haired girl sat on her stool like a statue on its pedestal, her legs closely together, her
school bag arranged on her tights, her hands placed left and right of the commander's discarded spectacle case.

Word- and motionless, with skin like white marble, she sat there, her unwavering red eyes transfixed on the 'occupied' sign of the operating room, until the light behind it faded.

Chapter End Notes

(1) It was very important to me to portray the whole incident with Ramiel's laser beam as religious levels of horrible. It certainly was for Shinji; If I can't make the audience feel his fear, I want them in awe. I want the emotional progression to what follows next to be clear, if that's not beyond my abilities. You see, they have this scary term 'clinically dead' for when your heart stops and has to be restarted…

(2) I think there was a bit of a theme of the angels being vaguely parallel to the people who fight them; Maybe there was, maybe there wasn't, if there was, I didn't want to ruin it, but a lot of this is also influenced by my own observations/ideas/imagination of/on what Ramiel's perspective could be like. There won't always be the time/story weight to give each and any Angel "personality", but I wanted to do a bit of that here or there, at least enough to set precedents. They're supposed to be not that much unlike humans, after all. It was also important to me to get the idea/concept of "promised land" in there, with all its edges, warts and implications.

(3) You didn't pay that much mind to Shinji's "…if I lose, everyone will hate me" in 1.11, didn't you? "He's just saying that because he's got issues…" Looks a lot harsher in hindsight, doesn't it? Becoming universally loathed IS a real concern when your actions may affect, let one ruin tons of people you don't personally know. You see it with celebrities and politicians all the time, but sadly, a competent asshole gets more respect than an incompetent average joe in our world – it's just how it works. Something Q generally did was put the threat back in a lot of things from the original – for example, everyone was always so freaked out about Unit One going berserk, when it ultimately ended up working in their favor/getting rid of the angel most of the time. Well, it's a copy of something that does impacts, and Ritsuko knows it. That's why… I actually retroactively inserted a few lines into this chapter after Q to give that statement its proper underlining. I hardly had the narrative comment on it at all when I first wrote this/dwelt on other, more obvious lines. I feel kind of stupid for not recognizing this earlier. Sorry Shinji, seems like I'm still far from being worthy of calling myself one of your number one fangirls… I didn't mean to make Shinji too world-savvy with that paragraph, he sure isn't, but I figured it would be a… "distant general knowledge thing". I'd imagine the post-impact world after the chaos and the wars, in regards to how people have had to accept the reality of human ugliness, as a more extreme version of modern-day Germany – central Europe's one of the most peaceful places on the earth nowadays, few actually know war and it only ever happens far away, few have 'catastrophe experience', but you can't walk past any historic building without noticing a place that says it's only a replica of the actual historic building that had a bomb fall on it some time ago. That sort of… ubiquity.

(4) Let's face it. Misato's favorite part about working in a secret organization working to preserve life on earth is probably being allowed to take other people's stuff. XD
(5) In the next chapter, you shall witness what it without doubt the blazing, radiant climax of the first act. Observe the birth of a hero and the forging of a bond that will decide the fate of the world when everything piques in an epic confrontation at the summit of the Futagoyama. Also, Shinji might finally get his much needed… well, a hug is perhaps too much to ask at this point, but if he succeeds in kicking plenty of angel butt, he might just earn himself a hand to hold… Does an octahedron even have a butt to be kicked in? That, and more, awaits you in chapter 14: [You are (not) alone], or: [In front of the person I admire] Angels of Doom are com-ming! *hums melody*
I've been

watching your world from afar

I've been

trying to be where you are

And I've been

secretly falling apart

Unseen

To me

You're strange and you're beautiful

And you'd be

So perfect with me but you just

Can't see

You turn every head but you don't

see me

I'll put a spell on you

You'll fall asleep

'Cause I put a spell on you

And when I wake you

I'll be the first thing you see

And you'll realize that you love me

-Aqualung, 'Strange and beautiful'
caress, enveloping every minuscule skin fold, every single hair, and remained his only companion in this precarious state between being and nothingness, almost a reassuring whisper gently assuring that he had yet to cross the line to the latter, not if he could still feel pain, not when every neuron in his body was still leaking a disruptive excess of signals that made coherent perception impossible even as they dissipated, when every pathways was still ringing with delayed refractions of freshly-formed memories that had burned themselves as deeply into his flesh as his soul; They surrounded him like ornaments of molten metal, heat so divine, pain so intense that it stopped being recognizable as such – towards the end, all he could perceive was a radiant, all consuming light that had taken all senses from him, gradually reduced his entire being to nothingness, up until the point he lost consciousness – he didn't have any memory of the exact moment this happened, for there was little capacity for clear thought left in him at that time, mostly preoccupied with formulating the desperate wish to finally be destroyed for good, for the molecules that constituted him to be stripped to their carbon skeletons, so that the endless, ceaseless conga line of suffering that tied the last fourteen years together could finally cease – in the end, even that was extinguished, and he felt like he had become a star, or perhaps a divine apparition, a burning bush, roasting, but not charring, screaming for a man whose ears had been deaf to his voice to begin with, falling into pieces to revive from the ashes like a phoenix, for the sole purpose of being immolated all over again, yet another burnt offering on that uncaring man's bio-mechanical altar.

Another? For an instant, he was able to hang on to a vague, elusive sense that there was another person he should be thinking of, but he couldn't anchor her in any sort of internal order that would mark her as part of reality; He had long since lost any sense of time or the ability to draw any clear answers from the overloaded circuits that were supposed to hold his memories – Towards the end, he was no longer certain that he hadn't died at some undefined point in time, and that all of this wasn't hell.

Thus, he had become alike to a star in a wholly different way, for the very creators that ignited them unspeakable time ago had placed them so far apart that even light needed centuries, or even eons to connect them, surrounded in all directions by an incomprehensible vastness of empty space – that was exactly how Shinji had felt, as if he were trapped inside the molten core of the earth, separated from any other living being by layers upon layers of rock and stone, caught inside his tiny metallic capsule.

All alone.

He had screamed and screamed, begged and begged, but no one had answered his pleas...

No one had as much as moved a finger to release him from his agony...

Just what did these people think they were asking of him?

Did they really expect him to keep defeating the never ending deliveries of such terrifying monsters, all by himself?

Even Shinji himself was painfully aware that he was just a normal kid... no, not even that!

He was an useless failure if there ever was one!

How was he of all people supposed to handle the truly herculean task they were imposing on him?

He... was afraid. His pounding heart could burst from the mere thought that it might not be long before he would have to endure more of this torment...

He...
He was still alive.

Although the light of divine punishment was still burning in his retinas, he had to be alive to perceive the stinging and burning that it caused at the back of his rapidly moving eyeballs, to be aware of the clammy layer of sweat that clung to every part of his body, to feel the wild beating of his heart as it struggled to normalize its rhythm while adjusting to produce the level of pressure needed to sustain a conscious state.

Little by little, the persistent afterimages of the battle began to be first overlaid, then displaced by new sensory input, until his eyes adapted to the overload of brightness to the point that they were ultimately able to construct an image coherent enough to stir his brain from its stupor, allowing him to realize that he wasn't crossing paths with that particular lamp for the first time.

"It's that ceiling again..." he mumbled, still somewhat disconnected from his surroundings. The lighting in NERV's sickbay was every bit as needlessly bright as it had been after his last near-death experience, rendering all colors even more faded and sallow than his condition would have anyway.

"...that's what I get from piloting EVA..."

But as grotesque and absurd as Shinji found the mere possibility that his body may be adapting to the surreal tribulations of EVA piloting, let alone doing so successfully after the merciless excruciation it had just been put through, he couldn't help but notice that the battle's afterglow and the stupor that came with it dissipated much, much faster than it did on his first visit to this establishment, and soon, he was sufficiently awake to notice yet another significant difference: This time, he wasn't the only person in the large, empty hospital room.

In fact, the first thing he saw when he finally tore his gaze from the lamp, lured by the sound of a turning page, shaking off the last dust clouds of daze as his nerves coordinated the first directed movement after the ordeal they had been put through was a familiar face with a pair of very intent red eyes observing as he propped himself up with his elbow.

"...Ayanami?"

Shinji wondered what in the world she was doing here, and how he could possibly end up keeping watch at his side, perseveringly waiting for his awakening – but a single look downwards was enough to dispel all doubt that she had done just that: She had arranged herself on a small stool next to his bed, and her delicate hands held a small book that she must have been reading until just now.

"Have... Have you been here all along?"

Shinji didn't understand. Had he not spent the last day not wasting a single opportunity to earn her antipathy, as unintentional as it may have been?

Instead of bothering to ask his essentially superfluous question, she closed her book and instead produced a little red notebook from some unspecified pocket somewhere in her uniform dress and began to read from it, her eyes always following after the words on the paper.

"I am here to introduce you to the schedule of Operation Yashima." she reported in a businesslike fashion. "Today at 19:30 hours, the pilots Ikari and Ayanami are to arrive at Terminal number two. At 20:00 hours, preparations for the departure and transport of both units to the site of operations. Departure at 20:05 hours. At 20:30 hours, arrival at the provisional base at the peak of the Futagoyama. There, the pilots will be awaiting further instructions until the operation officially
begins at 00:00 hours."

At first, Shinji just listened in simple bewilderment while she recited the plan, but eventually, he ended up averting his eyes.

From the looks of it, they had already come up with a new plan to try out, everything was already decided and neatly packaged, they totally expected him to go along with whatever they had cooked up like nothing ever happened, and didn't seem to have spared a thought to the idea that he might protest, because who cares if he nearly died the last time!

But he should have known to expect that...

Meanwhile, Rei had pocketed her little notebook and leaned forward to retrieve something from the small trolley next to her seat and throw it on his bed.

Shinji sat up to get a better look at the object – it was a brand new plug suit in different shades of blue, neatly packaged in an envelope transparent plastic with the word "Nerv" printed on it. It was basically identical to his old one – which must have been destroyed when he had been admitted to this place, his half-dead state presumably having necessitated some sort of crude, hurried removal.

He knew that he was supposed to be grateful to her right now, but the truth was that he really didn't feel like seeing this type of clothing right now, and he didn't think he felt like wearing it, either...

"Please be careful not to arrive like this."

At first, Shinji failed to realize what Rei's remark might be supposed to signify and gave her a reaching, confused look – until it came to his notice that he was stark naked under his blanket, the corollary being that he had been presenting Rei with the full frontal view since he just sat up.

This probably meant they were even now.

Nonetheless, the fourteen-year-old boy frantically grabbed his blanket and did his best to get as much fabric between Rei and the X-rated areas of his body as he could possibly manage.

Before long, he had pulled his legs close and raised a mountain of cloth around them, on which he then rested his arms to hide his face between it all.

"I'm sorry...!"

Rei kept looking in his direction, but didn't display any further reaction.

Shinji couldn't say whether this was a good or bad thing.

Warily, he began to raise his head again and glance past his arm, although he still didn't dare look her in the eyes.

He was seriously beginning to consider that he might have some sort of twisted talent for unwittingly stumbling into embarrassing situations, especially if the people involved were females he would like to peacefully coexist with...

The Third Child sighed.

"I've been saying that a lot lately..."

Causing a short noise, Rei straightened herself up and swiftly pushed the trolley next to her into Shinji's direction.
"Your meal."

There was, indeed, a tray with something vaguely resembling food on it to be found there, but the various piles of goop might as well have been plastic and did little to rouse Shinji's appetite – not that there was much that could have done that so soon after he nearly got himself barbecued.

He soon averted his eyes.

"I'm not hungry."

Rei wheeled the trolley back to its original position, but left it in the room.

"We will depart in sixty minutes." Rei added, already in the processes of leaving.

Shinji didn't want her to leave.

He didn't want to be alone with those dreadful thoughts and memories, or everyone's apparent certainty that he was going to do something for which he lacked both the will and capacity necessary.

Even Rei seemed to assume that he fully intended to continue this.

As for Shinji, he was afraid. His entire soul was metaphysically bursting with such horrible dread... But there was no way he could talk about this with Misato or the others. None of them would take his fear seriously, or lend him an open ear, with little to no regard for the boundless horror that was silently ripping him apart from the inside.

And why should they? They were all very busy with impossibly important things, and Shinji was supposed to be a boy after all. They were all expecting him to "stop whining" and prove his valor, but... Shinji simply wasn't a brave person...

In the end, none of that mattered, no one wanted to hear any of this. He didn't have to bother talking to them to know what they would say, their own interests predetermined the scope of what he could expect them to say to him from the start – They would obviously urge him to pilot the Evangelion if he wanted to stay here, and perhaps even mark themselves with some hollow gesture to "cheer him up", when he knew very well that their faith in him amounted to absolutely zilch – he was the unwanted, troublesome child, the unreliable, untrustworthy tool they wished they could replace with a piece of metal if only they had a better grasp on their own fearsome technology...

All they wanted, or even needed was someone who would climb into that steel abomination and fight for them, regardless of what might happen to him – It all didn't take long to become some sort of crazy game: Let's just see how badly these monsters would have to break him before NERV's scientist couldn't patch him back together anymore, like he was Humpty Dumpty or something.

In his desperation, he clung to the only person whose reply he couldn't fully anticipate, whose hard demands he couldn't already picture in full color and full motion – Ayanami.

"Do I really... have to get back into this thing?" he asked, although he new the answer very well.

"Yes." she answered without cushioning or artifice, cutting his last thread of hope with a single, simple word. He should have learned to expect this by now.

It wasn't like she was responsible for deciding any of this, and either way, why in the world would she have any kind words to spare for him after he'd thoroughly blown any and all chances he might have had with her? Still, he was unable to keep those words bottled up any longer.
He just wanted to be *heard* for once.

His father hadn't heard him, hadn't *wanted* to hear him when he had screamed for him inside the boiling LCL – And in some simple, childlike corner of his mind, making his father's prized confidante listen instead registered as the next best thing.

The ironic thing was, her answers were probably the ones he dreaded the least.

"But I don't... want to..." Shinji admitted, almost accusing.

"Maybe *you* don't mind because you never came within an inch of your life, but I just can't do this anymore... I don't want to experience any more of these terrible things..." As he went on, his words didn't take long to lose all of their firmness and stopped themselves within an inch of breaking out into sobs.

He was peripherally aware that directing such a display at a girl should feel him with shame, but Ayanami was... different.

At the time, he distantly reasoned that he had already taken notice of the simple matter of course that she was unlikely to react like a normal girl, which, as much as he could have slapped himself for that thought, was very opportune circumstance right now, for he couldn't have held back the flood of pent-up, undignified squalor if he'd wanted to, and even this wanting would have been something he could not muster right now.

"It was so dreadful... I'm so scared... but I can't run away, either..."

"You're afraid of EVA? Alright. Then stay and rest."

Shinji was shocked. No lectures? No expectations? She was letting him off the hook... just like that?

"...but... then..."

"I will pilot Unit One in your place." she explained, tonelessly.

The Third Child couldn't help but gawk at her. "It can be reprogrammed at any time. Dr. Akagi has already completed the preparations."

In certain ways, Shinji felt like the ground had been pulled from beneath his feet.

He had expected to be pressured into piloting by any means available, that everyone involved would subject him to their carefully assorted repertoire of empty phrases ans guilt trips, getting all the more adamant the more he refused, but now, he found himself charging past an open door only to tumble into the abyss behind it – with nothing to oppose, nothing to hold on to, he was falling through thin air – Al he could do was decide, and if he didn't, everything would just continue without him, as if he'd never been here...

But that was besides the point.

To his own honest astonishment, the first impulse to stir up in response to this potential release from the ties that supposedly kept him enchained here was neither relief nor indignation or even fear:

Not *everyone* was expecting him to subject himself to these horrible things.
This girl, this... almost complete stranger... after he'd spent the better part of the day embarrassing himself in her general surroundings, she was unflinchingly willing to do what he dared not.

She was going to do battle with the fiend that had nearly claimed his life and would have little trouble doing the same to her, all by herself...

It was just like that other time, when they first met – She knew very well what awaited her, and just accepted it without complaint. Shinji knew all too well that if it the roles were reversed, he would have broken down pleading and begging her not to let him be thrown before that abomination all by himself.

He couldn't stand this, this whole situation – it was like being pulled into a dozen different directions without being able to budge an inch.

He couldn't stand the idea of climbing back into the EVA, he couldn't bear the thought of being responsible if Rei didn't return from the battlefield, but the worst was being stuck with the choice, and knowing that a better person would see none.

This would be so much easier if it was anyone else. Everyone else was asking things of him, demanded that he pay in blood if he wanted them to let him stay here, if he wanted their kindness, gallons upon gallons, be it the blood of the angels, his own, and even that of innocents like Touji's sister, it was all good currency to them.

Everyone else would be dragging, chasing him all the way to the cages, but not Rei.

Not Rei... Of all the people he had personally interacted with so far, she had the least reasons to show him any compassion – Since their first proper conversations, he had not wasted a single opportunity to draw her ire, while he couldn't fault her for anything, and even if she were trying to get him to pilot along with anyone else, he would have lost any right to accuse her the moment he had considered leaving her to the angel.

And still, she, who had more reason than anyone else, was the sole person who didn't ask anything of him, the one who didn't judge him for a moment, the one who told him to stay and recover, the one who had kept watch at his side and stayed with him...

He could see for himself how unfair that was, how ungrateful it would be of him if he didn't accompany her into battle after this... this awareness was always the worst. He knew, he knew and he could hate himself forever for his fear, this filthy primordial self-preservation instinct that would always remain much stronger than the sum of his heart and rational mind squared.

What a disgusting coward he was – even now, in the moment of truth and decision, he still saw himself reaching, attempting to cling to the next best person... but his only company in this painted white prison was turning to leave.

"I need to leave. Dr. Akagi and Captain Katsuragi are waiting for me." Rei explained without turning back another time as she walked towards her guillotine, as every clacking of her soles on the floor brought her closer to the particle beam that would cook her alive.

"AYANAMI!" he called, in the motions of a surprisingly full-blown stirring, of half-baked regrets, but all her got was a last look at her backside of a body that had already stepped into the hallway and a last, quiet "Farewell." before the automatic door cut her off from his view.

For an instant, the horrible feeling that he would never see him again brushed over him like the shiver of a passing train and that cold seemed to have frozen him in place, remaining as he was like
a statue, until he finally lowered his head dejectedly and curled into a ball, drawing his legs even
closer.

He couldn't do it.

There was just no way.

There was no way in hell he could just leave Ayanami to her fate.

He should leave, he should get up and go after Rei, to where Misato and the others were waiting
for him.

He mustn't run away.

He should already have realized just how useless that would be, and he should have done so three
years ago – there had been ample time, time in which he had found himself brooding over the same
questions again and again... and it was clear that he would continue to do so indefinitely if he didn't
budge now.

Moving with jerky urgency, trying to ride this wave of intensity as far as it would carry him, Shinji
straightened himself up and looked around in the hope that someone might have thought of leaving
him some fresh clothes to wear.

He didn't really feel like marching out of here in a makeshift toga improvised from the bedsheets –
If worst came to worst, there was always the plug suit Ayanami had left him, but...

This thought was cut off when he noticed one of his school uniforms haphazardly folded on one of
the lower racks of the tray Ayanami had used to deliver his unwelcome meal, but the truth was that
part of him did not want to accept this resolution to get back into the violet titan as part of his
personal reality, and feeling the plug suit's material tightly pressed to every corner of his skin
would make that impossible.

In the end, the sense of obligation he felt towards Ayanami and the others did nothing to alleviate
the reality of his endless dread...

"STOP RIGHT THERE! Just where do you think you're going?"

With Kensuke's nigh uncanny knowledge about the workings of such mechanisms and a bit of
applied muscular strength courtesy of Touji, the gate leading to the emergency shelter did little to
stop the boys, but whimsical as fate could be, their luck left them as soon as they reached the rose
golden evening sky behind the heavy steel doors, their doom spelling itself in the shape of the class
representative's voice coming from behind them, which is where the girl herself was standing,
dressed in her school uniform, her hair tied in her usual twin tails, her face looking anything but
amused, especially once she ascertained the large density of uniformed students in the general
vicinity of the exit – it was practically the whole of her class.

"Seriously! I really don't know what to say... I would have expected something like this from you
two, but I can't believe what the rest of you is doing here! ...Even you, Mitsurugi-kun?" She only
just discovered his bandaged head of dark hair at the edges of the unrepentant flock.

"You only just transferred to our class, and you're already participating in this kind of lunacy? I had
the impression that you were a more reasonable person! I expected all of you to be more reasonable
than this, even you, Suzuhara Touji! You'd think that getting caught up in the last battle would be
more than enough for anyone!"
"I'm not planning to stay for the battle!" Touji retorted.

"And you expect me to believe that? Where else would you be going?!"

"We want to cheer on Ikari." Kensuke explained.

"And obviously get the heck out of there before the battle starts." Touji added, since that detail was not necessarily self-evident if his friend was the one speaking. "Kensuke found out when and where he and Ayanami will depart from their underground complex. The real battle is scheduled to take place somewhere else entirely."

"We all know that he can be a little... sensitive at times. So I thought that a little extra motivation couldn't hurt, and had Kensuke invite everyone.

Those two will be risking their asses for us before this night is over, so I really don't think this is the time to be obsessed with protocol!"

Hikari didn't reply right away – until now, she had always perceived Suzuhara Touji as... well, to be honest, as a big-mouthed, trouble-making ruffian. But seeing him worry about the new kid like this, making such a... 'ardent speech', he looked almost downright heroic and unexpectedly mature...

"S-Still...! I have no guarantee that you're telling the truth. How do I know you won't do something incredibly stupid out there as soon as you're out of my sight? I'm supposed to be responsible for our classes' evacuation efforts, in case an of you are familiar with the meaning of that word!"

"Well, class rep, if you really think we need a babysitter that badly, why don't you come with us and make sure for yourself? If we really do anything 'incredibly stupid', you can just go back and rat us out."

Several shouts of "Exactly!" could be heard from the crowd. "You really don't have to be so bossy all the time!"

Hikari paused to think.

"...and what about the others in our class?"

"They're hardly gonna set the shelter on fire just because you won't be there for five minutes. Or, if that really irks you so much, you could just take them with you!"

"Alright! But I'm bringing my mobile, and if any of you try anything..."

"Yes, I know. We'll be in big trouble. We get it. We need to get going if we don't want to miss the EVAs."

"Hell yes! Let's go!" Kensuke agreed. "I can't wait to check out Ayanami's Evangelion. Just wait until you see how ridiculously awesome these things really are!"

In the meantime, the preparations for the final showdown were running at full throttle – the provisional base atop the Futagoama had transformed into a bustling anthill: Trucks with new components were almost arriving by the minute, power transformers were being assembled, particle accelerators were being plugged in, superconductive cables were being installed, cooling systems were being tested, until the constant whirring of machinery blended with the voices of the technicians to create a sound reminiscent of a swarm of bees.
Much like its sound scape, the outpost itself was beginning to take a distinctive shape, a giant-sized staircase leading up to its central heart piece that had finally been assembled.

"This here is our positron cannon." Hyuuga explained, for the benefit of the technical division's leader who had only just arrived on-site, having overseen the work on the Evangelions themselves until now. "An untested military prototype."

"It should be able to handle the job, at least on paper..." Dr. Akagi commented until her young assistant informed her that they had finished adjusting the sighting device to the G-type components. "We can't be sure that it won't just explode in our faces until we try it out."

"Well then, let us give that thing the benefit of the doubt."

But Hyuuga's daring bravado did little to soothe Dr. Akagi's worries, since the cannon was not even the main cause at their roots. "...the least reliable component in this setup is still pilot... In the end, all of this depends on whether Misato can persuade him... "

Impossible.

Try as he might, he could not force himself to do this.

He had dressed himself, called in to accept the mission, even familiarized himself with the finer details of the plans, but when he was supposed to take the last step towards a definite affirmation and report at the cages to finally board the bio-mechanical monstrosity, he found that he couldn't make himself budge.

One step forward, one step back, fairly usual fare for his waste of a life.

He seriously intended to go out there and fight, but...

Shinji was afraid.

Beyond afraid, completely taken over by a heavy, leaden sludge of paralyzing fright that hardened around his limbs until his steps had been slowed to a half halfway across a runway between two of the lager buildings hanging from the ceiling of the geofront and refused to let him advance one more inch – Behind him, all lights had been turned off already, presumably to redirect the power to Misato's herculean endeavor to stop that monster; If he wanted to go back inside, he'd have to rip a sealed security steel door out of its frame. There was only the way forward, into the light, but he dreaded what lay ahead of that path.

The radiance reminded him of his previous battles, one if a nocturnal city full of artificial illumination, two times he was touched by weapons of light – This afternoon's memories were the freshest, the slightest brightness was enough to stir them up, recollections of a light so blinding it could unmake flesh and metal.

He tried to force himself to move, but then he thought of the agony, the terror and utter helplessness, and was swiftly reminded that he couldn't bear them, not even if the form of static memories.

He knew what had to be done and what it required him to do, but accepting that and actually carrying it out were very different things under the pressure of panic – if he let it, it could crush him without even becoming a reality, this mere idea of straining to hoist the entire weight of the world onto his shoulders from where billions of years worth of evolution and development could drop in a single split-second mishap, of being all alone with that weight and the certainty that if,
no, when he inevitably failed no one would be coming to save him.

Mishaps could not be avoided indefinitely; Anything that could go wrong would go wrong sooner or later and then, he would be the one who brought the sky crashing down on the people of the earth, simply because he had agreed to try and prevent it – The plates are usually broken by the person who uses them the most...

What was the point of all this?

What did he even think he was doing here?

It wasn't like he knew anything about the forces he was meddling with. Misato, Ayanami and the others may have devoted their lives to this cause, but he wasn't qualified in the slightest. That was a fact. This was not a world where things would work out merely because he really wanted them to. Charging in there like a white knight in shining armor and giving the enemy a scary look was not going to make him invincible of all sudden.

Leaning forward to rest his weight of the bannister framing the walkway, Shinji peered down at the abyss that, to him, seemed as alluring as ever.

He had forced himself out of that bed by telling himself that he would have to gorge himself on an overdose of sleeping pills if Rei were to die after he refused to have any part in that battle, but he had just been kidding himself.

If he had the guts to spare humanity from having to put up with his presence, or even the remote capacity to dispose of himself, he would have done the world this favor three years ago. If Rei were to die because of his ineptitude and cowardice, he would probably have to problem going on his merry way.

So what if he had a whole new reason to feel aggression seething every morning he inspected his mirror image, for the kind of asshole he knew he was, that wouldn't be more than just another drop in the ocean.

Yes, the chasm beneath his feet had seldom looked more attractive to the young Eva pilot, but his situation was like that horrible children's joke about this guy who won second place on an idiot competition... for being an idiot.

He contented himself with merely contemplating the sight of the depht. He'd stared into it for a much longer time before, that time in the mountains, and that was when he found out that he was seriously afraid of heights.

It was useless to try anything, up to this point, he had already come to accept his metaphysical prison.

This was him, Shinji Ikari: Too inept to even die properly, too much of a coward to turn his back on the world for good, let alone save it.

It should be of little surprise then that he didn't have the heart to turn around when he heard slow, but firm steps echoing across the small walkway.

He could already guess that it had to be Misato, that she would have her arms crossed, and that she would have a less than pleased look on her face, sitting in judgement over him with her lofty glare.

"Shinji-kun. You should have reported for duty already!" she admonished. It was practically hilarious that she picked this of all times to start sounding like an actual parent.
Shinji might have laughed if he hadn't felt like screaming.

He didn't know how to answer her.

"You chose to stay of your own, free will, didn't you? So do your job!"

Of course. He had pretty much expected her to pull this sort of tactic.

Like this was an issue of *wanting*...

"I'm afraid, Misato-san. I'm afraid of piloting the EVA." he quietly admitted, his back still turned in her direction. Fearing the cold, sharp words hat could be reasonably expected to follow, he reached to somehow justify himself before she could form her retort.

Why did he even have to be in this situation in the first place? Why him?

Why would *he* have to come up with any explanations at all?

Last time he checked, *she* was the one asking unreasonable things of him. She was demanding he go out there and put his life on the line, all by himself, with little to no chance of victory...

"That's easy for you to say, you and the others, you'll just be sitting safely in your bunkers and giving orders... you're leaving all the horrible things to me..."

In the wake of long-suppressed emotions bubbling to the surface, he finally turned away from the handrail, looked Misato in the eye and spoke the words that had been sticking to his tongue for the past six weeks: "Do you have any idea just how unfair all this is?!"

Shinji's statements produced a long chain of consecutive reactions in Misato's face, starting with simple shock that he would openly throw such accusations in her face without hiding behind a passive-aggressive veneer of badly faked complacence, to a doubtlessly affected glance aside, sudden realization, a thin smile, and ultimately, a firmed, determined look aimed directly at the disgruntled boy.

If *that* was his problem, then she knew what to do about it, that, at least, was something he could fix.

"Just come with me for a bit!" she demanded, grabbing her young ward by the wrist, already aware that words alone wouldn't be enough to produce an effect.

She thought she was beginning to understand, at least a little bit.

The numbers in the elevator's gauge kept getting higher and higher, the little wheels compromising it kept up their steady clicking like a metronome as the small elevator delved deeper and deeper into the abyss of the geofront, to the center of the sphere, of which the little tip compromising the huge subterranean area on which NERV headquarters was built had only been the tip of the iceberg, traveling onwards into the darkness.

Misato kept Shinji's hand safe and warm in her grasp, squeezing it from time to time to assure him that everything was going according to plan.

The boy kept his eyes averted from her.

He knew that when the actual battle came, her hand would be somewhere completely different.
But even Misato's gaze was, all determination notwithstanding, aimed straight ahead.

This wasn't a topic she was particularly comfortable talking about.

"Fifteen years ago... half of the earth's human population was eradicated in the incident you know as Second Impact. According to the history books, this calamity was caused by a small meteorite hitting the antarctic ice shields at near light speed.

But that is only the official version – what really happened on that day was covered up."

"What? Are you saying everything I ever heard about Second Impact at school was a lie?"

"Exactly. But as a member of NERV, you're allowed... no, entitled to hear the truth.

15 years ago, humanity discovered a large, humanoid being in the antarctic ice... that was the first angel. When they tried to analyze it, it came to life and exploded for yet unknown reasons. That explosion was the Second Impact.

If any of the remaining angels ever succeeds in causing a Third Impact... then it's game over for humanity. No one would survive."

"So in the end, none of this really changes what I've already heard over and over again. I'm supposed to save you all, all by myself."

Misato didn't directly address his complaint, but simply continued with the explanation she had been meaning to give from the start, suspecting that it would be better at convincing him anyway:

"If any angel should ever successfully invade NERV headquarter and breach level EEE, the entire complex is set to self-destruct. To avert Third Impact, we would be willing to sacrifice ourselves. Everyone who works here is aware and agrees with the necessity of such a measure."

Misato explained, her voice serious.

And as it usually went when someone spoke of the devil, the little turning wheels of the lift switched to display the letters EEE before she had finished speaking.

Shinji barely managed to note that the letters were printed on blood red ground when the elevator's lighting switched off – but soon, light in ample quantities was entering from outside, an insubstantial, uncertain red glow that matched the surreal wold outside the elevator all too well.

Everything seemed drenched in a deep red, and they might have been surrounded by a liquid medium; That, at least would explain the strange, oversized bubbles out there, and the seemingly organic networks and structures that seemed to defy gravity: They resembled oversized microorganisms or perhaps a coating of corals, microscopic slime molds perhaps, or the yolk sacks that unborn organisms carried with them in the earliest stages of their embryonic development.

The way they appeared to be 'rooted' to the 'floor' of this bizarre place, or, if they were growing from the 'ceiling', their way of branching out, was also distantly reminiscent of trees.

The elevator, downright tiny compared to these alien structures, lead them through this layer and deep into the 'ground' and the 'roots' that filled it with their growths.

By the time the door opened, a look upwards would not have served to spot anything but darkness.

Shinji didn't even want to know what the meaning of these structures was supposed to be, or just how deep underground they just went.
But a plate found on a gigantic gate, the only recognizable piece of technology in this dark alien world besides the elevator itself, insisted on informing him:

"TERMINAL DOGMA

MAIN LCL PLANT

HEAVEN'S DOOR"

When Misato swiped her security card through the corresponding slot and the machinery inside the gate audibly sprang to life, Shinji shuddered with the sudden feeling that he never should have come to this place. He felt like he was about to desecrate the adytum of a temple, and the numerous, subsequently opening little mechanisms didn't make it any better. What really made Shinji's blood run cold, though, was the sight that greeted him behind them, burning itself into his brain instantly and forever.

He could have gone mad on the spot.

Before his feet lay an endless expanse of red liquid, and from its approximate middle protruded a large, red, cross-shaped monolith.

And fixed to it with nails through it's palms and numerous tubes coming from behind was a creature that vaguely resembled a human torso.

It's pierced hands were almost exactly identical to a human's, but lacked fingernails; The white, shapeless skin hung in folds around the nail and drooped from the arms like cloth. Its thick, massive neck, too, was wrinkled, and above it was a thick, violet mask-like plate of which it was impossible to decide whether it was a bony body part like those he had repeatedly seen on the angels, or something that had been tacked on artificially to shield onlookers from the unmentionable horrors beneath. Either way, it appeared to have seen better days with less scratches and bumps, and its hard edges cut into the chalk-white, rubber-like flesh, demanding a tribute in slow trickles of orange blood.

In any case, the face was where any pretense of humanity ended, because the plate, otherwise featureless save for a triangular symbol, came equipped with seven openings behind which dark, lifeless, not further defined orifices could be glimpsed at, that were outing as eyes by the shape of the slits in the mask more than anything else.

Additionally, the being possessed a vestigial auricle, but otherwise lacked any features that would be expected on a human head.

Shinji wasn't sure whether it's chest should be classified as 'male' or 'female'; The presence of nipples or areola would sure have helped. Once he thought about it, the breast mounds did appear somewhat rounded, although he was easily distracted by the indefinitely more conspicuous scar running diagonally across the creature's body, garnished by numerous cross-shaped nails that looked tiny compared to the being itself.

From the chest downward, the white body was hopelessly disfigured. One could still vaguely recognize a narrowing following by a widening, in the sense of a feminine waist followed by a childbearing pelvis, but that aside, it was quite appropriate to say that the entity consisted of nothing but shapeless lumps of misshapen meat -

At first glance, one might have concluded that it was missing its legs, but a closer look revealed that it had more than enough of those – dozens, if not hundreds pairs of distinctly feminine lower
limbs sprouted from the disfigured abdomen, from all angles and in all possible sizes and degrees of completeness, some even including associated buttocks.

Here and there, you could even see smaller legs growing out of larger ones, from knees and ankles, thighs and calves, and all the inbetweens.

And the worst was, they were still twitching.

They were moving.

This thing... This being, whatever it was... despite all this, it was still not dead.

Not that it seemed particularly alive, either; A waterfall of an orange liquid, that could only be the creature's blood incessantly streamed down the cross into the endless bloody lake that stretched out before his and Misato's feet.

At first, Shinji thought that it must be coming from the exit wounds corresponding to its scar, but the flow didn't seem to have the right width for that. He couldn't see where exactly all that blood was coming from, but he couldn't shake off the impression that this thing was... menstruating.

The whole enormous cave was certainly thoroughly drenched in an oppressive stench of old blood which didn't take too long to sweep into the hallway Misato and Shinji were standing in, forcing the latter to fight down an acute bout of sudden nausea.

"Is that... that... that can't be, can it? An... an Angel? Or... an EVA?"

"It's neither." Misato explained. "This is probably the source of all life on this planet and, at the same time, the key to its obliteration. This is the Second Angel. Lillith."

"Lillith...?"

"Yes. It's a potential trigger for Third Impact. This is what the Angels have been trying to reach with their attacks, and the only thing that could possibly stand in their way is a being with the same powers... an EVA.

Because we need to protect Lillith, we fight with the EVAs. But none of us can use them. Only you can. So we have no choice but to trust both you and the EVAs with all of our futures... other than just sitting by and waiting for our doom to come, that is."

"And why does it have to be me?" Shinji demanded to know.

"Why was I of all people picked out to carry that heavy load all by myself?"

Misato, however, seemed to have been waiting for that particular question:

Without spending too much time thinking, she swiftly turned her head in his direction and gifted him with a warm smile.

"That's not something anyone decided. It's probably just your destiny.

But I brought you here because I wanted you to know that you're not the only one who is risking his life in these battles. We all are. Together.

You are not alone."

Shinji's glance avoided hers.
It was not like he was really all that convinced on the inside, but Misato's words had certainly taken the edge off of his accusations.

He certainly didn't want to be responsible for the end of humanity.

"Alright. I'll pilot it. Just this once."

Misato affirmed her grasp on his hand anew, and he was, for the first time, all too ready to squeeze back and cling to the support she was offering him.

As long as she was with him... as long as she was holding his hand... he might just manage to convince himself that just maybe, he really wasn't on his own with all this.

At least for now.

"We've been standing here, like, forever!" Touji complained. "Are you really sure this is the right time? If we stay here much longer, someone is gonna notice that we're not in the shelter..."

Touji, Hikari, Nagato and the rest of class A-2 were waiting on the roof of a bunker-like complex, and had been doing so for quite a while. Much to Hikari's displeasure, a few students, including Kensuke, who was no checking his wristwatch, had decided to sit down under the railway and let their feet dangle off the building.

"The time is definitely right. I got the info from my Dad's computer."

"In that case, why aren't they here yet?"

Touji's doubts, however – along with everyone else's – were soon silenced when the students started hearing machine noises.

An entire mountainside, along with all of it vegetation was in the process of moving to the side, revealing steel and concrete beneath.

"Unbelievable! The mountain is moving!" Touji shouted.

Kensuke had already jumped to his feet. "That's got to be the Evangelions!"

Both boys, much like the other students they had brought along, didn't cease their awe while the two titanic bio-machines were lifted to the surface.

Even Nagato and the usually serious class representative displayed a certain degree of excitation.

"So that's Ikari-kun's robot?" Hikari asked.

"Yep!" Kensuke confirmed. "That is, Ikari pilots the purple one. The orange one is probably Ayanami's."

And indeed, the usually strict class representative leaned past the handrails, raised her arms into the air and shouted: "You can do this! Do your best!"

Touji stared at her for a third of a second.

Looks like she wasn't always bossy, at least not 24 hours a day... right now, she practically had a caring, nurturing quality about her.
"We trust in you!" Touji joined in, which prompted most of the class to break out in various kinds of cheering, with those with longer reaction times taking until Kensuke's "You're the greatest!"

Nagato was far too self-conscious to start shouting at loud, but did hesitantly rise his arm and wave as the Evangelions stomped past them, sporting a bit of genuine enthusiasm or even a faint smile towards the end.

After their arrival at the provisional base, Shinji paradoxically found himself with a fair amount of time on his hands, despite the general urgency of the situation, since his part in the operation couldn't begin until the last preparations were taken care of.

So, he stuffed himself back into his school uniform, and tried walking around the perimeter for a bit to kill the time.

It didn't help much.

Seeing the numerous technicians work on all these unique, delicate and complicated arrangements did little to quell his unease, if not the exact opposite, for their sight didn't allow him to forget, not even for a second, that he would very soon be responsible for all of their lives, and all of their efforts – whether their hard work would bear fruit was all up to him, and he couldn't help but feel stunned by the weight of that undeniable certainty.

It was just as hard as it was to assemble the electronics in this time frame, as it was easy to fill it with funereal brooding.

Somehere along the way Shinji decided to follow Misato's suggestion and try to catch some sleep in some quieter corner of the bunkers, but it was futile, in part because of his growing anxiety regarding the battle, but also because he'd already spent most of the afternoon in bed, if not exactly by choice.

Still, when they did ultimately call him in for the final briefing, he felt no relief.

"Look over there, Shinji-kun! That's our new positron rifle I told you about. We're going to use this to break through the enemy's AT-field."

"But... it was never intended for real combat, right? How do we know it won't just explode?" the young EVA pilot asked, uncertainly.

"According to our calculations, it should be able to handle the strain, but I want to be honest with you." Dr. Akagi replied. "If this works out, it will be the first time in history that such amounts of energy have been channeled into a single device. Compared to this array, the Large Hadron Collider is a children's toy. No one can say if the conduits, the capacitor or the barrel will be up to the task before we fire the first shot."

Shinji swallowed.

This was already starting out great.

"I will now inform you of your roles in this operation!" Misato continued. "Shinji-kun?"

"Yes?"

"You will be the gunner in Unit One."
"Yes, Ma'am."

"Rei?"

"Yes?"

"You will be the defense in EVA 00."

"Understood."

"Although Unit One is not completely repaired yet, we need to do it this way because Shinji-kun has a higher synch ratio with Unit One. This operation calls for utmost precision." the scientist explained. "You also need to take into account that the rifle doesn't fire in a perfectly straight line. At this scale, it is going to be influenced by earth's rotation, magnetic and gravitational field. This is important because you absolutely must strike the angel's core in a single shot."

"But how do I tell where it is?"

"When the angel takes its attack stances, it reveals a peculiar structure in its center. We believe that it is the core. We have already inputted a target recognition program into your interface. All you have to do is to follow the on-screen prompt and pull the trigger when the indicators meet in the center. The computer will handle everything else.

But since the power supply system we're using is so complicated, your EVA won't have much leeway to move. You will need to remain in sniping position no matter what."

"So dodging is impossible..." Shinji realized, visibly disconcerted.

"Right."

"And what happens if I miss and the enemy shoots back?"

"Don't concern yourself with unnecessary thoughts. Just focus on destroying the target in one shot."

"So I have one shot...or it's all over..."

Then good night!

Shinji had never trusted his reflexes very much, let alone under such pressure.

In theory, awareness of the high stakes involved in this venture should have made him more cautious and prudent, if anything, but in practice, this reality involved the limitations of the uncertainty principle.

This stress level alone was enough to make any outcome that didn't involve a massive failure of royal proportions downright unattainable.

His salvation, temporary as it was, came in the shape of a high and fragile voice whose owner posed a question that should have been superfluous after the previous explanations:

"And my task... will be to protect EVA 01, correct?"

It was almost like she deliberately wanted to remind him that she still there.

That he wouldn't be alone.
But that's it. Only almost.

He could no longer even tell whether he was just trying to convince himself of just that, reading things into a simple request for confirmation to retroactively rationalize his decision to get himself back into this crazy flurry of harsh noise and dazzling light.

What reason would she have to be worried about him, after all?

"Yes." Misato stated, closing the open question and shutting down the tentative field lines tingling-warm tension it left in the air. "Get yourselves dressed."

The provisional base came complete with a provisional wardrobe, small, bunker-like, situated in a re-purposed vehicle, and – this being the issue – with only a green, half-translucent curtain to separate the boys' from the girls' lockers.

Shinji got it over with as swiftly as he could, and subsequently preoccupied himself with folding his uniform, and even his socks and underpants with meticulous care, mostly as an exercise to calm his threadbare nerves; At the touch of a button, the initially loose-fitting fabric of his plug suit tightened around his thoroughly unimpressive body.

He still didn't look particularly confident.

By contrast, Rei had simply undiscerning dumped her uniform in a artless pile on the ground.

Her dress was already sprawled before her feet, and her blouse followed shortly after.

Even her bra was carelessly thrown to the floor.

Next, she plucked her panties (pure white, like most of what she seemed to own in terms of underwear) off her buttocks and let them slide down her thin, but subtly curved, marble white legs and stepped out of it, leaving it, too, just where it had fallen.

"We might-" only when he attempted to strike up a conversation did he realize that he was staring yet again and shamefully averted his eyes even though she probbly wouldn't notice from behind the curtain.

Unobserved, Rei pulled the plug suit's rubbery fabric over her flawless body.

"We might both be dead by tomorrow morning..." Shinji speculated, dejected. He still didn't have the slightest bit of faith in the possibility that he might actually succeed, so he was all the more shocked by the clear, firm answer he received: "No."

"You won't die." Rei announced, determined. The plug suit tightened around her body and shrank her silhouette behind the curtain to a very distinctive shape.

"Because I will protect you."

The sound of her steps, much like her silhouette, disappeared in the distance behind the green curtain, until the opening mechanism of an automatic door could be heard.

Once it closed behind her, Shinji was left in silence, contemplating whether he was even worth protecting.

He didn't think so.
"These messages were left at our public affairs bureau. They're for you."

Surprised, and somehow still disbelieving, Shinji visually inspected the small audio device, hesitating to take it out of Misato's hands.

It probably had to be something important if Misato had gone through the trouble to cut him off on his way to the boarding platforms, even though he couldn't imagine who could possibly have left this for him.

Warily, he pressed down on the "play" button.

"It's me, Suzuhara. Ikari... no, I should probably be calling you by your first name by now. Shinji. We trust in you!"

"This is... Mitsurugi. I'm certain that you... will be victorious, Ikari-san."

"Hi, this is Aida! Ikari, show 'em what you're made of!"

With the moment of truth approaching, the isles of Japan went dark.

One light after another turned itself off, one window after the other, city after city; Even a certain penguin observed in astonishment how the darkness spread beyond his familiar living room window, until only the milky way remained as the last source of light.

The various underground shelters were no exception here, millions of people found themselves sitting in the darkness with questioning looks, waiting for the state of emergency to be lifted, including Touji and Kensuke.

They had already done what little was within their might, everything else was up to Shinji and Rei.

They could only hope that their contribution had been enough to make a difference.

After everything was said and done, Shinji and Rei found themselves on their boarding platforms next to their respective EVAs, sitting far up in the clouds above the brightly glowing structures of the provisional base, two lonely silhouettes beneath the starry canopy.

While Shinji was sitting cross-legged, Rei had all her limbs pulled close to her body.

He found the presence of the huge gap between them regrettable, but he didn't know what he would have done differently if it hadn't been there.

In the end, the precipice between them wasn't purely physical in nature.

Lost in thought, Shinji once again found himself silently observing his comrade from the distance, this girl that hadn't ceased to mesmerize him for the past few weeks.

For most of this time, he'd had this impression of her as a fragile being he wished to protect, but now, she wound up being the one pledging to protect him.

Not that this should be particularly surprising: Despite her delicate, sickly-looking exterior, this girl had already shown him what she was made of back when they first met. Fear seemed unknown to her, and many of the things she had been willing to do in the short time they knew each other left little doubt of her boundless inner strength and determination.
In the last two days, Shinji had learned so many new things about her, and at the same time, he was well aware that he still knew nothing at all, but there were at least two things he was perfectly certain of:

That this silent, solitary girl was worthy of all the respect and admiration he could possibly produce from his tainted dishonest heart, and that he wished from the depths of his soul to be like her, that he might one day, in a distant, faraway future measure up to her strength and determination, her ability to simply go and carry out what he knew had to be done even if it would be less than pleasant, but also her capacity for loyalty and devotion, that he might be able to give of himself, maybe not for a big abstract cause, but at least for an important person, and to her way of neither resenting nor judging when he could only produce a deficient imitation of apathy.

She was the first person who ever showed him any degree of understanding without demanding anything in return, and yet, she had also managed to gift a thoroughly useless person like him with the feeling of being needed for once in his life, that he might be capable of doing something, anything to genuinely benefit other people.

For these two things alone, she would always hold a special place in his heart, even if none of this had been her intention... and she would most likely never know.

There was still a large, large distance separating them.

Still... If he should fail now, if he should bring about the end of the world, he was grateful to have seen her one last time.

But there was one more thing Shinji wanted to know before they would go into battle side by side: "Say, Ayanami... why are you an EVA pilot?"

She paused to think first, almost as if she had never considered this question before, at least not in this particular form.

When she did, however, present an answer at last, there was not a speck of doubt in her voice:

"...because of my bonds."

"...bonds?"

"Yes. It's my bond."

"...with my father?"

"...with everyone."

"You are very strong, Ayanami..." Shinji admitted in a tone between serious admiration and open shame about his own inadequacies. But Rei herself didn't see it as anything to be proud of: "I'm just doing what I'm here for. I have nothing else."

Shinji reacted with deep perturbation.

Did he say something to upset her again, or- he didn't know. He had no idea what exactly she was specifically referring to, but he knew that just hearing her say that filled his chest with a heavy lump of bitter sadness.

'I have nothing else'... that sounded far too much like his own feelings...
He didn't want her to feel something like this, she shouldn't have to, he couldn't see how a
downright awe-inspiring person like her could possibly deserve to feel the way he did all too often.
But what could he possibly say? A complete outsider like him... If he could, he would have
preferred to grab her hand and never let go of it (at the very least, that had been somewhat helpful
when Misato did it with him), but that was impossible.

Even if she had been within his reach, he would never dare to approach her.

Just what could someone like him ever really do for her?

"It is time. We must depart." Rei declared before he even found the time to ponder this question.
She hadn't finished speaking when she rose to her feet and straightened herself up, covering part of
the lunar disk like a white, impregnable tower sparkling in the moonlight, reminding him once
again of why he ever so often felt so tiny and insignificant before her.

The pale moonshine turned out to be the perfect lighting for her, it seemed like it could make all of
her essence visible with one glance.

Shinji couldn't help but to pause his thoughts just to marvel at her - This image of Rei in the
moonlight was more beautiful than any sight he had ever witnessed in his life so far.

This was obviously not the first time he had seen her with fairly revealing clothing (or none at all),
but most of this time had been spent contemplating various oddities of her behavior and relations,
or panicking because of her unclothed state, so he never really paused to really notice that while she
was many other things, she was also beautiful.

Her slim legs, which some might have found lacking in substance, but, in Shinji's opinion, radiated
a certain elegance; Her stance, upright and determined, ready to succeed in her objective at any
cost, her breast, slightly below average in size, but firm and taut, her butt, small yet feminine, still
retaining a rounded, childlike quality, her supple hips every bit as curved as they should be... utmost perfection, but also, a beauty of a potentially very ephemeral sort -

Holding his father's old glasses, she preceded her departure with one last "Farewell", immediately
taking Shinji back to her earlier answers, and the thought and associations those provoked just
exasperate his feeling of being close to falling apart spontaneously, speechless and unheard within
his self-inflicted halo of silent darkness, holding back unshared words that chore to burst out in
fireworks, and all the more unable to keep her from saying any more of these horrible, sad things or
the corresponding thoughts that gave rise to them, not when he couldn't even force his own
thoughts to make sense, or stay on the trails he had intended for them...

And just like this, with a brief session of thinking, he had found a wealth of new reasons to hate
himself, as much as some critics might argue that a bunch of them were just cheap rehashes of the
same old, of which there is seldom anything new under the sun.

He must not fail.

For her sake, as well.

Ultimately, the steady trickle of seconds, cruel in both its steady advance and sudden arrival,
unavoidably reached the dreadful, viscous moment when the battle was a few effusive instants
away from demanding its due respect as the undeniable, tangible reality of the present moment, and
Shinji was already long since trapped inside the entry plug, deep within the EVA's flesh, away
from all exits and boarding platforms.
Struggling to harness this last certain opportunity to gather his thoughts and concentrate, he had leaned backwards until he almost vanished into his chair, closing his eyes in a forced attempt to calm himself down.

He mustn't miss.
He mustn't run away.

It was all up to him now.

He had only one shot, and it had to be dead on target.

And the moment when he would have to do this was right now, as announced by a high-pitched acoustic signal.

"Shinji-kun... I know how much effort it took you to even agree to participate in this. For that alone, I am grateful."

He absorbed each of her words like drops of nectar and ambrosia, hoping that this humble stockpile would be sufficient to appease his fear, perhaps not completely, but just long enough.

"Operation Yashima begins now!" He then heard her order.

In that same instant, the bunker was bristling from all the typing and coordinating – Dr. Akagi, Hyuuga, Ibuki, Aoba, the elder Mitsurugi, and many other technicians, like the tree young women that shared the bunker with them, one with straight, straight cut chin-length dark hair, another with a more natural, fluffy bob, and the last with a somewhat androgynous figure and her hair strictly tied back into a ponytail, they all had their hands full with work.

Even commander Ikari and Fuyutsuki, who had stayed behind at headquarters and occupying their usual spots on the unusually vacant command bridge, were solemnly observing the events on the main screen.

Practically no time after the various technicians had finished its assembly, the components of the energy supply systems were being activated one after another – So far, everything seemed to be going alright or at least staying inside the expected parameters, including the countdown that had sprung into existence just one undefined time span ago, seeping into his consciousness only when it was already in progress.

Shinji was audibly inhaling and exhaling, growing more nervous by the second.

He had to strike it down in one single shot... or it was all over.

The end of the world was imminent ....and only he could stop it...

The next phase of the plan was set into motion – continuous fire from automatic turrets, intended to lure the enemy into the offensive, make it reveal its core – and distract it, if such a thing was possible.

As expected, the simple rockets were hardly any challenge for the angel; Its continuous flow of transformations eagerly performed the crassest order of sacrileges against common sense and euclidean geometry.

Meanwhile, the lively exchange of hermetic techno-babble all over the provisional base, impenetrable as it may have been to Shinji, had resulted in most of the energy being moved exactly
where they wanted it; the loading sequence for the particle gun was beginning, the sight devices being deployed, one the size of a car for EVA 01, and a smaller pendant inside Shinji’s entry plug.

Discouraged, Shinji observed the wild dance of the on-screen indicators and the virtually invincible Angel beyond.

This whole undertaking had gotten into motion much faster than he could even begin to properly comprehend the vast magnitude of implications connected to this surreal spectacle, a level of importance and weight he couldn't even properly grasp because his imagination was insufficient to give it form.

"...I wish I had Ayanami's determination... I don't even have the slightest bit of faith that I can actually do this. What am I even doing here, and why is it me doing it? Protecting humanity?! What does that even mean...?"

The time to figure out the answer was a luxury he didn't have. All the energy produced by every single power plant in this country, all the efforts of every single person who had ever worked on this... it all converged on his shoulders and pressed the breath out of his chest.

"FIRE!" Misato ordered.

Simultaneously, both triangular indicators in the interface united in the shape of a star.

"Massive energy surge inside the target!"

Shinji pulled the trigger.

The beam sped past the land like an avalanche of light, melting a few unfavorably placed pylons and frameworks straight into oblivion.

But the angel was far from oblivious about the concentration of energy that had been swelling in the distance, and swiftly formed back to its hourglass-like configuration, dispatching another jet of radiant light.

Upon contact, both beams circled each other until they were entwined to a single connection of pure light, but that state didn't persist for too long, since the particles that made up the beams
influenced each other with their charges and the electromagnetic fields they created – The angel's
beam barely missed the refuge of humanity and crashed into a nearby mountain, blowing a gigantic
pillar of light into the sky and raining thick sprinkles of lava upon the landscape.

The beam from Shinji's weapon was a bit luckier: It broke through the angel's AT-field, all
according to the calculations, burning a swath of destruction through its innermost – And at once,
Shinji was made to realize that he was fighting flesh and blood, not some mineral automaton –
Unlike its predecessors, its hard, strictly geometric structure and strictly methodical behavior like
its indiscriminate attacks and slow, but steady drilling could easily be misconstrued into a distinctly
inorganic, even mechanical impression, but now, after he had struck the creature at its center, there
could be no doubt, for it reacted very much like any average animal would react to a deep injury –

A blood-curdling, screeching noise somewhere between chalk starching along a whiteboard and a
wailing human impact echoed through the night, accompanied by an apparently involuntary
transformation into a mass of asymmetric, chaotic spikes that broke out from the angel's outline in
a matter of seconds, burnt-out black, only retaining their characteristic blue color in their center,
almost like the angel was in too much pain to bother bringing it along.

It was a scream that could not only be heard, but also very much felt, throwing the air into violent
vibrations that reverberated in every fiber of those unfortunate enough to witness it firsthand.

The angel was ostensibly wounded.

But was it a mortal wound?

The unearthly messenger, a being that was never intended to ever touch the ground, could no
longer maintain its levitation and sank; From the middle that had been the target of Shinji's positron
beam, blood spurted forth like a geyser, a whole supernova rushed out of the angel's body, spraying
entire city districts full of crimson.

"Did we just win?" Misato asked.

Every pair of eyes and every flock of sensors, be it in the provisional bunker or central command,
immediately darted to the angel's physical wound, which in the strictest, most concrete sense
consisted of a cylindrical entrance canal and the bloody, shattered crystalline flesh around it.

Those cracks looked pretty much irreparable – but they weren't.

With shocked, wide open eyes, the NERV employees inside the bunker watched as the supposed
shard arranged themselves back into one plane and connected.

Even the gaping hole in-between closed up completely without even leaving the slightest blemish,
and beneath, the core: red, round, and unscathed – Shinji had barely grazed it.

Someone with a stronger desire or capacity to make the world conform to their model might have
explained this all away with bad luck or a minuscule error in their timing, but Shinji could not deny
the first thing his instincts told him, simply because he did not have the time or the strength to stuff
that impression away –

The lingering certainty that his opponent had seen him,

that demanded him to acknowledge the fellow mind that was peering at him from beyond the
mountains – It was apparent that the angel's attack was never meant to hit them in the first place...
instead, its primary purpose must have been to divert NERV's particle beam, and be it ever so
slightly.

Not only had the angel seen their attack coming despite the steady bombardment to distract it and their position far outside its firing perimeter, it had been able to anticipate that its AT-field alone wouldn't be enough to shield it from the beam, and initiated precursory actions to protect itself...

This thing was highly intelligent, and Shinji's bungled attack had just told it where it needed to aim if it wanted to get rid of all its problems really quick.

He knew he would screw this up.

He had known all along.

The angel didn't waste a single second – at first, it folded itself back into its preferred, octahedral form to gather its strength...and then, it got ready for the coup de grâce, and twisted upon itself to produce a gigantic, star-like shape whose size needed to be multiplied through several iterations of the same motions.

It was as if a new sun had been lit in the very center of the lightless night; The angel had no intention of leaving anything half-finished, and thus chose the simplest, most direct path between itself and its enemy: A straight line.

The medium sized mountain unlucky enough to be situated right on that line melted in seconds, fleeing in a wave of fervid lava, away from the sheer boundless energy striving to evaporate it.

The earth beneath the provisional base shook as the components in bedrock beneath them changed into substances with other physio-chemical properties in a cascade of reactions fueled by the immense heat; Where the light directly touched the ground, the stones simply disintegrated, sending the more tenacious chunks flying across the landscape, as if banished by a decree of the heavens. Tanks flew through the air, various facilities sunk into the molten ground, materials shattered from the thermic shocks alone, bunker windows broke, welcoming certain death along with the shards.

If the entire provisional base didn't instantly evaporate along with the several hundred NERV employees in it, then only because it was situated at the back of the mountain – The angel had been aiming for the summit, precisely targeting the source of the positron beam whose deadly powers it had only barely escaped.

Up there, the world as we knew it was about to disintegrate and dissolve, leaving behind puddles of liquid metal; The atmosphere itself was red, burnt and ionized, the arrangement of the laws and forces suitable for humans had broken down to the point that small rocks spontaneously began to float freely into what was left of the air.

Further down, on the side of the mountain that was turned away from the angel, known physics were still sufficiently intact to allow for the existence of small bunkers – and the one containing Misato, Dr. Akagi and their underlings had miraculously been among the lucky ones to remain in one piece.

Sure, most people inside of it had been thrown off their feet, the lighting wasn't working, the alarm systems didn't cease their beeping and it would probably take a while until the patch of ground just outside the entrance had cooled enough for a human being to survive leaving its confines, but they were here, they were still alive.

Although Misato had been standing freely between the consoles and therefore keenly felt the brunt
of the tremors, she forced herself off the ground immediately.

"...the... energy supply system?" she asked, not wasting a second.

"It's still usable. We're already recharging!" Hyuuga immediately reported – having held on to his console, he was still left in his chair.

"...and what about the positron canon?"

"Still operational, barrel cooling already in progress... but no one knows whether it can withstand a second shot..."

That was enough.

It had to be enough.

"Don't bother with the verification! We've got no choice, we have to try again..." Misato concluded.

"Shinji-kun, are you alright? You need to get Unit One back into sniping position!"

But all that could be heard over the com line was uncontrolled sobbing.

Where you would once have found elaborate structures of metal and concrete forming a trench for the EVA and a socket for the particle gun, there were only scorched earth and the red glow of molten rock. It was true, the gun itself was still intact, but it was just about the only thing around here that could be described as such, probably owing to its immediate proximity to Unit One and its AT-field on the immediate moment of contact – not that it provided more than a subtle mitigation.

EVA 01 itself had been knocked back a few hundred meters by the force of the strike, which was probably what had saved the life of its pilot – had they been exposed to the beam for the full duration of its shot, both he, EVA 01 and the positron rifle would have melted into unrecognizable puddles by now.

But even so, the outer layers of EVA 01’s armor had not escaped without their partially molten patches, and while the god-machine had withstood both the attack’s kinetic energy as well as the heat of the beam itself, Shinji had felt all of these things all too keenly, as if the slightly scorched surface of the still-steaming cyborg were his own skin.

He had missed his target...

He failed, as he knew he would, and-

-the terrible, terrible pain...

Everything he had feared had taken place before his very eyes, before all of his senses, all roads leading to his brain.

Incapable of forming even the tiniest clear thought, he sat there, his legs brought as close to his body as the fixtures of the entry plug would let him, his arms clasped around his body, helplessly sobbing in the dark as the angel's bright, white radiance burned in every square centimeter of his skin.

Tears of desperation gathered in the corners of his eyes.

In the end, all pretty words of this world didn't make a difference; Everything still went exactly like it did the last time... So many people had done their best, Misato, Dr. Akagi... everyone...
They all had trusted in him, and he had still messed up his one shot.

How could he ever expect this to turn out any way other than this?

This, all over again...

Quite possible that Misato and the others would use their last breaths to curse him, and soon after, the world would be left in ruins, every single person on this planet would die and would all be his fault.

And the worst was that while absolutely nothing could be done to stop it (Misato was telling him to try again, but they both already knew that it would never work – even if their equipment didn't blow up on him, he couldn't see ho the outcome would be any different), he would be left with a good few minutes to ponder his own misery and the scope of consequence of that one missed shot: He would have to live until he died, right where he started, paralyzed by fear and dread, painfully aware of his own helplessness.

All he could do was sob – even though he knew full well that there was no one to hear his cries and come for him, no one who would even consider getting him out of he-

"The pilot of Unit One is hereby relieved of duty. The pilot of Unit Zero will take his place."

Shinji’s eyes, which until now had been tightly shut, were suddenly wide open, so far it seemed more like an abrupt switching of states than a process that required time.

That voice... He would have picked out this deep, matter-of-fact-ly voice among thousands, and yet, he would have expected to hear any of these thousand unknown voices before vaguely hoping for this familiar one.

It had come a long distance, reaching the boy's soul after a lengthy journey through his eardrums and those distinctly mammalian auditory bones, following a path alongside the slopes of the mountains, up from the depths of the earth – all the way from the lips of his father.

"Ikari!" the subcommander called, clearly alarmed, spinning around sharply to face his superior.

Fuyutsuki didn't have to tell him just how unfavorable the odds for a successful pilot switch were at this time, now, with the enemy preparing to finish them off at any moment, and its probe not too far above their heads, or how unlikely they were to win this battle with only one EVA and no one left to carry the defense shield.

Even still, Ikari was adamant: "We have no choice. The current pilot is incapable of carrying out the task."

That just couldn't be changed – The last few battles had been decided through what outwardly resembled random factors, but to him and other initiates was recognizable as the stern hand of predetermination; but that was as far as they could go with the current state of affairs: Barely fulfilling the tally. These were the limits of the Third Child's capacity.

Regardless, he never had any real alternative to using this unreliable, frightened boy - because of the great plan, because there were no other weapons available, because any other course of action would be even more strategically unsound. From the beginning, that child had been a contingency plan, the least efficient option except anything else currently at his disposal – that is, until now. Ikari Gendo had always been a rather pragmatic person with a straight, firm gaze at the big picture, at organizations as a whole – and as such, he had been able to accept the fact that he had (or saw?) no choice but to sit back as the child that had been entrusted to him by the woman he loves
screamed his lungs out.

But...

He couldn't do this again, not right afterward.

"Please reconsider!"

The commander's only ostensible outward reaction to seeing a he window with the face of the operations division leader open up on the main screen was a quiet, questioning sound.

"He hasn't run away yet! Don't you think we should leave it to him to decide whether he wants to continue or not? Please, have some faith in your own son.

I trust in the pilot of Unit One."

Ikari didn't expect his subordinate to speak with such complete conviction;

Leaving the boy in her care had not been a mistake.

This whole situation stirred vague, long-buried recollections of days long gone.

Was it true? Had he underestimated his son?

It was quite possible. He had already failed this child in so many other ways...

...and that woman seemed so very sure of her cause.

"Alright. Proceed at your own discretion."

"Thank you very much, Sir!"

Shinji could hardly believe what he had just witnessed.

Misato... the others... even his father...

They really believed he could do this!

He of all people.

They... they really believed in him.

They trusted him!

Were he not in this dire situation, and still feeling pain, he could have cried just from this alone.

He... was not alone.

He had never been alone out here.

Misato... Dr. Akagi... All the Technicians... His friends and classmates, too. All of them trusted him! They had all done what they could – even if that was little more than to cheer him on – so that his burden would be lessened, so that he'd only have to press a button to finish this.

And they... they actually believed he could.

Even now, Shinji couldn't believe his own blindness, he had been distracted by his own fear, his
own pain, and even now, he found himself confronted with the ugly truth about the useless coward
that stared back at him from the mirror every single morning:

He still didn't believe he had any chance of succeeding and not wasting everyone's efforts... but he
owed it to Misato, Ayanami and the others to at least try.

He had to show them all that he didn't want to leave them alone either, that he at least wanted to do
his part as well, even if he couldn't promise them anything, even if all was already lost. At the very
least, he wanted to show them that he did appreciate their faith and effort, so that... so that they
might hate him a little bit less when everything inevitably went south.

So that he might hate himself a little bit less.

He had to try this, he had to...!

Shinji knew that he would never forgive himself if he remained frozen in terror now, now that his
father was watching him, even beginning to trust him with such an important task, now that he was,
for the first time since he could remember, forming real expectations for him, like... a proper
father.

Scratching together every tiny quantum of courage and determination that he had ever possessed in
any crevice of his being, Shinji set himself into motion, still very much in pain, panting loudly and
filled with dread, and clumsily reached forward with a hand that was separated from the fabric of
the plugsuit by a thin layer of sweat, until he finally rasped the control yoke and held on to it like it
was his own wretched life.

He rose from the back of his seat, his tears of joy and despair still ticking to the corners of his eyes,
pulling himself forward with his arms because the rest of him hadn't finished being frozen up in
fear.

All the people that he had once lightly accused of not believing he could even accomplish what
they were asking them, all those in front of whom he had openly admitted that he didn't know
where to get the strength to fight this war...

In the end, they very words, of all things, ended up being what he derived that strength from,
draining syllable after syllable like some desperate mosquito.

"Shinji. We trust in you!"

With his teeth gritted so hard it hurt, he clawed the EVAs hands into the closest bits of bedrock
that still seemed halfway solid, using it to pull the still steaming violet titan out of the half-molten
pit it had been stuck in, barely managing to catch himself so he wouldn't collapse onto the ground
all over again.

"Hi, this is Aida! Ikari, show 'em what you're made of!"

Groaning with exertion, he forced the singed bio-machine to crawl across the pulp that once
constituted the ground, straight through all of the destruction left by the angel's last attack,
dragging this aching body that wasn't his own with sheer force of will.

"I trust in the pilot of Unit One."

Without anything he could have used as an improvised crutch, he brought the Evangelion back
onto its feet in defiance of everything his senses were currently trying to tell him, and picked up the
positron canon that was enormous even when compared to the Evangelion.
"Shinji-kun?" At the time Misato's voice reached him, it was still brimming with the same confidence.

"The entire energy output of the Japanese isles... all our hopes and dreams... and the future of humanity and every other living thing on the face of this planet... are now in your hands. Good luck."

"Understood." Shinji affirmed, pulling on his control levers one last time to fully place the particle gun in its final firing position.

They told him that he would have to aim the gun manually this time, but his level of uncertainty and stress was such that this didn't even feature as a substantial increase – No time for that: The provisional base had just received reports that the angel's drill had breached the roof of the geofront.

All of NERV HQ must be shaking—and so were Shinji's hands.

It was all or nothing now. After half a second of shaky attempts, he managed to aim the positron cannon at the angel.

The few seconds between the present and the moment the particle gun would be ready to use felt like an eternity – he wanted to be able to shoot already so he could end this fast—

"We're detecting another energy surge inside the target!"

"Damn it!"

Oh no.

Please no, please no, please not now... not now, when he was finally—

Shinji didn't even get the time to properly greet the incoming swelling of radiance with an appropriately contorted expression of horror before it broke loose from the angel's star shaped body, melting its way through rock and stone... but for some reason, not through the armor of EVA 01.

The only thing that reached Shinji was the blinding lights, but not the beam of high-energetic particles that endowed it its deathly power.

Struggling against that remained component alone, Shinji forced himself to open his eyes at least a little – and, in defiance to the contrary instinct, widened them to the brink when he realized just what had happened.

Instead of hitting their mark, the rays of deadly subatomic projectiles scattered all around him, numerous streams of incandescence simply passed him by, fanning out like the delta of a river without even grazing him, because at their nexus, armed with an ridiculously large, spaceship-shaped shield and garish orange armor, was EVA 00.

And while the pilot of the metal-coated meat colossus would probably always see it as the simple fulfilling of her duty, Shinji couldn't help but see it as it was: She had just saved his life, and with
the thunder of divine retribution, she held back anything that could have stained the absolute clarity of an inevitable conclusion: He was not alone, not even on the battlefield.

"AYANAMI!"

Now she had done it. If he hadn't been before, now he was certain that his admiration for this girl would never cease.

There she was, boldly standing in the way of a fiery avalanche that could swallow them both at any given moment, protecting him with only a shield that was already breaking apart, and all this because of the obligation she felt towards each and every person she had crossed paths which until this day.

She had completely surrendered herself to the mercy of his ability to to this storm of fire; Hers was also one of the many lives that were currently depending on him.

The time had finally come; The time for him to add his own contribution to the great work, so that everyone else's would not go to waste.

He mustn't disappoint them, not now, when he had finally seen how they were really willing to support him.

He mustn't disappoint himself, now that he finally got the opportunity he had been waiting for... a n opportunity to prove himself to Ayanami, a chance to protect her... and not just her, but all of this small world, this little... home he had built for himself since the time of his arrival. He wanted to protect them with all of his strength, however small it might be.

Impatient, he worked at adjusting the cannon's aim.

"C'mon... C'mon..."

His initially pleading voice gradually transforming into a commanding tone.

"C'mon... C'mon!"

"Come on!"

Once the finder sight indicators clicked into place, Shinji didn't waste a second a pulled the trigger.

The positron beam tore through the enemy's ray of devastation, drew rights of electrified water around it as it passed over the sea, and finally pieced the angel straight in the middle, met with the sound of breaking glass.

The messenger still tried to save himself by folding back into his preferred, diamond-like shape so he might expel the fire, but it was no use.

The shot had gone all the way through, and quickly revealed why the angel was forced to separate its crystalline flesh from its core to fire its weapon – The finer structures that composed the angel's body might not be what we might call "molecules" or "atoms", but their particles were still liable to change their energetic states and dissolved their bonds if excess energy was available, so whatever it was reacted with itself and the surrounding atmosphere, and the resulting gaseous chemicals rushed out of the molten exit wound as flames.

Ramiel screamed, a sharp, grating shriek more grating than the last, the asymmetric spikes of the form accompanying it much wilder and larger – and then, he fell silent forever.
Multiple craters broke into the angel's surface, ugly, misshapen indentations, and in the walls of the largest one – multiple reflections of the core.

No matter what unearthly material the crimson sphere had been composed of, nothing living could withstand the direct contact with such extreme amounts of energy – there was a delay, but in the end, it simply burst, spraying the inner part of the spikes that had still remained blue with the bright red of its liquefied remains.

The second shot... had been lethal.

The probe that had caused them so many problems simply disintegrated just a little more than ten meters above the tip of the pyramid, baptizing NERV headquarters in a waterfall of blood.

The spikes, too, began to decay, first slowly and then at all once, starting with quickly multiplying rivulets of blood raining out of each of them, spraying out drops of the material with a startling gentleness, until finally, the hollowed out outline of the angel collapsed in a matter of seconds, smearing a streak of rainbow across the night sky as the last hollow remains refracted the moonlight as they were broken down into their components – the flying fortress had fallen.

But Shinji had no time to indulge this spectacle, because towards the end, Ayanami Rei, this fascinated, inexplicable, determined girl, had been protecting him with the bare body of her Evangelion after the last remainders of the shield had long since melted out of her hands, blocking the path of the angel's attack towards the bitter end.

Now that the task was accomplished, EVA 00 crashed to the ground like a falling rock, its only motions mindless convulsions of pain, much of its brown flesh exposed after its many constricting layers of metallic armor had been thoroughly seared or molten away, and the molten cinders that remained of the earth beneath them after all of these high-energy reactions were all too glad to swallow the one-eyed giant as compensation, even more, the helpless EVA, parts of which were still glowing white-hot, was eagerly devoured by the hungry battlefield like a small child in a pit of quicksand.

Immediately, Shinji carelessly threw the positron cannon aside, and raced to pull at least half of the smoking Evangelion onto the halfway solid patch of rock he was standing on.

Next, he had to get her out of there as fast as possible – everything else could be explained later.

Incapable of thinking up anything better, he just drew his prog knife and used it to hack at the molten hatch until he had cut it free and revealed the EVA's mechanized spine, just where the entry plug was supposed to go in.

Thankfully, the part of the machinery that was supposed to eject the entry plug and expulse the overheated LCL was still functional, sparing Shinji from having to further dissect the EVA and risk possibly harming its pilot in the process.

As soon as EVA 00's entry plug, the outside of which was partially molten and hot enough to inflict the same on EVA 01's hand, was safely set down on the ground, Shinji exited his own EVA, and lept down from heights he would have been terrified of in any other context, from the plug to the sitting EVA's shoulder, down its arm and finally all the way to the ground, all without even really thinking about it –

At this point, his mind was concerned with one one thing, or rather, only one person.

Ayanami Rei.
For so long, he had been observing her and the peculiar world she lived in from the distance, for so long he had tried to get closer to her, all the while feeling like he was silently falling to pieces...

Now, he would finally be able to do something for her.

In haste, he turned the half-molten opening mechanism of the overheated emergency hatch, and it hurt like hell, just like it did when he used his Evangelion's hands to put the plug down in the first place, but he couldn't care less.

All he wanted to know was that she was alright.

The fight against the emergency hard was hard, but did bear fruit, and soon as it was out of the way, Shinji leaned into the darkness of the entry plug, where he found Rei's unmoving bone-white form lying in her control chair in the faint, silvery twilight of the moon.

"Ayanami! Ayanami!" he shouted into the murky gloom of the plug interior, increasingly anxious. "Are you alright? Please say something! AYANAMI!"

He couldn't make out any sort of reaction. What if she...!

No. She was moving.

The was a stirring in her thin fingers that had refused to let go of his father's glasses until the very end.

She was alive.

The rest of her sprang into motion as well; She weakly turned her head in his direction and opened her eyes.

He was the first thing she saw.

Shinji was completely overcome with emotion.

When he stepped into her entry plug, he could distinctly feel the tears of pure bliss accumulating ducts of limited, all the heat and salty sparkliness forcing itself out so vehemently it was almost painful.

She was alive.

In spite of all this...

Oh, by all gods and all celestial bodies, she was alive!

He was so hopelessly overwhelmed with feeling that he couldn't piece together anything to say in a situation like this, leaving him with no options other than to let these true, unprocessed feelings pour out as they were.

"Please... don't say any more horrible things like 'I have nothing else'..." he began.

Rei just looked at him with big eyes. "...and always this 'Farewell', as if we'd never meet again... That always makes me so sad..."

Shinji lovered his gaze, unable to get his sobbing under control.

As for Rei, she looked slightly confused, as if she genuinely didn't know what to do or say next.
She, too, seemed a little bit overwhelmed.

Carefully, she moved herself into an upright sitting position without ever taking her eyes off of Shinji.

Rei didn't think she fully understood what was happening, or where this strong reaction on his part was coming from, but he did seem really upset again, as she had been before, and she felt a discomfort at the sight.

"Why are you crying?"

He didn't seem to be able to answer.

Had she done something wrong?

Dejected, Rei averted her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to express myself in situations like this..."

Shinji looked up to her.

"How about a smile?"

Only now did she notice.

And it shocked her that she noticed only now.

The way he had leaned forward through the hatch, the devoted look in his midnight blue eyes, even that smile of deepest relief...

*Just like the commander.*

He had come here... because of her. To save her, to make sure she was alright, she alone, regardless of how many clones were floating around in some tanks in NERV's underground complexes... of course, the Third Child knew nothing of this, but that didn't change that the only ostensible reason for his tears was the simple fact that she was... not damaged, and that he was looking at her in a way that only one person had ever looked at her before... as if she were something _precious._

Just like the commander... and yet, _not_ like him.

The elder Ikari had created her and given her a purpose, but his son didn't have any _reason_ to worry about her, nor did he derive any benefit from her remaining intact...

Rei was almost a little shocked about this.

She felt reminded of the day he had taken her into his arms, so firm yet dilligent, and not cold at all, so very, very different from the metal floor of the umbilical bridge, handling her with great care, like her torn, malfunctioning body was something of unspeakable value.

At the moment, she had been far too preoccupied with the pain that filled her body and the possible task at hand to bother with less relevant sensations, but when she looked back, she hadn't been able to think of a reason back then, either...

And maybe that was why she had spent the empty moments of her days unwaveringly gazing at his back, from the very next moment she was wheeled past him in the sickbay hallway up to when she...
had watched him at the depart to his first confrontation with the sixth angel from the walkway near the walls of the launchpad room. Maybe that was why she had volunteered to alert him of the penultimate angel's attack, or why she had waited in front of his sickroom instead of just making her way there once he was reported to have regained consciousness – but she hadn't had any other tasks scheduled for his time, so she couldn't be sure.

What she was already sure of, however, was that this had to be a kind of bond she was not yet familiar with, one that would unavoidably shape them both however subtly and soon be another voice in the choir of her reasons for being where she was, already more so than others by simple virtue of having extended her existence or at very least spared her further downtime.

He had worried for her, and that... touched her.

So she showed it to him.

The beautiful, warm smile she reserved for a very select group of melancholy men with midnight blue eyes that had saved her life, and for whom she would be willing to give her own at any time, without a moment's hesitation.

Shinji could barely believe that she was actually smiling, at him, no less, and what a smile it was!

Thin and tentative, as if she wasn't quite sure if she was doing it right, but the expression in her eyes was proof that it genuine and heartfelt as anything could ever be.

It tinted his cheeks with the slightest glow of pink, and left him no choice but to return it tenderly. He offered his hand and the discolored patches in the rubber of his plug suit that had been left by the heat on his palm, and a bit hesitant and first but somehow still very deliberate, she offered hers in return.

As they sat in the darkness of entry plug, holding hands amidst the molten landscape, half sitting in a pool of LCL with the silvery gleam of the midnight moon high above even the towering figures of their Evangelions, Shinji knew in spite of all the strenuous ordeals he had been forced to endure today, this day would always remain a very important and even fond memory for him, one that could never be replaced.

Chapter End Notes

(1) It seems there has been an unexpected rush of followers since I posted the last chapter. Thanks, everyone. *blushes sheepishly*

(2) Sorry, new computer, new keyboard, I seem to need to press these new keys a bit harder. So I'd like to apologize for any random missing letters that the spell checker didn't find.

(3) Yes, that title is shamelessly stolen from a certain Naruto-Chapter, I'm certain Hinata wouldn't mind. *waves Hinata flag* XD Expect a chapter called "The gap between our power", too, although with somewhat less deadly sibling-rivalry and no actual siblings.

(4) One of the things that was important for me in this chapter was establishing the primary "seeds" of the various aspects of "how Shinji perceives Rei" so that I can work
on the individual threads from now on. First there is Rei as a confidante, who would be useless as such if she didn't bluntly say the truth to his face, but Rei's also a person who creates this space where she doesn't judge... which is, of course, in some ways entwined with/the basis of the next aspect, that is his perception of Rei as a stronger person who impresses him and... makes him want to measure up (See title. You could say that they all ultimately appeal to different, mutually exclusive sides/desires, but if you were to look for a common denominator between Misato, Asuka, Rei and Kaworu, it would be the ability to devote themselves completely. There's a too much for everything, and at least the girls fall under it, but of course, Shinji is seeing this from a position of humans generally wanting what they don't have, or think they don't have, like a naturally thin person telling someone with a tendency towards chubbiness, "I'd like to have your problems!", but more constructively.), and there's certainly, on the other side, protectiveness and a feeling of being needed, but – and that's the harder part to write and not get wrong – not this blunt, primal "Caveman protect little female!" thing, but a mix born from "compassion in a world that can't afford it", which is fairly characteristic for him, and, at this point of Shinji's journey easily slides into naivety, but could be tempered into something awesomer if he doesn't throw it away, and this feeling that for once in his life, there might be something where his presence might actually make a bit o a difference, any difference, tiny as it may be.

Fascination/mesmerized-ness is still there, of course, and was already beaten to death in the last chapter, and in some ways you could call it the cheapest aspect ("Duh, an unexplained weird girl with weird looks and stuff"), but it needs to be there for the... integration of everything. Anno once discribed love as "the motion of the spirit towards something it doesn't understand", and while one doesn't have to agree with that as all-encompassing, hm... What bugs me is that he doesn't specify if that motion is because, or inspite of the lack of understanding – Personally, I find the former too narrow (not encompassing things that are clearly love), the latter to wide (possibly including subsets that I would call not love), but that may be an actual difference in opinion and not a definition problem. But wether the definition is complete, I think both categories are definitely a thing, and I tried to include them here, both the deep fascination and the "running through a minefield to get to something good" You see a bit of that in most relationships in EVA, I think. It was even more important for me to show that... Rei was 'staring back'/taking an interest too from the other side, not being 'conquered'... while still keeping it subtler than some cheesy love at first sight thing, one of the impressive things of how this was handled in EVA was that you Shinji did NOT magically get her by walking on her like it so often happens in other anime (Although I do find naked embarrassed people as funny as the next person; It's the forcedness that is – at times – a problem.), but had to face a monster that terrified the shit out of him and pay some actual attention to what she says. The experience that IS technically possible to win over someone who was initially more hostile or at least apathetic ("hope that people can understand each other") is also important for Shinji's progression here. She was just supposed to have been sort of distantly curious before, taking into account that she probably had relatively few other "personal wishes" to act on in the less strictly defined parts of her rountine, with the latent empathy to the fact that he got nearly barbecued drowning out the previous annoyance. Rei II, as far as I have not completely misunderstood her, is simply not the grudge-keeping kind; It doesn't have to do specifically with Shinji at this point. Argh.

TL;DR: This is important to me and I really, really hope I didn't screw this up somehow, especially not in some twillightey-looking way.
15: [Hope]

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Nobody knows who I really am
I've never felt this empty before
And if I ever need someone to come along
Who's gonna comfort me
And keep me strong

We are all rowing in the boat of fate
The waves keep on coming and we can't escape
But if we ever get lost on our way
The waves will guide you through another day

-Rie Fu, 'Life is like a boat'

"Very well. This debriefing is concluded."

"In spite of all adverse conditions, the outcome of this operation has been largely satisfying."
Subcomander Fuyutsuki appended to his superior's laconic final summary. "If you don't mind, we will add a mention of your exceptional services in the planning and execution of this mission to your personnel file, Captain Katsuragi."

"Thank you, Sir." Misato replied curtly, standing upright across her superior's in their spacious office. "Alright then." Fuyutsuki continued. "The duties of cleanup, data evaluation and determining the extent of collateral damage will be the dubious pleasure of the technical division. You are dismissed."

"Yes, Sir."

As soon as the office door closed behind her, Misato allowed herself to drop the 'professional poker face' and surrendered to a hearty yawn.

It had to be about two in the morning by now... at the very least.

But she guessed she could be worse off – Ritsuko, Aoba and the others could probably count themselves lucky if they even got to look at a bed before dawn.

Misato was fortunate enough to belong to the operations division, which, as the name suggested, had only so much to do once the operation was completed.

The only task she still had ahead of her was to pick up the pilots from NERV's sickbay, where they should have been given a thorough checkup by now – only a routine measure, since they had both
seemed mostly unharmed when they had been retrieved – curiously, from one and the same entry plug.

Indeed, she found both of them already waiting on a bench in the hallway just outside the examination room, where a visibly tired physician explained to her that neither of them had sustained any actual, physical damage, and the commander was already informed. The First Child in particular had apparently gotten very lucky due to the combined factors of her relatively moderate synch ratio and her swift removal from her half-molten EVA.

At last, the man departed into the well overdue end of his shift, leaving it to Misato to remove the kids from his hallway.

Both of them were still in their plug suits, but when she threw them a closer look, she received an answer to a question that had been swirling around in her head for most of the debriefing – so that's where the commander's uniform jacket got to. He must have draped it over Rei's body at some point between her arrival at headquarters and their meeting itself.

The small girl could easily have disappeared into this piece of clothing, meant for a grown man of considerable stature.

For an instant, Misato could have sworn to have glimpsed a thin smile on her lips.

Shinji had been silently observing her until now, but he swiftly turned to face his guardian when he noticed that she was finally walking over to them.

"Shinji? Rei?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"As far as I've heard, the both of you should be okay, given a bit of rest. It's pretty late anyway. Take a shower and go home. I've arranged for you to be excused from any and all experiments for tomorrow – and obviously, school as well.

Shinji-kun, can you wait for me at gate number two?"

"Yes."

Now, at least two of the far too numerous doors in the pilot's shower room were being used – The doors did cover the most necessary and could be used to drape clothes over them so that you could technically leave your individual shower cubicle fully clothed, but Shinji would still have preferred to have a little more than a thin divider between himself and the next naked girl.

Theoretically, it could have been argued that there was nothing to her that Shinji hadn't seen yet, but that did very little to mitigate the inherent awkwardness of the situation.

Shinji had not exchanged particularly many words with her since the incident in the entry plug, but that as because there was no need for them – the silence had been one of understanding.

But then, his father had shown up at the infirmary.

At that point, Shinji had been sitting on a treatment couch with his plug suit removed down to his waist so the physician in charge could attach some electrodes to his upper body to measure something he didn't quite understand, and since the opposite side of the room contained a person of the opposite sex – Rei, to be exact – waiting for a similar procedure to be performed on her, a
foldable divider made of thick paper had been used to separate the couch in question from the rest of the room, so that Shinji could only discern her silhouette from where he was sitting – and that of his father, once he arrived.

After inquiring about the estimated usability of the pilots and in return received his answer through the folding screen, he turned to Rei and her alone to ask her about the battle.

Rei reported the events in a neutral, businesslike fashion, barely saying more than that the first shot had missed, that he had been put in charge of the defense, and that the target had been annihilated in the end.

Her heroic act of standing in the way of the angel's particle beam which she had eventually blocked with EVA 00's own body wasn't even deemed worth mentioning.

The commander's only comment on her brief resume was a curt "Good.", after which he remarked that it was also fortunate that she had remained unhurt.

Rei remarked that this was not extraordinary considering that the Third Child had quickly retrieved her from her Evangelion.

Shinji himself would have given a lot to be able to see their expressions right now, his mind racing with questions of what she might answer if his father should inquire further.

- but ultimately, all of that worrying was for naught when the elder Ikari's reaction turned out to be disappointingly terse:

"I see."

After that, he commented on how Rei was still drenched in LCL and inquired whether she wasn't cold.

When Shinji, now fully back in his plug suit because he didn't really have any other clothing at his disposition right now, was finally allowed to emerge from behind the folding screen to inform Rei that it was her turn now, he found the commander, who was already about to leave, one step away from the door frame.

The older man actually stopped and turned around to face his son – yet the words of praise that Shinji had naively expected for a second never came. All Ikari did was to look his son directly in the eyes, with a stare that could have drilled its way straight through his skull and broken through on the other side, before he turned and left without leaving behind a single word.

But when Shinji finally went to address Rei, he found her wrapped in a black jacket with golden border strips and the occasional green ornament – his father's uniform jacket.

Any uninformed outsider observing this scene might have easily mistaken him for Rei's father.

Shinji hadn't known what to feel, and this hadn't changed by the time his thoughts were called back to the present, ironically by Rei herself.

She was done showering and – this time, fortunately, orderly packaged into her school uniform – left her cubicle, carrying both her plug suit and her towel under her arm.

She was probably going to leave now – so, it naturally followed that he was supposed to say something if he wanted the shrinking of distance that had taken place between them this night to be a permanent one. Somehow he had expected that it would get significantly easier to talk to her now
that they had both saved each other's lives, but the real world didn't follow dynamics as simple as 'breaking the ice' or 'earning a relationship upgrade'.

Despite himself, he forced a shaky little "A-Ayanami...!" out of his throat.

She neither turned around nor made any other efforts to look in his direction, but that she stopped just where she had been standing right then established beyond doubt that she was listening – and he suddenly realized that he was expected to answer now, but had never thought about what exactly he was going to say.

His mouth was already opened in the preemptive motions of this maneuver, but no words would come out.

Rei just kept standing there, giving him no outward signs of any kind indicating whether she was getting impatient, or just expecting his next words, which either way defaulted to the conclusion that he was currently *making* her wait.

He had to say something... at least something simple.

"Uhm, good night."

Rei didn't answer.

Just as Shinji was wondering just where his hapless attempt fell on a scale between 'pretty awkward' and 'absolutely ridiculous', she set herself back into motion – did he just confuse her just now, or had she simply tired of standing round waiting for him to form coherent sentences?

At least, Shinji would leave this room educated about the dozens of light years between him and an understanding of this girl: Just as she reached the threshold, she paused again.

"See you later."

Three simple quiet words that weren't even spoken with particularly much emotion, but to Shinji, they held a wealth of meaning:

She had said 'see you later', not 'farewell'.

This time, her parting words didn't fill Shinji with this unmeasurable sad feeling that they would never meet again, but with some sort of unfamiliar warmth fueled by the certainty that this girl would continue to walk through her life in a slightly different way from now, that the events of this night had actually... mattered.

It ignited a hope within him that he never dared to feel before and still wouldn't dare to speak out loud: The thought that he could really make a difference in someone's personal world, that this place wouldn't simply go back to the way he left it if he were to vanish from it the next day.

"Yes... see you later, Ayanami!"

It was true.

He *would* see her again. He might have told Misato that he was only going to pilot the EVA 'just this once', but right now, he didn't feel an all too strong urge to leave, so he decided to just postpone those thoughts indefinitely and to keep going about his days without mentioning it – at least, for now.
He would stay and... give this all a try.

After all, he had just managed to get a little bit closer to the girl to whom his father readily showed that other side of himself... so maybe someday, somehow, he, too, might find a way to become a part of his personal world as well.

Still in deep thought, and, to be honest, finding his thinking facilities increasingly impaired by creeping fog of fatigue, Shinji found himself in the passenger seat of Misato's car after the two of them had finally departed on their drive home, absent-mindedly observing the limited strips of world which either the various street lights or the small blue car's headlights protected from total darkness.

Misato attempted to strike up a conversation.

"Poor thing! You're probably just about to pass out from exhaustion! Don't worry, we'll be home in just a few minutes, and then we can all finally indulge our beauty sleep! We've really earned it, haven't we?"

Shinji didn't really show much of a reaction, being far too preoccupied with his brooding on the events of today.

"No, for real, you have all the reasons to be proud of what you did today. You're a proper hero!" she assured in a light, playful tone of voice, smiling in the hope that he would at least look her reflection on the window in the eye.

Accepting that Shinji was unlikely to be moved by great displays of enthusiasm, Misato toned it down a bit.

"But seriously. Everyone here knows that you were very brave today, and that none of us would be here anymore if it wasn't for you. You have saved us all. You just need to have a little more faith in yourself. I'm certain that even your father must be proud of you for what you did."

"That's what I'd really like to believe, but..."

"But...?"

"I... I just don't want to talk about it right now, okay?"

For how could he do that if he wasn't even sure what to think of all this yet.

He just... would have to take his time to process all this.

As soon as he reached his room, Shinji let himself sink straight into his bed, following gravity like a falling stone – that he had even managed to change into some more loose-fitting clothes on the way was no less than a miracle.

He immediately fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, from which he didn't wake until the rays of the late midday sun had been caressing his face for a long time, finally reaching the precise angle needed for their full brightness to permeate his eyelids.

Tentatively beginning to move, he started out covering hairline with his forearm, casting a pleasant shadow over the rest of his face.
Only now did he open his eyes the slightest bit, initially directing them towards the ceiling.

He was wholly unaccustomed to be surrounded by such brightness at his time of awakening – instead, the Third Child was used to the pale color palette of the matutinal crepuscule, and this amount of light was more likely to summon up uninvited memories of his 'favorite' hospital room than to provide any sort of enjoyable experience. Contrary to the common reputation of his age group, Shinji could count all the times he had slept in this late in his life so far on a single hand, probably because he usually went to bed a lot earlier – He actually tended more towards the opposite problem of not really knowing how to fill the remaining hours until nightfall – most of the time, he had just spend this part of the day staring at the ceiling with his headphones plugged in, hoping to drown out at least the majority of the gloomy thoughts festering in the unoccupied thought space.

But this day was still far from it's overly drawn-out farewell, so Shinji stretched his limbs, tentatively at first, and ultimately decided to leave his room, his eyes still holding a faraway look as he stepped into the kitchen.

There was no trace of Misato. It was only at the second glance that he caught sight of the small piece of paper pinned to the fridge by a tiny magnet, containing an explanation in astonishingly scrawly handwriting: She had gone to work to take care of the battle's paperwork-related aftermath, complete with a simplistic drawing that depicted her swingin around a little origami sword in the right corner of the note.

If you knew her in your everyday life, it was hard not to doubt whether the word 'serious' was even part of her vocabulary – It was hard to believe that just yesterday (or technically, earlier this morning), she had earned herself a positive mention for extraordinary strategic creativity in the final operations report.

Soon, Shinji was forced to amend his conclusion, for the note was not even the only thing Misato had left behind for him to deal with – Apparently, she had treated herself to a package of microwave sushi before departing to NERV HQ, which resulted in the packaging, the plate she used and all the empty sauce pouches and soya sauce stains strewn across the table in addition to everything else on it – the thought of getting rid of the remainders of yesterday's curry nightmare did not even seemed to have occurred to her, the most she had done was push it out of the way a bit. All of it was still where it had been left, including Misato's now empty instant soup bowl.

The amount of accumulated used chopsticks left on the table would have easily sufficed to play jackstraws with.

Shinji needed a while to pause and think before he could attribute the oldest layer of encrusted old plates to their dinner with Ritsuko-san two days ago – Such much had happened...

The young EVA pilot wondered how Misato could possibly not mind all this chaos in the slightest – Whenever he mentioned it to her he'd get rewarded with a joke about how she just happened to be very busy, and how he was fussier than a purebred french poodle with a ridiculous hairstyle, usually coupled with a request to clean the mess up himself.

Since he didn't have anything better to do, Shinji started to do just that – technically, Misato was supposed to look after him, but at times he couldn't shake off the impression that it was exactly the other way around, especially since he had ended up doing nearly all of the housekeeping lately.

Today in particular, though, he wouldn't have minded to find an even larger pile of dirty dishes, since he found himself confronted with his initial problem of not knowing what else to occupy himself with.
Normally, he would be at school right now, and there was always something strange about being in a place that was usual abandoned at this time of the day, like being in a school building at night... then again, comparing this apartment to some classic horror story setup might be a bit of a stretch, as he was swiftly reminded when the resident penguin suddenly waddled out of his designated fridge and greeted him with a not entirely pleased "Waaak!"

More than the bird himself, Shinji found the notion of having already gotten pretty used to the strange animal somewhat startling.

"Good morning, Pen-Pen!" he greeted.

"Waaak!" came the reply.

Shinji chose to interpret this as a good sigh.

The hot springs penguin then pointed one of his... wings? Arms? (Shinji had no idea wether there was any establishes naming convention for how to refer to a flightless bird's front limbs) at his feeding dish, which was sufficiently filled, but the Third Child could not really fault his feathered flatmate for eschewing the formless mass that his mistress had gifted him with.

Shinji took pity on the bird and opened him a can of sardines.

It wasn't much of a stretch to interpret the sound that followed before Misato's pet went to greedily devour it's lunch as a gesture of gratitude.

The boy toyed with the thought of having lunch as well, but couldn't summon up anything resembling proper hunger, and thus he was still out of ways to chase away the time.

He guessed that Touji and Kensuke would probably have been overjoyed if they were the ones getting a day off, but Shinji couldn't really think of anything to do with it.

For a moment he wondered what Ayanami might be doing right now.

She had a day off as well, but he couldn't think of many things that could be done in that stark, empty apartment room – maybe she was reading right now, after all, that was what she did to pass the time when she had waited for him to regain consciousness, and he could also recall a pile of complicated-looking books on her dresser.

Shinji considered listening to some music, but ultimately settled on taking care of the homework he hadn't been able to work on yesterday, since he had been busy saving humanity.

The very idea that he was able to come up with a serious, non-ironic sentence containing both the words 'homework' and 'saving humanity' that nonetheless accurately reflected his life was a telltale sigh of just how crazy his life had managed to become in so little time.

Still, he could no longer rightfully call himself a complete stranger to this mad, ludicrous world of EVAs, angels, giant underground complexes and blue haired girls who didn't mind being seen naked. Since his arrival, he had formed many new bonds, lived through many new experiences and maybe even made a bit of an unique difference to the fate of this place and its people – yet, at the same time, the recent battles had taught him anew what this place made apparent over and over again: That he might never really get used to this place and is seemingly endless repertoire of new, disturbing surprises.

After the homework was taken care of, it occurred to him to take a look at the apartment's veranda. He knew there was one, but he'd always found it too embarrassing to actually ask to see it or what it
looked like. It seemed silly to engage a conversation with Misato just to satisfy a passing whim of curiosity – Since she had said that this was supposed to be his home now and everything in here was at his disposal, he figured that it should be fine if he went and checked it out, but he still felt nervous at the mere thought that he would do something 'without her knowledge'. When he did open the door, the veranda turned out to be fairly large, with only a few pieces of cheap, plastic lawn furniture to adorn it – from the looks of it, this place hadn't seen much use in the time Misato spent living here, everything was covered with a gray layer of dust.

Shinji stopped to send a look downwards to the city. The view was nice, but this apartment was pretty far up, so he tried not to look down all too directly lest his not inconsiderable fear of heights assert itself.

There was one undeniable perk to this place, though – it was pleasantly calm so far above the streets; the noises of the city only reached these heights in a substantially dampened form, if at all.

Actually, the more the Third Child considered it, the more this seemed like the ideal place for-until now, he simply hadn't felt like it, or had been to embarrassed to ask Misato about it or do it where she would notice, she was bound to comment on it in some way that would just end up fueling his awkwardness and insecurity about the whole thing, but now, on the day after his third battle in EVA 01, he chose to finally unwrap his old Cello, and take possession of a little bit of living space by designating it as his very own practice corner, a figurative 'secret garden' no one else knew about.

With great care, he lifted his instrument out of its box, where it had remained untouched in a corner of his room until now, grabbed himself one of the chairs and prepared the music stand he kept in the same box, before finally taking his place on the chair.

Much like he expected, he was terribly out of practice.

In some ways, his dealings with this musical instrument were similar to his career as an EVA pilot – sometimes he seriously wondered why he even bothered with either of these things.

But at last for right now, he had decided to just continue for a while... with both of them.

"...I am once again in your debt."

"And you'll hardly be able to pay me back! As for the material they demanded under the Freedom of Information act, I've had the people in charge black out the relevant parts of the documents. Their lawyers are already preparing a formal complaint to the government, but of course, that will be useless. What about the project itself? Anything else you want me to take care of?"

"Judging by the material you have sent me, that won't be necessary. Proceed as planned."

"Alright! I'll go pick up your little packages then!"

"Very well. We will discuss further proceedings in person."

Once his interlocutor had hung up the phone, Ikari folded his own back together and swiftly put it away, after which he folded his hands into each other like he typically did and rested his chin on them.

Everything was going according to plan.

He didn't even bother to look up when he heard the door of his office sliding open – The person
who just stepped inside personally made sure to bring herself into his field of vision and occupy as much of his field of vision as she could. It was Dr. Akagi, although not in the attire she commonly wore around the base. Gone were the blue top with its large pull ring and her white lab coat, replaced by a black mini dress so tight that one might wonder why the pieces of fabric that formed it didn't just burst apart.

She was even more tarted up than usual, her face thoroughly smeared with make-up that displayed her lips in an intrusive, coral red, bolstering their volume through several optical tricks and imbuing then with a lifeless, mineral shimmer of ruby.

Not even her excessively applied, choking cloud of perfume could mask the stench of cigarettes that clung to her.

Even the hair was obviously fake.

Repulsive.

Sometimes, very rarely, Ikari distantly wondered if anything about this woman was real at all, but that was the most thought he would ever spend on her.

This woman, if she could still be referred as such, was nothing but the means to an end – She might have some illusions about being a replacement's replacement, but to do any replacement, she would have needed to have some vague resemblance to the real thing.

Yes, she might have had the same, rather rare eye color, general hair length and skin color, but none of these things were what he really loved about Yui.

This whore was just as fake and disgusting on the inside as she was in terms of appearance, as much as she might hide her true self behind a mask of false congeniality – but when he looked at himself, he had to concede that he had to right to push her away from himself – that same, difficult and ugly nature made it an untenable risk to openly scorn her, and as a punishment he had chosen himself, she was probably just what she deserved.

He couldn't fathom what this woman (or her mother) had been looking for when they threw themselves on him – He had nothing to give them, he swore he couldn't fix them, and neither did he have any interest in doing so, nor was there anything about them he could possibly desire.

This wasn't even about sating some sort of lowly drive, merely the maintenance of an instrument whose rebellion would be inconvenient to his plans right now – Every time he was made to look at her face, he longed for the day he would cast off this filthy, inconvenient body and meet his beloved in the light, just as she remembered him from the day of their parting.

That someone like Yui had even wound up anywhere near him in the first place... had to have been some great mishap of fate, remedied just as quickly as it had taken place, like a random quantum fluctuation in the vacuum.

That woman walked over to his desk and leaned forward, as if to place her breasts right around his face.

"...did you take care of the business concerning that government project?" he asked, dryly.

"Oh yes... but let's forget about all that for a while. You're going to that budget conference tomorrow, aren't you? I will miss you terribly, although some fresh air will probably do you good. You haven't been to the surface for ages!"
She laughed.

Her deep, full-bodied laughter was just as fake as the seductive tone she had tucked onto her words – she was just about as arousing as a plastic brick with the color chipping off.

That is, as far as he could even still tell such a thing. He had only ever had eyes for one woman, and after years of letting his unending work consume all his life, feelings and thoughts and the desensitizing presence of this laughable, fake woman and others like her, he was seldom moved beyond this all-encompassing numbness.

He didn't say anything.

She was quick to hide her disappointment.

"Well, in any case... You'll surely want a little bit of...relaxation before you depart on this tiresome business trip, right?"

"No."

She looked at him in perturbation.

"Alright. I know what you mean. Come here."

He stopped halfheartedly extending his arms towards her the very instant he heard his phone ring.

She might as well have ceased to exist in that same moment.

A swift glance at the cellphone's screen told him who was calling.

As unlikely as it may seem, he did recognize his son's private number – and because he recognized it, he banished his phone into the depths of a drawer and let it ring to its heart's content.

"Who was that?" the fake blonde asked.

"Unimportant. Let's get this over with, Fuyutsuki will be expecting me in laboratory five in about half an hour." he answered without the slightest hint of passion.

Akagi merely donned a thin, sinister smile.

"Oh, you won't believe... all the things that can be done in just half an hour..."

While the empty, usually deathly silent office filled with noise, the Katsuragi residence was enveloped by an uncharacteristic silence – Shinji heard proof of Misato's return a few minutes ago, but hadn't made himself noticeable, hoping that she would conclude that he was already asleep and try to keep quiet, which was just what he wanted.

He was, in fact, situated on his bed, although he was sitting on it more than he was lying in it, his mobile phone still folded in his hand.

He would really like to believe what Misato told him in her attempts to cheer him up, but...

"I knew you wouldn't pick up, father..."

After this, Shinji felt no more desire to talk or otherwise interact with anyone before this day was over, nor even to lift as much as a finger for any solitary activity, so he resolved to to what Misato
already thought he was doing and hid away beneath his blanket.

This night, Shinji once again encountered that dream.

By now, he was already used to this: The sounds of the ocean, the fine white sand beneath his palms, the feeling of his drenched clothes sticking to his body – He was beginning to dread it as much as the ceiling of his designated room at NERV's overly bright sickbay.

Why was he here?

That question haunted him by night as much as by day, even if 'here' didn't necessarily refer to the same things at both times. He was no longer just wondering what had landed him here in the particular universe of this dream, but rather why he was even having these dreams, why he had to find himself back in this cold and empty place all over again every time he closed his eyes for too long, why some part of his subconscious seemed to insist on telling him subtle variations on the same story over and over again, like some sort of mantra that he mustn't forget if he wanted to survive.

He just could not fathom it.

Perhaps he should talk to someone about this – but it wasn't like these visions were significantly influencing his daily life, or disturbing him enough to disturb someone else over it... that aside, this whole thing was madness. He didn't know whether he even wanted anyone to know about this, heaven knew what this would make them think about him.

He just wanted these dreams to stop and leave him in peace so he didn't have to think about them anymore – and so he wouldn't have to endure this overwhelming, unfiltered sense of loneliness that inexplicably assaulted him whenever he found himself marooned in this abominable place...

The loneliness and pain of a thousand and one lives, the infinite emptiness...All of it came too him, too diffuse, and too cruel to tell from where exactly, or just why he had to suffer like this.

But none of that lament would do him any good, so Shinji decided to try opening his eyes in the hope that he might be able to do or trigger something to make this dream stop.

Above him, the sky stretched out like an infinite velvet canopy, crossed by a lone streak of crimson.

It had no borders, no frame – Shinji looked up and saw only emptiness.

He couldn't stand it.

Slowly, the Third Child turned his head to the side, to where the shoreline was, and in the waters lay an enormous, detached hand the size of a mountain range, gigantic enough to utterly dwarf the petrified, cross-shaped Evangelions, not to mention Shinji himself.

The ocean went on endlessly until the horizon, not revealing anything of what lay beneath its opaque surface – by now, Shinji knew all of this by heart.

It was then, however, when he glimpsed something he had never encountered in any of these visions before: Another person.

She simply stood there, all alone, in her school uniform, like a ghostly apparition that refused to become part of the background and its red lighting, standing on the surface of the water like a
deity, several meters away from the land.

Ayanami Rei.

At least, she looked like her.

The pale skin, the short, blue hair – who else could she be?

The sight sent a decuman shiver, but also a subtle sprinkling of deep sadness through his body.

The Third Child couldn't explain it.

No matter how long he looked at her, no sense of recognition would come.

He just stared at the impossibility before him, unable to say a word, until she was no longer there.

He couldn't have said whether he had blinked or something, but just as he was about to call out her name, she disappeared without a trace, like a shadow at nightfall, like she was never there to begin with, leaving him to question whether she had been a figment of his imagination, his desperation for some kind of life to show itself before him.

Aggrieved, he allowed his eyes that had been opened wide until now to relax and narrow, and fill with tears.

Of course he was alone here.

He had always been alone here, and although he couldn't name the reasons, he couldn't shake off the impression that this was just what he deserved, a just punishment, and the worst there could be, for there was no more desperate wish inside his thoughts than the plea for someone else to be with him.

Someone he could hold on to, someone who could take his hand explain everything to him, someone who could make it all make sense with her soothing words, and show him that he wasn't alone... Someone with the strength to believe that there was a way out of this empty, desolate world, who could tell him what to do... Someone warm... and soft...

Someone... he could depend on.

And if someone had read his thoughts, he felt a warm, soft hand gripping his own in that very instant, and an indescribable feeling of safety and bottomless joy.

There was something real and alive he could hold on and cling to...

And the tears spilled forth anew, from a vessel filled to brink and waiting to overflow from the slightest additional excitation.

How long had it been since the last time he had felt the sensation of human warmth on his skin? How many eternities had he spent here, in this desolate place, without even the slightest shred of company?

He returned the tender gesture and gripped the hand like he would never let go.

And it was only now, with that tension relieved, that he finally noticed just what he had been staring past for his line of sight to reach the red ocean.

This couldn't be her, could it? It was far too crazy to be true, too much of a coincidence...
Something told him that he should never have seen her again, a wild flurry of shouts, tears, her necklace and the taste of her blood on his deflowered lips.

And still, there she was, tangible before him, the one person in the world he wanted to see most of all.

It was impossible, and yet, undeniable: The drenched, dark red fabric of her torn mini dress, that insufficiently concealed the location of her nipples and tightly clung to the triangle formed by her thighs; The mature, feminine shapes of her body and the attractive tan of her skin which her torn clothes revealed plenty of, including part of her scar that went on beyond the upper remainders of her dress and invited to rip the last shreds of it away to follow along its path, back to the old story whose red thread connected them both; White bandages that the hands of god seemed to have wrapped around her midsection and one of her upper arms, her long, black hair flowing over the ground, and last but not least, the tired, but confident smile on her well-meaning face.

Misato.

Shinji, who had sat up to get a better look at her, trembled and sobbed at the realization.

It was beyond his capabilities to get his surging emotions back under control, and he couldn't even say why.

The young EVA-pilot had never been good with this type of situation, but even if he couldn't remember why he couldn't form a coherent sentence right now, he couldn't believe that she was really here.

What was she even doing here?

Why was she here... with him, in this dark and lifeless world he had created even though she had given everything to prevent exactly this.

He didn't deserve this... He didn't deserve it, and he didn't understand it either. She should hate him right now – but she didn't, she was smiling, picking herself off the ground and sitting up while he observed every single motion of her body in disbelieving wonder, every swing of her hair, every shifting of her breasts, and her full, inviting lips which didn't take off their smile for one moment.

For some reason, he was holding her necklace in her his left hand, and holding out in her direction, trembling as he waited to be judged.

"F-Forgive me, Misato-san... Please don't hate me..."

Shinji averted his eyes.

He had wanted to say something, at first, some explanation, or justification, but every string of words he could possibly think of fell short of his deeds, and so he turned back to what he knew he could say, what he had had to say so, so often, repeating himself like an old fool.

"Forgive me, please... I'm so, so sorry..."

But she gripped his hands with both of hers without a moment's doubt or hesitation, just squeezing it without letting go instead of taking the necklace from it.

"It's alright."

He stared at her in shock, like the heavens and the earth had switched places. She didn't sound
reluctantly appeasing or sarcastic at all, just sure of her words.

She let go of his hand and wrapped her arms around his body, lovingly squeezing her form into the crevices and faults of his, burying her fingers in the wet fabric of his uniform shirt led by a final, ceremonial passion that was at least set free, now that they were no longer bound by any of the categories, barriers and lines of their positions, now that this war was over and with it the need for her to be his guardian, his superior, a fill-in for variety of things she'd never be, or anything else other than just another person under the same moonlight, offering her chest like a pillow for his wearied, tired face.

Shinji's own arms were still hanging downwards.

He was still staring forward at the piece of landscape framed by her breast and arm as if paralyzed, unable to process or explain any of this in any way.

"B-But Misato-san... I... I did... I am..."

"Hush now, Shinji-kun. It's alright now. It's all over.

You did well."

"But I- you wanted me to-"

"I just wanted you to make a decision, and you did.

I already told you that I don't care, as long as it was what you really wanted. If that is what we see here, then I'll have to respect that. I'm not perfect either, Shinji-kun, I've told you that before. I honestly don't know what I would have done in your place... Most likely, I wouldn't have found the right answer right away, either."

She pulled him even tighter to her own form.

"But you, you really did it. You made the right choice, for you, for me, for all of us. In spite of all that happened, despite all you said, you still chose life..."

She let go of him, then moved her hands to his shoulders, so that he had to take an upright position and show her his face.

He still couldn't bear to look at her directly.

"And do you know what this means?"

No answer.

Pulling his fingers tighter around the token she left him, he found the courage to look her in the face, more or less.

She leaned forward towards him.

"It means that you are very, very strong. You are a very, very special, very, very strong person. You should be proud of yourself."

"But Misato-san... I... I did..."

"You did what you did because that was what you wanted. That's alright with me. I've already told you that, even back when you didn't want this to be true for fear of having to live with the
consequences... You just wanted to, and no one can blame you for that, least of all me... but in the end, you went with the right path instead of the easy one, because you didn't want it any other way... I don't think you ever really did something you didn't want... and I'm kind of envious of you for that, to be honest...

It was my job to show you the things you needed to do better, but the truth is that there were also many things for which I envied you...

"M-Misato-san?"

"Shinji-kun?" she sweetly whispered into his ear. "Do you remember what I promised you the last time we met?"

He nodded cluelessly.

"You really earned it."

Then, she took him into her embrace.

She had said something about him making the 'right' choice, but when he looked at his surroundings, they didn't look like the result of anything going particularly right at all -and that still didn't tell him the slightest bit of what had actually happened for things to end up this way.

Still, this version of the dream had been almost...pleasant. He might just be telling himself things, but lately he felt like he had actually moved forward in his life... not only in his dreams...

Once morning finally arrived, however, everyday life took little time to reassert itself with a vengeance, which was synonymous with Shinji being forced to do all the housework because a certain lady adamantly refused to be woken up until he finally gave up when he concluded that he might accidentally break down the door if he knocked on it any harder.

Thus, he had just toasted himself some slices of bread for lack of alternatives, and supplied the resident penguin with some proper fish to eat. Sometimes, Shinji wondered how this woman (let alone her pet) had managed to survive until now.

It was only when both Shinji and PenPen were already eagerly consuming their meals when the alleged token adult in this house finally showed herself – In shorts, an open, loose cut vest of the same material which was probably supposed to form a set with the shorts, and a black sports bra, no less. She was standing in the door frame displaying a sort of cavewomanish pose, scratching herself beneath her breasts as if everything else weren't enough, and her hair also gave off the distinct impression of having come from some distant past before the invention of the hairbrush, or at least didn't seem to have met one today.

Shinji briefly showed symptoms of moderate shock, but they wore off rather quickly since such sights pretty much become part of his everyday life by now.

"Good morning.", he said, 'enthused'.

Reminiscent of a zombie, Misato walked over to the table, where she unabashedly yawned in the faces of her flatmates, and finally returned a somewhat marrowless "...morning." in Shinji's general direction.

Nevertheless, her usual enthusiasm returned very quickly once she got her hands on a nice, cool can of her favorite beverage and dumped a sizable amount of it straight into her throat.
The usual scream of joy, complete with tiny tears of bliss promptly followed:

"Ah, there's nothing like a cool beer in the morning to flush away your worries!", she shouted ecstatically. In the beginning, Shinji might have found this spectacle distantly fascinating in an intimidating way, but by now, it just made him doubt whether she was aware of her own age – To be honest, the alcohol content of her drink seemed to be the only indicator here. If you had switched the beer can for a milk bottle, she would easily fit into the local kindergarten.

Shinji didn't really get how exactly beer was supposed to be particularly suited for the morning hours.

"Why don't you try drinking coffee instead?" he suggested, well-intentionedly.

- But his so-called 'guardian' didn't even take him seriously and protectively bend forward over her beer can while maintaining balance with the aid of her elbow.

"No, No! I'm patriotic, and and a typical Japanese breakfast traditionally consists of steamed rice, miso soup and a nice drink!"

"You mean your typical breakfast." Shinji retorted, surprisingly open with his ostensible irritation. "Oh, and speaking of breakfast, do you remember whose turn it was actually supposed to be? It's not surprisingly that you're still single at your age!"

That hit its intended target straight in its center.

Misato's right eyebrow engaged in uncontrolled twitching.

"Are you implying that I'm lazy?!"

"A lazy slob. That's a pretty accurate description."

"What did you say?" Misato replied, visibly irked.

Shinji considered his breakfast demonstratively finished at this point, and rose from his seat.

But in spite of all his complaints, he ended up donning an apron and taking care of all the dirty dishes by himself for the umpteenth time, not before having provided Misato with some slices of toasted bread of her own, which she seemed to interpret as an official license not to take any of his arguably valid objections seriously in the least, gave up her mostly symbolic gesture of properly closing her top after the first two buttons, and generally grinned at him as widely as it was possible with the aforementioned toast in her mouth.

"...And you're... really planning to show up at school today?"

"Of course!" Misato declared cheerfully, briefly removing the toast from her mouth to speak. "It's parent-teacher consultation day after all! This meeting could be important for your future!"

"But... don't you have work to do?" Shinji asked, partially to show his appreciation, but still probing around the apparent softness for the very same hard edges and uncrossable boundaries he had met with his father.

But Misato just tossed out some casual reassurance: "That's no problem! You're a part of my work, after all!"

"Part of-? ...I see." Shinji's mood appeared to have gone through a process similar to a falling vase
Just now, he was concerning himself with the possibility of burdening her, and then, she had to go and let something like that slip out of her lips, just like that, like it was nothing...

And there he was, beginning to delude himself into thinking that there was something connecting them apart from the EVA, that this was different from the arrangement with his teacher...

Misato likewise noticed that this might not have been the wisest choice of words to calm him down, and paused her matutinal display for a guilty look aside – Until the doorbell chimed in as a welcome distraction that lead her to reach for the inter phone to provide the visitors waiting at the base of the tall apartment complex with a befitting reception and possibly, entrance.

"Oh, thank you for coming all this way!" she announced in her best cheery tone. "No problem, just wait a minute!"

Shinji, who had used the meantime to equip himself with a school bag, promptly turned around at the incoming threat of humiliation with a bright red face.

"Misato-san... Please don't open the door dressed like this... That would be very embarassing..." he begged.

"For you or for me?" she simply asked, crossing her arms and jokingly pushing her chest outward.

The crazy thing was that this retained a certain crude, arousing quality despite her unkempt state, causing Shinji to tun away a fortiori, his face glowing with a mix of overload and the realization that he'd actually been looking before common sense and annoyance reasserted themselves and intermingled with the newly refreshed memory of this morning's dream making it all worse.

Thankfully, the whole situation quickly dissolved itself when the bell on the apartment door rung.

Behind it were Touji and Kensuke.

Both were grinning like idiots and the former was carrying his school bag in a very...interesting fashion that involved wearing the strap around his head.

"GOOD MORNING, IKARI-KUN!" they called in unison, before synchronously turning around and peering into the apartment while holding on to the door frame. "HAVE A NICE DAY, MISATO-SAN!"

Shinji had barely managed to back out of the way, horrified about having to concede that he just completely failed to keep those two from glimpsing the 'imposing' sight of his half-naked guardian – but thankfully she had possessed at least enough common sense to hide away in the kitchen and show them no more than her unclothed arm as she waved to them while wishing them a nice day too – Paradoxically, this was more than enough to leave them staring after her in adoration and get a very impressed "Aaaaaahhh...~~" out of them, much to Shinji's bewilderment. He couldn't deny that Misato was significantly attractive and liable to looking quite cool if you saw her on duty, but any initial awe he might have held quickly evaporated after spending a few days in her squalid apartment and getting himself drafted into being her personal char lady.

He just wanted to get the hell out of here before she got any ideas within earshot of his friends.

"Let's go already..."

By the time the three boys had left the building, Misato had taken a quick shower, wrapped herself
in some green towels as an improvised and quite insufficient covering, grabbed another can of beer from the fridge, and opened it.

In spite of all the complaints she had to endure this morning, there was a genuine, serene smile on her face.

"Ironic, isn't it?" she quietly wondered to herself as she was gulping down another mouthful of beer. "You can tell that he's starting to really feel at home here when he honestly says what he doesn't like..."

She still remembered when he first stood before that doll with this meek, uncertain smile, asking whether he wouldn't be a bother – During their first proper meal together, he even came pretty close to hiding under the table! And cute as it may have been in such generally hilarious contexts, they way he seemed to just accept everything even when his real dissatisfaction with the state of affairs was painfully obvious could be downright creepy at times, it was just something she couldn't stand to see reflected at her.

Besides, him voicing the desire to have a specific degree of order and cleanliness here was a sure sigh that he had truly come to see this place as something of his own that he also deserved jurisdiction over, that he was beginning to feel more comfortable... which was what she had been trying to accomplish from the very beginning.

'Managing' Shinji may not have been as easy as she had initially expected it to be, but nonetheless, today was a good way on which she felt that she had ultimately been able to make genuine progress – and this meant that there might still be hope for this world.

Nonetheless, her temporary joy did not cloud her view of the very insurmountable-looking challenges looming in front of them all, be it the ever unannounced attacks of angelic juggernauts, or this serial killer – tomorrow morning, the newspaper headlines had in fact told of a new brand new case. There were claims of an entire pile of rotting bodies having turned up in an abandoned warehouse, apparently dragged there by the killer without this... liquification the reports had spoken of. This was getting more and more abstruse – one strange factor (like the strange ways of killing) might well be expected with the work of someone who was a crazy serial killer to begin with, a second (like this supposed piled-up collection of corpses) may be a coincidence that was bound to happen somewhere on this world, but when you added a third extreme oddity (like her having been told that this killer was supposedly already dead), it was obvious evidence of some sort of foul play.

But Misato had nothing tangible to build her suspicions on – Sure, that person, whoever they were, had attacked Shinji, but as far as she knew, it didn't seem like they explicitly sought him out, nor did she have anything to justify how any of this was related to her area of jurisdiction, or even NERV itself.

Misato sighed and picked up her phone.

"He's on his way to school. Guard him well."

Meanwhile, Shinji was following closely after his friends, an expression of uncharacteristic bliss and serenity on his face.

Embarrassing personal quarrels of the daily life aside... it was a beautiful feeling when others came to pick him up, to actually dedicate their time to him in such a way.
"So, Shinji, how are you today?"

"Uh, not too bad..." he answered with an uncertain smile, still not wholly used to Touji addressing him by his first name.

"Why do you ask?"

"Nothing. It's just that both you and Ayanami were absent from school yesterday. We were wondering if you get hurt or something."

"No, not at all.. it just got pretty late..."

"Well, in that case we've got nothing to worry about..."

"Soooo, onwards to the next point of interest! How was the battle?" Kensuke asked with sparkling little stars in his eyes.

"Uh, that was... er, that went... like this..."

As far as his rather modest knowledge about strategy and technology allowed it, Shinji tried his best to explain the rough technical outlines of Operation Yashima, while avoiding the subject of his own participation in the progression of the actual battle, or even mentioning his state at the time, let alone the whole deal with his father... that was something he neither wanted to speak nor think about right now.

As usual Kensuke deemed it all impossibly cool, spewed ample praise for Misato's tactical genius (and her looks, although these weren't really related to the battle) and lamented that he didn't get the opportunity to participate in the battle as a fellow EVA pilot – Even if he had been very sparse with any descriptions of the most unpleasant experiences, it was a mystery to Shinji how someone could hear his story and not feel glad that they didn't have to go through this sort of thing themselves – one of the few things he was halfway comfortable describing was the terrific amount of molten rock the angel's attacks had left behind.

Touji's reactions to the account of the battle were more sensible, but in exchange, he was all the more enthused about singing the praises of Misato. Deciding not to go ount of his way to burst their bubble, Shinji simply gave them the answers they requested and left it to them to connect the dots in the most roundabout manner possible as they constructed themselves an idea of both being an EVA pilot and life with Misato that had fairly little in common with the truth.

"Either way, we knew you could do it! All of us did."

"I... I hardly deserve any credit for this. If it wasn't for the efforts of Misato-san and Ayanami, or even your support, there's no way I could have done this, and I still very nearly screwed it up..."

"No, no, there's no need for fake humility here!" Kensuke stated. "After all, you have now successfully rescues your very first distressed damsel! That's an important milestone in the career of any superhero... and just to hammer home how ridiculously lucky you are, she was none other than the girl of your dreams! Oh, if only I could be an EVA pilot... it must be nice when all the girls worship you like that..."

"I'm not a superhero... I'm not being worshiped... and Ayanami isn't 'the girl of my dreams'. It's not like that at all..."

"Oh really?" Kensuke didn't seem all too convinced. "If that's what you say, I'll just go on and believe you."
"So what was it like, after you saved her?" Touji asked. "Did you have to wait much until they retrieved you? Did you say something to her?"

Not feeling that this moment was something he could easily speak about, nor wanting to bring the unavoidable teasing on himself that would inevitable follow if he told those two that they had engaged in an activity for which he couldn't come up with any description other than 'holding hands', he decided on a simplified answer:

"Well, I guess she was grateful and happy about being saved. I mean, at least I think she was. She did smile, though, so-"

"What? For real? She actually smiled?"

"She can actually do that?"

"Uh, sure... why wouldn't she? What's so strange about that..."

"Maybe because no one at school has ever seen her do it?"

"Damn it Ikari, you're so lucky, you should go to jail for it! As if it wasn't enough to live under the roof of the gorgeous Misato-san and pilot an EVA, you also get to be one of the most popular guys in our glass, and even our inapproachable ice princess can't help but melt away under the influence of your charms..."

"Although I would still stick with Misato-san if I were in your place."

"It's... really nothing like that..."

Nothing indeed.

When he next laid eyes on Ayanami, it was yet another of these stray gazes across the classroom like countless others before it, they had almost become a standardized part of his average school day since his arrival in Tokyko-3, and like many times before, she appeared every bit as distant and aloof as she did the last time, nothing about her looked the slightest bit different from the usual condition, like nothing had ever happened at all, and the last few days were nothing but a wishful dream that was already beginning to fade.

Like so many times before, he found her at her usual seat, resting her head and the thick, blue hair on it on her intertwined fingers, silently gazing out of the window without showing any indication that she was paying very much attention to her surroundings – Shinji felt reminded of his father's usual posture, the one he always took at his own desk or his console in central dogma, right down to the nonexistent expression.

He recalled how Dr. Akagi had compared the two of them – and he had personally witnessed how they definitely seemed to be on a similar wavelength.

When he considered this thought, Shinji couldn't help but feel a certain heaviness hanging over him – As his biological son of NERV's sombrous commander, one would expect that he would get along with him at very least as well as Rei did, but that was very far from being the case. In all the time he had spent in the same town, working in the same buildings, they had hardly ever spoken to each other.

...but at the very least, he had allowed him to finish that battle two days ago.
Maybe... just maybe... things would continue to go well from now on, and his father would come to rely on him over time, maybe he wasn't even too far from earning his actual trust...

After all, he had briefly stopped in his tracks to look at him when he came to check up on Rei after their medical exam...

Or was he just reading too much into it?

That was when he noticed, and rather suddenly, too, that there was at least one pair of eyes that was definitely directed at him with deliberate purpose, but in the present rather than the past – Ayanami's.

She must have somehow noticed that he was looking at her... but she didn't move or say anything beyond that, she simply looked him straight in the eye, unabashed and direct.

Shinji sent himself into motion and walked over to his seat.

Even though the teacher had yet to arrive, in spite of all that had happened and everything they had exchanged, he still found it hard to speak to her in a public place like this, where everyone might just start gossiping about it.

In the end, old vices die hard,...

...but...

When the bell rang to announce the end of the first period and he moved towards the door for a joint trip to the water dispenser and chat with Touji and Kensuke along the way, he heard a high, female voice coming from behind him, no louder than absolutely necessary for it not to get lost in the ensuing bustling of liberated students: "See you later, Ikari-kun."

Quiet as it was, this ordinary phrase held enough significance to make not just him, but the two other boys who had made their way over to where he was standing stop in their tracks.

As he mumbled a slightly clueless, "O-Okay...", Kensuke adjusted his glasses as if to make sure that the words had indeed come from the lips of the pale girl who had remained at her place, not drawn away by any friends seeking to chat with her or even the simple desire to move around a bit.

A particularized silence of a flavor between awkward and disbelieving persisted between them as a sea of typical break activities continued parallel to the meeting of their eyes over the noise, but as soon as the boys were out of the room-

"Wow! She actually talked to you!"

"I... I guess so..."

"She never talks to anyone unless there was a reason..."

"Are you still going to insist that 'nothing' happened between the two of you?"

How could he not?

He still didn't know how to classify these events, he still didn't know how she felt about any of this, so what should he call this? How could he speak of it to none else and know that he wasn't sprouting nonsense?

"Still, she just- there's nothing special about... talking to someone. I'm doing it right now..."
Nonetheless, it was a kind of proof, proof that these crazy events that had transpired on the summit of the Futagoyama had in fact integrated themselves into reality, that things were different than before.

The mere fact that she was speaking to him didn't imply anything like... whatever Touji and Kensuke were thinking, but it was something, something tangible, maybe a sign that she was 'counting him in' somehow, as more of an associate than, say, the girl with the short, dark hair whom he often saw chatting with the class representative.

Now, he and Rei seemed a little bit more like actual comrades.

Later that day, Shinji spent most of the lunch break looking out of the window himself – Large parts of the inner city were still covered in the blood left by the angel's disintegration, many of the taller buildings retained large stains that had turned brown and dried into a thick, ugly crust, every bit like one would expect it if they had been left behind by a human instead.

He had succeeded and defeated the angel, but... ultimately, no one had ever quite told him just what exactly he was up against. Misato had only recently entrusted him with the knowledge that they were beings who sought to destroy all of humanity, but this was pretty much all he could claim to know, and the things he didn't know encompassed pretty much everything else: Where did they come from? Why were they here?

How could they just burst into liquid the moment they were defeated?

Shinji probably would have continues his musings for a long time if he hadn't been distracted by the sound of squeaking car wheels – He immediately recognized the blue vehicle and the supercilious nonchalance about any sort of safety regulations with which it was parked in front of the school, and so did Touji and Kensuke, who had rushed to the window with an almost uncanny speed, squeezing their unsuspecting friend into what little space was left between them.

"She actually came!" Touji exclaimed, elated.

Kensuke had, of course, somehow summoned his camcorder from hammerspace at this point, and was already pointing it at his object of interest.

Both boys – and pretty much every male student on this side of the building (that's what he got for confiding in those two) – soon got to see what they had been waiting for, complete with a sinfully short, black miniskirt, white high heels, a sand-colored bolero and a white, strapless top that seemed designed to conceal as little of her breasts as she could get away with without losing her lob.

As she removed her sunglasses, Shinji could see that she has switched the small peal earrings she usually wore fore somewhat larger, cross-shaped ones.

While it was probably perfectly proportional to her outfit, the commotion she caused inside the school was previously unheard of.

"What a gorgeous babe!"

"Who is she? Someone's older sister?"

"That's Ikari's guardian!"
"What? Ikari gets to live with that beauty?"

Many of the girls were far from delighted by the sight of the boys storming to the windows – Hikari in particular titled them as "Such Idiots!". One of the exceptions was Rei, who remained silent in her seat, apparently fairly indifferent to the ruckus around her.

But the boys also had the occasional dissenter among them, such as Mitsurugi, who didn't seem particularly impressed with the sight of Misato or the behavior of his classmates. Unlike Rei, he did briefly glance over to the Window and listen in to ascertain what everybody else was talking about, but his attention soon went back to the Rubik's cube in his hands.

Kensuke, by contrast, wasn't shy to express his ardor in words and actions, which included using his camera to zoom in on Misato's face – when she noticed her young amateur paparazzi, her only reaction consisted of an even wider grin, and a V-sign flung in his general direction.

Both boys eagerly returned the gesture, while Shinji looked at them with little ostensible comprehension.

"Oh boy, Misato-san is really, really hot!"

Touji was in complete agreement: "And on top of that, she's also the leader of NERV's operations division! How much cooler can you get?"

"Well, I don't really know..."

Touji and Kensuke looked at their newest friend like he'd just admitted to disliking pizza or chocolate.

"Say, Kensuke, aren't we lucky that Shinji is still such a baby?"

"Yep. That's one contestant less!"

Shinji found it hard to relate to their enthusiasm, and secretly suspected that those two would think very differently if they had spent the last seven weeks cleaning up her messes.

"Oh, if only I had a girlfriend like her!" Touji continued to slobber, blowing a kiss into the air.

"You'd have a hard life..." Shinji informed them.

But as expected, those two insisted on knowing better and just shot him odd looks. "You have no clue! How about this: You take care of saving the earth, and in turn, we will take care of Misato-san for you!" they suggested, affirming their 'pact' with a seasoned pat on their new friend's back without waiting for an answer.

As far as Shinji was concerned, he was beginning to feel abit like an actor stuck on the set for the wrong movie.

If anyone here was clueless, it was them.

While their words had mostly just annoyed him at the time, they returned to haunt him long after school, when he was sitting inside unit one for another test in the late afternoon.

Although he was still very far from recanting his thoughts on the part about Misato, there was something else they had spoken about – 'saving the earth'. Earlier, Kensuke had jokingly referred to him as a 'superhero', too, but the reality of his current situation was even more ludicrous than
any satire could hope to be, not least because those terms were actually pretty accurate descriptions of the kind of task he was expected to perform by and for this organization.

With an involuntary shiver, he recalled the disturbing appearance of the white giant he had seen beneath the lowest levels of NERV HQ. If one of the angels were to make contact with that creature... it was all over. That much had become quite clear to him, but beyond that... what was that thing, really? How exactly was it related to 'all life on this planet', as Misato had phrased it? And what about the angels, what were they?

Or the EVAs.

They were supposedly created to protect humanity, but Shinji had no clue what they even were, and he was aware just how suboptimal that sounded when he said that while he was sitting inside of one.

He had to think of the grueling experience that was his first battle, particularly this bit right at the end, when he had caught a glimpse of the EVA's reflection in a nearby building, after the outer plating on the face had been destroyed, and there was this eye, and the distinct, unshakeable feeling that it had focused on him, that it had recognized him...

His initial hypothesis that he was dealing with a mere robot had gone out of the window a long, long time ago, and now he thought of it, Unit Zero had been largely fleshy under its molten armor, which was its very own pit of madness – for what sort of flesh could largely survive the kind of heat that reduced rock and metal to puddles?

And there were other strange things, subtler, but all the more unsettling in retrospect – Over the course of the many, many test he had been forced to sit through, he couldn't help but notice this faint, underlying scent of blood characteristic of the liquid they used in the entry plug – he had shrugged it off, tried to convince himself that this was too morbid to be something other than his dreadful experiences inside the EVA making him misinterpret his senses, but on his visit to level EEE, he was forced to find out that the truth was in fact even more nightmarish than any impression he could conceive of, and yet, even though he knew full well that he was currently sitting in a claustrophobic tank filled with the blood of that twitching, undying abomination, he didn't feel all that unsettled, not what he would usually consider the appropriate degree.

Whatever flowed back when he let his thoughts float into the metaphysical expanse of the Evangelion's largely empty shell and opened himself up to connect with it kept exuding this vague sense of... safety and comfort, and there was also the... (grotesque as it sounded) sense cozy warmth the entry plug was kept at, which betrayed itself to have origins beyond the physical temperature inside the plug, just from the unlikely circumstances it arose in.

All these details, or indeed the very situation of being a guinea pig for some experiment should be nothing short of terrifying, given what had happened to Ayanami on a supposed routine test, and the mountainloads of awful experiences he had personally lived through in this very seat, and here he was, not panicking, wondering how this activity managed to be calming.

In the end, he was left with this irritating cloud of confusion about everything apart from his insurmountable conviction that he didn't know anything at all.

He had been EVA 01’s designated pilot for almost two months, for all this time, he had been completely unaware of something as crucial as this business with the second angel... they had only told him now, and even then, only because the alternative was him refusing to fight the sixth angel. At any point in the last seven weeks, he could have waltzed right out of Tokyo-3, ignorant of the vast consequences that his absence could have had...
What other ways to damn all of humanity with the slightest misstep was he yet unaware of? How was he supposed to make decisions like this, if no one told him anything?

There was still so much about NERV and the EVAs that he still didn't understand at all...

Unable to completely soothe his displeasure, he was beginning to process the sobering realization that this was simply the kind of world he lived in now – He had gotten himself into a world of great distances, distances that could only be conquered little by little, if at all. A world of insecurity, uncertainty and slow, tiny steps.

Once upon a time, before he came here, everything had been clearer and easier... now, the events and occurrences hunted after each other faster than his eyes could follow.

He still couldn't say for sure if these last few weeks had been a change for better or worse.

And he still couldn't fathom just why he had decided to force this on himself.

He was still pondering this when he found himself silently waiting on one end of the small platform that served to transport people up to the cage, or, now that the experiment was finally over, all the way back down.

Meanwhile, some the other participants involved in this experiment – Dr. Akagi, Misato, Hyuuga and Ibuki – were on the same lift platform, discussing a multitude of topics he could barely follow. The most he could tell that they started out saying roughly positive things about the results of today's test (So there was at least one thing he didn't have to spend too much worry on), but later proceeded to discussing the damages resulting from the latest battle:

"So, what's the status on Unit Zero's armor?" Dr. Akagi inquired.

"Massively damaged. Judging by the finalized damage assessment, we'll have to replace it completely, but that will completely exhaust the remainder of our supplemental budget..."

Dr. Akagi sighed. "Perhaps we'll be able to relax a little once EVA 02 arrives from Germany..."

But Hyuuga was less optimistic: "I'm afraid it might go the other way around. Even having the angel's remains mopped up costs a fortune each time..."

"Money, money, money! I really don't get how they can be so stingy with the budget. Considering that we're ensuring the survival of humanity here, it's practically a crime that we don't get more cash!" Misato complained.

"There is nothing we can do." The fake blonde concludes. "EVAs aren't edible, and both supplying people around the world with provisions and securing the distribution of our few remaining natural resources also costs money. This is also a part of ensuring the survival of humanity."

"Still, if they're renegotiating the budget, the commander will probably be going to one of these conferences very soon..."

"He already left." Dr. Akagi confirmed. "His plane should already be up in the air."

"He can take his take as far as I'm concerned..." the young technician stated. "His absence makes headquarters a quiet place..."

"Oh, and Misato?"
"Yes?"

"That event will be held tomorrow, just as they originally planned. Don't forget it."

Hiding his growing dissatisfaction behind a manual he was studying for the umpteenth time without ever having managed to suck any truly relevant information out of its pages, Shinji just kept standing where he was while the platform continued its descent.

What a surprise – from the looks of it, his father had disappeared off the map yet again without anyone informing him, and he probably wouldn't even have noticed that he ever left if he hadn't paid attention to this particular conversation, that was just the extent of how little they actually had to do with each other.

The Third Child didn't really feel like asking them, in part because their conversation was none of his business and he didn't want to bother or interrupt them, or come off as nosy, but from the way they were talking, it wouldn't surprise him if this conference his father was supposedly going to was not even in Japan. But even if the leader of NERV had left the country, what reason would he really have to tell his son? It' not like they would speak with each other any less because of this. All he ever heard of what was going on in his father's life were just things he picked up by coincidence during his own work at NERV.

And judging from Lt. Ibuki's words, he didn't seem to be very personable, or even popular with any of his underlings... well, apart from Rei. Or maybe it was just some of them, or just Ibuki. Shinji felt like it was his duty to say something about that, but he couldn't think of anything in particular. He barely knew Lt. Ibuki, and so far his limited impression of her was that of a normal, compassionate person, but Shinji still felt that it was somehow his duty as his son to defend his virtues – but if NERV's aloof commander had any virtues worth defending, Shinji had never seen them. He didn't know what about him he was supposed to defend when someone spoke ill of him, or what to miss when he was out of town. Shinji briefly wondered if perhaps Ayanami could properly miss his father, but that would probably be another one of those many, many things he wasn't going to find out any time soon – much like the answers for his questions about this... being he had encountered that day in the woods, all of which he tried to banish from his thoughts as well as he could.

And there were so many other mockingly casual mentions of things they weren't telling him anything about... it was the first time he heard about this 'event' Misato was apparently planning to participate in the very next day.

At least Kensuke would probably be delighted to hear that they were apparently going to get a new EVA, EVA 02 if he understood them correctly – He distantly wondered if Rei was going to pilot it, now that EVA 00 would be out of commission for a while...

Speak of the devil.

After a long voyage, the platform finally reached what was the ground level relative to the cage, and down there, they were already being awaited by the crew that had been dispatched to the neighboring cage, consisting of one of the women who had been in the same bunker as Misato and the others during Operation Yashima, a middle-aged male technician Shinji didn't really recognize, and most importantly, both Aoba and the unintentional source of endless awkwardness and stewing misery that was Mitsurugi senior, who immediately engaged his superiors with lively hand gestures and outgoing mannerisms, informing them how the last member of their half of the team had performed, a figure as silent an distant from him as Shinji was from his own allotted batch of synch score measuring adults, whose light skin and hair worked together with he ghostly white plug suit to create an illusion of an unearthly glow around her.
So far, Shinji had deemed it wiser to spare his surroundings from getting interacted at by someone in a mood as disgruntled as his, but since it was her, the words she had spoken this morning (not just during the first break, but also when they were both about to leave the building) were back in the equation, and with them, the feeling that he owed it to her to take the next step upon himself since she had taken care of the last one.

Since the adults were busy talking among themselves and both pilots had been standing a fair bit behind them to begin with, it should be easily possible to strike up a quit conversation without drawing too much attention (and thus, teasing) from them, and since Misato would probably take him back home after she was done talking, this was probably the last chance he would get to speak with her until tomorrow morning in a classroom packed with gossip-happy classmates.

In addition, he saw that she had her arms half crossed as if to hold her own upper arms and elbows, which rekindled his earlier worries that being connected to EVA 00 while it was still substantially damaged couldn't have been all that comfortable.

Sure, her expression and posture were a stiff sort of stoic, but he'd just walked out of a similar test himself. Despite how awful he had felt at various points during the last battle, it turned out that the actual, physical damage to EVA 01 was largely superficial, so that he found it mostly repaired and repainted when he reported in for the experiment today. While yesterday had been his day off, the various technicians had been busy repairing and replacing everything, but while the biological parts could be regenerated much faster than the corresponding bits in a human, Shinji had come to notice a slight sense of soreness right beneath his upper skin layers that partially stayed with him even after the hours-long experiment was over.

By extrapolation from how much worse EVA's damage had been, he could guess that Rei had to be worse off than him even with her somewhat lower synch ratio, but of course she hadn't objected to being subjected to yet more unpleasantness after the more than sufficient dose she should have gotten while her EVA acquired the damage in the first place. While she was later declared to have no actual physical injuries, he had to support her when they first heard the retrieval squad's helicopter outside of EVA's plug. Offering to help her get to her feet seemed rather natural since she was the one who had been unconscious just before and he was already conveniently holding her hand, but when he saw that it still cost her come effort to get to her feet, he was initially worried that she might have sustained some serious injuries since she was already weakened from the previous incident. She was at first somewhat surprised at his sudden urgency to grab her ("What's the matter?" "Uh..N... nothing...", as if having to have this degree of physical contact with her whole arm didn't make this awkward enough), and repeated her earlier assessment that she could probably stand well enough, and helped her towards the lights of the nearing helicopter, which unusually contained a very worried Misato frantically pointing around with her flashlight in addition to the typical load of paramedics (For all her apparent foolhardy confidence in her crazy plan, she ultimately revealed herself to be very, undignified terrified of the prospect of having gotten any of her pilots injured as a result of her actions, especially so soon after the last debacle), where they had provisionally strapped her to a stretcher, just in case.

Ultimately, it was just the usual numbness as her nerves gradually switched back to 'normal' after the strain of what must have been a painful misadventure, but Shinji knew from personal experience that this didn't mean it wasn't pretty unpleasant.

He wouldn't be surprised if she spent most of yesterday resting in her bed, which wouldn't have been necessary if he'd taken out the angel with the first shot, so while the whole deal had ended positively enough for Shinji not to bother with the whole self-blame cart when he had other, more recent things to brood about, but it did serve as a further point he used to convince himself that he owed it to her to g and talk to her, and do it properly.
In the end, however, making what he actually ended up saying look like the result of great conviction seemed to have been too much too ask, although this was, in part, to blame on the usual need to reach for the next best conversation topic.

"We're getting a new EVA, Ayanami... Misato-san and the others say they're bringing EVA 02 over here, all the way from Germany..."

The lack of immediate reaction of even a turn of the head in his direction was expected, but in his current state, Shinji couldn't completely dampen this dissuading feeling that crept up in loops and circles formed by pessimism's all too familiar dance of 'I told you so'.

"Did you know that? That other countries were also making EVAs... and that there's more than just ours?"

"Yes." she stated, without otherwise moving any part of her body that weren't her lips.

This was discouraging in more ways than just one, to know that she hadn't told him either. He obviously hadn't known her that long, certainly not long enough for her to spill anything she knew to him, and he didn't have delusions about that either, but it would have been nice to have reasons for further conversation, and perhaps he would have unapologetically liked this feeling of... knowing that there is someone in this same boat of not knowing.

Considering that Rei had been affiliated with NERV for much longer, it shouldn't even surprise him that she knew such things, even if she was also just a pilot... considering that the spent much time around his father, she might even know more about the EVAs than even Misato, and the more he considered it, the less legit reasons he saw to have ever thought otherwise. Their perspectives were completely incomparable in that respect... His second concern, however, wasn't as easily explained away, which was, simply speaking, one of opaqueness. By now he could tell that her not looking at him didn't necessarily mean she wasn't listening, but that didn't necessarily mean he was suddenly an expert on her or anything; In truth, he couldn't read her at all, he couldn't even tell if she had been waiting all day for him to respond to her, or if he was currently just bothering her while she was already feeling uncomfortable, and this was really the most untenable state.

"Hm..."

Before he got the chance to gather his thoughts and maybe take a closer look at her as she stood there, between control panels and corridors, it became apparent that time was up when Misato blithely announced that they were all finished for today, and filled even whatever last holes the one-sided observation of proper decorum could have left by taking the time to wave in Rei's direction and wishing her a nice evening.

Trapped in a private space of longing silence that seemed to exist in its own dimension separate from wherever Misato was spreading her usual brand of slightly forced, supremely embarrassing yet ultimately well meaning cheerfulness, he yielded to the flow of gestures and words leading him out of the room. There was very little he could do about that.

In sepulchral silence, Commander Ikari stared straight into the inkblot-blackness of the outer atmosphere.

With arms crossed over his chest, he sat in large first-class compartment on board of a supersonic jet, all of which had been reserved solely for him and his purposes, and yet, he still renounced all of its worldly pump by sitting right next to, and directing this firm, ambitious gaze right through one of the numerous small cabin windows, his choice a declaration of intent more than it was a
pastime, for what lay outside was more in line with his nature, and far more pleasing to his eyes, especially now that the high altitude path of the man made vehicle was crossing the bloody edges of the southern region, though still not daring to approach the edges of the rampant vortex, where an old wound gaped in the skin of the red earth ball which to this day had staunchly refused to ever heal.

Even when he perceived the sound of a door sliding open, he didn't bother averting his eyes from the merciless abyss beneath or the outer darkness above – he had already been waiting for his informant to show up.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I sit here?"

The informant, a large Chinese man in a dark suit, didn't wait for an answer and cut straight to the chase instead: "The supplementary budget for the sample collection has been passed without further delays."

"Of course. The committee would never risk their on survival."

"And there is yet more good news: With the exception of the United States, all permanent members of the security council have approved the budget for unit 07 – and it's only a matter of time until they approve as well." the informant took a gulp out of a pocket flask he had pulled out as he went on explaining. "Excuses like unemployment or national debts won't cut it any longer."

The commander did not avert his eyes from the darkness beyond the window.

"And what about your country?"

"We will participate from unit 10 onwards. The plan for the second facility is still afloat – our only problem is that we still don't have any pilots."

That would be a secondary problem at best, but at this point, Ikari chose to keep that to himself, for he had other concerns to worry about – among them, the simple fact that there were two more numbers between seven and ten. As far as the other missing numbers were concerned, he was already privy to certain hints, but the number eight, this insignificantly tweaked symbol of infinity, cloaked itself in complete and utter silence.

"We can't afford to be negligent right now. The angels have returned, and the EVAs are the only weapons that can defeat them."

"That is true... No one wants a tragedy like Second Impact to repeat itself..."

After having taken his time to practice a bit on the Cello to calm himself down a little and actually achieved a fairly satisfactory Shinji did not expect to have this dream again.

Not two night straight.

But still, there he was.

On a beach in a dead world, beneath a blood-sprangled sky.

The familiar roar of the surf just would not leave him in peace under any circumstance.

Why?

Why did this have to happen again?
Why did this have to happen at all?

As much as he hoped to have found the 'solution' to the recurrence last time, when something halfway pleasant took place, this dream was proving itself to be very persistent.

Shinji had far past enough of this, he couldn't see any point, it was like having a warning repeated over and over again after he'd gotten it the first time.

He felt this stubborn little impulse to just get over with opening his eyes to make this end faster, but he hesitated.

In his mind, he begged whatever forces controlled this place not to make him suffer the first, let alone the second variant of the dream – once again, he could feel that vexatious mass of alien feelings filling his being, pestering him without ever revealing their sources, horrible feelings that made him want to tear out his hear and throw it as far as his thin arms could manage, gooey, succulent squirts of guilt, self-disgust and loneliness, stronger than he ever knew them, more intense and absolute that he ever feared they could be, hideous emotions in quantities that could tear him apart.

He didn't even know where this pain came from, so what could he do to rationalize it away? What should he focus on to repress it, how could he run away from it without running straight into its arms, never mind taking some real measure to stop it.

He was wholly and truly at its mercy, and all he could do was hope that he'd hit the version of the dream in which there was someone here with him.

More than anything, he wanted... some sort of company, any sort of company...

Not necessarily Misato – right now, he found it hard to even have this kinds of thoughts about her, he was still substantially disgruntled because of this whole housework thing, and her comment about him being 'part of her work' constricted around his heart like a thorny vine, fertilized by the many unspoken secrets festering around the joint workplace that connected them.

He'd prefer to have someone who was... yes, still pleasant and wise enough to lead him, but without expecting him to pay in slave work, favors or anything else, someone who would... just be there and let him be there, but still left him a certain distance without detracting from her acceptance... distance that left space for mystery and a connection to the things beyond this world, but without the completely 'unworldly' intangibility of Ayanami, he wouldn't mind if she talked, like, a lot.

But now, he could no longer deny that he was beginning to wish, and this was more than he ever deserved.

So he opened his eyes, and there she was again, where the sea touched the land, standing on the surface of the water like a mirage to be admired and desired, but never to be reached or touched.

Only this time, the sight of her, the sounds of the waves, and the fine sand were accompanied by the most curious of sight, a change to surreal that he barely payed it any mind because of it's sheer crazyness and the lack of possible sensible ways in which he could react to it.

The entire sea, including the furthest outreach of the waters that nearly reached his position, was a deep, unreal gradient of blue, like something done with a computer's graphic program, from a dark midnight color at the distant horizon, to a light-drenched cyan where shallow outreaches seemed to lick the white sand.

Had he been in a more ordered state, he might have connected this counter-intuitive sight of all
these stories about how the sea had looked and smelt in the times of their ancestors, but as he was right now, Shinji couldn't process a blue sea any more than a green sky, or a forest where all the leaves on the plant where a bright, sugary pink.

Between the sea and the apparition above it, it was the image of the girl who offered more sensible ways to react with her.

Ayanami Rei. Or was she?

In any case, having her at his side was something he couldn't even hope to dream of.

Her image disappeared right before his wide open eyes.

This didn't deter Shinji from keeping up his stare.

That is, until he became aware of this blurred object at the lower edges of his field of vision, which he swiftly exposed as a female body by adjusting the lenses of his eyes.

The Third Child couldn't have explained why he began to experience this rising, warm perception, or why he began to quake with sobs and tears as soon as he sat up to get a closer look at her – the person next to him was not Misato, but a complete stranger.

The girl before his eyes appeared much younger, still ostensibly older than Shinji himself, but not by very much; Regardless, she probably would have towered over him if they were both on their feet and was generally rather 'developed' for her age – while she was fairly thin around the waist to the point that she might have seemed lanky if it wasn't for her wide, feminine hips and the well-stocked buttocks behind them – Shinji couldn't really see it in this position, so the fact that he somehow knew about it regardless made him pretty nervous. Her breasts, however, would have been very hard to hard and impossible to overlook, since they were positively gigantic and her clothing did very little to hide them.

Wait a moment, her clothing... wasn't that a plug suit?

A bright pink one, at that, also featuring the occasional blue or white element, clinging tightly to her skin and hiding very little of her ample secondary sex characteristics.

Damn, you could even take a guess at the outlines around her mons pubis... - Shinji took note of the numbers '05' on her suit, and then forced his eyes up to her face.

He really couldn't find even a single previous memory at this face in his skull, not at school, not at NERV, not in the city, not in the village his teacher lived in, her features just didn't trigger any sort of 'click' in his head.

As far as Shinji could tell, she looked a little European, although he had to admit that he had never ventured far beyond the previously mentioned locations, and his teacher's native village was hardly a nexus of cosmopolitanism. There was this lone Korean family, and Shinji had never really talked to anyone in this village anyway. He hadn't even seen anyone from outside east Asia up close, except on television.

In any case, the stranger had long, chestnut-brown hair, one or two shades lighter than his own, and carrying and contrasting his inconspicuous earthy tone with a rufous warmth to her characteristic hue.

Her mahogany tresses flowed freely over the ground, and somewhere in the back of his mind, this registered as vaguely wrong, like she was supposed to have another hairstyle. What paradoxically
didn't bother the back of his head was the ridiculously out of place, girlish blue headband which looked like something you'd expect on the head of a six-year-old – except for those small white plastic ornaments at each side, whose futuristic design of straight, edgy lines and general shape reminded him of... an interface headset for Evangelion pilots?

That would certainly explain the plug suit, but as far as he knew, there were no other pilots apart from himself and Rei – wasn't that why they had insisted on recruiting him in the first place, because there was no one to beat the fourth angel in Rei's stead?

Either way, as soon as his initial confusion had abated, he felt inclined to make sure whether this strange girl was alright – but he wasn't completely in control of his actions in this place, he still kept feeling things that he couldn't explain, but still influenced his actions.

Carefully, almost tenderly, he lifted up the girl's upper body and cradled her in his arms.

Of course.

Of course she would be here.

Her never fading fearless smile that she kept even if the most dire of situations had always been continuous proof of her bottomless strength.

She had always been strong, and loved life, so much that she would spare the life of, think of saving even those for which redemption was forever beyond their reach, specifically, the person who took it all away from her, who rendered all her effort moot, the one who let all of her willpower and determination go to waste in spite of the advice she had tried to give him.

It was obvious why she had come back, but why in the world would she be with him?

She had to be horribly disappointed...

She had to hate him...

And although he knew full well that her insurmountable superiority above him came precisely from the fact that she was wholly incapable of such ugly things, he still dreaded the moment of her awakening and the ugly mirror it would present to his own unworthiness, his inability to understand why she would spare his life, but with every moment in which this didn't occur, another, even ghastlier fear took hold in his mind: The idea that she might never wake at all.

He called out her name, a simple, short combination of sounds that would have slipped from his grasp by the time the rays of the sun brought him back into the realm of the living.

And indeed: She reacted. She lived, she began moving, she opened her eyes the slightest bit – they were a vivid, light blue-green the likes of which he'd never seen before.

She raised one of her hands, at first a bit tentatively, probably because she was still somewhat dizzy, and stretched it into the air. For an instant, Shinji worried that she was going to slap him across the face or otherwise touch him, a possibility that made everything about him stiffen in apprehension, but in the end, all she did was to place her hand across her own face.

"Have you seen my glasses?"

That was... somewhat anticlimactic.

Shinji didn't really know what to say – part of him still wondered why he even bothered with being
surprised in the presence of this girl, and put a small, relieved smile on his face – She was alright after all – The rest of his conscious reasoning was busy wondering just why he felt, and so far, even acted like he knew this girl. Witnessing all of this in the first person was indescribably mind-boggling, but dizziness did not seem to be part of the experience his subconscious had decided to squeeze him into.

As for the stranger herself, she just contented herself with looking at him right through the gaps between her fingers and narrowing her myopia-ridden eyes, hoping to at least vaguely discern his outline.

"Hey you." she began, her seemingly unshakeable aura of good-natured calm and vaguely detached serenity barely perturbed by their post-apocalyptic surroundings or the kind of pose their bodies were currently arranged in.

"NERV Puppy, is that you?"

Shinji confusedly blinked at her. Did she just say Puppy?

The idiosyncratic stranger answered her own question by making use of her convenient proximity to his chest by leaning over to sniff it.

Strangely, this didn't freak him out nearly as much as it should, but instead filled him with a kind of fond nostalgia steeped in an aftertaste of longing melancholy.

"Yep! It's you! Including your nifty LCL parfume!"

She grinned, vaguely teasing but mostly just brightly.

"So, Puppy-kun, have you seen my glasses after all?"

"Uh... I'm afraid not... Sorry..."

The girl sighed and detached herself from his arms in order to sit up.

She arranged herself opposite him, looking somewhat peeved.

"Meh. I guess I'll have to do without them for a while." her expression shifted back to a warm, bright smile with a hint of something otherworldly in its corners. "At least we're all still alive... Good job there!"

"But... I..."

"It's alright. It's okay. You obviously can't be sure whether something is good or bad unless you give it a try, right?"

She giggled.

"See? It wasn't that hard after all. I knew you could do it!"

"But I... I did..."

Shinji couldn't bear to look her in the eye.

He was completely undeserving of her certainty; Or even of dwelling in her orbit.

"You... you shouldn't have spared me. Neither you, nor.. Why did you do it?"
"Why not?"

"Why... Isn't that obvious?!

"Not really. I couldn't think of any reason. What good would it do? Would not helping you help us in some way, or fix anything of what happened? Excuse me, but I don't really see appeal in sitting down and moping, or just smashing things 'cause you're pissed. The Princess has been trying to teach me for ages, but I guess I'm just no good at it." she stated, calmly, hard to challenge in the simplicity of her conclusions. "Besides, if I do help you, you could help us a little. You and the Princess used to be friends, right? So I thought you might want to help her. That's what I meant to tell you back then. And that other time, a long, long time ago. So no reasons to leave you, and even reasons to not do it. Sorry if that's disappointing, but that' really all I thought. As I told you, if you always worry about everything, you'll never get to have any fun. I think."

But she had lost him quite a while ago.

"...help you? Me? Help you? You and Asuka?"

How on earth did she expect him to answer that?

How could he possibly begin to?

"I'm the one who should be apologizing, and not just for something like disappointing you... I fear you thought too highly of me there, ..." He spoke her name again.

But the stranger was sure of her words:

"I don't think so."

"Why on earth wouldn't you?"

The girl just giggled.

"You know, Puppy-kun, sometimes you can be really cute with the way you just don't seem get anything at times."

What on...?!

"You know what? Let's dispense with the talking. It's just because..."

And before Shinji had grasped what has happened, she had leaned forward an covered his thin, exhausted body with the opulence of hers, evoking old memories – but this time, her head did not slide right past his to sniff at his neck or even whisper in his ear, but stopped to plant a tiny kiss on his cheek.

Even when he had risen to his feet, the initial bewilderment on his face was still nearly palpable.

"Le's go!" she said, offering her hand with a challenging, confident smile. "We need to go find the Princess, Sakura-san and the others! They're probably waiting for us!"

Shinji was willing to lift up his hand, but when the moment to make contact came, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Everyone's waiting.
When he looked at the girl before him, the outreached hand, the way her whole body and every
tiniest facet of her posture had transformed into an invitation, how a single glance would tell her
everything about her truth, and the way she could not be otherwise, he felt the sting of an ancient
pain flare up inside him, a faded image of another girl of such truth and honesty, who hadn't needed
any sort of filter or discrepancy between the innermost of her feelings and the cheapest, simplest
truth of her words and actions, a girl that was long gone, along with the world she lived in and
many other lost souls that had been dear and special to him, along with those doors that, while still
present in this world, had definitely closed and would never open to him again, at least not the way
they were, not if he wanted to add something new to these ruminated pictures of the past that
would only strike pain in the hearts of everyone involved.

But as sure as these bonds were forever lost, he had come to the conviction that they weren't
worthless. If he was still here on this beach, then only because of the absent friends that had taught
him these lessons.

As sure as these bonds were gone, they had been real; They held genuine light in them, and they
had shaped the patters of his heart and mind, like someone he once knew would have worded it
very long ago, and for this, he cried every day and he would continue to do so for as long as his
memories would carry them with him, and he didn't want it to be any other way, he didn't want to
stop hurting or caring one little bit for one of the sous that had been lost in this war, although he
knew that it was probably too idealistic to not expect any numbness...

But this was another truth:

As sure as he had lost these bonds, he had also forged then long ago, and maybe, just maybe, he
would be able to forge new ones, maybe with this girl before him, maybe with other people like
Miss Sakura that were scattered across the night.

There was a time when he had loathed change, when even the minor shifts in the folds and
conditions of human existencethat followed along with time were enough to terrify him out of his
mind, but when he looked at this girl who seemed to embody the very unpredictability that lurked
at the corners of this world, he began to think that maybe, just maybe, he might be able to live with
it.

So the two of them walked hand in hand, leaving footprints in the alabaster sand although they
knew that the refreshing, soothing blue of the tide would soon wash them away, and that low tides
would follow them, over and over again and allow for very different paths of footprints.

And as they wandered along the shoreline, a crown of red refraction announced the incoming
arrival of a sun he thought he would never see again.

With a blissful smile on his lip and a whole new world to be reclaimed, even a subtle, heady feeling
of being on top of the world managed to creep into his thoughts with the morning sun, and once
again, he wondered what he could possibly have done to deserve this, even if the words held a very
different meaning this time...

But even as he felt the sunlight on his cheeks, the wet sand beneath his feet and the pink rubber of
his companion's pink plug suit in his hand, among the wild flurry of emotions that was only new
beginning to settle, there was also a faint, dreamlike sense of what was barely distinguishable from
common, personal disbelief, a sense that somehow, somewhere in time, the calling of what now
felt like a distant dream he could hardly even recall was still awaiting his return, it's distant,
forgotten beckoning characterized more by the absence of characteristics to describe it with, hollow
shapes in the recesses of his mind that did little more than occupy space and swallow any complete
certainty of warmth more efficiently that silence ever could.
Still, whatever might be there, waiting for him to remember where he out it, there was no reason that the thought that warmed him now couldn't continue to do so when that tie came, when he would manage to think of the paradoxical absurdity he had been flung into.

That he had been forced to endure sad and horrible things in the past didn't mean that he couldn't build a present for himself right now... wherever 'right now' might be...

Chapter End Notes

(1) A bit of what whipping out the Cello was meant to signify beyond creating this general mood of "passing contemplation" was to show Shinji in the process of reaching a certain critical level of comfortableness and stability, he's no longer constantly on guard, and reaches a state where... "something to do" becomes something he'll concern himself with/no longer immediately defaults to "grab SDAT player and retreat under blanket", as a companion piece to the "open complaints" thing, but also further exploration of the very apparent shift we have after what used to be ep 6.

(2) Yeah, the "trailer version" of unit 08 has made it into the plans for this fic, partly because this part of the planning was done long before Q and too entrenched to be changed/ixed with minor adjustments (like, for example, the Mari scene), and partly because it'll be cool to explore what the alternate scenario might have been like. While it is not very unlikely for finalized!EVA 08 to show up, it will probably be under a different number. I DO want that gratuitous infinity symbol symbolism, I blame it's use in "Nadia".

(3) So, finito, finish line, end of the chapter! What, were you expecting a little more? Sure, it would be nice if we could peacefully proceed to the next Act at this point but wait, wasn't Gendo plotting something earlier this chapter? Well, Anno certainly was when he was making episode 7, for how could you make a series about deconstructing the Humongous Mecha genre without deconstructing the idea of a Humongous Mecha itself? Therefore, there shall be derpy robots, misogynistic jerks and a very different side to both Misato and NERV. Stay tuned for chapter 17: [Flesh vs Steel] ! So don't be disappointed, Shinji, just one more mecha battle (for once, involving actual mechas), and we will have concluded the story arc! Surely someone who previously defeated eldritch monstrosities with little more than a glorified kitchen knife will not be daunted by a puny robot?
Nobody knows who I really am

Maybe they just don't give a damn

But if I ever need someone to come along

I know you will follow me

And keep me strong

[...]

And everytime I see your face

The oceans heave up to my heart

You make me wanna strain at the oars

And soon, I will see the shore

I want you to know who I really am

I never thought I'd feel this way towards you

And If you ever need someone to come along

I will follow you

And keep you strong

-Rie Fu, 'Life is Like a Boat'

When the next morning came, Shinji awoke to a muddy feeling of déjà-vû and the faint, lingering impressions of a faded dream, just like he had the day before, and he felt it even more definitely now, this strangely urgent sense of having forgotten something very, very important, like he had a pot cooking on a stove somewhere, or neglected to unplug the smoothing iron – domestic objects with whom he'd had far too much contact for his liking recently, although he had managed to avoid such mishaps thus far, mostly owing to his nigh neurotic fear of burning down the house accidentally, which had made him extremely cautious about checking every source of heat or electricity twice or thrice, never leaving anything of the sort unsupervised – Which was strangely not mutually exclusive with the awareness that he was probably a pretty pitiful sight while engaged in such activities.

And although all this was increasingly beginning to register as 'normal' to his brain, to the point that he could mercifully go through with the undignified household chores without thinking too much about what he was doing here, he still couldn't shakes off this strange dreams and the feeling of déjà-vû that followed them in the mornings that increasingly marked them as a distinct entity from the general chaos this piloting business and his new surroundings had thrown him into... nonetheless, this only worried him very distantly, since those dreams had begun to be significantly less unpleasant lately, and after all, he was being subjected to all these EVA-related experiments
some of which involved monitoring his body function very closely, so any perception that the
intensity of this episodes was slowly increasing surely had to be a product of his overactive
imagination which could be reliably trusted to spin everything into an impending catastrophe.

Therefore, he decided to simply ignore these confusing perceptions, and finally put on the fresh
uniform which he’d prepared and put on a clothes hanger yesterday, as if to spite the lingering
impression that he had done this many, many times before, seen, heard and touched this exact
same set of perceptions so often he’d lost count... But as time passed, either because he was more
or less forced to pay attention by routine tasks that didn't offer much distractions, or because he
was wrong after all, and the echoes that followed the sounds of the house were indeed intensifed,
he was beginning to think he could make out a second, female voice in the latter, of theoretical, not
further describable *someone* who seemed to be 'missing' from the present, as little as he could think
of anyone to miss... it certainly wasn't the girl from his lat dream, was it?

The more he thought about it, the less sure he became. Just now, a few minutes ago, right before
he woke up, he felt he had knowledge of her name and personality, but now, it was all just breaking
down into a haze, even her face had devolved into vague outlines.

But never mind;

There was little he could do about it anyway, it was not like he could ever expect to receive an
explanations for this.

Stretching himself a little, Shinji left his room and departed towards the kitchen – in passing, as he
was about to close the door to his room behind him, he briefly felt like he saw a very different sign
on it, bearing a name other than his own.

He shrugged it off and blamed it on the aftereffects of the dream, which in any case didn't waste
much more time in disappearing like they had never been there as soon as he opened his window
and exposed his skin to the warmth of sunset.

It was pretty bright today and appropriately efficient at chasing the uncertain darkness out of the
rooms, and there were even the shrill cries of birds to remedy the silence, almost like the universe
were feeling exceptionally merciful – or simply forgot about tormenting him.

Speaking of birds, the resident penguin was also up on his feet already, and used one of his fin-like
wings to point at his food bowl as soon as he spotted the recently acquired secondary human.

Shinji sighed.

By now, he had no doubt that there had to be some truth to that old story about how pets and their
owners often ended up resembling each other.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming..."

As soon as Pen Pen was provided with a sufficient amount of fish, Shinji popped some slices of
bread into the toaster and waited for it to pop them back out in a somewhat crispier and browner
state, after which both of them went on to enjoy their breakfast – He had also put a can of beer on
the table in the meantime, even though he knew that it would probably stand there for a while
before it was actually opened.

He had only just begun to mentally prepare himself for an encounter with Misato in her typical,
half-naked state when the door to her room opened a whole lot earlier than expected.

Both penguin and pilot experienced an exponential increase in the size of their gawking organs –
the former even dropped the fish he had been chewing on to let out a rather confounded "Waaak?!"

Right before them stood the impossible – Misato. Appropriately dressed. Early in the morning.

Lest anyone interpret 'appropriately' to mean that she had some sort of jacket draped over her
sinfully scarce coverings, or even something like a nice nightgown, what would never occur to
anyone otherwise had to be explicitly stated: Against all established laws of nature, her body was
almost entirely covered with black cloth, specifically a high-necked, elegant dress with sideways
slits just below the hips, paired with a matching, long-sleeved bolero.

Despite its tendency to expose part of her legs, her atypically upright pose managed to give the
regular shapes of the dress a military tough... usually, she would look more like a moody cave
woman than any sort of ranked officer.

Both the dress and her posture, however, worked together when it came to accentuating her shapely
curves.

"Good morning." she said without the slightest flicker of hyperactivity, her demeanor more serious
than it was even for most of the time he saw her working at NERV, unless there was some special
occasion like an urgent, angel-related situation.

Shinji blinked several times to make sure that this wasn't yet another dream. But no, she was still
there.

"G-good m-morning..." he stuttered, too thoroughly floored to even put his toast down. She was
even wearing pumps.

With high heels.

"I'm going to Old Tokyo on business. I'll be late, so you better order out."

"O-okay..."

And just like that, she left.

Still holding the toast in his hand, Shinji kept staring at the door long after it had been closed.

"And then I said – with a lemon of course!"

As soon as Touji had delivered his punchline, he couldn't quite help laughing at his own joke, and
Kensuke, too, seemed to find it rather amusing, which ultimately only served to direct their shared
attention at the one person who had remained relatively quiet during their ongoing conversation
about citrus fruits, warships, the meaning of life, and the deep and intricate relations between them.

"Hey, Shinji!"

Almost instinctively, Shinji reacted to the not exactly raised, but still louder than usual voice of his
classmate, who was once again blissfully ignoring the school's dress code, a fast and somewhat
subordinating reaction comparable to a young child suspecting that his mom may just have found
the remains of an ill-fated vase under the carpet.

"What's... the matter?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. You seem pretty distracted today. Did something happen?"
"Not really... It's just that, this morning, Misato-san was dressed up grandly for some reason, with... makeup and jewelry and stuff and, this fancy dress..."

"A fancy dress? What sort of dress?" both boys mentioned in tandem, taking little time in erasing the previously mentioned lemons from their mind to make room for what they apparently considered more interesting topics.

Shini suppressed a sigh, maybe to avoid coming off as ungrateful.

Those two probably thought that Misato wore this sort of thing almost every morning – in truth, she had almost seemed like a completely different person, like she had been abducted by aliens and replaced by a distinctly unconvincing, inhumanly well-behaved robot duplicate.

"It was a black dress..." he ultimately answered his friends' inquiry, somewhat reluctant to mention it at all, mostly because he could already imagine what would happen next:

The two boys' reaction made it very obvious that they had immediately pictured said dress in their mind and most likely imagined it to be a lot more revealing than it actually was. "You lucky bastard! No wonder you've got your head in the clouds today. Mine would be, too!" Touji's gushing was immediately met with Kensuke's agreement: "Oh yes! After all, it's hard to resist a lady in black! Especially if she's got a military rank... Sometimes I wish a lady like that would order me around..."

"Well, she is a Captain, but-..."

"COOL!" both boys shouted in unison before Shinji had any chance to finish his sentence.

They did not quite manage to infect him with their enthusiasm.

"And what about you?" Kensuke wanted to know. "Do you also have a rank? You were wearing some kind of uniform that day..."

"Why would I have a rank? I'm just a regular high school student, I didn't go through any sort of training or anything... and that outfit isn't really an 'uniform' at all. It's supposed to help with the connection..."

"It's still cool!"

"I'm not sure if you would still think that if you had to wear one yourself... It's embarrassing, really, it feels like walking around half naked... and mine isn't even that bad, you should see what they make Ayanami wear..."

"Incredible." Touji said. "At home, you get to see Misato in hot black dresses, and when you go to work, you have the next hottie ready to be ogled! You know, sometimes I really wish I had your life..."

Shinji struggled to keep that treacherous sprinkle of red from solidifying on his cheeks.

"It's... not like that at all..."

"Yeah, suuuure..." The tone of Kensuke's voice made it pretty obvious that he wasn't convinced at all. "Come on, you've gotta have some sort of code designation at least, didn't you mention something like that recently?"

"Yeah, that much is true... I'm apparently the 'Third Child'."
"Cool! And what about Ayanami?"

"She's the 'First Child'"

"...that's a weird way to refer to the pilot of a combat robot." Touji reckoned.

"Who cares! It's English and sounds cool!"

Shinji had previously wondered about said designation, but considering all the other strange details he'd had to put up in this place, he could hardly be expected to put this very high on his list of priorities... very little would surprise him anymore, considering that he already knew all too well that the EVAs were far from being mere robots – but even he could tell that he most likely wasn't supposed to tell them about that, and even if he did, it would probably just end with Kensuke vividly imagining a battle between an EVA and an actual robot, and presenting his ideas as a kind of one-man theater play reminiscent of his occasional recreational military role play.

"...but there's still something rather puzzling about that..." Kensuke continued his musings, after finishing his extensive praise of the supposed 'coolness' of EVA-piloting.

"Uh... What, exactly?"

"Well..." Touji added, apparently having picked up on it as well. "...I guess no one could blame you for neglecting our English classes when you're busy saving the world, but there is one number missing."

"That's right." Kensuke confirmed, holding around three fingers and using his other hand to play around with the middle one. "Whatever happened to the Second Child?"

"I... I've thought about that before..." Shinji admitted.

"...And?"

"That's it. I've wondered about the numbers, but that's all I could do. I've certainly never heard anything about a 'Second Child'..."

It was not like they ever told him anything. "B-But we are getting a new EVA, anyways..."

"For real?" Kensuke immediately responded with little stars in his eyes.

"I can hardly wait to see it! I'll have to film it in action... Who's going to pilot it? Do you think I've got a chance?"

"Why are you asking me that? I don't even know why I was picked... I guess Ayanami will do it. After all, her EVA was pretty badly damaged..."

"Or maybe it belongs to our mysterious Second Child."

"Could be. But, to get back to the deal with the Lemons... Ikari? Are you even listening?"

"O-Of course I am!" he assured, detaching his glance from Mitsurugi, whose father was eagerly waving goodbye to him just over the road.

"How about those limes again?"

"Lemons, Shinji, lemons."
While Shinji continued on his way to school, his guardian was likewise approaching her own destination – on a hovercraft.

Together with Dr. Akagi, Misato was sitting in the back of the flying vehicle, having spent most of her voyage being bored out of her mind. Now, however, their destination was in sight: Beyond the window, numerous abandoned skyscrapers could be seen, many of which weren't pointing straight up anymore.

It was a desolate sight.

"It's hard to believe that this used to be a florishing metropolis... It's just a testing ground now..." Misato commented, quite visibly wanting to be somewhere else, and not just because of the 'inviting' landscape.

Dr. Akagi, fairly equanimous by comparison, simply informed her friend that they were about to arrive – which did little to stop her from complaining: "Why did they have to pick this of all places... isn't the SSDF doing anything about this project?"

"The japanese military? No, they've been ordered to stay out of this."

Misato rolled her eyes, her words oozing with sarcasm:

"Great! So they can do anything they want!"

With every minute that went by, she found herself with less and less patience or motivation to suffer through the upcoming event, especially now, as their helicopter was about to land amongst the various other ones.

Once they entered the congress hall, Misato demonstratively went straight for the one table that wasn't littered with greasy food, pamphlets and promotional giveaways, and Akagi followed suit – She did, however, not pass up the chance to grab some drinks for her friend and herself.

To Misato, this was one of these pointless peripheral parts that were hiding behind even the least mundane of job descriptions, a needlessly boring matter of appearances, PR and being seen at the right places – that the ridiculous toy robot these people had concocted would never amount to anything should have been clear to begin with. The banners that were hung across each and every corner all read 'Jet Alone' – probably an allusion to the purely inorganic materials said plaything had been assembled from. For all Misato cared, they could have one one step further and named that thing for the primary motivations to which it owed its existence – 'Cash Alone'.

She just hoped that they would begin the presentation soon, so it could end all the sooner, while Dr. Akagi, who had shown up in a simple blue blouse and a very revealing skirt of matching color was already mentally arranging the words she planned to throw at the PR guy that would unavoidably be sent to deal with then – and speak of the devil, there he was, charming (read: slimy), well-groomed and wearing a suit that must have cost more that most people could attain with a month of hard work.

And then there was the voice – how long did he have to practice to make himself sound this pushy?

"In the name of the Japanese Heavy Industry Association, I want to thank all of you for coming to our exhibition. We will now proceed to the control room where you will be able to observe the official demonstration, but first, are there any questions you'd like to ask?"

Before he had even finished closing his mouth, the first hand flew up into the air, a hand that had been waiting for its cue.
Of course, the PR guy immediately knew who he was dealing with:

"Ah, the famed scientist Dr. Akagi Ritsuko! I'm very glad see you here!"

"May I as my question then?"

The PR-man displayed his most skilful smile, most likely fine tuned to defusing tense situations.

"Absolutely!"

Dr Akagi wasn't impressed in the slightest and skipped straight to the point: "Is it true that your product is equipped with a nuclear reactor?"

"Exactly! This is precisely the great advantage of Jet Alone: It's internal power supply allows for over 150 days of continuous deployment!" he reported straight into multiple microphones, apparently very confident in his product.

Nevertheless, the fake blonde was already prepared for an immediate comeback: "But don't you think that a nuclear reactor in a land-based weapon intended for close combat is an untenable security risk? I don't think we need any more nuclear disasters in this country so soon after the last."

"What we need even less is failing to prevent another Second Impact because are relying on a robot with a battery that runs out after just five minutes." he jeered without the slightest trace of shame or bashfulness, or even the tiniest creak in his well-practiced plastic smile.

"Yours is remote controlled. I'd hate to imagine what might happen if the signal were to get cut off in the middle of an emergency situation!"

But the salesman came prepared: "So you say? I'd dare to say that using a remote control is at least much more humane than a system that puts its pilot under severe mental and physical strain."

For most of the discussion, Misato had spent her time sucking at her straw in seeming disinterest.

"...they're beginning to sound like toddlers..."

Meanwhile, the conversation was steadily growing more heated, although the PR-man, true to his profession, seemed to have an easier time maintaining an appearance of level-headedness.

"As I said, a remote control can always fail!"

"That can't be much worse than having another of your metal monsters running amok in the middle of the city." Glib as ever, the man in the man in the expensive suit pulled out a folder labeled 'top secret', garnished with an image that was far too familiar to Dr. Akagi and her colleague. But he wasn't even done yet, oh no, now he tried to make himself look all personable and attempt some humor: "A weapon that cannot be controlled is the very epitome of disaster – It's just like dealing with a hysterical woman. Don't we all sometimes wish we had a remote control to switch them off?"

And to add insult to injury, she was left standing amidst laughter and applause.

Now, at the very least, Dr. Akagi's capacity for poised professionalism was all but exhausted: "Our pilots and technicians have the EVAs under their control, thank you very much!"

"Or so you say." The salesman's stream of smug holier-than-though swank showed no sighs of letting up. "Do you really think that the human mind is capable of taming the beast that doubtlessly
dwells inside every single EVA? Are you sure? Do you expect us all to bet our lives? Would you?"

Did he really think he was in any position to lecture them about ethics? The nerve! Dr. Akagi's facial muscles were not far from losing all semblance of composure: "Yes. I would."

Just when the thought she had managed to throw him off his routine with an unexpected answer, he instead aimed for the finishing stroke: "There we have it! It's exactly because you rely on such evidently unreliable things like the human mind that this sort of dangerous and most notably costly accidents keep happening at NERV. Just yesterday, the united nations had to pass yet another ginormous supplementary budget that could have saved 20,000 people from starvation! And when you ask why, all you ever get is 'The investigation was inconclusive'. It's just about time you took some responsibility! You should count yourselves very lucky that your organization doesn't seem to be accountable to the law!"

But Dr. Akagi wasn't that easily silenced – There was still one more ace up her sleeve, and one he'd hardly be able to trump. She had not wanted to as much as allude to this in public, but this was personal now, at very least since the sexist joke: "No matter what you say, the fact remains that only NERV has a weapon that can defeat the enemy!"

Alas, this was just what that cocky braggadocio had been waiting for: "You mean the AT-field? Don't worry. It's only a matter of time until we develop something similar. NERV's monopoly won't last much longer."

While the twitching of Dr. Akagi's eyebrow went increasingly out of control, the crowd around them erupted into cheers and applause.

Only Misato seemed relatively chill – which lasted just about until they found the way to the wardrobe.

"THAT ARROGANT, CHAUVINISTIC PIG!

HE DARES TO PLAY THE STARVING CHILDREN CARD, WHEN EVERYONE KNOWS THAT ALL THESE INDUSTRIAL BIGWIGS CARE ABOUT IS TO GET THEIR OWN SLICE OF THE ANGEL EXTERMINATION CAKE! JUST LOOKING AT HIS FACE MAKES ME SEE THE WITH THE URGE TO PUT MY SHOEPRINT IN IT! LIKE THIS! AND THIS! AND THIS!"

After she had scrunched up the prospect she had been given and stuffed it into the next best trashcan along with her plastic cups and a pair of USB sticks that supposedly contained further information, she had gone to vent her anger at the next best available target, namely the first locker that had crossed her field of vision, using it as a substitute for the PR-guy's face by kicking at it until it was all but demolished.

"He is just a tiny little man begging for attention; Don't give him more credit than he's worth." Dr. Akagi replied with a cold, evil smile while she fed the pages of the Jet Alone prospect to her lighter.

Misato briefly granted the locker some respite in order to turn around towards her friend.

"Then how the hell did he know about our AT-field?!" she complained, still livid.

"There is always a certain risk of information leaks."

"Still! Just what is the intelligence division doing?!"
To enumerate what every single member of the division was doing would probably lead too far right now, but it probably sufficed to say that Asahina Najiko was standing at a terminal in one of the cylindrical towers adjacent to the very congress hall her two superiors were currently visiting, wearing disposable gloves, pressing a delete button before withdrawing the CD Dr. Akagi had given her earlier as soon as she had finished her work.

She was using a CD instead of an USB stick because the former was easier to break apart and throw out of a window once it had served its purpose.

Expressionlessly, Asahina observed as the glittering pieces tumbled into the depths, becoming playthings of the wind as soon as they her fingertips, set to become just a few more pieces of plastic among the multitude of dust, debris and glass shards that constituted the abandoned capital.

In spite of all warnings, the Jet Alone demonstration was eventually commenced with, drawing the crowd of expectant businesspeople into an orderly line, into which they had gathered right at the Window to observe the spectacle, aided by an ample supply of binoculars that had been previously distributed as free advertizing gifts, complete with the company's logo.

By contrast, Misato and Ritsuko were sceptically leaning on a nearby wall, the latter bearing a strange, cold smile as she listened to the men in the control center as they booted up their robot, led by the obnoxious smartass from before. They were deploying the signaling poles, adjusting various things and calibrating others, the usual fare when you tried to precisely control every tidbit of a far too complex process.

Next, they stirred up a big fuss as they announced that they were going to activate the walking program and activate the right foot – 'Slow walking mode, forward!'

Misato found her own private relief in imagining just how chaotic and disorganized this lot would quickly come to look if they were faced with a fast, intelligent angel.

She found it hard to believe that this walking nuclear bomb actually received applause for the great, mighty deed of being able to put one foot in front of the other without falling over right away.

The idiot in the suit barely seemed to believe it himself. Judging by his exaggerated expression, he might as well been surprised that his glorified tin can worked at all.

"Wow..." Misato commented disparagingly, having snatched a pair of binoculars from somewhere after all. "Their big toy can walk! I bet the boys must be very proud of themselves."

She threw a glance at her friend, hoping that she would join in in her mockery, but the scientist's face was unexpectedly serious – of course, Misato couldn't possibly have known just what she was waiting for...

And there it came, just on time.

It all started with a small beeping signaling an error to one of the consoles.

"What's the matter?"

"...Something's wrong. The pressure in the reactor just keeps on rising!"

"Same with the temperature in the primary cooling unit!"
"Open the valves! Inject auxiliary coolant into the reactor!"

"It's not working! The pumps aren't starting up!"

"Shut down all engines! Send the emergency shutdown signal!"

"Transmission of the shutdown signal confirmed!"

"It's not accepting! The communication system isn't working!"

"Jet Alone is out of control!"

"It's coming this way!"

The whole congress hall filled with a turmoil of voices that could have put a beehive to shame. The guests started screaming and panicking as the salesman from before did little more than stare at the screens in impotent disbelief while his product advanced toward the building, coming closer and closer with thundering steps until the screen was no longer necessary, because the construct rudely broke down the ceiling to deposit its intrusive feet in the middle of the hall, whose occupants had fortunately been gathered at the sides, leaving a piece of the ceiling atop a few demolished chairs as it kept marching onwards, unavoidably tearing holes into everything it trampled beneath its lubberly feet.

Coughing out the dust that had had rained upon them from the crushed ceiling, Misato looked up from the edge of the 'footprint'.

"That robot's manners are just as lousy as its builders!" she resumed the events. "Now why am I not surprised?"

Meanwhile, whatever was left of the command center was busy concluding an imminent meltdown – the eyes of the man who had just been shilling his robot's supposed safety and reliability kept getting wider and wider. "How... how can that be?" He stuttered, still not quite admitting the events to the immediate present of his reality.

"Jet Alone's central computer was programmed to handle every possible emergency! This shouldn't be happening..."

"But it is!" Misato sharply affirmed from below. "What do you plan to do to prevent a nuclear catastrophe?"

"Under these circumstances... all we can do is hope for a timely emergency shutdown..."

"What's the probability for that?"

"0.00002%... It'd take a miracle..." one of the technicians admitted.

For Misato, this was impossible to accept.

"I don't know about you, but I'd rather do something about it than pray for a miracle!" she announced furiously.

Her face and clothes were covered in dust and the consoles with the control panels far above her, but her commandeering tone was more than enough to establish that she was now in charge.

"Tell me how to shutdown that thing!" she demanded to know.
"We've already tried everything!" the representative retorted.

But Misato refused to take that for an answer: "No. There's always the option to delete the entire programming. Give me the reset password!"

"The formatting password is top secret! There's no way I can just disclose it without a formal permit..."

"Then get one! GET A MOVE ON!"

Misato, who had since transferred herself up to the command platform, observed with crossed arms as the representative fumbled his way through various phone calls.

Apparently, not a single person in that company was man enough to take responsibility for this event, which kept them getting referred them to the next best stinking rich asshole with just as little concern for human life.

"Filthy bureaucrats!" Misato hissed contemptuously.

To think that this bastard had only just dared to speak about wasted resources – he might as well be squabbling away the minutes that could cost everyone within a radius of several kilometers their lives.

Meanwhile, his robot was blissfully marching towards Atsugi to gift ten thousands of people with ugly death by atomic mushroom.

At last, the professional big mouth, now substantially humbled, appeared to have reached some sort of agreement with his superiors and put down the phone. "Alright, now we just have to wait for the courier with the written permit, and-

"We hardly have time for such nonsense! If that thing explodes, it's all over!

Sorry, but I'm going to handle this myself. You can keep waiting for a miracle if you feel like it!"

"Hyuuga-kun?" Keeping her phone squeezed in between her head and her shoulder as she climbed out of her dress and walked past a disbelieving Dr. Akagi in the scant white shift she wore beneath, she did her best to waste as little time as possible. "...I've already informed the authorities in Atsugi. Send me Shinji-kun and Unit One in F configuration. Yes, this is an emergency."

She hung up.

Her still fully clothed friend kept shooting her skeptic looks.

As far as she could tell, Misato seemed to have concocted another of her lunatic ideas. "Stop this, Captain Katsuragi. How do you expect to have a realistic chance at stopping this robot?"

As expected, Misato's foolhardy confidence wasn't dampened in the slightest as she proceeded to tie up her hair and press a button on the wall to reveal a gray and violet hazard suit that was originally intended for maintenance-related purposes.

"Simple. I'll do it with my own two hands."

While the transport plane with EVA 01 on board was already on its way, the Jet-Alone...
representative was given yet another opportunity to gawk incredulously.

"This is madness! If the heat doesn't kill you, the radiation will do it! It's far too dangerous!"

"Perhaps. But if I pull it off, everyone will be safe."

Both turned towards the now useless consoles when they heard a chinking noise – One of the technicians, apparently impressed by Misato's determination, had broken his console with an emergency axe marked with bright red varnish.

"If the signal gets cut off, the entry hatch can be opened manually."

"You'll find it on the back."

"Hope."

Misato turned around in surprise – indeed, it was the once so overconfident flack who had spoken, although his new-found spine wasn't quite solid enough to look Misato in the eye.

"Hope. That is the reset password."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. But honestly... How do you intend to pull this off all by yourself?"

"Not at all." She smiled. "Looks like I'll have to rely on our good, old 'unreliable' human mind. And believe me, I've trusted that particular unreliable human mind with a lot more than my own backside... not literally, of course."

And to think that this day had started out so nicely – When the ringing of the bell announced the onset of the second period, just as he was beginning to understand whatever Kensuke's point about those lemons had been, a handful of security personal had shown up at their classroom to escort both him and Ayanami to NERV HQ.

The rest of the class, especially his pair of friends, had briefly waved them off, and the next thing he knew, they were telling him that EVA 01 had already been loaded onto a transport plane, and that he was to grab his plug suit and board said plane immediately – Since EVA 00 was still under repairs, Ayanami was ordered to remain on standby in the geofront.

Thus, he hurried over to the hangars, where he was being expected by Hyuuga, who explained that Misato had called in about some sort of emergency, and that not even he really knew what was going on. In any case, the angel alert hadn't gone off, no one had detected any AT fields, and oh – there was a halfway enclosed compartment in the back of the plane where he could change clothes and find some benches to sit on.

It all happened far too fast for Shinji to process.

No angel alert?

Oh, no doubt, if Misato said there was an emergency, there would surely be one – she might be a slob on par with the devils who inhabited whatever part of hell overzealous neat freaks were punished in, but as soon as things got serious, she typically quit the joking – the problem was more that this deviation from the typical proceedings left Shinji with very little idea of what to expect.

There very thought of an imminent battle made Shinji tense up considerably.
Whatever battle was waiting for him down there, it was just as uncertain as ever, if not more – so far, they hadn't told him a single thing about the enemy.

Shinji tried to calm himself down by harmonizing the rhythm of his breathing with the steady motions of removing and folding his clothes.

He tried hard to remember whatever it was he had done to survive the last few battles, but all he could think of was dumb luck, coincidence and blind panic.

Luck, coincidence, panic, and Ayanami.

It wasn't just her physical stunt with the shield – just having her present made a huge difference. He supposed that having Touji and Kensuke with him had helped in a similar way, although he wasn't particularly keen on repeating that part where he almost squashed them. If only he wasn't being deployed alone. In a way, having people rely on him was a dreadful experience as well, he didn't want that risk to disappoint or fail them, but when he thought of the last battle on the summit of the Futagoyama, or even his first regular combat experience with the fifth angel, he was tempted to conclude that he had only persevered because he knew for a fact that people were relying on him.

He really didn't understand it.

All he knew for sure was that Ayanami wasn't here, and that this meant he would be alone on the battlefield once again. Wondering what she might do in this situation, Shinji put on his plug suit. Quite possibly, knowing whatever course of action she would pick would be of little use to him... he could easily match her in terms of synch ratio by now, but she had one important advantage that enabled her to do quite a few things that were impossible for him – She didn't seem to fear anything, at least not in battle.

He had noticed that she always seemed to bring his father's glasses into battle, and maybe that was part of what allowed her so be strong and sure of her actions, but when he thought of his old man, he felt anything but strong and certain.

So he would have to come up with his very own way to do things one way or another.

(He didn't want to say 'battle style' or 'coping mechanism', the former implied some sort of pride or dignity, and the latter had implications that would not be productive to think about right now)

As he pressed the button on his wrist and felt the fabric of the plug suit tightly enveloping his body, he tried his best to force a serious, stoic expression onto his face.

The Third Child was ready for combat.

With nothing more left to do, he sat down and tried his best to squeeze the questions and worries out of his head until further notice.

When he finally heard nearing steps on the metallic cabin floor, he immediately looked up – and was surprised to find that it was Misato, who was wearing a form-fitting full-body suit of her own today, albeit one made of a significantly thicker material – her pronounced feminine curves were still easy to discern.

With those thick, padded soles, she looked even taller than she usually did.

She sat down on the bench opposite him, which he thought almost looked like she was going to climb into a battle machine of her own – which he soon found out wasn't all that far from the truth.
She looked directly into his eyes, and proceeded to provide a concise, apposite summary of their situation: "Our target is the nuclear-powered battle robot Jet Alone. There's a danger of meltdown in a little over five minutes. So we need to keep it away from any residential areas."

That was... quite a bit to take in from one moment to the next.

A battle robot? A nuclear meltdown?

"Hyuuga-kun?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

Misato turned in the direction of the Cockpit and promptly began to hand out orders: "Get out of here as soon as you've launched the EVA. Climb to a safe altitude and circle the area until we've concluded the operation."

"Roger!"

She now addressed the Third Child: "Shinji-kun?"

"Yes?"

"Run after the target, put me down on its back and then do your best to hold it in place as long as you can."

Shinji could hardly believe his ears and stared at his guardian in alarm. "You want to climb around on that thing?"

"Actually, I'm gonna climb into it." she corrected.

She couldn't possibly be serious about this!

Did she really just announce her intention to venture into a superheated nuclear reactor?!

Even the most mischievous of five-year-olds should be able to grasp why this was a very, very, very bad idea. Radioactivity was this evil scary stuff with the shrill, yellow-black warning label associated with it – and since he was first acquainted with this important life lesson, Shinji had suffered the doubtful fortune of sitting through the occasional physics class where he'd been introduced to yummy details about how this phenomenon works and what it can do to you.

Shinji found it hard not to doubt whether she was truly sober right now.

"That's insane!"

"I know. But I still have to try it."

"But...! This is far too dangerous!"

"Don't worry, even if things go south, EVA 01 could easily withstand the explosion, and I've had it fitted with the extra-dense armor plates just to be sure. The radiation wouldn't even reach the plug."

"I don't mean that! What about you? All you have is a hazard suit..."

"I know that, too." She smiled as if to pass some of her temerarious boldness onto him.

"But I still have to try. Otherwise, I'd regret it forever."
Upon hearing this, Shinji's features solidified into an expression of determination – later he would come to realize that he had all but forgotten any inkling of fear for his own skin the moment he heard of Misato's mad venture... - No, the fear was still very much there, but his worry about her was a much stronger force that easily overshadowed the former.

By now, the Third Child knew well enough that trying to talk Misato out of an idea that had firmly lodged in her head was destined to be a fruitless endeavor – and let's face it, he would undoubtedly regret it just as much as her if he didn't do anything to stop this walking nuke.

Slob or no slob, he had to respect that courage of hers, her strong will to do what is right or at very least necessary when nobody else would, to use everything she had at her disposal to force paths into existence where others saw the end of the road.

If he were in her place, he would find himself held back by so many things, thwarted by fears and doubts, that is, if he would even be able to make out the faintest outline of a path to follow, but all of these things were far besides the point.

The point was that Misato was relying on him to help her with something that was important to her.

He wouldn't be alone on the battlefield after all – Today, it was simply his turn to be the one holding the shield, at least figuratively.

Four days ago, Misato had taken his hand into hers and shown him that he wasn't alone – and now, he would confirm to her that he wouldn't leave her alone either, that her trust in him was, at the very least, not completely misplaced.

"Target sighted!" Hyuuga reported.

The time was near.

Indeed, Misato and Shinji just needed one glance out of the window to spot the ill-fated robot, marching across the landscape with its thin, white mechanical legs.

"Let's go!" Misato announced.

Shinji nodded back as a last confirmation and then, without any further delay, went to take his place inside the Evangelion while his guardian departed for her own spot between the phone booth sized fingers of the purple titan, while Hyuuga got ready to launch them without any need for further words.

Without ever really noticing a definitive moment of turnabout, they had grown to work as the interconnected pieces of a functioning team.

Holding on to the EVA's gigantic fingers, Misato gave the final launch order. At this point, he was sure that a cowardly person like he considered himself to be would never have her courage, but the least he could do was to do his part and contribute to the best of his limited ability like he had done of that mountaintop four days ago.

After he had made sure that he wasn't holding her too loosely or too tightly, he waited for the faint jolt to inform him that Hyuuga had released the last lock bolts and took the EVA's remaining not currently occupied three limbs off the rectangular frame it was contained in and let himself plunge into the depths.

EVA 01 shot towards the earth like a spear, shifting from a horizontal to a vertical orientation almost by itself, its lower half being blown backward as its pilot positioned its legs for the landing
– its feet slid a few dozen meters forward and stirred up quite a bit of dust and debris, but Shinji himself was astonished how easy the landing had proven to be. He had some 'academic' knowledge of the fact that he had just descended from what by all means should be a terrifying height, but it had felt like a mere jump from a moderate height, enough to feel a dynamic firmness around the ankles, but not difficult at all, in fact, he started dashing forward out of the same motion, putting landscape behind him with an unfamiliar lightness. The battle against the blue, shape shifting angel had probably served as a sort of testing crucible from which he emerged in something of a tempered state – compared to what he went through four days ago, this here was a significantly easier task, he didn't feel nearly as tensed up and unable to think clearly as he did on the occasion of his very first EVA-related misadventure, making the EVA's feet carry out a running motion didn't even require his full, conscious focus anymore, he didn't have to think about what the feet were supposed to be doing, it was enough to focus on his goal and concentrate on reaching that damned robot and willing the distance between them to shrink further and further.

The sun over the abandoned city garnished both of the massive giants with long shadows; The robot, stomping ahead with steady, monotonous motion, throwing its limbs forward more than it was taking steps, and behind it, the EVA, with the same articulations as a human, leaning forward as it accelerated like a sprinting human would.

"I caught up!" Shinji realized, his face lighting up with a flicker of joy and weightlessness. It was working! So far, this was really going well.

"We have less than four minutes! Put me down!" Misato ordered over the intercom, this time not transmitting from headquarters, but the helmet of her hazard suit.

Shinji did his best to get a hold of the robot – and once he had a firm grasp on it, he invested every bit of strength and determination at his disposal in refusing to let go, leaning backward to make use of the EVA's immense weight, as much as that was possible without the hand that was currently occupied with transporting Misato.

His efforts were enough to keep the robot's feet stuck in place, but its arms kept carrying out their arc-like mechanical swinging – The force exerted by the motors striving to make Jet Alone's feet resume their motion was strong enough that the EVA's steadfast opposition resulted in its feet being pressed into the ground.

 Needless to say, it wasn't exactly easy to keep the robot in place while carefully handling Misato at the same time, but he figured that this was as favorable an opportunity as he was going to get, so he still proceeded to carry out her order and lead the Evangelion's purple fingers over to the fidgety machine's entrance hatch.

He initial landing was successful enough, but beneath her, the robot's untiring engines continued to resist Shinji's attempts to hold it in place like an ornery hose trying to shake off its rider, and one of these jolts shook the mechanical creation before Misato had any chance to get the hatch open.

"Misato-san!" Shinji cried out in shock, watching as she rolled off the mechanical giant's surface before he had any chance to do something without letting go of the robot – and witnessing how she barely managed to grab one of the metal rungs that formed one of two maintenance ladders on the back of Jet Alone and pull herself to safety.

Shinji exhaled in relief, well aware of the agitated pounding in his chest.

"Be careful..." He requested with a thin smile.

As usual, her preferred method of assuaging his worries was to make fun of them, boisterously
sacrificing one of the hands she should have used to hang on to fling a V-sigh in his direction, before reaching for the opening mechanism of the main hatch.

This, at least, was a good sign, if she could still afford to act like a complete lunatic, she was probably uninjured.

What might have taken place if she had tumbled off a bit further from the ladder or reacted a split second to late didn't even bear thinking about – If that happened, he would have been lost for good...

Meanwhile, Misato herself was anything but pleased with what she found beyond the hatch – "This looks bad. I feel like I'm about to step into an oven..."

As she ventured into the figurative lion's den, the Jet Alone stubbornly refused to stay where it was, Shinji decided that it might be best if he got to the front of the robot to block its path, now that he had both arms available.

"Stay where you are, damnit!" he shouted, gripping the robot's torso with both arms and every bit of strength he could pull from the EVA's muscles with his current synchronization rate.

The results were... mixed.

On the one hand, the mechanical creation did stay in place, but he could still feel the building pressure under his hands as its engines pressed onward with nowhere to release the kinetic energy they were conducting – in the end, the internal pressure near one of the shoulder parts exceeded the maximum strain the material was able to hold in, and he was greeted by a geyser-like effusion of coolant vapor – Shinji immediately covered it with one of the EVA's hands, in part because he feared that radioactivity might escape through the leak, in part to get such an obvious reminder of the situation's severity out of his sight – but the reality was that this measly automaton might very well explode at any moment with his guardian still inside.

"Misato-san... hurry..."

She was certainly trying to.

Peering at the map of the robot's innards that the big-mouthed robot salesman had left her with, she ascertained one last time that she had indeed found the right place and smashed the glass between her and the emergency mechanism designed to get the thick steel door in front of her out of her way.

Finally, a ray of hope: At least the doors were working.

Rushing inside, she immediately pulled the key-card she had been given through its designated slit on what should be the primary computer terminal to activate it.

She booted up the terminal entered the reset code, which was, as expected, met with a request for the password.

Considering herself seconds from ending this spectacle once and for all, she typed it into the terminal and pressed enter.

But her only reward consisted of the word 'ERROR' written in red letters across the screen, accompanied by one of these endlessly grating, tinnitus-like beeping noises she'd had more than enough of today.
"Error? How come?"

Assuming that she might have it the wrong key in her hurry, she repeated the input but again, to no avail.

"No doubt... someone must have tampered with the programming... This was deliberate sabotage..."

Misato barely had the time to formulate her conclusion when a sharp jolt went through the metallic giant, potent enough for Shinji to notice it, or at very least the much increased rush of vapor spraying out of the leak. Alarmed, he tried to cover the source of the escaping coolant with both hands, but it was no use – The rising pressure simply found itself another way out, shooting another jet of vaporized coolant out of the robot's back.

The last salvos of urgent warnings resounded both in the congress hall and inside the robot itself – They all understood that it could be too late at any minute now, and Misato, in particular, realized that she had only one option left: "Looks like I'll have to do this the old fashioned way. It's sink or swim now."

Given that she was currently in the main control room next to the reactor itself and had already eaten a nasty dose of radiation for that 'privilege', she decided that she might as well make use of it and moved to physically push the prone control rods back into the reactor. They were all part of single mechanism, so there was a good chance that all of them would automatically follow if she just managed to push one of them past the line that signified the automatic insertion of the others.

Misato pushed and pushed, leaning all her weight against the control rod, but it didn't seem to budge a single millimeter... or maybe it was.

Just a little, not enough, it was like having to push the weight of the entire wall, the mechanism was certainly not designed for manual operation.

Her teeth gritted, Misato kept pushing without respite until her muscles protested – if she let up, the rods might just slide back out, and even if they didn't, it was quite obvious that she didn't have a second to spare, a fact that was equally obvious to Shinji, who reacted with appropriate horror as further leaks seemed to burst open on all seams and articulations of the robot to expel further coolant vapor into the atmosphere – it was quite apparent that every single bit of coolant inside Jet Alone had reached its boiling point and the volume it had readily occupied in its liquid state was far too small to contain all of it in its gaseous form – and the more of it escaped, the more of it pressed against the robot's hull from within, the less there was to stabilize its core of uranium rods. Even if the robot didn't burst apart on him, it was only a while until the contents of the uranium liquified, melted their way through the metal shell encasing them and disappeared into the ground to disseminate their death-bringing poison.

"Misato-san, get out of there!" he exclaimed, but Misato didn't think of escaping – if that robot were to explode, any attempt to get away from the blast zone would be futile at this point. "Move already, you useless piece of junk!" she cursed in exertion.

She could feel the heat that had been oppressive to begin with raising even further, squeezing the sweat out of her pores, and she knew that the radioactivity levels were most likely following suit.

Just a little bit further, and she should trigger the automatic latching mechanism, just a little bit...

Jet Alone's hull groaned under the strain from its internal pressure, even with more and more geysers of coolant shooting out of it.
Shinji became all too aware how small and fragile a single human being was in this kind of situation – She was currently in the center of something could quite possibly depopulate this entire swatch of land, and there was nothing he could do to get to her without risking to set off the blast... Misato...

He couldn't think of anything other than her and how she would be blown into oblivion if this damned tin can were to explode.

"Misato-san!" he cried in horror, with tears in the corners of his wide open eyes.

Back in the congress hall, they were already expecting the meltdown to occur at any moment, and although Misato was pushing with all her strength, the control rods that had been their last hope refused to budge for that last strip of distance that would've meant their salvation – In short, everyone involved was far too preoccupied to pay attention to the screen of the primary computer terminal when the error notice disappeared and a few rows of undefined numbers flashed across its screen instead – Misato found herself tumbling to the floor when the control rods she had been leaning on unexpectedly gave way and slid into the wall and the reactor beyond it.

Exhausted as she was, Misato immediately faced up to follow the rods with her eyes – Indeed, they had slid in.

But would they still do any good at this stage?

Fortunately, yes.

It worked, probably a lot better than a supposedly out of control machine should be able to.

The red emergency lights deactivated and left the inside of the robot to an unreal green.

Observed by Shinji's uncertain eyes, Jet Alone orderly shut down, the vapor jets ceased, the antennas were retracted and when Shinji let go of it, its legs lost a fair bit of their tension now that the engines weren't pressing them onwards.

"SHE DID IT!" one of the technicians first dared to shout.

The congress hall filled with a storm of rejoicing and exultation, there wasn't a single person who didn't at least sigh in relief, even the PR-guy had a genuine smile on his face.

Only Ritsuko was leaning on the wall without displaying any major gestures.

"...that madwoman..."

So, the day was saved and the population of the surrounding few kilometers had nothing to fear anymore – the colossal silhouettes of both the robot and the cyborg had fallen silent, and only one question remained in the minds of the onlookers: Had the foolhardy loon whom everyone in the surrounding area ostensibly owed their lives to actually survived her venturesome deed?

"Misato-san?!" Shinji yelled into the intercom, almost hysterically. "Are you allright? Misato-san!"

"Well, to be honest, I've really had better days..." she spoke from the human creation's dark interior.

She was leaning against a wall and beginning to feel the effects of the radiation now that the adrenaline was wearing off.
Shinji was deeply relieved.

For all her laziness and all their occasional arguments, he really wouldn't know what to do without her.

"Oh I... I'm so glad you're allright, Misato-san! So glad... I can't believe you actually did it! I underestimated you! It's truly a miracle...!"

As much as Misato appreciated the fact that she was still in one piece and that any danger of radiation-related calamities had been awaited, she was now pretty certain that she didn't deserve all of the credit...

"So, how are you feeling?" Hyuuga asked, concerned.

"Better. I don't mind if you concentrate on flying... If it puts your mind at rest, I do plan to take a little detour to sickbay once we arrive at headquarters."

Misato, whose hair was still sticking to her sweaty face, had since disposed of the helmet belonging to her hazard suit and laid down on one of the benches in the compartment where they had also held their mission briefing.

Although she was positively exhausted, she took great care to placate both her assistant and her young ward a warm, but tired smile. "Don't worry boys, bad weeds grow tall."

Even now, she felt responsible to make sure 'her boys' didn't worry themselves too much.

Shinji however, was kneeling at her side, still dripping wet with LCL because he had only just climbed out of his entry plug. Today, it was his turn to hold her hand.

"The recovery of unit one was successfully concluded. On-site analysis revealed that next to no radiation was leaked. Aside from Captain Katsuragi's intervention, everything proceeded just as planned." Dr. Akagi discribed, matter-of-factly, like this kind of hazardous sabotage was her everyday business.

Ikari, who was slouching over his desk as usual, spoke to address both the scientist and Asahina from the security division who was also standing infront of the afore mentioned piece of furniture after they had finished their report.

"Good work. Asahina-kun? You are dismissed."

The woman in black exuded a quiet "Yes, Sir." and left the room with little production of sound, all the while slipping her hand into the left pocket of her Blazer.

It was only when the automatic door closed behind her that she pulled out what her thin, spider-leg fingers had been grasping and eyed it with a brief, dispassionate gaze.

It was an old photograph, slightly crumpled at the ending, displaying three people at what appeared to be a wedding, although unassuming young girl of fifteen or sixteen years could easily have been overlooked in favor of the coruscant newlyweds – she was purposefully standing aside to let them take the center of the picture, a plain and homely young thing with two shoulder-lenght braids of dark brown hair, clothed in an unostentaneous combination of a long-sleeved black blouse and a long plaited skirt in the same color as if to help her fade into the background – despite the festive ocassion, she did not seem particularly joyfull.
The only thing about her that might have stuck out were her youthfully large dark green eyes, although this wasn't enough to keep the happy couple from overshadowing her.

The groom, in particular, wasn't helping her cause with that shoddy dark red suit he was wearing, as if he were purposely intending to stick out like a sore thumb – most of the people working at NERV HQ, however, might have found his face much more eye-catching than his getup, for they might have felt that they were looking an an older version of the Third Child. The groom was probably twice his age at last, but the resemblance was all the more striking – Very few other people on this chain of islands had this sort of deep-set mindnight-blue eyes. If it weren't for the age difference, they could have been alike enough to get confused, although a closer look gradually revealed the disparities – His skin was darker, his face more rugged, the part in his hair and the few strands that fell into his forehead were arranged somewhat distinctly despite the overall resemblance of their hairstyles, and even if the young EVA pilot might very well have some further growth spurts ahead of him, it was unlikely that he would ever reach this man's type of tall, broad-shouldered stature, and last but not least, the groom's body language and overall demeanor were very different from the Third Child's: He had his right arm tightly wrapped around the hips of his beautiful young bride, not just as a predatory gesture to mark her as taken, but like he had no intention of ever letting go, slinging a frivolous grin at the camera.

His new wife was the exact opposite of him, slender, long limbed and of pulchritudinous shape, her fair skin barely contrasting with her elaborate white dress – and this was all that could be said about her, since the part of the photograph that corresponded to her face had been scratched with a thin, sharp object beyond the point of recognition.

Asahina shot a cold glare teeming with old wrath at the picture, then the door behind her, then back at the picture, and stuffed it back to where she had pulled it from after meticulously folding it twice.

Then, she left.

On the other side of the door, Dr. Akagi had finished yet another report, one that hadn't been intended for the other woman's ears: "I have already requested the related document from Golghata Base. I think that I'll be able to present you with a method of locating our little problem pretty soon."

"Very well. Either way, continue with the regular search efforts for now."

"That goes without saying. But all of that aside... you've only just returned. Don't you feel like... doing something a little more... relaxing after the long journey?"

Ikari felt briefly tempted to sigh, but concluded that it wasn't worth it.

Without the slightest reaction, he remained sitting in his usual pose.

"Not now. I will see you at twenty-two hours in the usual place."

"Yes, Sir."

But as exciting and instructive as it might be to participate in an action-movie like attempt to stop a nuclear meltdown and marvel at Misato's heroic deeds as she did the same, the next morning, the typical everyday proceedings of the Katsuragi household went on as usual, and this involved Shinji being the first to rise and put on his uniform, and the only one to bother with providing himself and the other inhabitants with anything resembling breakfast.
He had long since recognized any attempt to get Misato to stick to their initial already pretty unfair distribution of tasks as a long cause, and he felt sorry for the resident penguin who hadn't done anything to deserve the piles of dirt and unpalatable sludge that would result from him refusing to do Misato's work.

So he surrendered himself to his fate, filled up PenPen's food dish and preemptively placed a can of cool beer on the table to await the bird's mistress.

He might as well acquire himself some cookbooks, if he was ever going to eat anything other than toast and junk food in this house. But for today, he chose to content himself with munching on the usual piece of toast as he pondered today's obligatory weird dream.

Lately, they seemed to be... accumulating, almost as if they meant to draw his attention to something, perhaps something that was still just about to happen, something major... this night, the dream had turned upon itself four times in a row as he rolled around in his bed, at times intersecting or switching between each other, and there had been that other vision that was ostensibly distinct from the one's he'd had so far, but still carried that same telltale tinge of déjà-vu with it that had accompanied the others... he had seen himself standing in some vague, undefined location, beneath a bright blue sky, surrounded by a circle of familiar people: Misato, Ayanami, Touji, Kensuke, Dr. Akagi, the class representative, even PenPen, Hyuuga and the other two bridge technicians – and even people that he hadn't recognized and had only shadowy recollection of, but hadn't triggered any bells of unfamiliarity or newness within the context of the dream – there was a young man with a face full of stubble, for example, or this vaguely familiar looking tall woman who had been standing next to his father, although he still wasn't sure whether the person standing at his side wasn't simply Ayanami, whose height his chaotic subconscious had gotten mixed up somehow. The actual 'plot' of the dream didn't involve that much happening, just all of them congratulating him for something he couldn't really remember, but it had all felt really meaningful at the moment, like those words were so much more. Maybe it was his birthday or something? In any case, he distantly recalled words of gratitude and parting afterward, but it was basically over at that point. The other four visions had taken place exactly like they usually did, red streak of blood on the sky and all. The first two had continued the motif that seemed to have emerged in the last few days, each of them presenting him a pretty girl that was unfamiliar and yet not, none of which he had recognized or showed up a second time, the first had been fairly tall, if not as much as the one in the pink plug suit, had long, raven hair and wore thin-framed, round glasses, the other had short, reddish-brown hair and showed up in a drenched white dress that betrayed much of her youthful body, claiming to be his girlfriend. The third vision also followed that pattern, but once again presented him with a translucently-blue ocean instead of a red one, perhaps to match the azure neckerchief of the young woman that woke up next to her – unlike the others, she was not a teenager around his age, but in her early twenties, although her petite stature and cheerful personality had relativized that somewhat. While she had a bright disposition and soon implored him to consider how good it was that 'all of it' – whatever it was that had taken place to make the barren wasteland around them into what it was now – was finally over now, there was something about her that kept her from completely opening up in his presence, a slight tension in her body language, a clam component in her cute, girlish voice, a heavy shadow that she couldn't quite conceal behind the sparkles in her eyes, despite her conscious efforts to keep it down – it might not be something that might be noticed right away, but somehow, he knew where to look for it, and it bore a terrifying resemblance to fear. And there was another thing... he was pretty certain that he was seeing this particular waterfall of long, brown hair for the first time, but there were some parts about her face that looked ridiculously familiar. Not even in a distant, ominous meaningful way, but the most profane variant possible, like something that stared him in the face every day at school. Something about those dependable-looking, chocolate brown eyes, her nose and her cheekbones, just generally most of the lower part of her face.
More curiously still, despite the very obvious sensory shape she presented to him in sight sound and touch, something felt at odds with the idea that she should be older than him. The idea of it tasted far-fetched at wrong even in the salty, bloody wasteland of his dream-scape, even though it should have been he other way around – the only way he was ever going to be younger than her was in the manner of someone who was long dead, but remained forever frozen in memory as they were on their last day, like... yes, exactly like an older sibling who had died at a young age, so long ago that the younger ones had reached the adulthood they never got to live, and that particular idea tasted like irony and bitterness and gentian roots, as far as ideas could even be said to possess something like a smell and taste...

In the fourth dream, however... he woke up next to a boy, drained and exhausted from the storm on intensity brought on by the variety of mad visions and emotions he had been put through, for so long he had consciously noticed that he was dreaming and unsuccessfully tried to wake himself again and again as he was being jerked around in these waves of images and feelings like an elastic rubber ball thrown by some ambitious god – He should no longer even have cared whose face he would next have the misfortune to glimpse, but he did, and erupted into tears as much from joyful bliss as from utter depletion.

And the other boy in the sand, whose tired smile suggested that he was just every bit as worn out as Shinji himself, just reached out one pale arm, weakly touched his cheek with a kind worshiping tenderness, and spoke a single sentence with a voice like an ancient lyre:

"I forgive you."

Fortunately – or was it? – the sound of a door opening distracted him before he could continue musing on whatever all of this was supposed to imply about him – his attention was quickly occupied by the doorway and the half-naked woman standing in it, as usual, unkempt, grungy and unabashedly scratching her stomach area.

She then proceeded with the usual ritual consisting of a half-hearted greeting, slurping down her can of beer and celebrating her new state of ridiculous drunkenness with an exaggerated cry of joy.

"Wееell..." she continued in sing-song, suddenly manifesting an almost traumatizing cheerfulness now that she was properly drunk and on her way to grab yet another beer can. "It's shі-shа-shower time! Have you seen any clean bras and panties laying around somewhere?"

Shinji didn't bother with an answer, instead settling for a disgruntled to distinctly irked expression as he hurried to get his breakfast over with and escape her oozing aura of sticky, palpable embarrassment. Sure, when it came to preserving peace on earth, she could at least pretend to be a reasonable, professional adult, but apparently, she didn't deem her presence worth bothering to behave at least a little more presentably than your average hobo – the renewed knowledge that she was very much capable to look cool and heroic if she wanted to just made it all worse.

So it came that the Third Child still looked visibly displeased by the time Touji and Kensuke showed up to pick him up, which quickly managed to turn their widely grinning faces ("GOOD MORNING, IKARI-KUN!") into expressions of confusion.

"Good morning..." he replied, not completely successful at concealing his sour mood. "I'm leaving now!"

"Have a nice day~~!" it promptly resounded from the direction of the kitchen where a particular half-naked woman refused to divert any effort to concealing her pretty overt state of drunkenness.

Shinji was anything but overjoyed and made sure to get out of there before he ended up being
subjected to any more public humiliation, although such an event might just have made his friends comprehend why he didn't share their enthusiasm.

When asked whatever he'd been escorted out for on the day before, he proceeded with a rough description of what had transpired. As usual, their reactions remained very predictable:

"So we can now again bask in the light of another day thanks to the heroic efforts of the glorious miss Misato~~ You should have told us right away!"

"Misato-san is really impossibly cool~~!"

"And so sexy~~!"

"That's what I thought at first, but you have no idea how she acts at home!" Shinji openly complained with a degree of sincerity that would have been unthinkable just a few weeks ago. "Once she takes off her uniform, she's nothing but a frowsy, lazy slob, and really, really uncool... and she doesn't seem to have the slightest bit of shame about acting that way right in front of me!"

"Wow! I really envy you." Kensuke stated, defying logic hard enough to make Shinji stop in his tracks. Didn't he just go out of his way to explain how living under Misato's roof was anything but enviable?

"Sorry, but I really don't get why you would say that..."

A sentiment that Kensuke seemed to share from the opposite side of the mirror - "You really are a baby, Ikari!"

"Hell yes!" Touji added, crushing Shinji's hopes that at least he could be expected to sport a remotely reasonable reaction.

"Explain."

Kensuke smiled. "She's showing you a side of herself that no one else gets to see. That's very much like family. She wants you to see her like she really is."

Swiftly floored, Shinji looked at his friends with unintended astonishment.

He had never really looked at it this way – there he was all along, wondering if he was any more than a job assignment to her, when the answer had been right under his nose.

A relieved, hearty smile spread on the boy's face as he hurried to follow his friends on their way to school.

The sun shone, the birds sang, and Shinji marveled as a heady sense of happiness permeated his body like the warm daylight on his skin.

Before he had come to Tokyo-3, he wouldn't have thought that feeling alright could be this pleasant. Surely he would have stuck to his suspicious that this was one of these vastly overrated things about which the reports were too greatly exaggerated to match what could be expected exist in this world, at least according to his experiences so far.

He still couldn't quite say why he had stayed here, and he no longer had any illusions that this would be a question for which he would soon have an answer, let alone one that was remotely comfortable. He had, at the very least, decided that he could ask himself later – right now, he wanted to be on this piece of the sidewalk, he needed to be in this body to feel and experience the
sounds of the morning and the outline that could be felt as the breeze tugged at its edges.

It wasn't like he had suddenly started to believe that he would definitely master the tasks ahead, or even manage to succeed at all, but it would sure be nice if he did pull it off in the end... not that he thought of the events that had transpired as any less unpleasant than he did the day before, but they had led to other things, other meetings, other images, thoughts and experiences that had piled up exponentially over the last few weeks... EVA 01, Neo Tokyo-3, Touji, Kensuke, Ayanami, Misato... even his father as he spoke the words 'Proceed at your own discretion.'.

Having all of this was... kind of nice.

Shinji never had any of these things before, none of what he had managed to scrape together for himself in spite of all the adversity, like a weed breaking through asphalt – A purpose, a home, a pair of loyal friends he could turn to, somebody to long for, a semblance of family, and even a goal to strive towards...

Until now, he had always been all by himself, aimlessly going through the motions as he drifted through days, months and years.

But not anymore.

If there was anything remotely encouraging he could say about the imminent journey he had just hoisted upon himself, then it was that he wouldn't be alone on this path.

So it came to pass that Shinji finally reached the decision to, at the very least, give this whole world-saving business a good try.

What made him do it would remain yet another of the many omissions, unspoken secrets, and ambiguities which populated his new workplace, but much, much later, he would arrive at the uneasy admission that the moment he held his father's letter in his hands, he had first felt something that he had never known before in his old life, but had offered him numerous chances to get acquainted – the sweet, sweet fragrance of hope.

Silence so complete and abject it could only exist where nothing living plotted its ending in all of its dominion.

Expanses of cleft swathes of land made of black, burnt-out rock, the occasional reminders of civilization poking out here or there, among then rigid, cross-shaped monoliths resembling Evangelions in varying states of destruction, although they didn't resemble any particular model Shinji would have recognized at this point... and far beyond, yet visible right above their peaks were the lights of the milky way, too many to ever be counted, so numerous they just melted into one single, diffuse streak covering the blood-stained blackness above, sparkling brighter than they ever did in hundreds of years, now that all artificial lights that could have drowned them out had been extinguished.

In the landscape below, chunks of steel and concrete could be glimpsed, horizontal, uprooted scraps of buildings too far removed from, or even recognizable for the purpose they had once served to even be called ruins, but their sight paled before the very worst details in this picture of desolation, the apparently randomly scattered pieces of a woman's torn flesh, petrified evidence of its once half-melted, now bizarrely frozen daliesque state, flesh melting off bones, bones bending like rubber where their obdurate should have broken, tatters of a corpse that dwarfed all mountains, pieces of a woman that covered the eyes of the earth as it wept. That piece at the outermost corner of his vision, he thought, was an arm; The flesh-mound in the distance, straddled by the ocean,
looked like one half of the head.

Only the red, red ocean bore any resemblance to the world Shinji was used to, and all it did was let its waves sweep back and forth in a long tethered motion, enclosed into itself and content with the space it occupied – By now, he hardly even needed to open his eyes to describe every single corner of this wasteland, he could say, with quite a bit of confidence that was still useless to reassure him, that every tiniest facet of this place had burnt itself into the squishy inside of his skull – and right upon seeing it, he could assuredly conclude that he was dreaming yet again, there was not even a delay anymore.

He just hoped that he would be having one of the less unpleasant versions tonight.

One of those visions where he was here with someone else – Yes, he did want company, but when he thought of it, he was a lot less sure of what kind of company he wanted his subconscious to summon up that he had been on most of his visits to this realm – just a while ago, he could have thought of all kinds of things he was lacking, but by now, he had found many of those in a place where he didn't have to retreat into his dreams to find them. People that would walk through life at his side weren't so scarce anymore as to be like water in a desert, that he would be in this desert here, occupied with the activity of yearning for them. In that sense, he could almost grant himself a thin, refreshing layer of leeway in the oppressive humid stench of this place, a measure of curiosity about just what might be awaiting him this time, like it had become a pastime experiment and less a clawing for sustenance – someone new would be nice. Something fresh and virgin that he hadn't seen before... how about something exciting, something a little more challenging for once?

Shinji could hardly believe that his heart could even harbor such a wish, but in the end, this were his dreams, and they would be over soon enough. After what he had lived through until today, he felt ready to be challenged, perhaps not exactly shouting for the universe to bring on the next level, because that, he would never be, and not feeling such vainglory nor ever thinking of seeking it was perhaps one of the few points where he might have had an insufficiency less than what you commonly label as a hero, but he felt that if challenges could not be avoided, he wouldn't mind it if they came now, so he could go back to his quiet and his peace when they were gotten over with.

So he opened his eyes, and as always, his first glimpse was the only firmly-entrenched constant in his place, an ever-solemn apparition of a girl standing on the surface of the water.

As in every iteration, she would just stand there and stare down at him like an angry ghost, and left him struggling to explain how this image of a person who looked like Ayanami, dressed like Ayanami and took a posture that was all too common for her could fail to trigger any sense that it was her, to the point that he found himself lamenting the difference where there was none to be discerned, curled up like a tiny, unnoticeable dimension beneath height, depth and breadth, but still enough to feed his nigh delusional certainty that this faint specter neither would, not should mesh with his thoughts and ideas of the girl who had smiled at him when he came to her rescue in an event whose age had, at the current point in time, almost reached a week, and as he still pondered why she defied comprehension, the transient image dispelled itself before his very eyes as it had done many times before, enough for him to expect for it to happen and even wait it out before deciding to move, although his motion of sitting up lend into one of looking around for her to see if she had left any trace, a sentimental endeavor half-rooted in habit that he had long known to be futile for quite a while now, but it felt like a question of breaking a promise to not do for her what he would do for anyone else and not assume that she had disintegrated into thin air, and besides, the best way in which to pay her basic respect that he could think of right now, not that he had any delusion that his inconsistent fumblings were of any more use to him than a rain dance around a suspiciously human-like personification of its power to replenish and aliment the land was as a 'thank you' to the clouds, but these weren't the target of his actions, and even if he might get
accused of just wanting to calm his own selfish mind, it just didn't feel right to say nothing at all.

He, too, accused himself, the curse of awareness made him feel these reasonable doubts very keenly, and knowingly used his newfound propensity to hope to dearly wish they were unwarranted, perhaps shamefully – the word *prayer*, however, was probably the one furthest from his current thoughts, first because he had never believed in this kind of thing, and second because he if he had come back here, then only because he was sufficiently convinced that he didn't want to become a part of an enveloping goddess' Christ-Body even if such a thing could be made reality.

Some of those who wouldn't boil with a wish to hack off his head for what he had done might come to call him a savior, and this was probably what the self-appointed holy mother had in mind, but as far as the only truth of his own was concerned, it was his debt to know that he was at most the lowly Magdalene, unworthy to even spill his endless tears on the true star of his hope, unmistakably a sinner, and yet the one she had come to chose. She had granted him a request alright, but he hadn't asked her to be his goddess – She could have been everyone's goddess, but only he could be her chosen one, and in their mingling conceive what would become the zygote of a brand new world that was yet beginning to emerge from its amniotic fluid, and yet, was already destined to become just as tainted as the union that had brought forth this second genesis, their star-crossed embrace in the heart of a dying world.

And this was nothing more than what he had wanted – his taint was his taint, his own rock would be his own business, and he would gladly roll it all the way back to the top of the mountain, this time, bitterly weighed and deliberately chosen.

This meant, of course, that now was the point in time where he usually realized that he had been staring past the silhouette of a girl, and indeed, there she was, the first inhabitant of this new Eden – Just like the first one, it stank of various organic molecules like it hadn't done for countless billions on years, and like all previous creations, it reached its pinnacle with a man, a woman and a promise waiting to be broken – Until now, he had served his exile in perfect silence, but now, it was his turn to bite into the fruit and chew it hard, for only when the first words between two separate people would be spoken and everything he had attempted to banish from this world had made its return that the final sanction would truly be undone.

And what an opulent harvest the foliage did reveal, of the ripest, most tempting red that his primate ancestors had developed that extra green receptor for, bright, yet deep like the color of blood and the red, red sea – a girl wrapped in a thin peel of plug suit rubber and a occasionally, layers of bandages that curiously seemed to mirror the pattern of injuries Rei had sported upon their first meeting. Beyond all doubts, she had what TV, magazines and other popular media would describe as a perfect body, but it wasn't Misato's kind of warm, playful sex-appeal or Rei's ethereal, unearthly beauty that would have been fit for a greek goddess, but the extremely alluring, provocative yet coldly unattainable type of attractiveness one would associate with a model or an actress, and she might as well have been one: She was extremely thin, there was not a single gram of misplaced fat anywhere on her body, her slim waist obviously a product of the same rigorous, nigh self-flagellating discipline that must have created her long, athletic limbs, which were probably covered in the same light, yet rosy skin that was visible on her inhumanly spotless plastic barbie doll face, framed by long, lustrous hair in a baked martian red, whose every dainty motion gave rise to new waves of effervescent lust – Her breasts were even smaller than Rei's an were shaped more mounds than hemispheres and barely filled out the protective plates embedded into her plug suit, but it was precisely this half-revealed and easily uncoverable state that made them all the more titillating.

Her eyes, however, were cold, icy blue and wide open to brim like those of a dead fish.
Now there wasn't a single language on this planet that could have described the impulse that
overcame Shinji when he saw this girl. He was shocked at his own thoughts, twitching and
screaming within the prison of a head that wasn't completely his own in this dream world. He was
so repulsed and disgusted that he could have thrown up right on the spot, but the vomit just
wouldn't come.

In its place came abyssal hatred, cold as liquid nitrogen – This girl, this complete stranger... he
wanted to do something to her, to make her hurt, he was completely overtaken by a tar-like, black
urge to sully and depredate her, to touch her no matter whether she wanted or not, fuck her, fuck
whatever she wanted!

He wanted to mangle her, to sink his very own teeth into her flesh until he could feel the salty-
metal taste of her blood all over the inside of his mouth.

He felt his tears building up below his eyes – she did come after all.

She had come here, because she had need of him, because she had use for him, because she had
spend all that time pining for his presence as much as he had languished in hers, because she had
noticed the absence his voice in the endless choir of the millions and missed it enough to follow
after him – And yet, she had always rejected him and reveled, even basked in every ounce of pain
she had caused him, spewed forth lies in the shapes of both words and kisses from her pretty, pink-
lipped little mouth that always seemed ready to lick up his blood like it was the nectar of her life,
and always, always weaponized that shell of hers to taunt him, until he had finally gotten himself
what kept withholding, to the sight of her vain, shallow ornamental artifice of a husk.

Enough.

With a sudden, fluid motion of his arms, his hands constricted around her neck and pressed down
with all of their force.

He would give all of her counterfeit gaudiness to the maggots, her smooth, slight neck, the her
perky breasts, the long, speckles calves, every single one of her pavonine, vainglorious wonders, so
he would never, ever, ever have to see any of them ever again.

Now she came to him? Now she dared to throw herself beside him, like she had done it before, to
ask for the comfort and consolation she had always coldly denied him?

She had once told him that she wouldn't want anything to do with him even if he were the last man
on the whole damn planet, and now it was her who had sought him out after the end of everything,
and instead of delivering on her own damn promise, she came to him, out of pure self-serving
necessity, and voicelessly asked for a love that wasn't even worth a few damn words to her, and
never had been.

Oh no, you don't!

Not this time, not ever again.

Devoid of mercy or pity, Shinji clenched down on all the little blood vessels and air passageways
of this supposed stranger, greedy to squeeze the very last and dying breath from everything he'd
ever dreamed. Now it was his turn to repay her with the same cruelty she had mocked him with
when he still would have given everything to be with her forever, taking his sweet time to take his
revenge for every ever so tiny quantum of pain she had ever inflicted on him.

…wait a minute, 'everything he'd ever dreamed'?
'be with her forever'?!

What... what exactly was he even doing right now?!

He... he didn't even know this person, for crying out loud, and neither did he recognize himself.

Why on earth would he ever-

There was something warm on his cheek.

The girl's bandaged hand, which had slowly yet fatefully been lifted up while he was too lost in his intensity to notice before was now softly sliding over his cheek in what was almost a caress, just like he had wished it would time and time again.

His grip loosened.

At first, this was all that happened, but then, softly yet violently, Shinji broke down into sobs and tears like a collapsing house of cards.

His very soul just flat out imploded, leaving only a wretched bag of meat.

There was just nothing left of him anymore.

Everything that had once resided in this form, given it structure, substance or drive had been smashed, bashed in and thoroughly broken.

He was just completely and utterly dilapidated.

His tears dropped onto the stranger's face, who icily darted her dead eyes over to his face without the slightest hint of emotion, and in the coldest possible voice a human throat could produce without violating the laws of physics, she spoke two words:

"How disgusting."

Like a masterfully crafted sword wielded by a righteous executioner, those words pierced Shinji's soul, his dream and his sleep – Swathed in sweat, he sat up, his whole body shaking and refusing to be calmed.

He felt terrified, somehow, of the very room he was in, its very corners like a claustrophobic constriction bursting with used-up air, its very walls dripped with a sense of menace, like the space itself was haunted, rightfully possessed by something that wasn't him, whose heavy, suffocating dampness of the summer night weighed on his chest.

He felt he needed to get out of here, out to where he could have air, out of the place where space belonged to her, was steeped in her, whatever 'her' was supposed to mean, in his internal chaos of half-awake agitation, all manner of words became little more than unprocessed strings of sounds.

Driven by a force he didn't understand, she jumped from his bed and stormed from the room in a frenzy of clumsy, undignified haphazardness and a diffuse name forming a suffocating lump in his throat. In hindsight, he was very lucky that he didn't stumble over his own feet, when he pulled the door open, slammed it shut behind his back with a defensively-blocking posture where he leaned his weight against the closed door forming a brief intermediate before he continued his confused shreds of flight and the ugly aftertaste sticking to his palate.

Afterward, he couldn't say why he would seek to find safety there of all places, but his agitated
pace continued until he found his way to the mostly empty, dark and dusty room where Misato kept her rarely used cleaning supplies.

It was here, between boxes and brooms, and bizarrely even more constricted space than in the room he had bolted from, that his loud breathing and throbbing heart could finally be persuaded to calm down.

_What a singularly horrific nightmare._

He couldn't help but shudder from head to toe, in part to keep his blood from curdling from the sheer horror of the still very confusing experience.

For starters, _why?_

Why would he have this nightmare now, when everything seemed to have been on its way up so far?

He didn't understand. He hadn't understood this all along, nothing at all.

Why did he have to experience this of all sudden, when he felt like he was on his way to 'solve' those dreams, but now, he'd been struck with this version so much worse than even most the earlier ones, which made it all too clear that he was still very far from figuring out just how those dreams worked or why they plagued him, what they were... trying to tell him, if such wordings were even applicable to the world he now lived in.

Even though he still felt a distinct shiver when he entered back into the shadows and found himself hesitating to close the door, Shinji had no choice but to get back to his room and try to get back to sleep once he'd calmed himself as well as he could.

Tomorrow (or today? He had no idea if it was already past midnight or not) was a Saturday, but from the looks of it he would still have to get up early, since Dr. Akagi had just compiled a new combat simulation for him, based on the freshly-evaluated data from his battle with the latest angel and thus requested his presence at NERV HQ so she could spent almost all day testing and refining it.

Shinji sighed.

At least, Misato had promised him some sort of compensation in the shape of a so-called 'surprise trip' on the day after. He was even allowed to bring Touji and Kensuke, who, according to Misato, would 'absolutely love this!', which Shinji didn't particularly doubt given that Misato herself would be present for them to marvel at. Still, Shinji couldn't help being the slightest bit disappointed that Ayanami would be unable to come along with them – apparently, she was required to stay behind in Tokyo-3 in case an angel attacked while they were away – Given that it would be a week after the last battle, the next enemy could technically show up at any given moment, and none of them could say when.

Shinji sighed.

Yes, the distance between him and the First Child had surely shrunk after the last battle, but since then, he hadn't had much in the way of a real conversation with her, like nothing had changed at all...

Or well, _almost_ nothing.

He kept noticing the minute, but telling fact that she would now usually depart with the words 'See
you later' as opposed to her earlier 'farewell', most recently when she'd been ordered to stay behind at headquarters while he was being informed that he would be sent to deal with Jet Alone.

And that, at the very least, left room ...for a little bit of hope...

**Act I: [THE END]**
~Elaborate Act II Preview~

In the first act, our unlikely protagonist found himself unexpectedly confronted with an offer he couldn't refuse and the heavy burden of a strenuous, horrifying task that seemed night-impossible, especially for someone as ostensibly unsuited for heroism and warfare as himself. Even still, he persevered and managed to not only survive, but even build himself a little harbor of his own - As time progressed, he came to realize that while the people in his new surroundings surely made huge, at times unquestionably unreasonable demands of him, they also offered him the opportunity to find something he didn't have in his quiet, but aimless previous life, such as a way to contribute to society, a home, new friends, a person to yearn for and admire, even a semblance of family and a goal to work towards- In the light of all these new experiences, Shinji Ikari finally accepts what is shaping up to be his destiny-

- but just like when he first made the decision to climb into EVA 01, signing up for the job was just a sneak preview of the grueling trials and tribulations he will have to master on his way. Will he actually be able to persevere through the neverending, ever more creative attacks of the angels and defend his newfound significant others, even when ominous conspiracies show themselves to be stirring in the dark, along with something even more fundamentally terrifying that is about to raise the stakes even higher than Shinji ever thought possible? And how will the quiet world he has build for himself shift and mutate when it is shaken up by various new allies and enemies alike, all of whom confront him with their strong personalities, unique perspective and the new experiences they have to offer?

This, and much more awaits you in Act II: Rising Action: [You do (not) connect], a story about many unique individuals, and how they come together to master the impossible.

Yes, the title 'You can (not) advance' is being saved for later... In any case, the second act will be substantially longer than the first one and contain significantly more original content, while you might recognize some of it as expanded/beefed up versions of some of your favorite episodes (occasionally not in the order you'd expect them in) and EVA-related video games (particularly the introductory episodes of everyone's favorite redhead) others will be only loosely based on a few canonical details that provided the inspiration and otherwise be creations of my own sick brain. The current plan (which, admittedly, has shifted and expanded in the past but is, at least right now, not expected to undergo any more drastic changes) envisions the second arc (which is, in fact, still ongoing in the original version) to consist of multiple sub-storyarcs, for which you now get a little preview:

0) 00: *Prologue – (featuring an Illustrious newcomer to the pilot roster!)

1) (01-08): [SECOND CHILD HATES YOU] – (At least, she really, really doesn't like you)

2) (09 -18): [The Second Impression] – (Because the first ones can be deceiving)

3.) (19-27): [Collapse of the Wave Function] – (Finally! Explanations! Heed the enemies of the world, of which there are three. The father, the son and the holy spirit.)

4.) (28-37): [Instruments of Fate and Destiny] – (SEELE's scenario is being overwritten by us. Everything in existence is merely an instrument to achieve this purpose.)

5.) (38-49) [The IdolatrousExpressionismPunk] – (VIGILATE ET ORATE – ITAQUE NESCITIS DIEM NEQUE HORAM)
6.) (50-?) [Darkness in Paradise] - *(Invaders must die!)*

7.) ?-?: [The Denial of the Self]* – *(As if everything else he gets to put up with wasn’t bad enough, poor Shinji now suffers from an acute case of artist’s block. Other stuff also happens. Lots of other stuff. "Baka! Why do you even bother with that oversized Violin in the first place?")

8.) ?-?: [The Good Machine] - *(Because as it turns out, context does matter)*

9.) ?-?: [Femina Faber] – *(There was no way that she would allow a man who had given life before to come inside her dwellings... "Say, Shinji-kun, wouldn’t you like to have a step-mother?")

10.) ?-?: [The Shinji Ikari Raising Project] - *(NERV had treated the First Child as a science experiment, the Second as an elite super-warrior, and the Sixth as an employee. The pilots were neither of these things.)*

11.) ?-?: [Turning Back the Pendulum]** – *(Just where did it all go wrong?)*

12.) ?-?: [The Weight of their Names] – *(Lethe, Lethe... Why did the ancient Greeks only leave us the word, and not the recipe?)*

13.) ?--?: [Struggling Onwards] – *(They just keep coming!)*

14) ?-?: [Girlfriend of Steel] – *(Aww, how cute~ Shin-chan finally got himself a girlfriend!)*

14a) [Spring] (?-?) – *(Ohmygosh you’re so cute! Please be my boyfriend?)*

14b) [Summer] (?-?) – *(Of course this has to happen now. Now you have ambitions of being happy.)*

14c) [Fall] (?-?) – *(Because what goes up must come down eventually...)*

14d) [Winter] (?-?) – *(She broke my heart. You merely broke my life.)*

15) ?-?: [To The Pain]*** – *(Yes, I know what you think of me. You never shut up.)*

16) ?-?: [The AHAB Desperados] – *(You have amazing instincts, Ikari Shinji-kun. But could you actually fire that gun?)*

17) ?-?: [The Fort In The Clouds] – *(The Angel of the God Rock)*

18) ?-?: [Reverse Rebirth] – *(The great defeat Shinji had long expected to come.)*

19) ?-?: [Heritage Arc] – *(Swear to me, father. Swear on something that matters.)*

20) ?-?: [The Threshold Guardian] - *(Thou shalt (not) pass)*

21) ?-?: [Peaceful Days] – *(Because in the end, my feelings were real)*

22) ?-?: [Finale] - *(Nomen est Omen)*

* possibly sub-arcs; It’ll be really long, probably the longest of this list. Although I currently think of it in terms of multiple intertwined plot threads that run parallel instead of subsequent events. Just a bunch of situations I always thought would be interesting to try out. I hate how that list is not an accurate representation of actual text volume at all.
** Might, or might not get integrated into "Denial of the self" as a subplot/spread out plt thread. It will make sense when we get there. Might also be placed later, or even become an Interlude between this Arc and the next.

*** Might end up taking place after "Denial of the self"-Arc, or become a subset of it – it depends how it fits with certain events and lines/points/relationship trajectories. I might even cancel it completely.

Some titles may change if I think of better ones. This list/preview will be actualized for the benefit of later-coming readers until Act II is finished.

...Also, this is a good a spot as any to explain the chapter numeration which is going to reset in each full arc, and also be a little different than it is in the German version, in that what are chapters 01 and 02 will be merged into a single one and labelled as 00, mostly because they're pretty short, I don't want the chapter quote to be that significant a fraction of the page lenght XD I hope this will alleviate the wait at least somewhat, I'll try to work as fast a thing think called RL lets me...
Act II: Rising Action: [You do (not) connect] Chapter 00: [Mari of Bethany]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Es ist deine Reinheit
Die du mit dir rumträgst
Es ist deine Würde
Die du in dir auslebst
Es ist deine Wahrheit
Die du mit dir rumträgst
Es ist Weiblichkeit
Die vor dir herschwebt

[...]

Es ist deine Anmut
Die aus dir herausbricht
Es ist Energie
Die jedem ins Herz sticht

Die ganzen Menschen hier
Alle tanzen nur für dich
Denn du bist wirklich
Göttlich
Heftig
Mächtig
Weiblich
-Megaherz, "Göttlich"

[:]

It is your purity
that you carry around with you

It is your dignity
that you act you within yourself

It is your truth

that you carry around with you

It is femininity

that floats onward before you

 [...]  

It is your grace

that breaks out of you

It is energy

that pierces our hearts

All the people here

they're all dancing just for you

because you are truly

Divine.

Intense.

Powerful.

Feminine.

-Megagerz, 'Divine'

"Kaji-san! At last, I finally got through to you in person! I'm sick of that stupid answering machine!"

"Well, you know..." a man of about thirty years began to speak, holding his stubble-covered chin to the surface of his phone while his steps reverberated on the metal grate that made up the high runway he walked on.

It was about as wide as the average man was tall and framed by a handrail on each side. Further onward, there was a crossroads of such, four of such catwalks joined by a round platform as their juncture, which was held up by a black, cylindrical pillar; Otherwise, most of the room was dark, filled with machinery, tubes and pipelines many of which seemed to be oriented or leading towards a large tank with the dimensions of a skyscraper, as far as the dim, red lights allowed it to be seen.

While there were various maintenance gauges and even a few consoles accessible adjacent to the catwalk, none of them seemed to be active beyond a simple standby mode, which might have given rise to questions about just what exactly the man was doing there, besides conducting a phone call: "...I'd like to spend all my time sitting around chatting with you, but I'm afraid there's this little thing called 'work' I have to take care of..." he explained, jovially. "It's called business trip for a reason. But don't worry, I'll be back in Germany by tomorrow. Wouldn't want to miss our ship. I've
just got a few... errands to run first. You'll get to see me soon enough."

"I can't wait! Without you, I'm really getting bored to death over here!" a girl's voice emanated from the receiver. "Where exactly are you, anyway?"

"Bethany Base." the man answered, a tall, exceptional specimen with his long, brown hair tied into a ponytail, an anthracite-gray uniform that further supplemented the coolness value of his hairstyle and, to crown it all, a considerably attractive, masculine face adorned with a sward of stubble. "I'm pretty much at the North Pole."

"I bet that sucks. You must be pretty bored yourself, between all the annoying office work and being stuck up there... I don't suppose the North Pole has much to offer in terms of recreational opportunities..."

"Sorry to disappoint you." the man answered. "But boredom is just about the least of my problems up here. If work doesn't keep me on my toes, then good old Mari certainly will make sure of that..."

"Mari?!" the girl on the other end of the connection shrieked, having lost a good portion of her earlier haughty intonation. "Who the hell is that? Don't tell me she's some Ex-girlfriend of yours!"

"No, no, nothing of the sort." the man, whom his young conversational partner identified as 'Kaji' replied with a soft chuckle. "Just an old friend. Well, not literally old, considering she's not much older than you are. Quite the little free spirit, though, so I guess birds of a feather flock together... I'm sure you'd get along with her, too."

"Well, I'm not convinced!"

"Anyway, I've gotta say 'bye' now. Things are about to get very busy over here."

"And don't you dare make a move on this other girl!"

Once the call was ended and the white screen with the words 'Sound Only' on it had been displayed by one slightly lewd wallpaper featuring a well-endowed, long haired woman on a beach, he folded his phone back together and stuffed it back into the pocket of his uniform. Now more serious than carefree, he gazed back into the darkness he had left behind him, and of what he'd left behind back there.

He didn't exactly like having to do this, but neither could he think of any alternative that would be within his power to carry out.

From that same pocket he left the phone in, he pulled a small electronic device, briefly checked the series of numbers on its lone display which was steadily counting down, and then put it right back.

Normally, he ought to be mostly concerned about the remainder of the preparations he would have to make for what was about to take place, now that he had a strict time schedule to keep to – but the word 'ex-girlfriend', as casually as the girl had mentioned it, was very effective at leading his thoughts to another inevitability that awaited him only slightly further ahead on the path he had decided on...

He might be so efficient at lying and cheating that he could earn a livelihood with those skills, but a liar skilled enough to convince him that the prospect of crossing paths with that woman after so many years hadn't struck him with heartache was something god had yet to thrown down from the heavens.
The darkness was crossed by both a few bubbles and a sloshing noise as the warm liquid ousted the air from the entry plug.

She knew that the sight of substance enveloping her was probably just about to be replaced by the clear view of the interface, its patters and frames designed to fool her into thinking that the liquid wasn't there – but Mari Illustrious Makinami had never trusted her eyes that much to begin with, in part because ever since her birth, she could have given a mole lessons in being near-sighted.

Just because the vibrant color of the LCL was no longer reaching her retinas, there was no reason to suppose that it had disappeared, for the Fourth Child could still sense it in all of its majesty as she took in the medium around her, purposefully sucking it in as if she wanted to swathe every square centimeter of her body's internal surface in the liquid's inimitable taste and smell so it might continue to dance on her cells, the cursed red water that smelled of red, smelled of life.

Starting on the inside of her limbs, she began to feel the emergent ticklings of the most intense, most electrifying sensation she had ever perceived, stronger than the deepest bungee jump before the process was even past the start-up phase.

The tingling covered every speck of her skin, filled her volume completely, and from the moment she had first sensed the tug of the connection, Mari opened herself all too gladly, opening the gates of her soul to more and more of that torrent of weightlessness, welcoming it with wide open arms as she allowed it to rush inside of her.

She gazed into EVA 05, and EVA 05 gazed into her.

Not that there was much, no concrete sense of 'self', just a simple spark of organic life, composed mostly of basic instincts and drives, mingled with a distant refraction of something surprisingly familiar, but that would do.

There was nothing amongst those things that Mari didn't also have.

They would become fast friends, EVA 05 and her.

'Come, let us go', she told the enormous colossus, with every pulse of her soul, those ecstatic, overflowing waves at the borders of her region that wildly ebbed and flowed into the expanse of the connection in her playfully-probing attempts at feeling it out. 'Come, and let us live, at least a little. Aren't we both life, you and I?' Along the path of that thoughts, her oscillations finally settled on a gentle, yet unearthly wavelength that followed other rules than the languages of humans, like the song of a fearless tamer who could calm the most ferocious beasts, like the medium who made her very existence a path between here, now and the shadows of the netherworld, or like a pagan priestess channeling the gods, intoxicated with incense and thoroughly, willfully lost in the mad dance of the korybantes.

She was here, she was now and she was breathing in the thrilling, rapturous red.

Life wants to be alive, and all she wanted to do right now was be.

She didn't think of it in terms of her little ritual being crowned with success, she just felt the growing resonance that reverberated closely behind those sensations and how they, in turn, reflected her initial invitation; Heart and Heart being roused from whatever less dynamic state they had slumbered in and progressively harmonizing themselves into a single, booming concord as Mari herself sat in the darkness and enjoyed the indescribably exhilarating, and at the same time, awesomely extreme, almost painful process, barely registering the technicians' voices as they passed her by.
"Start Entry Sequence."

"Initializing LCL ionization."

"Plug depth stable at default value."

"Boot-up voltage has cleared the threshold."

"Launch prerequisites achieved."

"Synchronization rate requirements are go."

"Pilot, please specify linguistic norms for cognitive functions."

It took Mari a bit to realize that she had just been addressed and was expected to answer.

Somewhat sheepish, Mari began to think of an answer – The question, however, did not have the effect of disrupting her concentration, the connection process steadily continued in the background of whatever her conscious mind was doing, for the Evangelion and her were already connected at a significantly deeper level, one of the innermost layers of herself that was much more constant than her fickle thoughts – What language? Her choice did end up reflecting those earliest, dearest memories that resided in that place, but also whatever all the spectators in the control rooms would be the least likely to understand – this moment was hers, a long-awaited one, and she wanted to give this experience its space without anyone's squabblings intruding:

"Uh, since it's the first time, I think I'll go with Japanese."

"Roger!" some operator affirmed.

Then, Mari listened as the machinery around her started to move, and hung on to her control yokes as her EVA was moved into its finalized launch position.

A sharp jolt went through both the Entry Plug and the Fourth Child inside of it – Despite all her earlier musings on red, most of what she could see from there was actually green: The green of her plugsuit, the green of her pilot seat, even the helmet she was wearing was green, to match the EVA itself; All these things might consist of rubber, varnish, plastic and metal, but what really gave them their shape and consistence was the hope of the people who'd participated in its assembly – It was almost as if their thoughts were manifesting in the color of hope that coated their handiwork.

The only physically visible red were the strings of letters and numbers that were speeding through the 'windows' of the interface at the time it finally appeared, akin to the booting sequence on a computer – but there was a very good reason for its presence, since the "provisional" Unit was, as the name suggested, not technically finished yet. But since the beginning of this project, the growth of the head and torso had been prioritized so that they would have a halfway operable EVA as soon as possible, even if they had to prepare cybernetic limbs for the event of an unexpectedly early launch – In that way, EVA 05 was more of a straightforward cyborg than many of its more 'conventional' brethren.

These mechanical parts, however, couldn't be moved nearly as intuitively as the EVA's biological parts that were already very human-like to begin with, therefore, the Entry-plug of a provisional Evangelion was filled with much more visible technology than a regular one: The control yokes had several switches built into them, the pilot wore a large, clunky helmet with an insect-like red visor closed in front of her eyes, and the wrist-parts of her plug suit were attached to three green tubes per arm.
The plug suit itself was green on the torso, but white on the limbs, inverting the Evangelion's own color scheme; The white parts and whatever padding they included was divided into white rectangles that might have evoked an old soviet spacesuit, while the green parts ended in a skirt-like seam shortly below her hips, leaving her pubic mount and the majority of her buttocks to be covered by the same white material as her legs, while her breasts were encased in a protective plating made-up of several hard plastic stripes – but only quite inadequately.

The plug suit might have been designed to adapt to it's wearer's body shape, but as Mari found out when she was shaken around by the contraptions meant to position the EVA, and thus, was made to undertake her first proper full-body movements since she boarded the plug, that wondrous adaptability did not extend up to cup size E.

She tried to squirm around inside the suit to nudge her breasts back into their designated spaces, but there simply wasn't enough such space for them to fit into, so that she ultimately capitulated with a sigh.

"I'm sorry. The remaining components didn't arrive in time." Kaji, who was apparently present in the command center as well, apologized over the intercom. Not that those missing components were all too high on Mari's current list of worries: "My chest is completely hemmed in!"

"Sorry about that, to. And about having to send you out in a provisional unit as well."

"I don't mind." Mari stated as she adjusted the small dials on her helmet until she had a sharp view of the outside world on the hexagonal panels of the interface. "I'm just glad that I finally get to pilot an EVA!" she confessed, greedily taking in every bit of the enormous stream of information that the EVA offered to her – She was bursting with excitement and loving every bit of it – She could already feel the Evangelion's metallic limbs almost as if they were her own; She hadn't thought that there could be a conscious state so far from the sensation of ordinary 'being'.

"Well, you little troublemaker didn't exactly make it easy for us to trust you with one. Good luck!"

That was basically her launch order – Time to go, time to go!

Mari couldn't hardly contain the feeling, yet alone believe it. The rush of adrenaline that shot through her blood was beyond her wildest dreams. She looked past her white-clad thighs to where her controls were, letting her nigh-manic fingers make the final adjustments.

"It's moving! It's moving! This feels so wicked I could go crazy right now!" She now leant forward to finally grasp the controls firmly, bearing an ecstatic grin.

She pulled on the levers to cause the antennas meant for the power supply to connect with the corresponding rails on the ceiling of the tunnel – Mari supposed that the mechanism probably worked roughly like a bumper car – and finally concluded that everything was in place. Oh boy, oh boy! She felt like every single nerve cord in her body was just about to catch fire – The experience was incomparable even to any sort of parachute jump, it was practically a spiritual event. Despite the constricting suit and tunnel walls, she felt unspeakably free, free beyond all bounds, free to fully live out what had always been inside of her.

"Ready!" she informed the people back at the command center, after it kind of occurred to her that they still existed, and released the last remaining lock bolts. "Provisional Unit 05, activate!"

The luminescent writing on the pilot's helmet lit up in the same instant.

Now, he could get started with the actual task at hand – which was more than overdue, ince her
enemy was also very much ready – Raziel, the angel of the deep.

With a laser beam fired from his eyes, he effortlessly blasted one of the tunnel network's numerous shutters out of his way, and proceed to float across the fire lines of several tanks, all completely unharmed without showing the slightest semblance of damage.

How ridiculous they were, those defense lines of the Lillim – the more humiliating it felt to Raziel that being like these could have taken the promised land from him and his kind, or that they had held Raziel himself for so, so long inside their earthly prison – He didn't know just to what he owed this opportunity, nor was it in his nature to even formulate such a question, but this didn't detract from his certainty: He would make good use of this chance to take vengeance on those accursed beings who despite the tiny, fragile nature of their measly bodies somehow managed to strip the flesh from his bones by wiping them from his sight to reclaim this world for himself and his remaining brothers and sisters.

The pain, a side effect of their probing, still reverberated throughout his being; A Lillim would be long dead in a state like his, but a being blessed with the fruit of life could never die, unless the very vessel of its soul were to be destroyed, and that was still perfectly intact inside his bare skull.

Therefore, his suffering still continued.

And, his life still continued. He would make good use of his father's gift, and finally, for the first time since his life first awakened deep, deep down inside the eternal ice of wherever the explosion that accompanied his birth had blown him to, he would taste the air of the planet whose riches should have been his birthright, ever since that birth, the time span he didn't know they would call 'fifteen years', on the occasion of that fateful, failed attempt to convert this world for the likes of them.

Raziel intended to complete what his father had begun and, after all this time he had spent inside the Lillim's alien structures, finally, finally create a place he could call his own.

Driven by pure survival instinct, Raziel melted his way through one door after another, his mind filled with only one thought:

……FREE...DOM...FREEEEEEEDOM... FREEEEEEEEEEEE...

As far as the people in the command center were concerned, Raziel already had a place where he belonged: His now breached containment tank.

Consequently, it was easy to guess just how happy they were about his unstoppable advance through the tunnel systems: Not at all.

"Defend the Limbo Area at all costs!" an elderly man ordered, hanging on to his console in disbelief, stunned at what the screens in front of him seemed to be wanting to tell him. "We cannot allow it to escape from Archeron!" The man paused to order his thoughts;

This was way beyond all worse case scenarios.

"How could a containment system as secure as Cocytus be neutralized? That fool Mitsurugi claimed it could easily withstand a nuclear blast!"

Right on cue, a stream of mangled English intruded from the back of the platform: "It was within the realm of possibility."
Whether the old man and his subordinates turned towards him because they didn't quite get what he was saying, or exactly because they had understood him will always remain a mystery.

In any case, Kaji, who had shown up with his gray uniform with a sly, confident smirk on his face, continued his massacre on the English language:

"On its own, humanity isn't capable of holding the Angels in check. The analysis following the permafrost-excavation of the Third Angel was so extensive, all there was left was the bones. And that was the conclusion."

The NERV-personel's expressions, be they shocked or confused, quite soon took a turn in the direction of indignant surprise when Kaji, without any further comments, spontaneously pulled out a flight helmet and waved goodbye with an audacious grin.

"That said, good luck!"

And then, he toddled off, leaving the Bethany Base staff standing there like a bunch of pizzas that had been ordered, but never picked up.

As soon as the guy with the special mission from headquarters made his escape, it didn't take them any exceptional mathematical arts to figure that they were pretty much done for.

In the meantime, EVA 05 was likewise steadily proceeding through the base's tunnel system – on a direct collision course with the angel.

The power antennas slid past the corresponding power rails on the tunnel ceiling; As if unconsciously, the Evangelion followed every tiniest motion of its pilot in a very natural manner, like the expectant rhythmic forward motion of her arms. The small wheels on each of the EVA's legs which, unlike with regular units, numbered four, were coated with a dark, forest-green varnish, and substantially more insectoid in shape, the robotic grappler, the long, gigantic medieval-style that resembled the weapons that the knights of old used to use in their jousting matches, but in reality consisted of an experimental material meant to constitute a first-generation copy of the legendary Lance of Longinus, the torso that had remained white because it's paint job hadn't been finished in time except for the many glowing security stripes on it, even the sharp-edged contours of the head which also evoked a knight's helmet, it all danced to the tune of its crusading palladina, a literal tune, one might add, for Mari felt so elated that she spontaneously erupted into song:
"Shiawase waaaa aruite ko-nai, daaaaakala aruite yukunnnn da neeee, Ichi ni chi ippo, miiika de sanpo, sanpo susun-nipo sakaruuuuu. Jiiiiiiusei wa one-two-punchiii..."

In time with her song, Mari overjoyedly pulled at her control yokes, causing the lance and the grappler to move in tandem without the slightest delay.

The Fourth Child's synchronization rate had shot up with remarkable ease, she led the green titan forward like a fish takes to water – The experience of moving a foreign body and at the same time, feeling it with her own was simply unbelievable.

Effortlessly, she sped through the corridors and shafts, just fooling around in zealous expectation, driving on the wall for a bit to test out her possibilities as the automatic shutters kept closing behind her – until she finally locked onto a red glow at the end of the tunnel, and thrust her full body forward from her previously fairly upright sitting position to engage the target with all she had.

"There it is!" Mari gushed euphorically. "Deploying AT-field!"
And indeed, Raziel came, consisting of little else than a long spine with ribs and a bare skull inside of which the luminescence of the core shone at full energy output. The being displayed a kind of serpentine motion throughout its full length, which nonetheless didn't contribute to it's main form of propulsion – at the middle of its body, it's ribs were not stark naked, but still contained within a horseshoe-like shell whose shrimp-like segments alternatingly constituted yellow-black stripes, and on it's underside, several wiggling, tiny insect-like legs that it used to eagerly crawl forward – the mere idea that these thin, wispy things could possibly carry the full weight of the bone giant was one giant insult about whom there would probably continue be a lot of snickering behind the laws of physics' back.

With a distantly avian shriek, Raziel unscrupulously charged the blasphemous creation of the Lilim that was blocking its path – and so, ran directly into EVA 05's very readily positioned, piercing lance.

Mari could barely wait to try it out.

With a bestial war cry that would have been worthy of a Klingon, Mari struck out backwards and then jousted her weapon forward making use of the kinetic motion of her EVA's forward sprint and a flowing, full-body movement in which she first lowered the EVA's torso and then stretched it forward along with the actual attack, thrusting her weapon directly towards the angel's body – But it turned out to be very flexible and quickly slithered out of harm's way, using that same motion to wrap around the EVA as they both scratched against the wall, sending sparks flying.

"K-KYAAAH!" Mari shouted, unexpectedly overtaken and unused to the inertia of the EVA's greater mass, freeing herself from the angel's stranglehold with a well-placed kick. "It's hard to move in here!" Slightly pulling her legs together, Mari tried to somehow maneuver the Unit that had been uncontrollably flung away – She activated the brakes, but Unit Five still didn't come to a halt until it hit the next closed shutter – But Mari was not quite that easily to get rid of – Her parents had picked just the right thing when they settled on her idiosyncratic middle name: Illustrious.

Without wasting a single second licking her wounds, she charged after the angel in a full-body motion, again leaning forward both her own ample shell and the EVA's body with all of its troublesome bulk.

"Well, then I'm just going to need some brute force!"

By now, Raziel was just about done melting a hole through the next wall, and triumphantly marched into the larger hall beyond.

Here, he switched his wriggling crawl for levitation and appropriately, a large, golden halo of pure energy spread out above his body, and a dark mirror image of it's outline promptly broke from the ceiling.

All of Bethany Base shook, when the halo, and with it, its dark pendant above reached their full sizes – Everything glowed with golden light, and where its dark counterpart had been, an entire column of metal and concrete fell through its outline, and the halo rose to catch its handiwork and push it upwards; Together with the column of concrete, the angel ascended towards salvation.

"Outer wall integrity compromised!" a blonde technician reported with palpable anxiety. "The final seal is about to be breached!"

"Target has broken through Limbo Area! Now moving into Archeron!"
The older male who apparently commanded this outpost was progressively losing his nerve: "Get Unit Five to do SOMETHING!"

The angel, by contrast, had successfully reached his intermediary goal – Further and further, the cut-out concrete column rose from the outer hull of Bethany Base, hoisted up by the angel's herculean telekinetic strength, with which he gleefully broke it apart once they both finally, finally reached the surface at long last.

Inside a slim pillar of light, the angel continued its vertical ascent – below him lay the dungeon that held him captive for almost his entire life: A large disk crowning the violated husk of what had once been his primordial, egg-shaped cocoon, surrounded by a circle of long, cylindrical black pillars that were inscribed with the ever-shifting, dynamic glymphs of the ancient ones in the red of their shared lifeblood.

A storm was raging outside, shaking up the red waters of the arctic sea, which surrounded the small outpost on all sides. Undoubtedly, most Lillim would have described the view as hellish and hostile to life, but Raziel was thoroughly overwhelmed: He had never personally perceived any of these things, only felt their presence through his inherent awareness.

He never knew that the creator's sky was so endless and vast, or that the roaring of it's winds was so mighty and ferocious. He never knew the red of his father's sea, the deep crimson color that spelled death to the Lillim, but for him and his kind meant nothing less than life itself in its purest form.

He didn't expect the promised land to be so opulent, so glorious, so large...

The messenger felt awe.

He was in awe before the world, before the creators, and before his father;

At the sight of this seemingly infinite, unbelievable vastness, Raziel once again felt the wish to possess it, no longer born of any desire for childish revenge, but out of deepest admiration; He wanted to wipe it clean of all these repulsive Lillim who had no appreciation for its splendor and hid themselves away from it inside of the feeble, constricted structure of their cancerous swarm clusters.

Oh, you poor creature.

Your plans for your grand intentions never accounted for Mari.

"YOU STAY RIGHT HERE!" Mari bellowed, blasting off her EVA's power antennas and activating the rockets on its underside without wasting a single thought on the question for a way back.

The angel might have escaped, but that didn't mean it had won: Like a comet, Unit Five raced towards the skies, following after the angel through it's own improvised escape route – Her EVA might not have been intended for use outside the tunnels, but it wasn't like Mari had some more compatible EVA hiding in the barn, and besides, there was no way she would pause for a pit stop just where things were beginning to be really, really fun! The emergency rockets only came with a very limited on-board fuel supply, but this problem could be quite easily solved in a convenient way that would kill two birds with one stone – With all of her strength, Mari rammed her lance straight through the angel's spine, into the black stone of a glyph-covered sealing pillar – Did she
For an instant, the lights inside the angel's skulls did indeed fade, and its entire body hung down limply like it had been knocked out – But Raziel remained tenacious, even when pinned to the mystic runes of the ancient hex, and soon awoke, expelled a screeching shriek, and aimed a point-blank shot of its laser at EVA 05's legs as they were holding on to its carapace, in a desperate attempt to interrupt the choke hold of the human creation.

The LCL to her right immediately boiled, the Fourth Child's entire right arm was glowing like burning coal in a storm of frantic bubbles. The material of the plug suit swiftly discolored, its surface started to peel off, and because of her high synch ratio, she was quite serious that the skin beneath must have been covered in large, ugly blisters at this point.

"Auuuuu, aaaaaiiiieeeee, ouuuuutch...! This hurts! It hurts like hell!"

But above her gritted teeth, the Fourth Child's lips formed an animalistic smirk: "But it's so damn fun that I don't mind that all!"

Canalizing her manic ecstasy into her physical impetus as she lunged forward, she used the remaining, pincer-like arm to reach straight into the angel's jaws, firmly grasped the core it had bared to power its last attack, and squeezed. The creature frantically struggled to close its gorge, but it was no use.

With one hand on core and her lance in its throat, Mari was inseparable from her enemy.

Besides her, however, the battery counter was steadily nearing a row of zeroes – She might have her target pinned down, but in this unfinished – albeit faily likeable – Evangelion that was continuously breaking apart on her, she had no way of killing it off.

"There's no more time!" she concluded, squeezing down under great strain.

There were still bits of color coming off her plugsuit's still glowing right arm and floating all around her in the LCL, her nerves in that limb were so overloaded with pain that they could only answer her continuous orders to get back to the controls with erratic twitching of her hand. The other hand, meanwhile, was curled so tightly around its respective control yoke it hurt – The green, mechanical pincers squeezed and squeezed, but somehow, the full extent of the pressure Mari was summoning up in her mind did not reach the angel's core. "Not enough power to force synchronization with the mechanical parts! The unit isn't holding out, either!"

The interface was beginning to flicker, too.

Great! Was there any other adverse circumstance she might have forgotten to mention?

Oh yeah, the plug suit's traitorous plastic chest plates seemed absurdly determined to chafe her breasts raw.

And if all of this weren't enough, the angel continued its lasery assault in spite of the Fourth Child's choke hold, which, all things considered, had been pretty useless anyway. Between the very cornered angel and the steadfastly crumbling Evangelion, their fight had long since turned into a pure battle of wills that transcended their faltering physical bodies, and what the angel wanted could be felt very clearly in the unprecedented strength of its most recent attack: It cleanly severed all four of EVA 05's legs and made sure they would still explode up in the air to further bombard the unfortunate unit and its pilot.

But the British girl was not deterred for long: Where any others might have clung to the lance as
the final lifeline keeping the EVA from tumbling into the abyss, Mari laughed death in the face by
ejettisoning the lance (which caused the green tubes to detach from the wrist of her still smoldering
arm which she finally managed to move through little other than iron determination) and
proceeding to grip the angel's core with both of Unit Five's grappler-like hands.

The EVA groaned with the additional strain and shared the further tension with the plastic panels
that had been sewing its toothless mouth shut so far, ultimately tearing asunder with extreme
prejudice, after which they now ironically resembled teeth, almost as if it wanted to scream
together with Mari.

With both hands, she gripped the left control yoke and using all the strength she had left, pushed it
as far as it would physically go.

"Now hurry up and DIEEEEEEEE!!"

The core shattered and burst in her hands, but just to make sure it was really dead and all of her
other mission parameters were fully accomplished, Mari reached for the only weapon the mutilated
EVA had left at its disposal: The self-destruct mechanism.

In a single instant, EVA 05 transformed into a wave of light and fire – Mari, however, didn't.

She had ejected her entry plug at the last possible moment and had it click smoothly into a rocket-
powered harness she had attached to the EVA's back for this explicit purpose – The tiny propulsion
jet and the entry plug strapped to it became a small, shining dot radiating into the atmosphere and
outran the massive, spherical explosion which shattered the pillars of Bethany Base with its
indiscriminate force.

A small aircraft soared beneath the clouded sky that was now beginning to clear up, as if to
celebrate the ending of the battle with those first rays of sunlight that were only now breaking
through.

Kaji, whose eyes had since concealed his eyes behind his helmet's visor in order to fly his one-man
plane, pensively observed the ocean's surface beneath.

According to the incoming messages, the angel had been destroyed, the EVA completely
vaporized, and its pilot safely escaped.

"...she triggered EVA 05's self-destruct mechanism without a moment's hesitation..." Kaji
concluded. "Still... I don't like having to leave this kind of thing in the hands of a teenaged girl..."

He sneaked a brief peek at the security-hard-top case that lay atop his own, orderly packed luggage
that had been long prepared for today's 'accident'.

There goes package number one.

As for the second one, it was still waiting to be picked up back in Germany.

He just hoped that Commander Ikari had been serious about this 'generous escort' he had promised
him for that particular hazardous cargo...

Although the cloud layer was slowly but steadily opening up, the waves stirred up by the final
shock wave had yet to calm down completely. Compared to the drifting entry plug, the bloodied
seas still resembled a range of large hills.
But once its floating patterns were deemed safe enough, the hatch opened accompanied by a puff of steam, and out sprang a very exhausted Makinami Mari, hanging on to the entry plug's outer metal hull for support while she lifted her still aching body out of the hatch. The silhouette that now contrasted against the red of the arctic ocean was that of a tall, lanky girl who nonetheless possessed plenty in the terms of opulent female attributes such as wide hips, large breasts and a generous distribution of material around her thighs and buttocks, even though all of it was still throbbing from the heavy side effects of her first proper Evangelion battle.

The fire-garlands of pain were still dancing through her nerves like the memory of a loyal friend whom she had only known shortly, but was very unlikely to ever forget.

"Oh my, synchronization with an EVA is even more intense than they ever told me..." she mumbled to herself while she leaned against the hull of the plug, opened her visor and finally removed her helmet altogether.

Ah, there was nothing more relaxing than good old fresh air!

Despite the stench of the bloody sea, Mari could still make out the typical freshness of air purified by a storm.

That, too, was a strong contender for the 'scent of life'.

Her now liberated pigtails playfully danced in the breeze; Mari had a fairly attractive face framed by wild brown hair, with vibrant blue-green eyes and a thin European nose in its center. Said hair was further adorned by a somewhat dreamy-looking alice band in the color of midday sky which simultaneously served as her interface headset as evidenced by the white nerve clips on its sides.

The most noticeable accessories were probably her bright red plastic glasses, especially since the right lens seemed to have cracked at some point of the battle.

Despite the trickle of blood that was running down her face on her right side, or the way she was letting the arm with the discolored plug suit rubber around it hang down because the injuries and subsequent overexertion had rendered it impossible to move reliably, there was an unearthly smile on her lips when she finally stood at her full height.

"But never mind, it's good to be alive... still, I don't like having to involve adults in my plans..."

With her gaze directed as the two cross-like beams in the distance and the rainbow that had appeared around them, and a calm, serene expression on her face, she chose to dedicate a moment to a fallen companion:

"Farewell, EVA Unit Five... Thank you for fulfilling your role so bravely."

Chapter End Notes

(1) Title is a funny little allusion to the biblical character "Mary of Bethany", who some interpretations equate with Mary Magdalene. Basically the hair towel chick, if any of you remember her.

(2) Just to avoid confusion: The person Kaji was phoning in the beginning was intended to be Asuka. As for his phone's wallpaper, it's supposed to be Misato, in a
pose not unlike that photo from episode, although not necessarily the same one. He could never bring himself to press the delete button once and for all... or something like that.

(3) I've taken the name 'Raziel' from the proposal, where the first angel (or rather, 'apostolo') to attack wasn't good 'ol Sachiel, but rather a 'metallic giant' by the name of Raziel. Given that the name was intended for some spiritual predecessor of Sachiel, it seemed appropriate for the one who got squeezed in before him in the numeration.

(4) If the horrible English thing was unintentional, (which I admit it probably was) I wonder why everyone else's English was significantly more tolerable. XD

(5) Translation of Mari's song: "Happiness won't walk to me just because I look for it/ so I'll have to walk to where it is/ One step in one day/ three steps in three days/ three steps forwards and just two steps back/ sometimes life just punches you out..."

(6) In case this wasn't completely obvious, I absolutely LOVE Mari *.*

(7) The next chapter will be longer again and comes with the fairly informative title of 01: [SECOND CHILD HATES YOU] I hate to make you wait any more, but I fear I'll have to update the German version next. I'll probably pop out the whole remainder of the "Practice" Arc at once to make up for how long it's been... * sigh * and of course, the semester has started and it's time I got a move on if I plan on passing any exams this year... I'll try my best, though, so thanks for all of your patience until now.
01: [SECOND CHILD HATES YOU]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

\textbf{Got a figure like a pinup}

\textit{Got a figure like a doll}

\textit{Don't care if you think I'm dumb}

\textit{I don't care at all}

\textit{candy Pie, sweety pie}

\textit{Wanna be adored}

\textit{I'm the girl you die for}

\textbf{I chew you up and}

\textit{I spit you out}

\textit{'Cause that's what young love}

\textit{Is all about}

\textit{So pull me closer}

\textit{And kiss me hard!}

\textit{I'm gonna pop your bubblegum heart}

\textbf{I'm miss suggar pink}

\textit{Leca leca lips}

\textit{Hit me with your sweet love}

\textit{Steal me with a kiss}

\textit{I'm miss suggar pink}

\textit{Leca leca lips}

\textit{I'm gonna be your bubblegum bitch}

\textit{I'm gonna be your bubblegum bitch}

\textbf{Quetex, latex}

\textit{I'm your wonder-maid}

\textit{Life gave me some lemons}
So I made some lemonade
Soda Pop, Soda Pop
Baby here I come
Straight to number one
Oh dear diary
I met a boy
He made my doll heart
Light up with joy!
Oh dear diary
We fell apart
Welcome to the life of Electra Heart!
[...] I think I want
Your American tan
I think I'm gonna
Be my biggest fan
-Marina and the Diamonds, 'Bubblegum Bitch'

"Yes. I've already made arrangements with the committee about this. The cargo has already left Sasebo and is currently on its way across the pacific..." folding his phone after finishing his call, Ikari had barely had the time to redirect his attention to the next task at hand when he heard the hiss of his office door.

"...come in." he demanded, making sure his phone was turned off and stored away before beginning this conversation – In the door frame stood Akagi, mercifully in her usual costume consisting of a miniskirt, stockings and her white lab coat and not any more dolled up than it was typical for her. She was carrying a clipboard with various papers, which she proceeded to place on her superior's desk. One might inquire why she would still bother to keep up her facade of professionalism in front of someone who had seen her true self very clearly – perhaps so she could tolerate her own sight in the mirror. But that potential wondering someone certainly wasn't Ikari – His thoughts were someone else entirely and his disengagement of all potentially bugged or otherwise fallible electronic devices wasn't a gesture of discretion as much as one of situationally appropriate paranoia, part of which was to make sure they actually discussed whatever their cover was supposed to be.

"Here are the progression graphs for the synch tests of the last few weeks."

The front page of the report her long, deep red fingernails were arranging in front of him showed two distinct curves, one that had remained very, very flatly at one particular point on the border
between the lower and middle thirds of the scale, and another that was on a very obvious, very steep course upward, the occasional spontaneous downward fluctuation notwithstanding.

The commander's scrutinizing eyes briefly browsed over the resume, but ultimately responded with a quiet "Good.", before moving on to the most urgent reason for the secrecy: "And what about... our other problem?"

"There have been no further victims. Which I'm personally not ungrateful for, given that panic breaking out in the city or having this connected to the names of our organizations would needlessly complicate things at this point. But on the other hand, that means that we no longer have any indicators to keep track of what that thing might be doing, and if its behavior patterns are indeed changing... we don't have much of a capacity to predict it, either. For all we know it might have left Tokyo-3 already..."

"I don't think so." Ikari objected. "If killing humans had been its only objective until now, it wouldn't have had any reason to stay here in the first place. But it did stay. Almost as if wanted to stay close to some resource that would not be present elsewhere."

"You mean it's sticking close to us?"

"Or to something in our vaults." Ikari concluded, somewhat exasperating the fake blonde by showing little outward signs of concern.

"Then why doesn't it just come and get whatever that it wants? And, on that subject, why has it only killed so few people so far? When it escaped, it was butchering everyone it came across, but the later killings have been mostly isolated incidents with no obvious blood trail between them... When you look at it that way, it becomes hard to believe that killing humans was ever among its primary objectives..."

"...but rather, a means to an end." the commander completed, implying a conclusion that the leader of the technical division was reluctant to articulate: "Which would mean that it has stopped to kill because... it no longer needs to... Given where it came from, this should be completely impossible, but that would mean that this thing really has something like a plan, complete with multiple stages."

"Which makes stopping it an even higher priority." Ikari stated dryly. "What about that tracking method you have proposed?"

"Here are the blueprints." Another pile of papers found their way onto the commander's desk. "The results from Golghatha have proven very useful, although we are probably still miles away from having the dummy plug at our disposal. Additionally, this new purpose will require its own particular modifications and adjustments, which might take a little while. The finished device could be called the prototype of the world's first physical implementation of an AT-field resonance detector."

"...Well done. From this moment, this entire affair, including the design and assembly process of the detector, will be codenamed 'Project Kronos'. The escaped subject will be reclassified from 'Rei 49' to 'Leatha'."

"Understood."

"And how are the blueprints for the upgrade of EVA 00 to production model status coming along?"

"They're finished, and the same goes for the minimal repairs on the most essential systems. All
That's left to do is to ask the pilot what color she'd prefer for the paint job on the outer hull. If worst comes to worst, it can probably be launched and operated in case of an emergency, but it will probably take weeks before it's back to full efficiency."

That Sunday morning, it was the warm rays of the morning sun that tickled Shinji out of his sleep.

Not quite settled into the new day, he tentatively opened his eyes, which filled with distant bewilderment right away.

Judging by the trend of the last few days, he would have expected a significantly ruder awakening preceded by intense dreams, but all he could recall from today's vision was a simple shoreline – The sea had showed itself in a clear, translucent blue, which, at least for Shinji, was a pretty strange sight, but that was had been the most remarkable thing about it.

It didn't fit at all with the steadily intensifying visions that had plagued him for the last few days... but that was only natural for dreams, right? To not follow any particular sense or order. If anything, that should confirm that they were just that, dreams.

They hadn't felt like normal illusions, but then again, the life that was generating them wasn't a normal one, either, and the... pretty girls his fantasies had assembled (he tried not to think about the boy) were fairly average products for a 14 year old's head.

Trying hard to be relieved, he forcibly diverted his thoughts from the night before to the day that lay ahead, which was admittedly enough to place the beginnings of a genuine smile on Shinji's lips.

Today, he had this supposed surprise road trip with Misato, Touji and Kensuke waiting for him. Shinji wondered what Misato might have prepared for them – with her, you could never really know what she might think up.

In any case, Shinji found himself surprised that he was still capable of such jaunty anticipation.

Having a person that could in some ways be classified as a relative prepare some spontaneous excursion with his friends, just going out of town to have a good time... all of these things were new to him.

It had been a long time coming, but by now, Shinji didn't just feel at home here, he felt happy.

The Third Child climbed out of bed and started dressing.

Curiously, he had to admit that he was actually anticipating the 'surprise'.

As the young EVA pilot walked into the kitchen and began with the preparing breakfast, any grumblings about how he'd ended up doing all the housework were long forgotten – instead, he had gladly accepted and even begun to appreciate that he had his own places and tasks in this household.

He had no idea of that the events of this day were just about to throw his ordered little world into great disarray...

As far as their little tour's entertainment value was concerned, Misato had certainly kept her promises: Touji and Kensuke were having the time of their lives. Especially Kensuke.

Soon after their departure, he already wore a grin wide enough to put every respectable Cheshire
cat to shame, the main reason being the vehicle that was intended to transfer them to their still mysterious destination: "Wow! I never thought I would ever get to ride a real MIL-55D cargo helicopter!" he exclaimed, alternating between filming the inside of their flying machine and the sea beneath with his trusty electronic friend, only putting down the camera to jokingly address the incumbent of the middle seat with a wide smile: "It's really great to have influential friends like you!"

Shinji, who had been thinking about something unrelated up to this point, merely answered with a slightly confused, "Hm?"

Only later would he explicitly notice that this was when Kensuke had begun to call him by his first name – for now, his attention was occupied by Misato, who was sitting besides the plane's pilot, but now turned around to let the kids in on the secret: "I thought that you might be bored of sitting around at home all the time, so I decided to bring you along for our rendezvous maneuver."

While Kensuke, who had shown up in green cargo pants with many pockets, a yellowish vest and a red tank top instead of his uniform, was busy filming again, Touji almost jumped out of his seat at the words, while Shinji did not quite know what to make of the start in his eyes: "Did my ears just hear the word 'rendezvous'? Speaking of which, I've bought this cap especially for this occasion!" he declared, enthusiastically adjusting the position of the white baseball cap on his head.

Shinji, who was sitting between his two friends, couldn't summon up any such huge passion to be honest, and simply asked where they might be headed. It hadn't even occurred to him that this might be the kind of 'special occasion' where it might have been more appropriate to wear something other than his everyday school uniform, but since his previous life (or at the very least, the last three years of it) was completely devoid of any 'special occasions' whatsoever, he didn't really possess any clothing that would have been appropriate for this sort of thing. The uniform was practical enough, served its purpose, and he really wasn't the type to buy something 'special' just in case, especially since the last few memories pertained to events he would rather forget. Ultimately, he did feel somewhat bad for not even considering new caps or anything like that; He didn't want Misato to get the impression that he was ungrateful or didn't appreciate this sort of activity. He couldn't really say if he did. His feelings at the moment were generally positive, but to answer that question with a 'yes' felt like a commitment that extended to other possible circumstances, or might lead her to do things or supposed favors outside of his control.

For now, Misato appeared sufficiently pleased with what he did say, for she seemed to have been waiting for that exact question and winked at him with a conspirator grin as soon as he had voiced it, her answer consisting of a pointed finger directed at the sea beyond the window: "We'll be going on a little cruise through the pacific on one of these little boats!"

The boy's expression's soon betrayed that the 'little boats' were anything but what that description might lead one to expect, but this was perfectly alright with Kensuke, who immediately pointed his camera at them and proceeded to display his encyclopedic knowledge about military vehicles of any kind: "WOW! Five aircraft carriers and four destroyers! It's a full-fledged battle fleet! Oh, thank you for bringing us along! Now that's what I call true friendship!"

"These are supposed to be the 'little boats'?” Touji asked, distinctly less impressed. By contrast, Kensuke's amazement grew all the more: "I can hardly believe it! See that ginormous one in the middle? That's the 'Over the Rainbow', the proud flagship of the UN fleet!"

"It's pretty huge." Shinji commented, not completely unimpressed.

"It's also practically a museum piece. I wonder how such an obsolete ship can even stay afloat."
"That's precisely the most awesome thing about it!" Kensuke gushed. "That's still real vintage work from before Second Impact! And we really get to see it up-close? Incredible!"

While Kensuke was so excited that he probably would have chewed off the entirety of his nails including his fingertips if he hadn't still needed them to hold his camera, the ship's bridge was far from teeming with elation about the helicopter's arrival.

An older man in uniform, marked by his insignias as an Admiral and thereby the commanding officer of the fleet, observed the vehicle's descent with the sourest contempt.

"...There goes the power plug for that children's toy we get to ferry across the landscape..."

But there was also someone else watching the helicopter land, observing from a banister on a heightened platform, wild tresses of hair swirling around in the sea breeze like dark extensions of the solar corona above...

Yet unaware of the imminent danger, Shinji and his friends unsuspectingly disembarked from their helicopter.

"Ooooh! Incredible! Incredible! Incredible! In-cre-di-ble! Oh the joy~~"

At the sight of all the war planes, ships, antennas and satellite dishes, Kensuke seemed dangerously close to a moderate seizure and continued his camera-toting dance of joy right past the somewhat nonplussed soldiers, closely followed by Touji's prized cap which had taken advantage of the not particularly gentle onslaught of the wind to take flight, prompting its owner to chase after it in a distinctive panic.

Behind them followed a comparatively calm Shinji who was more concerned with leisurely stretching out his arms after the long ride in the cramped cabin, and of course, Misato as well.

Meanwhile, Touji's cap had caught up to Kensuke and in fact, taken the lead, much to its owner's chagrin – given that they were currently on a ship, his fears that that his new accessorize might end up sinking into the ruby waters of the pacific were not exactly unmerited.

The tall boy desperately sprinted after his headgear, but despite his generally formidable athletic skills, it probably would have taken some sort of professional Olympian runner to match those merciless winds – but his hope flared up for a moment when he saw his base cap roll past a pair of slender feet in expensive, firetruck-red woman's shoes.

He didn't really know what this sort of footwear was doing on the ever-swaying deck of an aircraft carrier, but he was familiar with all those stories about women and their shoes. Some of them were fairly prone to have their common sense overruled by their vanity – actually, nearly all of them, except for rare exceptions like the bossy class representative, who in turn had her bossiness to compensate... most of the time.

In any case, he wouldn't be the one to complain as long as his cap was safe – but the initial relief that had begun to manifest on Touji's face met a grim end when the apparent savior of his cap revealed herself to be significantly less noble than the convenient placement of her feet would have him believe – To be fair, she did effectively keep the cap from being blown away again, but unfortunately, her preferred way of doing that was to generously stomp on it with her sinfully expensive name brand pumps.

And as expected from someone who was superficial enough to insist on this kind of footwear on the deck of a military vessel, she proved herself unfeeling enough to completely ignore Touji as he
knelt down to pull his cap free, and instead took her sweet time to greet Misato who had since arrived with the other two boys in tow.

Within the first second of being acquainted with that person, Touji was decidedly certain that he could not stand her.

But Touji wasn't the only one on whom the girl left a swift and definite impression: Shinji, too, was examining the unfriendly stranger with wide open eyes.

In fact, she had been the very first thing his eyes had focused on upon reaching this place, she had completely taken over his field of vision the moment he spotted her, and indeed, he had to choice to look anywhere else, since the girl before him was pretty much impossible to overlook – She was making personally sure of that.

Every tiniest tidbit of her appearance seemed deliberately crafted to irresistibly draw every pair of eyes whose gaze crossed her to where she stood, like a personified inward spiral inviting the eye to follow its lines to the center of the pattern: She stood there, with her legs spread apart and her hands on her hips, taking up as much room with her legs and elbows as she could without her pose seeming unnatural.

Her face was the worthy throne to self-assured smirk that informed everyone in her surroundings that they were being looked down on, regardless of how tall or important they might think they were. She adorned herself with a short, yellow sundress held by spaghetti straps, kept in the colors of the central star above, evoking the way it claimed the whole sky for itself each time it shone.

Besides her shoes, other garnishments to that picture involved a red wristwatch and a sky blue necklace.

The sum of her getup did not hide very much, but made what little it did conceal all the more titillating by keeping it just inches away from visibility – In general, the whole sight of her seemed intended as the worst possible torture a hormone-whacked teenager could experience, compiled by the skilled hands of an expert torture technician – and by that, Shinji didn't mean her expression's clear announcement that she knew just over 200 methods to make someone scream and was very much willing to use them.

Those were just an incidental supplement to a very different sort of weapons that were built right into her thoroughly perfect body and gave it its aura of irresistible attractiveness that made her shine like the afore-mentioned solar fire in Shinji's eyes.

But her beauty was not comparable to Misato's or Ayanami's; Misato's warm, playfully-provocative manner was too tangible and charmingly cozy to be labeled with a 'hard' word such as perfection, and Ayanami's perfection was the sort you might find in a moonlit greek statue, an ethereal, almost divine immaculateness; This young woman here was different. She, too, had something cold and unapproachable to her, but in a very different, profoundly worldly way: Her kind of perfection was the one you could find on the covers of magazines, the impossible standard that was demanded of idol singers and actresses; The kind that most girls her age strained to reach with diets and make-up, but never quite reached.

She might as well have been a model: Her sleek, athletic body had been rid of all imperfections by means of grueling hard work, with both these traits expressed as far as it was possible without slipping into an extreme that would no longer resemble traditional attractiveness.

Her breasts were even smaller than Ayanamis, more conical than rounded, but this exactly made them straddle this zone of not-quite-visibility despite the sparseness of her dress' yellow fabric.
It was like someone had described the global maximum of calculable beauty with a differential equation and then twisted the results into the shape of a girl of Shinji's approximate age group—There was nothing welcoming him to rest and lean onto her, nor any fragility as a toe point to apply protection.

Instead, she was a numbingly exotic, dominant presence that existed high above him even when they were standing on the same ground.

A seductress.

Exotic, in part, because she did have Japanese-looking features in her face, but quite obviously had some of her roots elsewhere: Her skin was, depending on which member of the newly arrived quartet you compared her with, distinctly to noticeably lighter, but still rosy, and her eyes were blue—This was probably the first time that Shinji saw someone who shared his, at least in his homeland, fairly rare eye color, although it was a far lighter, icier shade of a pale, barely-there color, indicative of the cold and rainy place her ancestors had come from.

If Shinji had to guess, he'd say she was part... middle-European, although he wasn't very sure, most of the Europeans he'd seen so far had been on the screen of his sensei's old TV. Tiny villages like the one he'd grown up in were seldom centers of cosmopolitanism.

Now, he'd known that the occasional European (or American descended from them) would come with very light, almost golden hair, but what this girl had naturally sprouting on her head was something else entirely: Long, straight, vigorous, shining, and red like polished copper metal. If nothing else, that alone made sure that this girl would stand out of every ever so large crowd.

There was something about the color red that made it different from all other color—It's a typical 'warning color', he once heard his teacher say when discussing some kind of poisonous frog or beetle. A signal to the world.

Or maybe it was because human blood was red, but somehow, any tiniest amount of the color would always stand out more than anything, no matter how chaotic the background; It attracted the eye if it as much as crossed its periphery.

There was always a particular air of eroticism around a woman in red—he already knew this from Misato.

But someone who had this red, this inexorable color of life as a permanent part of her own body that remained even when she was naked, that had this waterfall of red swinging after her with every step she took...

Shinji, who had always understood himself as someone inconspicuous and hesitant couldn't help but feel deeply intimidated by all that she was.

That was probably the reason why he didn't follow much after those passing thoughts that were telling him how impossibly familiar this new and foreign face seemed to be, or those implying a connection between her very conspicuous, obviously bright-red hair clips and the nerve clips on his very own EVA piloting interface headset.

He was far too busy marveling at her sheer existence.

"Hello, Misato!" She greeted leisurely, still adamantly refusing to remove her foot from Touji's cap, or to even acknowledge his existence with the slightest blink of her eyes.

"It's been a while! How have you been?"
"Oh, okay, as always." Misato assured, smiling as if oblivious to the spectacle below.

Quite bluntly, Shinji realized of all sudden that those two apparently knew each other from somewhere, and he didn't know a thing about it – This had to be yet another of these very significant details no one had ever bothered to tell him about.

Both females were talking to each other in suspiciously familiar tones: "Is it just me, or have you grown quite a bit taller?"

"And I've filled out, too!" the redhead boasted.

Only now did Misato decide to provide an explanation for this girl and what in heaven's name she was doing on an aircraft carrier: "May I introduce you? This is the Ace of the European Airforce: Captain Shikinami Asuka Langley, designated pilot of Evangelion Unit 02, our Second Child!"

That... explained a lot.

But either way, fate had not decided to be generous with our unfortunate little protagonist today: As soon as Misato had finished her explanation about the scantily-clad girl, another regrettable incident took pace.

As mentioned earlier, the flight deck was being incessantly whipped by a non-trivial amount of wind, but as much as the Second Child welcomed a moderate dose of dramatic sea breeze to accentuate her dramatic entrance, as it was customary for television-worthy badass heroes, the boundaries of what she was willing to tolerate were definitely overstepped when one bout of not-so 'gentle Zephyr' subjected her dress to the same treatment as Touji's cap.

Of course, miss Shikinami's dress was more limited in its freedom of movement, courtesy of two orderly little bows on its straps, but those didn't keep it's lower half from being blown to new heights and revealing her underpants – with the side effect that all three boys got treated to a generous view of said small piece of white cloth and its immediate surroundings.

Corporeal punishment followed on the spot.

SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!

A very unhappy-looking Shinji and one positively furious Touji were left with bright-red hand prints on their faces to confirm that the Second Child was indeed as unpleasant as their first impressions had led them to believe.

Even Kensuke, whose attention had been focussed on a warship behind the terrifying girl an only turned in her direction by chance had not escaped a beating, although this only became apparent once he put down his camcorder. It was hard to ascertain whether his discouraged expression owed its existence to acute facial pain, or his grief over the now broken camera lens.

Touji however was significantly more hot-headed than both his friends, and demanded an explanation, since he hadn't exactly asked for that stupid gust of wind, and certainly didn't have any desire to see her sleazy underwear: "What the hell was that for?!"

"Viewing fee for the pretty panorama, of course. Do you think it's for free?" came the caustic reply. The lady was obviously quite sure of herself, not to say overtly swanky, and apparently not remotely interested in veiling her unfounded hostility.

Touji was distinctly pissed. Who did she think she was? She dressed like a bitch, acted like a bitch, and now, she even insisted on being paid like a bitch. And to boot, his cap was now lost for good,
blown overboard when that crazy shrew stepped away from it to hand out her physical assaults.

"Well then, I won't be stingy and show you my gratitude!" Touji retorted, now finally ready to explode, and swiftly proceeded to pull down his own pants, boxer shorts included – As he might have gathered from his friends' sighs as they averted their faces, this wasn't exactly the smartest of moves.

Misato found the juvenile swaggering faintly amusing.

After Touji's face was provided with a second hand print, Asuka marched past him like he was a zero on her left, and turned her attention towards what she considered points of real relevance – First, her scrutinizing eyes searched her immediate surroundings for a girl her age, but they couldn't find any.

"What a surprise. Looks like the commander's little pet that gets to pilot unit zero didn't feel like gracing us lowly mortals with her presence." she scoffed. Only now did she deem the three boys worthy of getting reflected in her eyes again and probed each of them with an analytic glare.

They could practically feel how she glued the words 'clown', 'nerd' and 'loser' to their foreheads.

"And which of you three jokes sucked up to daddy to get to play with Unit One?"

She pierced both his Shinji and Kensuke with her icy irises, but neither of them really dared to answer. Only now did she recall Touji's existence and turned to Misato in protest: "Please, don't tell me that THIS idiot is the famous Third Child!"

"Don't worry. It's him. Over here."

Misato, who already seemed pretty used to the female EVA pilot's fierce temper, casually nodded her head in Shinji's direction, upon which he immediately wished he could disappear through the deck of the ship.

He really didn't know how to handle... this girl's very... direct personality, especially if she was saying... these kinds of things... He'd have to properly know his father, or at least talk to him on a regular basis, before he could even begin to think of 'sucking up' to him, and while he had no clue why he of all people had been selected to pilot that stupid mecha thing, he certainly never asked for it, nor was he all that thrilled about having to risk his life in fights against giant monsters that played with the factors in E= mc squared like they were lego bricks. In her defense, she had no way of knowing his circumstances, nonetheless, her words were hurtful – but she wasn't done in the least, oh no, she was was only just starting:

Shinji probably twitched in fear when she erected her full height directly before him and pointed her outstretched right arm and index finger straight at his chest.

Her first impression of him was anything but positive:

"Say, are you an idiot?!"

Shinji looked at her with big eyes, unable to formulate a reply.

He didn't claim to be any sort of genius, but...

'I've seen recordings of all your so-called 'battles'! Although I mistook them for some joke from the PR department at first. In all of my life, I've never seen an useless, cowardly SLUMP of your caliber! It seems you're too idiotic to follow even the simplest of orders! It's hard to believe that the
entire world, including my person, very nearly went down the drain several times over just because you were too busy shivering in fear! Last time was the worst, you even had to get your ass saved by a girl!"

Shinji looked back at her in unhappy silence.

He couldn't exactly deny her accusations, and the past battles certainly weren't anything he was proud of or would let himself get cocky over, he got that beaten out of him pretty fast. But at least they had been something he could look back at as an adversity he had mastered, or at very least survived.

To hear all he had lived through in the last weeks reduced to such insufficiency was not pleasant... but on the other hand, he knew very well that he hadn't exactly smeared himself with glory – If he tried to apply objective reason to this, he could easily see how the effort that all this had cost him 'on the inside' could not be expected to count, least of all in the face of an imminent apocalypse.

This was a sobering experience.

But the Second Child didn't seem to feel like she had humiliated him quite enough: Without leaving him the time to even hang his head in shame, she kicked his legs off the ground from under him in the fraction of a second, leaving Shinji spread over the ground after an unpleasant landing.

By the time he sat up again, she was already standing over him, practically pushing her skirt into his face, her hands at her hips, looking down at him with nothing but contempt.

"You're not even alert! How did a complete weakling like you ever get chosen as an EVA pilot? It really IS just your father's influence..."

To be honest, Misato probably would have been a whole lot more imposing if she hadn't scribbled over her age, weight and measurements on her security card. Not being visibly hungover on photo day might also have helped her case, and her extremely colorful company probably wasn't that productive in furthering any appearance of authority on her part: Touji was sneaking a 'discreet' glance at her butt, Kensuke went back to ecstatically filming everything ("A real man always carries a replacement lens!") and then, there was Shinji, who was sticking close to Misato because he was somewhat afraid of having to stand next to the girl who had just wiped the floor with him.

But they weren't the only reasons for the sour mood of the fleet's superior officer, who wasn't ashamed to show her just how unwelcome she was after returning her 'interesting' security card.

"Aha. I had mistaken you for some boy scout leader at first."

"Thank you for your warm and agreeable welcome." Misato replied poisedly, keeping up the superficial politeness with only a slight bit of amusement shining through, without ever making it less than obvious what she actually meant to say.

"Yes. And thank you for bringing even more brats for us to babysit." The Admiral murmured, not hiding his vitriol at all.

As if on cue, one of the aforementioned 'brats' could be seen blissfully dancing across the background, waving around his camera like he was in some sort of otaku paradise.

"In any case, we are still grateful for your assistance in the transport of Unit Two." Misato pulled out a clipboard and removed several pages from it. "Here are the specifications for the EVA's power supply in case of an emergency activation."
The officers cast suspicious glares at the papers, and the Admiral, to whom they had been handed, didn't even bother skimming through them – His opinion had been firmly in place from the very beginning: "Like hell will I let you activate that plaything in the middle of the ocean!"

"As I said, it's only a precaution in case of emergency." Misato clarified. "The EVA is very precious, after all."

"So precious that they had to divert the entire pacific fleet for its protection? I'd like to know just when the UN forces became a delivery service!"

"I'd say that was when a certain organization was formed," the first officer opined, every bit as frank about his dissatisfaction as his superior had been. "Even you will have to admit that mobilizing the entire fleet just to guard that plaything is hardly appropriate!"

"You're right. I would have preferred an additional squadron of aircraft." Misato countered with a smile, unfazed by the stream of provocations.

She pointed another stack of paperwork in the Admiral's general direction.

"Please sign these forms."

"Not yet." the officer sharply clarified.

This time, Misato did require some effort to keep her features from twitching.

She could hardly believe her ears – First the Jet-Alone bastard, and now this. Did someone write 'please to your best to be an uncooperative jerk in my presence' on her forehead the last time she overdid the beer ever so slightly?

"The cargo, including its pilot, has been under our jurisdiction ever since we picked it up at the third branch in Germany, and as long as it stays that way, we will not let you do whatever you please. You can count on that."

"And when do you intend to relinquish that jurisdiction?" Misato inquired.

"No sooner than we arrive at the port in Neo-Yokosuka. As long as we are at sea, you'll have to follow our orders!"

"I see." Misato affirmed, her smile not fading for as much as a single second. "But just in case, I'd like to remind you that I as a member of NERV am authorized to relieve you of your command in emergency situations."

Silence.

The only sounds that could be heard were the waves, and Kensuke's absent-minded gushing over the 'supermegacool' steering wheel as he once again frolicked straight across the scenery.

"Cool!" Touji commented, his reddened face betraying the less than safe-for-work thoughts that had accompanied his observation of Misato's well-practiced pokerface skills.

Even Shinji, who had grown quite desensitized to her 'coolness' due to frequent exposure to what she looked like when she climbed out bed in the morning, couldn't help but look impressed – Even the Second Child was looking in Misato's direction.

"She almost sounded like Ritsuko-san..." Shinji realized.
It seemed like absolutely nothing could possibly put a crack into that superior, professional smile of hers – except for that one single thing that had just entered the bridge and added a comment of their own: "Wow. You're as courteous as ever!"

All eyes darted to the bridge's secondary entrance.

The Second Child, in particular, instantaneously turned ninety degrees, although her entire demeanor kept spinning for yet another ninety: Of all sudden, she was blushing all over her uncannily kensuke-oid expression of utmost adoration, and excitedly waved in his direction like she was a little kid about to meet Santa Claus: "KAJI-SEMPAI!"

Half standing in a doorway that seemed far too small to him was a tall, broad-shouldered man whose name was ostensibly 'Kaji', who casually waved back and addressed them all with a nonchalant "Hi!".

He looked exactly how you would imagine someone whom even the Second Child would label as a worthy mate: Like some kind of intrepid movie hero.

He was roughly around Misato's age, wore his pants loose-fitting, his dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the tie slightly loose, resulting in an overall 'look' that was surely stylish, but not bourgeois. He might as well have worn a T-shirt that said 'Hello, my name is Mr. Cool' – no, his current outfit probably got that message across way better than all T-shirts of this world could have managed, and he could as well have been dressed like a hobo and still steal the entire room's attention with a single wink, his debonair pose alone was enough to put James Bond himself to shame.

He was so ridiculously good-looking that he could drive people to suicide with his face, and in case there were any more doubts that this fellow was only inches away from dying of testosterone poisoning, they would have been extinguished by the mere mention of his classical action hero designer stubble – and yet, all that androgen didn't seem to have affected his full head of long, ash brown hair, which he obviously wore in one of the coolest hairstyles ever devised by man: A ponytail. A goddamned ponytail! Why did it have to be a ponytail?

All he was missing was a leather trench coat, those classical midnight sunglasses and a giant motorbike.

Some kind of primal instinct that had been lingering about in Shinji's DNA ever since his distant ancestors had been climbing around on trees in sunny Africa frantically declared some time of Alpha-Male-Alert, which once again reminded him what a complete and utter zero he must have been in the Second Child's eyes.

Shinji could have given up on life right here and now.

And to think that this day had started so nicely...

But Shinji wasn't the only one to feel somewhat irradiated by the unshaven gentleman's sudden arrival – the Admiral immediately began to bark out complaints and clarify that the resident James-Bond-ripoff had no place on the bridge.

Misato's reaction was also fairly enlightening – She didn't seem to be seeing this exemplary specimen for the first time, but certainly wished to have seen him for the last time. Shinji wondered how many hitherto unknown acquaintances of Misato they were going to run into today, and whether all of them would be so brazenly cool.
As far as Misato herself was concerned, it was probably enough to state that her expression gradually transformed from the very image of abject shock to the physiognomic equivalent of a pleading "Oh no!".

Immediately, she ordered the supposed 'boy scouts' out of the room and then stormed off in an attempt to put as many meters between herself and this Kaji person as logistically possible, closely followed by Shinji (who was grateful for every centimeter between himself and all the crazy), Touji (who was not quite satisfied with the progression of the 'redevouz' so far) and Kensuke (whom they had needed to collect from a remote corner of the bridge and still kept filming everything).

Kaji himself also went for the exit with the Second Child following close behind, leaving only the officers to shake their heads in disbelief.

"And they really expect this lot to be the saviors of humanity?" the Admiral complained.

The first officer sighed. "Times change. By the looks of it, the committee is putting all its hopes in that robot thing..."

"That children's toy?!" The Admiral glared out of the windows, toward another aircraft carrier where the Evangelion in question was being stored under a large, white tarpaulin. "Our budget gets cut all the time, and then, they throw all that money right out of the window for this kind of nonsense!"

Unfortunately, Misato's wish to maximize the distance between herself and Kaji was not granted, much like the boys' desire to avoid any further encounters with the Second Child for the sake of their health – Instead, they ended up a lot closer than any of them was comfortable with. Almost as if fate had decided to step on their fingers in every way possible today, the only way down to the canteen turned out to be a single elevator, because the 'Over the rainbow' didn't happen to be 'a goddamn tourist canoe' as the Admiral had delicately put it. The plaque claiming that it was intended to carry eight people must have been referring to the lifting strength of the machines and not the cabin's dimensions, which were already decidedly... cramped after the insertion of six passengers, four of which weren't even fully grown, which was a very friendly euphemism for a state that was more comparable to that of the canned sardines that Shinji occasionally fed to his feathered flatmate.

Misato still made a honorable attempt to position herself as far from Kaji as the limited amount of space allowed and, for the time being, contented herself with glaring daggers at his painfully handsome visage. Touji had found himself unintentionally and quite unelegantly promoted to some kind of human sucker mouth fish when the resulting chaos pressed him against the glass doors, while the Second Child had claimed the corner next to Kaji and demonstratively refused to look at the other passengers in the lift, her chin turned upwards for emphasis.

Shinji had once again fallen victim to his uncanny ability to attract awkward situations like a magnet and magically draw ungodly amounts of naked female flesh and/or breasts, in this case, Misato's breast between which he was pretty much being smothered after a mutually unplanned, unintended contact. To their credit, they were nicely warm and soft, but still possessed a definite firmness like a brand new pillow, and Misato's personal scent could be sensed through the dress – The only reaction Shinji was capable of was a slight reddening of his cheeks.

Only Kensuke was apparently perfectly content with the corner he'd ended up in and happily filmed whatever there was to film in an elevator shaft.
But if the fates did insist on forcing her to waste her time being stuck with that brainless macho ape, Misato would take it upon herself to purge him of any illusions that she was doing so willingly:

"What in the world are you even doing here?" she demanded to know.

"I'm on a business trip to Japan and decided to accompany Asuka along the way." he explained, skillfully ignoring her hostile tone without ever dropping his charming smile, inadvertently staging some sort of ironic reversal of the earlier situation with the officers.

"I should have expected something like this..." Misato lamented.

As if to further the overall level of discomfort, a sway of the boat then happened to combine with the motion of the elevator in such an opportune manner that, as far as the inside of the lift was concerned, it resulted in both females loudly exclaiming the words "HEY! DON'T TOUCH ME!" to which the for once completely accidental 'perverts', more specifically, Touji and Kaji, responded by unanimously asseverating their innocence.

And since they were all leaning forward to make sure that their screeches would be hurting the other party's ears properly, poor Shinji found himself caught in the crossfire, squeezed even tighter into Misato's shapely chest. Despite his dubious fortune, the Third Child tried his best to keep his balance in order to avoid another debacle in the style of ill-fated visit to Ayanami, and, since he didn't have much in the terms of athletic skill or assertiveness, did little else aside from squeezing his eyes shut and hoping that he would be delivered from his... situation before he ended up squashed, suffocated or deaf from all the shouting, not to think of the possibility of a more... embarrassing reaction to his current... location. He counted himself lucky to have survived until the glass doors of the cramped elevator finally opened and allowed its passengers to stumble out with varying degrees of inelegance, although he did have to admit that he sort of missed the warmth of Misato's chest.

That Touji couldn't quite avoid an unintentional meeting with the ground (and promptly got himself titled as 'too stupid to walk' by a certain redhead) reminded him all too clearly how closely he might just have avoided a repetition of that unfortunate incident.

Once Misato had ensured they wouldn't kill each other on the spot, everyone involved moved on to the tables to have their lunch, where Touji and Kensuke displayed an impressive sprint in order to claim both seats next to Misato's – which she didn't mind in the slightest as long as it kept a certain stubble-faced individual away from her. To compensate, he placed himself straight across from her, bridging the physical distance without invitation.

The more he leaned forward, propped up by his strong, masculine arms, the more Misato recoiled,retreating back into her chair. The Second Child immediately seized the seat next to Kaji, leaving Shinji no choice but to place himself next to her, as carefully as he could muster and, obviously, leaving a wide safety margin.

Lucky for him, she was all too busy eying the exchange between Kaji and Misato with suspicious, displeased eyes to bother taking note of his presence. Touji, too, gave off the impression that his mood would have been brighter if he and Kensuke had their 'sweetheart' to themselves.

"Well?" Kaji asked, utilizing a tone that should have been reserved for a close associate, concealing his true feelings behind his charming smile. "Are you seeing anyone?"

Misato vehemently refused to look at his face – apparently, she was trying her best to make him understand that she wasn't the slightest bit interested in her advances, and appreciated them as
much as a bullet to the chest. Was he some sort of... Stalker, or unwanted Admirer of Misato's?

Shinji wished he could claim to have adequate knowledge of Misato's life – Sure, they had reached a point where they would easily act relatively natural around each other, or as close to 'natural' as either of them ever got, anyways, but all she'd ever told him about her life before his arrival was that she had only just moved in herself at that time. By now, he had been able to gather that she probably used to work in Germany before that, given that she knew the Second Child, but didn't seem to have seen her in a while.

"I don't know how this is any of your business!" she brusquely answered.

"That hurts. For real."

Kaji shifted himself into a somewhat less pushy posture, perhaps feeling a genuine sense of defeat somewhere behind the aura of coolness that he didn't dispel even now.

Neither Touji nor the Second Child seemed particularly happy about the coloration in his tone of voice.

All the while, Shinji pondered what their exact connection might be. Stalker, admirer, or perhaps old friend who has never quite understood that it was all platonic on her side? Possibly a meddlesome ex-boyfriend?

Whatever his past with Misato may be, he proceeded to take a sip from his coffee cup with a marked pretense of huffiness, before turning towards the other occupants of the bench he sat on. This, of course, caused the terrifying girl's face to light up for a moment, in hopes that he might finally be turning his attention back to her – but the sweet reality was that he was looking past her to face Shinji of all people. "...I've heard you have been living with Katsuragi. Is that so?" he asked in his typical, exuberant ways.

"Y-Yes." Shinji confirmed as polite and friendly as his shyness allowed. This man, too, seemed to have a very... direct way of speaking to people, but since he hadn't beaten Shinji up yet (unlike a certain other person who seemed to consider it a normal way of greeting people), he was glad to take this as a sign of mercy and kindness.

Mostly, he was a bit impressed with his ability to act this laid-back in rooms full of rather explosive people, and wished he could be more like that himself. If he was more like Kaji, he might have a much easier time talking to Ayanami. If your level of sheer coolness was sufficient to not only tame ferocious beasts such as the Second Child, but have them fall to your feet, winning the affections of a comparatively harmless, nice girl should be a peace of cake...

Too bad that nothing about Shinji could ever justify such confidence.

He couldn't even fathom how Touji and Kensuke had ever arrived at the conclusion that he was 'popular with the girls' – *Now this* was the living image of a glorious Don Juan, this Kaji person or whatever he was called, with his masculine facial stubble, his sly grin, that playful glint in his endless dark eyes and the brashness of his conspiratorial purr: "You must know, I'm an old friend of hers... So, tell me... does she still toss around in bed and leave her sheets in a mess?"

An ex-boyfriend.

*Definitely* an ex-boyfriend.

The mildly traumatized visages of everyone involved were very much worthy of Homeric laughter;
Most were aimlessly gesticulating with their arms, the Second Child, in particular, seemed to have frozen into a statue, and Misato nearly fell out of her chair.

"In... In bed?" Kensuke repeated with notably reddened cheeks.

Shinji, too, was rather... impressed, not necessarily in a positive way. No matter how much of a 'baby' his friends might consider him to be, that particular... allusion... did not go over his head, although he could just as plausibly be talking about the sphere of disarray that tended to percolate her room from her bed outwards. Shinji certainly hoped that this was what he meant, because, if he meant the other thing-

"WHAT ARE YOU IMPLYING THERE?!" Misato bellowed angrily after she had managed to snap out of her initial stupor, punctuating her words by slamming her first on the table and, in the process, sending her coffee cup on a short flight that nonetheless caused a sizable stain in the tablecloth.

"I see! So she hasn't changed at all! Right, Ikari Shinji-kun?"

The older man deviously winked at the boy.

Misato's expression progressively transformed into a proof of utter desperation.

"Ehh..." Shinji began, leaning forward to look past the still-frozen Second Child. "I'm surprised that you know my name..."

Kaji found that question rather curious and playfully brandished his index finger. "Why so humble? It shouldn't be surprising, considering that you're pretty much a celebrity in our circles."

It was the word 'celebrity' that roused the Second Child from her salt-pillar-like state. Because her head was turned towards Kaji, Shinji couldn't really make out her expression. Meanwhile, Kaji continued to elaborate: "You are the only one who ever succeeded in moving an EVA without any kind of prior training. The famed Third Child."

Kaji raised two more fingers to allude to the boy's numeric designation - "I... I just got lucky..."

Shinji managed to produce, twirling his fingers to soothe a his self-consciousness.

He didn't really know what to do with this kind of praise, and neither did he feel like he really deserved it, given that he didn't have the slightest clue what exactly had made the EVA react to him.

Still, it was nice to get a little acknowledgment in return for his suffering, especially from an older, wiser, more experienced man... Some of his less pleasant experiences had been hard to even process, so it was certainly motivating to hear this, especially after having his admittedly meager, but hard won achievements stomped into the dirt by his new coworker.

For Shinji, this was yet another experience he never knew before – If... if someone like Kaji was saying this, it probably meant something. He looked like the sort of person who would... know what they were talking about. Shinji guessed that it was another confirmation that he wasn't alone, that the whole organization was working on this and that his contributions mattered to them.

He wondered if it would feel somewhat like this if his father were to praise him, perhaps it would be like this experience, except much amplified by his long, long wait for the words in question.

"Luck is part of your destiny!" Kaji explained just as he was about to rise from his seat. "This sort of thing is commonly called talent. It's an asset like any other."
...talent?

"Well then, see you around!"

This was new, too.

Despite all the unpleasant events that has marred this day so far, Shinji was beginning to feel that his anticipation hadn't been completely in vain. He didn't think he'd ever looked himself that way, or noticed anything particularly special, much less anything that could be referred to as talent. So far, he'd been convinced that he was thoroughly unremarkable if not inept in all skills one could think of, and to be honest, he still didn't consider his battle skills an exception, but if there were people who were... satisfied with his results, then having ruined his chances with a girl who was going to become a comrade of his. So what if she had her opinion stiffly formed before she ever saw his face? It wasn't just Kaji who thought he was making valuable contributions, either. Misato and his friends had also showed him that they thought he could pull this off. The opinion of an experienced adult spectator and the people he cared about should be weighed higher than that of some obviously overconfident, unlikeable stranger, right?

Although he still didn't feel completely at peace with just ignoring the opinion of someone he'd be working with on a regular basis, even if he had only just met her.

Regardless, he did try to bid his farewell with a genuine, if tentative smile.

Then again, that made him just about the only person in the room (apart from Kaji himself, who was already halfway out the door) who looked anything close to pleased – Touji and Kensuke were still recovering from the initial shock, the Second Child, who followed her older companion straight on cue, demonstratively averted her eyes from the rest of the lot, except for Shinji, at whom she had been glaring daggers ever since he had somehow drawn the attention of the object of her affections, which was apparently tantamount to some kind of capital offense in her book, and Misato had supported her head with her elbows and clawed her fingers into her hair, complete with mumbled pleas for all of this to turn out to be some kind of prank or nightmare.

"So? What do you think of Ikari Shinji-kun?"

"Booooring!" the girl replied as she absent-mindedly played around on the ship's outer guardrail, almost mildly indignant. "...I can't believe they chose such a disappointing loser to be the Third Child..."

"Don't judge a book by it's cover." Kaji advised. "After all, he single-handedly killed two angels, and not only that, when confronted with sudden combat with no previous training, he immediately reached a synchronization rate of over 40%!"

"I-Impossible!" the young redhead exclaimed, staring at Kaji with wide, shocked eyes.

Not even she... could have pulled this off. She had been certain that she had nothing to fear when she saw what kind of wimp the supposed famous Third Child had turned out to be, but what if he was not nearly as harmless as he looked?

Just now, she had been disappointed that she wouldn't get the chance to best a proper rival, but now... No. The Second Child refused to classify that idiot as a potential thread just because he'd had a little bit of beginner's luck – His oh so extraordinary synch rate was still miles below hers, and the brat himself was positively useless.

Hell would freeze over sooner than that weakling would stand any chance at getting in her way,
and she felt a spontaneous surging of a need to make this very clear to him – if not for anything else, then to make Kaji notice her and show her that this supposed 'natural' he was trying to pair her off with was way below her league.

Blowing her older companion a kiss as she departed, she stormed off to show that pathetic amateur just who he'd picked a fight with.

In the meantime, Misato, whose mood was greatly improved by Kaji's absence, was currently riding an escalator towards the surface of the ship since Kensuke had decided that there was something on the portside that he really wanted to film.

The Third Child seemed similarly relieved to be away from his fellow pilot and stuck close to Misato, while his two friends were standing a little further down.

"Oh dear, that Admiral big shot was pretty sure of himself!" the tanned, tracksuit-wearing teen complained, in part for the purpose of actual venting, but also with the thought of scoring a few extra points with Misato.

"A massive ego is almost a necessary job requirement in his line of work" she answered, her amused smile nourished as much by the subject of their conversation as by the boys themselves. "Just try not to take him too seriously."

"The other one wasn't too humble either." Shinji commented, more good-natured than seriously irked. "I mean Kaji-san."

"Oh yes!" Misato retorted, with significantly more of a deprecatory edge to her voice. "He always insisted on making a complete joke of himself. That idiot!"

This wasn't exactly what Shinji had meant, but since she obviously didn't seem inclined to talk about him, he decided to stick with that answer.

But then, the universe seemed to remember that the event of Ikari Shinji being pleased and content for more than a few minutes was supposed to violate some yet unknown natural law, and scrambled to ensure that it wasn't caught slacking off, which it did by rapidly throwing some more trouble his way, and having it loudly announce its presence to secure his attention: "Hey, Third Child!"

Looking up in bewilderment, he followed the escalator to its end, where he was awaited by a red-haired girl in a short yellow dress that bared much of her long, athletic legs that seemed to have been drawn by a skilled artist in an attempt to create something that would mock this flawed world with its unattainable perfection.

"Come with me!" She demanded, her body language making it clear that she wouldn't accept any 'Nos' or 'buts'.

Before he'd even reached the end of the escalator, she firmly grabbed Shinji by the wrist and dragged him after her.

Their path led them to a small, lifeboat-like vehicle that she somehow knew how to operate without the slightest delays, and with it, all the way across to one of the other ships, on which a large, pavilion of white tarpaulin could be made out from afar – and Shinji already suspected what must have been hiding beneath it, even though he would have preferred it greatly if he wouldn't have been struggling to catch his breath by the time they reached the boat, feeling pushed to the limit just from keeping up to the headstrong girl's steadfast pace, and really wishing the were a lot
more firm and stable structures separating him from the poisonous red waters.

It was pretty much beyond him what was currently driving this girl or what she planned to do, or why she didn't just avoid him if she so obviously couldn't stand him. Why would anyone go out of their way just to bring further unpleasantness upon themselves and others? Shinji couldn't claim to be a particularly passionate person, so he couldn't say he understood, but after seeing this girl in action, he was no longer all that sure that this would be a desirable thing.

Either way, the self-proclaimed warrior girl ultimately led him to the other ship's deck, where she boldly gripped the tarpaulin and revealed the cargo beneath to the light of the day.

What could she possibly be expecting him to say, in regards to something like this?

"Nice color." Shinji remarked when he couldn't think of anything better. "I didn't know that EVA 02 was bright red."

The varnish on the armor plates was indeed of a very intense, conspicuous color that could reliably be expected to draw all eyes to itself. At this point, it was impossible to miss that this must have been her favorite color, in case the watch, the shoes and the interface clips didn't make it sufficiently obvious. Personally, he'd always been reluctant with such strong, bright colors – he didn't necessarily dislike them, but he'd feel uncomfortable if he were wearing something that was likely to draw attention, that stood out, yes, provoked a reaction. He preferred to stay quietly in the background and have his peace, but it hadn't taken him long to notice that his new co-worker was his exact opposite in that respect, although he supposed that it would have been easier to name the ways in which they didn't seem to be as different from each other was the hot, sunny daylight was from the cold darkness of the starry night.

He supposed that there was a certain praiseworthy aspect to that, as well, that endless, unstoppable drive she seemed to possess, how she always went straight for what she wanted. He did not have this capacity; On his worse days, he could hardly summon up the energy to do anything at all, even when he knew he should. In a way, it reminded him of Misato's and Ayanami's determined refusal to let any unpleasant feeling or physical barrier get in the way of what they were convinced needed to be done – although this was probably the only thing the three of them had in common. Or maybe they were just normal, and he was different in that he was a coward.

Either way, the brash young pilot seemed pretty insistent on making him take a closer look of her firecar-red Evangelion, and admonished him for wasting her precious time.

The Evangelion was being transported on its 'belly', with its head turned on the side and catwalks consisting of plastic plates affixed to a row of plastic barrels forming paths across the basin of purple coolant it was half submerged in.

Unlike the Units Zero and One, EVA 02 possessed a total of four eyes that were furnished with green lenses, and two orange, horn-like protuberances on the crown of its head, which gave it the vaguely demonic appearance that seemed to be typical for the bio-mechanical god-machines.

The slender girl's sudden, unannounced and completely dauntless leaps from one part of her red giant to the next seemed no less superhuman, given that she seemingly reached its tip on its back in a few casual, practiced motions and only turned back down to stare at Shinji from up above – Apparently, she really enjoyed looking down at people.

But where others may have been preoccupied with feeling insulted, Shinji couldn't hold back a certain sense of awe.
She hadn’t expected this kind of stunt and nearly tumbled off the barrel-bridge himself between the kinetic energy left behind by her jump and his own disbelief, and had stuttered something about how she should be careful while she proudly displayed either the athletic achievements of military training to which her deceptively slim body owed both its trim figure and its exceptional physical prowess and catapulted herself to building-like heights with only the force of her strong limbs, chiding him for expecting that ‘everyone else would be as much of a wimp’ as he was, especially considering that she’d had varied combat training.

But once she had taken her beloved place on the summit, she was wholly occupied with the very reason she had come her: Her Evangelion.

"The color isn't the only thing that is different about Unit Two! The Units one and Zero were still part of the development process, a prototype and a test model – That they could be synchronized with a complete newbie is the best proof!"

So she was right back to trivializing each and every of his achievements – had she honestly dragged him all the way here just to scoff at him?

Perplexed, Shinji looked up to her and wondered what exactly she might be expecting of her, and what he’d ever done to her to warrant this.

"But Unit Two is different!" its designated pilot continued, performing a wide, sweeping motion with her right arm like a saleswoman pitching her product.

"You could say that my model is the first proper Evangelion, the final, full-fledged result of the program!"

Just as the Second Child was done gloating about her EVA, the entire ship was shaken up by a jolt of considerable strength which sent the surface of the coolant basin into motion. While Shinji had to trouble to maintain his balance on the swaying, floating bridge, the girl before him easily remained upright, never mind that she was standing high on the inclined surface of a red giant that was never intended to be walked on.

"What happened?" He asked in confusion, and the answer, too, assured him that he was in fact dealing with an implacable professional that he hardly compared to: "Underwater shock waves!" she immediately recognized. "There must have been an explosion nearby!"

Immediately, Asuka descended with a swift chain of jumps, just as fearless and elegant as on her way up, and rushed right past Shinji to get to get outside, her bragging quickly forgotten once a potential serious situation presented itself – But Shinji’s expression was just as severe, his mind racing behind a mask of forced stoicism – An explosion, in the middle of the ocean. And there was an Evangelion present on this ship. He knew full-well what this could mean, and hoped from the bottom of his heard that he was mistaken, but the very real possibility of an... angel attack was nothing he could afford to ignore.

It had been roughly a week since the last one, so the next one could very much be due already, which meant that all the hopes, expectations and the hard work of thousands of people, including the few that were particularly dear to him, were now at stake once again, along with the life and fate of humanity and every single living thing on this planet.

Shinji took a brief moment to order his thoughts and pull himself into a manageable state and repeat the many, many reasons why running away was not an option to himself in his thoughts, then he rushed after Asuka, who had already reached the guardrails and leant past them to spot the
source of the disturbance.

Her trained eyes searched the agitated waves for the reason they existed.

Shinji, too, soon arrived beside her and concluded that his fears had come true: "This is..."

Before their very eyes, one of the other aircraft carriers went up in flames, leaving behind a gigantic, cross-shaped pillar of light that was accompanied by by strangely colored, approximately mauve vapors. Something undefined was shooting through the red waters like a torpedo, fast enough to leave torrents of foam in its wake, and it was picking off the ships one by one, blowing them up before they had any chance to pose the slightest bit of resistance.

There was no more room for doubt.

"It's an angel!" Shinji concluded. "It must be!"

"W-What? A real one?"

In that instant, the entire illusion of competence was gone from her face, and Shinji was brought face to face with the realization that, despite all of her adulation and talk of her supposed exquisite military training, this girl had never seen combat before.

If anyone was the 'expert' in this situation, it would have to be him.

And that wasn't a thought he found particularly comforting – she was right as far as his own lack of professionalism was concerned – but currently lacked the time and resources to change that. If they wanted to save this world, they would have to act fast – But how? They were currently faraway from headquarters, and Unit One, unfortunately, wasn't.

"We need... We have to get back to Misato-san and do something!" he quickly scrambled together, for the sake of having, at least, some kind of coherent goal or plan that had chances of working, even if it might not be the best or smartest.

But the girl at his side, who had since gotten past her initial disbelief and stuffed it away behind the wide, sneaky grin of a predator that had glimpsed its chance to strike, had already concocted a plan of her own: "...I think we can dispense with finding Misato."

Chapter End Notes

(1) Chapter Title is an allusion to the Bleach manga volume titled 'Quincy Archer hates you'.

(2) I'm going with 'Shikinami' here because I had to pick one, and I just think it sounds cooler. Also, since this has Mari in it, the Theme Naming is a definite feature. This is not a statement about which scenes to expect or not to expect.

(3) It is easy to forget that for an episode and a half, Shinji & Asuka shared some very reciprocated, very straightforward antagonism, before the more familiar dynamic fully set in... Stuff written from Shinji's perspective is meant to reflect that here a little, hence the depreciating tone at times.

(4) "Leatha" comes from some biblical phrase but is also a somewhat archaic female
first name. I've heard somewhere that 49 is assigned the value/meaning of 'Unification', although it's mostly just a number I consistently have a thing with.

(5) As for the descriptions of Asuka and the contrast with Misato/Rei, I was going for a 'judgement of Paris' type of contrast of different appeals and the things they stand for, not any obvious marking of anyone as 'better'. If it came off that way, I've screwed up. I don't think 'worldly' needs to be a pejorative adjective, and it suits Asuka well, for worse, but also for better. Also in the sense that she is at least, always distinctly human, although Shinji hasn't realized this yet. But Sadamoto himself also described her, as far as her superficial first-glance appearance goes, the 'teen idol' of the EVA world. But there is also something potentially self-destructive about this kind of culture/aesthetic which is very... suitable, considering that she ends up starving herself in ep 24. But keep in mind that Shinji is supposed to be, and will keep on being, subtly misunderstanding her. He's pegging her for more of an Aphrodite, for a colder, negative interpretation of her, but any superficiality or seductiveness only ever goes skin-deep with Asuka, she's probably more of a less matronly Hera, a symbol for coexistence despite difficulty and conflict. Asuka's ideal place would not be above, but besides you. 'Seductress', even if it's a misnomer on Shinji's part here, needn't be negative in every context either; It's an experience you can have, not a type of person. But Shinji isn't quite over an innocent/simplifying drive to compartmentalize here. It's less a flaw he has than a lesson he hasn't learnt yet. Also, a certain repetitiveness/evocation between her initial description here and in the last dream sequence is fully intended. Making you feel Shinji’s sense of déjâ-vu, or something like that. Also, the solar motif! That was important to me, too. Rei = Moon and Misato = Earth meets Asuka = Sun. (Shinji = Stars wasn't a thing back when I wrote this... Neither did I know about that Nordic warrior sun-goddess. I would have done something with that if I had known. Yeah, basically, let's get in some more gratuitous mythological motifs besides just the Judeo-Christian ones, basically. )

(6) On the subject of the military ranks... you just wait.

(7) All that aside/clarified, I admit that Asuka is simply a character that I have less of a 'feeling' for/grasp on than, say, Shinji or Rei. The last thing I want to do is to get her wrong or give her a skewed portrayal just because she isn't my favorite character. If I fuck up (particularly in scenes that do/will feature her own PoV), please tell me so.

(8) I deliberately chose not to render Asuka's infamous line with the exact phrasing of 'What are you, stupid' to dillute fond reactions to a familiar cutesy catchphrases, because, words mean things, and especially here at the beginning, it wouldn't symbolize a relationship yet. In the German version, I tried to accomplish this by using 'bescheuert' instead of the more common 'doof' or the 'blöd' the dub used, basically an equally colloquial synonym.

(9) Onwards, Baka! To the Asukamobile! For truth, justice, and the Tsundere way! This fanfic will be continued in chapter 02: [ASUKA STRIKES]. Because nothing says 'heroic' like your name in ALL CAPS
**02: [ASUKA STRIKES!]**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Boku-tachi wa hirake au*

*Suiteki no you ni, wakusei no you ni*

*Boku-tachi wa hanpatsu shiau*

*Jishaku no you ni, hada no iro no you ni*

-Tite Kubo

(:)

**We attract each other**

*Like drops of water, like planets*

**We repell each other**

*Like magnets, like the colors of our skin*

Gaghiel, the Angel of fish, was on his way.

As soon as he'd emerged from his chrysalis, he'd listened for steely voices like his own, and departed to follow the loudest one he could hear, ready and eager to claim this world for himself and his brothers, to complete what neither his predecessors nor his honored father could finish.

Now, Gaghiel was – as one might express it in Lillim-terms – not the brightest bulb in the box, and this was reflected in the form he'd chosen: A gigantic, massive body that boasted of raw strength in place of sophisticated trickery with a shape more fit to his father's ocean than to braving the shores occupied by the Lillim, perhaps a sign of a childish personality or a misguided attempt to flatter or impress his origin; Though he would have described this more as "glorifying his name" rather than anything that would imply communication or need on either side, in some ways the angel was not as different from the children he would soon meet in battle than the vast disparities of their outer forms would suggest.

But there was yet another bizarrely-ironic parallel between them, or in this case, between Gaghiel and Shinji in particular: He just got lucky.

The messenger had been following the loud and faraway calls that seemed to be coming from beyond the shore, but thanks to a whim of fate, he crossed paths with a cluster of Lillim vessels on his way there. Originally, he'd meant to remain far beneath them in the protection of the crimson deeps, but as he neared their position, he perceived a small, familiar cry, a voice that seemed to shine in, of, and for itself rather than being directed anywhere – The indistinguishable mark of a being blessed with the fruit of life, much like Gaghiel himself.

As of now, he lacked the knowledge needed to recognize that sign for what it was, but it felt unprecedentedly... familiar and it was *there.*
Driven by some kind of childish curiosity, Gaghiel surfaced, and following the obstinacy born from that same childishness, he tore apart one Lillim vessel after another – For the call he’d heard was too weak, too diffused, to easily pinpoint its exact location – whatever its source was lacked the energy to produce more than localized background static, its presence felt closer to drops of a viscous fluid randomly leaking more than it did to wave patterns being broadcast. The signal was scrambled and scattered, and yet, Gaghiel zealously continued his search – That strange quality he could only describe as a sense of familiarity kept pulling at his instinct like a horseshoe magnet would attract a tiny bit of iron turnings.

......WHERE...ARE...YOU...

Meanwhile, the humans inside the "vessels" were completely at the angel's mercy. Most likely, the only reason that they kept in motion was their pride demanding that they should at least look like they were doing something to get this situation under control – but not many were fooled.

"Damnit...!" the old admiral cursed, looking through his spying-glass in disbelief. "What is going on out there?!!" And if an uncontrollable situation wasn't the worst a person who earned his living through establishing order could hope for, the bridge was then visited by the last person the admiral wanted to see right now.

Just minutes before, he would have been outright grateful for any chance of a proper battle that would give the rockets in his ships' vaults some proper use before they were inevitably decommissioned as a consequence of budget cuts, but now, he and his troops were being humiliated.

"Greetings! NERV delivery service!" she declared cheerfully, not boasting, but neither hiding that she saw this incident as a confirmation of her earlier points. "Would you like to order information about the enemy, or perhaps some effective countermeasures?"

"We are in the middle of combat! There is no place for civilians on the bridge!"

Misato's smile was replaced by a more serious, somewhat aggravated expression just as one of those kids showed up behind her, and much to the officers' chagrin, it had to be the one with the camera.

"You know, it's just my personal opinion but I think you might be dealing with an angel here."

The admiral tried his hardest to ignore her. "All ships, fire!"

Misato already knew that this man was only wasting time and ammunition – and most likely, he knew that as well. One might think that there was some kind of official meeting of big mouths on this ship.

Speaking of big mouths – or someone Misato might have termed that way – There was another person observing the angel’s lengthening trail of destruction with visible signs of alarm: Back in his cabin, Kaji was peering through the shutters with a small spying glass, thoughts racing behind somber dark eyes as the angel mowed down one ship after another – this turn of events was very, very inconvenient right now...

In the meantime, Misato had personally invited herself onto the bridge, and observed the confrontation unfold alongside Touji and Kensuke. What was taking place out there was too one-sided to be considered a battle.
"Why is the angel even here?" Misato asked herself, sensing a vague unease in her gut. So far, they had all gone directly for Neo Tokyo Three, as far as she knew, because Lillith was buried underneath it. So what could this creature possibly want here, with these old ships in the middle of the ocean? What led it here?

"Could it be... Unit Two?"

Elsewhere, Asuka had grabbed Shinji by the wrist, and pulled him back into the corridors of the ships as she pleased, without giving him even the slightest indication of where they were going – He was well aware that they had no time for any whimsical drivel now that the angel could tear this ship apart at any given moment, but he couldn't make himself talk back to that crazy girl, who seemed very unlikely to pay him any mind either way.

That she had taken a bag in her favorite color from a crate in her Eva's storage room would suggest that she had at least something resembling an actual plan which Shinji was currently unable to follow for lack of explanations – And since he himself did not have one and probably lacked the ability to concoct one even if he tried, it shouldn't surprise anyone that he kept his quiet, allowed himself to be dragged along and left all the thinking to the so-called 'full-fledged' pilot, but after a while, what little sense of duty and self-respect he'd acquired over the last seven weeks nagged him enough to prompt some resistance: After all, he knew very well that the fate of humanity could depend on their next actions, and this girl, a complete greenhorn at that, did not seem to take this very seriously. All along, she had been talking like EVA battles were some kind of sport for her to excel at.

But since Shinji was as much subject to his personal limitations as all of us, which included being more than a little scared of said "complete greenhorn" (especially considering that his faith in his own capabilities was still rather shaky), his "protests" for the benefit of the actual task at hand turned out fairly unimpressive, if not mostly confused and shorttaken:

"Ehm, uh, where are we going?"

When the Second Child's next move actually resembled stopping to think for a moment, Shinji opened himself up to the hope that he might still receive a sensible explanation of the Second Child's course of action today – but no such luck.

Instead, for unfathomable reasons, she decided to spin around rapidly and drag him in the opposite direction, until they had reached the access point to a stairwell that she'd paid absolutely no heed when they'd ran past it earlier.

Only now did Asuka release his poor, mistreated wrist from her merciless stranglehold.

"Stay here for a bit, yeah?" she commanded, in a tone that made it impossible for the shy boy to reply anything before she could whirl around again and run off with her mysterious bag in hand.

He could only send a half-hearted "...but what are we gonna do here?" after her, which lacked the demanding tone that would have been necessary to make her listen, and thus, Shinji was left standing there with half-outstretched arms.

Resignedly, he let his hands sink and slumped down on the stairs, given that he didn't have any other real choices. He felt vaguely like some little kid whose parents had promised them a surprise, but decided to make them wait in uncertainty beforehand, and Shinji had never handled uncertainty or surprises very well.
What in the world was so hard about letting him know how exactly her current endeavor would keep the angel closing in on them from blasting them all to the bottom of the sea?

The sounds that could be heard from the stairwell were befuddling at best.

What was she doing down there? Had she perhaps forgotten that this ship could be sunk at any moment? Shinji considered calling out to her, but feared that he might make a fool of himself once again by interrupting some useful activity of hers.

One way or another, he would end up insulted and humiliated again...

Nonetheless, the prospect of impending watery death made sure to keep the tension in his nerves rising, and before long, he couldn't stand to just sit tight anymore.

Since it seemed vaguely more useful that pacing around or repeatedly shifting positions, he chose to walk over to the stairwell's handrails and take a look at whatever the Second Child was doing.

Big Mistake.

Because as Shinji's treacherous luck would have it, he found the dress and sinfully sparse underwear he'd previously seen her in hastily scrunched up and thrown over her now open bag, which seemed to have contained a plug suit that was, of course, inescapably bright red – And its owner was just about to stick her arms into the corresponding portions of the suit, which was still wide, loose, and hanging off her dainty little body in a few strategic places.

As if that ill-fated gust of wind hadn't revealed enough, he was now treated to her hair falling past her bare shoulders and a good portion of those hill-shaped mounds of flesh and their incidentally titillating little motions.

The nipples were just barely covered by the plug suit's crimson rubber, but that wasn't fixed in place, and together with the unexpected suddenness of this kind of sight, his inevitable awareness that it could slip aside at any moment made Shinji struggle to keep his... biological functions in check.

With any other lady-person he'd come to know, such as Ayanami or Misato, he would have averted his head in shame just about now, but this time, he just kept staring, frozen in place. At the time, he thought it was mostly because the processes he was trying to stave off were diverting blood from his central thinking organ.

Or perhaps it was a matter of respect, or lack thereof – at the time, he was impressed by Asuka's assertiveness, but not exactly charmed by her as a person. Maybe some part of him has subconsciously decided that a retreat wasn't worth his effort given that her opinion of him could hardly sink any lower than it already way, or maybe, as he would consider in a few dark, dark moments, it might have been some sense of carrying out an act of justified revenge that kept his eyes transfixed on the alluring German girl – whatever it was, it got completely replaced by shame soon enough once she spotted him and immediately began her obligatory cursing: "Stop peeping at me immediately, you disgusting pervert!"

Her order was quite unnecessary as Shinji had already turned to flee and hid behind the upwards reaching flight of stairs.

"Why do all boys have to be braindead peeping toms and butt gropers!" he heard her complain.

With a sigh, Shinji sat back down on the stairs.
Great.

If she didn't hate him before, she definitely did now.

Why did he always end up in such embarrassing situations?

And why was she always yelling at him, anyways?

He just wanted to see what she was up to, she really could have warned him, or really, given him any explanation at all.

That she was putting on a plug suit at least suggested that she hadn't completely forgotten about the angel out there.

The next thing Shinji heard was the characteristic hiss as her suit adapted itself to her thin frame.

What he didn't hear, however, was the quiet sentence she mumbled to herself with an atypically serious expression, or even a hint of real tension:

"...Let's go... Asuka."

This was the moment of truth.

The day she had been working towards for nearly all of her life.

The instant that was meant to justify all of her attitudes and choices, if not her very existence.

In more ways than one, this was the beginning of her battle for the right to remain on this world, and if this Third Child brat was going to get in her way, she was going to crush him so hard that it would squeeze all the juice out of him, without a shred of mercy.

On the outside, the remaining war ships continued their bombardment of the angel, not that it did any good – they kept firing endless salvos of torpedoes and rockets, but the enemy wasn't even slowed down.

The angel didn't even seem to care about them, didn't adjust its course and kept destroying ships according to some seemingly whimsical pattern that none of the humans could make sense of.

If it was following some kind of priority list, it certainly didn't have anything to do with the weaponry of the ships, which made the obvious all that much harder to overlook despite the officers' best efforts.

"Why hasn't it sunk yet?!" the admiral shouted in disbelief.

"I knew it! That thing can only be defeated by an EVA!"

The fact that it was Touji, the relatively normal one among the boys who'd previously looked at the Evangelion-program with some degree of skepticism, and not, say, his battle-crazy, camcorder-swinging buddy who's finally revealed the emperor's figurative new cloak to be nonexistent, got him quite a few disgruntled looks from the admiral and his first officer – especially because his relative neutrality underlined the fact that he was undeniably right.

The officers weren't the only ones who had to face an unpleasant reality – Shinji, for instance, was currently forced to confront a situation where Asuka had dragged him all the way back to her
Evangelion's storage room, and then thrown her spare plug suit at him.

Looking anything other than happy, Shinji glanced at the importunately red article of clothing in his arms.

This was a girl suit.

Sure, he was aware that those things were made out of flexible rubber which adapted to the wearer's body shape and as such, technically unisex.

But he knew that they were still somehow tailored to the intended user's measurements, and the measurements that had been used to make this one were bound to have been rather... feminine perhaps?

It wasn't as if he had anything against the female sex, per se. Some of his best friends were girls, if Misato and Ayanami counted as such. But that didn't mean that he wanted to wear their clothes – and he most certainly didn't want to wear Asuka's.

It was only her spare suit, but there was still a remote chance that it had been in contact with the more... private bits of her anatomy.

Besides, while wearing something like Ayanami's suit might've been just barely feasible, this model has to plastic caps on its front which Shinji, for all his politeness, could only describe as 'boobie protectors'.

The Third Child really didn't want to put on that plugsuit, but Drill Seargeant... er, Captain Shikinami knew no mercy: All she did when he gave her a pleading look was to put her hands on her hips in a superior manner that clarified once and for all just how little she cared about her fellow pilot's concerns. The gesture accentuated her ample behind which was one of the few places on her body that could've been classified as 'opulent'. She had the sort of perky, round, surprisingly mature-looking butt cheeks that could be seen in magazines. Her unpleasant personality aside, she was almost on par with Misato in the A department and probably won out against Ayanami there, but that was of very little help to Shinji as he was dealing with her front side right now and the parts of her that were meant for talking had yet to produce any sort of explanation.

Instead, he was once again met with her index finger, which she copiously swung around to compound her imperious orders. Her chest, somewhat supplemented in size by the "boob protectors", also subtly jiggled while she did this.

"YOU are coming with ME!"

And as soon as she stopped speaking, she turned on her heels and stormed off, leaving the hapless boy standing there all by himself.

Anything but pleased, he realized that he'd have no choice but to make his peace with the boob protectors.

The result looked just as dreadful as he'd expected – Since Shinji had never possessed anything that could have been considered a particularly masculine physique, the suit's design, distribution of padding and boob protectors (after using that word a few times, in started sounding more like a technical term and less like a reason for massive embarrassment, at least in his head) all worked together to create the impression that he'd spontaneously decided to throw his Y-Chromosome in the thrash, but some things couldn't be hidden, especially not in a skin tight suit designed for a rather thin young girl.
It wasn't tight enough to be uncomfortable, but left very little to the imagination – the last thing he needed right now was for Asuka to start making jokes about that.

Keeping his legs in relative proximity to each other and making an attempt to cover the offending bits with his hands, and – once he'd folded his clothes – tried moving into the direction Asuka had disappeared into, with a pathetic waddle that would have made PenPen proud.

By the time he found Asuka at the end of the catwalk leading to Unit Two, the color of his face had begun to rival that of his borrowed suit. She was casually leaning on EVA 02's power socket, standing on its back near the entry hatch and not showing the slightest quantum of remorse for the humiliation she'd brought upon her male co-pilot.

"Uhm, why exactly are we wearing plug suits again?" he asked, hoping that all of this would be over soon. The Second Child didn't wait a second to continue mocking him, closely followed by further testaments of her recklessness: "Are you an idiot?"

Those were the same words she'd 'welcomed' him with, and something told him that he would be hearing them very often in the near future.

"We're going to beat up that thing with my EVA 02!" she declared, confident and pugnacious. She was barely done speaking when EVA 02's entry hatch opened automatically, and its plug slid outside, ready to be boarded.

Shinji couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

Apparently, she wanted to jump inside her EVA just like that, and... fight with it?

Right now?

Just like that?

So far, doing this had always required the participation of all those technicians at NERV headquarters and... lots of technical stuff, and this was the first time he heard of anything like two pilots controlling the same EVA – would that even work?

In any case, it seemed unlikely that this girl had ever tried it before.

Once again, he got the feeling that she was seriously underestimating this whole situation – there was no way the two of them could just spontaneously defeat an angel all by themselves, that went against all his experiences from his previous sorties, particularly his first.

"...wait a second... Shouldn't we ask Misato-san for permission or something?"

Granted, his attempts at being the voice of reason turned out rather puny so far.

Try as he might, he would never be a cool, decisive person – much unlike Asuka, who casually dismissed his shaky objections out of hand. "Don't worry!" she grinned, as if she were already feeling her triumph dissolving on her tongue like some expensive chocolate. "We'll ask her right after we've defeated that thing!"

Even when the main hatch opened and revealed the interior of Unit 02's plug, whose cockpit unit looked somewhat different than what he was used from EVA 01 (larger, more spacious, all around shinier, with extra buttons on the levers and no trace of that bridge-like extension he always had to stick his feet into), the Third Child was still far from convinced. Captain Shikinami, by contrast, already seemed to consider the angel as good as exploded:
"So. Now I'm gonna show you what a trained pilot can do. Don't get in my way!"

In the meantime, the angel had been busy playing "Battleships", while Touji and Misato observed it perplexedly.

It goes without saying that Kensuke was watching it alongside them, of course, filming it as well, but his expression was ore akin to that of a small child on Christmas day.

"Strange..." Misato mumbled, more to herself than anyone else.

"It's almost like it's searching for something."

But Misato and the boys weren't the only ones watching the spectacle with worry – Kaji's spyglass was still peering through the segments of the blinds that he'd pushed aside, looking not at all pleased, in part because he was privy to the exact reason why this particular angel had struck so far from where its brother had struck –

Next to a few bags with his personal belongings, a few more of his things and the hard-top case he'd purloined from Bethany Base was another such case, varnished in deep red.

The bright color seemed at odds with the ship's rusty cabin walls and Kaji couldn't help but observe that it was the exact color of blood – not at all unfitting when he considered just how much of the ruby life essence had been spilled for or by what was contained within.

"Well, being assaulted by an angel on the high seas was not was I expected!" he spoke into the phone he'd pinned between his ear and his shoulder, hiding his concern behind the flawless poker face he earned his bread with.

The man at the other end of the line – Ikari – was completely calm. "That's why Unit Two is on board. I've even provided you with a spare pilot. If worst comes to worst, escape by yourself."

"I understand."

Beneath its canvas cover, the afore-mentioned Eva's entry plug had already been inserted and filled with LCL.

Shinji, who was holding onto Asuka's seat from behind, still didn't feel confident about any of this, and it wasn't solely because of his less than dignified outfit.

The prospect of fighting without Misato and everyone else in the command bunkers... he couldn't even imagine how that was supposed to work, and as for the "glorious Captain Shikinami", well, she had pretty much dragged him along for the sole purpose of showing off her 1337 p1lt sk!lz to him, which didn't make her look all that professional.

At least, her ego had assured that he'd be in the plug with her and thus have a chance to intervene if the battle should become too much for her to handle – after all, the fate of humanity was at stake, and so on.

Also, Shinji wasn't enough of a complete savage to let this inexperienced young girl who probably expected EVA battles to be much the way Touji and Kensuke imagined them walk to her doom if he had such a chance to prevent it... even though he had to admit that he wouldn't have insisted to come if she hadn't dragged him along.
Perhaps he should be ashamed of that – On the other hand, it was also true that he might have been more involved about this if she weren't treating him like a cleaning mop.

This would be the first time he'd sat inside an EVA other than his own – ultimately, it felt fairly similar, but there was more of a difference than he would have expected.

He felt as if the inside of EVA 02 felt a great deal cooler and darker, more in the figurative than the literal sense but with the latter of course influencing his perception of the former. There was simply a dismissive, inclement atmosphere dominating both the metaphorical and physical dimensions of the plug, which made him all the more aware of just how strong this half-conscious, inviting feeling of safety and comfort had been inside of EVA 01.

EVA 02 passively allowed him to connect to it, but unlike unit one, it didn't... accommodate for him, or meet him halfway, and his feeling of the EVA's limbs remained much more numbed, sluggish and imprecise. Presumably, all this synch rate and harmonix stuff must have been significantly lower in here.

As much as Shinji could perceive EVA 02's mental expanse, it was an unpleasant, unwelcoming, lifeless sort of place.

He briefly wondered what it might feel like to Asuka.

She had since closed her eyes in concentration and began to give system input commands in a strange, foreign language Shinji could not understand. He presumed that it must be German – was that where she was supposed to be from, Germany?

In any case, her words were followed by the typical flimmering lights of the activation sequence, only for a wall of repetitive red text to appear in place of the interface. Shinji was unfamiliar with the combination of western letters that kept flashing on the walls in bold red capitals, but the beeps that accompanied them confirmed his guess that it had to be the German equivalent of "ERROR".

"An error message... what happened?" Shinji asked with mild concern.

"Thought noise!" she spat back without anything resembling an explanation. "I told you not to get in my way!"

Apparently, she expected him to have memorized all those terms the technical division occasionally threw around, just because he'd been able to move an EVA well enough to land it flat on its face though some unlikely whim of fate.

He wondered if she was aware of how paradoxical this was, given that she'd spent far more time in the service of project E and had, so far, expended nontrivial amounts of time and energy to assure that he wouldn't forget that for as much as a minute.

Thankfully, her highness seemed to be feeling generous for a change, or maybe she was finally sufficiently focused on the battle to be ever mindful of her intentions to pick him on – One way or another, the heavens opened, a beam of light descended, and granted him the unspeakable miracle of actually receiving some sort of answer as to what he had supposedly screwed up: "You've been thinking in Japanese! If you have to think, do it in German!"

While it might have been very considerate of her (by Asuka standards) to offer him some sort of actual solution instead of simply calling him an idiot, this time she might have had legitimate reason to doubt his abilities. What made her think that some average Japanese boy who had been living in a little mountain village until very recently would be able to converse in all of Europe's
languages? English might have been halfway feasible, but German?

No choice but to fly the white flag.

That is, if he weren't dealing with no one, but two monsters at the time: The one outside that could send them to the bottom of the sea at any given moment, and the one in the entry plug who was unlikely to accept any lazy excuses, or anything she might liberally term as such.

Despite the fact that he hadn't produced a single German sentence in his life, Shinji made a shaky attempt to oblige her, even though he understandably didn't rate his probability of success very high: "Ah, okay..."

Panicked, he searched his 'memory banks' for anything to do with Germany – His first association were cars, but he didn't have the slightest clue what the German word for "car" might be, and then, there! A spark of hope: "B-Ba... Baumkuuuu-hen..."

"Idiot!" she snapped, forcefully enough to make him recoil.

It was probably superfluous to note that he didn't look particularly pleased.

"Alright! Change systems language to japane" she ordered sourly.

While the walls of the entry plug thus began to shine in a varietly of colors all over again, Shinji took the time to wonder what else he might have to endure now that this person was to be deployed as an EVA pilot on a regular basis, but then tried to quiet these thoughts to mentally prepare for the battle ahead, given that he bore a certain responsibility as the more battle-experienced pilot.

In the meantime, the interface had appeared around them, with the 'scaffolding' between the screen panels bearing a different color scheme than those of Unit One.

In an instant, both realized what this meant: They were ready to go.

Captain Shikinami didn't hesitate for a second: "Evangelion Unit Two, Launch!"

Meanwhile, the Children's activities had not remained unnoticed – when the First Officer of the 'Over the Rainbow' reported that EVA 02 had been activated, all eyes immediately turned to the large white covering on the deck of the large flagship 'Othello', under which something seemed to be stirring – both the boys and the First Officer who had just delivered the message immediately turned their heads, during which the latter pulled out some binoculars whereas Kensuke swung around with his camera still in hand, presumably making good use of its zooming capabilities.

Misato seemed to excited about the news that she inelegantly pressed her face to the window pane and immediately sprouted a few words of praise – the Admiral, alas, only reacted with a rather apalled 'What?!' and grabbed the local speaker microphone as soon as he regained his bearings, with all intentions to put an end to what he saw as an useless, childish waste of time: "Abort activation sequence immediately! I said abort!"

He had barely finished speaking when Misato suceeded at squeezing herself past him and wresting the microphone from his hands. "Ignore that!" she shouted right into it without much of a care about the elderly Admiral squirming beside her. "Permission to launch!"

"WHAT?!"

Using his very loud voice and the occasional spray of spit, the Admiral gave Misato a 'friendly'
reminder of his continued presence. Making use of the timespan in which she'd reacted to the booming volume in her ears with an involuntary shutting of her eyes, the old officer pushed the Nerv employee out of his field of vision and laid claim to the microphone: "Both the EVA and the pilot are under our command! You can't just do as you like out here!"

"Who cares about the formalities at a time like this?!" protested Misato, who had since slipped out of the naval commander's grasp and continued the embittered war over the microphone.

Although both of them seemed very occupied with their struggle, the First Officer, who unlike the other supposed 'adults', had not forgotten that a battle for the fate of humanity was happening under their noses, decided to inform them that the Evangelion about whose deployment or non-deployment they were currently squabbling was currently fitted with merely B-type equipment – it was ready for activation, but not for much more – and that information was enough to make them overlook their differences for a brief moment and followed the First Officer's example in turning their heads in the same direction that his binoculars had been facing for a while now: Directly toward the transport ship carrying the Evangelion.

Its pilot had since realized their precarious equipment status themselves, and Shinji, who, as the more experienced passenger, felt obliged to act as a voice of reason in the presence of a naïve young girl who was evidently overestimating herself, assumed the thankless task of bringing it to her attention:

"...if we fall into the sea, we're done for..."

Ooops. That did not really sound very much like an authoritative veteran... rather more like a henpecked scaredy-cat. Shinji was beginning to feel like he was the newbie here – which wasn't completely without merit, given that Captain Shikinami had been trained for years, unlike himself, who couldn't even muster a tone of voice firm enough to make the daredevil Second Child spare him a glance.

Her determined, far more combat-ready expressions stayed the same and betrayed no sign that his warning had deterred her in any way.

"Well, if we don't fall, we'll be fine." was her laconic, almost outright annoyed answer.

While Asuka did not pay her co-pilot any heed, at least mission control took some note of him over the intercom, including Misato, whose general excitement indicated that she considered this very fortunate: "Shinji-kun! Are you in there as well?"

Both the tone of her voice and her confidently relieved smile indicated a significant decrease in whatever worries she had not outwardly shown, but very much felt regarding the unexpected surprise battle – she had absolute faith in that 14-year old boy.

The most recent events had left her to choice but to conclude that she once reluctant and not all that stable boy had long since proven his worth.

And with Asuka there to back him up, their odds weren't looking all that bad – She had awaited her first proper combat for years and was far too ambitious to allow for a defeat – though it was probably a good thing to have Shinji mitigating her daring.

Having long since forgotten all about the microphone that both his and Misato's hands still happened to be grasping, the Admiral did not believe his eyes: His poor opinion of Project E went without saying, but unlike Misato, he had only encountered the pilots as a loud, spoiled brat and a rather inconsequential-seeming boy none of which he found particularly trustworthy: "But they're
just two kids!”, he lamented.

But Misato had many reasons to think otherwise: "They can do it."

The seriousness of her voice left no room to doubt that she had no doubts, either.

Thus, she finally took complete control of the microphone and shouted the final launch order at the top of her lungs: "ASUKA, GO!"

And that was indeed a wise suggestion, for during the time she and the admiral had spent arguing about the chain of command, the lethal game of 'battleship' that had been going on on the crimson waves outside had ground to a halt, for the simple reason that its perpetrator could no longer sense its target's presence, try as he might.

Just as Gaghiel thought to have picked up the definite presence of his origin, his surroundings were inundated by a second, far stronger source of energy that confounded his senses.

Was that his father? The goal of his journey?

No, it was different. It was similar, but it was different.

Something empty. An empty, warped image of his father, enthroned on one of those Lillim-made structures whose purpose eluded him – Was it too the work of the Lillim? Frightening. It was almost as if they had the ability to influence the matter around them however they pleased. Despite their tiny, laughable forms, they were formidable enemies: They could move freely through the red flood that had been created in their father's incomplete attempt to remake this world into something fit for the likes of the messengers, a paradise from which the Lillim should have been barred – But that they would be capable of creating such a perversion... but ach! It wasn't even the Perversion's nature that bothered Gaghiel the most, it was its strong presence, which masked the tiny signature it had been seeking in the first place.

The angel did not need long to decide on a pragmatic solution to its distress: The Perversion had to go!

Disquieting the red waters with the stirring of its mighty fins, the angel of the fish went straight for EVA 02, marking its path with a wild spray of water, advancing faster than any ship mankind had yet managed to build.

"I-It's coming!" Shinji warned, mildly startled from the battle's swift beginnings yet clearly in the process of mentally shifting into 'combat mode'.

Against all logic, the Second Child was wholly unperturbed.

"And go!"

Without wasting another second, EVA 02 departed from the metal it had been resting on, escaping with a powful yet gracile leap before the ship beneath it was torn to pieces, with the long, white covering it had been hidden under trailing behind it like a giant overcoat.

Far from quartered, the Evangelion elegantly landed on another ship, greatly straining its upper components, without showing the slightest sign that its pilot had spent any extraordinary effort in keeping its balance – She hadn't even needed to use its hands, which were still holding the tarpaulin under which it had been shipped, giving it the appearance of a dignified roman toga.

Her movements had been graceful, almost dainty, as well as very smooth and natural-looking,
almost as if she could command the EVA better than her own body (which was saying something)—Shinji doubted that he could produce such fast, fluid movements with Unit One, and even if he could, his lousy reaction time would have thwarted any attempts at such a bold escape maneuver.

"Where'd it go?!" the redhead asked.

In any other situation, he might have complained about having to serve as a human satnav the after she'd spent so much time bragging about how awesome she was and how he mustn't get in her way, but there was a time and a place and this was not it. This was a battle for the survival of humanity; At least one of them had to take this seriously: "Over there!" he answered swiftly, glancing over at the battery gauge which had drawn his attention through a familiar noise that Asuka did not seem very interested in. "Just 58 seconds!" he warned, briefly stumbling over the thought that it was probably 56 by the time he'd finished speaking—Asuka's acrobatics might look very impressive, but they lost all admiration Shinji might have initially conceded to them as he realized that they probably required the EVA to switch to full power—This was very not good.

But once Asuka had spotted her target, she seemed to have relegated him back into the category of unnecessary, annoying things barely worthy of her attention, and chided him with a caustic "I know!" as if he'd tried to explain to her that things drop to the ground when you let go of them.

Now that she had degraded him to being pure decoration, Captain Shikinami was free to pursue her true passions: Fighting and ordering people around.

"Misato, ready the power cable on the flight deck!" she commanded, not taking her eyes off the angel which was speeding toward her current position.

"Will do!" came the answer from the command bridge, despite the admiral's ineffectual wailing in the background.

Asuka fixed her target with an icy glare, like a consummate hitman who'd just spotted his target. "So," she began, curt and condescending. "Do you like hopscotch?"

Shinji barely had the time to produce a somewhat dumbstruck "What?" before she once again took the initiative without even thinking of gracing him with an explanation.

In a swift, sudden movement, the EVA crouched down, only to shoot into the air with a force that Shinji couldn't have produced is he were struggling to save his own life, soaring through the air like an arrow to land rather precisely on the one bit of free flight deck located on the next ship, which was subjected to some consequential damaged from both her landing and the consecutive jump, during which she finally let go of the tarpaulin altogether like a butterfly discarding its chrysalis.

She did not stop moving for even an instant: Barely wasting a thought on the ships' crewmen who often only barely escaped the brunt of the impact, she demolished one flight deck after the other, often jumping out of the same fluid movement with which she had landed. Despite the colossal mass she was moving around, she kept her balance as effortlessly as if the EVA were as light as a feather.

She was not merely pulling off a batshit-insane feat in a masterful manner, no, she appeared to be having the time of her life doing it, much unlike Shinji, who clung to the back of the crazy girl's seat while she emphatically announced her success: "EEVA 02 INCOMIIIIIING!"

The red colossus landed on the Over-the-Rainbow's flight deck with hardly a problem and easily caught its balance despite the humongous waves towering around the aircraft carrier.
Even so, some of the aircraft unavoidably ended up tumbling into the sea, which, oddly enough, seemed to bother Kensuke more than the angel currently speeding toward the ship he was standing on.

Shinji however was perfectly aware of the implications concerning his friends' current locations which ensured that he was swift to play his part in avoiding the worst: "It's coming from Nine o'clock!"

Asuka, to her credit, had busied herself the power cable in the meantime: "Switching to external power now!" She plugged the Umbilical Cable into its designated slot, and immediately, the battery gauge stopped its dreadful beeping.

"Successfully switched to external power!"

Once the power supply problem was taken care of, EVA 02 and both its pilots turned their attention to the nearing angel – In Shinji's case with a stern, determined expression, whereas Asuka bore a haughty, bloodthirsty grin which swiftly and efficiently expressed her great anticipation to shoot some holes in the enemy – speaking of shooting: "We don't have any weapons!"

But despite Shinji's attempts to remind her of the facts at hand, it seemed like the german pilot had a brief, prideful answer for everything: "Is the prog knife not a weapon?"

Self-assuredly, she motioned for the knife to be released from its storage compartment in the EVA's shoulder and readied the blade – and not a moment to soon, for the angel had risen from the sea as if to answer her challenge, presenting them with its massive, yellowish body and the mask-like face typical for its kind.

The messenger aimed its charge straight at them, like a predator who had chosen its next victim.

"...it's huge..." Shinji commented, worriedly.

As expected of the 'Ace of the European Forces', 'worry' did not seem to be part of the Second Child's vocabulary, instead, the enemy's dimensions seemed to delight her: "This is just like I imagined!"

"What are they going to do now?" the admiral asked, still feeling like he'd stumbled into a bad action movie. But Misato explained confidently: "According to our experiences, the most efficient way to neutralize an angel is melee combat."

Ready for the afore-mentioned melee, EVA 02 held out its prog-knife before it, but the angel was ready, too, and jumped out of the water like a kind of flying fish, shooting all of its massive, slippery body through the surface with a powerful movement of its fins, to then continue to shoot toward the Evangelion though the air, making it look like a tiny insignificant human that had been foolish enough to pick a fight with a ginormous whale.

The colossal, fish-like being arrived with a thundering sound, with its arrival spelling doom for a couple more military planes, surely much to the chagrin of their owners (and to Kensuke's lament.)

But the angel had overestimated itself: Outside of its element, its massive form wasn't able to move nearly as nimbly as before.

Sluggish and limited by its own weight, the being had been more adapted to the red waters and barely managed to flop about, with any and all of its attempt to get back into the sea being frustrated by EVA 02's tight grip, which held the beast's head firmly in its unrelenting chokehold.
"Well done, Asuka, you stopped it!" Misato praised, her enthusiasm not quite infecting the admiral given that the Prog Knife, which Asuka had let go of to grasp the angel's slippery hide with both hands, had since bifurcated another aircraft.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" he exclaimed in displeasure. "You wrecked the entire flight deck!"

That complaint might not have been wholly unfounded, but from a pragmatic standpoint, the true problem was that the flight deck hadn't been demolished enough. If a particular plane-ferrying elevator at the corner of the ship had only been stuck or jammed, it would have saved everyone involved many grievances. As it was, it gave way once EVA 02's foot slipped onto it as it was wrestling the angel, causing the EVA to lose balance and creating an opening for the creature to launch itself back into the dead ocean, which it immediately used and plunged downwards followed by both its long tail and the red evangelion.

Interestingly enough, the screams blaring through the intercom were Asuka's, not Shinji's.

The tremors shattered the command bridge's windows, leaving them open for Touji and Kensuke to lean past their frames in worry for their friend (the latter still holding his camera), and stare unbelieving at the sea that had swallowed the two Children and seemed in the process of returning to a calmer state without a care in the world.

"They fell into the ocean!" the admiral curtly summarized the rather unfavorable situation – even Misato lost her cool for a moment, but quickly regained her bearings in a matter of split-seconds and immediately began shouting orders into the microphone: "Asuka, retreat immediately! An underwater battle with B equipment is completely impossible!"

But Asuka saw things differently – Even though the worst case scenario she had been trying to prevent from the very beginning had just come to pass, the Second Child had not lost her resolve, forcing the Evangelion's arms to hold on to the one solid thing there was to hold on to down there: The body of the angel.

How did that old saying go? If you've got a tiger by the tail, never let go – and as a Defender of the Earth, the redhead thought herself a high enough authority to decree that the same was true for fish jaws.

Nothing in this world could make her retreat and let go of her prey – a true elite pilot like herself didn't need no special equipment to beat some overgrown manatee, and she'd make sure that the cheap excuse for an EVA pilot she had sitting behind her knew it, too!

According to her own ideals and standards, she did not permit her answer to betray anything other than a boundless, superior bravado, brazen enough to worry even Misato and making her doubt whether she had sufficiently prepared this young girl for the serious trials awaiting her, or whether she had not cultivated a dangerous hubris in her attempts to motivate her: "We won't know that until we try it!"

The continuous lowering of the cable that served as the only lifeline between the EVA and the surface was certainly not very encouraging, moving sometimes left, sometimes right as the unsuccessful angel-rodeo continued and less and less of it remained, destroying yet more of Kensuke's beloved airplanes as it moved across the flight deck.

Apparently, the angels seemed delight the wanton destruction of buildings even if they showed up on the high seas – the unfortunate structures whose silhouettes were only barely discernible in the turbid red waters had presumably belonged to a city which had been eradicated in Second Impact and subsequently joined the likes of Atlantis and Vineta on the bottom of the sea.
That the Children's desperate attempts to hang onto the angel got them shaken rather badly probably needed no further explanations – and just as Shinji had feared, the battle had revealed Asuka as the inexperienced rookie she truly was the moment it had turned dead serious – She just sat there with her eyes shut tightly in exertion, needing all of her strenght and attention just to keep her hands on her control levers and those of EVA 02 clinging to the angel's hide – Here was a young girl no older than himself, and she appeared to be reaching her limit, and so, it fell to Shinji to think of further plans and actions – only that he was not exactly a great planner. He'd reached forward to grip the controls and support the Second Child at her harrowing task, but beyond that, he couldn't really think of anything to do – He could barely constrain his own panic behind his grit teeth and and stoic, serious facade, so that it was more to himself than Asuka that he mumbled to about the need to absolutely do something.

But this cruel, mean-spirited world did not leave him any real chance to think of such a plan – any half-formulated plans Shinji might have managed to scrape up dissolved back into diffuse mist when Misato's voice interrupted them over the intercom: "The cable is running out! Brace for recoil!"

She had not shut her mouth when said recoil made itself felt, shaking the ship and perpetuating itself through the depths for miles along the cable, until it ripped EVA 02 off the angel's body despite Asuka's best efforts.

"Damnit!" she cursed.

Back in the command bridge, the large setback was summarized with a curt sentence that barely did all of its implications justice: "The EVA has lost its target!"

Kensuke, as usual, had different worries: "Why does the blasted memory card have to be full now of all times?" But even the camera, whose offending component he was currently holding with the corners of hiw mouth while he went about replacing it, could not hold his attention when he heard the sound of engines. "Holy Canoli! It's a genuine Yak Ninety-Eight!"

Indeed, one of the very same ramps that had become EVA 02's undoing had just propelled a shiny blue plane to its flight deck, and right on cue, one of its occupants announced himself over the intercom: "Hi, Katsuragi!"

Misato herself did not know why she reacted with a bright smile and a matching exclamation of his name that would have rivaled that of Lois Lane in the exact moment tht some supervillain's actions were interrupted by the whole 'Is it a bird, is it a plane-?' shtick, but she was forced back to her senses when he sprouted some nonchalant comment about how he had something left to deliver and a few words of parting and ordered the plane's pilot to take off, the latter crossing the line completely and evaporating any of the questionable joy she might have connected with the sight of him.

By the time Kensuke had succeeded in exchanging the memory disc, there was nothing to film but Touji's and Misato's expressions of flabbergasted indignation and their remarkable similarity to rain-soaked poodles.

The former finally summarized the ludicrous event that had just taken place before his eyes:

"He just... ran away..."

In the meantime, the angel had not been able to locate its true target – No matter where it swam, it could no longer sense the faintest hint of its presence, even without the Evangelion closeby –
which left the aimlessly drifting cyborg as its only remaining target and thus, the aim of its latest charge.

"It's coming back!" Shinji warned, but before he could do or suggest anything, the control levers had been reclaimed by a pissed-off and frustrated Second Child. "This time, I'll finish that thing!" she announced in defiance of her current helpless situation without this ever sounding fully convincing to Shinji after all he had already witnessed.

Asuka pulled on the levers – but nothing happened.

EVA 02 remained a static piece of driftwood that refused to move much – it is said that pride comes before a fall, and Captain Shikinami did fall, into an undignified panic, that is.

"W-WHAT? Why isn't it working?"

"Must be because of the B equipment..." Shinji mused in resignation.

"What are we going to do?!"

Shinji could hardly believe that she would seriously ask him this about all her bragging about how she was supposedly trained and all that, but he was far too bummed out about the imminent prospect of becoming fish fodder to bother with any serious umbrage.

"How would I know?"

"Beats me! You're supposed to be the famous Third Child, aren't you?"

"It's coming!" Shinji remarked, at this point far past caring about her childish provocations.

Asuka barely managed to raise the EVAs head before the angel opened its long, gaping maw to devour them.

"T-Teeth!" Asuka remarked, recoiling from the screen in visible fear, leaving bits of perspiration to dissolve into the plug.

Shinji, by contrast, remained somewhat calm and collected but not exactly hopeful.

"It really is an angel..." he remarked upon spotting the angel's glowing red core somewhere further down its throat.

As the angel pushed its countless, curved teeth past the EVA's armor plates into its tender flesh, a further tremor shook the screaming girl and her silent companion who'd grit his teeth and stoically endured the ordeal.

Shinji could easily imagine that it was not merely fear that was bringing forth her screams – the high synch ratio that allowed for her earlier acrobatics must come at a price – As for himself, the sensation of being pierced by the angel's teeth was more strange than anything else. Sure, the pain was there, except not really – the corresponding parts of his stomach felt more like a limb would after having it 'fall asleep' and then having both circulation and feeling return to it, that precise sensation of discomfort when you tried moving it again – it was very far from the real, stinging pain he would have experienced in EVA 01, which seemed only natural when one considered that this was mostly Asuka's EVA that he'd never sat in before – Even with Unit One, he'd needed some time to properly get the hang of it.

But even EVA 02's designated pilot was not of any use – despite her military rank and braggart
attitude, Asuka had evidently never seen real combat, suffered the result of violence on her own body or been forced to power through an injury, leaving Shinji with the obligation to take matters into his own hands.

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On the bridge of the over the rainbow, a look at the instruments had since allowed its occupants to guess at the Children's predicament: "The EVA has entered the target!"

"Entered?" Touji repeated incredulously. "Does that mean it got swallowed? Like a worm on a fishing line?"

"Like a fishing line?... EXACTLY, like fishing line! Suzuhara-kun, you're a genius!" Misato called out with the same familiar glint in her eyes that tended to accompany the hatching of another of her wacky, reckless plans.

Almost immediately, she seemed to shift back into 'serious mode' and turned toward the officers with a serious, determined expression.

"Admiral?"

"Yes?"

"I am dependent on your cooperation."

Unaware that a remedy to their unfortunate situation was already in the works several hundred meters above him, Shinji was directing all effort he could muster to stave off their doom.

The entry plug was being jerked around again and again, and each time challenged his endurance anew – Most of the time, he managed to keep himself in a stable position by clinging to the control yokes with all of his strength and leaning against them with his body weight, but still, he could not help the impression that the EVA could break apart all around him at any given moment.

Right now, it was still lodged in the jaws of the angel, its legs hanging out of its jaws like something it forgot to clean away from its teeth, limp save for the occasional weak twitch.

When he wasn't being shaken too badly, his efforts were diverted to the attempt to force the sea monster's enormous jaws apart, but no matter how much Shinji strained his arms at the controls, they did not move as much as a millimeter, like he might as well be pushing against a solid brick wall.

The only consequence his great exertions left behind was the thin layer of sweat that had begun to spring up between his skin and the rubber of his plugsuit.

Shinji knew all too well that this EVA must have been home to an unending wellspring titanic, violent strength, but wherever that power was, he wasn't reaching it. No matter how much wide tried to open himself, it only worked up to a certain limit that even concentration and willpower could only push so far – and the cool, turbid dephts of EVA 02 were not exactly sending anything
resembling a directed reply – His synch rate was probably far too low to match the angel's herculean strength, and simply wasn't making any progress.

But Shinji could not afford to stop trying – He wasn't fighting because he thought he could win, but because he had to win.

The EVAs designated pilot might have been capable of getting to to move, but she could not be counted on, and with tons of water above their heads, there was no help coming.

"We're in a big pinch..." he concluded, parting his teeth for a moment – The Second Child, who had been emphatic ignoring him so far seemed to take somethin about that sentence as a personal insult and barked for him to show up – but once she'd acknowledged his existence beyond that of background noise, she could no longer overlook that Shinji had 'dared' to grab her controls, which necessitated that he lean over her thighs and at times even graze her breasts, a factoid that left her rather genuinely bothered, complete with a shimmer of pink showing up on her face – Not that Shinji had been able to concentrate on anything other than saving both their lives, but since when did the 'glorious Captain Shikinami' ever stop to consider such insignificant details?

She made up her mind about the situation right away: "Get off me right now, you pervert!"

Her ensuing attempt to brusquely shove him aside did not make his task any easier. Tightly shutting one eye to avert it's destruction by Asuka's fingers, he protested: "But we have to free ourselves!"

He did not expect that reasoning would have much of an effect on the stubborn braggart, and he might well have been right, but at that exact moment, the wrestling match inside the entry plug was interrupted by something completely different: The sound of Misato's voice which filled the entry plug over the intercom and, to Shinji's ears, sounded like the first sunbeam breaking through a storm: "Asuka, can you hear me? Don't let go of the target at any cost!"

The plan was to conclude the operation in the following manner: Two evacuated battleships were to be sunk along the umbilical cable, which would be reeled in like a fishing line to keep the angel from evading them. Once sunk, all their remaining munition including the self-destruction charges were to be emptied into the angel's mouth, thus blowing it apart. EVA 02's role in this consisted of ensuring that the ships would reach their destination – In one sense, by neutralizing the angel's AT-field, but in another – and this was the tricky part – by physically forcing its mouth open with its own two hands.

"That's insane!" the Admiral retorted once the plan had been fully explained to him. But Misato had already made her decision: "It might be insane, but it's not impossible."

"I... understand. But what about the Evangelion?"

"Don't you worry, those two will be fine."

Misato had always been an optimist, though there was a legitimate concern that she might not have taken such a rosy view of the situation if she had been able to monitor the debacle currently unfolding within the entry plug.

Once her pushing strategy had proven ineffective, Asuka had unleashed the time-tested tactics of 'punching' and 'hair-pulling' on the Third Child, both skills she had presumably mastered during her days as a mean kindergarten bully.
"No one operates EVA 02 without my permission!"

Since no one else seemed to remember that they were currently engaged in a battle for the future of mankind, Shinji tried his best to endure the assault and responded with an affirmation and assurance that he'd try his best when Misato inquired whether they'd understood the plan – or, as he privately added, he'd do the best he could manage with Asuka's deducting from his ability to concentrate.

He'd just have to deal with it – after all, Misato was counting on him.

There was, however, not much time for him to pull that off; Right after Misato's warning, a further, much stronger shaking had went through the plug – they'd begun to reel in the cable, from which one could deduce that the two battleships were already speeding toward the angel at this precise moment, when it's jaws were still tightly shut.

Shinji gave it everything he had, but his efforts seemed in vain – With his best efforts, he did manage to somewhat pry apart its jaws so that a section of its long, sharp teeth were clearly exposed instead of being covered beneath the flesh of its mouth, but that could barely be called a success: Though the ships were speedily approaching, the rows of teeth were not even fully separated from each other and the jawbones themselves weren't budging a millimeter, and just to make things worse, Asuka was still vigorously complained, even if she had mostly ceased her physical assaults for lack of effectiveness: "Get off I said! Get away from my thighs immediately!"

"Don't we have other things to worry about?" Shinji retorted, his voice peppered with real, clearly discernable anger "If this thing doesn't open its mouth any time soon, we're done for!"

Bundling all the physical strength he had left and gathering all the willpower he could muster from every last nook and cranny of his being, Shinji made one last attempt to force the beast's jaws apart, laboring under the bright radiance of the core in its throat, but the muscles that must have been necessary for the task of opening or closing such a titanic maw would have hard to overcome even if he'd had his own EVA at his disposal, not to speak of this foreign one.

The hellish strains he was putting himself under were barely reaching the Evangelion's hands, and what little was getting through was far from enough to elicit a sufficient effect.

At last, the Third Child was forced to admit that he was getting nowhere.

"It's no use!" he called out, turning to Asuka in a bid for help.

But she was even further from having a solution to this problem: "We're out of time!"

Of course, he should have thought better than to expect something other than this; But he was beginning to realize that there was something entirely different he should have thought of: This girl before him was this stubborn Evangelion's designated pilot.

She'd made quite sure that he didn't forget her bragging about how she'd been training with this thing since forever, far longer even than he'd working with Unit One: If anyone could bid this thing to move under these circumstances, it had to be her. As little as he could stand that stuck-up shrew, in order for them both to survive this and save humanity, he needed Asuka – Right now, he had the battle experience and the nerve to pull this off, but she had a higher synch rate with this Evangelion, and of course all that training she'd been speaking off – If there was any chance that the angel's mouth could be forced open in time, it would require them both to fight it together and put aside their mutual antipathy toward each other's opposite personalities for the good of humanity, in order to command the EVA in perfect unison.
In actuality, he had witnessed it many town now, how an unbearable load or insurmountable odds could somehow still be overcome if people came together to unify their strength.

It wasn't that Shinji thought of himself as that great an additional asset, but if that Captain Shikinami was even occasionally half as awesome as she claimed to be, they should be able to pull it off between the two of them. Sure, she was liable to let that supposed skill get to her head, but that's what the 'legendary Third Child' would be here for.

If even people as different as them could balance and complement each other to make the impossible happen... yes, then, there might actually be some genuine hope for this world.

For once, Shinji did not hesitate any longer.

Determined, he swiftly turned to the control and tried to remember one particular functionality that he'd heard of sometime during his many training sessions – Meek and fearful as he'd been, he'd tried his best to obediently memorize everything that had been asked of him, even though he had not thought that he'd ever truly need it, but it was still incredible luck that he manged to retrieve a seemingly insignificant detail that he'd attempted to squeeze into his head in a very stressful and turbulent time – but how had Kaji put it?

Luck was part of his destiny.

Another yet more fortunate fact was that the mechanism was exactly the same in EVA 02, even though the design of the control yokes had been fitted with several additional buttons – He pulled the complete device out of its usual place and folded its upper portion apart, so that the rail now offered enough space for two pairs of hands – and against his expectations, he directly felt another set of warm hands on his own, without having to apply any further persuasion first.

Her hands rested on his as indiscriminately as on the metal below, and since their plugsuits both had the same, bright red color, the contours of their fingers seemed to blur, almost as if the two children had indeed joined as one, interwoven in their forms and unified by their joint will to part the angel's jaws.

"Alright, but don't think anything weird!" she still warned once more.

"Like what for example?" he retorted, not breaking his serious look ahead.

"Just concentrate!"

"Like you need to tell me!"

Hand in hand, they both pulled on the levers, which still offered them a lot of resistance, but finally showed signs of actually budging.

Not just Shinji, but Asuka as well showed her exertion plain on their faces, but nonetheless, at very least Shinji felt much lighter than before, like he had been crawling and had only just started to walk.

It was still very far from what he could have archived with Unit One, but at long last, he finally got the feeling that there was a continuous flow of information between himself and the Evangelion... and not just his own.

He guessed that the stream of his thoughts was now wide enough to become aware of Asuka's, a wide, boundless torrent that seemed to fill the expanse, much stronger and regular than anything he'd ever managed – not even with Unit 01.
He could only surmise that her claims about all of her training hadn't been just for show – he could not even get a feel on the magnitude by which her synch rate must have outclassed his own.

If the frenzied torrent of her thoughts and feelings had a color, even it would have been that same, saturated rose-red, but at the same time, her essence was nothing like he imagined it – Rather like EVA 02 itself, it did not really have any sort of pleasant warmth to it, but it wasn't repulsive, either; There was mostly a sweet, fruity and vital quality to it, like fresh strawberries, mixed with tiny, minuscule sparks of something that wasn't all that different from his own being...

Both streams seemed to come together in a double helix, as the contents of their minds came closer and closer to each other, their unified will kept pushing into the same direction and even their hearts seemed to beat in unison with both each other, and the thoughts that filled the Evangelion's inner mental expanse as a chorus:

"OPEN, OPEN, OPEN, OPEN!"

What happened next could have been described in a multitude of ways. One could have said that the streams of thoughts merged as one, technically speaking, a resonance of their ego boundaries had taken place, with the effect, that instead of forming an interference pattern, their synch ratios had been added onto each other, like they had come from a single person if you were feeling poetical, you could even have said that their souls had touched.

One way or another, the event had one unambiguous consequence: The angel's fate had been sealed.

Godlike and effortlessly, the Evangelion raised its head like an executioner's scythe, and its head plating folded open to reveal the eyes beneath, shining brightly like the stars of the southern cross, while the red titan's arms parted the angel's jaws with ease, just seconds, before the warships sped past the evangelion to its light and its left, shattering the angel's once awe-inspiring teeth like cheap little toothpicks.

What followed, was Misato's order to fire, followed by a flood of rockets and explosions, which distended the angel's body to a multiple of its size, until it could hold no more and burst like an air balloon, followed by a tremendous explosion that erased every last trace of the angel.

One the surface, the spectacle manifested as a column of water that explosively blew into dizzying heights, but was by far dwarfed by the cross-shaped light beam emerging from its middle, which penetrated far into the atmosphere and made it look tiny, no matter how insignificant and insect-line it made the humans and their ships look.

The water eventually came crashing back down and whipped the human creations with waves, while parts of it rained down on them as red rain, the sea water indistinguishable from the remains of the angel.

The falling drops refracted the midday sun, causing it to crown the victory with the usual double rainbow.

And somewhere in this entanglement of light and water, EVA 02 had been shot from the dephts, which actually managed to pull off an elegant landing onto a flight deck – only to slump down seconds later because the explosion had torn up the power cable in its entirety.

The next thing Shinji recalled was an unpleasant feeling pulling at his body, not quite pain, but more like its afterimage, like the sickness left behind by a burn or even an irradiation, a sort of damage that could still have a disintegrating effect long after you were separated from its source.
Those were an uncomfortable couple of seconds, but soon, the feeling dissipated without a trace by the time he'd managed to lift his head and open his eyes – what had happened?

Oh right. He'd defeated the angel... and had come into contact with the contents of Asuka's head. No wonder he'd been feeling a bit queasy.

But the worst might well be yet to come, as Asuka herself was still lying in the plug, every bit as unconscious as he'd been moments ago, but in a precarious position that was bound to earn him another Shikinami-brand roundhouse kick the moment she woke up – After his own first battle, he'd been out for a day, but he had been unaccustomed to linking with Evangelions and what had just transpired did not compare to a full-blown Berserk incident in terms of intensity. A day? No, she'd probably wake in a minute, at most.

And then, things might get painful for him – Because they had ended up on what used to be 'roof' of the plug when the EVA was still in an upright position, and she was lying on top on him, uncomfortably pressing the plastic of the 'boob protectors' he wasn't exactly filling out onto his chest – Not that she was particularly heavy, she really did have the measurements of a model, and even if he'd probably never get used to her abrasive personality, as long as she was asleep, she simply looked like a regular, cute girl that almost had something dainty and endearing about her, with that very light European skin tone of hers – though she wasn't exactly pale or waxy, either; Her skin was rosy, well-cared for and brimming with vitality, and even her hair still bore the faint scent of strawberries after being submerged in the LCL and its bloody stench, doubtlessly the result of whatever expensive shampoo she used and and all the business secrets of the German chemistry industry.

(Shinji had to admit that there was something pleasing about the way her long hair whirled around her, and it's bright, eye-catching color he could hardly believe was real. )

Actually, this situation didn't seem that bad... an opinion which he immediately cancelled once Captain Shikinami began to stir and look at him with her demanding, ice-blue eyes, reminding him again of the entire 'terrible personality' part.

"Uh... is... is everything alright, Shikinami-san?" he asked nervously.

Of course, he got slapped, onto that same cheek that had barely recovered from the last assault.

The Second Child immediately began calling him an idiot and a pervert, to ask him just how stupid he was and if he could possibly have been less useful during the battle.

Then, she got off him, located the entry plug's escape hatch and climbed outside, where Shinji already heard what he believed to be Misato's voice.

Yeah.

Miss Shikinami was definitely alright.

Shinji exhaled a sigh of relief before he got up to leave, in part because Misato was calling for him outside.

"Hey, Shinji-kun! Come out already! You can get all the rest you want once you're outside!"

"I'm not surprised that that Daddy's boy is such a slowpoke. The real question should be how someone like him ever got to be EVA pilot! I know that he's only assigned to the test model, but still! This 'Legendary Third Child' has been such a disappointment!"
"I think you're putting him in a box a bit too quick there. Just wait until you properly get to know him, you might change your mind!"

"Are you joking?"

A brief while later, our protagonists had reached the port of Neo Yokosuka, where they were received by Ritsuko and a security detachment, among others – at the first opportunity, Misato had sunk down on the seat of a vehicle intended to bring her straight to headquarters, incidentally right next to her friend and co-worker.

Though no one could have blamed her for the exhaustion brought on by the more than eventful voyage, especially when one looked at the few remaining but still rather demolished ships that bore witness to its trials.

"You've really done it again..." the Leader of Project E commented in her usual cynical manner.

But Misato was far too exhausted to come up with a snappy comeback.

"It was my fault, I should have prepared for an underwater battle..."

"That's rare! You're admitting a mistake?" Ritsuko questioned teasingly.

"Not necessarily. After all, the situation allowed us to connect much precious research data, for example, about what happens if you put two pilots into the same Evangelion..."

"Perhaps..." the blonde confirmed as she thumbed through the stack of papers given to her by her co-worker, until something inside them suddenly made her stop in her tracks. "Misato?"

"Yeah...?"

"This data really IS precious. Those two reached the highest synch rate ever recorded!"

"But only for seven Seconds. Must've been the adrenaline."

While the two women proceeded to discuss the recorded measurements, the routine examination of the pilots had been concluded elsewhere – Shinji didn't have a scratch apart from the temporary soreness in his arms, though Asuka had incurred mild skin irritation in the places corresponding to where the Angel had bitten into EVA 02's body, though she was given a supposedly modern salve that was supposed to cure it by tomorrow or at most the day after, in short, they were let go without much ado, after which they were made to exit the makeshift sickbay tent through a small escalator, at whose lower end they were already being awaited by Touji and Kensuke, whereby the later was using the opportunity to film EVA 02 being transported – it seemed that he, too, would conclude the day with a lot of 'precious research data'.

The first to descend was Asuka, who looked around her as if she were searching for something and was wholly ignored by Kensuke, who was otherwise busy and not really the belligerent type anyways, whereas Touji merely graced her with a disdainful glare.

Their reaction to Shinji, however, could not have been more different, as Touji pointed at him with wide eyes and exclaimed, 'P-PAIR LOOK!', causing Kensuke to turn around and capture the moment for eternity with his omnipresent electronic companion.

By the time the Third Child had reached the bottom of the escalator, his complexion had come to
rival the color of the offending article of clothing.

He began seriously pondering, if it wouldn't have been preferable to get rid of it at the first opportunity and suffer the humiliation of showing up in his birthday suit instead.

In the end, he ended up choosing the path of least resistance and the fewest required answers, until a lady from the security department showed up and instructed them all to get into a nearby car. It was only at the second glance that Shinji recognize the woman who was now set to drive them all back to Neo Tokyo 3 as someone he'd met once before.

She had been the one who had saved his life back when he'd... ran away.

He tried his hardest not to think of that.

He realized that she probably had work to do and might want to get over with it without further delay, but he'd be damned if he saw her again and didn't seize the chance to thank her for what she'd done.

Because he was embarrassed to bring up the subject in front of his friends, (He was worried about what they might think of him if they heard that), he waited until they had gone ahead and boarded the vehicle, and only turned in her direction when she was about to leave herself, but did not manage to speak to her until he'd spent long enough awkwardly standing there and staring at her for her to ask him what the matter was.

"Uh... Well Miss..." He spent quite a while uncertainly twiddling his own fingers while hardly looking at her, but then, he rose up his eyes to meet hers and spoke swiftly:

"Thank you!"

"...what for?" the Woman in black asked curtly.

The clothes and her dark sunglasses gave her an unfathomable, intimidating aura, which was probably their explicit purpose.

"For what you did... earlier... by that river..."

"There is nothing to thank me for." she replied in a businesslike fashion. "I was merely doing my duty."

Shinji thought that this sounded rather similar to what Ayanami had told him not too long ago. "But I still... wanted to thank you, anyways. U, I- I'm Ikari Shinji."

"I am quite aware of that."

"And you? Y-You don't have to tell me if, if you're not allowed to, but I thought I s-should know after... afer you..." Since he could not produce any more words, he endeavored to muster a timid smile.

"Asahina Najiko."

"Uh...?"

"That is my name. You did ask for it, did you not?"

"Y-Yes I did. So, uh, thanks again, A-Asahina-san."
And then he turned around, following his friends to the car.

Asahina's gaze followed the boy. For a moment, her otherwise cool and professional expression was tinged with a bitter, sadonic note that extended to the thin, warped smile blossoming on her lips.

"Ikari Shinji..." she repeated, as if she couldn't decided if she found the name ridiculous, unspeakably sad, or to be something that made anger rise up through her being.

But it was only a brief moment, before the tides of her face ebbed away and left her to follow the boy in order to do her job.

Asuka, meanwhile, had reached the cordoned-off portion of the harbor's parking lot before the boys and rather than to wait for an escort, looked around briskly until she spotted Ritsuko and Misato, and immediately ran off to towards them to further her own ambitions.

"Hey!" she spoke excitedly as soon as she caught up to the two women. "Have you seen Kaji-san anywhere?"

Misato, in whose vicinity that name should probably not have been mentioned, immediately seemed like her mood had dropped by an octave. "You're not gonna find him anywhere around here; He made off long ago! Actually, I'd bet you anything that he's already returned to headquarters, that bastard!"

Though one might have disagreed about Misato's colorful assessments of her ex-boyfriend's personality, at very least her guess regarding his current location turned out to be dead-on target:

The long-haired NERV employee had indeed arrived at headquarters, to be exact, he was currently in the commander's office.

The room was composed of a single, spacious expanse that did not provide the eye much to hang onto apart from the three men situated within (its owner, his second-in-command, and Kaji himself), the desk situated in its center and the horizon lines formed by the intersection of its floor and ceiling with the featureless panorama window. Both below and about three meters above them was what appeared like a single, shiny plate much unlike the usual materials that ceilings and floors tended to be composed of – you could have turned the whole room on its head and not expected anyone to notice, the only distinction between floor and ceiling being the distinct symbols covering the width of both surfaces.

The windows, which substituted for three out of the rooms four walls, let in plenty of the bright but diffuse light from the geofront's many lighting devices.

Despite the light's intensity, its cold coloration kept it from eliciting the same positive associations as proper daylight.

Lamps that produced this intense, pure white light might have been more efficient and power-saving, but did not succeed in removing the cave-like character from the geofront or the buildings it contained.

Three men of different age groups cast long shadows in that fallow glow, Fuyutsuki from right by the window, and Kaji and Ikari from the latter's desk, at whose sides they were standing across from each other, whereby the younger man was carrying two solid plastic cases one of which was slightly larger than the other.
"That was no easy task!" he narrated in an easygoing manner, to which the commander listened
with a serious, unfathomable expression, for once standing in front of his chair rather than sitting in
it.

"Well, concerning the Third Angel and Unit Five, that's probably it. The incident has been
classified as an accident and it spelled the end for Bethania Base's Marduk project. Everything
went according to your scenario. In my most recent dossier about SEELE, you'll find-
"We've already read it. The data on the construction of Mark Six has proven very useful." Fuyutsuki confirmed without turning around to face the younger man.

"I'm glad to hear that. Oh, and here are the 'presents' I've promised you. This one is from Bethany."

After placing the smaller one at his feet, Kaji heaved the slightly larger suitcase onto the desk and
released its locks, after which it opened automatically, tingling the men's faces with a cool, blue
clue uncomfortably reminiscent of the Cerenkov- radiation, which could occasionally be observed
in nuclear reactors, bathing their faces in contrasts of light and shadow that gave them an almost
demonic tinge.

"This is it. The lost number that should have served as a replacement. The key to the unification of
the human spirit with the divine."

"Yes." Ikari confirmed, looking into his subordinate's eyes with a thin, willful grin. "If everything
else fails, this will open the doors to the instrumentalities of mankind... the Key of Nebukadnezzar."

The case's lid had revealed an oblong, rectangular block of a transparent, orange material which
was much smaller than the case itself and had been fixed in its relative center. What resided inside
it bore only a very distant resemblance to an actual key.

There was actually a sort of 'base' for it to be gripped by, with a 'hilt' parts of which flared out like
an infinity symbol, but where a key's 'teeth' should have been, there was something that rather
resembled a human nervous system with all of its twists and branches, the small tiny area that a
human could influence through their will alone.

Gently, almost lovingly, Ikari moved his large, glowing hand to the case's lid and carefully pressed
it down until the components of its locks connected with a click.

His hand still rested possessively upon the box.

"And what about the one you were supposed to pick up in Germany?" the commander asked, his
expectant smile not leaving his face.

Kaji placed the second, slightly smaller but just as black box upon the first one, where Ikari
immediately accepted it and even opened it personally this time.

This lid revealed another labeled block, its contents no less bizarre but rather different: Inside the
amber preservative was a disgusting, mishappen being that bore a distant resemblance to a human
embryo in a late stage of development, only that it was several orders of magnitude too large for
one of those despite its insect-like size.

One did not even want to ponder what this creature's adult form might look like, considering that
unlike an unborn human, it already possessed a single red eye the size of a grape, that made you
wonder how it didn't fall out of its skull, or if it was pure coincidence that it appeared to be pointing
in the direction from which the two men gazed at it, or if it was somehow following them – and
Ikari in particular.
"It had regenerated itself up to this point until it was frozen Bakelite," Kaji explained "...but it is without any doubt, alive. This is another of the puzzle pieces that you need for your project, isn't it?"

"Yes." Ikari confirmed, about as delighted as his personality seemed to allow. "This is ADAM. The first human."

"Alright, that would be it!" Kaji concluded. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take a while off to take care of some personal business. If you need me to make any more deliveries, just let me know.

With an informal wave, to which he did not really expect an answer from any of the stiff older men, Kaji departed the room without another look behind him.

"Kaji Ryoji, Leader of the Investigations Department..." Fuyutsuki summarized, finally turning to let his gaze trail after the younger man with a hint of worry. "Can we really trust him?"

Ikari did not supply his subordinate with the answer he deserved.

The orange liquid sprayed into the air and twisted into a spiral-like tower, floating in the air like the inverted form of a maelstrom detached from the ocean, its neck twisting and narrowing further until its point began to solidify. A thin liquid turned into a viscous one, then into a gel, which then further hardened into a kind of crystalline structure, which, even further upward, began to lose its shine and resemble living, pulsating human flesh, first vaguely, and then increasingly turning from a conical spiral into a cylinder of a limb, on whose very top the likeness of finger buds could be seen... only for the whole flesh-tower to burst apart from the very inside, before these had reached a significant length, splattering the walls of a warehouse, with the orange liquid it had been composed of.

Splattered from head to toe along its nude form, just like the stage of its unholy ceremony, and still standing there with its hand outstretched like it had been all along, the escaped experiment that had been recently classified as 'Leatha' dully stared ahead with wide, ostensibly shocked eyes.

{{He is here.}}

Excerpts from SEELEs Seventh Battle Report and the ensuing comitee meeting from the inner circle:

*The Seventh Angel, Gaghiel, has been encountered.*

*The Second Child, Asuka Langley-Shikinami, the exclusive Pilot of Eva 02, deployed EVA 02 for the first time.*

*A close range battle at Sea ensued, and the first underwater battle occurred.*

*The confrontation took place around the former Ito area.*

"This incident was a deviation from our scenario!"

"But the result was within the expected parameters. The divergences should be easy to correct."

"I beg to differ. The UN forces lost a their of their fleet!"

"You're saying this because they were ships of your nation; The losses were negligible."
"Indeed. It was fortunate that the damage was so light."

'Thanks' to his unexpected encounter with a ghastly aquatic angel and a land-dwelling, but no less ghastly EVA pilot, that turbulent Sunday ended as fast as it had arrived, and before he knew it, Shinji found himself on Monday morning, walking to school in the red of dusk.

So much for his plans of recovering from the recent strains on a nice relaxing weekend.

This morning, he'd once again had one of those dreams, again the version where everyone who knew him stood around him congratulating him for something diffuse and abstract that he'd always have forgotten by the time he woke up. But the strangest thing was, last time he'd had the dream, he'd distinctly remembered seeing a few people that he hadn't seen before, and this time had been no different, except... the red-haired girl in the yellow dress and the man with stubble and ponytail... those had been Kaji and Asuka, hadn't they?

If it was just last day's events mixing themselves into his dreams, that would not have been that extraordinary, but... he could not shake the impression that they had been part of the dream last time, too, that he's seen their faces there before he could attribute names to them in his waking days. Asuka had been wearing the exact same yellow sundress as yesterday, when he'd first met her; How could he possibly recognize her likeness in memories that could not have contained her?

He had heard the usual tales of dreams foretelling the future, but... this was far too crazy. Even the missing voice from the deja vus in the morning appeared to have been Asuka's... Perhaps his mind was playing a trick on him, and retroactively plastering her face into those vague, senseless visions.

But even without those dreams, Shikinami succeeded in occupying his attention. Sure, she'd driven him up the wall yesterday, and he'd never met a person with a higher ratio of ego to body weight, but even though he could not describe her personality with a word other than despicable, he could not help but admire her a little. If she wanted to say something, then the greatest effort involved in it seemed to be the opening of her big mouth; there was never the slightest delay. If she wanted something, she'd assert herself without regards for mercy... both things Shinji knew he would never be capable of. Not to mention that yesterday had been her first battle.

Her very first – Shinji still found himself shuddering at the thought of his own first battle.

Even if she had not lived up to the heights of her own bragging and displayed the occasional moment of brief panic, the difference between the two of them could not have been more apparent.

She was a go-getter, a fighter, an image of ambition... and even so, he found it hard to believe that she'd shrugged off an experience in actual armed combat just like that.

"Shikinami... Asuka..." he mumbled to himself, pensively. "Having to be an EVA-pilot doesn't seem to bother her at all... she even seemed happy to be a pilot..."

He could not even begin to understand her.

Shinji's broodings were briefly interrupted, when be believed, for a moment, to have seen a flickering of light in an alleyway he'd just passed, one that he used to pass almost every day on the way to school without ever noticing anything out of the ordinary.

Shinji stood still and uncertainly peered into the narrow alley's shadows.

He couldn't really make out much but the usual trashcans; Must've been a mistake. Normally he'd just continue walking, but... between this, the dreams and the deja vus and everything else, he was
honestly beginning to doubt his sanity. He should probably hurry up and get to school, where there were people and sounds, back into full rooms, where everything he saw or heard would be seen by at least 20 other people.

He was about to turn away and leave at a brisk pace without risking another glance backward, when he found his wrist seized by a slender feminine hand that seemed to be wrapped in a cool, rubber-like material.

"Wait!" he heard from a voice that somehow seemed familiar – he turned around to find someone before him, a girl slightly younger than himself.

He did not know have the slightest clue what to make of her.

Her appearance seemed vaguely familiar as well, but he could not have said why.

The girl was a bit shorter than him and had thick dark hair the exact length of her chin, which framed her round, soft-seeming face including her deep blue eyes.

Her strange clothing resembled a plugsuit, but the material seemed much thicker and the gadgets integrated onto it less technically advanced.

The suit was mostly white, but showed the occasional blue or yellow plastic elements, including two yellow, button-like structures at the base of her ribs, or a triangular yellow plaque right above her right breast with the Name 'I. Yui' engraved onto it.

Shinji couldn't help but stare at it, and not just because the strange girl wearing it had shown up out of thin air – but because she happened to have the exact same name as his mother.

But he wasn't given much time to gape, for the girl wasted no time in addressing him – He only saw the moving of her lips and the stirring of her hair tips as she moved, because he did not dare to take his eyes from that plaque, as if he feared that the name on it would disappear if he looked away.

He expected everything to disintegrate at any moment, only for Misato to wake him from a dream, but the truth remained that the girl was truly and corporeally standing before him, and that the hand holding his wrist never lost its undoubtedly real, physical firmness.

"Ikari Shinji?!" she asked, as if she'd spent days wandering the desert on death's door, and were requesting the permission to begin to hope that the oasis she'd spotted wasn't just a fata morgana. "Is this really you?"

Far too confused to do anything else, Shinji answered the question with a hesitant nod.

The girl smiled.

Since he had spent so long staring at her plaque, he only noticed that she had her eyes lowered when she raised him again – She seemed to have been exhausted and out of breath, but had since caught it again and finally looked up into his face.

"Yes... yes... I can tell it's you..."

Her smile widened and shone with an unwarranted sincerity;

Shinji even thought he saw her eyes water – and could not explain her reaction or its intensity by any means.
He had never seen her before in his life.

Ignorant of what was happening before him, he watched as the girl stood up to her full height and regained her bearings, gathering her lapsed features into a stony, stoic expression.

Her demeanor now resembled a soldier's in a way that reminded him of Rei and brought to his attention that the girls bore more than a passing resemblance to each other.

The color of her eyes, however, bizarrely resembled his own.

"Please listen to me, I don't have a lot of time." she requested. "Please excuse my reaction just now, it was probably unnecessary to ask your name... it's just that the Ikari Shinji I'm most familiar with has, for example, slightly longer hair..."

"The one... you know?"

"I'm sorry. Explaining everything to you would take too long, and besides... my experience has shown that the wrong word in the wrong place can have serious consequences. Let's make it short.

I'm Yui. For now, that is all you need to know.

She pulled at the plaque on her suit to present it to him.

"You must be wondering... why I have the same name as your mother, right?"

Shinji froze where he stood.

"Yes, that's right... how can I know your mother's name, or even yours, if you've never met me? Not at all. We have met before. Though one might argue how far that's the same as having met you as you're standing before me now... this is just one of many endless possibilities. But let me explain. My name is 'Yui' because I was named after your mother, though it's not exactly the same... my name is Ichijou Yui. Of course, I cannot prove this to you, but I can surely convince you that you and I are not strangers. How else could I know all this: Your name is Ikari Shinji, and you were born on the sixth of June in 2001. You like to play the Cello but also spend much of your time listening to music. The reason that you use an outdated device is that it used to be your father's – where I came from, it was a gift, but that's not the version I found in most other variants... Your best friend is Nagisa K- no. He should not be here yet. Suzuhara Touji. Your best friend is Suzuhara Touji, but it was not a friendship at first sight. He punched you in the face when you first met. I suppose you could ask me for your mother's maiden name, except there is no maiden name. Your father took your mother's name, not the other way around."

She'd just cited a torrent of personal data about him without even taking a breath, but there was one thing in that list he could not confirm or deny.

"He... did?"

"Shoot!"

The girl covered her mouth with both hands.

The calm attitude of her previous speech appeared to have evaporated. "Forget it. Just forget it. It could be, or it could not be... as I already said, the wrong word at the wrong moment could be disastrous. The point is that we know each other, and that you can trust me. Tell me... where are you right now? What's the last thing that happened? The last angel you defeated... what was it like?"
"It looked... like a fish of sorts. We defeated it in Unit Two... me and Shikinami-san that is. She's-

"I know who Asuka is. So this time, it's Shikinami again?" the strange girl scratched her chin, as if
she were thinking. "I wish I'd landed somewhere, where my advice could be more useful. I
considered many situations and what to say in them, but I don't have anything for this one... You
usually handle this one just fine on your own..."

But listen to me."

Her earlier bashfulness vanished from her voice, and she sounded dead-serious again.

"For the next few months... there is one thing above all others that you should keep in mind... no,
you surely must already have thought of it yourself: In order to defeat the enemy, you must become
one, unified in heart and soul."

"W-What? Me and... Shikinami-san?"

"You, Asuka, Major Katsuragi, your father, whoever else there is. All of you. And Shinji... even if
there are some very, very happy days waiting ahead of you, I lament to tell you, but... it will not
last. The home you built for yourself, your friends, the people you love... none of it will last.
Indeed... there might come a day on which you feel like your world is coming apart all around you,
without you being able to do anything about it. I know this must sound very harsh to you, but for
me... it has already happened."

"Already... happened? Do you mean to tell me that you're from the future, or something like that?"

After everything else that had happened to him since his arrival in this town, he could easily
believe her.

But Yui did not confirm his suspicion – instead of an answer, she gave him a loud, bitter laugh that
seemed out of place on her.

"From the future? There IS no future anymore. And by that, I do not mean that I no longer have
hope, else I would not be here... I mean to tell you that every single moment after that fateful day
has physically disappeared from this world."

"What day would that be?"

"The day of Third Impact."

"Does this mean... we fail?"

"That depends on how one defines failure... but I don't have the time to explain to you. So I want to
focus on the one thing you will need to know in order to take back the future that you worked for
so hard... even harder and much longer, than you even know..."

Yui grabbed him by both shoulders and stared straight into his eyes.

"The world is wrong."

"...wrong? What... what is that supposed to mean?"

"Wrong means wrong. Not right. Not as it should be. You must have noticed by now, haven't you?
You must have had those dreams... or at least, an inexplicable sense of deja vu, right?"

She was truly frightening him out of his mind now. The information about his person, she could
have come by somehow, but he had not told a single person about his dreams, so how could she know?

He felt like he was seeing the pieces of a puzzle coming together, not sure if the whole they were forming was something he ever wanted to know.

He did not understand anything about this anymore.

"You did have them, did you? It is practically written on your face. And Asuka! Remember Asuka. You just told me, that you just met her for the very first time, right? That is not true, and I'm certain that you must feel that. Asuka is surely no stranger to you. You lived through more hardship together than most people do in their entire lives. You've known each other for a very long time. You must know that. You must feel that she is, among other things, one of your very closest friends!"

He wanted to retort, that he would not think of befriending that madwomen in a hundred years, but that would have contradicted the presence of her image in his dreams, and that sense that the sound of her voice was missing in the mornings.

"You know, don't you?" Yui insisted.

For the love of god, he did not know what to answer.

"...why? Why are you telling something like this to me of all people?"

"Isn't that obvious? You are perhaps the most significant individual in all of human history."

Shinji stood frozen as the chills raced through his spine.

That was exactly what that... mass murderer had said.

"What makes you think that I-"

She was gone. Disappeared. As if she'd never been there... and maybe she hadn't been. Perhaps he was indeed beginning to lose it.

The Third Child glanced around at the buildings surrounding him... Tokyo-3, a place he had since come to think of as his home.

Touji, Kensuke, Misato, everyone.

None of this... none of it would last?

No future? Third Impact?

The world is wrong?

That was all far too much.

He plain and simply could not take it anymore – he was nothing but a boringly normal boy with no extraordinary features about him, a mere bystander who had been pulled into all of this madness.

Slinging his arms around his upper body, he ran off without ever looking back, away from this place, away from this silence and this twilight.

With every step, he tried to convince himself that none of this ever happened. Exactly! All of this
was completely impossible, and even if it were true, what could he possibly do about it? Who could he talk to about it? What could he do?

How was he to react to such nonsense as 'The world is wrong'?

All of it was nonsense! How could something like that possibly have happened? Of course it couldn't have happened. No, no, no, no, just no!

Forced to stop to catch his breath, Shinji forced himself to focus on the pattern of bricks on the sidewalk instead of his nonsensical dreams. That's all they were, right? Just dreams. And there was no way anyone could know of dreams he'd never spoken of, right? Except in a dream.

Anything else was impossible, and surely, anyone he could have asked about this would have told him the same – or think him mad.

A thing like that could not possibly happen...

Shinji was immensely grateful, when the sound of a starting car engine distracted him from his thoughts – There, a little further along the street that led him to school every day, a man had fired up his car and left the boy standing next to it on the sidewalk with a few casual parting words before driving away – Shinji soon recognized the pair as Mitsurugi and his father.

His new classmate, whose cast did not seem to have gotten any thinner over the weekend, remained there for a few moments, lost in thought as his glance followed after his father's vehicle.

Then, however, he pulled his school bag, which he'd been gripping with his hand so far (likely because he'd just removed it from the trunk of his father's car.), onto his back and journeyed on towards the school.

Shinji had only spoken to him a few times before, but at this moment, his fear of being alone with his own thoughts was stronger than the one associated with initiating contact.

He just needed some sort of... input to wash what had just happened out of his consciousness and conveniently squeeze it into some dark corner in the back of his head.

The Third Child considered to break into a brisk pace to chase after him, but could not quite find the necessary confidence and ultimately stopped himself after the second step.

The other boy did not seem to have noticed yet, which was to be expected; The distance between spanned about six meters, with a tendency toward increasing.

He had no choice but to do something that he'd done so rarely in his life so far that he could count the occasions with his fingers: Call out loudly to draw someone's attention on a public street. Strangely, he found this little easier than yesterday's fight against a surreal giant monster.

Though he expected that his words must have gotten stuck somewhere inside his throat, he could not find them there, and his lips seemed about as hard to part as the angel's jaws – but he had managed to overcome them, after all, even if it required a little help from a crazy European.

"M-Mitsurugi-kun...!"

Shinji did actually seem to have managed to shout loud enough for his classmate to hear.

Slightly surprised, the slightly older boy turned his head, around which he still wore that same heavy cast.
"...Ikari-san? ...Good morning."

"S-Same to you." Shinji answered quickly. He still wasn't very good at suck situations, so that he had a hard time thinking of something to say, and the usual easy road of waiting for his conversation partner to come up with something seemed unavailable, as Mitsurugi was himself on the reserved side. By the looks of it, he was waiting for Shinji to say something, which he could not be faulted for if one considered who had begun the conversation in the first place.

Nonetheless, Mitsurugi junior did easily find his voice once he'd stepped a little closer to the other boy and got around to getting a good look at him.

"...is everything alright? You seem somewhat... upset."

"Oh..."

That must be because of... earlier.

Shinji began to doubt if getting himself near other people at this moment had truly been the wisest choice.

But he couldn't just turn around and run away, either? What would Mitsurugi think?

So, there was no way out but through.

"It's nothing, I just... didn't sleep very well, because of yesterday's battle."

Shinji hoped that he could be forgiven this one little lie.

"What? Another battle? But they did not issue a state of emergency..."

"That's because it didn't take place here, but on the high seas. Misato-san – that's my superior at NERV – She brought me to... pick up ...a new EVA that was being ....transported here from Germany..."

"And you were attacked on the way back?"

"Yes, exactly." Shinji attempted a smile. "But I, I can cope with that, I think..." He failed to stifle a half-suppressed, nervous laugh. "I should probably have gotten used to it by now, but..."

Surprisingly, Mitsurugi contradicted him: "No you shouldn't." He spoke in the same formal, sober and substantially reserved manner as usual, but with an audible, deliberate firmness to it. "If you ever got used to this, it would be a terrible thing. It would mean that this world had finally gone mad for good. Don't get me wrong, but sometimes when I see our classmates talking about your task, I wonder how they can be so excited about it. I think those battles are terrifying, and I can't even imagine what it must be like to fight them yourself... That we as a people are forced to resort to using child soldiers is an extraordinary sad thing. It should not ever be considered okay, or be something we can get used to. I must admit, I felt rather awed myself when I saw your robots last week, but the more I think about it, the more and more I realize how mad this world and especially this city has become...and I wonder why it is that this doesn't seem to bother anyone... Or I don't know, it may be that no one wants to show it, so that everything can keep functioning...

I... I don't want to sound spiteful, and I admit that I should probably be ashamed of myself for this, but, somehow, I find comfort in knowing that even you still feel fear..."

Shinji was a bit overwhelmed – This was his first time meeting someone who had such a view of
the events. "It's alright. I... To be honest, I'd rather know you thought this way than be confused
with some sort of hero... It's not like I wouldn't like to be... popular, or something like this, but, I
don't think I could live up to the expectations that people would have of a 'defender of earth'...
believe me, I'm anything but hero, and I know that very well..."

He had to think of Asuka, and the way she'd teased him about being the 'Legendary Third Child'.
Though it was still preferable to 'Daddy's boy'. Of course, the Second Child could not have known
his circumstances, but... it just hurt too much.

"I see that a little differently."

"Heh?" surprised, Shinji turned to Mitsurugi, who actually wore a thin smile on his pale face.

"It's true that I am averse to all these mad things, and I'm glad that you're... not mad, but I also
understand that these battles are necessary for us to defend ourselves. Even before Second Impact,
this country has often been hit by catastrophe, and always, this meant that we had to find people
who were ready to give up themselves, their own happiness and their own dreams in order for
everyone else to go on living as normally as possible...

That you've lost a lot, and might well go on to lose a lot more, perhaps even your or life... cannot
be changed. It needs to be done, and the rest of us can't do it, nor can we ever give you back what
has been taken from you. But the least we can do is to keep the noble deeds of you and others like
you in our memories. Yes, I'm aware that you work is not anything like an exciting action movie, if
you pardon that comparison, but in my eyes, that's exactly what makes you a hero."

"I... I'm afraid you're thinking too highly of me there... I'm not even sure if I'm... really doing it
because it's a noble thing, or-..."

"Does that in any way lessen the price that you've had to pay? Excuse me, but I think you're the one
who is thinking too lowly of yourself."

"No, no, that's... different..."

"Well, I'm not privy to your innermost thoughts, but-"

Whatever Mitsurugi was going to say next remained unsaid, as his thoughts were then occupied by
something else entirely: "Oh...we... we really ought to get going. I can't possibly be late to class
after my father went through the trouble of driving me all the way here..."

Shinji believed to have spotted a hint of urgent embarrassment in his new classmate's face.

"M-Mitsurugi-kun? Would you mind if we walk to school together?"

"I thought you always walk with Suzuhara-san and that friend of his... Aida-san, was it?"

"Yes, but I usually meet them further ahead by the bridge when they don't come to pick me up –
but I'm sure that Touji and Kensuke wouldn't mind if you came along! If they haven't already left
without me, that is..."

"Then we should better get going, I guess..."

"Oh, and Mitsurugi-kun?"

"...?"
"I want to thank you for the message you left me last week. It really helped."

"You don't need to thank me for that. I see it as my duty."

"...I admire you."

"...excuse me, but, for what reason?"

"It's just that it seems lately that just about everyone except for me can just go and do what they think is right without hesitating. You, Misato-san, Ayanami, the Pilot of Unit Two. Except for me. I have to force myself at every step of the way, just to do what everyone says is the right thing to do..."

"But you're still doing it, aren't you? ...wait, did you say 'Unit Two'?"

The remainder of their walk to school was occupied by conversation about sunday's events, in which Touji and Kensuke eagerly participated once Shinji and Nagato met up with them along their way.

Kensuke excitedly educated Mitsurugi about all the military vehicles, whereas Touji spent more time talking about Misato's cool attitude, her creative planning, and in particular her exceptionally attractive rear end, whereas Shinji filled the other three in on the parts that had taken place inside the entry plug or underwater, where it had been concealed from their eyes – though Shinji was not the most enthused of narrators, Touji and especially Kensuke did not mind as long as he was talking about cool battles and meekly answered their questions, though he kept some of the more embarrassing details to himself.

Kensuke and Touji had not particularly fussed over the happenstance that Mitsurugi was now somehow walking along with them, and despite Shinji's initial fears to the contrary, Nagato did not seem intimidated or off-put, though he never showed the same degree of eagerness.

But as differently as the three boys had chosen the focus of their narration, there was one point on which they all agreed: Asuka was despicable.

Alright, Shinji's choice of words might have been a little more subdued, but it was enough – Even Nagato's requests that they not use such foul language when referring to a girl ceased once he heard a detailed account of how she had 'greeted' the trio, even though he still hesitated to form a definite opinion on her.

"She's irascible, psychotic, stuck-up, fearsome, arrogant, cruel, self-absorbed, cold-hearted, childish, egocentric, violent, self-important, narcissistic, insane, hot-headed and all total bitch!" Touji and Kensuke reported convincingly, taking turns at coming up with unfriendly adjectives until they formed a chorus for the last one.

Mitsurugi didn't know whether to listen to his good upbringing or the sympathy he felt for Shinji and his friends.

"And I always thought our class rep was stuck-up!" Touji continued to rant. "It's a real waste since she was really cute, but she was probably the bitchiest bitch under the sun!"

"Can she really be that bad?" Mitsurugi wondered, still in disbelief that such a dainty, lovely creature of a girl could inspire this amount of aversion.

"Yep!" Kensuke insisted. "Though it IS kinda cool that she's already a Captain even though she's
no older than us!" Though he quickly corrected the slightly awed tone of his voice back downward. "But still, it's a relief that we'll never have to see her again."

"Indeed!" Touji agreed pointedly. "But our poor, unfortunate friend here is gonna have to deal with her at work! That deserves our sympathy, doesn't it?"

But Touji had celebrated too early – It might have been his comeuppance for all the bad karma he had amassed through his frequent violations of the school's dress code, but what his horror-stricken eyes gazed upon when he turned towards the sound of the door opened in case it was a teacher or the class representative was so abominable, that he tumbled off his chair from the shock, just to get back up a point both a trembling finger and a hearty "AAHHH!" at the person on the threshold.

But Touji probably wasn't the only one who'd have preferred to see just about anything else over there – The expressions of him, Kensuke and Shinji could each be rather fittingly described with the words 'Holy shit!', 'No, No, please no!' and 'Aww shoot!', whereas Mitsurugi, who had no missed the acute resemblance between his new aquaintances and Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' eyed the new arrival with a certain worry.

The frightening creature proceeded to ensure that no one (except perhaps a deaf-mute, but there were none of those present anyways) could have had the audacity to ignore her arrival by means of the chilling chalk screeches she produced as she wrote her name onto the blackboard in pretty, immaculate feminine handwriting.

Before she even turned around, her long, shining, copper-colored hair had caused the first few boys to gape at her rather impressively.

But the sugary-sweet voice with which she introduced herself revealed nothing of what lay behind her charming smile:

"Hallo! My name is Shikinami Asuka Langley! Nice to meet you!"

Chapter End Notes

(1) The chapter quote? From the same Bleach Volume the last chapter was named after. Yeah, I sort of really really like Mr. Kubo's poetry. Expect to see most of them at some point or another. For anyone who doesn't know who he is, Mr. Kubo is the author of the popular Shonen Manga Bleach, which is basically your basic sword fighty shonen manga with some little artistic accents here and there. It's a guilty pleasure of mine. Ulquiorra! *squee* This one seemed particularly suitable for this chapter because the attraction & repulsion between people, in short, 'coexistence', is basically a huge part of Asuka-chans 'Thematic Stuffing', also, it marked the introduction of the 'aloof rival character' to the manga, and Asuka pretty much is your typical rival character. Initially hates teamwork? Check. Child prodigy? Check! Parallels with the MC's backstory? Check. Designed as contrast to MC ? Check! Outward arrogance with hidden inferiority complex? Check. Initially much more skilled, then takes it very badly when MC overtakes her? Check. More methodical, pragmatic thinker to contrast the hero's impulsive and naive ones? Check. 'Lancer'-like dynamics, ie, calls BS on what the hero does and presents an alternate set of values? Check. Extremely competitive and obsessed with 'winning'? Double-check!... The only abnormality of sorts is that in any other anime, Shinji would be the one with the
red mecha.

(2) "Yui Ichijo", complete with name and outfit, is borrowed from this character sketch from the proposal: . which probably used to be some alternative character-design for Rei. This will eventually make perfect sense. Or so I hope.

(3) Nooo, Shin-chan, you mustn't run away~ But of course he's gone into full denial mode, because, he would, wouldn't he?

(4) The story will soon be continued in Chapter 03: [Das Modell]
Sie ist ein Model und sie sieht gut aus
Ich nähm' sie heut' gerne mit zu mir nachhaus
Sie wirkt so kühl, an sie kommt niemand rann
Doch vor der Kamera, da zeigt sie was sie kann
Sie trinkt in Nachtclubs immer Sekt – korrekt!
Und hat hier schon alle Männer "abgecheckt"
Im Scheinwerferlicht, ihr junges Lächeln strahlt
Sie sieht gut aus, und Schönheit wird bezahlt
Sie stellt sich zur schau für das Konsumprodukt
Und wird von Millionen Augen anguckt
Ihr neues Titelbild ist einfach fabelhaft!
Ich muss sie wieder sehen, ich glaub' sie hat's geschafft
-Rammstein, -das Modell (Kraftwerk Cover)
[:]
She is a model and she looks great
I'd like to take her back home with me today
She seems so cool, no one can get close to her
but in front of the camera, she shows what she can do
She always drinks champagne in night clubs – correctly!
And has already 'checked out' all men around here
In the spotlight, hr youthful smile shines
She looks great and beauty gets paid
She exhibits herself for public consumption
And gets looked at by millions of eyes
Her new cover picture is simply marvellous!
I need to see her again, I think she's done it

Perfectly even, always smooth, regular, and forever safe from the ravages of time – such was the skin of the perfect little girl.

Flawlessly perfect, made to be perfect, the plastic had been molded in the seductive, though not all that realistic, exaggerated proportions of a small child, knowing well that the little lady would be so much more adept at inviting the glanced of others onto her as that other child, which was made out of somewhat different polymers.

Neither macromolecules were all that different from the others, both had a spine made out of carbon atoms, but the little plastic child had her perfection, and that gave her a clear advantage.

Her big, blue eyes and her tiny, button nose would never grow out of the most ideal, most endearing proportions, and neither would her tender cheeks lose their lovely color, nor would one of her little red locks fall out of place or lose its very special red color – And never would her sweet little eyes tire, always ready to expectantly and charmingly look up at the dirty brats that came to admire her.

Oh, and what a perfect little dress the perfect little girl was wearing!

Such a bright and pretty red that put to shame all roses, all strawberries, and the streak on the moon! Oh, how grey and fallow was everything else compared to that brightest red!

The dress might not have been as perfect as the perfect little girl, but she still loved to wear it; Once, her mommy had torn it up and pulled at the spot where she had once stitched in her same, so that it would always be clear that this dress belonged to one very special little girl;

A girl so pretty and beloved and desirable and perfect, that her mommy could not help but love her very much; For her mommy had made her perfect, and that's why she would always have to remain perfect, so her mommy would keep loving her, and so she would refrain from trying to kill her again and bring even more scarred imperfections onto her dress.

Thus, the perfect child always made an effort to talk in her sweetest, cutest, most perfect voice, and to sound just as happy, as a perfect girl always had to be: "I'm different from everyone else!" she explained proudly, excitedly moving her tiny arms in a joyous dance, just like happy little girls should. "I am very, very special! And because of that…

...you can't rely on anyone but yourself, Asuka."

And then, the perfect little girl was violently flung into the next corner by the other child, a terribly ugly, naughty child, where she flew into a tower of cardboard boxes and slid to the floor, all alone and abandoned, cold, motionless and without any will of her own to drive her onwards.

A little more than a week after Tokyo-3 had last become a battleground, peace and normalcy seemed to have returned, at least in appearance – There was no choice.

Even if this quiet only preceded a storm that was already balling itself together on the far horizon, all fear in the world would not change people's desires to eat and buy material comforts, and thus, the show had to go on.

Everyone cheerfully indulged in the illusion that they were foolish enough to put the danger out of mind as soon as it was out of mind, and instead, chose to feel their fear in secret, in the shadows of the cleaning vehicles that had not yet finished to swipe all of the blood left behind by the blue crystalline angel off the cities many buildings.
Without the means to do anything about its source, open fear would be of no use anyways.

Thus, the sun continued to rise as it did every morning, without anyone expressing any surprise that it did, or taking the time to observe the spectacle in the fear that they might never get another opportunity to do so.

Instead of moist eyes and relieved signs, it was the turning of many buildings that greeted the dissipation of the morning mist, automatically switching positions after having spent the night pointing in the direction where they had last seen our world's central star in the evening.

Caressed by the first, gentle rays of morning, uncounted solar panels turned toward the brightest spot in the sky, to pump yet more of the eternal summer's gifts into the power grid, where they were desperately needed – for along with the buildings, the people were also beginning to stir, and with them, the usual work traffic.

Not all of them had chosen to walk on foot or use their bikes to cross the walkways and greenery, therefore, trams had to be moved, switches had to be flipped to divert trains, and traffic lights needed to be powered;

Overhead, planes that had recently flung into the air floated over the multitudes that were checking their watches, waiting for lights to turn green, reading newspapers or just going about their way in a daze as if still half-asleep – wherever one looked, the city's quickening pulse was beginning to pump unnumbered masses through its streets in order to revitalize it, much like their own hearts pumped the blood through their bodies.

Here or there, one could occasionally spot some of those rare people, that did not seem to be in any great hurry – one of those unhurried people could be seen descending an escalator from a street crossing.

It was a melancholy young man in an unassuming school uniform, who'd only counted himself among the city's inhabitants for about two months.

He might not look it, but it was thanks to this unassuming boy, who seemed too zoned out to pay much heed to anything other than whatever was playing on the Walkman he was carrying, that his fellow citizens had received the necessary respite to sustain their lively lifestyles – He was Ikari Shinji, the Third Child, designated pilot of the humanoid war machine Evangelion Unit 01.

After he'd fixed breakfast for himself, his caretaker (whom he'd ended up taking care of most of the time) and her house-penguin and taken care of any leftover household affairs, he'd departed to go to school, as he usually did on most weekdays such as the present Tuesday.

Typically, his way to school involved using this crossing and, occasionally, finding his friends waiting at the bottom, as he did today.

Usually, that sight alone was enough to brighten his face – Having friends was something the fourteen-year old had only recently become used to. The memories of the days in which he'd rarely ever found the confidence to talk to his peers were still fresh in the memory, and continued to serve as a source of gratitude and appreciation now that they had become a part of the past. Still not quite believing his fortune, he'd pluck his headphones from his ears, walk up to the boys in joyous expectation, and greeted them with a few hesitant but sincere words.

The small group that had assembled itself near the bottom of the escalator consisted not only of the 'savior of the earth', who would have been rare curiosity by himself, but also of a bunch of other ingredients that one would not have expected in one place – among others, it was composed of the
great hero’s best friend, designated class clown Suzuhara Touji, a rather energetic but nonetheless reliable fellow, also a dedicated big brother and avid basketball player, as well as Aida Kensuke, the local military nerd, an intelligent, well-informed youth with a good understanding of people, as much as these qualities were occasionally obscured by his reckless, adventurous streak.

The fourth boy in their circle had only recently begun to associate with the curious threesome, by now known as the reserved A-student Mitsurugi Nagato, had proven himself to be a polite and sensible member of society once the other had gotten around to spend some time with him; Some might have been surprise that such an ostensibly serious person had chosen to associate with some of the legendarily silly members of the class community, though he did seem to fit with the groups apparent theme of not fitting together at all.

Himself a recent member and still in disbelief about the in his opinion not entirely deserved fortune that had fallen into his lap, Shinji had nonetheless been the one to lead the newest person into their group, which the others accepted without even a comment.

It had certainly been a precious experience, and one of the many things that maintained the thin smile he continued to wear until he reached the school, a path he no longer took by himself, but usually in a group of three or, most recently, occasionally in a group of four.

After a few minutes filled with vivid conversation, the four of them reached the school building, whose white facade almost seemed to shine in the intense sunlight.

But the thicker the stream of uniformed students got, the more the boys heard of a certain name that was wandering through everyone's mouths, and reminded them of the one thing that had not gone back to normal, and probably never would – the once empty desk one row to the right and one row behind that of the class representative was no longer empty, but had become the lair of the cruel beast known as Shikinami Asuka Langley.

All throughout the school, there was hardly a person who talked of anything else anymore, she was the uncontested number one topic from dusk to dawn, everyone started discussing her latest stunts the moment the teachers weren't looking.

Everyone wanted to be with her or be her. The girls lined up to become her friends or learn her secrets, whereas the boys didn't stop gawking at her athletic physique.

Asuka here, Asuka there... If Shinji had become one of the established school hotties the moment his 'side job' had become public knowledge, then Asuka's insistence on wearing her nerve clips as near-permanent hair accessories assured that no one would forget her identity as EVA 02's pilot for as much as five minutes – thus, the male and lesbian population of the school community now had their own starlet to drool over, and her showy, extroverted personality suited her new found fame better than Shinji's ever had.

But while the shy Third Child had gone unnoticed for the first three weeks, Asuka ensured from day one that everyone would know her name, rank and occupation, and swiftly advanced to the top of that cadre of popular girls who got to decide what was to be considered 'cool' or 'in', or who could be terrorized without repercussions.

Over the course of the week, perhaps motivated by a desire to take retroactive revenge for the loss of his unfortunate cap, Touji had decided that he and Kensuke should at least get a little bit of profit out of the situation by supplying the horny, hormone-crazed masses with pictures of the newly established school-diva, some of which appeared to have been shot from... interesting angles and might have gone on to be used to spark the occasional student's imagination during their... late night activities.
Touji had the idea after the copies of Kensuke's cinematic recordings of the battle and the aircraft carrier had not only been a hit with his fellow nerds, but proven very popular among regular students of both sexes, who, depending on their sexual orientation, couldn't wait to see their 'adorable Ikari-kun' or 'sexy Shikinami' in action – it was truly fortunate that both had been sitting in that Evangeline at the first time.

After the forging their diabolic plan, the two had ditched both Shinji and Mitsurugi (who might have had ethical reservations about the plan or feared the wrath of a certain unpleasant EVA-pilot) and started working:

Asuka in a crowd of her brand new girlfriends, Asuka quenching her thirst on a drinking fountain, (in whose place the buyers would probably picture something rather different), Asuka walking past a few miffed, jealous girls in all of her glamor, Asuka in her sparse PE outfit, or in the process of removing it...

Click, click, click! And the moment was captured on film for eternity, ready to make both boys a fortune.

Many of the pictures were blurry, unfocussed or showed far more of the class representative's back than of Asuka (for reasons that surely had nothing to do with Touji having been the photographer), but even so,

But the little videoclip, in which Asuka callously trampled the mountain of love letters that had tumbled out of her locker one morning was something the boys would be keeping for themselves – bursting the bubbles of those poor lovesick suckers was neither nice nor good for business.

All in all, the trade with these little pictures had turned out to be a lucrative venture, the profit of which the boys intended to invest in replacing the cap and camera lens that had not survived their first encounter with the Teutonic fury.

It had been good luck within bad luck that Asuka was admittedly very attractive despite her caustic personality: Those pictures would not be nearly as lucrative if her sugary act revealed the frights of her true nature – Having seen plenty of it during the past week, during which they had been regularly pestered and christened with the unpleasant but catchy term 'idiot quartet', they would not have paid a single Yen for it, but rather given others money to get away from her.

But unfortunately, all the money in the world could not have saved Shinji from being singled out for her torment.

Walking past his friends like they were potato sacks, the newest horror of Tokyo 3 came sauntering towards him.

It spoke for Asuka's fearsomeness, that the mere sound of her voice was enough to get a fearful shudder out of a boy who'd charged an over-earthly monster with a knife not too long ago, though that description probably made Shinji sound tougher than he really was.

Deliberately ignoring the male pilot's visible apprehension, Asuka strolled way further into his personal space than he was comfortable with, and adressed him with a unmerited cheer that was most likely intended to assert her superiority, using words from some foreign language whose mastery she often flaunted.

In part because he was a polite person who preferred to avoid confrontations, but also because he hoped to escape further humiliation this way, he forced himself to smile despite the fear and aversion he didn't fully manage to hide, and tried to repeat the part of her statement that had
sounded like a general greeting as well as his inexperienced tongue could reproduce them.

But his efforts were in vain, as she continued her advance toward him and brought her hand uncomfortably close to his face – an omen which revealed that he was unlikely to have evaded today's dose of pain.

"Geez!" she complained almost casually, as if picking him on in public were no big deal – by now, a swarm of nosy, worried or jealous students had assembled itself around them, which filled Shinji with the desire to disappear into the depths of the earth – Large crowds had always made him nervous and uncertain, there were far too many people for him to keep track of, so many eyes on his every move, so much hushed talking – He only understood half of it, and his reconstructions of what the other half might be were likely distorted by his pessimistic self-assessments.

The most awkward parts of the crowd might be those who were either jealous or hoping to find out if their popular competition was finally 'taken' (which they somehow meant to deduce from whom they might talk to). Shinji couldn't stand being the center of attention – but that girl seemed to relish in it, delighting in his misfortune and bolstering her ego with every spectator. It's like she did not truly feel awake in the morning before she'd bathed in the spotlight, and had little scruples to pull him into her performance for the sake of her personal gratification, ruthlessly disregarding what feelings this might flood him with...

Once again, he was certain that he would never comprehend her.

"I can't believe you already look this gloomy in the morning!" Asuka chided with a dizzying playful ease, before flicking him across the forehead, touching it without hesitation like it was not part of someone else's personal space, but merely part of her own element – Out here, she was a fish in water, fast like an arrow and too slippery for it to be grabbed or stopped in its tracks. "If someone receives the honor of being greeted by me, they should cheer up! I'm the most popular girl at school!"

Once she'd had her fun, her interest in the now somewhat miserable-looking boy receded to the level she reserved for cold coffee, but before he could breathe a sigh of relief, she turned back to him after a few instants of scanning their surroundings, deciding that he was still of interest to her – or rather, the information she hoped to extract from his mouth.

"Oh yeah" she asked, almost casually. "Where is the other one?"

"The... other one?" Shinji repeated, wondering who could be meant by that rather general but clearly deprecative if not deliberately disrespectful appellation.

"Who do you mean?"

She looked at him as if he'd failed a simple grade school level math problem.

"Are you an idiot?" she complained, annoyedly placing her hands on her hips.

"The other pilot of course! I'm talking about the First Child, who else could it be?"

"Oh... you mean Ayanami..." he finally concluded, gesturing toward one of the unassuming benches on the edge of the schoolyard, where Rei would occasionally spend her breaks or wait for class whenever she wasn't just waiting in the classroom proper, a fact he was aware of because he'd made several attempts to approach her over the course of the last week.

The first few times he could not bring himself to say a single word and quickly made off the moment she showed any signs of noticing his impolite observation and looked up to him.
Once, he'd instead tried breaking the ice with a simple "Hello", to which she hadn't answered or otherwise reacted. He had a bit more success once he followed the greeting with questions, to which she would usually answer, if mostly in one-liners.

In addition, he often had trouble thinking of conversation topics beyond "How's it going?" and "So what have you been up to lately?" when in the blue-haired girl's presence. Though the latter had almost led to something like a conversation yesterday, when she'd answered it with a brief "I have been reading." - He had since come to notice that she did that a lot, (for example, hadn't she been entertaining herself with a book when she'd awaited his awakening at his bedside?) and decided to ask her about it, asking her what she was reading. It turned out to be a collection of treatises about a strange, obscure branch of natural science he could not hope to understand in a hundred years, but when he'd asked the First Child if she understood it, she'd answered with a curt yet unassuming "Yes." - Apparently, she'd borrowed the book from none other that Shinji's own father; When Shinji inquired how he was doing, he learned that he was, once again, away on a business trip.

One again he'd found himself painfully reminded of just how little he shared with the man who'd given him life – and how much closer the girl before him appeared to be to their common superior.

At the moment, he'd stuttered up something incoherent that was once meant to be a genuine compliment of Rei's intelligence, but couldn't help but wonder if his father would lend him books as well if he had any hope of understanding the complex, small-printed literature on his fields of expertise.

But however that might or might not be, today Rei was back on her usual spot with another thick door-stopper, and after a brief, ascertaining glance, Asuka had marched off in that direction before Shinji could give any further explanations.

In hindsight, he wondered why it had taken Asuka a whole week to show interest in one of the only two people who could fight beside her in this war; She had undoubtedly been aware of Rei's existence all along – If his memories weren't playing tricks on him, she'd mentioned it all the way back on the ship.

The crowd, especially its male components, followed, in part because they seemed to be expecting a catfight.

As Shinji had noticed as early as during their first meeting, Captain Shikinami enjoyed looking down at others – literally, if possible. If there was no skyscraper-sized Evangelion nearby, and she wasn't certain enough that the other person could easily be kicked to the ground, she'd have to do with standing on a nearby brick wall to get her fix as far as her feeling of superiority was concerned.

Her posture alone signaled that the red-haired EVA pilot considered herself very, very important, from the broad, spread-apart position of her legs to the hands on her hips – thus, she deemed it absolutely unacceptable that she'd have to speak someone to get their attention – her pride demanded that others ought to notice her.

But since her sense of reality seemed at last intact enough for her to realize that every reaction had to have at least some kind of direct cause, she sought to deliberately engineer the 'being noticed' part, which she did by rather penetratingly blocking the path of the sunbeams that illuminated Rei's literature.

But unlike Asuka, the pilot of Unit Zero was not exactly the hot-headed sort, so that her initial response consisted of little more than moving her book a little bit to the left – only when the Second Child took a further step to adjust her shadow to the book's new position and finally made
the effort to greet the other girl in case she didn't catch that hint, either, did Rei finally raise her glance, not even turning around to face Asuka, but solely moving her eyes for the simple reason that this was enough to see her fellow pilot.

"So you are Ayanami Rei, the pilot of the prototype!"

The First Child continued to glance up at her without a word.

"I'm Asuka, Shikinami Asuka Langley, the pilot of unit 2!" she declared bombastically, with a not all that sincere smile which, along with the pointed use of the word 'prototype', made her next offer sound more like a gesture of pitying condescension than real interest: "Let's be friends!"

"Why?" Rei answered quietly, already looking away once she'd sufficiently connected Asuka's face with her name and saw no further reason to continue looking at her.

She wasn't really well-versed at these types of things and they had never been part of her tasks, either, but as far as she understood it, friends were supposed to be individuals that one knew well, spent a lot of time with and felt a certain sympathy or affection for... Rei was barely familiar with the Second Child, so there was not even the logical possibility that she could like her – as in, having an absence of any positive opinion toward her, not necessarily the implication of anything negative, for which there was not yet a reason, either... so what could be the intention behind that offer?

"Because it would be... quite convenient?" Asuka answered somewhat dumbfounded, gesturing with one arm. That there was anyone who might not jump at a chance to be friends with such an awesome, attractive and popular member of the elite such as herself eluded her comprehension... much more so if it was coming from this sort of freaky bird of paradise who could barely call herself an EVA pilot at all, having been given that old, trashy prototype that was almost ripe or the garbage dump. Even a complete idiot like the Third Child had managed to get himself at least some friends, even if they were such a bunch of embarrassing monkeys (A loser, a nerd, a dumb jester and a teacher's pet, such natural enemies unified in perfect harmony... although it has been said that cats and dogs would be living together in the days before the end), but here was this chick, sitting by herself in solitude in a corner like a complete loser – you'd think she'd be overjoyed to get such a great shot at improving her position – She ought to be ashamed for her ingratitude, but for the benefit of her apparently rather dense potential new friend, Asuka chose to keep playing it nice.

But make no mistake: She was immensely offended by the prospect that someone might not like her.

Though it was the next answer to her attempts at friendliness that led her to the conclusion that she was facing a lost cause:

"If I'm ordered to, I will."

Unlike the Second Child, Rei was not the kind of person who cared a lot about dominance, reputation or popularity, and did not really care, think about or even understand what perception – since she had very little experience in these kinds of things, she might not have been able to clearly describe herself as such if she had been asked to, but though she was not ultimately the sort to hold grudges and held a certain understated kindness for those whose hardship she might witness, she was not the sort to 'collect' friends and calculate some statement of worth from their mere number; Though she had not had the opportunity to really explore this at this point, she would have rather had the tendency to reveal herself to only small number of close confidants but treasure them all the more (as of the present, only the Commander existed in that sphere though he has a... complex
case.)

But as of the moment, she could not detect any reason or desire to forge a bond with the Second Child – She merely answered her question. That she could have taken offense to this formulation did not occur to Rei, any more than she realized how her reference to 'orders' might have irritated the other girl – She'd simply added that caveat because 'No' would not have been the correct answer. If tomorrow she were to receive the instruction to befriend her, for example, to assure her loyalty or because it was deemed to boost their efficiency in battle, it would have become part of her task, an she'd have carried it out to the best of her ability like any other part of it, needless to say that it would take precedence over any personal preference she might have, a circumstance that, to Rei, was so much of a given that she did not separately mention it, even in thought – after all, Rei existed to carry out her task, and not the task for Rei.

Unaware of most these things, Asuka's first impression of her fellow pilot turned out rather sobering: "What's her damage, anyways?"

Off-put, the great Shikinami retreated into her Halo of sycophants, to whom she went on to complain about how antisocial 'The First' and how she supposedly thought she was better than her even though they were both fellow EVA pilots an Asuka had the more advanced architecture, how it was hardly a wonder that she was spoiled if her parents had allowed her to dye her hair such a garish, attention-grabbing color, and how she was the commander's favorite anyways.

Shinji figured that she'd get to hear the same stories he'd heard from Touji and Kensuke back in the day, about how Rei had never had any friends and various unfriendly speculations as to what the reasons were, about her being retarded or unlikeable and whatnot.

He was surprised that Rei didn't seem all that bothered by the whole event – She just sat there and continued reading her book. If he'd been in her place, he wouldn't have been able to handle having everyone talk about him like that – it was a nightmare come true. Intelligence and Strength might not be the only advantages Rei had over him; One way or another, there could be no doubt that there was a deep gulf of a difference between both those girls and him... yes, even between him and Asuka. For all her despicable qualities, she had no problem openly showing it when she had a problem with someone, whereas she'd probably rightly accused him of being a pushover... on the other hand, he was often merely trying to avoid fights and not upset anyone, something Asuka did not even seem to consider.

It was probably true that she had some admirable qualities about her, but... Shinji was reluctant to employ strong words here, but he really, really, really didn't like her.

Having to hear her talking crap about Rei with her easily-new-found friends just exposed him to the uncomfortable sensation of wrath bubbling up inside him – What did Asuka know about Ayanami, anyways? Having gotten to know something about that girl, having seen her world (That tiny, empty apartment... those abandoned concrete buildings and his father), her worries ("I have nothing else.") and her strength, the thought of walking over there and doing something about it did briefly cross his mind, but it was discarded just as quickly. It figured that he'd prove himself to be a coward, and besides, he was unlikely to accomplish anything besides becoming the target of laughter himself... all the more surprising was it to hear Nagato's disgruntled voice beside him, bringing to lights the very same words his own soul had wanted to speak: "I don't want to overstep my bounds, but, is that the way they should be speaking of a girl who risked their life for the sake of all of us not too long ago? That's no way to speak about another human being, period..."

"...You're probably right in the end..." Touji replied. "...but it's not like I can't see where they're coming from. Don't get me wrong, Shinji, but you EVA pilots are quite the eccentric bunch..."
Kensuke could somewhat follow that conclusion, but reacted with more delight than skepticism: "So you think I'd fit right in?"

After the first sounding of the school bell, all students had relocated into their respective classrooms, EVA pilots included, leading to a math lesson where the actual math lasted little longer than five minutes, because the old teacher had gone on another ramble about Second Impact, until the students were all released by the sound of that same bell.

Much like his mornings, Shinji's school days and breaks had returned to an utterly mundane, pleasant routine, that almost let him forget the complete un-normality of his situation and made the few moments where it inevitably bled through all the more jarring and grotesque.

Still, for the most part, he thought that it brought him genuine respite to spend the break talking with Kensuke, Touji and Nagato, sitting around one of their tables, forming a little group just like everyone else.

Before him, he saw a scene as it occurred almost every day now – Kensuke was in the process of presenting them some passionate explanation about something, Touji weighed it with the occasional comment, some of them humorous and others sceptically, whereas Nagato remained quiet but added his own elaborations when he felt that something held implications for society or the current political situation, busy with his hands with a little puzzle-cube when the main topic didn't hold his full attention, which, at first, had somewhat bothered Touji – Kensuke was fond of the things himself and had some admiration for Nagato's skill, whereas Shinji had since learned to just ignore or accept the little unusual things about this place. But soon it had become clear that the bandaged boy was listening well enough despite his reluctance to put away his little toys.

'To his defense', Kensuke had jovially remarked that Nagato was probably still rather nervous around new people (especially such 'lively' ones) despite his reserved, measured exterior, and that it wasn't exactly uncommon for people not to know what to do with their hands when they were nervous. The older boy had then confirmed that theory through a hesitant nod – Shinji found himself admiring Kensuke for that skill of pressing just the right buttons with others in order to understand them.

For his own part, Shinji had to admit that he had very little insight into the people in his immediate surroundings – even about Misato, or the two girls, in whose direction his gaze tended to derail itself whenever they happened to be in the same room – First and foremost, there was Ayanami, who was sitting at her usual desk and silently looking out of the window as she was wont to do. They were supposed to have grown closer since that no-longer-so-recent battle, but... he supposed that the exceptional situation would have catalyzed the exchange of their deeper feelings a little. In his day-to-day life, he still barely had the confidence to really approach her, but, what boy his age would have not reservations in talking to a pretty girl his age?

Especially a boy with limitations like his own. It was still not very encouraging to see her sitting all by herself in that corner.

But since last week, there was another pole in this classroom that magnetically attracted his looks – Shikinami Asuka.

Perhaps it was... because he was a tiny bit envious of her, or because they were supposed to be comrades despite everything...

Or perhaps it was because Touji would sometimes glance over in the process of complaining about her antics.
Usually, she would be surrounded by other girls and stand there laughing about some celebrity's most recent misfortune or the newest gossip, but the moments that really interested, even fascinated Shinji where the few occasions on which Asuka would be by herself, when she would, for example, lean against her desk and entertain herself with a handheld game.

Something like playing video games... probably didn't fit so well into the image that people had come to have of her around the school; Most likely, they overlooked it because it did seemed like a minor deviation from the appearance she otherwise presented, but, as crazy as it seemed, Shinji thought that in those moments, she almost looked like himself with his headphones, when she did, for once, not hold her head up high but downwards, and wasn't wearing that scary artificial brightness on her face, but instead looked annoyed, or even... downcast?

He had to think back to what he'd felt the moment just before they'd opened the seventh angel's jaws together. There had been some quality that reminded him of himself, who knows, maybe everything she showed to everyone else was just a mask... or maybe that was just what he wanted to believe, that even Ms. Perfect had some human weakness somewhere.

Before he could even finish the thought that he might ever be able to feel sympathy towards her, he witnessed firsthand how she'd proceeded from stomping on people's love letters to planting her foot on their authors themselves, kicking down several boys that had been literally standing in line for a chance to confess to her or talk to her or something like a row of dominoes.

Figures that you'd have to be an action-movie worthy incarnation of manliness of Kaji's caliber to even be noticed as a potential suitor by her.

No. There definitely wasn't the slightest hint of a similarity between himself and Shikinami; They might as well have been creatures from different planets, living in worlds as different from each other as this idyllic school life with friends and all was from the brutal world of battles that they could be pulled back into at any given moment – after all, by now, a whole week had passed without any angel attacks, the next one could be due at any moment... and still, subtle little things like the omnipresent nerve clips in Asuka's hair continued to remind him that both of these drastically different worlds were equally real parts of his life.

Both of them, and the beginnings of something even crazier... the old teacher had since erased it, but in the morning, when the classroom had first been unlocked, there was something written on the blackboard – A few only partially wiped math problems left over from yesterday, and a small, unassuming line of text in the lower left corner of the blackboard - "The world is wrong.", signed 'I.Y.'...

As to who that message was meant for, there could be no doubt, especially once Kensuke began to recount how the mysterious mass murderer hadn't claimed a new victim in weeks, and how people were now discussing what the cause might be...

Shinji had long since sunk all his attention into his friends' conversations when Asuka's seat received another visitor.

At first, she reacted to the soft, tentative 'Uhm...? ' with a slightly annoyed, inquiring sound, but when she looked up to size up the other person, she was met with a surprise – before her stood not another one of her 'admirers', but a girl, one that did not belong to the usual crowd that would gather around her place. She had neatly parted dark brown hair tied into a pair of twin tails with some purple ornamental baubles, with brown eyes and freckles – the class representative, if she was not mistaken.

She did not exactly have the best reputation with the other girls – though some of the quieter,
wallflower-ish girls had described her as an involved and dependable friend, the overall perception of her was not so favorable. Most students, especially the 'popular' ones tended to see her as a self-important busybody, a snitch and a killjoy. The Second Child could have listened to her new friends, told this chick to sod off, and give her hell merely for annoying her, but sh hesitated.

Truth be told, she did not feel any real affection for those easily swayed bimbos, she could tell they were opportunistic fairweather schmoozers who'd do just about anything to get in good graces with whoever happened to be the alpha males or females in a given setting, always following the leader almost like... dolls.

Asuka regarded those girls more as trophies than friends, swaying their attention was merely the proof she needed to be popular, and she did not think that this was a sad state of affairs... they didn't know her true self anyways, all they wanted was to bask in her rays.

But the class representative was... different. It was possible that she was here to improve her reputation, but just as likely that she defined respectability by entirely different terms than simple popularity, which would mean that she was after something else entirely.

Asuka decided to hear her out before deciding anything, probably in part because she still felt irritated about the whole deal with the first child. (Just why did the other pilots have to be )

"Uhm, Asuka-san?" she began, almost shyly, partially averting her gaze, not at all like the domineering person she tended to be described as."Would you like to eat lunch with me?"

That did not sound practiced, polished or put-on, but surprisingly... genuine.

"Uhm... okay..." Asuka answered, displaying an atypical moment of uncertainty; Usually, she tended to form her opinion about a person very quickly, often both preemptively and persistently, but for once, she really wasn't sure what to think of this whole situation.

The class representative smiled timidly.

"I'm so glad that I finally worked up the courage to talk to you." she admitted.

She'd admired Asuka's confidence and assertiveness ever since she first transferred into their class last week, and had wanted to become her friend, but thus far, she hadn't been able to find a good moment to approach her, since she tended to be surrounded by a cluster of girls. Hikari knew well enough that she was probably commonly thought off as the sort of girl that gives boys nightmares – She did not hold any ill will against anyone, but it was important for things to get done and to make sure that something resembling proper classes could take place now and then; She was concerned about the future of the very people who tended to write her off as a bitch.

"Your name is Hikari, isn't it?"

"Uh, yes..."

"Sorry? Could you perhaps tell me whee to find the main facilities of the technical division?"

When the person Kaji had addressed turned around, he was faced with a smiling man a little above his own age. Between his long, dark hair and the white coat he'd draped over his uniform, there was a bit of a stylish quality to him, even in the garb of a large organization.

"Well, I don't mind telling you, but I doubt that some directions will be of much use in this labyrinth. I have to go there myself, so I can show you the way. Where exactly do you wanna go, anyways? The test chambers for the Evanelions?"
The technician's eyes darted to Kaji's uniform. "...or perhaps the offices?"

"The offices will do. Speaking of which, do you have any clue whether Dr. Akagi currently happens to be in hers?"

"Yeah, I think so. She should still be looking through some data from the last battle. Follow after me."

"My, my, this please seems to have changed a lot..." Kaji commented after his 'guide' pulled his security card through one of the terminals, opening a door beyond which the leader of the investigative department did not recognize much at all. "I've only been gone for two years, but I feel like a living fossil..."

"I know." the white-coated man replied. "I've only recently been transferred here myself, and I have to admit, it took me a while to find my new office."

He smiled a little more.

"Still, it's a shame that I didn't get to bringing this here any earlier." he pulled a thin picture frame from the NERV-issue bag that was slung over his shoulder, and proudly presented it to Kaji.

The picture showed the man in his younger years, next to a woman in a long red dress, with a toddler sitting on her lap. "I already brought some pictures of Kikyou and Nagato over there, but none where you can see all three of us together."

Though Kaji felt a bit stricken at those words, he maintained his smile.

On the picture, the technician and what he presumed to be his wife looked little older than he had been around the time Misato had dumped him.

Lies and concealment made everything much, much easier.

"You seem to have started the family planning rather early."

"Why wait, when you've found the right person?"

"Why indeed... unfortunately it happens that one not only needs to find them, but to be found oneself. The thing about 'the one' is that, like you can tell from the expression, there's only one, and if you screw it up, you don't always get a second chance..."

"Did you get yours?"

"I wonder; If so, I doubt that it's particularly much of a chance. But well, in the end, there's lots of fish in the water..."

"You should try anyway; I'll be rooting for you. If it's really the one, it will be worth the try one way or another... oh, this is my office. You'll find Dr. Akagi's at the other end of the corridor. You can't possibly miss it, it's the door next to that big glass panel."

It was nice talking to you. These days, most people underestimate the rewards of a nice little chat. I'm expecting fruitful cooperation, Mister..."

"Kaji. Ryouji Kaji, investigations department."

"Mitsurugi Minoru, technical division. Pleased to meet you. See you around!"
Whereas school allowed the Children the occasional break from EVA operations, a few hundred meters below, Ritsuko was not so lucky – Her ashtray and coffee cup had to be enough for relaxation, and her little cat figurines had to suffice as company – though they performed admirably, as their mistress had some very interesting data to look through; Even after weeks of dissection, the results of the double piloting incident, supposedly a spontaneous idea of the Second Child, had posed a lot of interesting questions whose answers they could only guess at, but they still had to to extract as much conclusions and information from those records as they possibly could with such a sparse evidence situation.

Since the situation had involved mortal danger, it was not exactly something they could easily repeat under controlled conditions, but they had to be ready if some circumstance allowed them to draw or confirm further conclusions, many theoretical scenarious had to be drawn up, considered and their outcomes calculated under different assumptions, knowing well that the actual outcomes might resemble neither of their predictions.

It never would have occurred to her to complain about the amount of her work – that would have been like complaining about the air or the existence of trees; In her life, work formed the most omnipresent, most basic fabric, the canvas on which her days unfolded – but despite what some might presume, none of that meant that she wouldn't enjoy a warm touch, or that she wouldn't feel flattered if a man embraced her from behind and quite audaciously placed his hand on her left breast.

She swiftly recognized just which old charmer was responsible for this maneuver, and thought to have already guessed at its true purpose, but she didn't resist either way, even gladly accepted the gesture, even gleefully closing her eyes for a moment as his well-practiced hands went to work on her breast, on which the size of his hands didn't quite seem to fit.

It was true that she was in what she considered a committed relationship at this moment, but right now, her latest backlog in tiny moments of wrath almost casually took the helm, wrath that existed exactly because her so-called 'boyfriend' was unlikely to feel all that much personal jealousy over this, and had not been him who'd systematically destroyed all functions of her soul which would have enabled her to feel regret back when he had corrupted her? It was not like she'd decided that she did not owe that man any loyalty because he would never take her into this sort of romantic embrace, never whispered sweet nothings and generally didn't act like much of a lover; She was simply in love with him and refusing to accept that he had no interest in anything other than her skill and reliability as an underling; So, she simply didn't think of him and simply let it happen – why should she contort the artificial makeup-caked face reflected on her computer screen?

"Could it be that you've lost a bit of weight, Rit-chan?" the familiar voice of Kaji Ryoji whispered seductively, letting the weight of his weight rest on her shoulder and thus shrewdly reducing the distance between the centers of their masses to zero.

"Oh, what makes you think that?" she replied playfully, reciprocating his little game with at least passing interest.

"You must be going through some heartache." he concluded with the charm of a professional casanova. "Is that so?" she asked, tangentially curious about how his choice of pick-up-lines had managed to strikes this close to the truth, close enough to evaporate at least a minute portion of her relaxation, enough to strain her smile to a degree too subtle for Kaji to notice.

By the time he touched her lips with his large, masculine hands and their scent of smoke, earth and work, and thus gently invited her to turn her face toward him, they looked as picture-perfect as the ruby-red waterproof lipstick that resided on them.
"That is because a woman with a mole in the path of her tears is destined to cry a great many of them."

She distantly observed that part of what made Kaji's sweet talk so effective was that he managed to keep a flawless straight face throughout it, like he might as well be talking about the latest worrisome philosophical developments or deep philosophical truths.

Ritsuko recognized it for the cheap trick that it was, but had to admit that she found it pleasantly refreshing. She began to imagine what these words might sound like if they had spoken in the voice of a certain other man.

"I must admit that your strategy is pretty refined, but there's one significant miscalculation in it: Unfortunately, I've actually gained 1570 grams."

"Oh?" He did not allow himself to be daunted or dissuaded for a moment, but only proceeded to pull her more tightly into his embrace, framing her face between the hand that was not busy with her breast, and his own face which was warm though covered in pointy stubble.

The soft touch of a real skin, an used, adult hand that had lost its youthful softness, but still retained its human warmth.

Of what a difference it was, how much more more real it felt from the simple addition of real, fragrant skin that wasn't concealed behind some bone-white mask, which his a hallowed ground consecrated to someone else, and converted the touch she yearned from into the stabs of a dagger, by reminding her that even though she might have been naked before him in body and soul, he most certainly wasn't, that he was marked, disfigured for the sake of the copy of a copy of something for which she was a replacement's replacement, just barely fitting the pattern because her eyes happened to be a similar shade of green, because she had such fair skin and her hair was not much longer...

Of course, she knew that this, too, was a game and a lie, but there was a point after which a lie had been imbued with so much art and finesse that it was closer to being a fairytale, an epic even.

A beautiful, pleasant lie, exactly like a dream – oh, why couldn't he even make an effort to lie to her, given the autoatic ease with which he usually tended to spit out untruths, like vending machine releasing cans.

"I'd like to confirm that with my own eyes..." Kaji whispered.

"Alright, but I should probably remind you that this room is under constant surveilance."

"No problem!" he declared with a James-Bond-esque coolness that was probably somewhat mitigated the thick accent sticking to the English words, that nonetheless added an endearing quality.

"I've already fed an endless loop into the surveillance system."

"You really think of everything, don't you."

"I just don't like losing."

"Is that so? Then I'm very sorry, because you've already lost." Ritsuko disentagled herself from his arms. It had been a nice little game, but part of being an adult was to recognize when playtime was over. "A seaaaaary lady is watching us."
And indeed – Misato looked as if the contents of her head were about to build over, and the glass next to her face cloudy with her perspiration.

She felt a little 'found out', bit but pigs would fly before she admitted that. If anyone ought to be ashamed, it was him, to be making out here in plain view like some kind of special discount offer in a shop window – quite possible that he'd have presented anyone unlucky enough to walk past this window with a free pornographic flick if he'd found a willing co-conspirator. What was he thinking, to hit on people right in front her, and to go for her best friend, at that? N-Not that she was in any way jealous, or anything, quite the opposite! It just confirmed her long-standing opinion that this man was disgusting, a slave of the same hormones that fertilized the pointy hair growing on his face.

Who'd ever get jealous over him? Certainly not Misato! And still, that guy had the nerve to act as if nothing had happened and continue his conversations just like that.

"It's been a long while, Ryo-chan." Ritsuko greeted, as usual a bit more practiced in the art of keeping her cool.

"Yes, too long."

"I must admit you're not quite as discrete as I remembered you."

"He's never been 'discrete' in his life!" Misato protested as she angrily marched into the room.

"What are you doing here and why the hell aren't you back in Europe yet? Unit 02 has been transferred safely, so why haven't you left already?"

He either failed to notice her anger or had chosen to ignore in his bid to thoroughly ruin her day. It's like he took every 'No' for a 'Yes' and every 'piss off' for a declaration of love.

"I was officially notified of my transfer this morning," he recounted, his stupid, annoying grin not faltering for a minute. "Looks like I'll be staying here for quite a while. The three of us can hang out together, just like we did in college!"

"I have absolutely no intention of recapitulating the olden days with you!" Misato retorted indignantly. "I just have some business with Ritsuko! The transfer of Asuka's personal data is finished. That's it!

And anyways, just what makes you think that anyone could ever want to-"

Before the leader of the operations division could further demonstrate her skill in the art of the cold shoulder (or any lack thereof), the wall behind her lit up with hexagonal alarm symbols, calling every man or woman to their posts, which was further underlined by the blaring klaxons that resounded through the complex.

"...an Angel Attack?" Misato concluded, quickly flipping from 'malcontent toddler' to 'Lara Croft mode' before anyone could get in any further snappy comebacks.

"I'll see you in Central Dogma!" she declared, briefly making eye contact with as the automatic door was opening.

One second later, she'd turned around and ran away.

"She seems jealous." Ritsuko commented as she stood up and gathered up her things, with due swiftness but without excessive rush. "Ryo-chan, you might still have a chance."
"Well..." the badly-shaven man replied with a shrug. "It is said that one should never give up hope."

{}{}

Between the LCL that soaked her form and the long, blue hair that surrounded her like a cloak, and the lumps of shapeless twitching flesh scattered around her, parts of which were in the process of coalescing from or disintegrating into their liquid state, the being classified as 'Leatha' suddenly averted her gaze from her handiwork, looking upwards, to where she had sensed a potential disturbance to her plans.

Stinking of blood and guts, in the nude to avoid her garments being soaked with the products of her work, she rose from where she had been kneeling to continue her unholy labor, and stood up to her full height.

It might seem like she had simply fixated an arbitrary point on the tin walls on the warehouse she was working in, but in truth, her stare was meant for something that lay far beyond that wall.

It looked like this would once again delay her ventures a little – To continue, she'd have to wait until that bothersome child which had come to conquer the world in Adam's name had been consigned to the past – As far as she has proceeded with her undertakings up to this point, there was a good chance that Adam's annoying brood might detect her activities.

To call it 'hope' would have been an overstatement, much like even deeming 'Leatha' capable of producing such a sentiment, but she decided that it would be most preferable if this resolved itself quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Look forward to the next part: 04: [THE LONE AMAZON]
Don't do love, don't do friends
I'm only after success
Don't need a relationship
I'll never soften my grip

Don't want cash, don't want car
Want it fast, want it hard
Don't need money, don't need fame
I just want to make a change
I just wanna change

I know exactly what I want and who I want to be
I know exactly why I walk and talk like a machine
I'm now becoming my own self-fulfilled prophecy
Oh, oh no, oh no, oh no

One track mind, one track heart
If I fail, I'll fall apart
Maybe it is all a test
Cause I feel like I'm the worst
So I always act like I'm the best

If you are not very careful
Your possessions will possess you
When the alarm sounded, Shinji had been racking his brains over a particularly frustrating physics problem, for which the equations – if he'd even used the correct ones and remembered them correctly – just refused to spit out any sort of sensible results. But though the shrill klaxon came with the promise that he would not be expected to finish the calculations under his nose, it was not a reason for relief.

Quite the opposite, though the wave of apprehension that shot through his body was no longer as sharp as he'd expected it to be – it was more of a somber acknowledgment of the threat, but no longer that extreme paralyzing panic...He'd been expecting the next angel lately, and one hand would no longer have been enough to count the times he'd already gone through that whole procedure.

Of course he was still worried, but the experience was barely compared with what he'd gone through in the moments leading up to his first few moment – duty called, and, unfortunately, so did Asuka.

“Are you an idiot or something? Why do you keep sitting there and staring at the air? We've gotta get going!”

The Second Child had already jumped out of her seat, Rei was on her feet as well, and for that matter, so was most of their class – Hikari had reacted fast and called for everyone to leave the room in an orderly manner, in a commanding stone that had nothing to envy from the alarm klaxons.

Many students turned back to wave at the pilots or wish them luck.
“Go Shinji! Show those beasts who's boss!” Touji hollered.

“Yeah! Just like the last times!” Kensuke added. “It's a pity that we can't come and watch the battle....”

“Don't even think of it!” Hikari clarified, still remembering what had happened the last time the freckled boy had thought of this sort of idea. “And stay safe, Asuka-san. Good luck! And of course the same goes for you two. Be careful!”

Most of the boys cheered for Asuka, a good portion of the girls for Shinji, and now and then, even Rei got mentioned for completeness’ sake.

Not much for exuberant gestures, Nagato just sent a silent, confident smile in Shinji's direction. Even the teacher, who probably had a nice side when she wasn't torturing innocent students with physics, stopped to wish the pilot trio success.

But as their cheering classmates proceeded to vacate the room and march away, Asukas complaints increasingly dominated the local soundscape “How much longer are you going to take? Move your ass!” She licked her lips in what might have been anticipation or even a hint of sadistic excitement. “Today is going to be my great debut in Japan, my chance to finally show everyone what I can do, and I don't want to be late because you stayed glued to your chair like an idiot!”

“Yes, I'm... I'm coming....” Shinji answered as he rose from his seat. He had to admit that he'd really been a little distracted, but he had to admit that he simply wasn't used to being trusted in such a way by so many people, to even have that many noticing let alone talking to him. He was still not used to it, but neither did it frighten him as much as he had in the beginning... the fear to disappoint all their expectations.

Instead, he was almost beginning to feel a thin sliver of confidence, he was actually wearing something like a very thin smile as he sped towards headquarters.

He... would surely manage.

By the time the pilots had arrived at headquarters, the angel had already been identified, localized and confirmed as such, all while the Evangelions had been prepped for transportation:

As the city's defense systems had yet to be fully repaired from the past week's altercation, especially since all the artillery batteries distributed around the fortress-town had been used as cannon fodder in the battle, and had therefore been processed into mere lumps of molten metal by the Sixth angel, it had been decided to intercept the Eighth Angel before it reached the mainland – For that purpose, the Units One and Two were to be deployed, as the EVA prototype happened to be every bit as demolished as the defense systems.

Therefore, Rei had been ordered to remain on standby, waiting at their base as a last reserve for the most extreme of emergencies, in case the angel somehow got past the other two and could not be stopped by any other means.

Shinji and Asuka, however, were loaded into a pair of those nifty transport aircraft along with their Evangelions, of the sort that at least Shinji himself had already become acquainted with before his battle with Jet alone.

Meanwhile, Misato, Dr. Akagi and several other technicians departed in a series of somewhat less
cool but altogether sufficiently functional vehicles that would serve as a mobile control center - The Subcommander remained behind to oversee the operation from headquarters.

Shinji's father turned out to be out of town, much like Rei had said.

As one might have expected of NERV's tendency to be prepared for every scenario their imagination could have conceived of, all of the components had reached the coastline reached within a short time, and been used to set up a provisional basis long before the angel even came into their sights – like many of its predecessors, it was projected to attack from the depths of the red Ocean.

It was, as Misato secretly suspected, perhaps fate that the spot where the MAGI expected the angel to reach the land according to its current course happened to fall close to a city that had been partially destroyed after Second Impact and subsequently rebuilt at a safe distance from the coast – here before them loomed some of the "Old Town"'s crumbling remains, the taller of the wrecked, half-submerged buildings littering the coastline.

"So ..." she began, clinging to a pole located on the ceiling and talking into a communication device, while some of her subordinates – among them Ibuki and Hyuuga – typed away at their consoles behind her.

On the wall in front of her, there were a clock and two screens, both of which displayed active, open channels to both Evangelions, on which both of the children could be seen sitting in their respective entry plugs.

"We are going to engage the Angel at close range. EVA Units 01 and 02 will take turns in attacking the target."

"Got it." Shinji confirmed.

But Asuka, or rather her huge, greedy ego, saw a serious problem with this plan: "Menno! This is supposed to be by great debut in Japan, I'd really like to know why I'm not allowed to fight alone!"

"It can't be helped, that's not the plan." Shinji explained, in an attempt to placate his red-headed comrade with a friendly smile before the true fight would begin.

But somehow, he only succeeded in making her even angrier: "Just don't get in my way." she snapped at him, sufficiently loud and bossy to cause him to shrink back from her mere image on the interface screen.

This just confirmed to her once more what sort of meek little wimp she was dealing with.

"Even if he is the commander, just how did your old man ever manage to get you selected as an EVA pilot?"

Shinji sighed.

No matter whether he reacted with hostility or kindness, all she ever did was get mad at him. By nature, he tended to be a fairly peaceful guy who preferred almost anything to an open dispute and was usually willing to look the other way (often because she lacked the courage to actually protest ...) but this girl was very irritating. He could make even less sense of her than of this morning's confusing physics problem – If it were him, he'd just be grateful that there was a plan to fall back on and someone to fight at his side.

All things considered, he'd really rather have Ayanami with him right now, but beggars couldn't be
choosers, and it was time for the landing - Asuka went first, retracting the locking pin that kept the EVA attached the transport plane unlocking and letting herself gracefully glide toward the countryside.

Shinji himself followed suit with a short delay, so that he touched down on the sand about a second after she did, after which they both waited to be fitted with the power cables that had previously been set up on-site.

"...Attacking two-on one is hardly a fair fight..." Asuka commented while pulling her weapon out of a passing transport vehicle.

Unlike Shinji, who had opted for a regular old rifle that could be operated simply and intuitively from a safe distance, her choice was driven less by strategical efficiency or any fear of losing her nerve in an unfavorable situation, and much more by a desire to show off, or as she would call it, 'elegance', pompously brandishing an enormous battle axe with two gigantic, shining blades that would have driven any self-respecting viking mad with envy.

"...I don't like this."

"This is not a game, Asuka. When it comes to the salvation of mankind, we have no choice but to play it safe." Misato reminded her from down in the provisional base.

After the last of the preparations were concluded with a fortunate swiftness, both pilots had their biological war machines rise to their full heights and readied themselves for battle.

It was Shinji who first noticed the angel swimming towards them, leaning forward to grab the controls as he outfitted his face with a somber expression appropriate for the occasion, warning his comrade with a quiet “It's coming.”

As if the angel had somehow felt that it had been found, it chose to show itself the very moment he was done talking.

A column of water shot upwards from the scarlet tides with explosive force, only to rain down around the being that had creating them, adorning its surroundings with a rainbow.

This angel bore a slight resemblance to the first one Shinji had encountered – It, too, consisted mostly of a rubber-like, dark greenish material, but in addition to rib-like protrusions resembling those of it's distant predecessor, it had large areas of its body covered by a reflective, metallic shell, coating the inner side of its legs and the arch formed by the upper side of its torso all the way to the tips of its arms, ending in small avian claws.

The creature had also something that had very distant resemblance to a face, a round area capable of turning itself that enclosed two holes, which were probably be supposed to be eyes, and a furrow, which parted it like a ying-yang symbol.

So that was the latest enemy ... Shinji wished that there way some way to gauge the relative strength of these things based on their forms – some of them had this bill-like face, but otherwise, not one of them had looked like another.

"Attack!" Misato ordered.

Without warning, Asuka set her EVA into motion and ran ahead without giving Shinji any time to react. "I'm going first! Cover for me!"

"C-Cover?"
"Sure! Ladies first!"

"Beginners should wait their turn!" Shinji retorted, having grown tired of the way Asuka kept treating everything like a game and insisting on turning everything into a competition in the manner of a three-year-old.

Showing her just as little regard as she had shown him, he pointed his gun at the angel and sprayed it with bullets before it could strike first.

But Asuka had kept charging ahead as he had spoken, and gave him little more than a scant "Now I come!" before jumping straight into what used to be his line of fire just seconds ago – It's like she wanted to get herself killed!

You'd think the last fight ought to have taught her a lesson about what happens when you refused help!

Grandiose as ever, she jumped from one ruined building onto the next, a practice which had been significantly more useful in the last fight, and, on this occasion, likely served no other purpose than to show off her high synch rate, sped forward, let out a shrill battle cry and ... sliced the angel clean in half...?

In a single strike?!

Shinji was honestly... not expecting this.

This had been a little too... quick, right?

Could one of these things truly be taken out so easily?

Marvelling at the effortlessness of her victory, Shinji was forced to admit that there must have been... a little more than just hot air behind her tall tales about her long and rigorous training.

"Good work ..." Shinji commented, honestly impressed.

But just because Shinji was not a sore loser, that did not imply that Asuka had to be a graceful winner – There was no way she was going to renounce an opportunity to present the subject of her wholly imaginary rivalry with her best sneer: " Watch and learn, Daddy's boy! That's what a real fight should look like: Elegant and without waste of ammunition!"

But to be honest, all the considerable effort that Asuka was putting into her dismissive smirk was going unnoticed, as the Third Child's glance had drifted past the frame of her image on the interface screens all the way to the sad, drooping remainder of the Angel - Why, he wondered, hadn't it liquified yet?

He received his answer when he saw the purple flesh Asuka had sliced in twain beginning to twitch, only for the angel's Ying-Yang symbol-like 'face' to be retracted into its body with a sucking noise, only to be replaced with a new, circular mask in uniform gray, this one bearing no lines and three point-like eyes.

This ... This could not good.

Asuka had just enough time to recognize the look of dread on her fellow pilot's face before the two pieces of Angel swelled only briefly, and then contracted in wrinkles as if they mold themselves to
a certain shape before tearing open like some sort of package, leaving two miniature versions of the
supposedly deceased Angel to be liberated therefrom, each complete with their own metallic shell,
one golden, one silver.

The angels did not take long to rise up and grant Asuka her wish for a "fair" fight fulfilled, though it was now Misato who gripped her walkie-talkie far to tightly as she began to rant about the 'unfair' nature of the fight.

The enemy, the face the Children the children were faced might have begged to differ, if hadn't lacked a concept of anything like 'fairness' - His name was Israphael, the Eighth Messenger, the angel of Tears and Music: Below-average firepower, quite slow regeneration, at most mediocre AT Field strenght.

But despite all of this, he was very sure that it was him who would fulfill their divine mission and take this planet for themselves – all because of one small facet of his biology that he believed would more than compensate for his shortcomings in all those other areas: A double core.

As the impetuous Lillim had charged at him, her will driving a perversion reminiscent of the Angels' father, she had overlooked how the messenger had looked in her direction, dignified her a rather unimpressed blink, and made no further attempts to evade her attack.

Israphael had understood her intention to cleave his body in half, from the top all the way to the bottom - and saw no real reason to avoid it.

She had not inflicted the slightest damage - Not a gram of his body had been destroyed, all of it still connected to a completely undamaged energy core, one in each half.

The seconds of motionlessness that followed its ineffective bifurcation had simply been the fraction of time the angel's consciousness had needed to get used to its new state, the sensation of being in two places at once, of mantaining two wholly separate forms with one and the same AT-field.

It had been a momentary shock, a consequence of it's soul's finite reaction time, ...but nothing more.

It was but a fright which quickly passed and did not alter Israphael's combative prowess, or the certainty of it's victory.

It was time to take on the Lillim.

And those had pretty much shot themselves in the foot when they helped the angel with the twin cores to two unconnected forms – in some ways, this had doubled the number of their enemies, and in others, left it the same, and they had done that in the one exact combination that would be the most unwelcome to them.

Since they had split the angel in two, Shinji and Asuka were no longer outnumbering it.

But as both bodies were being commanded by the same soul with the ease of a man ruling over his own two feet, the two halves of the angel had an unlimitted capacity for the one thing its adversaries were the most lacking in: cooperation.
"This morning at 10 o'clock, 58 minutes and 15 seconds Evangelion unit 01 was overwhelmed by one half of the target object, hereinafter referred to as Alpha, and sunk about two kilometers from Suruga Bay."

In order to accompany Lt. Ibuki's report, both the projectors in the back corner of the small briefing room were presenting an image of the usually awe-inspiring violet titan surrounded by comparatively tiny salvage ships, it's legs poking up into the air like some pitiful comic book character, 'boasting' of a level of coolness that would have made a wet dog resemble a Terminator by comparison.

But though she was attending the 'debriefing', which better described as a damage report, from the seat next to a rather unhappy-looking Shinji, a sympathetic but somehow amused Kaji and a distinctly un-amused subcommander, Asuka couldn't seem to muster much in terms of scoff – perhaps because she could very well guess which image was to follow next:

Yes, exactly. Another EVA that had been rammed head-first into the ground, leaving only it's feet to protrude from the hole: Her very own.

If one had any further questions as to what had taken place, a mere glance at the clock, or alternatively, the two Children, who sat on their benches with their plugsuits still on and some towels provisionally draped around their shoulders would have been enough to conclude that it had taken quite a while to liberate the two from their rather precarious situation:

"Twenty seconds later, EVA 02 was incapacitated by the beta half in a similar manner. The head of project E's scientific division summarized the results of the operation like this:"

They were then treated to a frank complaint from a recording of Ritsuko's voice:

"...a complete disaster."

To leave those words unchallenged was... absolutely unacceptable.

Asuka couldn't allow, and much less suffer to hear the possibility being discussed for as much as a second, nor the prospect that she could have failed at the one thing she had been pretty much... made for, after she'd spent all her life training and preparing for this very moment to arrive.

Immediately, she jumped out of her seat, paying no mind to the towel that slid past the outline of her body to come to a rest on the ground.

Mere split-seconds after the recording had stopped, she'd been standing at her full height in a broad posture, and also, in the way of the projector beam, casting a shadow on the likeness of her shame as if to cover it.

"Man! I can't believe this stupid daddy's boy had to go an ruin my big debut!" she ranted, as if she were stating an universally approved fact that was bound to garner a firework of agreement from everybody in the room.

But the bubble containing that mental construct she'd defensively raised for her protection was quite rudely popped when someone actually dared to contradict her – and of all people, it had to be him, that loser, that useless weakling who was only here because of his father's influence...

Back in Germany, she had always been treated like one would expect to be treated as the pride of the European armed forces, the pilot with the highest synch ratio of the all (at least insofar as she was aware.)
She had been the unwavering focus of the third branch, and as such, been spoiled like a princess, been granted a proper commission in the forces as soon as she asked for it, and paraded in front of high-ranking politicians and businessmen from all over Europe, including the chancellor herself, the current leader of the European Union's commission, and even a certain Mr. Lorenz, the reclusive billionaire, who, at least on paper, supposedly owned half of Europe and two thirds of the internet.

Every wish had been read from her lips, every comfort she could want or her quarters, every expensive piece of brand clothing or outlandish leisure time activity had been given to her if she as much as implied being interested in it – Because she was worth it.

She was the elite. One of the very few, very special people on this world who had been desperately sought and needed, and, once found, been trained, educated and molded since she was a small child. Barely past her toddler days, she had been taken from her father and stepmother so her mind could be nourished by the best teachers in the world, and for her body to be steelied from a young age. Every one of her training sessions and every single meal she'd been fed had been prepared for and planned out by qualified scientists.

She was the best in the world, with the highest synch ratio, the only one who didn't get in through nepotism, not because of who she knew or because she was related to so-and-so, but because she was good.

Better even than the First Child from headquarters!

Because she was something special, born into this world with an unique purpose.

She alone, and no one else.

So why was this nobody, this pathetic little brat who had just randomly shown up out of nowhere and couldn't stop himself from flinching if you as much as spoke to him in a loud voice jumping up from his seat to block the light much like her, and looking her in the eyes without any shame?

Yes exactly, how did that happen? When the boy arrived here about two months and a week ago, he would never have had the nerve to openly defy a sharp-tongued, dominant person such as Asuka, and would much rather have conceded blame without dispute just to stop her from yelling at him, meanwhile struggling not to burst into tears with every word she said –

But he had changed after his ordeal on the Futagoyama, his fiery second baptism in molten metal. It wasn't like he had suddenly become a confident person, the human heart does not change so rapidly, but, to simply stomach that everything had been his fault, that wouldn't fare well with the lump of anger that he'd been silently harboring for a long time, and now, it was beginning to shout louder and louder, about how none of this was fair and how he couldn't have done anything to possibly deserve all this... and least of all Asuka's accusations!

He'd followed the plan – aim for the center of the target and fire!

Even though he hated fighting more than anything, he'd come along and done everything he was supposed to do. He'd done his part, just as he'd done on the mountain, and back then, that had been enough for everything to work, hadn't it? It was her, that stupid, childish newbie who had to turn everything into a game and didn't do her part!

This was not his fault.

There was a time when that very concept would never have crossed his mind, but for once, this was
not his fault, at least not all of it – He had done his part.

“What are you talking about?” he retorted, in a manner that was not really sharp, as he probably still secretly feared that he might be confronted with less than apparent reasons as to why it was, in fact, all his fault after all; Though he was now capable of at least enduring conflict to some extent didn't mean that he didn't find it rather uncomfortable and wished it would stop, but he retained a certain firmness because he knew that he couldn't be all wrong: “It all went downhill when you went off on your own, Shikinami!”

The Second Child couldn't believe her ears.

There wasn't even any real anger or impetus in the pathetic wavering insistence of his voice, he couldn't even be bothered to muster any proper assertiveness – or, he didn't consider her worth 'lowering' himself to her level...

He actually had the gall to put the blame on her? That bumbling half-wit? Just because he'd started out with an oh-so-impressive synch rate – that was still far below her and not anywhere near catching up, mind you – and wasn't even any use to him because he was too cowardly to do anything else but to senselessly shoot around from a distance? Or was it because he expected that either the leader of the operation division or allmighty commander Daddykins would get him out of whatever trouble he and his big mouth could get themselves into?

Who did he even think he was?

(Perhaps, that he was a scarily talented ascendant who might actually come to pose a serious threat to her one day if he kept going the way he had? That there was some reality & substance behind the flashes of a somewhat different, surprisingly serious, brave and determined person she'd briefly thought to have glimpsed on the battlefield? That there might be a good reason for the chills that had gone down her spine, and the dark premonition in her gut telling of a warrior's black, black soul dwelling beyond the almost unnatural midnight blue of his eyes? That the stupid, clueless little brat in this equation was, in fact, Asuka herself?

No, this couldn't be. She would be lost with a rival like that. She forced herself to focus on the idiot who presented absolutely no threat, the fearfulnobody who couldn't even muster a serious attempt at avoiding her in the mornings, took her physical heckling without a fight and seemed to lack all capacity to stand up for either himself or what he wanted, a dead ringer for the kind of pathetic person who was perpetually doomed to end up under the wheels of life. She refused to see anything that could be read as kindness, or the wisdom to bend in the wind rather than have it break you, nor anything she'd never had or been forced to pay a grudging respect to. He was nothing but a worm, he had to be. A worm, barely worth the dirt under his fingernails, and given his track record, he might not even have the guts to dispute it if she were to say this to his face. And as for all the doubts she simply couldn't afford to have, Asuka knew when to just swallow them down.)

“You're blaming me?” she retorted brusquely, pointing her irreverent, fearless index finger straight at the chicken heart inside his chest. “I don't have to put up with excuses from the likes of you! You have some nerve for such a lame slowpoke!”

That spineless brat didn't seem to have anything resembling pride! She'd bet anything that he wouldn't even dare to open his-

“That's rich, coming from you! This would all have gone a lot better if you didn't have to turn everything into a competition!”

Well, as it turns out, Shinji Ikari was anything but a coward – he just thought he was one, and
sometimes, that slight but important distinction made itself felt.

The Third's child accusation was too close to the truth to be dispelled through reasonable arguments, not that they had ever been the hodheaded pilot's language of choice to begin with: “Just look at yourself! Sunk like the Titanic!”

He was about to respond that she was the one acting like a toddler, but at some point, even Shinji's patience was bound to have reached it's end, leading to him following her lead, pointing at the rather uncool image of her own Evangelion and asserting that she hadn't exactly beat him in terms of elegance.

Only when the report resumed did the two adolescents interrupt their argument to turn their attention towards the screens, which now displayed a particular sigil and a squadron of fighter jets in place of their Evangelions.

“At 11 hours and three minutes, the operation was formally aborted and command was turned over to the UN forces.” Maya's voice narrated – and yes, she was referring to the same conventional military whom NERV usually told to stay out of their business.

Subcommander Fuyutsuki, who'd had the dubious pleasure of kindly requesting their assistance, made no particular effort to hide his disgruntlement: “We've made a laughing stock of ourselves!”

“At 11 hours and five minutes, an N2-mine was dropped on the target.”

The next slide showed snapshots of the explosion and extensive damage reports.

“So we'll have to redraw the maps once again.” Fuyutsuki commented acerbically. He couldn't believe his eyes – any moment now, the kids might start pulling each other's hairs.

Did they have any concept of the changed landscapes, uprooted trees, the burnt meadows?

And all that because of a dispute between children...

Second Impact almost seemed justified by comparision. It pained his heart to see which trivialities sufficed to justify carving up the face of the Earth these days, as if mankind had just collectively thrown its arms up and decided than one scar more or less would hardly make a difference anymore.

But what could he offer but lamentation?

Despite all he had to admit that the marring of the world had not exactly moved him to tears; Not when he had been the one giving the order.

Such was the fate of those who fearfully clung to their lives – If Ikari were here, he likely wouldn't have considered those few layers of sediment remotely worth mentioning, and contented himself with bringing up significantly worse alternatives if anyone had felt inclined to object.

Fuyutsuki doubted that he'd ever see the man with a head full of gray – If a bullet didn't get him first, they would undoubtedly be washed away by third impact, a fate they would both welcome with open arms when the shadowed half of this Earth was once again made indistinguishable from the dark night it inhabited.

And on top of all that, he had to deal with bickering children.

It was all rather frustrating and disheartening.
The next slide in the presentation showed the sky clearing up over the angel's torched surroundings. Parts of an evacuated city that had been painstakingly reconstructed, molten down to its skeleton-like steel pillars. Oh the humanity!

And these two children were talking about it like it was a children's game... as one would expect of children.

Once again, reality sunk in painfully, about Ikari's little child soldiers and the certainty that there simply was no better way.

How grotesque it all was, how repulsing, from all the loud noises to the senseless destruction, up to and including the way the boy's hair parted over his forehead, and how it reminded him of Yui. But that fact, at least, was not his to complain about.

The operation's undignified resume continued: “The blast incinerated roughly 28% of the target's mass.”

“They destroyed it?” asked Asuka, unintentionally naive – Shinji already suspected that this was highly unlikely, especially since the angel looked at most somewhat melted on the top, the way an action figure made of rubber or plastic would be. Indeed, the disgraced subcommander was forced to correct her: “They stopped it.”

Even his displeasure was only half-heartedly present in his final summation, having reached a point where it was no longer worth even getting worked up about: “The next attack is only a matter of time...”

He was rather weighed down by the sheer senselessness of it all.

Only Kaji seemed capable of seeing anything positive in this whole Unpleasantness, and smiled at his thoroughly peeved superior: “At least this gives us some time to think of a better plan.”

This didn't really console him, but at least it seemed to have convinced him that it might be worth a try to talk to the youngsters:

Overshadowing their silhouettes with his own, he turned a strict gaze toward the children's questioning faces.

“Listen you two. What do you think your job is?”

“Well, to pilot the EVAs of course!” Asuka replied, as if at the touch of a button. What was even the point of that stupid question?

As it happens, its purpose was to alert the young lady of a fundamental misunderstanding:

“Wrong. Your job is to defeat the angels.” Fuyutsuki clarified.

“Nerv exists to save humanity, not to present it with some grotesque farce!”

Fittingly, the projector was displaying images of the rather inelegant recovery operation, a highlight being the sight of EVA 01 with an oversized tube float – but though it made for a less hilarious sight, it was EVA 02's retrieval that had taken the longest, a fact one would do well not to mention in front of its temperamental pilot.

“It's time that you two learn to work together!” their superior admonished.

And, indeed: Eureka! For once, the two Children were in total agreement, even replying in unison:
“How am I supposed to work together with someone like that?”

Fuyutsuki gave it up.

After one last grumling comment that this had been enough, he escaped to freedom via one of the internal lifts. Where was Ikari when you needed him?

As soon as the subcommander had left, the lights turned back on, leaving Asuka to sink back onto her chair with an annoyed sigh.

“Menno!” she complained, as if she had been made to deal with hours' worth of bureaucratic errands over a trivial matter. “Why does everybody here have to make such a fuss about every little thing?”

“Well...” Kaji replied in an informal tone that spoke more of wisdom than nonchalance, attempting to answer her questions in a diplomatic manner: “As it happens, adults really don't like it when you embarrass them.”

Shinji's question was a little more modest: “...by the way, where is Misato?”

“Clearing up the aftermath. She was supposed to be in charge of the operation, and the person in charge exists to take responsibility...”

Misato didn't even want to look at what once, in better days, had used to be her desk. Technically, it still was her desk, but she couldn't see very much of it, given that it was buried under ridiculously large piles of paper, whose sheer volume made her feel like she'd stumbled into some exaggerated comic book punchline. Paper, paper everywhere!

Thick envelopes, thin envelopes, white, brown, rectangular, sheet-sized, petite, a veritable zoo of complaint letters.

And that wasn't even all of them – Ritsuko had just entered with a few small, white envelopes in her hand which were probably yet more complaints.

Before she'd even gotten an opportunity to see the correspondence, Misato had already been forced to give multiple explanations, some with and some without a rather frosty-looking Fuyutsuki glaring at her.

“Here are the damage reports and the complaints from the state department...” the Blonde began, leading her co-worker on a little tour of the paper-Himalaya before her. “Over there are the letters from the UN and this is a formal complaint from the PR department.” she elucidated, handing her co-worker the last few letters. “Have fun reading all this.”

Misato sighed. “I don't have to, I already know what's written in all of them: 'Defeat the angels, but not in our backyard.' I can deal with this once we've defeated the angel.”

Refusing to spare the paper mountain more than the most necessary of glances, Misato walked past it and sat down with interlocking hands. In her mind, she was already contemplating how in the world they were supposed to deal with this latest ridiculous enemy – if She didn't have to deal with all this annoying paperwork, they might already be sitting at the planning table...
As far as the EVAs were concerned, their embarrassing positions had been the worst of the defeat – there had not been any significant damage. The real problems, of which there were two, or perhaps rather four, were the angel's double core and the bickering pilots – On their own, either of the issues would have been surmountable with some creativity, but together they made for a rather unfortunate combination...

Leave it to her good old friend and eternal pessimist to remind her of a third, or perhaps fifth problem: “The Subcommander is very angry. If you humiliate him again, you'll doubtlessly be transferred…”

“...Probably.” Misato admitted. In all the time she'd worked under Fuyutsuki, she didn't think she'd ever seen him lose his temper before. He tended to be fairly calm – Then again, having lead the operation herself, she knew full well that those two kids had a rare talent for driving people up the walls.

“It was fortunate that Commander Ikari isn't here...” Usually, she would be wondering what kind of conspiracies he might be hatching on his latest business trip to Europe, given that he was supposed to meet with the committee themselves, or complain that he was never here when you needed him, but as of now, she wouldn't mind at all if he were to take his sweet, sweet time.

“Yes.” Ritsuko commented with a surprisingly nonchalant smile, leaning over the paperwork to see her old friend. “If he'd been here, he'd have straight up fired you before you even saw these.”

“Well then, I'm hoping that you came here with some brilliant idea that will save my job?”

“Indeed.”

Ritsuko pulled out a data stick.

Misato joyously rose from her seat, placed her ellbown on the paper mountains to better see Ritsuko and glowed at her with sheer gratitude. “As expected by the brilliant Dr. Akagi! Oh thank you, it's so great to have a loyal best friend like you!”

“That's flattering, but I'm not the one you should be grateful to.” Though Misato was already about to snatch the data stick out of the Blonde's hands like a non-swimmer reaching for a life-saver, Ritsuko playfully snatcht it right out of her grasp only to turn it around as reveal the adhesive label on the other side, on which one could find a sketch of a pink, stylized head and some writing announcing that this data stick was 'For my Darling'.

“This was all Ryo-chan's idea. He says the thought came to him when he watched the Children arguing...”

“It's from Kaji-kun?”

What turn of events.

Her previous reactions to anything even remotely related to the man might have led one to suspect that she'd be liable to brutally smash the poor, innocent data stick into the next available wall, but instead, there was even something like a smile spilling across Misato's lips, probably the safest sign that her supposed oath to never touch anything that had been in the man's hands wasn't what it used to be.

Only distantly did she consider the question what sort of cheap and shallow person one would have to be to denounce and hate only when it was convenient.
The desperately needed rescuing of humanity was always a good pretext to put such considerations out of her mind and allow herself to wonder with some degree of anticipation what the sight of the bickering pilots may have inspired him to do.

That, for once, was a question whose corresponding answer was bound to be much lighter fare than the very different one no one had yet dared to pose – for as embarrassing and inacceptable as today's incident had been, they should all have known to expect something like this sooner or later – as much as they tried to do the work necessary to their survival regardless of that, the pilots they were using were children, in the most turbulent, unpredictable of ages. Of course they were liable to get into childish fights or lose sight of what was truly important. That was precisely why 14 year olds shouldn't be soldiers, among many other reasons.

Could they really expect them to do much better than they did? If their superiors could afford to turn up their noses and complain,

In the end it wasn't fair to demand a standard of maturity from them that even adults couldn't always muster – but because humanity's very survival depended on it, she had to choice but to ask, demand, even enforce that standard.

Of course, Misato always did her best to do this in a... not necessarily “careful” but at least “teacher-like” manner so the children wouldn't feel like soldiers, but... that didn't change that this was exactly what they were.

As he was heading home later that day, it appeared before him again, a bright red grafiti sprayed across a somewhat neglected wooden fence: “The world is wrong”.

It was neither the first nor the second time that Shinji had unexpectedly stumbled across these words when he least expected them, always jolting his memory before he could fully put them out of his mind.

They were everywhere, always scattered by the wayside of his paths, as if someone had exactly predicted it... which was painfully close to something that, ludicrous as it was, actually had a chance of becoming the truth. That girl, Yui... She had spoken of things that were yet to come.

“The home you built for yourself, your friends, the people you love... none of it will last. Indeed... there might come a day on which you feel like your world is coming apart all around you, without you being able to do anything about it.”

The mere afterglow of her words was enough to send chills down his spine.

He didn't want to see this. He didn't want to hear this. If he was bound to fail... then why did she have to tell that to him? Why couldn't she let him enjoy the 'fake' world for as long as it would last? Why couldn't she leave him whatever transient flicker of peace was still left for him? Why couldn't she leave him the few joys he'd fought hard to claim over the last two months? Why did she have to tell him, and why pick him of all people to bear that knowledge, why burden him with awareness of things that he couldn't change anyway?

Why did she have to haunt him with those words, and who was she even?

And if she had spoken the truth, did it not mean that he was bound to fail?

Sure, they had lost today's battle and he'd be the first to admit that his capacity was limited, but...
Misato was sure to think of something, wasn't she? So far, she'd always produced a plan sooner or later.

Shinji forced himself to get moving and ran off, away from the writing on the wall and the things he should have no way of knowing and these events that made no sense. He wanted nothing to do with it – this... life with Evangelions everything was bad enough, but he could more or less wrap his head around it. These words, however, and the way they seemed to be omnipresent like a prophecy, these dreams and all this talk about the future or the absence thereof...

All of that was way out of his league.

Time to get home, back to where familiar sights, sounds and smells were waiting to occupy his straying mind. He wouldn't even mind having Misato ramble at him and make her usual attempts to enthuse him about her exaggerated cheeriness, but she would most likely still be at NERV HQ cleaning up the aftermath of today's disastrous battle.

He had at the very least tried to follow her plan, but that was no good if he was the only one doing so.

Sighing for a very long list of diverse reasons, Shinji pressed the required button to 'order' the elevator that would escort him all the way to Misato's apartment. Distracted by his brooding, he'd almost taken the stairs, but as much as that may have looked like the healthier alternative at first glance, the simple circumstance that the Katsuragi residence happened to be on the eleventh floor dissuaded him from opting for that path all too often when his attention wasn't compromised by the many worries inside his head.

That same inattentiveness was probably why he had failed to take much notice of the U-haul truck that had been driving in the opposite direction as he had been approaching the building which hauled his most recent domicile – a sign that might perhaps prepared him for the unpleasant surprise that awaited him in his own home.

“I'm back... not that anyone's here...” he absentmindedly mumbled to himself as he entered the supposedly empty apartment, perhaps in part to assure himself of his tangible surroundings in the here and now, though mostly out of simple habit.

It was probably that same habitual familiarity with this place, in addition to his remaining inner consternation which kept him from looking too closely at the walls and floor of the hallway as he traversed it, leading him to walk straight past the cardboard boxes, suitcases and bags with nary a clue, no matter how conspicuous they should have been, just from the sheer amount of space they took up, the various 'Deutsche Post' insignias and the neat, cursive handwriting that declared each and every one of them to be the property of 'S.A.L.', not to mention the occasional bits of women's underwear poking out.

He paid the price for his absent-mindedness when the foreboding surprise ended up hitting him with all the dignity a sudden unintentional cold shower once he opened the door to what, just this morning, had still been his quiet and comfortable room, his only, silent refuge from this very crazy world that increasingly resembled a Dalí painting, leaving him to stare in petrified horror at what revealed itself when he slid the door to the side.

For one thing, there was little left behind that door that would have exuded any sense of cozy calmness – Everything was cluttered with unprecedented multitudes of stuff:

Tables, chairs, bags, suitcases... and cardboard boxes, lots of cardboard boxes, all the way up to the ceiling he often liked to stare at. Mountains, nay, archipelagos of boxes!
What had once been Shinji's room was now filled to the brim with a somewhat blocky cardboard facsimile of the Himalayas.

Some of the boxes were even opened and partially unpacked.

“W-What in the world....” Shinji stammered, feeling understandably flabbergasted.

“What happened to my room?”

Shinji didn't even have the time to look for an explanation before some harsh words and their implications provided him one to which none at all would have been preferable: “Keep your hands off my stuff!”

Whenever he thought that his life had become as bizarre and surreal as it ought to be physically possible, his cruel, cruel fate would have thought up yet another means of making him question his feeble sanity even further:

Refusing to believe his ears he turned about to face the source of these fearsome sounds, causing his attention to be caught by a pair of long, slender, flawless legs.

Really flawless, rather desirable, a veritable joy for a hormone-ridden teenager such as himself – not that he'd never seen a pair of uncovered feminine legs before, put these were truly outstanding specimens, not too thin, not too thick, perfectly shaven, exactly right much like the sort one would expect to see printed in certain questionable magazines.

But alas, his experience dictated that legs usually came with a head attached, and the one belonging to this pair sported long, red hair.

Not that this would have been a problem in itself, but all the afore mentioned body parts happened to belong to one Captain Shikinami.

The arrogant European stood suddenly in the hallway of his once relatively safe apartment, her posture confident, casual and upright, calmly finishing a bottle of lemonade as if she owned the place.

And that was precisely what she looked like, barefoot, with her hair down, wearing little more than a scant, silky white nightgown with red lace decorations and a big red bow on the front, which, much like the questionable length of the garment, seemed like an invitation to 'unwrap' her.

Everything about her sent the unmistakeable message that she was here to stay and that she lacked even the slightest doubt or bashfulness about this.

“What's going on here?” The Third Child managed, helplessly. “S-Shikinami? What are you doing here of all places?”

Taking her sweet time to properly enjoy her nice cool beverage, the Second Child took a while to even bother with a reply, which ended up consisting of her turning toward the rather confused teen with a deep, dismissive sigh.

“Are you an idiot?” She asked, mildly annoyed, even though she already knew the answer.

“Heh??”

“The real question is, what are you still doing here.”
Confidently walking toward, or rather, straight past him to the door of her freshly-claimed brand new room, she didn't spare the Third Child as much as a glance, though she was quite deliberate about invading his personal space with his elbow as she generously supplied a simple gesture to elucidate what his likely rather meager intelligence quotient didn't allow him to comprehend, "Isn't it obvious?" she declared, unbothered by the way he fearfully flinched away. "You obviously blew it, so you shouldn't be surprised."

"... what?"

"You're being replaced by the superior model! Misato will be living with me from now on." she declared with a mocking sweetness. "Idiots like you are now obsolete! A good choice, when you consider who's got the superior piloting skills. Even though I would have much preferred to move in with Kaji-san~" she gushed, either wholly ignoring the distinctly lost expression in the Third Child's face, or outright relishing it.

"But honestly, why do Japanese homes have such tiny rooms? I could barely fit half of my stuff in here!" she complained without paying any heed to her fellow polit, who was by then beginning to realize that none of his own belongings remained anywhere in the room.

Back when he'd attempted to run from here, his belongings had still all fit into a single backpack, but thanks to the efforts of Misato, Touji and Kensuke, they could fill a couple of cardboard boxes by now, and every single item had been gathered up and heartlessly deposited in the next best corner: His alarm clock, his umbrella, his clothes, many of which he had only bought very recently, his books and astronomy magazines, even his NERV-mug and the heart-shaped doorsign Misato had bought for him, complete with it's "Shin-chan's Room."-tag. Sure, he'd found it a bit embarrassing when his guardian had first bought it, but by now, he had to admit that it had seriously grown on him.

Next to the sheer volume of Asuka's belongings, everything he owned or, had archived seemed rather puny and insignificant – Come to think of it, he had only been drafted as a substitute pilot to begin with. Were they actually going to send him away?

If that was the case, Asuka did not seem remotely sympathetic – she just kept ranting about everything in her line of sight like it was the most natural thing in the world. "...and while we're at it, don't you Japanese have any sense of personal space? I mean, paper doors that just slide open? How can you stand to live in a room that you can't even lock? Unbelievable!"

"That is because here in Japan, we value politeness and a sense of community. Hello you two!"

By startling them with her sudden arrival, their guardian actually succeeded in capturing both their full attention for what had to be the first time today.

"M-Misato-san!" Shinji reacted, half in greeting yet slightly accusing but mostly quite blindsided.

"You're annoying!", she proceeded to diss the timid boy. "Why don't you just take your garbage and leave?"

Misato did not seem all too concerned about her ward's uncooperative behavior, for even this had been accounted by dear ol' Kaji's genius plot, and he'd had months of experience in dealing with Asuka's whimsical nature.

Instead of rehearsing Fuyutsuki's earlier lectures, she simply smiled.
“Actually, Shin-chan will continue living here.”

'Shin-chan' might have been much more delighted about these news if Asuka didn't chose to vent her frustration by means of a sonorous “WHAAT?!” shouted in immediate proximity to his eardrums, though for once, he actually sympathized with her frustration.

“Our new plan to defeat the angel relies on a joint attach by Evangelion Units One and Two.”

“WHAAT?!” Asuka bewailed anew, annoyedly slapping her hands onto the table to support herself while leaning forward.

On Misato's end, the table was occupied by several report folders and sensor feed printouts and garnished with a can of beer. For reasons of fairness, the two children sitting across her had each been provided with a can of apple juice, green apple for Shinji, red apple for Asuka.

“Isn't it enough that this dimwitted daddy's boy got in my way once? Believe me, it will be much easier if I do it alone!”

“I'm afraid that won't be possible. This is not the sort of enemy that a regular one-on-one combat approach will work against…”

“Oh yes it will!” Asuka protested furiously. Were they seriously going to sic a babysitter on her just because she had lost one single time, and even then only because of that stupid daddy's boy getting on her nerves? She would absolutely not stand for that. “I'm perfectly capable of saving mankind all on my own, thank you very much! Or are you telling me I'm not good enough?”

“Not at all.” Misato clarified firmly, narrowing her eyes into a far more serious expression. “It's just that we are going to need all the skill we can get to persevere through the adversities of this battle. As it would appear, the only way to destroy this particular angel is to destroy both of its cores with a perfectly simultaneous assault. The attack needs to be absolutely synchronous, which means that your timing and cooperation must be nothing short of perfect. In order to prepare for that, you two will be living together from now on.”

“WAAAT?” the two pilots bemoaned in unison, making it very clear that they'd rather keep the greatest possible distance from each other.

Having to work with the other was bad enough, as was having to deal with them every day at school, but to actually share a home with them was a whole different ballgame.

While Shinji just instantaneously melted into a pitiful blob of unhappiness, Asuka wasn't shy about putting her disdain into words: “What is that supposed to mean? You expect me to stay here the whole time until the angel is defeated?”

“Of course not.” Misato replied calmly. “As fellow EVA pilots, you will inevitably have to work together many more times, even in matters of life or death. Besides, both of you are somewhat lacking in communication skills. So, in order to boost your teamwork skills, you two will live under the same roof and eat at the same table.”

“Impossible! Why doesn't the First have to participate in this nonsense? She's an EVA pilot, too, isn't she? Or is the commander's little favorite getting some more preferential treatment here?”
“Well, exactly! Why doesn't she have to participate? Unlike you, she didn't seem to need any special training to cooperate with Shin-chan. Her teamwork is just fine. It's too bad that EVA 00 is still being repaired... I thought you had seen all the recordings?”

Asuka was just about to explode. “This all sounds like pointless psycho-babble to me. I don't see how being stuck with Daddy's boy here will get me any closer to defeating the angel!”

“You're right. Merely living in the same house will not be enough to pull of a perfectly synchronous attack. That's why you are going to prepare for the battle by doing everything together. Eating, training, sleeping, everything!”

“WAAAS?” The reactions that this plan had been eliciting from the children had proven rather amusing so far, and, as such, helped Misato to retain her optimism despite their protests.

Shinji had turned bright red in the face and seemed to be shuddering frantically, as if to purge his skull of some mental image he found deeply shameful, whereas Asuka had resorted to leaning far across the table to ascertain that her superior could get a good look at every detail of her supremely disgusted facial expression.

“You can't be serious about this!” she insisted. “Everybody knows that girls and boys should sleep apart over the age of seven!”

“The angel is regenerating as we speak. We have no time to waste. Our target is projected to resume its attack in approximately six days. By then, your synchronization has to be effortless.” Misato stated, somberly reminding the children of the stakes.

“That is completely impossible! Especially in so little time...” Asuka whined, slumping back onto her seat with an emphatic pout on her features.

But Misato had never been all too daunted by the bad bad 'i'-word: “Then we have to make it possible. The attack plan is choreographed to match up with this melody.” she explained, pulling out an old cassette.

'Well, isn't this great...' Shinji though to himself. For his comfort, this sounded far too much like dancing- And he'd never been any good at that.

“For the next six days, you will study and memorize the plan in its entirety, and learn to work together. That's an order.”

“You can't give me any orders. I'm a Captain, just like you.”

“You're disappointing me a little there, Asuka. I thought you of all people would know that our ranking system works a little different than the one you have in the European forces. By your standards, I'd be roughly equivalent to a... Colonel I think. Besides, as NERV personnel, I have the authority to circumvent the chain of command of any individual nation or alliance of nations. Remember our little adventure with the American navy admiral?”

Asuka stared blankly into the air, aghast at the dawning realization. “Whoha... whah...?!”

“An order is an order.” Misato repeated with a smile that was only slightly forced.

With a sigh, Shinji turned to the girl sitting next to him. To be honest, he could barely stand her, but since the angels needed defeating, there was really nothing he could do, and since she seemed to have turned to face him as well, Shinji had some hope that just perhaps, his fellow pilot might be beginning to grasp the gravity of the situation.
Alas, all such misconceptions were crushed when she turned away with a markedly huffish “Hmpf!”, slamming her hands onto the table and using them to support herself as she got to her feet, leaving behind one lonely can of juice.

“...Asuka...?!”

“I'm going for a shower!” she declared, sharply. “I'm allowed to do at least that by myself, aren't I?”

And thus, she marched off.

Since his own was already finished, Shinji took pity on her remaining juice. It would be a shame to waste it, and besides, he was feeling vaguely sorry for it.

“Don't worry, Shin-chan~ Everything will be fine!”

The Third Child couldn't say whether his guardian's words decreased or increased his worries.

“And, by the way, doesn't that count as an indirect kiss?”

“G-Gah!” It probably hardly needed mentioning that Shinji narrowly managed not to choke on his drink after a protracted struggle.

At least the one responsible didn't remain seated nonchalantly but for once actually moved to assist him by affectionately patting his back, though not before she'd spent a few moments giggling with great amusement.

“You know, I think you might be able to win her heart by charming her with a homecooked meal. You know what they say about 'right through the stomach'.”

Since Shinji was of the definite opinion that he'd suffered enough for today, he decided to keep any quips regarding the situation or Misato's own 'cooking skills' to himself and simply followed her request.

A nice, quiet and constructive activity like cooking might be exactly what he needed right now. He'd long since accepted that he was fated to be stuck with the only apron owned by the Katsuragi household, and, around the end of last week, had come to the conclusion that it might be a rather expedient venture to learn the art of fine cuisine – At least, if he didn't plan to live on nothing but Misato's bungled instant food, the nearest fast food delivery services and the crap from the school cafeteria for the forseeable future. At first, he hadn't complained, especially since he had hugely boosted the level of available instant dishes simply by selecting, purchasing and preparing them himself, but by now he was beginning to think that this wouldn't be good as a permanent solution, not even for Misato.

And in the end, she had a lot of responsibilities and often worked very hard (if rarely in her own household) and given that she had taken him in and everything, it couldn't be wrong to do something nice for her once in a while. Making himself useful made his presence at her residence feel like less of an awkward imposition, but mostly, he'd finally accepted that to ask his guardian for food that remotely looked like it would pass a test with a Geiger counter was simply futile.

So, the force of circumstance had forced him to acquire a beginner's cookbook, put on the aforementioned light blue apron and start preparing dinner – now, surprisingly, for three persons.

As a beginner, he wanted to start with something simple, like... - he thumbed through his brand new copy of 'Japanese Cuisine for Dummies' - ...yes, how about fried noodles?
Good thing they sold those noodles in huge packages, so he wouldn't have to worry about having enough to accommodate Asuka.

Beginning to process the fact that he might have to get used to the insane redhead's permanent presence, Shinji thanked the heavens for this nice opportunity to work in the kitchen without being immediately derided as a softie.

That said, it seemed inevitable that he couldn't avoid that fate forever. Sometimes he just couldn't help the feeling that someone up there really didn't like him.

Perhaps, he might be able to reduce the amount of punishment he would inevitably receive by also acquiring 'European Cuisine for Dummies'.

One way or another, at least Misato might appreciate to eat something that had been heated by the stove rather than the microwave for a change, given that she'd already begun to empty a few cans of beer in anticipation and proceeded to arrange them into a funny little pyramid, but since birds weren't exactly known to like noodles, Shinji considered stocking PenPen's food bowl with an interesting-lookin can of tuna he'd spotted on his last trip to the grocery store.

Speaking of PenPen, where was he, anyway?

“AAAAAH! There is some weird animal in bathroom!”

Okay, that particular question was answered then.

Since the situation required him and Asuka to bury their hatchets sooner or later, Shinji chose this moment to take the first step and helpfully supply an explanation as a gesture of goodwill: “It's called a 'Penguin'. His name is PenPen.”

But just as he'd turned around with a smile to familiarize his new flatmate with their feathered companion, he realized his mistake with frightening clarity – though actually, the mistake was on Shikinami's side, not that he'd fall prey to the hypocritical act of faulting her for the very same oversight that had happened to him when he'd found himself in a very similar situation two months and one week ago.

To avoid beating around the bush any further, well... The Second Child was... well, a poetic and thematically fitting way to say it might be that she was wearing not her plugsuit but her birthday-suit for a change.

No, not the kind involving a party hat or a cardboard crown, nothing at all.

After the time he'd accidentally flashed Misato in a similar manner, numerous encounters with her breast and two comparable incidents involving Ayanami, he was beginning to wonder if some angry wizard had cursed him with an irresistible magnetic attraction for embarrassing mishaps.

That question was now decisively answered with a definitive “Yes”.

Before Asuka even realized why, Shinji's complexion had gone through an interesting spectrum of colorations ranging from a lovely pink to an eye-catching tomato-red, a charming red-wine ruby to a saturated dark violet, while it's owner desperately struggled to keep certain bodily functions under control before she noticed the effects the goodies generously shaken by her bold, demonstrative body languages were having on him and possibly started to mock him over certain measurements even though the whole fiasco had been her fault to begin with.

While giving him a weird look, probably wondering what his problem was, she shifted her weight
from one leg to the other, causing a plethora of little follow-up motions as throughout her flawless body. She stood in her usual, deliberately provocative manner with her hands on her hips, unwittingly presenting him the full frontal view, absolutely everything from the glossy, exotically colored hair cascading past her shoulders to the uncovered youthful mounds on her chest and the pigmented spots at their centers, which, free of all restraints or supports jiggled slightly with every ever so slight motion, decorated with tiny glittering droplets of sweat or water, down to the site of some tiny red stubble which she was probably in the process of shaving off, framing her secret place in a flame-light pattern.

Oh god, the sight alone was-

Oh no.

No further need to worry about his own reactions, the paralyzing fear of what she might do more than took care of that once it finally occurred to her to wonder just what he was staring at and looked down at herself and finally noticed that she had forgotten to grab a towel when she had left the bathroom in a panic.

The last thing he saw was how her lovely body expressed a progression from shock, to shame, to anger in the language of the old masters without the need for something as deceptive as words, and then, darkness.

It was then that he had his first encounter with Chucksuka Shikinorris' deadly roundhouse kick. Granted, he'd witnessed this divine messenger of pain and suffering once before on this earth, when some of her unfortunate suitors had the pleasure to receive it, but the hellish agony efficiently delivered by the kiss of her feet was worse than anything his clumsy imagination could envision, and more horrifying than words could describe – Though it was Shinji's opinion that the closest approximation could be archived by the unassuming little sound known as 'Ouch.'

The next thing he remembered was a meeting between his much-maltreated body and the lovely stone tiles lining the floor of Misato's kitchen, which, though it was probably redundant to mention, was not a pleasant experience.

But what mercy could he expect from a girl who had practically greeted him with a dose of physical punishment?

Ohh boy.

Life as a softie was rather hard for something that was referred to as soft-ie.

“What a pervert!” Asuka declared, adding a flurry of insults to injury as she provisionally covered herself with her hands and made her way to the bath to continue her shower. “Idiot! Lecher! Not just a loser, but a peeping tom! You're the worst! I can't believe it!”

So much for working together. By the current state of things, the next battle was likely to conclude with her knocking out Shinji rather than the angel, which meant that things weren't looking all too rosy for the fate of humanity.

Curiously, Misato did not seem the slightest bit discouraged by the filmworthy example of domestic violence that had just unfolded before her eyes.

“Look, PenPen!” the inebriated NERV employee commented to her faithful pet, passing him a can of beer she had previously 'enchanced' with a drinking straw. “They're already being brutally
honest with each other! Things are going nicely~”

Given the circumstances, the bird choose to comment this with an approving “Waaaak!”

When Misato decided somewhat later that it was now Sleepy Time, she barely managed to land on her bed – To cover herself with a blanket or take off the shorts whose button she’d undone at some point, or to even put away the bottle she had emptied just before had been distinctly beyond her, in fact, she had not even manage to place her beer-addled head onto the er pillow rather than the messy stretch of floor right behind it.

Like seemingly all tasks of dubious pleasure, the duty of maneuvering his half-naked, thoroughly plastered guardian to her room had fallen to Shinji, his face still bearing Asuka's bright red footprint at the time.

She had reeked of beer and the numerous half-eaten snacks and empty alcohol bottles and cans strewn around her bed reminded him candidly that this was neither the first nor the last time.

But it was the first time he noticed a wide, conspicuous scar on her partially exposed chest, the only imperfection marring the older woman's body ( - well, aside from her beer-induced halitosis.)

He wondered where she could have gotten it – Even though he'd been living at Misato's place for over two months now, there was a lot he still didn't know about her. Like her history with Kaji, or her past with Asuka.

PenPen had seemingly taken an optimistic view to the Situation and decided to take advantage of it by using his owner's shirt as shelter for the right, with the result that they were now both snoring to themselves with the unison that Shinji and Asuka so sorely lacked, but the Third Child couldn't help but to find the sight of her in such a state tremendously depressing.

There was something... broken to it, a feeling he really didn't like, or a sense that there was nothing he could do for her and very little he knew of her.

One way or another, today had been a thoroughly awful day, the only consolation being that it was almost over.

Exhausted, the made his way to the provisional joint sleeping area which Misato had set up in the living room for himself and Asuka, taking a moment to straighten out the sheets since his drunken superior had been even sloppier than usual, and then hastily hid away under the blankets in the hope that he would be, or at the very least, look asleep by the time Asuka showed up.

The last thing he needed today was another confrontation, regardless of what cowardice she might accuse him of for that sentiment.

Simply put, he was completely and thoroughly exhausted...

...wait, what was that?

Wasn't there something just now, over there... out on the balcony?

With slightly narrowed eyes, Shinji sent a probing glance into the nondescript darkness.

Nope. That must have been a figment of his imagination, probably brought about by his urgent
need for a good night's sleep.

Shinji was too tired to even listen to music or spend his usual few moments brooding over life's complicated questions and the reasons for his presence in this down, or even to bemoan his meagre odds of surviving this particular training session.

All he craved was a soft, quiet place.

Pulled away from the balcony door in a flash, the woman with the long, blue hair found herself pressed to the wall, held in the iron grip of a dark-haired girl in a thick, white rubber suit.

'Yui Ichijo', as revealed by the small, triangular plaque on her strange futuristic garment.

The being known as Leatha had already been expecting her and, despite her precarious situation, showed no significant reaction other than a thin smile.

And really, why should she have cared? She could have ripped this cumbersome girl apart without moving a single muscle.

Which was, perhaps, why there was very little nonchalance to be found on Yui's tender face – instead, she wore the dead-serious expression of a stoic soldier.

Compared with Leatha, she might have had the physique of a frail child, but for some reason, the escaped experiment did not seem to posses the physical strength to escape the girl's grasp without use of her powers – There was only so much she could do to stop the decay of that ridiculous parody of a living human body.

“What are you doing here?!” Yui demanded to know.

It was hard to believe that the slender girl had been the source of that hard, commanding tone.

“Well...” Yui heard, both whispered next to her face and thundering inside her skull. “At the moment, I am not capable of pursuing one of my goals, so I decided to pursue another.”

“Makes sense.” Yui commented, as steely as her opponent seemed nonchalant. “But I cannot let you.”

“Let me?”

Leatha's laugh filled Yui's mind. Her lips moved, but no sound escaped – all of the ghastly sound was happening exclusively in Yui's innermost. The first time she'd experienced that abominable sound, she had almost forgotten her own existence for a moment, because even the littlest parts in the back of her consciousness that stereotypically housed the residual self-awareness in times of panic or denial had been incapacitatingly busy experiencing fear, leaving her without even the ability to process or react to that same fear by means of screaming or running away – All of her consciousness had practically become fear, with no part of it left over to house a reaction.

But by now, she had grown so used to that sound, heard it so many countless times, that she could now suffer it without even batting an eyelash.

“I don't think you're in any position to 'let' or 'not let' me do anything.” Leatha clarified. “All it
takes is one thought to move one blood vessel in your head by one millimeter, and you're finished. Don't you realize that I could destroy you any moment I wanted?"

"Of course." Yui acknowledged. "You can destroy me any time you want. But not here."

Shifting her weight so that her things were solidly touching the body pinned down beneath her, the girl let go of her opponent and pressed the orange buttons on both sides of her suit, and in an instant, both feminine figures disappeared into a flash of light, leaving behind no dust, no ash, nor even a blackened stain or anything else that could have constituted a trace.

Even the light that was the only undeniable evidence of their presence dissipated without anyone being there to see it.

So here she was, in a foreign country halfway across the world, where absolutely nothing or no one was familiar to her, separated from everything she'd ever known and stuck with a woman whom she only knew on a highly superficial level and couldn't even stand, surrounded by walls, furniture, and a boy who was little more than a perfect stranger and would be free to do just about anything to her if he should have to luck to wake up before her in the morning, free to find her cowering under her blanket, pathetically curled into a ball and desperately clutching her little doll.

She could spin it however she wanted, push the blame wherever she could stuff it and present an ever-so flawless mirage of a strong and independent starlet, until she felt nauseated by her own hypocrisy –

None of that would change that she had failed today.

In the daylight, she might have been capable of believing her own self-aggrandizing redderrick, but here, in the light- and soundless darkness, she had no choice but to admit what she should have understood when the enemy had rammed herself and her evangelion head-first into the dirt, right where they belonged.

"There is no way I could have beat it alone..."

If one had thought that the concrete desert at the outskirts of Tokyo-3 was the most complete picture of desolation, one would have clearly failed to anticipate the day the city board would begin to rid itself of the identical concrete buildings, demolishing rows of them at a time.

Even in their prime, the stark grey concrete blocks had been a dismal sight. They had been built in the years following Second Impact for the purpose of accommodating some of the many, many people who had lost their homes in the catastrophe – Colors, space, light and individual distinctions had been a luxury that the people didn't even think of until housing had become sufficiently available for there to be choices.

Once, one would have found entire families crammed into the tiny bedsits, their laundry hanging out of a few wires next to the windowsills, but now that they were no longer needed, the relics of the reconstruction had been deserted and fallen into disrepair – thus, the powers that be had recently decided to rid themselves of their unsightly presence.

Where you would once have found angular, ordered evidence of civilization, there were now
extensive piles of rubble and asphalt, areas the size of football fields where dredges and wrecking balls were the only upright structures.

For the most part, the noise they counted was as distant as the chirping of the insects.

It was a desolate, abandoned place where no one would suspect to find a soul that wasn't being paid to be there. And yet there was a reason why the latest batch of demolition had spared one of the buildings, leaving it alone to tower over the demolition machines while the remainder of its row had been reduced to gravel.

The pardon that had spared it the same fate the came from all the way up in the hierarchy: NERV's own Commander Ikari had personally demanded that this building not be touched, not because he was a fan of industrial or brutalist architecture, or because he cared much about preserving the knowledge of the ugly barracks for posterity – He was a rather pragmatic person who cared little about appearances, indeed, he could rarely be bothered to zip the uniform of his own organization.

His reasons for taking pity on the old concrete building were rather simple: It was simply still in use as the dwelling of a very important NERV employee who had no intentions of leaving. Though it might be hard to believe, the silent EVA pilot had picked out and furnished her twilit dwelling by herself. Though the allowance would have sufficed for further amenities, she saw as little reason for unnecessary pomp as her creator and had felt right at home among the concrete slabs, perhaps because it reminder her of the familiar surroundings of the lab she'd been raised in.

Since the city had been practically built by and for NERV, any request that Commander Ikari made would be carried out without questioning. All it took for the First Child's domicile to remain was one simple, one-line email that had barely consumed three minutes of his time.

The construction workers had simply demolished everything around it but given the building a far enough berth to guarantee its structural integrity.

Hence, Ayanami Rei's bedroom had changed very little since Shinji last visited.

The room wasn't necessarily small, but it could also be described as very, very empty, and the naked concrete blocks that made up the walls were devoid of any wallpapers.

The bed had a metal frame and it's sheets didn't seem like they had been straightened out or even touched since Rei had climbed out of it earlier this morning, and on the other end of the room, there was a small fridge with a water-filled beaker and a few packages of medication displayed on top of it.

The most ordinary thing in the room may have been the handful of scattered clothes that one might have expected in the dwelling of a teenager, but it wasn't like they did anything to help the ambiance of the place.

A window was present, but the slim gap between the heavy nylon curtains shut out all but one of the available moonbeams, leaving its light to illuminate the dresser on top of which she kept her books and the commander's old glasses, and finally, the blue-haired girl herself, who happened to be sitting on her plastic folding chair.

There was also a simplistic little sink with a mirror above it, which was where the girl habitually did her dishes, but the objects that had collected in there were a far cry from the collection of bowls, plates and sticky residues that Shinji might have to deal with in the Katsuragi household's kitchen sink – Actually, there was little more than a couple of plastic cups.
The difference, of course, was in large parts due to Rei living here all on her own. When he found
the time, the commander would occasionally request for her to be present when he dined, but at the
moment, he was away on an important convention in Europe, and not coming back any time soon.

He had been gone for a while and she had known of his expected absence, so she couldn't really
say why the flow of her thoughts had grazed the topic of his absence precisely now, though it
called her attention to a certain sense of... discomfort or distress flickering across the corners of her
awareness, of distinctly being in a state she would prefer not to be in, or maybe this state had been
there first, there was a correlation somehow but the direction of causation eluded her.

Under other circumstances, there would have been those occasional brief conversations she would
have with the Third Child, but those, too, had become unavailable, as he had spent these last few
days engaged in a special training session alongside the Second Child, resulting in both being
absent from school.

Even if she'd had more of a reference frame to classify, compare or identify her experience, she
would likely not, exactly, have said that she missed either of the Ikari men, and certainly not that
she wished they were here rather than doing whatever important tasks they were currently
attending to, as she neither rated this experience which such importance nor expected to derive or
associate any comfort from or with his presence.

In truth, she had never had the reason or conscious desire to begin interactions unrelated to her
duties, and would likely never have sought out any greater level thereof on her own, but to the
extent that they had become part of her existence, she couldn't help but to find in some corner of
herself the knowledge that it would be ...good when their time together would eventually result.

Since she had always known what she had been created for, it would never have occurred to her to
wish for anything beyond that or to think that she should have more than she did, but by now she
had reached some level of awareness or conclusion that she... appreciated when others would spend
time with her without any particular reason strictly elated to the plan.

It eased some pain in the depths of her soul before she'd even fully realized that it was there...

Though all that aside, there was a much simpler, second reason for the sparse amount of dishes to
be done – There had not been a real dinner today, merely a few servings of cool tap water in order
to avoid dehydration, and to help wash down the medication that helped maintain her ever-
decaying, artificial shell in some semblance of functionality, as a daily reminder that she wasn't
...real.

Some of today's discomfort may well have been due to purely physical causes.

Quietly, she took a single pill out of the bag that Dr. Akagi had assigned her for such cases, and
contemplated it silently.

“W-What?! The Commander called?”

Ritsuko suspected that the rather amusing noise that could be heard from the other side of the
phone line was probably caused by a couple of unfortunate empty beer cans that her friend had just
inadvertently knocked off her dinner table.
The scientist only hoped that they hadn't caused all too much of a mess – though one may have argued that a mess could also be seen as a good sign, for it would have meant that the cans had not yet been emptied.

“...Uhm... Rit-chan... What did you tell him?”

“The truth, of course.”

Misato swallowed rather audibly.

“The angel displayed an unprecedented ability that overwhelmed our Evangelions, leaving us no choice but to deploy an N²-mine. You and the Children are already working on a complex strategy for the sophisticated counterattack required to defeat the enemy.”

“Oh... Well, that is... well, in a way it is the truth, but when you tell it like that, it sounds a bit too, ehm...”

“That's what happened, isn't it? Then again, if you have any objections to my report, I can try telling him a version of the story that will get you fired.” the blonde offered jokingly.

“No, no, your report is fine!”

“Speaking of which... how is our 'sophisticated counterattack' coming along so far?”

“...well, actually, that depends on how you want to put it...”

“Let me guess: The word you're looking for is 'abysmal'.”

“There are nicer ways of saying that.” Misato sulked.

“I can tell you're doing your best to a be a serious, mature example for the two of them.”

“Very funny... By the way, how are the repairs on Unit Zero going? Any chance that you might get it repaired earlier than expected?”

“I suppose we could attempt to use it if it comes to that in an emergency, but... let me put it this way, I was about to ask Rei what color she wants us to paint the armor once the first of the new hull components arrive.”

Misato sighed. “So we cannot rely on it... I get it. But oh, Ritsuko? Maybe Rei can help us is some other way! Actually, do you mind if I borrow her for a bit? I think I just had an idea. Just send her over to my place sometime later, okay? Bye!”

Sighing, Ritsuko put down the receiver, instead reaching for the previously prepared syringe whose contents were intended for the quiet blue haired girl sitting in front of her.

“You heard that, right?”

“Yes, Ma'am.” Rei confirmed, not showing the slightest flinch as the needle pierced her upper arm.

“Alright then. So what color would you like?”

The First Child pondered this briefly.

Since the evangelion's color would be of little importance in battle as long as it could be easily distinguished from the other two, she decided to chose according to her personal preferences,
insofar as she had those. Generally, she tended to opt for white objects, as she'd done regarding her
plugsuit and much of her underwear, for example. There was no particular reason – She'd simply
started it one day and never really stopped without ever giving real thought to the matter.

Perhaps she felt an affinity toward the color because it reminded her of laboratories and lab coats,
or maybe it was simply because it was perceived as a somber, neutral unobtrusive color, and
didn't try to catch the eye the way red and other 'bright', 'vigorous' colors.

But at this moment, her thoughts were not with those potential reasons, but two certain people.

“Dark Blue,” she decided simply, led by her stray thoughts. Even discounting them, she did find
the shade pleasant, and this wasn't exactly a consequential decision anyways.

“Would it be possible to have the EVA painted dark blue?”

“It wouldn't be a problem.”

“Good. I will be leaving then. Captain Katsuragi is expecting me.”

Wasting little time in buttoning up her shirt and quietly leaving the examination room, Rei swiftly
left without as much as a minimal farewell or even a nod of acknowledgment– She had an order to
carry out.

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1. While I am a big fan of Rebuild (or at least, I was, until Q bashed my tiny little heart into a
   million pieces, but, what else would I expect from this frachise...), I will never understand
   why they kept EVA 00 in that garish orange color. Not with me!

2. The adventure will resume in part 2.05: [Katayoku no Tenshi]
What she says: “While Reviews are always nice, I want you t know that I do this mainly for myself & the art, and I'm already satisfied if anyone reads this crap at all, so don't feel pressured or anything. “
What she means: “Recognition! Love! Feedback! Validation! FEEEEED MY EGOOOOO!!”
(She is rather Shinji-like in that respect)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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I'm not the one for you
You're not the one for me
We are like night and day
But damn I want you anyway
Together we are one
Like flowers who've kissed the sun
But deep inside I know you hate me
Well I hate you too, you irritate me
-Zombie Girl,'Gonna Getcha’

---

“Berlin.
A city like patchwork.

The devastation of Second Impact and the wars that followed it are only the latest examples in a long line of destructive cataclysm to shake the Capital to its foundations. But as usual, it has taken the people only a few years to manufacture at least a superficial state of florescence, now that the squalor has been banished into its designated districts. It is nothing if now one sprawling
monument to humanity's inability to create a state of equality and justice, its tendency toward forming scars, and its desire for vapid pompous fronts. After all, it was not natural disasters or twists of fate that had been smashing and burning its buildings, but political conflicts, wars and revolution – Even Second Impact was a man-made tragedy, albeit a tragedy of our own making.

Man is sad, pitiful creature with an unending hunger for destruction, just as incapable of coexisting with his own kind as he is of existing by himself.

That they even live here, refusing to abandon this farce of a city, is mockery and scoff.”

“That we are sad, weak creatures cannot be denied. The need for cities and houses at all is in itself undeniable proof of our insufficiency. Scared and cowardly, man cowers in his hiding places, steadily generating intricate, novel ways to hide away from the elements and escape from the harsh laws and judgments of nature. Some of them might make a phony performance of longing to return to it, but what they long for are ultimately neatly trimmed lawns and strictly pruned trees; None of them would chose to expose themselves to the insects, or the diseases that could quickly end their weak existence; They rarely mind interfering with nature when it serves to save their lives. On a fundamental level, all endeavors of humanity had sought to put a distance between itself and nature.

They struggle to maintain their crumbling cities, the monuments to their shame, and their ever-decaying bodies in an endless, futile battle against the rigors of nature."

“And all that, even though they must know that their battle is damned to be lost. There is no limit to their unbelievable pride!”

“It might well seem like a farce next to the lifespans of planets and stars, but I wouldn't say that it is pride which drove them to sustain this city. They're not so noble that they'd consider their pride to be worth all this strenuous labor. They do it because it's the only way to live.

Such is the reason that we hid away in buildings to begin with, and it will be for that reason that we will leave them behind along with the disgraceful needs they once fulfilled.”

“Indeed! But still, aren't you a little early, Ikari? I'd have expected that you'd spend the night in Hamburg.”

“You know of my disdain for such unnecessary delay, chairman. We can rest to our hearts' contents once the promised day has come, and once it erases our frailties, the need for rest itself will be erased from this world. It is that day we all dolefully desire.”

“You know, Ikari, when you first told us that all these years ago, we did not believe you, and we're beginning to doubt that your foolhardiness is a thing of the past, even if you have wiped that smirk off your face.”

“I don't know what would give you reason for such doubt. Is it the incident with Unit Five? The investigations were inconclusive.”

“Absence of evidence is the most damming evidence of all.”

“There is any arbitrary number of things that can be absent from a place or event.”

“That way be right, but do not forget who brought you into your position, and why. We are quite aware of the extent of your abilities.”

“...which are being used exclusively in the service of our scenario.”
“...let us hope that.”

“So, what is so confidential that we cannot discuss it over the usual channels? Headquarters is currently engaged in countering an angel attack. I naturally keep myself informed, but—”

“Your people have managed without you before, there is nothing to worry about. According to the scrolls, this messenger shouldn't be too much of a challenge. We are to discuss the details of the ceremonies for the instrumentality project, as well as some issues regarding our pact with Lillith. We ordered you here because we have had to deal with certain security issues as of late... Do you know anything about it?”

“No, I do not.”

----

Her long, sky blue hair flowed into the midday wind like a streaming liquid, an irregular band resembling a tattered flag whose corresponding pole was comprised of her pale body.

Seated on the debris of a ruined building, she observed the two colossal sky-scraper sized silhouettes that were slowly but steadily melting into one.

There wasn't much else she could do – the process she wanted to prevent had already begun, and the structure she was interfering in was delicate.

At least, so she thought as she absentmindedly licked the red liquid off her fingers, this would not happen again.

----

In agony, the short-haired girl dragged herself through an alleyway, her tight-fitting white clothing in rags. Both the floor she'd tread on and the walls she was leaning on were marked with a smear of red, marking her path as if to find her a way out of a labyrinth – how ironic.

Of all things and concepts in this universe, a 'way back' was probably the absolutely last thing she could be said to have.

One of the orange buttons on her outfit had been ripped off, the other was hanging off her on a few strings of fabric and ripped up cables.

She doubted that the device would ever function again.

In her eagerness to protect what she'd come here to save, she had neglected to maintain her strategic advantage – If her father were here, he'd probably tell her that she'd made the mistake of risking something she had only one of – that being her life and her equipment – for something that she could stand to lose time and time again... but the truth was that she couldn't say how long it had been since she had seen the man's face – She'd had no way to keep track of the time since her departure, no way to leave marks that wouldn't be washed away by the temporal tides.
Did this mean that she had lost? That her long, arduous, exhausting journey had finally reached its end that was both premature and yet long, long overdue?

Ichijou Yui had reached the end of the road, both literally and figuratively – the alleyway ended at the edge of a larger street, and the wall to which she had been holding on simply ended, and she lost her grip like the floor had been pulled out from underneath her feet.

Incapable of mounting even the most pitiful parody of resistance against gravity, the frail girl collapsed, slammed head-first into the pavement, loudly, inelegantly, with her head and face splashing into a puddle, and not moving any further.

In bands and clouds, a red liquid dispersed into the water, spreading out in streaks of orange and yellow as it was diluted.

It tasted awful.

Was that it?

Did this mean that, just like that, everything was over forever?

It seemed possible that even without her, the chain might eventually be broken by coincidence, but she'd seen too much to believe in such luck.

She began to ponder if she'd ever really believed she could do this, and if the answer to that made her a hypocrite.

One last time, she put up with the pain of opening her eyes and focusing, however narrowly.

Only one of them was any good, the other being under water.

Somehow, despite her wounds, it still didn't fully register that this was to be the end; She had been wounded before, and besides, this barely looked like the staging of a final end:

She sun was lazily passing in between a handful of leftover clouds, a faint rainbow could be discerned, there was singing birds and chirping cicadas...

It didn't feel like it should be the end...

Then, a shadow, a streak of darkness cutting her off from what little light was left to her in the brief remainder of her life.

She was tempted to believe that there was none of it left anywhere within the bounds of creation, no more life, no more hope, no more future...

Next, there was motion, a surge of pain, a dizzying turning of her head and body, and a mass of sticky, drenched dark hair. There was air. Evaporating cool liquid.

Azure blue sky, and stinging sunlight above her.

Cold.

Words, silhouettes, urgent voices that shouted and shook at her.

Sky. Blue Sky, that her eyes remained glued to, her thoughts slowing to a halt and taking a while to transmit an delayed order. Finally, her gaze found the spots and shadows, needing a while to process or decide which parts of them she was even supposed to focus on.
Oh, that's what it was.

Boys, three of them.

Odd.

She knew these two, didn't she? The third was less familiar, but she probably must have seen him somewhere before. Why these glasses?

Ah right. It must be a distinction of this variants, most of them had some. ..

But why all this big fuss with the hectic, frantic ways in which they talked to each other or typed around on their devices.

What were they so upset about?

---

The doors had barely closed behind the strange girl and the stretcher bearing her unconscious form when the vehicle sped away, flashing blue lights, sirens and all, leaving the boys standing at the edge of the sidewalk, the shock still plain on their faces.

Touji's summarized of the situation he and his friends had inadvertently stumbled into just there with the words “Holy crap.”

“I just hope that that poor girl is going to be okay. She looked really bad...”

“This was way beyond messed up...”

Kensuke's words came from the heart, and Touji's genuinely affected expression made further gestures of agreement unnecessary. As for Nagato, it would not have been much of an exaggeration to say that he was distinctly beside himself. Of the three, he seemed the most affected – granted, unlike them, he didn't have the prior experience of being very nearly squashed by a biomechanical war machine...

The older boy had buried his fingers in the black fabric of his pants, gripping the folds tightly as he stared straight away, as if in a trance. Upon a closer look, he seemed paler than usual and couldn't quite manage to stop shaking since that girl had collapsed at his feet.

While the others had immediately knelt down beside her to try and help, he'd sunken to his knees upon noticing the sheer amount of blood and mumbled unintelligible things while continuing to stare in horror.

Touji had turned the stranger onto her side, surveyed her injuries and tried to shake her awake, telling her to remain conscious, whereas Kensuke had immediately pulled out his phone to call for an ambulance.

After that, everything had gone rather fast.

In fact, so fast that the whole incident had been over before Nagato could even get close to
processing its beginning – the sight of the stranger, of blood and dark hair spilling across the floor, had touched the memory of a few images from his past that he’d rather forget... so he stood there, waiting for them to fade on their own or be flushed out by the next thing to distract him.

“Hey, Nagato, is everything okay?”

Kensuke. The other two must eventually have noticed his predicament. Touji held out a hand to help him up.

“Yeah... Yeah, it's fine...” he stated, hesitantly taking Touji's hand, yet unable to tear his eyes from the direction in which the ambulance had disappeared.

“I was just wondering... who she was. Do you guys think she was mugged or something?”

“Could be.” Touji's expression darkened. “Who is the world even does this sick stuff? If I got my fists on them, I'd just... argh!”

He emphatically punched the air to have at least some way of venting his anger.

For a change, the taller boy had actually bothered to put on his uniform this morning and seemed to be wearing something violet beneath it. The other two were wearing their uniforms, too, though there wasn't anything unusual about that.

“But, guys.” Kensuke interjected. “Don't you think her clothes looked a lot like those piloting suits Shinji and Shikinami wear?”

“Now that you say it her outfit was kinda weird. And it was in bits, too! I suppose I'll ask about her the next time I go to visit my sister. But for now, we've got someone else to worry about... I really wonder where Shinji has been all this time.”

“You're right...” Kensuke agreed. “He does get pulled out of class for piloting stuff all the time, but now he's been absent for three whole days, I'm kinda beginning to worry.”

“Me too.” Nagato admitted. Especially since there was an evacuation alert, but the area in question is still sealed off. I was going to ask Ayanami about it, but this morning, she was absent too. And I didn't get around to asking my dad because he's been very busy these days. He didn't tell me anything in particular, but, at this point it doesn't seem unlikely that they lost another battle...”

“They did.” Kensuke explained. “I looked it up on my dad's computer. The photographs of the Evangelions were solid comedy gold. But the report said nothing about the pilots.”

“You don't think they got hurt?”

“Well...” Touji commented, turning toward the row of tall apartment complexes that had been the trio's destination in the first place before they encountered the mysterious girl. “…there's only one way to find out.”

---

The 'way' Touji spoke of ended up leading to the appartment which Shinji currently shared with his attractive guardian, and, since that happened to be in the eleventh floor, involved riding on of the
two elevators in this part of the building complex.

Touji and Kensuke were already quite familiar with this dwelling, and even Mitsuurugi junior had been here once or twice.

But this was the first time that any of them encountered anyone other than Shinji or Misato in here. None of the other doors bore any name tags or decorations, and even from an outside view, few of the other balconies showed signs of having been used or even furnished. Besides the two NERV associates, there did not seem to be very many people living here, which wasn't surprising when one considered the recent trend of people leaving the city in droves or the general population decline in the post-impact world.

Quite the opposite – what actually surprised the boys, was to hear the chime of the second elevator in the exact same moment they were about to leave the first.

At first, Touji intended only to cast a curious glance at whoever happened to arrive at the same time as them, but when they unexpectedly saw a familiar face emerging behind the steel doors, he wasn't content to merely look at her.

“... wait, is that you, class rep?”

Her words confirmed what her freckles, twin-tails and unfailingly neat school uniform had already suggested:

“Oh look, it's there-fourths of the idiot quartet.”

Unbelievably, she didn't even say the last word in a particular mocking tone, merely using it as if it were a proper name or title. Touji wasn't sure if that made it less or more irritating.

Besides, she seemed to be including Nagato without further comments, though one might have spent a long time philosophizing on whether that was a reason for rejoicing.

But there was another, far more urgent question posed by her words:

“What are you even doing here?”

“Uhm, I, I was going to visit Shikinami-san. And you?”

“We're here to see Ikari-kun.” Touji answered, truthfully.

Thus, one question led to the next and resulted in a kind of domino effect that led to the four of them incredulously blinking at each other.

“Then what are you doing here then?”

“What do you think? This is where he lives. Apartment Number 1101.”

“That's strange. That's exactly the same as Shikinami-san's new address...”

“You must have remembered it wrong then.” Touji concluded.

But Hikari shook her head, and pulled out a little folded-up paper which, once unfolded, turned out to be a copy of the address list for their class, with the Second Child's address highlighted in a pink text marker.

However, that same list also turned out to confirm the boys' claims about Shinji's current residence.
“ Seems like we have a mystery here.” Kensuke commented.

Despite the boy's emphatic assurances that they were absolutely certain that this was Shinji's place, had been here a dozen times and that Asuka's address must have been subject to a mix-up or a misprint, Hikari insisted on coming along and get some visual confirmation of who exactly lived in that apartment.

To underline their argument, the boys led her across the hallway, all the way to the offending door, and lo and behold: The numbers matched.

Nonetheless, Hikari was still skeptical.

“This says 'Katsuragi'.”

“Of course it does. That's the name of Shinji's gardian.” Touji explained. “You remember that hot babe who showed up for the last parent-teacher meeting?”

Nagato cringed with second-hand embarassment.

Hikari's soberly griped reaction suggested that this did indeed ring a bell.

After Hikari had admonished Touji and Kensuke to refrain from acting like apes, it was decided that the three of the would be ringing the doorbell together, as a diplomatic solution to avoid further conflict.

Though Nagato, less passionate or involved than the rest, stood to the side, all four of them hoped that whatever would open the door would resolve it all as a big misunderstanding.

But once they were confronted with the sight which the door had been heroically shielding them from so far, the emotion of relief was about the last thing any of them felt.

Quite the opposite – Touji and Kensuke wildly waved their arms around, their expressions resembling those of someone who'd inadvertently touched some gross, slimy leftovers from the bottom of the sink, Hikari manifested spasms of not only but especially her right eyebrow, and Nagato was forced to take a step back in order to keep his balance.

It was probably hardly worth mentioning that they all looked to be at best, deeply traumatized and at worst, like they had just encountered a physically impossible, lovecraftian abomination far beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend.

“Y-You traitor...” Touji stammered, being the first to remember where he'd left his tongue.

“They're even wearing pair-look again...” Kensuke concluded incredulously. “Gross!”

Judging by his expressions, he too seemed rather shaken – quite an achievement given that we're discussing an individual whose most cherished dream was to fight absurd impossible creatures in a partially biological war machine whose insides stank of blood – not to speak of the distinctly more sensitive Mitsurugi junior, who was too overloaded to even express his shock, and contented himself with a quiet request for a glass of water.

Theoretically, what they found behind the door should have pleased everyone involved, given that both Shinji and Asuka were revealed within the confines of the Katsuragi apartment, but that was precisely the issue: They just stood there, right next to each other, wearing exactly the same costume down to the headphones, as Kensuke has previously implied.
And then, on top of that, the costume had to be a close-fitting, shimmering-black leotard that some wouldn't consider fit for men, complete with little decorative overshirts printed with adorable illustrations of musical notes, distinguishable only in their color – pink for the girl, blue for the boy.

“We're not doing this because we want to!” the pair answered. The ostensibly shameful sound of their voices may have mitigated their friends' wrong impression if it wasn't overshadowed by the way they were speaking in absolute unison – though the word choice in their explanation was somewhat clumsy as well: “It's all Misato's fault, she's making us do everything together, not just the clothes, but talking, eating, even sleeping!”

This was the point when Hikari's twitching gave way to a full-on derailment of her facial features: “You two are so indecent!”

“W-Wait, it's all a misunderstanding!” the duo assured, in Asuka's case, angrily, whereas Shinji sounded rather lost, though again, their speaking at once did not much bolster their credibility.

Hikari, whose view of the world and these two people in particular had been thoroughly shattered, was not convinced.

“What could you possibly misunderstand about this!” she wailed, burying her hand in her face because she could no longer stand to behold the preternatural perversion before her.

“Oh, Welcome!”

With the exception of Hikari, whose current state barely qualified as responsible, everyone turned their attention toward the new arrival insofar as their state of abject shock, or, in the Children's case, humiliation, allowed for it.

They had been joined by the apartment's owner, who, insofar as the Children's creepy unison could be trusted, was supposedly to blame for the whole debacle.

She seemed to be carrying a large brown envelope – oh, and for some reason, Rei was with her, too.

Touji didn't know what to make of her usual cheerful smile, or if the way she was acting like this was nothing out of the ordinary was in any way good or bad, but since she currently seemed more trustworthy than a certain friend of his (whose current clothing raised doubts about his sexual orientation and seemed nigh identical to the piece of black nylon wrapped around what a person who just a few days ago, had been their common arch enemy), he decided that Misato would be his best bet for getting any sort of reasonable answer concerning all this.

So it was her whom he addressed, while pointing his right thumb backward at the circus behind him: “Uh, would you mind explaining this?”

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“So that's why! Why didn't you say so right away?”
After all visitors including Rei had been provided with a reasonable explanation and a nice, cool lemonade, the relief that Hikari and Three-Fourths-Of-The-Idiot-Quartett had given up upon had eventually set in despite all the adversities once Misato revealed the reasoning behind the unconventional training method, which, in light of the situation, didn't seem that far-fetched after all.

Between the sugary beverages, the resident house-penguin, and Misato's contagious cheerfulness, the four of them had forgotten the initial shock by the time they were seated around the table – Hikari in particular immediately took to the strange bird, and asked to pet the creature.

(Touji had not expected her to have a side like that. If you looked at her like this, cooing over an adorable animal, you could almost mistake her for a normal, non-bossy, even rather sweet girl. Almost.)

But even so, she did not lose sight of their objective – to check on the two EVA pilots.

They were ostensibly unhurt, but she understood that the next battle was imminent: “So, how is the training coming along?”

Yeah, about Misato's previously mentioned cheerfulness? Not much of it was left by the time Misato was finished with that sentence. “See for yourselves...”

A collective sigh ensued.

If Misato was thereby implying that the spectacle the high school students could witness at the other end of the room was representative of how far her efforts had come in the last few days, things did not look rosy for the future of humanity.

Apart from Rei, who was currently busy reading through some papers on a clipboard, everyone present around the table unanimously declared the sight a valid reason to hang their heads in resignation.

For Asuka, this reaction was the last straw – For days, she had been forced to walk around in this ridiculous getup, chained to that meek and vapid lecher, who did nothing but produce half-hearted stuttering and weigh her down like a ball and chain – And all this after he'd cost her her first, grand victory and caused her untold humiliation.

And now, some clueless bitch who wouldn't even recognize talent if there were a huge, glowing red arrow to show her the way, had the gall to parade her in front of an audience and pretend like she was somehow a hopeless case just because she couldn't manage to monkey the every move of some clumsy dumb-ass – Daddy's boy was about as 'elegant' as any other pathetic timid shut-in without a life.

It was only natural after all: She was nothing like him, and that was a very good thing. She was better and didn't see why she should in any way be confined to the limitations of some random wimp who didn't even bother to hide his own inadequacy – Why would be even want to be like him?

Why in the world should she?

Thoroughly frustrated, Asuka tore off the headphones through which she was supposed to hear the music that was to be used for this ridiculous undertaking, throwing them at the feet of a mildly worried Hikari.

“That's enough!” she declared, enraged. “It's obvious that I can't adjust my movements to the level
of this awkward klutz! It's impossible, and I've said that from the beginning!"

Her claim was underlined not only by her hand gestures, but Shinji himself who, distracted by her complaints, lost balance and slammed head first into the twister mat which Misato had arranged on the living room floor as part of an improvised training device.

He hadn't partaken in regular exercise, let alone dancing, at any point in his life, and thus had enough difficulties hitting the occasionally glowing circles beneath him at all, even before featuring in distractions.

(And really, who could he have played sports with? With his teacher, perhaps? The man had made a few attempts to coax his reclusive ward into taking a course, joining a club or simply catching some fresh air, but all these options necessarily implied contact with other people, something that Shinji had avoided more and more for every year that he'd gone without any relevant experience – he'd been far too afraid of saying something wrong or being hit in the face with a ball, or being yelled at because he'd kept his hypothetical team members from victory or taken up the teacher's time and patience with his ineptitude.

The wound that his father's rejection had ripped into the boy's soul had gaped just as widely in the years following, and rather than softening the memory of being hated, time had distorted into a terrifying caricature the very thought of which he couldn't bear to contemplate – And that fear still plagued him to this day, but back then, before the fights, before Misato, Touji, Kensuke or Rei, the fright had extended to the mildest of criticisms or the briefest hostile glance – and to avoid interacting with anyone to the extent that they could form an opinion of him had been a simple and efficient way to avoid that. And thus, it had not been that unusual for him to go several days without speaking a single word, and hardly ever to anyone other than his teacher.)

“So you're giving up?”

At first, Asuka thought of Misato's question as a joke intended to raise morale, and thus assumed a posture that was more worthy of herself and implied clearly that she'd never consider that option in any serious manner. She even laughed a little to clarify that and to assure that the expectations directed at her would be fulfilled: “Well, it's not like you have anyone else for the job.”

“Rei?”

“Yes?”

“Why don't you give it a try?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

The primary goal of that attempt was not so much to actually replace Asuka as to motivate her a bit – Sure, if the Second Child were to persist in her uncooperative stance, it would at least be practical to know what results could be expected from using the First Child instead, but since EVA 00 was still being repaired and Rei's synch rate with EVA 02 would never reach that of Asuka or even the already humble numbers she managed with her own unit, Misato would vastly prefer to deploy Asuka – This little demonstration was only meant to get her off her high horse, prune her rampant ego and remind her of her own position.

If Misato could have fathomed the actual effect that this measure would have on Asuka's feelings, she would never have considered it.
Of all sudden, all confidence had vanished from the Second Child's demeanor; With every step that Rei took toward the training mats, her aura of glamor collapsed into an insecure teenager who seemed increasingly lost, even fearful.

It was as if the floor had been pulled out from underneath her feet – what she witnessed before her eyes defied all rules of the worldview upon which she had built her identity – She was supposed to be Shikinami Asuka Langley, the Second Child, the best in the world... a special person who was needed for the saving of the world.

This here... shouldn't even be possible without her, let alone for a soser and an antisocial freak like Daddy's boy and Wondergirl.... they shouldn't be any threat to her at all, they shouldn't even be capable of competing with her.

And yet, it was happening without her, just as it had before she'd even arrived here.

The First Child, that arrogant bitch who considered herself too good to become friends with her, didn't waste a single opportunity to humiliate her – (What was it that she lacked? What was she missing? What was so wrong with her that this gil wouldn't spare her a glance? No, no, that was wrong. It was clearly wondergirl who had to have something wrong with her. It was all her, the arrogant little bitch.)

Without deeming her worthy of a single look, Unit Zero's pilot picked up the discarded headphones and took her place next to that simpleton, and began her no-holds barred humiliation of Asuka.

As soon as the music had stated, Captain Shikinami was forced to watch helplessly as her reason for existing was stomped into the ground by those two nobodies – The motions of the pair were perfectly synchronous, every note and every circle was hit precisely, every single muscle seemed to be tensed and relaxed to the same extent, down to the curving of their spines, the positioning of their fingers and countless tiny details that one shouldn't be able to emulate at will.

It was like watching reflections or identical twins, as if they could read or even predict each other's thoughts.

If Shinji's pinky was poking out of the circle to the left, then Rei's would be doing the same.

In other words: Natural compatibility.

The redhead was devastated.

How could this antisocial bitch who had the lowest synch rate among all pilots, master with such singlehanded grace a task that Asuka hadn't pulled of after three days of training?

How dare she?!

Why wasn't that stupid Daddy's saying anything against it?

And had she actually been expecting any help from that (better, more experienced fighter) useless loser?

She... couldn't believe it, she just couldn't take this anymore.

This should have been different, all of this... it was completely unlike anything she'd pictured he many, many times she'd thought of how her glorious arrival in this country was supposed to go.

The genuinely impressed “Wow!” from her classmates was the cherry on top of the humiliation.
“Looks like Shinji and Rei might be the better pair for this operation.” Misato scoffed, driving the last nail into Asuka's perceived coffin.

She wanted to retort something, but she couldn't think of anything to say.

A sob escaped from her mouth.

She hadn't done anything wrong! She was the best, better than this half-wit... so why weren't they even giving her chance to take part in the fight for which she had been preparing her entire life?

What sort of an useless piece of trash did you have to be if you couldn't even do the one thing she had, without exaggeration, lived for these past ten years?

She was Captain Shikinami Asuka Langley, an EVA pilot.

The only point of an EVA pilot was to fight in her EVA!

If she couldn't do that... if they wouldn't let her do that... if they... wouldn't need her at all...

Oh no.

Oh no.

Were those... actually... tears that were gathering warm and traitorously as the corners of her eyes as she was uselessly stammering to herself?

Was she crying?

After she'd sworn that she'd never cry again?

No... no that couldn't be, not in front of, not because of the people in this room. They ought to be nothing to her.

This helpless little crybaby that wasn't needed... that didn't have what it took to stay here... that was not the kind of person she wanted to be, dammit!

Hiding the liquid proof of her shame from those who would delight in them, Asuka turned around and fled from the room in desperation, additionally aggrieved by the paper doors in this insufferable foreign country hat couldn't even be slammed properly.

“A-Asuka-san!” Hikari called after her, worried by her uncharacteristic behavior, but to no avail.

In the uncomfortable silence, the sound of the automatic apartment door closing was impossible to miss.

“Well look at that, seems like she does have feelings after all.” Touji commented, devoid of sympathy.

Not to sound insensitive, but, in his opinion, this girl really oughtn't be surprised to find out that her ass wasn't the center of the universe – Hikari, on the other hand, saw this whole situation rather differently and remained staunchly loyal to her most recent friend:

“IKARI-KUN!” she angrily addressed at the boy in the silly costume, who'd already interrupted his attempts at dancing by the time Asuka had stormed out of the room, whereas Rei, who didn't catch the immediate connection between her emotional outburst and the cessation of their current activity as she didn't see how her stopping or taking any other action could have quelled the redhead's
wrath, continued executing her orders until she realized that Shinji was no longer providing any movements for her to copy.

The boy, who had been looking at the half-open sliding door through which Asuka had disappeared, his expression mostly puzzled but also a little worried, turned to face Hikari in response to her wide gestures, removing his headphones in order to better understand her.

Unfortunately, those had somewhat dampened her initial shouting, leaving Shinji unprepared for the vigorous bark that now awaited him:

“Come on, go after her!” the class representative demanded.

“Heh?” Shinji replied, flinching at the harshness of her tone. He wished girls would make sense more often. He didn't understand what he'd done wrong, or why Asuka was suddenly upset about not having to do a task that she'd been incessantly complaining about for the past four days.

“You made a girl cry!” Hikari elucidated. “Take responsibility for your actions!”

Shinji paled, unable to say anything.

He'd... made her cry?

Was he even capable of that?

Until now, he'd considered himself completely unable to touch the Second Child in any way, as if she were existing... high above him, and everything he could say would be repelled like drops of Rain from the surface of a lotus plant.

She'd always projected an aura of complete self-reassuredness and superiority, as if nothing that Shinji or anyone else could do would be more important to her than the earthworms crawling in the dirt she walked upon.

And now, he was expected to believe that she could cry?

That he could make her cry?

The Third Child no longer understood anything in this world.

Even though he couldn't imagine what in the world he could have done to merit this reaction, he couldn't stand the idea of having hurt another, even if it was a person whom he disliked.

Unlike certain other people he lacked malice or hostility... and the very concept of being responsible for other people's hardship could drive him to madness.

It wasn't this paralyzing panic from the days with his teachers or the fights before the Futagoyama incident, but this small, accusing voice in the back of his head that longed to erase not just Asuka's tears but also Hikari's wrath, was enough to tip the scales in his decision of whether to follow her or not in favor of overlooking his disdain for the girl.

He didn't think he'd be successful and in fact fully expected to be yelled at, but at very least Hikari might be satisfied by his willingness to try.

But finding the enraged EVA pilot was easier said than done, since it was hard to tell where she could have ran off to after leaving the apartment.

His chances of catching up to her before she left the building were dim.
In the end, the necessary clue came, ironically, from Shinji's function as a dedicated 'house husband' as Asuka had often described it in mockery over the last few days – the shopping list he'd dutifully written and affixed to the apartment door to remind himself to buy the necessary items the next time he left the house was no longer in place – besides, he faintly remembered hearing Asuka complaining to Misato about the lack of fruit and salad in this household, and that she [Asuka] unlike some other people [Misato] “had a figure to maintain.”

To be honest, Shinji thought that Misato's figure was perfectly fine and that it was Asuka who could use some more meat on her bones, but her complaining suggested that she may have gone to grab the desired salad by herself, along with those beauty products she also kept demanding.

Which meant that with some luck, he might find her at the nearest grocery store.

He didn't waste any time getting rid of the ridiculous outfit – Hikari’s deathglare was scary – and departed to collect his redheaded sister-in-arms.

Knowing that she must have been running, he made an effort to walk as quickly as he could and ignore the many looks that his getup was garnering, but, as we had previously mentioned, he was not exactly athletic, causing him to be rather out of breath before he even reached the closest stores and forcing him to take a break halfway through.

As he was gasping for air with an arm placed on a nearby wall to support himself, he noticed a shiny object in the vicinity of his feet.

Shinji wasn't the type to take action out of curiosity, especially when he happened to be in a hurry, but the writing on the object, which happened to be a familiar yellow badge, convinced him to pick it up with only two words: “Yui I.”

Wasn't this the same alleyway where he'd met her the first time?

In a state of ambivalence, he felt the sides of the metal name tag.

It felt cool, smooth and most certainly real.

He wanted to throw it far, far away so he'd never have to see it, so he wouldn't need to be reminded of the terrible prophecy for which it stood.

He positioned his arm for the throw, but his fingers wouldn't let go.

This thing was the only proof that he hadn't gone mad, the only material evidence.

He took it with him.

Why would Yui leave it here?

Wondering if she was about to show up out of thin air, as she was wont to do, he glanced into the alleyway from whence she had come last time, suddenly afflicted by the fearful superstition that he might accidentally summon her with a thought.

There was something red, further back on the wall, a stripe, a streak –

Fresh, red, with individual rivulets running down all over it's full length, distorted red handprints forming a line, leading to what appeared to be writing further back in the darkness of the alley.

He could only see the end of it, but even so, he had no doubts about how the full sentence would
The world is wrong.

Shinji ran for it.

Mostly so he wouldn't miss Asuka.

Sure, there might have been additional reasons, but he refused to think about them as of now.

If Yui were here, she'd probably have advised him to follow Asuka anyway – wasn't that what she had said? That the battles they would be facing in the foreseeable future would require for him, Asuka and everyone else to fight together?

That is was the only way to defeat the enemy?

She didn't seem to be too far off as far as the next battle was concerned, the one looming in his personal future right now... it was actually rather evident, he'd never even considered that he could handle this gargantuan task on his own. But even something as intuitive as the simple truth that the challenges of life couldn't always be mastered took on an ominous, foreign tint when they came from this Yui person – it was almost like she'd known that this entire ridiculous incident was coming.

But one way or another, it was of urgent, vital importance that he find Asuka.

So he sped up.

Before long, he arrived at the nearest cluster of stores, not exactly what you'd call a mall, but – people. Sounds. Reality.

Opportunities to assure himself that he was seeing the same things as everybody else.

So, Asuka – she was the very reason he'd come here.

He had to find her.

She wasn't in the drugstore, but the sales clerk had seen her – Part-European girls in leotards weren't exactly a common sight around here.

Next, Shinji tried the grocery store – Bingo.

He found her crouching in front of an open refrigerator cabinet, picking out a soda.

In the time that it took for him to track her down, she had come to a decision.

If she hadn't been expecting him, she'd at least composed the words that she was planning to address him with -

When he walked over to her side and signaled his presence with an uncertain “Uhm...”, she immediately clarified that he could keep all of his apologies or assurances to himself: “Look, I get it. You don't need to say anything.”

Even if she wasn't looking at him, he knelt down as a basic gesture of respect and goodwill, to see eye-to-eye with her both literally and figuratively, and to avoid the impression that he was looking down at her in either of those ways like a 'Daddy's Boy' would.

How Asuka could see him as anything resembling a threat was far beyond him – He knew full well that he made for a rather pathetic sight and one would think that she saw it clearly, given how she
tended to mock him.

He'd acted hostile toward her because she'd treated him like dirt, but in the end, he'd much prefer it if they could treat each other with at least some measure of civility – The Third Child was anything but a fan of discord and strife.

He wanted to offer her his understanding, if she should want it – and to his great surprise, she seemed ready to accept his help: “I know. I have no choice. I have to pilot the EVA...”

But this wasn't belated insight talking, but rather a broken, downtrodden pride, a half-hearted, resigned admittance. This wasn't in the least the look of a happy, matured or relieved person, more like a beautiful fantastic creature from which something essential had been torn off, like someone had taken a sledgehammer to all its magic and left it broken on the floor, like a broken angel who'd had its wings ripped off and been left to fend for themselves in the storm, alone without the means to find their way home.

She looked... broken.

Damaged, clipped, stunted, repressed, bleeding but not bleeding out, burning but not burning up, simply spending her every day walking through the day with a quantum of unhappiness that wouldn't go away.

She looked just like him.

The sight of her crouching body folded upon itself, too alike to his on reflection in the refrigerated shelf's glass door through which he was observing her, and too significant in its overlap down to the lowered position of her head and the lost look in her eyes...

She had said that she 'had' to pilot the EVA, that she had no choice but to do it – Those were words that, to Shinji, sounded painfully familiar.

She didn't seem to see it as the tremendous burden that it was to him, but there could be no doubt that being an EVA pilot was extremely important to Asuka.

She, too, seemed to have some sort of reason that bound her to the war machine.

She too seemed to have something to prove...

Quite abruptly, it occurred to him that this perplexing, seemingly superior creature that had spent days whipping him with her scorn was only human.

That the Second Child had wishes, hopes and even fears just like everyone else, one of those fears being the of being the prospect of being... unneeded.

Just a moment ago, Shinji would never have believed that he would ever find any common ground between Asuka and herself, yet that fear appeared to be something that they both shared.

He didn't understand a thing about her most of the time, but in this precise moment, he probably had a very good grasp of what she must have been feeling.

And to see this person who had seemed so proud and strong feeling like that, and looking like that, that just looked wrong in more ways than Shinji could describe.

But even if they were both broken creatures short of a wing, even they might be able to fly if they wrapped their arms around each other and flew together.
Sometimes, when people came together, they could fly –

Even she had to understand that after the First Child had just presented that ugly mirror to her face. The Third Child might have been an idiot, but out of the whole bunch consisting of the First, Misato and those stupid boys he was probably the least insufferable one.

This indirect implication of a half-decision might well have been the only way that she would allow herself to ask for help.

Cementing the finality of her resolution by rising to her feet and closing the refrigerator, she declared the conversation over by asserting that she would do it.

She'd work together with Shinji to carry out this operation.

As soon as he was back on her feet, that enviable aura of strength had returned.

It was probably the first time that his response to it was glad glad rather than intimidated.

However, it was also the first time he came to consider the possibility that, at least on some levels, she was a normal girl.

However one might want to spin it, and whatever might have come followed after this n the days to come, at that point, Shinji genuinely felt like a moment of understanding might have passed between them, and before he knew it, he was being ordered around by his new flatmate in order to grab the remaining half of the grocery. With their combined efforts, they managed to acquire everything on the list and soon left the job carrying several plastic bags. Of course, Asuka insisted that Shinji do most of the carrying, but she 'generously' allowed him a break first, though under the excuse that she herself was hungry.

Thus, the pair wound up at a nearby bench, taking their time to consume a few refreshments, consisting mostly of some freshly-bought ready-made sandwiches.

You could hardly call it a kindness, but given the state of affairs so far, even attenuated meanness represented a quantum leap in their relations.

Shinji had come to know her at least this far – that is, he already felt like he was a little bit closer to her than he'd been in the days before.

Her admission that she needed him for this did not mean that she liked or even wanted to be around him, but now, she tolerated him.

Something like this meal in the evening sun wouldn't have been possible before – Someone who initially disliked him had ceased to treat him with unconditional rejection.

Someone had hated him... and he'd been able to change that, at least a tiny little bit.

It wasn't much, or even enough for anything by itself, just a teensy teeny baby step, and he tried his best not to think too much of it but he couldn't ignore that pleasant warmth spreading from inside him, and neither did he want to –

So even with someone who thought as little of him as Asuka, there was a chance of improving their relationship.
Maybe, one day, even his father could be made to not dislike him anymore...

One very distant, very faraway day...

“Eat up!” Captain Shikinami ordered, unavoidably using the bench as a pedestal to address him from above. “It's full of proteins and vitamin! I don't want you to fall behind during training just because you don't have enough of these in your skull!

We've got to show it to Misato and the First, and pay them back in spades!”

“Payback? But what for?” asked Shinji who, despite everything else, still didn't understand what exactly Rei, Misato or himself for that matter were supposed to have done wrong.

As usual, Asuka eyes him like a toddler who'd just asked a stupid question.

“How can you be so oblivious! At least you as a man should understand this!” The Second Child took one furious bite out of her sandwich. “They've humiliated me! They've hurt my pride! I can't possibly let them get away with that!”

Although that answer didn't bring Shinji any closer to understanding her aversions, he couldn't help but to break into a small, relieved smile – She was back to being her usual perplexing self, so he was glad that she was more or less alright. And if you looked at it from this perspective, it was almost adorable how she'd just automatically included him in some vaguely defined “we” she'd suddenly begun to talk about without ever asking him, or even herself if he'd taken any offense from the other two. (Which definitely wasn't the case).

Nonetheless, it seemed to indicate that she'd begun to accept him as a partner, comrade and brother-in-arms whom she was willing to imbue with a certain degree of her trust – He had absolutely no illusion that she could be looking at him as an equal just yet, but it was a kind of success that she didn't treat him as being completely beneath her anymore, and as such, it lit a warm and fuzzy feeling beneath the reluctant boy's cheeks and filled him with a heady, humble little joy.

Illuminated by the evening light, there really was something to looking up at the Second Child's trim silhouette as she gulped down her soda like it was part of some military regimen – the amber tones of sunset seemed to remove the coldness from her natural color palette, the exertions of the training had subtly intensified her natural scent, and as ridiculous as it might have looked, the silly leotard did not succeed in robbing her blossoming feminine curves of all their allure.

Everything about her boasted of vigor and vitality, like some kind of freshly bloomed exotic flower. Her actual build was more on the lighter side, though, if it wasn't for her confident posture and frequent expressions of dominance, the contrast between her light skin and strongly colored hair might have created the deceptive misconception that she could have used a protector.

So far, Shinji had perceived her as something unreachable and untouchable, an existence far superior to himself; He had not believed that she could possibly have any need for the likes of him, and in that sense, he'd though her to be fundamentally unlike him.

Perhaps that's how she wanted to be seen.

But at least in battle, there was something like a place at her side.

And Shinji would do his best to fill that place.
Despite their differences, he felt that he mustn't let her down, not with something that evidently meant so much to her.

Chapter End Notes

1. Katayoku no Tenshi = roughly, 'One-winged Angel'. Feel free to shoot my unapologetically cliched ass.
2. With the odds of successful teamwork now significantly increased, the long-avaited confrontation draws nearer... 2.06: [The Place at Your Side]
Early morning, she wakes up
Knock, knock, knock on the door
It's time for makeup, perfect smile
It's you they're all waiting for

They go:
"Isn't she lovely, this Hollywood girl?"

Lost in an image, in a dream
But there's no one there to wake her up
And the world is spinning, and she keeps on winning

But tell me, what happens when it stops?

They go:
"Isn't she lovely, this Hollywood girl?"

And they say:
She's so lucky, she's a star

But she cry, cry, cries in her lonely heart, thinking
'If there's nothing missing in my life
Then why do these tears come at night?'"

Lost in an image, in a dream
But there's no one there to wake her up
And the world is spinning, and she keeps on winning

But tell me, what happens when it stops?

-Britney Spears, 'Lucky'
"The patient in room twelve? She's the little girl who got trapped under debris from the first battle. She's been here a long time..."

"Her injuries were pretty severe."
"And to think that she's just a grade schooler..."

"Did the boy come in again today?"

"Yes, he did. After all this time, he still visits her at least twice a week. He must be very fond of his little sister, what an exemplary big brother."

"Boys of that kind are hard to find these days..."

Touji's smile disintegrated in the exact moment that he closed the door behind him. Little Sakura's lot in life was bad enough without any additional worries about his person, so he did his best to keep his composure, cite some entertaining trivialities from his week and relay some regards from their father. This time, he'd enthusiastically described the rather amusing sight of Shinji and Asuka in their leotards.

Though it was hard to deny that it wasn't easy to keep up his smile in front of a sight that still broke his heart.

After countless operations, the bones in her legs had been mended by liberal use of casts and screws, but it would likely take weeks of physical therapy before she'd be able to stand.

Same for the use of her right arm.

But even without any shattered bones to account for, the little girl would likely remain chained to her bed for the foreseeable future – The damage from her internal injuries and the blow to her head had not been that easy to fix, and Touji didn't feel like the amount of beeping screens and tubes in his sister's room had significantly decreased.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do to help her – Every day he came here, he came face to face with his own impotence, and every time, he felt like he was coming closer to tearing out his hair.

Since their mother had died early on and their father was required to work to keep the family afloat, it had often become Touji's duty to look after Sakura, and, for example, help her with her homework or console her when she was sad.

But when she had truly needed him to push her out of the way and take that chunk of debris in her stead, he hadn't been there.

Frustrating.

The memories of the first battle, in turn, led his thoughts to the other reason of today's visit, a
purpose for which the nearby pair of chatting nurses walking down the hallways would prove quite convenient:

“Excuse me, Miss, I have a question. About three days ago, there was this girl who's been found on the streets by a couple of boys. Did she, by any chance, get brought to this hospital?”

“Why do you ask? Do you know her?”

“Not exactly. I was one of the guys that found her. How is she?”

“Her injuries weren't as bad as they looked...”

“Thank goodness! Who was she? That is, if you're allowed to tell me.”

The nurse sighed. “At the moment, we can neither tell not refrain from telling you, we don't even know ourselves. She gave us a name, but there are no records of anyone like that, and she doesn't match the description of any missing person reports. It's as if she didn't exist until three days ago.”

“...can I visit?”

“I'm sorry, only next of kin.”

“Alright. I hope you find some of these sometime soon, so the poor thing doesn't have to be alone.”

---

Covered in bedsheets and bandages of sterile white, it took Yui a great effort to even move her head to the extent that she could see outside the window and catch a glimpse of the low-hanging cloudy skies.

But even if she hadn't managed, she’d still have known that it had only just rained – she recognized the fresh, cleansed smell of the cool air pouring in through the window.

The rain smelt just the same as it did back where her odyssey had started...the sky and it's whimsical weather had been the only constant on her long journey.

“If you were here... what would you do... father?”

----

The final battle was set to take place in three days, and the time remaining to them was not getting any longer –

instead, it was steadily ticking away.

Neither of the two children felt like they could afford any more delays. Determined to pull through, they devoted all their attention to their task and, by extension, each other.

But even then, to precisely match another down to a heartbeat, to familiarize oneself with their
motions and thought patterns to the point that you could predict them was no easy task, especially when you were as different from each other as Shinji and Asuka.

At least, they were not on their own:

In the light of their adjusted attitudes and newfound determination, Misato's strict regimen felt much less like a curse and more like a blessing.

It helped that the local hot springs penguin attempted to make up for the first day's debacle by offering moral support, be it by cheering, keeping them company or sometimes even participating in the exercises.

Unfortunately, he had to stay home for the parts of the training that were required to take place in NERV HQ. Particularly in the morning, Akagi would put the Children through countless iterations of the same simulation to practice for the fight. Training in the actual simulation bodies was particularly important in Shinji's case, as the choreography required him to have his Evangelion perform movements that lay beyond what he was capable of in his natural body.

According to the test data, he should technically have been able to do this since sometime last week as his synch rate had recently passed 100%, but he'd never done it with conscious intentions, which was exactly why he was supposed to practice it now – In fact, he managed to surprise the scientist by managing a successful handstand in the very first simulation, though his landing afterwards had not looked much more dignified than the results of the last battle – He ended up going through a great deal of struggle concerning the 'superhuman' movements, not because he couldn't do it, but having a hard time gauging, coordinating and precisely regulating their force without overshooting the margins.

Asuka, for whom everything required for the plan demanded about as much effort as a few simple jumps, protested that she was forced to waste precious time because of the 'Stupid Daddy's boy', but ended up giving him tips – Not, as Misato's teasing suggested, because she had somehow changed her opinion about him, but simply because she wanted him to stop getting on her nerves.

Shinji got the issue worked out on that very same day.

The instructions on the area of the roundhousekick should be particularly useful, and not only because Shinji could personally vouch for Asuka's skill in the area – the plan was to finish the angel off with a pair of simultaneous kicks intended to shatter both cores.

He'd guess that he was probably supposed to see it as a sort of honor to be introduced into this art by one of its masters – and her tips had turned out quite useful and intuitive in their application – but he didn't think that he'd ever be able to perform that move outside his Evangelion.

At least in that era, he would never be Asuka's equal – Though 'beating people up' wasn't exactly the kind of skill he'd always wanted to learn.

Though the simulation exercises ended around noon, the arrival of the afternoon did not imply a break. Oh no, that's exactly what Misato got those modified twister mats for.

To be honest, the Children still had the occasional inelegant moments, but Asuka was consoled by the knowledge that her mistakes rarely ended with her rolling across the floor or landing flat on her face. Since Asuka appreciated this brightening of her mood, she showed her gratitude by helping Shinji find his way back to his own mat – usually with a good old Shikinamian roundhousekick.

But much more than the training itself, it was the corresponding everyday life that still created the
most problems. In her endless quest to embarrass them, Misato had decided to boost the team spirit by buying them matching toothbrush mugs with their names on them. In hindsight, a larger sink might have been a more sound investment, as it might have prevented the kids from growling at each other each time there were some accidental sprays of water, which, given that they had to stand closely together, happened pretty often.

The evening’s television program was another point of contention: They could neither agree on something to watch, nor were they very good at imitating each other’s poses while they were pointing the remotes at the TV.

Their synchronization was fine up until the initial “Who watches this crap?” but there simply weren’t that many insults that would apply equally to a soap opera and a cooking show.

The subsequent quarrels go so out of hand that Misato saw no choice but to place her own futon between those of her young wards to assure that they wouldn't smash each other's heads while she slept.

The next morning brought a small victory – after she'd made them sleep under the influence of the music intended for the attack plan, she'd found them in the exact same position.

Another indication that her efforts were ultimately bearing fruit was how the children's bio rhythms seemed to be adjusting to each other, which wasn't an entirely positive change given that the apartment had only a single toilet, leading to a distances where both children and the penguin who's faithfully supported them in their endeavors would embark on a three-way race for the toilet – It was probably enough to say that Shinji spent the rest of the day with the bathroom door's imprint on his face after Asuka had 'accidentally' slammed it into his face – somehow, both the redhead and the bird always managed to claim the porcelain throne before he did.

Despite these occasional unfortunate consequences, Misato kept insisting that the three of them keep slurping their noodle soups at exactly the same time, though even her powers of persuasion were insufficient to convince Asuka to use 'those completely unpractical chopsticks', or at least, she'd given up when the girl's fervent speech about the inherent superiority of forks became too taxing on everybody else's eardrums.

Asuka kept her fork.

Annoyed by the whole incident, Misato actually made good on her earlier announcement to ensure that what little spare time the Children had left would be split evenly so that Shinji, who usually tended to back down in order to avoid further unpleasantness, for once received some help with the housework and even found some time to listen to his own music – which meant that Asuka was forced to take the other earbud and listen to his 'emo bullshit' as well.

Even so, he might have gotten more enjoyment out of his daily dose of musically underlined depressing poetry since Asuka had insisted that he keep his eyes closed as her underwear dried on a nearby clothesline.

This whole setup just made him nervous.

Participating in Asuka's hobby's did not offer him too much comfort either. For one thing, he quickly reached the conclusion that all those girl magazines were either evil or incredibly boring, no in-between. Honestly, he really didn't understand how it was any of Asuka's business if celebrity A was dating celebrity B or not, and he felt guilty just for reading it – it felt too much like prying, or gossiping behind someone's back, and that was... well, not nice. The fashion magazines were a little better as the models were easy on the eyes, but god help him if Asuka should catch his
eyes drifting from the clothes themselves to the unclothed bits – even calling one of the ladies ‘pretty’ had landed him a slap.

Another thing Asuka liked to do was to play video games, but she only owned a single handheld game, which resulted in the ceremonial unpacking of her gaming console and its swift connection to the television.

Misato insisted that they try the multiplayer setting together, preferably as a team, but even if Asuka's game of choice was nothing extremely girl-specific, Shinji was soon forced to admit that he didn't have the slightest bit of talent.

But even Asuka couldn't really savor the activity, given that she was stuck with someone who was dead weight in co-op mode, and easy prey in a duel. At first, she relished stopping him into the ground, but it lost its interest rather quickly.

However...

...between the training and their spats, another kind of little moments began to slip in, scattered instants when Shinji felt like he was about to burn up from the inside, when time seemed to slow in brief seconds where his gaze lingered on Asuka's tauntingly perfect body longer than necessary, the times where their gazes would meet, when they'd accidentally brush against each other, or touch for some necessity of their constant company.

There was a warm, tingly consuming sense of desire that had somehow crept in through the backdoor before he'd even noticed.

Since that conversation in the evening sun, she had seemed more... tangible, like she actually existed in the same world as him, on the same plane of being, in the same number of dimensions. He became increasingly aware that she was still a girl his age, perfectly capable of being... vulnerable.

A girl his age, who, despite everything, was strong, brave, intelligent and attractive beyond all bounds...

So, what about that thing that commonly happened if you placed a healthy young male (presuming he wasn't asexual or exclusively interested in males) in proximity of a powerful, enviable and extremely attractive girl, when he was made to spend large amounts of time in her presence, exposed to her youthful breasts, her long, slender legs, her taunt behind, her shining, fire-red hair and her sweet scent?

What tended to take place if they were then made to share their highs and lows, and live through successes and failures, great strains and intense emotions side by side?

What tended to happen?

Well, at least in Shinji's case, it sparked the beginning of those miraculous processes which, until very recently, had been the sources of all life.

Before he knew it, Shinji found himself confronted with the situation that this person, whom he couldn't even stand until recently, caused him to feel desire.

The new and strange feelings bubbled forth from some obscure, arcane source that was unknown to him, in a way he had never known before.
He pined and languished for the dream to take her perfect, flawless body into his arms, to cover her neck in kisses and rip the clothes off her body, to grasp for her breasts and feel their tips brushing against the palm of his hands, to feel her perfect legs between his own.

They had warned him of this in biology class, but they had never told him just how... intense this need could be, how languorous its fever... but all of these were double-edges blades.

Precisely because he was always stuck with her, he never found the time to seek relief through certain... solitary activities, and the very fact she was so intelligent, attractive and physically mature made it rather unlikely that she'd give an ineffectual loser such as himself as much as a passing consideration – She'd spurned the most muscular, wealthy and most popular boys their school had to offer, and set her standards so high that you'd have to be a James Bond knockoff with a face full of manly stubble to get as much as a passing consideration.

Shinji could think of many words with which to describe himself, but that list surely didn't contain anything like 'cool', 'charming' or 'bursting with testosterone', which turned each of Asuka's bold provocations, each and every of her motions in her barely clothed stage into a preview of hell and heaven at once.

In between all of her 'Are you an idiot?'s and 'You're such a loser!'s, she would throw in a certain degree of sexual provocations, simply because she loved being popular and relished in being seen as sexy and desirable, though she'd always clarify right during the flirtations themselves that she didn't even remotely consider him an option, and that he should consider himself fortunate for the chance to waste away in her orbit.

She taunted him with things she would never give him... and that almost led him to a kind of anger. Suddenly, all of her scoff and her mockery cut deeper than ever before, and he could no longer turn a blind eye to all the debasement humiliation she had visited upon him, losing the will to put up even the half-hearted resistance he'd managed thus far.

He'd begun to actually care what she thought of him, and weakly hoped that he might get along with her, and be there for her when she needed him.

She, of course, did not want this. She was merely holding back with her insults and physical beatings because she longed to excel in battle.

He was nothing but the means to an end, and slowly but surely, it was beginning to bother him.

One way or another, the days before the angel's return steadily approached their end, and by the time Misato declared the last of their training sessions to be over, the two EVA pilots had perfected their team work and synchronization down to the smallest detail.

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“So... see you then, Sakura-chan. I'll visit you again on Thursday, okay? I promise.”

Beyond the door to his sister's hospital room, Touji encountered the same nurse he'd spoken to earlier, not that the news she's brought had been all too encouraging.

She appeared to have been waiting for him to leave.
“By the way, Miss... What about the mysterious girl? Have you found her family? ...eh? Disappeared?”

“I'm afraid yes. We were going to hand her over to social services yesterday, but when we came to wake her up, her bed was empty and her window was smashed. It seems like she knotted her bed sheets and duvet cover together and used it like a rope to climb out. The police is already looking for her, but they haven't found her yet...”

---

The last eve before the battle had been long-awaited, and yet it snuck up on them; The last three days, which to Shinji, had felt like three small eternities as he'd been living through them, in hindsight appeared like they'd just sped past him like a passing train, making it hard to believe that all that had taken place in so little time and through such a limited number of events.

A few rather fundamental things had changed irrevocably, and he too, had been changed, tortured and enriched by some wholly new experiences.

At times it had felt like this evening would never come, in part because the times preceding it seemed to have lasted long enough to give him a sense of being significantly older than before, but now, this moment had finally arrived, and it didn't even feel like it was anything special, and there was neither anticipation or tension in the air.

In and of itself, it was nothing more than a regular, relaxed evening, the infamous calm before the storm.

Since Misato had left for headquarters to attend to the last preparations for the battle, and Asuka was currently in the shower, Shinji had decided to use the brief moment of quiet to take it easy – If he hadn't sufficiently memorized the attack pattern by now, it would have been too late anyway, so he'd put on some loose, comfortable clothing and pulled out his cassette player in order to treat himself to some calm and pleasant music and take the time to read that one comic book that Touji had lent him a while ago.

When the end of his brief respite was announced by Asuka's steps, he kept his eyes closed as as wise precaution – given her tendency to run out of the shower wearing little more than a towel, it had proved to be a rather effective method of avoiding unnecessary pain.

Indeed, the noises in the background suggested that she was about to get dressed.

“Where's Misato?” Asuka asked as she pulled her nightshirt over her head.

“At work. She just called to say the she won't be coming home.”

“Great! That means we have the place all to ourselves!”

Before Shinji's hormone- addled brain could convert that sentence and the seductive smile that accompanied it into a wild, steamy fantasy involving copulation, reality burst his bubble with a cold reminder that her choice, insofar as she had one, would always lead her away from and not towards him – Only under duress did she even lower herself to breathe the same air as him, and once that coercion was gone, she immediately packed up her futon and carried it into the next room, where she closed the door with her foot without sparing him as much as a glance.
What else could being 'alone together' mean but freedom from the embarrassing circumstances necessitated by their training?

He'd barely removed his earbuds out of some hope that she might have something to say to him when the door had already been slammed shut before his eyes.

And to be honest, he didn't have the heart to remind her of the mandates of their training, he wasn't really keen of being stuck with her grumpy self next to him, and if he looked at himself, it was barely a mystery why someone like Asuka wouldn't want to stay in the same room as him – perhaps, she even thought that he, too, would be delighted to have a bit of privacy, after all, she couldn't have known what she would likely never find out.

Suddenly, the sliding door opened again.

Her loose-fitting, yellow nightshirt didn't do much to conceal her breasts, but her hostile tone efficiently assured that his glances didn't stay from her face.

“Consider this door as the invincible wall of Jericho!”

“Hm...?”

Shinji blinked in confusion.

What was that again? Some sort of western thing?

In any case, he couldn't remember ever hearing of any such thing, not that this would have been unusual.

Luckily (?), Asuka was 'compassionate' enough to deliver an explanation:

“That means, if you cross it, I will kill you!
So, and now be a good kid and go to bed. It's way past your bedtime!” and before she'd finished speaking, the door slammed shut once again – this time, for good.

He heard her complaining about how the Japanese could possibly stand to sleep on the floor, but then, the clicking of the light switch revealed that she had no plans to waste any more words on him.

To avoid her wrath, he put away the aforementioned comic book, turned off the light and decided that she was probably right as far as his bedtime was concerned.

Feeling rather depressed for a variety of reasons ranging from Asuka's disinterest to the writing he'd found in that alley three days ago, he decided to listen to some of his own music while falling asleep, since the steady repetitions of Track 27 reflected his mood rather well.

Beyond the windows, one could see the last light of the dying day, which no longer even bothered to disguise its impending end through the warm colors of sunset, but simply clad itself in a fallow blue that was about to fade into blackness at the furthest edge of the horizon, and in its fading glow, make out the reflective surfaces of Tokyo-3's skyscrapers, and observe how they, as well as their countless antennas, began to display the twinkling of those little red lights intended to warn and guide the flights of nocturnal planes and helicopters, showing them the path to safety like a lighthouse would out on the open sea.
Shinji wished that he had something to show him the way – towards Rei, to Asuka, to humanity's salvation or even to his father...

Or the way to the answers to all of his questions.

He could really use some of those red lights to demarcate just how far he could go with each person without being rejected, and which areas to avoid so she wouldn't be hated. But he didn't have him, and so he was forced time and time again to enter the black spots on the map, where the Unknown dwelt... he couldn't stand this constant uncertainty in this big, confusing world, in which he was always surrounded by a large margin of emptiness, and all those who could have helped him were always far away.

The door turned the two or three meters that separated him from Asuka's place of rest into 'the next, enclosed room', and the words 'past your bedtime' made them a deep chasm.

Presumably, she lay somewhere over there, sleeping peacefully with no clue of the terrible power she could have over him without even knowing...

That said, there was also a lot that Shinji didn't know, things he couldn't have known, nor even suspected – For one thing, the distance between himself and the Second Child was only half as large as he'd thought: Still on all fours, the designated pilot of Unit Two remained on her knees next to the door, in the expectation that he would open it again, her thoughts quite removed from what he would have expected them to be:

Just how stupid could he possibly be?

How much more obvious did she have to make it for this stupid idiot to finally get it? He hadn't exactly made it much of a secret that he was mostly governed by his 'little' brain, and it was not like a wuss like him could afford to be choosy with the ladies, so what was the matter with him?

What else could a boy of 14 years, the exact age where the hormonal urges should be doing their worst, possibly think of when he heard that they had 'the house to themselves' and an attractive girl right under his nose? What was the invincible Wall of Jericho famous for – if not the story in which it had come crashing down?

Wasn't it enough that she was parading herself around in mere towels or slutty nightshirts?

Did she have to shove her breasts right into his face for him to notice them?

Or did the legendary Third Child actually think he was too good for her, him, that brainless, cowardly daddy's boy who didn't even have the guts to face her, always running off with his tail between his legs to avoid any possible confrontation?

How did that loser expect to ever get some if he kept acting like this? This was probably why she tended to get at least one love confession before lunch break, while he didn't.

Not that there was anything she wanted from those little boys – and he was the worst of them, the most immature of them all, nothing but a baby meekly following 'the plan' while clinging to the seams of Misato's skirt.

She wouldn't even be surprised if the pathetic wimp had a little bit of a crush on the older woman –
how deluded, to think that an experienced, older woman would ever consider him anything other than a child.

(To think Kaji would ever consider her anything else.)

Pah!

It wasn't as if she'd been seriously interested in charming that moron – if he'd actually barged in, she would have called him an idiot and escorted him out of the room with a kick, just for daring to think that she'd ever consider the likes of him.

(But wasn't it her who'd attempted to lure him here?)

She'd simply intended to use him as a guinea pig to practice the use of her womanly wiles before she'd attempt to seduce Kaji, just to try them out a bit. And it was only his status as an EVA pilot that made him eligible for that role, not that he'd had any appealing points that she'd be willing to waste herself on.

She belonged to the elite, so normal boys were about as distant from her as monkeys!

But even so, the only way the Third Child could possibly hold over her was as a plaything.

(To console herself after the defeat and the humiliation that had come with all this 'team work', to come to terms with the clear-as-crystal certainty that she hadn't been... good enough by anointing her wounds with a little bit of attention, recognition and affection.

To quieten her fears of inferiority by dominating the legendary Third Child with her body, at least.

And it hadn't worked.

She'd been waiting here for at least fifteen minutes.

He wouldn't come. )

Overcome with sorrow, Asuka lowered her head.

What was wrong with her, that she couldn't even tempt this horny nitwit even though he was quite obviously desperate?

If she couldn't even impress as hormonal teenager, how would she ever succeed with Kaji?

If she couldn't be NERV's best pilot, nor even an attractive adult woman, she'd be nothing but an useless child!

Everything... everything was working out without her being required or even needed for it... no one needed her, no one liked her, no one wanted her, no one admired her, no one would hold her, and no one ever, ever stayed with her!

Oh, how much she hated all this!

Everything and everyone here, this whole, damned country, she couldn't stand it, she hated it!

But what she hated the most was the useless, puny little child she had always- No.
She couldn't allow herself to sink that low, she couldn't stand this pitiful display.

This was just unacceptable.

It was him. This was all his fault!

That idiot!

How could he do this to her?

How could he spurn her so coldly?

There was no use in waiting for him, what more, she was glad that he hadn't come.

Determined not to waste another single second of her life on the Third Child, she sank onto her futon.

The silent apartment failed to show any particular interest in that.

She tried to get herself into some semblance of a comfortable sleeping position, but it just wouldn't work, and in the end, all her efforts amounted to was to restlessly turn in her sheets, bringing her legs close together as if she wanted to provide herself the warmth and consolation that this cruel, unfair world was denying her.

But it was no use.

She simply couldn't sleep, nor could she seem to relax or manage to overlook the gaping black hole in her soul.

Only when she finally gave up on trying to keep her eyes shut and found herself eying the sky through a gap in the curtains did she fully grasp what was eating away at her attempts to rest, and, indeed, had driven her to her attempt at luring the Third Child to her side – It hadn't been about trying out her feminine allures, at least not completely...

It was just that this 'adult', rather indirect, implied strategy was the only way in which the last reminder of her precious pride would allow her to beg for absolution from her suffering.

For up there in the dark firmament, there was a lone airplane pursuing its path, visible only a blinking red dot illuminated only by its nighttime security lighting.

Ever since she'd been a child, when she'd decided to devote every last second of her life to her duties as an EVA pilot, she had been striving to be just like that plane: The fastest, most expensive, most impressive kind of vehicle that could master even the furthest distances without being slowed down by the constraints of terrain, unimpeded by the mountains or lakes that forced other means of transportation to turn, and so special that it didn't have to share the ground with lesser options like cars or trains, being privileged to shoot through the heights of the atmosphere that were reserved only for its kind.

She'd always been a high achiever, or at least, she'd done her best to be one.

Yet, there were far fewer planes than there were cars, trains or ships, and when one flew above the landscape, one tended to have the whole sky for oneself, impossible to inore for anyone with the time and capacity to gaze upward.
That, however, was precisely the issue – that lone plane up there might have had the sky to itself, but what exactly was the sky even? There was nothing up there but the air and the cold and the gaseous waters of the cloud cover.

Whenever an aircraft flew, it flew all alone, surrounded in all directions by nothing but gaping emptiness.

All alone?

Had she attempted to get the Third Child's attention because she'd felt *alone*?

Because she hadn't wanted to be alone and he'd been conveniently at hand?

Because she'd wanted a warm body to cling to to distract herself from her failures?

Disgusting! Pitiful! Unacceptable!

Asuka couldn't make sense of the world anymore.

“Up until now, it's been the most natural thing for me to be alone...” she explained to the shamelessly disinterested air molecules. “Loneliness... isn't supposed to bother me...”

---

The Second Child wasn't the only person in this household who was having a hard time reaching a state of sleep – Even though Shinji knew that he would need to be well-rested for the big day tomorrow, it was simply not possible.

Even the music didn't help – he had far too many worries swimming around in his head, and they were not being helped by the additions of Asuka's rejection and the tensions regarding tomorrow's battle.

Then, suddenly, a noise.

It was a sliding door being opened – Asuka.

As if by some sort of reflex, Shinji immediately let his head and limbs sink down onto the sheets to feign a state of deep slumber – She'd told him to go to sleep, and the last thing he needed at a time like this was to incur her wrath this late at night.

Correspondingly, he didn't move a single millimeter as he heard her steps somewhere in the background – The only muscle he moved was the one needed to hit his cassette player's pause button, so he'd be able to hear what she was doing.

Only when he'd heard the squeaking of a door did he dare to peer past his eyelids – He didn't catch sight of Asuka, but the sounds he detected disclosed that her journey's destination had likely been the toilet.

Thus, Shinji decided that it would be for the best if he pretended to be asleep until she was back in her room, especially since he had no idea of the surprises that this night still held in store for him.

He definitely heard Asuka's steps as she was leaving the bathroom, but then, after what could not
have been more than half the way back, they simply ceased.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Shinji could have misjudged the direction of the noise or overestimated the distance, but... he didn't think he'd heard the sound of the door.

He could have made an attempt to ascertain the situation with an upward glance, but he didn't want to risk her noticing that he was still awake in case she was still in the living room.

For lack of other options, he decided to wait it out – but the answer he had refrained from seeking ended up seeking him out – quite literally.

Unbeknownst to Shinji, Asuka had spent a few moments looking down at him, conflicted and torn up by inner turmoil.

Then, he heard a definitive noise, along with a sudden sensation of warmth near his forehead, as he felt a touch that brushed against some of his hair.

Split seconds after he'd opened his eyes wide enough to realize what it all meant, they almost popped out of his skull.

The sight he was presented with drove a shock through his body and flooded the inside of his face with tremendous amounts of heat and blood.

As part of an instinctive flinch, his hand gripped the volume regulator attached to his headphones a little tighter, causing him to accidentally hit the rewind button, unleashing an ultra fast backwards version of his old familiar songs that was barely recognizable as music. It was a disquieting, disharmonious yet tolerable, screeching noise at the edge of Shinji's perception that vaguely conferred a sense of a time limit – He was far too busy with what his eyes were showing him to pay much attention to his ears.

For when he'd opened the former, he found his entire field of vision full with Asuka.

The source of warmth he'd felt against his forehead had been nothing other than a second forehead – to be exact, the one belonging to the Second Child.

She'd actually gone and planted herself in his bed, directly in his line of sight, her body aligned to his diagonal position, so that the distance between them remained consistently small – her long, slender legs were mere centimeters away from his own, as if they were only waiting for him to take the initiative and connect their forms until they were intertwined like a newlywed couple after their first night of passion.

All of Shinji's thoughts had been blown away, and all of what had once been his mind was completely paralyzed by the temptation supplied by his eyes, overloaded, conquered or everything at once.

He didn't even stop to consider what might have been right or wrong to do in this situation, what he 'should' have done or what the people closest to him might have thought of his actions. He did not even stop to wonder what just what in all of this immense, unfathomable universe could have led Asuka to do this.

For that, he would have needed to think in whole, coherent sentences, and that what not what he was doing.

He couldn't contain anything beyond this moment, as if nothing else had ever existed, and nothing else ever would, as if the Second Child were the only girl in the world, and the place at her side the
only spot he had ever belonged in.

All he could think of was Asuka, all he could feel was the soft, warm skin of her forehead and the loving, mildly tickling caress of her hair, all he could smell was the fresh, fruity scent of her newly washed body, comprised of the perfume in her body lotions, her seductively-invigorating rosemary soap, the same strawberry shampoo he'd noticed after their first battle together, and another smell of her very own, and he could see nothing but her – That had been her intention, and that's what she had succeeded at.

Had there been other circumstances, or had this been another girl, he would have averted his eyes in shame by now, but here and now, he was overwhelmed, far too intoxicated by the prospect of his nocturne fantasies coming true.

Too long, too strongly, he'd been yearning for what Asuka had teased him with but never let him reach, and he was too infuriated by her constant humiliations and insults to think about her privacy right now – He was not that noble a person.

He knew that he ought to respect her basic human dignity like she'd never respected his, but right now, he couldn't feel that responsibility.

The Third Child was only a flawed human being, and in the middle of puberty at that.

He knew that he should be ashamed of himself, that what he was doing was low, cowardly and scurrilous, but in this instant, he refused to care – Here was the chance he had been hoping for... after all, it was her who had pretty much shoved her breasts in his face, offering herself on a platter like a common prostitute!

He felt the blossoming desire to take revenge for her scorn, to take her when she couldn't refuse him.

But most of all, he sought to prove to both himself and her that he wasn't the coward they both thought he was, that he could be a man and take the first step.

In some ways, he still couldn't help but admire Asuka beyond all bounds, simply because she was everything he wasn't: She was pretty, she was strong, she was proud and she was popular, graceful as she said and did exactly what she wanted. She took what she wanted.

She seemed to be much more open and confident with her sexuality than he would ever be, and he wanted to understand that.

To understand what it was that made her strong and what it was that made her weak, so he could find such a source of strength for himself.

In this moment, he lusted for her as much as he hated himself, for having all the things he found lacking in himself.

He was consumed by the burning craving to lick that strength of hers from her lips and skin.

So he stared, brazenly, without shame or apology, directly at her sleeping body, her soft red hair, the large amounts of fair flesh and flawless, well-kept skin that her loose garment revealed, her bare shoulder and her breasts, soft, light yet defined hills of bared while flesh which poured out of her nightgown light water balloons, the nipples barely covered and pressing through the fabric anyways.

They especially captured his wide open eyes, as if he still couldn't believe that they could be both
real and this close at the same time.

Her bosom was squeezed just a little further from her nightclothes as she stirred slightly, but the main effect of her minuscule motion was to bring Shinji even closer to her face than he thought possible even just a moment ago, her lips slightly parted like an invitation that Shinji would not decline.

He wanted her.

Hastened by the sound of the rewinding player, Shinji reached something like a decision, insofar as his mental and emotional state allowed such a thing. 'Something like' because his next action wasn't anything he could have explained or defended with logical arguments but still deserving of the term 'decision' because he was, at that point, willing to carry it out without further thought or hesitation, or hopes of turning back.

Unceasing, he moved toward her soft, alluring lips, until they were all he could see, until they encompassed everything that was part of his world, her lips alone, as they slowly opened to welcome him–

No. Not to welcome him.

“Mh...ma... Mama...”

The cassette player reached the end of the tape and fell silent.

On the edges of Asuka's eyes, there was a gathering of liquid, the one chemical that could make any kind of lust evaporate at once.

Glittering little tears, matching her childlike little voice.

Shinji came to a petrified halt stopped less than nail's breath from Asuka's fate.

He felt like he'd been thrown into a pool of ice cold water.

It just wasn't fair.

He'd wanted to steal a kiss the superior, provocative young woman whose strength he'd been jealous of, not from some sobbing little girl that cried because she was missing her Mommy back home in Germany!

To put it bluntly, the young EVA pilot felt conned.

That arrogant little...!

She acted like she was all mature when she was no better than him!

He should have known.

Why did he even do this whole, pointless thing?

Frustrated, he grabbed his blanket and curled up beneath it, hidden away on the other end of the room, as far away from Asuka as possible.

“You're still a child yourself.” he mumbled, almost contemptuously, before pulling the blanket over his head and trying his best to forget this entire incident.
A torrent of folders and papers kissed the floor.

He squeezed his right leg between both of hers, and, all-too enabled by her short skirt, rubbed his thigh against her panties with a kind of practiced professionalism, using his left arm to squeeze her against his chest while his right held her trembling hand.

“Cut it out! What if someone sees...!”

“Like who?”

“You know, someone...”

Before she had the chance to say anything else, he'd already sealed her lips and shifted her weight against the wall, where her resistance finally melted completely and allowed his tongue to pass the gateway of her lips.

He demanded a long, intimate kiss, and all the time, the guilty, sullied glance of her eyes was transfixed on the counter that told her how many floors the elevator had left to pass.

Only when its doors opened did Kaji release Misato from the firm grasp of her arms, whereupon she departed in a firm stride, bringing a full meter of space between them before she thought of turning back around.

“Don't do this ever again. It's over between us.”

“That's odd...” Kaji retorted, as he gathered up the papers that Misato had dropped when his sudden ‘offense’ had surprised her. “Suddenly, your lips are saying 'no', even though they were saying 'yes' just now. So whom shall I believe? Your words or your lips?”

With his usual pompous smirk, he handed her the papers, and then had the audacity to actually bow to her.

But even so, the emotion displayed upon Misato's face was not anger or indignation, but guilt. She'd felt guilty and dirty... because just for a moment, she had enjoyed this.

No.

No she hadn't. Most certainly not!

Why should she even, with that self-important macho?

As far as she was concerned, he could stick his mucilaginous gentleman shtick where the sun don't shine! He could even have the papers back – right in the face, zing!

To this day, the poor, innocent elevator doors behind which Kaji had disappeared stilll wondered what they might have done to deserve the load of paper that isato had angrily thrown their way.
“Here, for you.”

“Oh, Thank you.”

Thanks to the coffee that her faithful friend had kindly provided her, Misato actually managed a grateful smile despite all the frustrations concerning both Kaji and the bickering kids.

“I admit, it’s a bit unusual to see you sober.” Ritsuko commented as she sat down next to her friend, on one of the large tables next to the wide panorama windows of the canteen.

“Is it because of work... or because of a man?”

“There are many reasons.”

“Still in love, hm?”

Misato, who had been sipping her caffeinated beverage at the time, barely managed not to choke. “What? Is that supposed to be funny?!” she retorted once she was done coughing. “I miss that guy like I miss a hole in the head. He was the worst mistake of my life! My only excuse for having been with him at all is that I was young and stupid.”

“You know, actually...” Ritsuko started, still surprisingly calm. “I meant to say that Kaji is still in love. But evidently, the same is true for you.”

“Oh, shut up...” Misato griped grumpily.

“If I’m wrong, then why are you getting so worked up? Just give him a chance. Who knows, maybe he was also young and stupid eight years ago.”

“That might make sense if he had changed in any way, but he's exactly the same! He simply refuses to grow up.”

“Look who's talking.” Ritsuko commented. “Last week, when he did your job for you and thought of a battle strategy, you still though it was cute. I don’t want to meddle in your private life, but don’t you think it’s a bit unfair if you only refuse him when it’s not inconvenient for you?

That sounds a bit like you're taking advantage of him.”

“It's not like I asked him to do that! He's the one who can't get it into his head that somone might not want to have anything to do with him. He still acts like he's the center of the universe. But let's just let this topic be, okay? We have a lot of work to do. Tomorrow is the big day.”

And the big day did come.

Exactly as predicted, the Angel resumed his march toward Tokyo-3, stomping through the landscape as the morning sun illuminated its partially metallic body.
But Israphael wasn't the only one who'd spent the last week preparing for a rematch with the humans – they, too, were thoroughly prepared, having prepared their counterstrike down to the smallest detail.

“It's coming!” Misato informed both of her wards. “We won't lose this time! Deploy your AT fields as soon as the music starts, and then do everything just how we practiced it!”

“Roger!” both Children confirmed in unison.

Whatever may have happened the night before, Shinji considered it to be wholly his own fault once he'd looked back at it in the morning light – He'd pulled some absolute nonsense there, and even he could no longer understand just what had driven him to do that.

He stayed at the conclusion that Asuka was not much better than him, but at the same time, it wasn't like he was so much better than her, and now, it was time for the fight.

Before them lay yet another battle for the fate of humanity, so his own chagrin (or lack thereof) could wait.

Deathly serious as always when he was mentally preparing for a battle, he went through the sequence of moves one last time before his mind's eyes, and felt deeply inside the EVA's mindscape to make sure that his connection with it was of sufficient strenght.

This would be the moment of truth – In a few moments, it would be decided if he could keep up with Asuka or not.

“Don't forget that we're supposed to go for maximum output and velocity from the very beginning.” Asuka reminded him, her anticipation at this chance to finally prove herself apparent in her voice.

“I know.” Shinji confirmed. “We'll finish this in 62 seconds.”

(Though Asuka would never admit this, he always sounded significantly cooler once he got inside his EVA.)

Finally, they both heard Aoba reporting that the angel had passed the point they had discussed earlier – The moment had come.

Misato's last instruction was for the power plugs to be divulsed – this operation would require maximal freedom of movement – and then, she gave the launch order.

Music, go!

Evangelions, likewise, go!

With the elegance of professional ballerinas, they shot out of the ground and immediately used their momentum to jump multiple times their own height – all of that in perfect unison.

Together, they threw two retractable staffs, between which an electromagnetic force field formed immediately upon their landing, neatly bisecting the angel.

Like before, it's reaction to this was to split into its two miniature forms, whose size roughly matched the Evangelions – The EVAs themselves landed on the floor smoothly and whirled back
to their feet in a kind of one-fourths pirouette, in order to grip the guns hat had been prepared and handed to them through the hidden armories in some nearby buildings – This was a point where the timing was particularly important as the gunfire was only meant to draw the angel's attention.

Striding forward with graceful sideways steps, both pilots aimed for the angel and emptied their magazines into it, both showing clear signs of strain or excitement.

Their painstakingly prepared reaction to the retaliatory cross beams resembled less a regular evasive maneuvers than it a kind of deathly gymnastics jumping course, given that it consisted mostly of a series of synchronous handstands – Shinji was surprised that he even managed it, but it was surprisingly easy, almost as if his imagination were the only real limit on his freedom of movement.

He even managed to maintain synchronicity with the Second Child as he did it and landed precisely on the white chalk outlines that demarcated where exactly the Evangelion's feet were supposed to go – which, in turn, activated the steel plates intended to keep the angel's next shot from reaching them, giving them time to grab another pair of guns to continue shooting at the angel – it, however, seemed to have realized that it wouldn't be getting very far with its regular energy beams and decided to go all-out, causing something like a halo to appear over each of its halves, both of them connected in the shape of a sideways eight.

Shinji had seen something like this before – with the very first angel he had fought.

And just like it, the two smaller figures began to levitate the very moment the rings of light appeared, landing directly in front of the steel plates before tearing them asunder with their claws – Both Evangelions had evaded their assault with a simultaneous jump at this point.

While the few bombs and rockets that Misato had fired at it distracted the angel however briefly, the Children prepared the decisive strike. Moving like the halves of a single body, both of their battle cries melted into one, and even without having to sit inside the same EVA or any other physical connection, the pilots could feel that they shared exactly the same will.

And then came the part where Shinji got to show off everything he learned from her – the part where they both rained down from the heavens to give one half of the angel the kick of its lifetime – 'kick of it's lifetime' because the next one was supposed to be lethal.

As the angel, now back in a single form, was being propelled across the landscape by the momentum of their assault, incapable of stopping itself or otherwise escaping its fate, a pointed glance passed between the pilots, blue-into-blue, Shinji, serious and cautious, looking to assure himself of her support, and Asuka, ecstatic and joyous in her triumph, ascertaining to him with a nod that he would have her full trust for what was to come –

And then, they delivered the coup-de-grace.

Spinning like dancing swans, they shot upwards into the sky, only to descend like bloodthirsty Valkyries, determined to strike the angel’s cores before they could dive back inside its greenish-black flesh.

Arranging their Evangelions into a giant letter ‘Y’ without them touching each other, the unlikely pair sealed the angel's fate. Euphoria flooded the command center before their blow even connected, Misato's playful smirk brimming with pride for her young wards, Kaji with a triumphant grin, Maya jubilant, Hyuuga in awe, Aoba appearing genuinely surprised and
astonished before his features settled into a thin, content smile, and even Ritsuko, usually the designated cynic, couldn't find a reason not to smile. Nay, even the usually rather serious subcommander, who had so scolded the pair just a week before was swept up in the wave of faith and rejoicing.

And for good reason – Israphael never had a chance. Its cores splintered from the force of the initial impact, and the more the force of the attack led it to slide up and down the mountains, the more the cracks deepened, until they finally broke to pieces at the exact same moment, bursting into a bloodlike liquid that splattered both EVAs only to be burnt right off their armor when the angel's remaining body exploded as well, wiping the small hill upon which it had expired of the maps in the firestorm that doubled as the messenger's funeral pyre.

This was followed by the usual cross-shaped light beam, the rain of blood, a double rainbow – even triple at the edges – and a crater that had been molten deep into the ground that would likely become a new lake with time.

“What about the EVAs?” Misato asked, curtly.

“No damage.” Maya reported.

Indeed, the explosion's fading light eventually gave way to reveal the two colossal shapes – one had to look closely to make them out as everything inside the crater was splattered with the angel's sticky, crimson remains, but they were there – Mission accomplished.

An all-around success then?

Not necessarily.

Once you made out the EVA's outlines within the burned-out sludge, it was impossible to miss how their bodies were hopelessly tangled – Misato and Ritsuko immediately recognized what was now inevitable.

“Oh noes!” the former commented, indulging in a generous facepalm.

The scientist extended her her full sympathies. “Any moment now…”

As soon as Shinji had climbed out of his entry plug to get a good look at the results of the battle, the internal line rang out and presented him with an adorable hologram of a rather cantankerous Asuka.

“Look what you've done! This is the second time I looked uncool because of you!”

“How is this my fault?” Shinji protested angrily. By all respect and so on, how could she make a fuss about something like that after they'd succeeded at taking that thing out without damages or injuries? She couldn't be serious!

She really was a total toddler! Granted, there were some things about her that he found impressive, even intimidating, but in moments like these, Shinji felt like he'd been sent out here to babysit her.

“You're the one who ran into me from behind!” he added, in order to at least clarify the facts.

“Only because you lost track of the timing!” came her caustic retort.
Beyond the semi-translucent hologram, he could see her real body in the distance, gesturing just as wildly near the hatch of her entry plug as the virtual image of her that was currently screaming in his ears. “Are you always this lame, or is it because you stayed up so long yesterday?”

She... had noticed?

“I was making sure that I’s memorized the right steps!”

“Liar! I bet you tried to kiss me in my sleep!”

She's noticed that, too?

Struck with sudden despair, Shinji swallowed.

“It's not fair to pretend to be sleeping!” he replied, sounding a little lost.

“You PERVERT! That was supposed to be a joke! Then you really did it? You dared to ruin my first kiss for me, after I'd saved myself for Kaji-san all this time...”

“NO! I stopped!”

“Who'd believe a pervert like you?!”

“You're the one who crawled into bed with me in the first place!”

It was probably hardly worth mentioning that the whole control room had long since dissolved into homeric laughter.

Resigned, Fuyutsuki once again buried his face in his right palm.

“They're embarrassing us again...”

As of late, the subcomander was losing all hope for Ikari's son.

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Much to the chagrin of all involved NERV employees, the Children continued to argue all the way through the retrieval mission and their transport back home, and even Misato couldn't manage to shut them up for long.

By the time they made it to the shower rooms, Asuka seemed to have lost the interest in further arguing – perhaps she had simply ran out of insults, though it may also have been related to the familiar face that had greeted them in the corridors, joining them in a white plugsuit dripping with LCL.

“Hello, Ayanami!” Shinji greeted with a friendly smile. “It's good to see you again!”

“Is it?” she answered, mildly surprised.

“Well, uhm, I... I can't think of a reason why it wouldn't be, since we haven't seen you in a long
time. We'll be back in school tomorrow, though, just so you know.”

“Good. Then you destroyed the target?”

“Of course we did!” Asuka interjected, sounding mildly indignant. “Do you really think you're so important that we wouldn't manage without you and your garbage can of a prototype? Really! Unlike you and this amateur over here, I'm not here because I had any sort of convenient contacts, but because I'm good. You can rest assured that some puny enemy won't be a problem for me! Granted, Daddy's boy over here helped me out, but it's fairly obvious whose accomplishment this victory was! But hey,” Asuka flashed her a condescending grin. “I can hardly blame an antisocial girl like you for asking a stupid question so that people will task to you at all. Must have been boring to sit around in your half-repaired EVA without anything to do!”

“...hey, Shikinami-san...” Shinji feebly tried to intervene. “I don't think Ayanami meant to-”

“Can you two please chat some other time?” she interrupted him immediately. “I'd rather wash the LCL out of my hair before it dries, if you please. If you don't move your bachsides soon, I'm leaving without you!”

Now that the number of pilots being employed here had increased to three, the shower room actually looked like it was being used – If they all picked the same side of the room, the number of the cabins in use exceeded that of the empty ones by one – but what could have made the room more lively and pleasant merely succeeded in making shower time more stressful, as Asuka had threatened Shinji with the Death penalty multiple times in case he should leave his cabin before she was done getting dressed, after all 'she knew full well what sort of pervert he was'.

Technically, the cabin doors covered everything apart from her head, shanks and feet, which she normally presented to the world quite freely... and even then, there was very little about her that Shinji hadn't seen yet.

But due to his rather understandable aversion to pain, Shinji decided to keep these objections to himself and simply waited until she would 'let him out'.

Since she insisted on applying a generous regimen of of beauty products, this meant that Rei was the first to finish and emerge from her stall.

“See you later.” she stated once she'd put on her school uniform and quietly walked toward the door.

Asuka took a good while longer, sat down on the central bench in the room and pulled out a hand mirror and a few jars of cream and makeup as she got to work on her face.

“You can leave, Daddy's Boy.” she informed him after a while, after she'd taken her sweet time to assemble her 'beauty station', as if she'd only then remembered that Shinji existed and had probably spent over fifteen minuted standing fully clothed in his shower cabin at this point, where some leftover water had dripped onto his blue polo shirt and his hair had begun to dry in odd, standity-uppity angles before encountering a comb.

“...Uhm, Shikinami-san...”

“It's alright, you don't need to wait for me.”
“I just... wanted to...”

Asuka sighed. “You Japanese are going to drive me crazy! Listen, if you've got something to say, spit it out now or leave me in peace!”

“I just ....wanted to apologize. ...In case I... got in the way somehow... “ he finally managed. Despite everything else, he'd seen just how important battle performance could be to Asuka.

“Don't worry about it. You weren't nearly as useless as I feared you would be. I must have rubbed off on you during training.”

“T-thank you.”

“Spare me the formalities and just get out of my sight!”

In part because of that order, she didn't get to see the noticeable blush that her compliment... or rather, her marked abstaining from using a *stronger* insult had caused on the shy boy's face.

Rather than pay attention to his steps as he left the room, she focused on the freshly beautified, seemingly perfect girl in her mirror.

Her smile seemed to have gone, but that was simply an unimportant external detail. Reflections couldn't ask questions, nor could they feel ashamed of weaknesses – The other girl, trapped all alone within the mirror, could not have met anyone else within her cage of glass, nor could she have called for help because she was mute –

Every time she appeared to speak, the only voice Asuka could seem to hear was her own.

She'd once heard her stepmother in conversation with her father, stating that mirrors did not merely reflect evil or imperfections, but that they outright *created* them, but the image that Asuka held in her hand didn't seem to have any flaws at all... If either her real mother or her stepmother had been given the choice, they probably would have opted for the silent girl in the mirror.

Even so, she was capable of flipping the mirror shut and packing it away. What did it matter to her what any of these women thought?

She did not want to be a silent reflection or a mute little doll, no matter how perfect that might supposedly make her.

She didn't have to be ashamed of having worked with the Third Child (or so she convinced herself), all things considered, he hadn't exactly been useful, nor would she *want* him to rival her level, to be honest. She was NERV's best pilot, and she intended to *keep* that position.

Besides, he was probably the lesser of two evils compared with the arrogant, antisocial cow that was the First Child.

And as much as she'd chided him, on some level it was actually quite flattering to be desired. Turns out that all her worries had been for nothing – *Of course* she could wrap a guy like him around her fingers. She just had to make sure to drop hints the size of sky scrapers with this guy.

Even if he *was* an idiot, she could probably manage to tolerate him for a while, and somehow,
somed... well yes, though she would never have admitted it, somewhere deep inside she didn't find it all that unwelcome to have someone standing at her side during battle.

1. Regarding the whole first name basis thing, there was a decision to be made, as this chapter would have been one of the logical points to insert it – One the one hand, the fact that they refer to each other by their first names is an iconic and important part of Shinji's & Asuka's relationship that actually fits quite well with the direction I eventually want to take them in, on the other, if I made her drop the 'Daddy's boy' thing now, it would barely have any presence and come off as part of the introductory process, and its importance would be lost – after all, she keeps doing it for a full third of 2.0, and underlines the fact that Asuka often relates to those around her as 2-dimensional roles in her personal script without even getting to know it, just like she calls Rei's 'Favorite/honor student/wondergirl', manga-Kaworu 'replacement' and was to do the same with Mari in some unused scenes, how she and Rei never use each other's names (each for different reasons that nonetheless underline their incompatibility) basically deciding that Shinji will be her rival without consulting him – when she used his name midway through 2.0, it meant that she saw him as a person and an equal, a point that should feel 'earned' when it eventually arrives, given the turbulent nature of their relationship. I was reminded of reading that bit in the 2.0 CR where Anno chose to downplay Asuka's connection with Hikari and scrap the Kaji thing to not dull the more important point that she came to Japan on her own – Of course I'm working with a medium very different from feature films that are characterized by a spaciousness rather than a conciseness of time, so they'll remain at 'Daddy's boy' and 'Shikinami-san' for the foreseeable future.

2. The Hijinks will continue in 07: [Worthy of Her]

3. It has come to my attention that this fic is mentioned & linked on the TV tropes page for “Groundhog Peggy Sue”. *sparkly sailor moon eyes* “Thank you”. 
There's only two types of people in the world

The ones that entertain
And the ones that observe

Well baby I'm a put-on-a-show kinda girl
Don't like the backseat, gotta be first (oh, oh)

I'm like the ringleader
I call the shots (call the shots)
I'm like a firecracker
I make it hot (make it hot)

When I put on a show

[...]

There's only two types of guys out there,

Ones that can hang with me
and ones that are scared

So baby I hope that you came prepared

I run a tight ship, so beware

I'm like a ring leader, I call the shots.

I'm like a fire cracker,
I make it hot when I put on a show.

I feel the adrenaline moving through my veins

Spotlight on me and I'm ready to break

I'm like a performer, the dancefloor is my stage

Better be ready, hope that ya feel the same
All the eyes on me in the center of the ring

Just like a circus

When I crack that whip, everybody gonna trip

Just like a circus

Don't stand there watching me, follow me

Show me what you can do

Everybody let go, we can make a dancefloor

Just like a circus

-Britney Spears, ‘Circus’

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“The world is wrong.”

That single, simple sentence kept on haunting him everywhere he went. He found it in all possible and impossible places, scribbled on blackboards, walls, street signs, advertisement brochures, just wherever he looked.

By its very nature this kind of situation would have been easily and naturally to dismiss as mere coincidence, but the bloody writing in that alleyway and the very real, cool metal badge he'd picked up kept reminding him that there was more at work here than his dreams or his imagination.

Many times, he caught himself wishing that he'd thrown that thing away and fled the scene without looking back. Did he still prefer ambiguity to certainty?

Did he still hesitate to slam shut the doors on certain possibilities?

That was probably true.

What a damned coward he turned out to be.

Even a blind man should have been able to tell that these encounters had been real.

And if he still doubted, the tale he'd heard from Touji, Kensuke and Nagato should have convinced him, at the very least once they mentioned just where they'd met the mysterious girl they'd spoken of – that was when he'd been certain that it had to be Yui – If he'd known of this before, he might have sought her out for answers at the hospital, but now, her location was unknown again, though she was probably spending a lot of time smearing “The world is wrong” onto all possible places as if she wanted to make it a trend among graffiti artists, probably with the intention that each and every one of her messages would reinforce the warning that still loomed over him like a menacing shadow:
“Even if there are some very, very happy days waiting ahead of you, I lament to tell you, but... it will not last. The home you built for yourself, your friends, the people you love... none of it will last. Indeed... there might come a day on which you feel like your world is coming apart all around you, without you being able to do anything about it.”

Like the world is coming apart? Thus far, that didn't seem to be the case – if anything, things seemed to be getting better, slowly but surely, slightly but steadily...

Even so, he felt the images of despair bubbling up from that forbidden part of himself, from behind the heavy gates that only fully opened in the state of dreaming, as he floated in the realm between being and nothingness – He saw Asuka, her once infuriatingly perfect face contorted by wrath and despair. He saw gestures and words of rejection.

“Behold, the invincible Shinji-sama!”

Then, with the destructive brightness of the sun and sudden might of a lightning strike, an image of a shattered entry plug.

The shamed form of an comrade, sometimes crippled, sometimes dead, sometimes, worse.

A dark and indifferent silhouette, walking away into the distance – in itself, an old and familiar source of pain, except that the dark silhouette now turned and extended his hand toward him, of course, only to withdraw it just as he dared to believe what he had seen, before he could extend his own shaky little hand in kind.

A gunshot, a loss, a deluge of tears and impotence.

Impotence, truckloads thereof. Asuka, screaming in agony.

A feeble, unsuccessful attempt to comfort her that was met only with cold, sharp words of rejection.

He couldn't save Rei, either. She took the whole town with her as she transformed into light, heat and fire, right before his very eyes. The only thing remaining was that which she had attempted to save, the person least deserving of being saved.

The radiance of the incandescent flames scattering away into the sky, leaving only ruins and scorched earth.

They hadn't even bothered to rebuild it, much like he hadn't bothered with any active attempts to keep on living.

Warm, sticky blood clinging to his palm, followed by a symphony that told of the deepest depths of despair and the highest heights of ecstasy that escalated into a single vortex made of love and hate, hope and death, violence and endless agony, and it came upon him like a storm of fire.

Corpses, Corpses everywhere...

An infernal spectacle begun by a simple wish, a thought so alien and distorted that it was hard to believe that it had originated from the mind of a human being:

“Nobody needs me, so they can all just die.”

“It makes no difference if I'm here or not, nobody cares about me, so I might as well die, too.”
But the most frightening thing of all was: This stranger, this... creature, this broken twisted shell of a human being... spoke with his own voice.

And then, everything was over, no more pain, no more suffering, no more pressure nor agonizing thoughts, only cold air and the blackness of a starry sky. A sudden, heady feeling of freedom.

Shinji stretched out his arms and breathed in.

Thirteen white Evangelions had been rammed into the ground like nails, only the fourteenth formed a green and violet cross; Apart from that, there was no difference to the others, even the neon-bright EVA was heavily damaged and petrified.

In death, they were all the same – Even the gods.

This time, the red streak in the sky was missing, but whatever would have otherwise formed it now colored the massive dark hole that now gaped in the fallow moon-disc, so that it resembled the encrusted, blackish-brown blood drying around a wound, a hole torn in the pallid skin of a decaying corpse.

This whole place smelt of decay.

If he hadn't known that smells could not possibly cross the blackness of space, he would think that the stench was coming from that dead moon.

Upon a closer look, he determined that this world of death did have a ring after all, but rather than red, it was gray, and barely distinguishable from the void beyond.

He understood that it had to be the lost flesh of the gutted satellite.

The hole was very deep;

In the dark maw's center, one could see stars sparkling through from the other side.

But where did the stink come from?

The boy was appalled at just how casual that question had sounded in his head.

He received his answer in the guise of lapping waves, when he attempted to turn around to gaze upon the other side of the sky.

The red ocean of Shinji's days had often been called a 'dead sea' possessed of an 'abominable stench', but what he saw before him now that was wholly, completely and irrevocably dead.

The stinking slag that surrounded him knuckle-deep had an opaque, milky-white if not slightly green color, an repugnant substance of uneven density as if the sea itself were rotting.

The great unification had taken place, the walls of the heart had been torn down, but there had been no new creation, no rebirth, not even a stagnant continuation.

Instead, everything had just died.

Every single organic macromolecule on this planet had dissolved, every last drop of the essence of life had gone spoiled, its had source run dry forever.
Everything had been irrevocably consigned to nothingness.

All around him was nothing, no more expectations, no more duties, no more fear, just endless, unlimited freedom.

Shinji might as well have been the last living thing in the entire goddamn universe.

Why?

He looked around nonchalantly, almost blissful, led by nothing more than simple curiosity.

Why was he still here?

Why had he ever been here in the first place?

And the he saw it, for the first time in this particular dream, the head of a gigantic female corpse, cleaved in half and still large as a mountain, accusingly staring at him with its dead, burst-open eyes.

Her features were somehow familiar, but before he could place them, the titanic face morphed into a replica of one Shikinami Asuka Langley.

“Are you an idiot? What you asking this stupid question for? You know perfectly well that you would never have the guts to do us all a favor end end your own pitiful existence, you goddamned coward!”

----

As Shinji awoke with a start, his eyes flying open in an instant, he found his hands firmly clawed into his bedsheets and the rest of his body flooded with ice cold sweat.

His hair and clothes stuck to his drenched, clammy skin, his bedsheets were a chaotic messs and his blanket was crumpled on the floor right next to his bed.

Needless to say, his heart was still pounding like a war drum, and his breathing was only now beginning to normalize.

This had been unspeakably awful, even by the standards of these dreams.

Even now, he could have sworn that that omnipresent stench of putrefaction was still loded in his nostrils.

Again and again, that stranger's words reverberated throughout his thoughts, showing no ostensible intention to let him go just because he'd woken up.

He was going to fail. Everything was going to die, everyone he'd ever known... It was real, just like that girl had been real, just like the badge on his nightstand was real though he was still afraid to look upon it.

On the one hand, he felt a desire to curl up in fetal position and refuse to move until the end of days finally arrived, but he couldn't seem to muster the strength to even do that, so he did what he usually did when everything became too much for him and the energy to anything about it eluded
him:

He stared at the ceiling.

For the rest of this week, the EVA pilot had been forced to acquaint himself with yet another unfamiliar ceiling – Asuka had kept the bigger room.

There had not even been a discussion, unless you counted her mocking assertions about how he was a whiny dunce for complaining, should stop looking at her like that and accept that the better pilot was bound to receive the larger room.

Though while he certainly didn't appreciate being uprooted from his old familiar spot of calm, he did understand that Asuka had brought a great amount of material possessions with her and needed the space to store them more than he did. And besides, he was supposed to be trying to get along with her... or at least, avoid more confrontations he'd be bound to lose.

The smaller room had served as a storeroom so far and was therefore 'just the right thing for an obsolete slump with about as much charisma as an old mop', as Asuka had put it.

Unlike his former abode, it had wooden pillars supporting the walls and a distinctly brighter lamp he'd since gotten used to.

But even the ambitious little light bulb, which evidently wanted to be a floodlight when it grew up, didn't manage to counteract the cave-like quality of the room's dark wallpapers and heavy, wooden furniture.

Shinji didn't mind terribly much – A gloomy, enclosed refuge was exactly what he needed whenever he felt like hiding away from the world.

Only the carpet would take some getting used to – its colors were far too shrill for his taste and the pattern reminded him too much of an AT-field, something he'd rather not be reminded of in his own home.

He'd probably have to learn to live with it – Removing it was hardly worth the effort of taking out all the furniture that rested on top of it, and he'd already refused Misato's offer concerning new wallpapers of his choosing, less old-fashioned furniture or one of those newfanled hanging storage devices.

The only thing he could have found any real need or use for might have been a dimmer for his new lamp to improve his ceiling-staring experience, but he'd never hear the end of it from Misato and Asuka if he dared to say that out loud. They'd probably just laugh at him, and that was precisely what he was trying to avoid... much like their reactions to any other requests he might have voiced.

He wanted neither to ask for too much, nor to have Misato feeling like she was doing something wrong or failing to push part any kind of fake humility, but though many things had changed since his arrival, there was a lot concerning her reactions to things that he still didn't have a clear grasp of.

One way or another, it seemed like the light of day was already shining brightly outside his new domicile, something he did not immediately take note of because of the room's tiny window.

He wouldn't be surprised if it was already past ten 'o clock, these visions had been seriously infringing on his sleeping schedule lately; He still had to suppress an involuntary shudder at the very thought of the last few, and accordingly, tried his best to think of them as little as possible and be swift in getting himself to the shower, rising from his bed with a sigh and pausing only to pick...
up his blanket from the floor.

Once he stepped into the living room, his suspicions were confirmed, not just because of the pervasive sunlight streaming in from the veranda, but thanks to the clock in the kitchen.

By the looks of it, he had the apartment all for himself – Even on Saturdays, there was no such thing as a day off at NERV, and Misato had been unlucky enough to be picked for the weekend shift today. As for Asuka, she’d spent all of yesterday bragging about having the ‘exclusive privilege’ of blowing her savings on a shopping trip with Kaji. So far, he’d been under the assumption that shopping was usually a girl thing and probably would have wondered why she wasn’t taking Misato instead, if he hadn’t spent that time lamenting how you apparently needed facial hair to be considered worthy of her and reflecting on how much she seemed to be playing in a completely different league despite living under the same roof as him.

Shinji realized that there was no point to this;

He should probably hurry up and make it to the shower.

On the way to the bathroom, he encountered the only member of this household who hadn’t left the nest, ironically, the local bird.

“Morning, PenPen.” Shinji greeted. The feathered creature answered with a simple “Waark!”.

“Man, you got the whole floor wet all over again... “ Shinji commented conversationally, as he looked around for the cleaning implements. “I guess I’ll have to mop it up. To be honest, I’ve never really understood what’s supposed to be so great about hot baths, but you seem to like them a lot... Which probably shouldn’t surprise me, you being a Hot Springs penguin after all. Have you ever been to a real Hot Spring, though? Not that I’ve ever been to one. Maybe we should visit one one of these days, I’m sure Shikinami would like that as well...”

After he’d cleaned up the water puddles and casually wondered if the cleaning implements resented him for taking over their former home, he provided the penguin with something resembling breakfast and decided that he could do the rest of the housework one he was done showering.

Afterward, he should probably take the time to read through his school notes – Lately, he’d been seriously struggling to make up for the absences induced by his piloting activities. They tended to cause a few days of absence here and there, sometimes consecutively, particularly when there were attacks, and now, he’d been out of school for an entire week – and even when he could physically make it to class, he’d have his head full of worries beyond what his normal degree of moodiness would normally predispose him to, and it wasn't as if he was particularly gifted, motivated or studious in a way that would make up for that.

Or perhaps, his abysmal failures in the last few tests were merely proof of the fact that he was simply just as idiotic as Asuka kept claiming. One way or another, he had yet to find the words or the courage reveal that ghastly truth to Misato.

He’d been avoiding it for a while now and the longer it took him, the more daunting the confession became.

But, as he said earlier, time to let the brooding cease and get himself showered – that is, he would have proceeded to the shower, if the doorbell hadn't interrupted his line of thought in that exact
Shinji didn't have the slightest clue who it could be, at a time like this – if it were Asuka or Misato, they'd have been back extremely early, not to mention that they would hardly ring their own doorbell.

His friends weren't likely, either – As far as he knew, they were busy packing and shopping for the upcoming school trip. Shinji himself hadn't even bothered with that – he was already expecting that at least some, if not all EVA pilots would have to stay home in case of attacks or something, because of 'the fate of humanity', 'peace on earth' and so on. He didn't particularly mind, either – He couldn't swim so all he'd be doing in Okinawa would be to stand around as an embarrassment. Staying here would at very least spare him Asuka's inevitable mockery.

Despite his awareness that he was currently wearing sweat-drenched pajamas, he moved to open the door, given that the alternative was to make the visitor wait for several minutes while he went to change his clothes, possibly creating the deceptive impression that no one was home.

When he finally opened the door, Shinji was met with the sight of just about the last person he wanted to see right now, any potential awkwardness due to his dingy clothing being superseded by the gravity of the situation:

Standing in the doorframe was Yui, severe, upright, wearing a dirty hospital gown.

“I will require a shower, fresh clothes and a warm meal.”

----

She sat there, in one of his old trousers that she'd somehow attached to her thin waist with an old belt, and a white T-shirt that was distinctly too large and at times revealed her shoulder, consuming the soup he'd made while she'd been washing herself as if it were the fruits of an oasis, found after a long trek through the desert.

It might have been more sensible to attempt fitting her into some of Asuka's or Misato's clothes (the former would likely not even notice if one of her five trillion sundresses were gone), but Shinji dared not enter their rooms, due to his personal, uh.... let's say, 'respect' of the ladies and their personal accommodations.

So far, he'd lacked the courage to speak to her in any way, simply observing the herald of his obliteration with a cautious awe, from a safe distance, fascinated to see her doing something so... 'mundane' – She appeared to have been quite hungry.

“I'm sorry for barging on on you like this and demanding things even though you do not know me right now.” she apologized, when she found the time for it in between two spoonfuls of soup.

“After all this time, it's still hard for me to get used to the facts that we are almost complete strangers here. For some definition of 'stranger'. I know that you're not the boy I know, but, I know that you're Shinji Ikari. And I know that the Shinji Ikari of right now is too kind and decent to slam his door on a 'damsel in distress'.

She turned toward him with a sad smile on her face.
“I'm in big trouble, far away from everybody I know, so, of course, I come to Shinji Ikari. I guess you know better than anyone that people do strange things under those circumstances. Maybe it's just the fear of being alone...”

“What's the matter right now? ... what exactly happened? I've heard from my friend that... that you got hurt.”

“Oh that? Don't worry, it wasn't as bad as it looked, at least... let's just say my injuries were the least of it. There's something else, something that really went wrong... Let's just said that it happened because I was making sure that you were alright. But it's not your fault, right? I chose this path myself.”

“I... I found your name tag.”

“Keep it. As a memento, if you will.”

He'd hoped that she would take the evidence of his damnation away from him. Instead, she got up and placed her soup dish in the sink.

“I'm leaving then. I wouldn't want to bother a complete stranger any more than necessary. We will meet again.”

With what seemed like a brief sigh, she got up and departed toward the door.

Now or never.

“Er, uhm... wait!”

Seconds after speeding past him, she stopped and turned.

“Wait... Ichijou-san...”

“It's alright to call me 'Yui'. You'd even do me great favor if you did. What is the matter?”

“Well, Yui-san...” Shinji swallowed. If she were to tell him that all of his efforts were doomed to be in vain...

No. If he ever wanted to have his peace, then... he mustn’t run away from this answer. “There is something I wanted to ask...”

It took him a great effort not to avert his eyes.

“It it really true? Is it true that I'm going to fail? Is there really... nothing I can do? Am I really that useless? Was everything I've been trying to do so far really that meaningless?”

Of all sudden, she looked deeply shocked.

“I never said that you fail...”

“You said that it 'depends on how you define it', and you said 'Third Impact'. That's what most people around here would call 'failure'. Don't leave me hanging in the dark like that, what do you think I'm going to feel?”

“Oh... oh. I see. I... I'm sorry. You wouldn't be used to this yet, the angels, the EVAs, everything, this must all still be very strange to you. My world has been nothing but this for a very long time. Maybe I've come to take the prospect of a second chance for granted, and this is my punishment
now...

I apologize. I failed to express myself clearly enough. You do not fail.

That's precisely why all of this happened...”

“B-but you said 'Third Impact'!?”

“Yes, I did, but listen, I...

No. Forget it. Your last battle was the one with the double angel, correct?”

Shinji nodded obediently.

He'd long since stopped wondering how she could possibly know all this.

“Alright.” Yui acknowledged, before looking him deep in the eye and declaring her next prophetic revelation: “With the next one, there won't be much for you to do, but keep yourself ready at the edge of the volcano. You'll have to jump in completely if you want to save her. Hang onto the cable with one hand as you jump in case it comes loose from the shock. Don't forget the laws of physics. Physics is actually an important keyword here.

'Thermic Expansion'. Remember that.”

This felt like one of these scenes in video games where you were given an important item and told to have it with you, likely for the next plot event.

Shinji was still confused. That, too, was reminiscent of certain video games.

“Physics? Save her? Who do you mean? And... Volcano? Is that meant to be some sort of riddle? I'm not good with that sort of thing. Please just tell me, what do you mean by 'volcano'?”

“Volcano means volcano.” Yui clarified, without actually doing so.

Shinji blinked.

“Believe me, it will make sense when the moment comes.” Yui assured him with a smile.

“As I said, I'll see you again. By the way... Major Katsuragi must be at home, but where is Asuka?”

“Shikinami-san?”

“Are you still calling her that?”

“Uhm...”

“Forget it. Just tell me where she is.”

“She's gone shopping. ...with Kaji-san, I think.”

“Good. Then it will happen very soon. See you around.”

With these words, she crossed the door frame and calmly walked along the hallway.

Before Shinji could ask her why she kept referring to Misato as a 'Major', the automitical door closed behind her.
He didn't get to ask her further questions about Third Impact, and perhaps, that was just as she had intended it.

All in all, this strange encounter had left him with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, she'd been adamant about assuring him that he wasn't going to fail, on the other hand, it was uncanny how much she seemed to know – She'd immediately known where to find the plates and the silverware in his kitchen, and even casually reached for a little package hidden in the back of one of the bathroom drawers, where either Asuka or Misato had hidden some of those patches that you'd use to conceal your nipples if you were wearing a low-cut or backless outfit (not that Shinji would have put it past either of them to own such things, given that they were both a lot more...confident in their sexuality than their male flatmate) – all while stating flatly that neither Misato's nor Asuka's bras would fit her, with as little room for doubt as if she'd previously confirmed this by trying them on.

And she hadn't denied anything about Third Impact...

He realized that he could probably have spent all day brooding about this without ever making sense of it – instead, he decided that he should probably be doing his best to memorize her instructions for the next battle – If only he'd written them down!

She'd said something about a 'volcano' and 'keep ready' and something about holding on a cable. She'd also mentioned the words 'thermal expansion'.

Shinji sighed.

Wasn't that part of the physics test he'd failed last week?

If Yui meant to warn him about *that*, she was already too late.

She'd also spoken about Asuka... who was probably drooling at the sight of Kaji's facial hair right now. Overall, Shinji found Misato's ex-boyfriend likeable enough to feel a little guilt about the implicit disloyalty, but he'd like him a lot more if he wasn't a constant reminder of just how nonexistent his chances with Asuka were.

He couldn't believe how unlucky he was.

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“I can't believe how lucky I am! I'm so happy that you finally found the time to go shopping with me!”

If Kaji had to describe the expression of the young girl who was clinging to his left arm with both of hers, he might have exaggeratedly referred to it as the widest grin in human history.

Knowing her history, as he would after having been her handler for so long, he found it very relieving to see her this engaged in normal teenage activities – Perhaps spending more time around children her own age would help her become more well-adjusted.
Of course there was still the matter of her inappropriate flirtations, which he tried to turn down as respectfully and gently as he could, but those were not a problem in and of themselves as long as they remained at the level of a typical schoolgirl crushing on a teacher or a pop star from the distance without expecting any real progression – Now that she'd had ample access to boys her own age, one could expect that problem to taper off over all – After all, if Asuka was being adored and liked by so many people, and got the chance to slowly learn how to like and adore others in return, it should be strange if she couldn't be happy, right?

He was always glad to hear Asuka talking about things like which shops and labels were supposedly 'in' right now and how she'd already checked some of them out alongside her new friend Hikari – Though she made a point out of making it look like child's play, adapting to a foreign country and finding new friends was not an easy task for a girl her age.

He wished to give her and the other children as much of a normal life as they possibly could – As his own youth had been dominated by floods, dirt and deprivation, he was all too aware of the value that such a peaceful, ordinary afternoon activity contained, which made it that much harder to uproot these children from what little peace and normalcy they had known in their lives to send them onto a battle field – Asuka was probably not even aware of how precious these quiet days could be, or what an injustice it was that so much of it had been taken from her. And neither was Mari.

As different as these two might be, they'd both been far too willing to let go of the ground beneath their feet to tumble head-first into a dangerous and foreign world.

They were to young to understand it yet, so it was only right that he would make it his duty to support at least Asuka in reclaiming what little normalcy this precariously balanced world could afford to give her.

In his life, he'd come to learn a truth of which he couldn't say if it was harsh or comforting, only that he had little doubt of its wisdom:

Even during the harshest of ordeals, one should always put aside some time to simply live.

That's the very reason one keeps fighting, wasn't it?

In order to live, for these scattered, happy moments that were worth it.

For that sake, he'd decided to honor Asuka's request to go shopping with her – though he also had some other reasons that weren't quite so noble. He hoped that looking after the children might score him some brownie points with Misato.

Eventually, their leisurely stride across Tokyo-3's shopping district led them to one of the shops Asuka had been gushing about. Unlike what one might expect, she did not pause every two steps to admire the sightly merchandise, but took a straight walk through the aisles and clothing stands as if she already knew full well what exactly she was going to buy – Through going exactly for what she wanted was not unusual behavior for this girl.

The designation of their journey, however, did surprise Kaji:

"Wait, the swimsuit department?"

He had a dark premonition.

Indeed, Asuka soon reappeared from behind the nearest clothing rack, accompanied by a bikini that barely surpassed the coat hanger it was displayed on in terms of surface area.
The top would cover her back and shoulders with little more than thin spaghetti straps, but it was a consolation that the roughly triangular front parts would be covering at least two fifths of her 'chest'.

The likewise 'stringy' bottom part did not promise much refuge for her backside either.

“Well...” Kaji began, attempting the diplomatic approach. “Don’t you think that's a little too bold for a girl your age?”

“Maybe back in your day. These days, all girls are wearing things like this!” Asuka opined.

Kaji understood that this was the point where he was supposed to ask if she'd jump out of the window too if 'everybody else' were doing it, but he decided to let the girl have her fun – The odds of dissuading her were low, and besides, it wasn't like she would be wearing that thing to school, given that they likely had school-issue bathing suits.

After they'd left the shop with the swimsuit and a colorful collection of scant and/or sinfully expensive clothing, Kaji did wonder if these recent acquisitions served any particular purpose – A question which Asuka was ready to answer with great swiftness and even greater Enthusiasm:

“It's all for our school trip!” the Second Child explained, beaming with genuine anticipation. “I'm really looking forward to it!”

“So where will you be going?”

“Okinawa!” she replied, excitedly. “We're even going to take a diving course!”

Kaji knew the young pilot well enough to bet that she must have generously adorned the corresponding pages in her calendar with plenty of little hearts in pink glitter gel pens.

“Diving, eh? I haven't done that in years...” he answered, pensively. The world kept getting more complicated, and far-reaching duties had required equal dedication of him.

“Say, Kaji-san, where did your school trip go back in the day?”

“It fell through.”

“How come?”

“Ever heard of this thing called Second Impact?”

---

Intending to top off his cozy Sunday evening with a nice, warm bath, the local penguin was relaxing in the katsuragi household's generously sized tub, when he was startled by a shrill shriek of displeasure emanating from the living room – a sound that, unfortunately for the dapper bird and his owner, had become rather frequent in their idiosyncratic little household.

“What do you mean, we can't go?” Asuka complaining, leaning onto her outstretched arms than in turn rested on the table as if to look down at her flatmates.

“Precisely what I said.” Misato confirmed, without any greater distrbance in her beer-induced good
Asuka certainly didn't see these bad news as anything to grin about – “And why?” she demanded to know.

“Because the EVAs have to be ready for combat at all times.”

For Asuka, who'd spent much time preparing, shopping, packing and neatly labeling all of her suitcases, bags and pouches, this was not exactly a satisfying answer. She'd only just been gushing about how much she looked forward to trying out the new bikini she'd acquired for the occasion, only for her bubble to be popped on what would have been the last night before the departure.

“Nobody told me anything about this!”

“Which is why I'm telling you now.”

But the Second Child was not listening to reason: “Pah! I'd like to know what kind of dunderhead decided this!”

“The leader of the operations division, that is, the 'dunderhead' sitting right in front of you right now.”

Asuka hoisted herself onto her feet for good, placing her hands on her hips.

The only thing that could possibly irritate her more than being deprived of her well-deserved vacation, which should have been her good right especially as a savior of the earth in her tender age, was how her absolute wimp of a flatmate kept quietly sipping his tea like a doormat inscribed with an enthusiastic invitation to please, please trample it to your heart's content – If there was one thing Asuka couldn't stand on the pain of death, it was meek, obedient people that followed every order like well-behaved little marionettes and let others do with them whatever they wanted.

It was simply disgusting.

“Hey, Daddy's boy!” she complained, in the vain hope to get some sort of reaction out of that blockhead. “Don't just sit there and say something! You're supposed to be the man in the man household, aren't you?”

But these provocations, up to and including that last one, were mostly without effect; In fact, Shinji took them with a placid smile. It was hard to take her seriously when she went one of her usual tirades of complaints about his person but inevitably ended with some variation of 'Third Child, do something' once she was out of ideas, and expected the exact same person whose masculinity she'd been doubting mere seconds ago to help her out and save the day.

In some was it was almost cute, but he didn't have the impression that she was aware of the stakes here – She never shut up about how she was proud of being an EVA pilot, but that only seemed to apply when it brought her privileges rather than duties.

This was yet more proof of just how little he understood of the processes in her head despite of all the challenges they'd braved together, and that the reasons that had driven her to climb into that terrifying war machine with a smile on her face must have been profoundly different from the things that bound him to this place, whatever either of these might be.

He didn't claim to understand it.

That aside, he wasn't terribly bothered by the lack of a school trip, to begin with, he wasn't really
all that crazy for travels, they were nothing more than stressful, hectic interruptions to his peaceful routines, and all for the sake of spending an inconsequential span of days stuck in a foreign place.

“I don't really mind.” he admitted. “I was expecting this to happen.”

“And you give up this quickly?” Asuka retorted, outraged.

She didn't know weather to classify the nod and vaguely affirmative nod that followed as a gesture of audacity or proof of the Third Child's pitiful nature, but this measly smile of his did not dissipate for a moment.

If you could win a trophy for being a wimp, that idiot would probably score silver, because he'd be to much of a wimp to win a wimp competition.

“You're a total wimp, do you know that?” she complained, redundantly. “There's nothing worse than a henpecked man!”

“Don't say that...!”

Interrupting the admittedly amusing discourse between the Children by firmly planting her latest can of beer onto the table, Misato drew their attention back to herself.

“Believe me, I understand your feelings, but we have no choice. What if an angel attacks while you're away?”

Since Asuka could not muster a logical counterargument to throw at that, she decided to vent its frustration in its unrefined form at those who had caused it, less out of any real hope to convince them, and more to ensure that she wouldn't be the only one whose day would be ruined.

“All we do is wait around! Why do we always have to follow their time table? Why don't we track them down wherever they're sitting, and attack them for a change?!”

“If that were possible, we would have done it already.” Misato explained without losing her composure.

Once again, Shinji was forced to confront just how little he knew about his enemies.

Where they even came from, if they even existed in some physical place at all before they just showed up out of nowhere was a question he hadn't even considered before – perhaps, he lacked Asuka's more practical thinking, or the scientific methodology to attempt to extend normal rules of time, space, cause and effect onto beings which seemed to exist far outside the world as it was known to man.

These things were so much of a black box to him that he didn't even consider the possibility that they might physically be in a tangible, worldly location in the here and now.

They were gigantic monsters with the innate ability to level cities when they should be collapsing under their own weight, so he'd been given very little reason to think that the mundane rules that one could take for granted when it came to everyday objects like, say, frying pans applied to these beasts.

Though once he considered, it did technically make more sense to assume that the angels must have come from somewhere that was possibly a real, physical location than to expect the opposite.
Shinji’s musings might have considered in this direction for a good while if they hadn't been scattered away by Misato's voice at this point:

“If I were you, I’d see this as an opportunity.”

So far, she'd faced the whole discussion in a fairly relaxed manner, as it constituted little more than a minor annoyance that was adorable if predictably childish from her point of view, but now, her features took on a mildly malicious look, as if she had some sort of ace up her nonexistent sleeves – and indeed, she did:

“While your classmates are away, you now have a full week to catch up on your studies! Or did you really think that I don't know about these?”

Much to the Children's displeasure, Misato pulled out a copy of their report cards and paraded them in front of their faces like a folding fan made of playing cards – It was evidently too late for Shinji to present their contents in a 'diplomatic' manner.

“Don't think you can hide your slacking off from me, I have all your grades reported directly to my personal terminal.”

While every single muscle in Shinji's face was being used to express a sentiment of 'Lord, have mercy!' without a single sound, Asuka was not so quick to accept anything that could be construed as a failure.

And when one couldn't deny the results themselves, the only chance to contest them was to dispute their validity:

“Bah! These numbers mean absolutely nothing. As if this old-fashioned school system could really do me justice!” she complained, hoping that no one in this room would be aware that the German school system was not nearly as great as its reputation suggested and in fact regarded as an antiquated, conformism-ridden ramshackle piecemeal in Germany proper.

She was evidently under the illusion that Misato would require that knowledge in order to shoot down her objection and the delusions of superiority that came attached to it: “Well, you know what they say: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. I'm sure you'll get used to our school system!”

“Absolutely not!” she retorted, vacating her place in frustration to remove the bags and suitcases that she now perceived as monuments to her defeat from the sight of her flatmates, longing to vent her frustrations in ways that didn't run the risk of being observed or otherwise compromising her pride.

The worst about this whole thing was how she and Shinji had been scolded in the same breath, without any distinction between their achievements. She couldn't suffer to be lumped into the same little box as that little wannabe.

That was completely unfair and besides, they were evidently not the same!

Misato simply leaned back with a sigh and directed her attention back at the can of beer left in her right hand.

With a certain delay, it occurred to Shinji that perhaps, it wasn't entirely a bad thing for Misato to scold him about his grades. He'd done it in her usual nonchalant manner, but she did scold him and had evidently concerned herself with how he was doing in school... that was something a real
mother would do, wasn't it?

At least, he thought so. It's not as if he could remember what having a mother had been like.

---

When the big day finally came and the plane to Okinawa departed, none of the three Children had been on board, though it was not from lack of protesting from Asuka.

She may or may not have been aware of the underlying futility of such statements, but either way, she'd been in a rotten mood all day long, and refused to waste even a single opportunity to complain about everything and anything unlucky enough to cross her field of vision.

Even as she was standing on the local airport's roof, watching as the condensation trail that the rest of their class had left on their way as the aircraft had carried them far away, her anger didn't subside.

Only during while bidding farewell to her classmates did she briefly affect a mask of indifference, claiming that she was proud to be an elite pilot and far too old for school trips anyways. The sheer speed with which she seemed to switch off all her feelings and the confidence with which she spat out her lies puzzled him as much as it disconcerted him, and unfortunately, the way he'd been glancing over at her while drifting into his own realm of thoughts and questions hadn't gone unnoticed, and Touji, being Touji, would never have ailed to capitalize on such a golden opportunity to tease him: "What, first Ayanami and now Miss Crazy over there? You really got some exotic tastes there, buddy!"

Shinji had obviously scrambled to deny everything, but his incoherent stuttering and the light redness on his cheeks had betrayed him, which in turn prompted Touji to coyly ask when he could expect the wedding to take place.

At this point, Asuka had gotten involved in order that Shinji was most definitely not on the list of eligible candidates.

Ultimately, it had escalated into another fight between Asuka and Touji, whereas Shinji stood to the side, distinctly daunted by the exchange of colorful insults and snappy comebacks contributing the occasional "Uhm..." without really taking part in the argument, until Hikari took it upon herself to smooth over the verbal combat before the noise level blew out someone's ear drums or resulted in an unscheduled encounter with airport security.

To begin with, Asuka had insisted on following the others to the airport an an extension of her protests, perhaps to guard her pride by succeeding to enforce something, if not all she had wanted, and randomly dragged Shinji out of bed because she didn't like the thought of anyone getting to sleep longer than she did, but once Misato had suggested that this might be an opportunity to see his friends one last time before their departure, he'd come along of his own free will.

But now, they were gone, and all the Children could do was to follow their trail with their longing gazes. That Rei hadn't shown up at all didn't help, though it was hardly a surprise. Asuka had insisted on hijacking this opportunity to rant about how she was probably antisocial and considered herself too good to spare some words of farewell for the common folk, not without underlining that she herself had come even though she had far more justified reasons to be proud.
If that was supposed to posture her as being humble or approachable, it hadn't worked, at least as far as Shinji's opinion was concerned. Strictly speaking, Rei didn't have any real reason to how up here. She wouldn't be going on that flight either and she wasn't close enough to anyone who was going to owe them a farewell or be expected to strongly feel their absence. Her only real friend in class II-A was Shinji himself, and he wasn't going anywhere.

Shinji himself, by contrast, received a surprising amount of attention, including some brief well-wishes from Hikari who then spent some more time trying to cheer up Asuka and promising her a souvenir. There was also an indistinct crowd of girls some of which Shinji couldn't even name who all lined up to express their heartfelt condolences about the trip and waved at him when they left.

Shinji decided that the polite thing to do would be to wave right back, which was met with much rejoicing on part of the ladies. (Asuka had to deal with a similar, largely male horde that she didn't pay very much attention to)

Kensuke had likewise expressed his sympathy for the children and vowed to provide Shinji with his share of amusing holiday videos and souvenirs. Mitsurugi, by contrast, expressed his thanks to the two and spoke of how they all ought to appreciate that it was precisely the sacrifice of people like Asuka, Shinji and Rei that made it possible for the rest of them to experience some carefree amusement on a school trip without having to fear for their safety.

Touji simply flashed them a wide grin and claimed that he'd have enough fun for the three of them.

All the same, they were probably already several kilometers away by now, which Asuka was distinctly furious about, leading her to follow the aircraft with a fuming stare, with her hands on her hips and her legs in a broad, dominant position.

Shinji reacted in a somewhat calmer manner, leaning against the viewing platform's handrails and realizing that he was really going to miss those three.

He had no idea what he would even be doing all week.

Just a few weeks ago, he wouldn't have thought twice about spending all his afternoons listening to music and/or staring at the ceiling, a pastime that he still defaulted to when he felt overwhelmed and needed a little space to order his thoughts, or simply didn't have anything else to do.

It wouldn't have been quite right to say that he enjoyed that empty time, but it was certainly a relief in a world that required him to be mindful of so many little things wherever he went; Life was chaotic, vast, confusing and complicated, and there was much of it that he still didn't understand, therefore, a small, safe, enclosed system was always a very welcome and much-needed respite.

Yet as of late, he'd dared to venture outside the enclosures of his habits, or allowed others to lead him into the larger world, bit by bit, little by little, and it had been going well for a while.

Without really noticing on a conscious level before today, he'd come to spend a significant portion of his life outside that protection, to the point that it had almost become normal for him, just like it seemed to be for everybody else, and now and then, he'd catch himself with a lighthearted smile.

Now that some of the people who had guided him into this big, bright world would be absent for a bit, he felt suddenly aware of just much much they had become fixtures of his life. As he was now, he'd prefer to have them around unless there was a particular reason for him to seclude himself... perhaps, because he knew better now?

“Let's go.” Asuka ordered, morosely, after she'd been forced to realize that her squinting wasn't
going to bring back the long since faded condensation train.

“Come on. We're just wasting our time here.”

He followed her instructions almost reflexively, a habit that had probably spared him the occasional beating.

He presumed that the very casual way in which this thought crosses his head meant that Asuka had become a new fixture in his life as well.

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Though the need for constant operational readiness didn't allow the central dogma bridge crew all too much vacation either, it would probably have been an overstatement to claim that they were working – As it happened, there were no angels attacking, there was no maintenance to be done and no crucial experiments to monitor.

At the moment, they weren't dealing with anything that NERV H's clever machinery couldn't handle on its own, which meant that the operators were basically decoration and free to use such quiet minutes to occupy themselves in other ways.

The elder Mitsurugi may have spared the occasional glance for the readings at his console and the automatic system tests they were reporting on, but he spend most of his time badgering his coworkers with adorable pictures of his son and heaping praise on the boy's academic performance.

According to what Misato overheard when she paused to look past the railings of her work station to see how the technicians on the lower posts were doing, Mitsurugi junior did not share the pilot's recent academic struggles.

Not that her own station was exactly a buzzing beehive – Ibuki was deeply immersed in a heartrending romance novel which had brought her to the edge of tears, whereas Hyuuga's lecture of choice, weekly magazine that published recent manga chapters, appeared to be of a more humoristic nature.

Though Aoba had also brought himself something to read – a couple of music related magazines, to be exact, he'd long since been hit by a sudden burst of inspiration and was now trying out whatever new tricks he'd learned on his trusty air guitar.

It was such a slow day that even Ritsuko, patron saint of workaholics, had actually taken the time to brew a fresh coffee for a chance.

“...a school trip?” she asked, her tone a little bit chiding. “Don't you think that's a little bit inappropriate given our situation?”

Misato wasn't sure whether she'd leaned of it from the report she was current reading, or if it had anything to do with a certain subordinate of hers going on about how much he missed 'Little Nagato'.

“I think it's important to let them have a little bit of fun now and then, precisely because we live in these dark times. Let them enjoy their lives a little, while they still can...”
Even as she said that, Misato couldn’t quite bring herself to look her co-worker in the eye.

“You really seem to believe that, and yet, it was your decision to keep the pilots here. It would have been enough to have Rei stay behind, we needed her for other experiments anyways.”

“In theory perhaps, but us in the operations division have to plan battles in the real world, and so far we’ve always done better with more than one EVA at our disposal. Besides, having only two of them fly off to amuse themselves while one stays behind sounds a little unfair, doesn't it?”

“Unfair? You can't be serious.”

“Of course not. But given what's at stake, we have no other choice. That doesn't mean that I think it's right... or that it was easy to tell Asuka that her vacation's been canceled, I think she was really looking forward to it.”

“So Shinji-kun is still an obedient child, hm? Knowing you, you probably implored them to be reasonable and hoped they'd be convinced by some rationate that you don't even believe in yourself. You try to package everything for didactic expediency in order to nudge them in a particular direction, in the hope that they'll think that at least you believe in what you're doing and feel safe with you...

But deep down you probably feel like they might have more sympathy for your real feelings than for the illusion you're maintaining for their sakes.”

“I want to be the firm, adult support than they need, even if it sometimes means that I can't be their friend.”

“But you'd like to be, wouldn't you?”

“I'm not sure... Shinji in particular seems like he could use a lot of both. Yesteday I had to scold them about their grades. Felt really rotten afterward, I mean, what gives me the right? I'm less worried about Asuka, she's always been a very good student even despite her pilot duties. She probably just needs a little time to adjust to the new school, or maybe she thinks that she doesn't have to bother with school anymore now that she gets to fight the angels.

But when it comes to Shinji... He missed a lot of class because of the battles and how they affected him, the experiments and the training consume a lot of time, it hasn't been that long since he first transferred... He's basically working two jobs at once and anything to do with piloting still burdens him a lot. He's at such a difficult age, too. How can I possibly expect him to get good grades under these circumstances?

But if I don't fuss about his grades, who else is going to do it, and what's going to become of his education and his future? The only reason we're doing all of this is so that children like him get a shot at growing up. It doesn't seem right to endanger his future...”

“You seem to be very convinced that there will be a future. When you look at it objectively, a single boys' grades are very unimportant in the grand scheme of things, particularly when you consider that the fate of the entire world is at stake here; You might even see it at a positive that school is ending up neglected for the sake of his participation and not the other way around – I'd rather see his grades slip than his synch ratio, motivation or overall mental state.

You can worry about whether he'll find work later on when we've made sure that there will be a world for him to work in. You might even debate if there is any point in sending him to school at all. Who knows if he will even survive the battles? And even if he does, there's a good chance that
he'll need to be institutionalized.”

Faced with her friend's cool, impassive words, she was forced to grip the railing ever harder in order to keep her composure.

Whether she like it or not, she was quite aware that Ritsuko had spoken the truth – the peace embodied by her subordinate's various relaxations and the childish bickering in her own household was ultimately little more than an illusion, a paper-thin veneer disguising a constant state of danger.

Ritsuko had spoken the truth – and it made Misato indescribably furious that it was the truth.

And leader of the operations division or not, all of this often lead her to feel lonely in her own four walls, because she was forced to hide the worries she wanted to shield the children from.

As the adult in this situation, she should have been able to deal with this, and yet, she found herself longing to share those same worries with them, and that had her wondering if she really wanted to be a friend to the children, or if it wasn't more about claiming a friend and support for herself, and she was disgusted as her own weakness.

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Unlike Shinji, Asuka was very certain about what she wanted to do this week – swimming, bathing, diving!

Once she had decided that there was something she wanted to have or do, she wouldn't allow any force in this world to stop her, be it Misato or the angels.

If she wanted something, she would get it, no room for arguing!

After all, she was the best, and the rest of the world could consider itself fortunate to have her.

After she'd spent quite a while being insufferable and whining about how she had ended up buying that new bikini for naught, and how absurd it was to live on an island without ever being able to go swimming, Misato had mentioned that there was a staff pool at NERV HQ.

Naturally, Asuka had immediately decided that she would be spending the afternoon there, and proceeded to grab Shinji by the wrist as if he were one of her personal possessions. He wondered why in the world she'd insist on dragging him along if she supposedly couldn't stand him? Did she honestly get that much enjoyment out of making him miserable?

He didn't even bother to resist her – after all, when had she ever cared about anything he'd said or felt?

Including what she felt about him.

He'd admit that it might have been some hopeless wish to please her that led him to come along meekly and assure Misato that he didn't mind coming along while Asuka dragged him over to the entrance of his room.

“Get your stuff!” she commanded, domineeringly, before turning around to pack her own towels
and bathing suits.

More out of habit than any chance that she was still paying attention, he nodded before stumbling past the door frame that led to his room, had a look around, and wondered what in hell's name he was supposed to pack – he didn't own a bathing suit, and he couldn't swim, either.

His teacher had made a few attempts to teach him that particular survival skill, but he'd never really had the courage to let go of the edge of the pool and would moderately panic at the very suggestion that he try it 'alone' for a bit. As he'd grown older and sometimes been asked if he wanted to come along, he'd usually responded with a hesitant shake of his head in order to avoid any more of these uncomfortable, embarrassing situations.

He had a few distant memories of a day when he'd passed the local community pool at about 12 or 13 on some errand he no longer recalled, and stopped to look.

He pictured himself, hidden in the shadow of a tree, his hands both clawed into the mesh-wire fence, his eyes wistfully transfixed on the other children, and how they spoke to each other in the sunlight, how they laughed, played and shot through the waters with an otherworldly ease, piercing its surface like arrows.

He'd felt like a phantom in the daytime, a ghost whose pale form couldn't be seen in the light of the day, as if he were the slightest of all shadows, incapable of speaking a single word, forever damned to silently observe the world of the living without ever taking part in it.

To do so, he'd have had to walk around the perimeter to find the entrance, he'd have needed a bathing suit, money and a towel, and besides, he couldn't swim.

There had been a few times he'd considered bringing money, and one time he actually did, but the bills never left his pocket. He'd understood that even if he were to get to the other side of that gence, nothing would have changed.

One day, he'd been noticed by a somewhat older boy and asked what he was staring at.

At that point, it had been a long, long time since he'd last spoken to other boys, and he could barely manage a few unintelligible stutterings before it all became too much for him.

He'd turned around and ray away, as fast as he could.

After that, Shinji had never even come close to the community pool ever again.

If you'd told him back then that he'd ever have a group of friends that he spent enough time with to actually miss them when they happened to be gone for a week, he would never have believed.

Even so, there was still the question of his empty backpack and what to put in it – rather than his nonexistent bathing suit, Shinji decided to bring his laptop and his school books, since he didn't have any better ideas and would have to take care of that unfinished business sooner or later.

In the hasty manner of a thief or at least someone attempting to hide a broken vase, he stuffed his things into his vase, feeling somewhat guilty for an act that Asuka was bound to be displeased with – and probably did so with good justification, as the Second Child ended up barging into his room just as he'd finished packing, and promptly grabbed his wrist to drag him along.

“You and I are going to have a lot of fun today!” she declared, teasingly.
The Third Child had few doubts that she would be having fun, but he wasn't very sure if there was much overlap in their definitions of that world.

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At least as far as the schoolwork was concerned, his suspicions turned out to be right: This was not fun. First of all, he'd have to deal with physics, where he'd last scored an 'E'.

After several reads through the books and worksheets, he'd managed to arrive at a rough understanding of what was meant by this in principle, but that didn't mean that he had the slightest clue about how these equations were meant to be used, or how he'd be able to remember them in the first place.

At the moment, he was attempt to divine what might have gone wrong with the latest problem, given that the equations refused to spit out a sensible result no matter what.

Needless to say, the last math test hadn't been much of a victory either.

As he sat there despairing about various physics problems, he faintly became aware of the sound of steps – He assumed that it had to be Asuka, who had disappeared into the changing room a few subjective eternities ago.

Sinji himself was still wearing his school uniform, and had arranged his things on a plastic table at a safe distance to preempt any scenario where Asuka ended up throwing him into the pool to appease one of her arcane whims. Besides, water, books and laptops didn't mix, so every meter between himself and the H²O was a gift of the heavens.

Perhaps he should not have brought any sensitive electronics to this place in the first place, but it wasn't like he had a choice.

Asuka never care for anything he said, and even now, she had very little respect for the fact that he was visibly busy.

What Shinji didn't know was that her decision to drag him here was a very convoluted, but, for her sensibilities fairly straightforward way to show him that she'd like to spend more time with him.

She'd hoped to raise her mood by catching herself some male attention – of course, her choice had only fallen on this idiot because he'd likely be too desperate to spurn her.

She'd bet anything that this loser secretly had the hots for her, and besides, as her fellow EVA pilot he was the only remotely acceptable target, though he obviously barely compared to Kaji-san and other proper men.

She couldn't wait to see his reaction to her new bikini!

And because she didn't want to wait until that blockhead noticed what was directly in front of him, she'd even do him a special favor and lower herself to the level of starting a conversation with him:

“What are you doing there?”

“Studying physics.” Shinji stated truthfully, as he continued his struggle with the equation.
Great! He was doing exactly what he was told to, and wouldn't even look at her – People like that irritated Asuka more than anything. “You're such an obedient little teacher's pet!”

“But we have to do it!” he protested, though not very emphatically.

After all, this wasn't about doing what anyone said, but about whether he would fail his classes this year.

But when he looked up at her with the initial intention of making that point very clear, the words got stuck in his throat and all plans regard.

After all, Asuka had left for the explicit purpose of changing her clothes earlier – and now she had done it.

She was wearing the new Bikini she'd been talking about, though it was probably more sensible to define the sinfully red outfit not as clothing, but as the lack thereof.

The bottom part did little to shield much of Asuka's own bottom from his glances, and the over part covered less than half of her breasts, offering him an panoramic view of the valley of her chest that surpassed even the one he had gotten when she had climbed into bed with him on the night before the last battle.

The whole getup was garnished with some silver sunglasses with blue lenses that she had flipped upward to boost her usual aura of cool superiority, and her usual interface nerve clips, that she didn't consider to remove even now, showcasing just how much her job as a pilot had become part of her identity.

To hell with the expression 'angelic beauty' – Asuka's beauty was demonic in its nature, part of a power that wanted his destruction and made him a plaything of its heat and its cold, much like the moon that kept circling the Earth while causing the dance of the tides upon its surface without ever, ever touching it.

Of course, Shinji had previously seen her without any clothing at all, but back then, he hadn't really had the time to get a good look before the swift arrival of her foot had plunged his field of vision into darkness.

But now, she wasn't making the slightest attempt to cover herself, despite the large amounts of blood that Shinji had no power to keep from rushing into his face and burning under his skin like a fever daze, nay, she was presenting herself on a silver platter, in her usual proud and provocative manner, like an call girl advertising her fleshy merchandise.

“Look!” she declared in her light yet distinctly playful voice, quite deliberate in her titillation.

“Maybe we can't go to Okinawa, but there's no reason that we can't go diving right here!”

He instinctively backed away as she leaned forward.

This was a little bit too much for him, he was absolutely not used to these kind of things and besides, every single tidbit of his upbringing said that he ought to look away – but she was the one insisting on shoving her twin mounds of her chest almost directly into his face.

There was no room for anything else in his field of vision, and it was as if he was no longer the master of his eyes as an intense sense of heat and a certain wild tingling took over his body.

“Let me see...” he heard her youthful voice musing. “Just let me have a look.”
If he didn't know better he would have said that she was deliberately adding a tint of seductiveness to the sound of her voice, but that impossible – She would never try to get his attention in such a way; She might as well be living in a different world as him.

She might have been made of tangible flesh and blood, standing right in front of him and spent much of her days in his presence, but effectively, she was as distant from him as goddesses and queens of the golden ages or the long dead heroines of distant wars of whom he knew little more than their names and the concept of their identities.

Though they shared the same space at the same time, she seemed to exist in a completely different plane of being where she had access to many people and opportunities that he was barred from and, what more, knew he'd never experience in his life.

They existed together in the way animals and humans did, in that there were some common universals, and that he was capable of perceiving some form of her with his five senses, see her without being able to conceive of her thoughts or understand her concerns.

“Can't you even solve such a simple equation?” she scoffed playfully, again clarifying the sharp contrast between them. Unlike him, she was one of the Beautiful People, one of the fortunate aristocrats of a world he barely managed to cope with, effortlessly floating where he had to laboriously drag himself forward at every step of the way.

He couldn't bring himself to pay much attention to her typing fingers or the equations on the screen – His eyes were ensorcelled by her flaming red hair, her feminine lips, and last but not least her breasts, which hung off her body like opulent stocks of ripe fruit waiting to be plucked while these lost little water droplets still clung to them as a praise to their freshness.

“See? Done! It's just that easy.”

She couldn't cease for a single moment to constantly rub under his nose how she was so much better, more intelligent and much more talented than he. It was if she'd only brought him along for the explicit purpose of mocking his stupidity.

“If you're so good at this, then how did you manage to flunk the last test just as badly as I did?” he demanded to know, making a half-hearted attempt at defending his dignity.

It didn't come out as caustic as he'd initially intended it.

“That's just because I didn't understand half of the questions.”

“So, you're having problems with our language?” Shinji replied in surprise.

He didn't think it would even be possible for her to be bad at anything.

She certainly didn't have any problems with speaking Japanese, which made it easy to forget that she'd only moved to the country very recently.

It was another reminder that she was not actually preternaturally perfect, something he of all people would know – but despite her evident tangibility, she was very good at convincing people to join into her personal little bubble of reality.
“Yeah.” she admitted. “There's many characters that I still haven't got memorized.”

With that, she had admitted a weakness – Perhaps as a sign of camaraderie or an attempt to open up toward him.

But as it stands, her pride did not allow for such an admission without being followed by a statement that immediately clarified her superiority over the Third Child: “I really should have taken a course on it back in college...”

“College?”

“Yup, I graduated last year.” she lied. While her private teachers back home had assured her that she was far ahead of her peers, such a thing was completely impossible and outright ridiculous under most if not all of Europe's current educational systems, no matter how much of a genius you were, but if that credulous dunce was willing to believe her, she might as well bask in the stumped, incredulously-impressed look in his eyes, before she'd be forced to reveal that she had possibly been downplaying her language problems.

Japanese was easy-peasy as far as the grammar and pronunciation went, but playtime was definitely over once you got around to reading it or writing it down – it was all because of those stupid impractical letters!

“By the way, what was that problem even supposed to be about?”

“Thermal expansion.”

“Thermal expansion?” she repeated. “That's practically for babies! It means that things get bigger when they heat up, and when they cool down, they become small again!”

Did she really think he was that stupid?

She was probably just making fun of him.

There was no way she would ever take him seriously... it was hopeless.

No wonder that she saw him as total joke, being a ...college graduate... and all that.

The way things were going, he'd never get anywhere near having a degree even as an adult.

He flat out didn't have a chance.

“I- I get that, but...”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the existential chasm, Asuka had had enough.

She'd gone and helped that idiot out, and this was the thanks she got?

Why wasn't he... reacting to her?

Besides staring, which pretty much anyone could do.

How much more obvious could she possibly make it?

Should she walk up to him and outright say, “Hey, Daddy's boy, look at my boobs!”?

He wasn't exactly doing a good job at pretending he was not interested.
All he did was talk about that stupid school stuff, like it was somehow more interesting than her.

Alright. This called for some bold measures.

“Hey, do you think my breasts would grow a little more if I were to warm them with my hands?”

To leave her intentions absolutely clear, she cupped her chest with her hands and gave her breast a little squeeze, so that dear old daddy's boy would have a clear example of what she wanted him to do.

“H-how should I know...” he stammered, lacking any strategies to deal with her overt sexual provocation and feeling daunted by the confidence she exuded as far as her body was concerned. “I don't know anything about that...”

Shinji had reached his limit – while he'd been looking until now, this was the point where he averted his eyes and tried his best to think about fat pensioners and cold showers.

Heaven knows what ….might have happened.... if he hadn't.

The hormones in his blood were practically coming to a boil at this point.

“You're such a bore!” Asuka complained with a distinct pout, sounding almost a little dejected or insulted.

Without wasting another second of her life on her fellow pilot, she walked off.

Why... hadn't he done anything?

Had she just been given the brush-off? How dare he...

What could she possibly have done wrong?

Was there something he didn't like?

Was it the lack of a tan? The red head? Boobs too small? Hips too chubby?

Why wouldn't he look at her?

Why wouldn't anyone ever notice her?

Ah, misunderstandings! The bane that made the flow of feelings from heart to heart so difficult. Burning hearts that moved past each other without an understanding!

In actuality, the contents of Shinji’s head were rather different from what Asuka had expected there.

Much like her, he was in the process of lamenting his own ineptitude, though his downcast look was a lot more noticeable.

He might not have guessed her intentions, but he'd heard the judgment she had passed on him very very clearly: 'Such a bore'.

Apparently, he wasn't even good as a victim for cruel jokes – for it's not like he could have seen her provocations as anything else, as nothing about her overall behavior suggested that she would ever seriously flirt with her – Given that she'd even started the conversation with a remark about his
stupidity, that was simply not something that would ever occur to him as a real possibility.

He knew his place.

All he felt, all his pining and longings... were things she'd never know of.

All his dreams, fantasies and desires would stay just that.

From where he was standing, Asuka was completely unattainable.

The fires of his feelings would probably stay his very own private ache, and not just as far as Asuka was concerned, for there was quite a lot that could not be attained by a person like him.

The afterglow of heat and redness in his face had been in the process of fading when it was given new reason to burn by the sight of another girl, who'd drawn his attention with a gentle splashing sound.

Ayanami Rei.

He'd heard the steps and splashes suggesting that someone else had entered this place, but he'd been too busy with his schoolwork to notice any details.

Half consciously, he might have assumed that it was just another random NERV employee, but now, he saw that it was her.

She was leaning forward to get something from her bag, allowing him a good glimpse of her pristine –

He forced himself to look away.

This was different from Asuka's case, she knew what she was doing and had deliberately displayed herself with deliberate intent, but Rei seemed to lack a sense for that sort of thing.

Even if she didn't mind, taking advantage of that seemed like a crooked thing to do.

And besides, unlike his flatmate, she seemed to have a minimal level of respect for him, so the least he could do was to return it in kind.

Though his noble resolutions were not so easy to keep – Rei was back to standing upright by now and busy drying off her hair, her expression serious and stoic, so that he could only view the numinous beauty contained in her body from the back.

It took him a bit on a deliberate effort to look at her face now, but in the end, it was what he really wanted to see.

What he felt towards her was a deeper emotional bond that went beyond teenage lust.

When he looked at her, he felt a deep fascination and a wish to become a part of her world and find out what her crimson eyes believed in.

Except that he'd been used to full capacity as of late, having much to worry about especially now that he also had Asuka to deal with, so he could not really claim to have come all that much closer to Rei.

One advance he could make right here and now was to note that she wasn't wearing the uniform swimsuit that he'd seen her at school with, but a minimalistic white model that didn't particular
flaunt her shapely curves but allowed them to speak for themselves for that precise reason.

She owned her very own swimsuit – which was notable given that he didn't think he'd seen her wear any article of private clothing before, it was only ever uniforms, be it at school or at NERV.

If she bothered to get her very own swimsuit, she must really like swimming.

After all, she hadn't been invited here, either, she had just coincidentally been here at the same time, which would have been very unlikely to happen if her presence here had not been a fairly common occurrence. It wasn't unlikely that she came here on a regular basis.

It seemed strange to have found a similarity between people as different as Rei and Asuka, apart from their faible for swimming and their above-average intelligence and their status as EVA pilots, they were very much each other's total opposites in their words, deeds, looks and personalities.

And well, another commonality would have been that they were both rather attractive, yet way out of his league.

In fact, if he were to be an animal compared to Asuka, then Rei existed in a completely different sphere altogether, that he couldn't even begin to comprehend the basic rules of, and he was to her as a microbe was to his person...

Lost in his distant admirations, he'd overlooked the third person left in the room, and Asuka did not take kindly to it.

The timing after her perceived rejection had been pretty bad, and so, the First Child, whom she didn't appear to be too fond of in the first place, ended up as the scapegoat of her rage.

That damned little Favorite!

She didn't just consider herself too good for her, no, she seemed to be looking for a fight.

As if it wasn't bad enough to have to put up with her as a rival EVA pilot, Asuka was beginning to realize that she might be facing a challenge in a rather different area.

Not that she particularly cared about 'winning' Shinji over – what would she even want with him? - it was the challenge that she couldn't tolerate.

She couldn't believe that she'd caught him staring at that unkempt, sickly antisocial girl after spurning her like that – who did either of these two think they were?

What did that miserable girl have that Asuka didn't have double?

She'd had enough of her, once and for all.

This means war!

She'd show that bitch just how little effort it would take her to trump someone like her.

Certain of victory, she masked her wrath with faked confidence and her diving gear.

“Over here, daddy's boy! Look! Backroll entryyy!”
Typical.

Of course she always had to be the center of attention.

With a sigh, Shinji sank down onto his chair.

He wasn't used to having so many pretty girls around, it could even get exhausting at times. (and that included Misato.)

It was all new, and he didn't really know how to handle it, any more than the changes he was beginning to notice in his own body.

He mostly felt overwhelmed, honestly.

It wasn't like there was any chance in the world that either of them would ever end up as his girlfriend or anything, even before one even considered such idle fantasies, it was pretty clear that he didn't measure up to them in any way.

1. The predictions of doom might just end up becoming a great deal more tangible in chapter 2.09: [Amazon Complex, Part II]; After that we'll have topped up the first proper story arc of act II.

2. The suit from ep 10 might have been considered scandalous in the 90s but we're in the 21st century now, so imagine her buying the bikini from that one artwork where you see her in a beach chair alongside Rei and Mari.

3. I must praise Anno for being realistic with a typical problem of bilingual upbringing, which is that you might not learn how to write the language of the country you didn't grow up in. I can confirm this from personal experience.

4. But I must chide him for thinking that “graduated college at 13” is in any way realistic or can be used as a throwaway characteristic that is never brought up again and doesn't have huge repercussions/ be an integral part of the character. Take that from someone who's actually skipped 2 years in school and got their abitur at age 17, that is just not how it works. I deliberately kept it ambiguous as I don't want to take away too much from what the character was supposed to be but it's just too ludicrous for me to stomach.

5. I have come to realize that just by the stats, this is technically my most successful fanfic to date, not counting Old Shames deleted in a rage many years ago before coming to regret it (These are precious childhood memories ^^), so, uh, thanks everyone? I'll do my best to stay on the ball.

6. I think at the time I first wrote this 'apocalyptic dream' intended something like a failed SEELE impact or some other absolute worst case, but it could as well be seen as a regular dream informed/inspired by the 'situation', a manifestation of guilt, fear and nihilism and I have come to find that option more interesting. Aesthetic wise I wanted to inject a little Ulquiorra into this.

7. The rest of the chapter hasn't aged well as a whole, tho, it has good parts but also kind of silly ones that could have gone better.
Primadonna girl, yeah
all i ever wanted was the world
i can't help that i need it all
the primadonna life, the rise, the fall
you say that i'm kinda difficult
but it's always someone else's fault
got you wrapped around my finger babe
you can count on me to misbehave

Primadonna girl
Would you do anything for me?
buy a big diamond ring for?
would you get to down on your knees for me?
pop that pretty question, right now baby

Beauty queen on a silver screen
living life like i'm in a dream
i know i've got a big ego
i really don't know why it's such a big deal though

And i'm sad to the core, core, core
every day's such a chore, chore, chore
when you give, i want more, more, more
i wanna be adored

Cause i'm a primadonna girl, yeah
all i ever wanted was the world
i can't help that i need it all
the primadonna life, the rise, the fall
you say that i'm kinda difficult
but it's always someone else's fault
got you wrapped around my finger babe
you can count on me to misbehave

Primadonna girl

fill the void up with celluloid
take a picture, i'm with the boys
get what i want cause i ask for it
not because i'm really that deserving of it
living life like i'm in a play
It was on the afternoon of that same day when the battle that Yui had announced began to shadow the Katsuragi household with the portents of its imminence.

The first sign to alarm the 14 year old boy was the shrill ringing of the phone, a sharp, ever-repeating noise that grated on the nerves and broke the forced silence in their living room.

The first words from the receiver had barely touched Misatos ears when her casual cheerfulness evaporated away, leaving only determined severity. And once Shinji had seen this, it didn't take him long to understand that something must be going on, no matter how quickly Misato had reverted to her usual relaxed cheer once she put down the phone.

Something must have happened, and she seemingly preferred not to tell them yet as to not worry them before it was strictly necessary. She did everything in her power to avoid disturbing the normalcy that she felt particularly indebted to give them after canceling their school trip. All she told them was that she'd been ordered to headquarters in order to look at some unusual readings, carefully inviting the mistaken impression that she might have meant their latest synchronization test data, or something similar to it. The two of them were to stay home, where they would be easy to contact or find in case their presence would be required, though she assured them that it was most likely nothing, and that they would do better to continue doing what Misato had ordered them to do anyways: Study.

Shinji immediately expected the worst and attempted to mentally prepare himself for battle, trying in vain to assemble the memories of whatever it was Yui had told him.

He ought to have seen this coming even without her presence.

He would probably have to fight again – so far, he hadn't said anything to the girl sitting next to him, leaving her the blissful ignorance whose benefit he so rarely received and barely took note of the way she kept calling him a meek, obedient little doormat and a 'good kid', or her declaration about how Misato wasn't the boss of her (especially when she wasn't home), cumulating in her storming off to her room to devote herself to 'the important things in life'. Like the adult she purported to be, she actually counted school among those things, but she was too proud to spend any more time forced to be in the same room as him, doing the same activity.

She was too ambitious to tolerate further failures, and the way she kept occasionally emerging from her room to ask for the significance of an usual letter likewise indicated that she was studying exactly as she was supposed to.

He kept answering her questions with nods, head shakes and one liners, but despite his best intentions, he did not succeed in completing a single sentence on the worksheet he had been trying
to solve thus far – Flooded by the cocktail of chemicals that denoted an uncertain premonition, his fingers refused to hold the pen steady.

He couldn't form a clear thought, each world was an ordeal to put down, and his thoughts drifted in every sub-clause.

Finally, his premonition was confirmed and his inaction excused when Misato ran back to the apartment over an hour later.

They were to follow her to headquarters immediately and told to expect a battle. Rei was already informed and on her way.

Misato had come straight for a nearby seismologic institute – If one built their cities on a little chain of islands under which several tectonic plates ground past each other, one did well to meticulously survey every single volcano in the land, unless you wanted to wake up to find unexpected lava melting your front lawn.

After the far-reaching Earthquakes a few years ago, the surveillance of the geologic processes had only become more painstaking, and thus it shouldn't have been surprising when an usual shadow inside a volcano did not remain unnoticed.

The picture had been blurry, but it did mean that there was a solid body in a lake of molten rock, where the heat and the pressure should have been able to liquify just about anything.

Once Misato had taken over the institute with Hyuuga in tow and subjected the 'shadow' to a closer look by means of a research probe that had imploded moments after the images were taken, their suspicions were confirmed: It was an angel.

“But... there was no alarm...” Shinji commented once he'd taken in the news.

“It wasn't necessary. The angel currently miles away from any inhabited areas, and it doesn't seem like it's going anywhere – Ritsuko thinks that it's in some kind of embryonic stage. Asuka, remember how you asked why we can't attack the angels before they attack us?

Maybe we can.”

The redheaded girl erupted in a large grin.

That was just perfect! For once, something good had happened on this rotten day.

There it was, the much-welcome change, her chance to show everyone what she was made of.

Immediately, Misato instructed the two Children to come with her. Before they'd even gotten to the elevator, she'd pulled out her phone and contacted headquarters.

If Shinji wasn't mistaken, the one who answered was that one technician with the long hair – Aoba, wasn't it? Hyuuga's voice was somewhat higher.

“Contact the commander and tell him that we need an authorization for an A-17.”

“Be careful what you say! This is not a secure line!”

“I know, that's why you have to call me back on the secure line as soon as possible...”
An A-17? That woman had quite the stomach if she would propose an action of such ramifications so easily, treating even his authorization like a mere formality she could take for granted.

Nonetheless, Ikari appreciated her.

She was always ready to use all methods at her disposal, and despite her at times unorthodox methods, she tended to carry out her assignments with reliable efficiency.

She had the kind of unfettered all-or-nothing mentality that the people of these dark times could not afford to lack.

“Are you honestly considering to allow it?” Fuyutsuki asked, doing a bad job at hiding his disbelief after the expected 'Of course not' had failed to materialize.

“Yes, I will.”

“But, Ikari...”

“Captain Katsuragi's proposition comes at a convenient time for us. There is a hypothesis I have been meaning to confirm for a while...”

“An A-17? You mean a preemptive strike?”

“Exactly.” Ikari affirmed, a bold-faced statement free of hesitation, digressions, justifications or Euphemisms.

He was fearless as he confronted the dark monoliths that represented his superiors, with his right-hand man stoically standing at his side.

“That is far too dangerous.” the American representative clarified. “Have you perhaps forgotten what happened 15 years ago?”

“We have been presented with an unprecedented chance, and I intend to use it. So far, we have only been defending ourselves. Now, we have a chance to attack.”

“It's not worth the risk.” Keel decided, intending for that statement to end the conversation.

It might not look like it, but –

Now, Ikari had them exactly where he wanted them – It was true that the circumstances of the Second Impact had involved the disturbing of a seemingly inactive creature with the fruit of life at its disposal, but there were large disparities in several other variables, and it wasn't like they were attempting this for the first time.
“But clearly, you must understand how valuable it would be for us to obtain a new test subject – A living angel. The projects that failed in Bethany Bay could be continued with the more experienced personnel at headquarters. After all the complaints we received from you about the incident, I'm surprised that you did not authorize the operation at once.

After all, we do not have any more angel test subjects, do we?”

Ikari wished he could see their faces, the slight flinches, the expressions in their eyes; But their brief silence had told him enough.

Had they learned something in Bethany Base that they didn't want him and his affiliates to discover? Did they thing a captive angel would effort him some strategic benefit?

Or did they actually have access to further captive angels?

Was there something going on in Bethany Base that was not meant for his ears?

He'd already found out that the Marduk Project had attempted to fit the serpentine creature with a kind of entry plug in hopes of controlling it as you would an EVA – perhaps by the fourth child or some other nebulous figures. If it had worked, it would have rendered obsolete a few things that Gendo's plan was still forced to rely upon and undermined the monopoly of knowledge and power that controlling headquarters was supposed to grant him – besides, allowing the angel to escape provided a suitable smokescreen for his acquisition of the key, all of which contributed to his decision to have the place sabotaged.

Now, however, his gut feeling was beginning to conclude that Bethan Base had merely been the tip of the iceberg, and that was without getting into the mysteries that were the ever elusive EVAs 06 and 08....

But regardless of the larger web of connections he was treading in, in this particular circumstance, he had asked the right question: It was evident when Keel chose to acquiesce rather than take the risk of answering it: “Failure will not be tolerated.”

Then, the monoliths faded, and the two men of NERV found themselves standing in a large hall with green walls, a holographic chamber.

Though he'd suffered through the conversation with stiff-lipped stoicism, Fuyutsuki's subdued outrage became apparent once he was free to speak his mind: “He won't tolerate it? Doesn't he realize that a failure would mean the end of humanity?”

He wasn't too sure about his immediate superior, either, given that he rarely granted him the benefit of an answer.

“Are you really sure, Ikari?”

The commander merely grinned a thin, concealed grin in the space under his gloved hands.

No matter what experiments they would perform on this particular angel, this time, the results would unfaillingly find their way to his desk, and he would learn what it was that the old men were so cautiously hiding from him.
“An A-17?” Looking at his bleached-blonde superior and her young aide, Mitsurugi Minoru bore a slightly puzzled expression, as if some minor inconsistency were slightly confusing him. “So, you want to destroy the angel before it reaches full maturity?”

“Not quite. The Commander intends to capture it. You were involved in the design and construction of Bethany Bases's Cocytus system, which makes you the most qualified expert on this subject. For the duration of this mission, you will act as bridge personnel. We are also requesting your aid in the design of the capture system.”

“It is an honor, Ma'am.” the dark-haired man answered, his expression hardening into a serious understanding contrary to his usual jovial manner. “I will do my best, but surely you realize that we are looking at some very different challenges here. For the Third Angel, we excavated it in place within its eggshell and built our base around it. For this mission, we are looking for a measure that will hold the angel secure and free of disturbance even while we transport it over long distances.”

“It seems like it will be a lot harder to catch an angel rather than just destroy it...” Ibuki reported. “For all we know, even the slightest touch or jolt could result in a tragedy...”

“Then the best approach would be not to touch it at all.” Mitsurugi opined. “I suggest that we use some kind of optical pliers. From what I've read about the characteristics of the angels' constituent matter, they should make that approach even simpler.”

“Optical pliers?” Ibuki asked.

The words seemed to mean a great deal more to Dr. Akagi: “Like what you use for experiments with microscopic complexes such as nanostructures?”

“Exactly. It's commonly applied to things that are too small to be touched, but in principle we should be able to apply it to other objects that we can't mechanically touch if we amplify it to sufficient energies. I was thinking about modifying a couple of industrial laser...”

“That won't work. Two poles won't be enough, that would be far too bumpy and imprecise. We'd something like a cage...”

“But that would drive up our power consumption and energy densities, especially if you consider that the materials we can use are limited by the conditions inside the volcano. We can forget about stable superconductors in there.”

“And if we used a solenoid?” Ibuki suggested. “Or we might... vary the frequencies.”

“Very good, Maya!”

The young technician blushed at Dr. Akagi's sudden praise.

“This could work! Have the Magi run the calculations right away, we need to hurry. No one knows when exactly the angel is going to hatch, and Katsuragi should be just about to arrive here with the children...”

---
"That's an angel?"

If Shinji were forced to describe the bizarre being on the shadow theatre-like shot, he'd have felt uncomfortably reminded of a human infant. It's skeleton had hands and feet, down to the toes and all five fingers. It's uncanny resemblance to human appearance left a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

As usual, Dr. Akagi didn't seem fazed as she coolly explained the plan in a businesslike fashion: "Exactly. It appears to be in an immature state, like a chrysalis. The primary objective of this operation is to capture the target alive and as close to intact as possible."

"And if that doesn't work out?" asked Asuka, to whom 'capture it alive' sounded rather boring. The scientist's ruby lips told her exactly what she wanted to hear: "In that case, it must be destroyed immediately. Is everything clear?"

"Yes." the trio assured.

"Alright then. Which of you will carry out the operation?"

This was the precise moment that Shinji had dreaded, while Asuka had been brimming with anticipation.

It almost frightened him to see Captain Shikinami cheerfully raising her arm and calling out without any regard for his nearby ear drums: "Me! Pick me! Please let me do it, I love diving!"

That naive girl... didn't she understand what might happen to her during that crazy undertaking, all the ways it could go wrong?

Yet, this was another wholly new experience for Shinji – would this fight possibly be dealt with without him? Would he actually be spared, no need for him to suffer, nor any chance for Yui's warnings to come true after he'd spent this last three minutes scrambling to retrieve them from memory?

He didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed that they wouldn't have any use for him. But either way, he didn't quite trust this supposed respite. In the end, he was bound to get stuck with all the unpleasant tasks, like all the times before – He might as well be cursed.

Except that whatever demon had enacted that curse seemed to have taken the day off: "Asuka. You will do it."

Wide eyed, Shinji marveled at the words.

That was a wholly new experience, to have someone not just willing, but eager to bear the burden in his stead.

"YEAH!" she exclaimed. "It will be child's play!"

Shinji would never understand this girl. What kind of person would ever rejoice at the prospect of having to jump into an active volcano?

Right – Yui had said something about volcanoes as well. - 'Volcano means Volcano', as she'd put it. In hindsight, he should have realized back then that she'd meant a real, physical volcano.

But hadn't she also spoken of 'jumping inside' and 'saving' someone?
The way things were going, the one to jump into it would be Asuka.

Perhaps the future wasn't fixed yet.

At least, Shinji wanted to believe that quite badly.

“And what role would I play in the operation?” Ayanami inquired, once it became apparent that the discussion was about to end without a mention of her name.

Ibuki explained how the special equipment required to withstand the volcano was incompatible with the prototype, which had been repaired but still remained untested.

“You will stay behind at headquarters until further notice.”

“Understood.” Rei affirmed. If she was in any way disappointed, it was not discernible in her expression.

Despite this, it seemed obvious to Asuka that having to stay behind was tantamount to being slighted, and seeing the First Child on the receiving end filled her heart with glee: For once, that arrogant bitch would be shown where her place is, and how thoroughly useless and obsolete she was as the pilot roster's fifth wheel.

That would teach her to drop her haughty act in the future – but of course, Asuka would not neglect the vchance to rub some more salt in her wounds, just to make sure.

This day may have had a sobering beginning, but it was about to get better and better.

“Poor wondergirl!” she mocked, affecting a superficial farce of a friendly tone as she leaned forward with a provocative grin in order to look past Shinji's frame. “You'll miss all the fun!”

“Since we don't know how much time we have left until the angel emerges, we have to depart as soon as possible. Get ready.”

----

For Asuka and the other Children, to 'get ready' meant to get dressed and make their way to the cages – this mission, however, would require special equipment and particular preparations for a variety of reasons.

Among other things, Dr. Akagi had prepared a new suit for her.

But once it had adjusted herself to the shapes of her body, Asuka could hardly tell what was supposed to be so special about it. The rubber appeared to be marginally thicker, but would that really make a difference?

“I don't get it.” the Second Child stated, intending to inquire about it just to be sure as she looked down at herself with a searching gaze. “I know this is supposed to be a heat protection suit, but it feels no different from the regular one.”

Dr. Akagi simply instructed her to try pressing the button on the other wrist.

But even if the scientist had possesed the necessary tact to at least warn the unsuspecting girl, nothing could have prepared her for the horrific process she would cause by pressing that button.
It was probably the wet dream of anyone with a weight gain fetish – The girl, who had painstakingly kept her body at the widely accepted ideal size through a regime of calorie-counting an exercise was forced to watch as her breasts, stomach and thighs appeared to swell up until she resembled a living Christmas tree bauble which barely fit between the rows of lockers in the pilots' changing room.

“Ahhh! What the hell is this supposed to be?!” she exclaimed, aghast for obvious reasons.

But Dr. Akagi was nowhere near finished with her torture session: “...Unit two should be ready as well...”

----

“HELL NO! What is the meaning of this?!”

The scientist had just led Asuka to a gigantic, clunky white thing that resembled an unfortunate crossbreed between a toy robot and an astronaut.

“This is the D type armor for operations under extreme conditions. It's shielded against heat, pressure and radiation.”

Except that Asuka wouldn't have cared if that getup would have made her completely invulnerable – None of it would change how extremely uncool it looked. And to think that she'd been looking forward to this assignment!

“Is this really my unit two?”

The head section that could be seen beyond the 'helmet visor' seemed to suggest that this was the case.... as if that was even the worst! With this monstrosity of a suit, she looked so fat that her hair following the bulk of its backside rather than hanging down like usual.

No!

She wouldn't suffer this humiliation for anything in the world.

A woman ought to have her dignity and priorities these days. As far as the pudding suit let her, Asuka made an attempt to place her hands on her hips.

“UNACCEPTABLE! I won't do it! I'd rather die than walk around in public as a living balloon! Just take Daddy's boy over there!” she demanded, pointing her outstretched arm at the conveniently nearby Third Child, whose expression and posture visibly faltered in the face of her apparent depreciation. “He's more suited to this kind of job to begin with!”

Great.

There we go again. O, Third Childe, cometh and solveth the problem, as I doth not give a fuck! When would this girl finally realize that this wasn't a game? It was just like with the school trip – She seemed to think that she could get away with being an EVA pilot only when it was convenient for her.

It wasn't like he didn't like Asuka – quite the opposite – but that didn't change that she really
frustrated him at times.

Fortunately for Shinji, there was someone present whom they hadn't noticed yet, someone who had a pretty good understanding of the vain redhead, and decided to take a shot at motivating her: “That's unfortunate! I had been looking forward to seeing you in action!”

But the unshaven operative's well-intentioned effort ended up backfiring, resulting only in Asuka's swift escape from the hall, leading her to hide in the entrance to the corridor through which she had just arrived.

“Oh no! I can't let my dear Kaji-san see me like this under any circumstance!”

“This could be a problem.”

“It looks that way.” Dr. Akagi conceded to her assistant. Shinji soon understood that there was no helping it – He would inevitably end up stuck with it after all...

“Alright, then I will-”

“I will go. I can pilot unit two as well.”

Shinji didn't know if she simply did this because she regarded it as her duty and was beholden to the same laws of common sense as he was, or if she had recalled him describing his fears and therefore sought to spare him further combat, but this was the second time that another hand had shot up before his did, ready to absolve him of what he still dreaded, even if he had since resolved to grin and bear it.

This time, his savior was Ayanami whose white-gloved hand volunteered for his grim fate.

But none of this sat very well with Asuka – Suddenly she realized that her role as an EVA pilot was about to be supplanted by that obedient little bitch, and it rekindled all too recent displeasure – It was one thing to demand that Shinji take over an embarassing task she considered beneath her; That was a choice of her own free will.

But she couldn't have that antisocial little puppet going around acting as if she could replace her like some piece of broken machinery, leaving her standing there like the sort of petulant toddler she couldn't stand to resemble for anything on this earth... To boot, the First had to time it in such a way that the Third Child would doubtlessly see as an invitation to be as cowardly as he felt like, yeah right, go and coddle him, as if he weren't already enough of a wimp.

_Hell no._

Deathly insulted, Asuka ceased the half-step she'd already taken toward the door and turned toward that brainless little favorite and the stupid Third Child, who, as usual, did nothing.

Had she spoken of war before?

No, _NOW_ was truly the moment when that bitch made the great Captain Shikinami into an enemy –

She'd show her!

She'd teach her better than to disrespect her like that!
Leaving Shinji no time to react with anything but an expression that was somewhere between baffled and disconcerted at the sudden and, in his opinion, disproportionate display of hostility, Asuka had moved at lightning speeds, in order to show the commander’s little princess to keep her hands to herself with one fast, brusque act.

Taking up her direct line of sight, forcing that antisocial brat to look directly into her eyes to make sure she understood: “Over my dead body! Sorry, but before you let the First Child into the entry plug of my EVA 02, I'd rather do it myself!”

“I know it looks bad, but don't you worry!” she told the Evangelion, her only remaining friend among this faithless lot. “We'll get you out of there real soon!”

----

Mere minutes after that, both EVAs had been shot into the sky on board their designated transport planes, though EVA 02 required a special harness due to its special equipment, with the result that they spent the trip hanging in the air in a rather stupid-looking manner, exposed for all to see – not exactly how one would imagine the day-to-day life of earth's valiant defender.

It was some relief that most of the bothersome preparations had been taken care of by the time they reached the provisional base – they had already picked out a ravine at whose bottom one could see the magma glowing. The surface appeared more viscous than really liquid, since the material began to cool where it was exposed to the air, but that thin layer, more akin to the skin of a homemade pudding than anything else, would be easily disposed of by means of a modified industrial laser, or so the white coats said.

Thus, they had assembled some semblance of a crane above the lacuna, from which Asuka would then be lowered by a steel wire affixed to the power cable and no less than five coolant ducts.

They wasted no time in hanging her onto the conduit and preemptively placed the cage intended for the angel into the heat armor's pincer-like hands – it was a strange feeling to direct those wholly mechanical parts, her hands felt a little numb, as if she were missing something – She much preferred the Evangelion's “regular” hands.

Meanwhile, EVA 01 basically spent the time uselessly squatting next to the base, looking down the narrow fissure – The Third Child was supposed to stay put in case anything went wrong, possibly as a backup – They'd even brought a second D-type suit with them, though they had refrained from placing the purple EVA in it, in case that the battle would need to be fought on the surface.

It was strange... so far, the angels had all come from the sea, hadn't they? And... what was it that Yui had said?

Something about how he wouldn't need to do very much but should keep himself ready to jump in order to 'save her'? Did she mean to tell him that something would go wrong and that he'd have to interfere?

Or would it work just as well without him in the end?
Either way, all springs in his internal clockwork were tightened to the max.

Oh, if only he'd never been foolish enough to wish to know the future – his chances and expectations had never been rosy one way or another, but at least he could have hope if he couldn't see his doom coming.... and could Yui possibly have been any more vague and imprecise?

That Asuka did not seem afraid or otherwise affected by the events in the slightest just increased his own nervousness further. She appeared to him like a naive little girl who was, well, obliviously stepping over the ledge of a volcano. Whoever needs metaphors when reality itself was already momentous enough.

He'd like to protect her somehow, or at least stick close to her, but how was he to do that when she would be carrying out the operation several hundred meters below him? They had only one crane.

Unfortunately, the number of Asuka's worries was no greater than that of the cranes:

“Where did Kaji-san go?”

“That idiot is nowhere near here!” Misato clarified. “And what would he even be doing here? He belong neither to the technicians nor to the operations division.”

“Oooooh.” Asuka lamented. “And I'd hoped that he could finally see me in action!”

*Wow. Were those the most serious worries in the blissful lives of the elite?*

Or perhaps, Shinji thought, he was just jealous.

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In Kaji's defense, his original intention had been to observe his former ward's heroics just as he'd previously announced it. But then, he'd received an important phone call insisting on a meeting that could be neither canceled nor postponed – his contact person from the ministry of interior would not wait, and given that her superiors were unlikely to be all too pleased with the recent events, he would not try her patience.

The meeting took place in a ropeway carriage, and each of the two people sitting across each other on its opposite ends knew better than to assume that the other person trusted them.

Correspondingly, they did not even bother to look each other in the eye.

“You're aware that an A-17 also entails the freezing of all current assets?”

“And I figure that means trouble for a lot of people?” Kaji inquired, seemingly relaxed.

The lady from the ministry, who'd arrived in her pink blouse and accompanied by a small puppy, retained a polite, friendly tone, but wasn't shy when it came to voicing her main point of criticism: “Why didn't you stop this from happening?”

“I had no pretext to excuse it with. The order comes from the very top, and the committee has already agreed.”

“But, if you consider that a failure on part of NERV would mean the end of humanity...”
“Don't worry. They're not that arrogant.”

Though the lady across him did not wholly believe him and, at the sight of his casual grin, wondered if it wasn't him who was blinded by overconfidence (He might claim to be on their side and act a lot more approachable and just plain normal, he was still one of them: A person who was involved with the Evangelions), his statements did have a reason behind them, or rather, a reason, one particular measure that had been prepared in the name of safety. When he told her of it, her smile faded – As Kaji put it, NERV's commander was rather thorough and not at all the type to do anything half-baked – Something his son was about to learn when he first noticed that measure as a distant glittering in the sky.

“What is that?” he asked, somewhat surprised.

The answer came over intercom from the pavilion under which Dr. Akagi, Ibuki and Mitsurugi senior were currently tinkering with the tangled cables connected to the EM cage's local measuring instruments.

It was the former who spoke to him in her usual curt, cold tones:

“The UN air force. They are to remain on alert above us until the end of the operation.”

“There they're here to support us?” Asuka asked with an excitement that, in hindsight, reflected her naivety. Dr. Akagi could only muster a cynical smile at the children's lack of suspicion. 'Support' was probably what would be written on the official powers, but the fake blonde chose to see the reality of the situation with a little more discernment: “Something like that. They're here to clean up the aftermath.”

“If we fail.” Ibuki added, for the sake of clarity.

The sliver of anxiety in her voice was anything but a good omen.

“Meaning... what?”

“In case the operation fails, they are going to drop an N² mine and burn everything down here along with the angel. ...and of course, us, too.” Ritsuko explained nonchalantly.

Once again, the young girl which Asuka truly was could be seen shining through: “That's terrible!”

She was right. As far as Shinji's own life was concerned, they could go ahead and burn it out for all he cared – and they would do it anyway whether he cared or not – but Asuka, Misato, Dr. Akagi... all the technicians, including Nagato's father, who couldn't be the only one here who still had family waiting at home or even children to be fed. After all, most of the children in his school worked for NERV. Who dared to place human lives on weighing scales as if they were no better than potatoes?

Shinji immediately felt his anger rising up, not just for his own sake, but because he felt that someone ought to demand justice for the girl that was about to take a death-defying plunge into an active volcano. He couldn't shake the feeling that this bitter cup was not supposed to have passed him by, as if Asuka were down there in his stead.

She didn't even seem to comprehend the gravity of the situation, not to mention that this was the first time she would be deploying on her own.
“Who would give that kind of order?!?” he demanded to know, a hard, edgy note of outrage permeating his otherwise boyish voice.

This turned out to be another piece of information that the scientist ended up delivering without moving any part of her face other than her mouth: “Commander Ikari.”

Shinji was distinctly shocked... and wondered why.

Why would he still be surprised whenever that man treated him and others like exchangeable tools? As long as he still had Rei, his son could go straight to hell for all he cared. And Asuka?

The Third Child would be surprised if that man even knew her name.

Rei was ostensibly important for him, Shinji himself was the one with the best track record so far, but the Second Child most likely meant no more to him than a fully interchangeable pawn...

That measly bastard, sitting up hair in his chair, sticking his fingers into each other and delighting in ordering others around and leaving them to do his dirty work without as much as lifting a finger. That damned phony! Whenever Shinji began to hope that there was, perhaps, a decent person beneath his cold veneer, he'd do something to remind Shinji of just how little he cared for his son's feelings.

But what would expect of someone who had no qualms using his own wife as a test subject or forcing his only son into piloting a horrifying war machine?

But no matter how hot his rage burned on the inside, the emotions of a 14 year old boy were no excuse that the greater world; They would not slow time or win the fight, no matter how much he wanted to be outraged or have somewhere to vent – The show must go on, and right now, the schedule called for the start of operations.

Listening to the intercom reports, he watched as they used a laser to blast an entry hole into the topmost, partially solidified layer of lava and began to lower Asuka into it, feeling somewhat churned despite his earlier attempts to master himself.

Yui's words, which he'd thought he'd successfully puzzled together, seemed to slip from the grasp of his restless mind like the recollection of a dream fading fast in the morning hours.

With every meter crossed between Asuka and the hellish maw beneath her, he wanted to kick and scream and ask why they were doing this to her and just why exactly the girl of his dreams needed to be thrown into a volcano this badly.

Some part of him wanted to plead and beg to go in her stead, so that at the very least, the human life being lost would be an unimportant, weak person and not such a beautiful, successful individual who'd doubtlessly had a bright future ahead of her – but it was far too late for that, and even if he had the guts to make that offer at loud, she would refuse it.

She'd only just assured them that she was ready to go, but the very way she'd said it, like it was the most stupid question she had heard in her life was the most evident reason to disbelieve her.

Even after she'd just learned of her superiors' callousness, she still lacked all of the appropriate concern this situation should have warranted, and that was probably the worst of it all.
“Eeek! That looks really hot!” she commented, as if she were speaking of appearance of some
random gross kitchen implement she had no choice but to clean if she wanted her allowance.

Her usual overconfidence took mere seconds to return, further emboldened by her drive to be the
center of attention and the chance that had presented itself with her first solo mission. “Hey Shinji!
Look over this! GIANT STROKE ENTRY!”

He could only sigh as the Earth’s glowing blood swallowed her up.

If only she’d be more careful.

Feeling rather useless, the Third Child could do nothing but watch as an ever greater length of
cable vanished toward the earth’s core, whilst the technicians kept reading out the steadily rising
depth.

This continued for a long while in which nothing concrete happened as the Second Child was
lowered further and further into the Earth, which only served to elucidate just how far down she
would be operating. Separated from her by more than a kilometer's worth of molten rock, they
would be laughably incapable of getting her out of there, let alone assist her in any manner if
something were to happen to her.

He wondered if any human being had ever ventured this far down; The only relief was the sound
of her voice, for as long as she spoke, she was still alive – but though she was normally quite
talkative, there was not much down there for her to comment on. So far, she’d only chimed in to
announce that she couldn’t see anything and would be switching over to CT to remedy that – but
even so, visibility remained low, and within the limited range she could look around in, there was
not terribly much to see. Wherever she looked, there was nothing but magma, magma and some
more magma in all directions of conventional space.

At the very least, one would have expected this to change once Asuka arrived at the target's
calculated position, but once she made it there and found her field of vision as empty as ever, the
NERV technicians in the provisional command center realized that they had a problem, and Dr.
Akagi did not take long to work out which one: “The magma currents must have been faster than
we anticipated.”

As a matter of course, the technicians did not need very long to correct the errors in their
calculations, but the crux of the matter was that the revised position lay at a significantly lower
depth, which meant that they would be forced to lower the Second Child into even more hostile
environments than what they'd already planned for.

The journey continued further and further down, ever closer to hell.

“Go deeper.” Misato ordered in an affectation of a command voice that had been polished to
perfection through long years of practice.

It was left to technicians to express any doubts she might have by turning all their eyes toward her.

Dr. Akagi didn't know whether she found it worrisome or amusing.

That was always an interesting question with Misato – Just how far was she willing to go in order
to defeat the angels? And did she believe that she could atone for the sins of her father if she now
succeeded where he had failed 15 years ago?
The EVA continued to sink lower and lower, and by now, the limitations of the technology were making themselves felt. There was trouble with one of the coolant pumps, and Asuka felt it keenly – the was a sound of material splintering, of the sort that had not ever meant anything good ever since she'd first encountered it through the broken plates of her childhood.

The blame, however, could not be ascribed to the engineers, as they had passed the maximum immersion depth that the equipment had been designed for quite a while ago and were now treading far past what the operation manuals would ever have recommended.

Non that they had any other choice – The target was still nowhere to be seen.

“Asuka, what's your status?” Misato asked, as much as she may have pushed toward continuing the operation – Dr. Akagi wondered if it was meant to calm her conscience.

In that case, the signals sent upward from the girl's vainglorious overconfidence should prove quite convenient for that purpose: “Everything's fine down here, but I can't wait to wash off in the shower once I get out of here!”

“But you're almost there. Please hold out a little longer... And you know what? I know some really nice hot springs around here. Once we're done, I'm treating all three of us to a visit! To make up for your school trip, if you will. Wouldn't that be nice?”

Interesting. So she was trying to make it up to them. Most likely, she was trying to reassure herself just as much as the girl.

But even the most well-meaning, pretty words were no help against facts – They wound not let themselves be denied, especially not when the harness that had been used to fasten EVA 02’s prog knife snapped under the monstrous presence and bid the surface goodbye forever.

“And Unit Two has lost the prog knife!”

Ultimately, it was Hyuuga, of all people, who ended up voicing the concerns everyone else was surely thinking: “Captain Katsuragi! It's not an unmanned probe this time!”

Usually her most faithful, trusted right-hand man, he now felt especially indented to call her out –

But her facade of cool professionalism held.

“I am leading this operation according to my own judgment. Please continue.”

“Misato's right!” Asuka affirmed. “I'll be fine, I can still go further!”

She didn't care that she could already feel a near-continuous layer of sweat between herself and the plug suit. There was no going back for her – If she couldn't carry out this mission to its end, now that all eyes were finally resting upon her like she always wanted, there would be no reason for her to live – Indeed, a heroic death would become the kinder fate compared to the shame and humiliation of defeat. For her, it was Victory or Death.

After more than five hundred additional meters beyond the intended depth limit, she finally reached what the technicians now esteemed to be the angel's actual position, and this time, their computers had no failed them –

There it was, the angel's chrysalis.
It was little more than an uncertain, ellipsoid shadow, neither its surface structure nor any further details could really be discerned – It was very apparent that the Evangelion's inbuilt measuring instruments had been constructed for conditions very distinct from these.

Dr. Akagi had compared it to the pupa of an insect, and since Asuka was somewhat more well-versed in biology than the average student her age, she had heard that those often dissolved into a sludge of cells inside their cocoons before their organs could completely reform from scratch. That sounded rather gross, but it was better than the other alternative, which was to regard that thing as a kind of egg, which would make its contents something like... a baby. It was not pity that she wanted to stave off, but revulsion.

She'd always hated babies, those seaming, neckless little homunculi with their distorted human faces that somehow managed to manipulate their hosts against their will by accessing the ancient coding inside their DNA.

She loathed their sight and the way it was regarded as ridiculously angelic and endearing... just like dolls.

She'd once heard her step-mother speaking about it, musing if the drive to have children wasn't the simplest, cheapest way to create something in one's own image.

Children were ascribed a degree of flawlessness and likeability nigh-unreachable for an adult person; Everyone said they were ever so adorable and miraculously started caring once they heard that children were involved somehow, even if they'd otherwise have more care for a dog than their fellow men. If you weren't careful enough to avoid conception and birth, you were immediately expected to make them the top priority in your life and give them everything, whereas they were completely helpless, useless and wholly dependent on you like some kind of symbiont, nay, a parasite that could not live on its own without burying into your body and licking it dry after exiting its deformed husk.

Moreover, while humans created children in their own image, no person could do this on her own; If they wanted to preserve anything of their ever-decaying shells for posterity, they had to employ other flesh and tolerate its presence upon the finished product, and if then failed to resemble oneself enough, or, conversely, resembled one much more than the more merciful kinds of reflections, all one could do was to reject the child by the time it grew up and talked back to you.

It was just not worth it, it was thankless hard work, made one dependent upon the help one needed in order to raise the child; Indeed, Asuka felt that there was always something creepily self-destructive about the choice to have children: Why would anyone chose something that would sap their time and money, affect their ability to work and law waste to one's body?

For Asuka, it was clear the she had no need of such futile dolls.

She loathed them, and she loathed the very prospect that she might become like that woman; She would not repeat her mistakes, would not allow herself to be chained up by anything – no man, no feelings, no children, no lowly procreation instincts.

So, she'd decided that she'd never bear children, nor would she ever give her heart away – at least, not really. She wouldn't allow anyone or anything to pull her down to her doom -

Not even this goddamned angel.
She brought herself into position and extended the EM cage to its full extent.

The fun could begin.

“An both you and the angel are subject to the magma currents, you will be swept away from its position as soon as you reach it. You've got only one chance.” Dr. Akagi explained.

But that was okay, and failed to cause even the slightest worries for Asuka – in truth, those words were exactly what she'd been wanting to hear for quite some time now.

“Don't worry. You can trust me on this.”

But could she trust herself?

Come on, all she needed to do was to float along with the currents until she reached that thing and then press the button at the exact right moment, it was practically no different from her video games.

Steadily, she came closer and closer, leisurely floating toward the dark messenger until she was just about to cross its shadowy form, and then – click!

The solid light bars of the cage appeared just where she had wanted them, trapping the dark egg in its center.

Just as planned, the ninth angel had been taken into captivity.

There hadn't been the slightest problem – immediately, a wave of relieved exhalations went through the provisional command center, the once hardened, tense faces of everyone present softening up. It was not hard to discern the weight that had been liften from everyone's hearts: Ibuki and Mitsurugi wore smiles, whereas Hyuuga took the time for a deep breath – Even the corners of Dr. Akagi's mouth appeared to be slightly tilting upward. “Great job, Asuka!” Misato lauded.

That much-deserved praise was a balm on the Second Child's heart, for even the dauntless pilot girl, whose hair was now sticking to her sweat-drenched forehead could see that she had not been wholly without tension now that she could feel the adrenaline winding down again. She, too treated herself to a deep, deep breath, though it was more rooted in exhaustion than assuaged fears in her case.

She didn't need long to return to her unshakeable confidence:

“Operation successfully completed! Proceeding to surface.”

Thus, the cables which hung down into the endless depths began to turn and move the other way, bringing Asuka closer to safety with every centimeter that was folded back into the coils that housed them.

Everything had worked out without any real incidents, to the point that it almost seemed too easy.

In the end, everything had worked out without Shinji's participation, or even any need for the counsel that Yui had left him. Perhaps...

Perhaps she was wrong, and the future was not decided at all.
With all the planning and effort that the adults regularly channeled into the operations, it shouldn't be strange to consider that one of these fights could go perfectly well for once – after all, Asuka was a trained pilot, and, for all her flaws, her tendency to panic in unexpected situations was lesser than his own, as one would expect –

It was really not strange that an operation involving her should go a lot smoother than his own attempts to do a job he hadn't been prepared for.

Nonetheless, Shinji barely dared to trust this peace.

“S-Shikinami-san, is everything alright with you?” he asked, still hesitant.

True to form, she showed no weakness: “Of course! What did you expect? Honestly, I probably had an easier time performing this operation than you did sitting up there worrying yourself.”

Now she was trying to reassure him. He should have seen it coming.

It was actually rather cute.

In part because of that, but also for the very uncomplicated reason that he was simply glad to see her doing well enough to be thinking of bragging, a calm and tender smile touched Shinji's face.

“Still...” she continued, apparently feeling safe enough to resume her usual habit of complaining about everything in sight: “This plug suit feels more like a sauna suit right now. I can't wait to get to the hot springs!”

To think that the Third Child was actually glad to hear that nagging tone.

“You can really feel the tension ebbing away.” Dr. Akagi commented, facing her friend with a genuine smile.

“So, you think?”

“Very much so, especially where you're concerned. Don't think I haven't noticed that you were every bit as worried as everyone else during today's operation.”

“Well, more or less... It's just that the stakes were high.”

“None of us want a repeat of Second Impact.”

But exactly when the two women were halfway beginning to relax, a beeping alarm signal immediately knocked them back into their 'business modes'.

Asuka's reaction to the sudden noise was not so elegant: “What's going on here?”

It wasn't long till she could see the reasons for herself – there was no telltale like the ghastly roar that penetrated through the EM cage and molten rock to finally reach her ears.

It was a deep, distorted noise that seemed to surround her completely, but despite the call's monstrous nature, she could not help but notice the bizarre similarity to the wail of a human infant.

Sandalphon, the Angel of the Unborn, had been content to drift in the magma currents of his
infernal cradle that gently rocked him in his long slumber, while his form and his consciousness had been slowly assembling itself from the light of his father, only slowly congealing into the contours of the form that was set to become his soul's dominion.

Roused by a sudden, abrupt moment followed by a gradual, ever-so-subtle change in his surroundings, the young being only now began to fully realize his own existence, and the purpose he had always known about, a goal far beyond the realms that had shaped him.

And now, with that, he was realizing that he could no longer afford to hesitate.

But as the young being longed to spread himself out, he was met with a clear resistance, a sharp-edged restraint even harder than the eggshell he struggled to break out of.

Bending and bulging, the dark ellipsoid’s outer shape began to buckle; Asuka could see how the diffuse, ambiguous limits of the darkness within came to a boil and ultimately went on to fill the light-shaped cuboid to its full capacity.

“It's hatching! Far earlier than we predicted!”

On the monitor, one could see how the archerontic matter swelled and swelled, losing its human-like shape and beginning to manifest some rather different outlines.

Then, the shadow tipped into light, and Sandalphon's birth was imminent.

“Well the cage hold?” Misato asked, already suspecting that her hopes would be in vain.

“A fully grown angel?” Though Hyuuga would have preferred to give any other possible answer, he could not change the truth: “Never.”

In fact, the two barely got the time to conclude that exchange before their situation became apparent: The thin, membrane-like barrier that formed the walls of the cage was first indented from the inside in five different spots as whatever was pushing against the other side increasingly came to resemble a human hand that was desperately reaching for the light.

But what finally broke through had very little in common with anything human, apart from perhaps its five-fold radial symmetry; The appendages instead resembled the tentacles and polyps of ancient times as they snapped at the sweating EVA pilot.

“Abort the capture mission! Drop the cage!”

Asuka wasted no time in ridding herself of the germinating dark seed beneath her, liberating the pincers that were meant to serve as her hands.

She hates being bound to things, particularly those things that could lead her to destruction, and she especially loathed having her hands tied; To begin with, this unwieldy suit allowed only for rather sluggish, inexact movement; If she couldn't bite or scratch, she'd at least need the capacity to kick, scream and hit.
So it was at first a welcome sight to see the cage abscond into the depths freely, its microbe-like “arms” still half poking out.

“The primary goal now is to neutralize the Angel at any price!” Misato ordered. “Asuka! Retreat and get ready for battle!”

“Roger! A real battle is far more to my liking anyways!”

Grinning widely and sure of victory, she allowed herself one vain moment of looking down on the now fully emerged enemy and tried out the pincers at the tips of her arms like one would stretch a limb, before proceeding to reach for her trusty prog knife.

So far, so good, but unfortunately there was a little hole in her plan: The fasteners that were supposed to fix the weapon to her body had been undone by the pressure quite some time ago, leaving her shocked, helpless and completely unarmed.

Still in disbelief, she kept pulling at the control yokes a few times without accomplishing much, while as color was being evicted from her face.

“...Damnit, I've lost the knife... and it's coming straight at me!” she added, barely hiding her fear as a being reminiscent of primitive crustaceans charged towards her.

She didn't have much time left to act, and she knew it.

Things were serious now; This was no longer about impressing anyone, but about saving her bare skin, and when it came to preserving its integrity, her mind and instincts managed to function in a surprisingly effortless unison: “Dropping ballast now!”

As soon as she’d pulled at the control yoke, the chain of black weights around the EVA's hips was blown in two by a strategically placed minor explosive charge and tumbled towards the depths, making the EVA a great deal lighter and allowing it to rise noticeably faster – only just fast enough to evade the angel: “It's fast!”

She tried her best to follow the beast's trajectory, but the volcano which had served as its cradle hid it from view. “This is bad, I've lost sight of it.”

Not to mention that the thing was now free to attack her from every possible direction. But as she was the one hanging from a cable here, she had very little control over her path and was forced into a very predictable ascent toward the surface; The cords that were her lifeline were yet another vulnerability she wished to be unbound from, in the sense that she hated how much she needed it.

But even if one repressed or overlooked these things, her opinion about her current situation could not be a rosy one: “... This is just great. That thing's gone, I can barely see anything, it's hot, this suit is full of sweat, and I still look like a beached whale.”

This situation desperately needed to be changed – a thought which Misato thankfully shared, so that she tried to remedy Asuka's sore lack of instruments with which to transfer her frustrations to the angel with one of her creative solutions: “Asuka? Shinji is going to throw unit 01's prog knife down to you. Try to catch it!”

“Understood. – Throw it already!”
Shinji did not need to be told this another time – It was bad enough that he'd been stuck up there by himself, unable to do anything, even if having to switch from being a mere spectator to giving one's 100% was easier said than done.

There was no time for further deliberations – He simply took the knife in his hand and slammed it downwards with all the strength he could muster with a thundering battlecry.

But even if one used the Evangelion's superhuman strength to accelerate the knife to a considerable speed, it would still need at least 40 seconds to make its way to Asuka's position, which only reminded everybody present of just how far down in the jaws of hell she really was – alone with a monster that, according to the technicians' reports, was drawing ever closer toward her.

The Second Child's screams pulled on everybody's nerves with the strenght of twenty locomotives: “Ahh! Stay away! Come on, sink faster!”

The creature extended its tentacles toward her and brought them in position to attack – She managed to grasp the prog knife just fast enough to fend off one of the angel's tentacled 'arms' – but unfortunately, the beast possessed two of those and grasped for the EVA's right leg with the second one, on which it pulled and yanked, apparently unwilling to give up until the material that was already overburdened by the pressure and the head finally gave way and began to crackle beneath its unyielding grasp.

Asuka didn't know if the creature had reasons to expect the head to be a weak spot, let alone how it would know those, but once it had opened its maw, unleashing a wriggling mess of teeth and feeder tendrils, it immediately clamped down on the EVA's head like a suction cup;

She could not suppress nor hide the shudder that passed through her body – The beast appeared to be sucking on her, almost like... a baby...

Oversized deep sea shrimp were not supposed to do that, dammit!

Either way, the two intertwined giant's twisting brawl had turned into a battle of three fronts, which was very clearly being dominated by the angel – While the Second Child and her EVA could not even exist down here without great difficulty, Sandalphon was wholly in his element here and able to move freely – Right here, at the heart of the volcano.

The astonishing adaptability of the angel wasn't lost on the people in the command center: “How can it afford to open its mouth in an environment like that?” Dr. Akagi wondered, thinking out loud. Her assistant shared her disbelief: “It's internal composition must be... straight up impossible...”

“Is it because it developed down here?” Mitsurugi speculated.

His reaction to what they'd been presented with on the screens was somewhat calmer but not by much. Angels... even though he had more experience than most concerning what they were capable of, they still continued to baffle him. They were almost like forces of nature, as if it were the mountain and the lava themselves whom they were opposing...

In the end, it had probably been sheer hubris to assume that it was possible to contain them...which made it harder and harder for him to shake off the certitude that there would come a day where he would have to pay for what he had done in his desperation.

In any case, the matter that comprised Sandalphon was significantly more robust than that of EVA
02’s helmet, which creaked and groaned under the strain of the angel's mandibles. The Evangelion was about to be broken apart like a toothpick.

Asuka sought to attack the creature with her knife, but though it drew sparks, it caused no wounds, and by then, the second tentacle-arm had broken the protective casing around the EVA's leg like a disappointing toy, forcing her to jettison it in order to maintain the seal on its remaining body.

Now, she was reduced to three limbs all of which were about equally vulnerable to the angel's assault – Sandalphon merely needed to decide which part of her he desired to crush next. But Asuka had long since forbidden herself to even consider herself as helpless and canalized the pain she felt in her real leg and her contorted face into her next strike with which she finally intended to pierce the creature’s hide to drive her blade deep into its flesh – but it just refused to work, no matter how frenziedly she kept stabbing at the being, even when she targeted its flatfish-like eyes.

The knife on which they had pinned all of their hopes was simply insufficient to break her out of the monster's chokehold, and the oozing gorge which had enveloped EVA 02’s head made her feel like her head was about to crack like a raw egg.

She was on her own, beneath an indescribable thickness of rock and lava that enclosed her in all conceivable directions, separating her from everything else that was alive – It was like an ironic form of hell devised to give her in a literal manner the separation from others that she had always craved – and yet, she wished nothing more than for someone to burst the shackles of nature’s laws and come for her, taking all her pain away.

“Extreme heat and extreme pressure... If the angel can withstand those so easily... then it's barely surprising that the prog knife is ineffective.” Dr. Akagi concluded.

“...but... if that is so, is there anything left that can save us now?” Hyuuga asked, voice tinted with the earliest symptoms of despair.

Everything seemed lost.

Shinji awaited the wave of panic he would expect to wash over him any time soon, but, it didn't come. It was as if he were merely observing the danger from a far-off place, his thoughts otherwise remaining surprisingly normal... normal enough for his own calm to almost frighten him but, that too, only in a distant way.

It sounded cold, but such situations were almost a common occurrence in his life now.

Asuka was about to get smashed, and he felt about as far away from it as the physically was as if his true essence hat been put away to some place where it was packed in cotton from all directions.

And there, in the midst of that unnatural clarity, it was very easy to remember.

Asuka had explained it to him herself earlier, hadn't she? And, Yui mentioned it too! The thought that someone like him would keep his nerves in a situation where a person like Asuka who was prepared, trained and generally much better at this did not felt distinctly wrong in an uncanny way – maybe it was just because he still wasn't down there in the midst of it.

What was there left to save them now? Well, once he'd thought of the answer to that question, it looked painfully obvious in hindsight: “Physics!”
That was all Asuka needed to understand. Of course it was. Knowing what to do next and how to go about it in a swift, aggressive manner was the rule for her, not the exception like it was for him. Or perhaps, it was an aftereffect of the synchronization training, for once again, it appeared like their minds had been one for a moment, even through tons of molten rock.

“Right, exactly! Thermal expansion!” she replied – and leave it to her to convert that insight into a plan in a matter of seconds.

Without hesitation, she reached for the next available coolant duct, tore it off from her body and stuffed into into the angel's throat, squeezing it in alongside the Evangelion's beleaguered head, reacting only with a fierce warrior-like scream when the heat inside the plug suddenly swelled up with alarming speed – it could barely be conceptualized as 'heat' anymore, it was more like a heavy, crushing wave which made it hard to breathe and drove the sweat out of her body as if her pores had become fountains and sprinklers.

But the agony merely fueled her zeal and become the energy with which she continued her merciless assault: “Take that!”

The angel's teeth lodged themselves in the heat shielding of the arm she was using to force the coolant down the angel's throat, but she merely ignored the boiling-hot pain and the creaking of her armor.

She'd been complaining all day long, but in this moment of desperation it became rather apparent that she ultimately didn't care that much about her personal comforts and frivolities – all that truly counted was victory. “Quickly! Pump all of the remaining coolant through duct number three!” she ordered, well aware that this would likely serve to seal her own fate as much as the angel's.

The creature itself twitched like a beached fish as all of the coolant duct's internal pressure empties itself into its innermost, a stinging cold the likes of which it had never known.

It didn't get the opportunity to even realize what hit it before it crumbled up and imploded mere minutes after it had hatched, leaving behind a tall, cross-shaped pillar of light that pierced the surface, sprinkling the inner walls of the ravines with bloody splotches of lava.

Eva 01 barely managed to dodge one of the glowing drops, the provisional command center was shaken by tremors and everybody inside it was forced to hang onto whatever they could grasp.

The liquid the angel decomposed boiled over in mere seconds, ascending to the surface in the form of gaseous bubbles that sprayed refracting droplets into the air as they burst, creating a small rainbow inside the volcanic crater:

The angel was defeated.

But it had been a narrow, unglamorous victory, for in its doomed last-ditch effort to preserve its own life, the angel had used the last of its strength to rip the coolant ducts apart.

The angel's attack came too late to avert its own destruction, but as it seemed, it would succeed at dragging the girl who had conquered it along on its path to the underworld – the creature's destruction had come at the cost of their remaining coolant reserves, and the torn ducts and cabled
that formed the girl's lifeline were just about to rip for good.

She'd interrupted the coolant supply of her armor in favor of flooding the angel, and now, after that the shock wave from its destruction had inflicted further dents on her much-abused protective shielding, the pressure and heat that it had warded off so far had their free reign with her;

The metal that made up the ugly, unwieldy armor bent and imploded, clamping closely onto the Evangelion's body, the glass of her visor broke and the interface rapidly filled up with glitches and error messages.

“I've defeated the enemy...” she quietly spoke to herself, oddly calm as the scope of her own words was buffered and muffled by shock and disbelief: “...but... it's all over now...”

Then, the last fibers of rubber holding the coolant ducts together finally snapped in two, and Asuka could only stare, wide eyed, as she lost all support and fell into the darkness, tumbling helplessly towards realms the light of day would never touch.

One thing that Shinji had always found repulsive about Asuka was her childishness, her stubborn refusal to understand the severity of their crushing burdens; That she'd actually be willing to give her life in order to save the lives of everyone else on this world – his own included – was not something he'd have thought possible. The hard, unmitigated reality of what had just happened hit him like a slap across the face whose harsh intensity even pressed a few tears from his eyes.

And then, nothing could hold him back, as if all the gates and misty veils inside his head had become transparent like glass, and he knew, without further doubts or hesitation, what he must do now.

Even if it felt like being roasted alive in boiling oil.

*You'll have to jump in completely if you want to save her. Hang onto the cable with one hand as you jump in case it comes loose from the shock.*

He had to protect her, if not for anything else, then because she'd gone in his stead.

(Not to speak of his other reasons. )

Asuka's downward plunge ceased with a sudden recoil-related shock, but then, she hung there, dangling but safe, held by a strong, firm hand.

Facing up, she encountered not the eyes of death, but those of a titanic Evangelion whose eyes were clearly glowing – without doubt, the same instincts and emotions that had allowed him to act this fast had also caused a spike in his synchronization rate.

The EVA's bare standard armor was glowing in places – even the most green of beginners could not have been connected to that EVA without enduring hellish torment –

And yet, he kept hanging onto her arm as if it were his own life that depended on it.
“Daddy's boy?!” she called out, as if she had forgotten that the words were ever meant to be an insult.

On her lips, a thin yet warm smile took shape –

No mean-spirited smirk, no plastic barbie megawatt grin, but a simple, genuine smile of the sort that had not be seen on her for a very long time.

“You dummy, you're just doing this to show off.”

But the accusation lacked its fire, the insult was little more than an affectionate nickname.

Honestly, it ought to bother her that he had saved her; If it were her, she would be gloating about this right now, scolding him for his foolishness; She ought to scold him right now, reason be damned, to maintain at least the appearance of not needing any help – Sure, tomorrow he would say to herself that she simply owed him a favor she would have to return, and regard all of that as being his fault, but not now –

For now, she allowed a certain warm, fuzzy redness to fill her cheeks.

The boys' deed had spoken directly to that fragile, lonely, long-denounced little shard of her soul that wanted nothing more than to be saved and protected.

This was probably the exact moment when Captain Shikinami Asuka Langley experienced her first crush, or at least, the first one to be attached to a real person and not one of her own ideas meant to praise herself;

It was the first time in very long that she'd actually welcomed, accepted and appreciated the help of another, even if it was only for a moment, the first moment in which she even remotely considered that somebody might be worthy of her – The strong, mysterious man who had protected her in this situation and stood at her side in battle; The friendly, gentle boy who still tried to be her friend in spite of her spines and edges, giving her hope that perhaps, she might be able to be strong even without her facade.

Yes, it might have been correct to say that this was the precise instant she came to have an attachment to him in particular beyond wanting attention wherever she could get it;

But what stole her breath and heated her cheeks was not strictly speaking the power of love, which became rather apparent once her field of vision began to flicker and was swiftly swallowed by the darkness.

---

“Shikinami-san! Shikinami-san! Please wake up, Shikinami-san! Please... open your eyes!”

“H...hm?”

When she woke up, she didn't really register much of the provisional sick bay that had been
assembled for her in the vicinity of the command pavilion. She barely even noticed that she'd been cut out of her plugsuit and covered with cool, water-drenched towels atop a camping mat. Not even the infusion inserted into the crook of her right arm in order to resupply her with water and electrolytes truly reached her consciousness.

Instead, her attention fell upon the boy who knelt right next to the afore-mentioned mat, leaning over her and seemingly overjoyed to see the blue of her eyes.

Right now, he was all she could see.

He'd pulled off his own plugsuit until just below the navel so that another cold, wet towel could be draped over his now naked shoulders.

His chest wasn't particularly muscular or otherwise impressive, but it was exactly what she wanted to see right now.

“Shikinami-san! I'm so glad you're okay!”

In any other situation, she might have complained that he hadn't at least cradled her in his arms, her lack of clothing or how men weren't supposed to cry even if it was out of joy –

But right now, she didn't have the strength for that, so he would have to content with the tired but genuine smile she sent his way.

“It's fine, Third Child, it's not like they had to operate on me...”

Later she would learn that she'd been somewhat overheated and mildly dehydrated, and that she'd remained passed out for about half an hour because of that – Shinji himself had required a sizeable dose of painkillers after the stunt he'd pulled, but had then refused to leave her side until she'd woken up.

As she'd recounted that, Misato had asked Asuka if she didn't find it cute and taken that opportunity to tease her a little about it.

“Such nonsense!” the German pilot commented after she'd emptied the bottle of mineral water which her guardian had previously handed her in order to combat the effects of the heat. “As if such a little bit of heat would be enough to bring me down! That idiotic idiot got all worked up over nothing.”

Misato merely smiled and determined that they had both more than earned their trip to the hot springs.

---

“Nagato...?”

“Dad? Is that you?”

“Is this a bad time? I wouldn't want to interrupt you if you're busy with your friends right now...”
“You're not ever 'interrupting' me dad. You know I'm always glad to hear from you. We're on a bus right now, driving back to our hostel.”

“Then you must have spent the day diving course?”

“Yes we did. Is there a reason why you're calling?”

“Oh, that's... not really. It's nothing. I was just missing you. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry about everything...”

The person on the other end of the phone line appeared to be struggling to master their emotional state.

“Dad...? What's the matter? What are you apologizing for?”

“Nothing in particular. I just wanted to hear your voice; We might just narrowly have averted the end of the world.”

The elder Mitsurugi sounded a lot more steadied them, almost back to his usual jovial self.

“Does this mean there was another angel attack? Is Ikari-kun alright?”

“As far as I've heard, yes. The commander ought to be very proud of the boy, he's a real gentleman. At least when it comes to rescuing damsels in distress.”

“...damsels in distress?” Nagato asked, disbelievingly.

“It's a long story. Let me start from the beginning...”

---

“For real? Oh man! Shinji gets to be a hero while we have to bake in the sun up here.”

As Mitsurugi Nagato came to discover, he wasn't the only one who didn't quite understand why everyone else was so crazy about the heat and the sunlight – His reservations were shared by none other than Kensuke.

So, he simply smiled.

Touji and especially Kensuke spent some time grilling him with questions about the battle, until the former somehow diverted the topic of the conversation towards Hikari’s brand new tankini (which landed him much widespread disapproval when she showed up with a bunch of her friends to ask Nagato about Asuka.)

“Hey, at least it sounds like the two of them didn't spend the week being bored.” Touji surmised, eventually concluding the conversation. “If what you say is right, they should be enjoying themselves in a hot spring just about now.”

----
Indeed, the pilots did indeed end up going on that promised trip to the hot springs, once they had been provided with adequate amounts of rest and liquid.

But before the Third Child could go about peeling off the school uniform he'd only donned just a little earlier, he heard someone announcing a special delivery that was apparently intended for 'the people from NERV' –

First, there was a postcard of Tokyo 3 above whose motif the words “the world is wrong” had been scrawled in red ink. On its backside, there was a block of writing announcing a date, a time, and a place.

But he could worry about that later.

Not now. For now, he deserved a little bit of relaxation.

Then, there was a package that was supposedly from Kaji.

As he went about unpacking it and casually wondered what it could be (His first guess was some sort of a gift for Misato), he distantly concluded that it was a pity how PenPen wasn't with them now that they'd have an opportunity to visit a real hot spring or once.

His surprise was all the greater when the bird in question burst from the package as soon as he'd pulled up its lid, immediately looking around for the hot bath which Kaji had doubtlessly promised him – This somewhat... unconventional strategy rather suited the cool, stubble-faced man.

And hey, now he'd have a little bit of company in the men's section.

"The hot springs are this way," he advised the penguin.

----

As expected, PenPen was rather enthusiastic about this opportunity and swam across in the hot spring with relish – which didn't mean that his flatmate had nothing to enjoy here. After his experience with the volcano, he had initially doubted if he'd ever use the words 'pleasantly' and 'warm' in the same sentence again, but all it took to change his mind was a cozy hot spring.

"This feels like heaven!" he decided. "I never thought that a hot bath could feel so good..."

Gone were the dark thoughts that would tend to follow him into the tub back when he'd first moved in with Misato. He was far too exhausted to bother with them, and for that, the warm water's relaxing effects had proven to be an excellent remedy.

He'd deserved this today (insofar as he was bold enough to say that he deserved anything), after all, this had been what by almost every standard could be called a successful day, even if it had not seemed all that promising when it first began – He'd finally managed to memorize at least some of that physics stuff, contributed a helpful idea to the angel's defeat, and had even managed to save Asuka's life – She'd smiled at him, too, so who knows, perhaps she was actually starting to like him... or at least, to not-hate him.
Perhaps, there was still hope.

“Hey Shinji!”

When Misato’s voice pulled him from his thoughts, Shinji couldn't keep the cloth he'd placed on his head as a further contact with the warm water from slipping into the pool below.

“Could you please throw us the shampoo?”

“Our ran out.” Asuka explained.

“Uh... alright, here it comes.”

Unfortunately, Shinji's throw of the shampoo bottle did not prove as successful as his earlier attempt with he prog knife.

“OUCH! Careful where you're throwing that, you klutz!”

So much for getting Asuka to like him.

“Sorry...”

“Geez! You've hit me on my most sensitive spots!”

“Ohh, let me see!” Misato offered – and apparently did not wait for any sort of agreement from Asuka's end.

“Ahh! That tickles!”

“Oh, but you have such soft skin, Asuka~”

“It still tickles!”

“Oh, really? And what about here? Or here?”

“Don't touch it!”

“Aww, why not? It's not like you'll lose anything!”

While both ladies appeared to be having a lot of fun, Shinji made the mistake of spending a little too long thinking about where exactly he might have hit Asuka. His all too concrete picturing of what the girls might be doing lead to some increased blood flow to the skin of his face, as well as to... other parts.

Let's just say that both Asuka and Misato were rather attractive individuals.

Far too busy with his futile attempts to banish the products of his all to lively imagination into a small corner of his skull, the boy only noticed their... result when his feathered flatmate threw him a curious glance.

He was swift as the wind in hiding himself beneath the water's surface all the way until just below his nose, though this was only a partial realization of his true wish to abscond into the depths of the planet. Where were those volcanoes when you actually needed them for a change?
“Thermal expansion... hehe... how embarassing...”

So yeah. Living with all these attractive single ladies could really be exhausting at times... Asuka, Misato... Rei too, though she wasn't present at the moment.

But regardless, they were probably still the three best things to ever happen to him and he'd continue giving it his all to keep them safe.

---

While their male flatmate was still cursing the fact that they'd gone to visit a hot rather than a cold spring, the two ladies had since concluded their games (that, in reality, had been rather more innocent than Shinji had imagined them to be.), and even gotten around to actually use the bottle of shampoo which had caused the entire mess.

Ultimately, they ended up seated on the rocks at the edge of the springs, paddling around in the warm water after they'd sufficiently washed and dried themselves, covered only in a towel (in Misato's case) and an interface headset (In Asuka's.)

Now that she'd been given a chance to get a closer look at them, Asuka war forced to admit that Misato's 'chest' outsized hers a lot further than she'd previously thought, which did make her worry about how that might affect her already meager chances with Kaji (and, though she'd never admit it, a certain other member of their household)

But then she noted something else, a long, leathery scar as wide as her thumb running down from the valley of her chest down onto her ribs. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed it.

“Uhm... I've always wondered...”

“You mean the scar? It's something like a little memento from Second Impact.”

Mildly affected, Asuka directed her gaze into the distance.

The scars of the past, eh?

A memento? She couldn't help but think of the hand puppet that she'd brought with her despite all her loathing.

“I suppose you know... about me...”

“It's a part of my job to know. But don't worry. All of that was a long, long time ago, right?”

Yes, it was. Or at least, it should have been.

---

Yet even if he'd taken the time to celebrate, it was ultimately impossible for Shinji to leave his pains and fears behind for very long, not any more than he could blot out the knowledge of his
heavy burden and his cruel duty.

There could be no better proof than his presence here –

At the exact same place which Yui had specified on her post card, the very same street corner where they had met the times before.

He had not forgotten her warnings.

Thus, he stood across from her in the light of the rising moon, his hair whipped by the cool evening wind before it had had the opportunity to dry completely.

Despite its scarcity, the time before his arrival here had been enough for him to reach a conclusion as to what he wanted to say next.

“Yui...” he began, opening and closing his hand as he often did when he attempted to squeeze something like determination out of himself. “I want you to tell me what I need to know for the next battle.”

If it was possible to know, then he had to grasp the opportunity, he had to know what it was possible to know even if it was just a little.

It it would help him to protect Asuka, Misato and Rei, he couldn't afford not to, even if that meant having to shoulder the burden of that knowledge. If it was necessary for that, he'd even bear it gladly.

“Let me think...” Yui thought for a bit, but soon broke out in a smile, as if she'd come to remember some kind of amusing incident. Or perhaps, she was simply glad that he was beginning to trust her.

“The next battle will probably be the one with the power outage. That's one of the easier ones.

Asuka is going to think of a plan, so all you have to do is follow it. And don't worry. This will be one of those rare cases where shooting works.”

1. Well, there goes our first story arc; On with the next. See you all in chapter 2.09: [The First Impression], wherein the Hard Life Of Shinji Ikari continues.

2. Yes, we may be seeing the trailer version of EVA 08 somewhere down the line. Which is not to say that canon!Eva 08 will not show up, but it'll probably have a different number because Nadia has given me a fetish for infinity symbols.

3. References to certain Orcish battle cries are wholly intentional. Horde ftw

4. Just to clarify/ avoid misunderstandings, because people often get shit about this: There are many perfectly valid reasons not to want children. But with Asuka there's reason to suspect that her warped experiences with Kyoko somehow played into it. And let's face it there are some objectively scary things about babymaking, at least in the sense than anything can be made to sound gross depending on how you look at it. I was mostly inspired by the creepy fetus-like brief flashing images in ep 22's mindrape scene and how they imply that there's
some fundamental revulsion going on beyond what would be proportional – my main goal was to make the venture into the dark depths on the Earth feel like a trip into the gloomy dark subconscious
What is love but the strangest of feelings?
A sin you swallow for the rest of your life?
You've been looking for someone to believe in
To love you until your eyes run dry
She lives on disillusion row
We go where the wild blood flows
On our bodies we share the same scar
Love me, wherever you are
How do you love with a fate full of rust?
How do you turn what the savage tame?
You've been looking for someone you can trust
To love you, again and again
How do you love in a house without feelings?
How do you turn what the savage tame?
I've been looking for someone to believe in
Love me, again and again
She lives by disillusion's glow
We go where the wild blood flows
On our bodies we share the same scar
How do you love on a night without feelings?
She says, love, I hear sound, I see fury
She says, love's not a hostile condition
Love me, wherever you are
It was a little more than an ordinary dream, and a little less than a vision.

Much like a regular dream, it started with the harmless memory of an everyday scene, unremarkable enough to be confused for reality.

Shinji found himself walking down the edge of a street he regularly passed through on his way to school, ear buds plugged in, gaze clouded by somber thoughts that acted as a veil between him and the cheerfulness that bright sunlight typically tended to induce in most people.

So far, it was a simple, ordinary occurrence that he lived through almost every day. He was merely a single, unassuming figure amid the large crowd moving through Tokyo-3's lively sidewalks.

But by the time he'd reached the road bridge that he tended to cross on his way to school, the dream had already begun to diverge from the rails of reality:

His gaze that had so far been lowered shifted upward, and his cobalt blue eyes widened to make room for the fear and awe that took possession of them, suddenly, yet leisurely, like a slowed-down video clip of eyes blinking.

Up there, exactly where the stairs ended, he was faced by a formidable apparition that had every fiber of his being shaking.

It took the shape of a young man, his entire form cast in sharp, profound shadows.

He stood astride, his fists clenched, his posture upright, his short, dark hair whipped by the wind, staring down at the boy below with firmness and determination as an angry spirit might.

His skin hung off his flesh like tattered cloth, and by itself, the sight of the muscles, sinews and bones that were so exposed was enough to drive a cold shiver down the boy's spine like some kind of glutinous, viscous syrup that did not merely flow down and vanish, but left behind a clear trail of residual chill.

And yet, the young man up there did not seem the least bit ashamed or hampered by his mangled appearance; On the contrary, he made no move to conceal it, but wore it proudly as a mark of his decision and a testament to the will that burned in his eyes and indeed glowed there so strongly that they appeared to shine with some inner crimson light.

He had the sort of eyes that you only needed to look into once to understand that this person had never done a single thing that he didn't want to do –

Up there was power beyond the boy's wildest dreams, condensed into form, the power he needed to wield in order to accomplish the things he cared about, abhorrent, terrifying, dangerous power.
Cowed and swallowed, he looked up at it, terror and adulation warring in his gaze, crossing blades in silence; No sound, no sigh of that wild turmoil crossed into the outside world.

The inner butchery had only allowed for fearful hesitation, fearful swallowing, or the uneasy shifting of weight from one leg to the other, and not much more, until the conflict would be over and the course decided, while the dazed remainder of him that was still capable of distantly perceiving the outer world was not enough to resist the hypnotic magnetism exuded by the young man's frame.

Unable to tear his gaze from the top of the stairs, he began to climb the steps one after another as if in a trance, even after the escalator had begun to run backwards and a fierce wind began to blow against him ever stronger, a sheer wall of air intent on blocking his path the more eagerly he climbed towards the terrifying darkness.

The wind tousled his hair, and somehow managed to open some buttons on his uniform jacket in order to whip against his bare chest, until an even stronger wave of wind nearly threw him off the escalator, ripping the ear buds from his ears and taking his trusty music player along with it, blowing it into the sky before he even had the chance to reach for it.

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Tracking the cherished memento with his eyes, he was too shaken by its sudden loss to notice how, in that very moment, the movements had stopped and the winds had ceased.

The path before him was clear, but now that he had lost what had once been his supposed protection against the loud and vigorous burning of the wind, he might as well have been in the midst of a featureless desert.

Deeply daunted and feeling very exposed, he no longer knew what to do and stood there motionless, paralyzed by his fear.

He wanted to turn back, but he was too afraid to turn that same back at the thing at the top of the stairs.

There may have been the beginnings of an attempt to escape by walking backwards, but before the first step to that could be taken, its direction reversed, and his face became the mirror of a determination that would not allow for him not to advance.

Without further effort, he now climbed the remaining stairs with firm steps, one after another.

By the time the young man reached the top, he casually wondered about the shivering, hesitant boy that stood (or had stood?) down at the bottom of the stairs, recalling a tear-stained face with dark blue eyes – but even then, he single-mindedly continued on his path, not taking as much as a second to look back.

---

Exhausted from all the running, Yui had no choice but to allow herself a brief breather, coming to a standstill while leaning against the wall. The shoes she had acquired were proving rather uncomfortable, and she could practically fear the sun and summer heat bearing down on her head
and neck like a physical weight.

It did cost a bit of willpower to raise her head.

As of now, she'd been roaming the city for quite a while, by day and by night, always on the run, always checking all possible hiding places, and always, always, without result.

The entity she sought... 'Leatha', if she had already been classified as such, was about the only thing she could never expect to find in the same place. That being knew every bit as much if she did, if not more, and it surely knew that she would be hunting for it.

But whatever she might know, Yui was still a single, simple girl... how could she hope to find something that even NERV security with all its resources had failed to locate.

Perhaps it was time for her to accept that her undertaking had been hopeless from the beginning.

No. She owed it to her father to keep fighting until the end, at the very least, even if it was futile. And wasn't everything, ever?

Her gaze turned toward the sky.

The power outage – if it was even going to appear in this version of the events – was taking it sweet time. She wondered if the instructions she had left to Shinji would be of any use to him in the end. In her thoughts, she went over past versions of the event. She hadn't told him how he usually managed to claw into the walls of the main shaft in order to protect both his co-pilots from falling to their deaths – Usually, he managed this just fine without any prompting, and she'd learned the hard way that it would be important not to tell him every single tiny detail, to ensure that he would not attribute his every victory to her little 'tips' – She wanted to use this stage of the events to boost his self-confidence, in part because she cared about him and didn't like to see him suffering, but also because she knew that he would dearly need it once the truly problematic battles began... Until then, she would need to win his trust through her tips and advice about the future, to ensure that he would listen to her in certain critical moments...

The very thought that she would need to win his trust in the first place sounded absurd and reminded her of just how lonely she felt, all alone in a world in which she was never supposed to exist.... for all their similarities, the boy she had been talking with was not the Shinji Ikari she had once come to know....

What else could she do? Warn the people of NERV about the power outage or the angel? She'd already tried all of that and it never lead to anything good, at least not long-term. In the end, everything had turned out more complicated, more chaotic, and above all, worse. The same was true for the people that were currently working on Unit 04 – She knew what was about to happen, but she didn't think she could stop it. There had not been a single time when she had successfully averted that particular debacle, at least not without further unpleasant consequences or the presence of other aberrant mitigating factors; It had been a long, long time since she'd come to accept that she could not solve all the problems in this world and would do well to focus on her objective without interfering too much with the sequence of events; But now that she knew that this would be her final chance, the weight of the lives she'd be unable to save weighed heavily on her shoulders.

“Hey, you! What are you doing in a place like this?”
Oh no. Two men. Police officers.

Of course. 'Leatha' wasn't the only one who might think of such abandoned warehouses as a good hiding place, the same was true for common thieves or drug dealers, which made it a sensible move to have the authorities check on these areas now and then.

“Hey, Taniguchi, doesn't that kid look familiar to you?”

“Yes she does. She matches the exact description of that girl that escaped from a hospital not too long ago...”

Damnit. Knowing well that her chances weren't especially grand, Yui nonetheless turned around and ran as fast as her legs would let her.

At the very least, she had to try;

Even if she would most likely lose, she wouldn't allow herself to be caught without a fight.

----

“This is it?”

“Yes, Commander.” Dr. Akagi confirmed, proudly tapping the top of the metal cylinder whose opened front was turned to face the commander.

Dissatisfied, she noted that the side of the hatch was still encrusted with stains of a dried, brown substance here and there, just morsels of the same sort that were still stuck under some of her fingernails despite her best efforts at precautions.

You’d have had to take a closer look to notice them, unless you had the practiced, scrutinizing glance of a researcher.

She hoped that her superior would overlook these spots much like she had when it was still the same, alarming red as as the varnish that covered the nondescript, cylindrical device, its shape almost perfectly geometrical and feature-starved save for the two buttons that needed to be pressed at once to open it up, two leather straps that allowed for it to be carried like a backpack, and some ports for screens and the like.

Its casing consisted of two symmetrical halves that could be folded apart like a book, and right now, it was wide open for purposes of demonstration, allowing the commander to peer inside.

“This is it. These are the fruits of 'Project Kronos',”

“Is it ready for use?”

“Theoretically, yes, but given the nature of the base material, I would prefer to run extensive tests before we begin the hunt for our escaped test subject. So far, it seems to be going remarkably well, considering the limitations posed by the attrition rate of the primary components. “

“Then do so.”

“Yes, Sir.” Akagi applied as she closed the casing of her invention. On second glance, she noticed
the red streaks that this had left upon the commander's desk.

“My apologies. I'll take care of it.”

---

She had opened the little plastic flap on the back of the seat before her to use it as a table, but the wobbly piece of plastic with a round indentation for securing drinks fell rather short of a stable surface.

Yes, she could put the book that she'd brought for her long train ride on top of it, but when she'd try to read it, the letters would spin and wobble before her eyes: The mild but persistent motions of the train made them more likely to cause her a headache than a pleasant reading experience.

And even when the train came to a standstill, it would do so only briefly, so that it was hardly worth bothering to open up her book.

Thus, it remained untouched on the previously mentioned plastic table, while her pale fingers rested uselessly in her lap.

Of course, she could also have chosen a bench of seats that was facing another with a far more stable plastic table in between, but she didn't have the courage.

There were only four such tables in the carriage, and if someone were to sit across her... if, perhaps, their legs or arms were to brush against each other, or, if she were to inadvertently take up too much space on the table...

No, she much preferred to stay right where she was, hidden away in some unremarkable little corner of the carriage, sitting directly by the window so she could feel the cool glass on her shoulder and feel safe in the small space between all three adjacent barriers.

She didn't like to be seen by others.

Her quiet, hesitant voice was not made for the ears of hurried people, nor was her body fit for their gazes... Even she did not like to look upon herself, but the faded, minimally-present reflection of her face in the window would never disappear for good, always present as a subtle, ghostly overlay over the images of the passing landscape, unless they were going through a tunnel.

That was particularly bad, because then, her reflection would become the only thing that could be seen.

She didn't want to see herself, nor anyone else.

She was so tired of everything, especially herself.

The train was going to Tokyo-3.

In these hard times, their father had decided to continue his search for work in that dangerous city that everyone was now fleeing from. It was only natural that the fleeing people would leave many vacancies in their wake... in particular, that mysterious organization called 'NERV', of which little
was known besides the open secret that it operated in Tokyo-3, was always looking for those few brave people who would be willing to live and work in a city that habitually turned into a war zone in exchange for generous compensation in both perks and monetary form.

So much for her father's reason to move here, but the silent, bookish girl couldn't really say what she was doing here. She didn't want to do her father an injustice, given how he worked day in, day out to support his daughter – but it was precisely for that reason that he seldom saw her, to the point that they could barely be considered a part of each other's lives.... besides, she couldn't really blame her father for eschewing her company. All she was to him now was a painful reminder of her mother and his anger at how she had left them both...

Or did he, in fact, blame his daughter for the fate that had befallen his beloved wife?

She did not know, but she did know that she could not expect her father to alleviate her loneliness.

Or anyone else, for that matter.

It was always the same, no matter where the winds of life would take her. What did it matter if the people surrounding her continued to change, if she'd never have the courage to speak to any of them? She wouldn't be surprised if most of the kids in her old class had never even noticed that she had been there to begin with –

Wherever she would go, by the time she had to leave, not a single person would be there to see her off at the train station.

And with each day that went by like this, she was growing more and more weary of it all. She'd had more than enough of this world, and of herself. And who knew, perhaps, she would soon find relief...

She could not glance at her pallid, porcelain fingers without contemplating how she'd always been rather feeble, and as of lately... well, she felt like the life was slowly but surely being sucked out of her as if drained by some kind of vampiric parasite.

The closer she came to her destination, the more she felt the urge to go lie down somewhere.

Who knew, perhaps, this might be the last time she'd be moving to another city.

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After the battle with the ninth angel, the Children had found remainder of their free week to be a rather welcome break, although the time that they could spend in the pool, on their beds or with any other leisure activities was limited by Misato's occasional threats of extra chores or cuts to their allowances, usually accompanied by a wicked grin and a school book being waved in their faces.

Shinji was fairly conscientious about getting to work, and in time, even Asuka began to see reason, though the reason likely had more to do with her pride than any real sense of responsibility. Even so, she would not suffer any more bad grades.

When school finally started back up on the following Monday, Shinji was well aware that there were still substantial gaps in his knowledge, but at least, he now had a rough idea of what the
Contrary to his expectations, he had also been spared being the only one who couldn't join in on the newest topics of discussion, though this wasn't exactly good news to the Children – For the reason that they were not all busy conversing about all the exciting happenings of their class trips that those had long since become old news: Since most of the students' parents worked at NERV, a few of them must have casually mentioned the tale of Asuka's mission and Shinji's 'heroic rescue' to their kids.

The student body's opinions on this were mixed – Some found the prospect that both the widely swooned-over EVA pilots might soon be taken (by each other) fairly encouraging, hoping that some of the opposite sex' attention might finally be left over for them; Others meanwhile sighed in resignation, burying their hopes that they might one day claim one of the pilots' hearts for themselves... the one thing they all seemed to agree on was that the simply fact that Shinji had prevented Asuka from plummeting to a fiery Death somehow implied that they were now a couple... or at least, that it would be terribly funny to tease them relentlessly about that possibility. To both their frustration.

That there may or may not have been a tidbit of truth in there only made it worse.

Even with his friends, Shinji could not seem to find any respite: “Shame on you! Fraternizing with the enemy while we were away! I expected better of you, you traitor!” Kensuke joked. “I knew it! The first time I caught you in pair look, I might still have believed you, but three strikes and you're out!”

“Shikinami can't even stand me.” Shinji retorted, mentally chastising himself for the transparently wistful tone and what it may imply of his wishes regarding that situation.

This, however, did not diminish Touji's grin by any means, but rather broadened it: “Don't you worry. They always puck on the ones they like. Even the happiest of couples have the occasional lover's quarrel.“

The sheer amount of giggling that followed this comment immediately cemented the 'lover's quarrel' part as an ongoing running gag, nay, a runaway meme that spread through the student body like a wave of the common cold. Even Nagato, who rarely participated in juvenile jests, disdained gossip and had previously apologized for carelessly spreading the tale of the battle's events, pulled him aside in a quiet moment to inform Shinji that he had nothing to be ashamed of and that Asuka couldn't be that bad – Shinji chose to interpret this as a somewhat clumsy attempt at humor on Nagato's part.

He was neither experienced nor good at it.

It was probably redundant to state that Asuka herself wasn't too pleased either and growing rather annoyed with the chatter that she kept hearing out of every nook and cranny in the school building or being whispered behind her back, and needless to specify that a lot of that displeasure was vented upon Shinji.

But one thing about gossip was that it did not have a terribly long half-life, particularly since the pilots were doing little to feed the rumors by failing to act anything like a couple, and though Touji would still occasionally tease them about the 'lover's quarrel' as it was his sword duty as the class jester, their classmates soon found something else to palaver about after the rumors ran their course, and before they had reached the middle of the week, some semblance of normalcy had returned to their lives, both at school and in the Katsuragi Household.
That also meant that they had returned to their old morning routine: Shinji was usually the first one up, either, because he was the only one in this household who neither skillfully ignored nor violently mistreated his alarm clock, or because one of these visions would already have pulled him from his slumber by the time it rang.

Either way he would generally proceed to put on his usual school uniform before doing anything else.

Since Asuka tended to occupy the bathroom for at least a sizable portion of the morning, he had acquired the habit of keeping his comb in his room so that he could get his hair in order without having to wait half an hour.

After he had done that and packed his school bag, he continued onwards to the kitchen, where he usually donned an apron (No matter how much Asuka might tease him about this, he did *not* want to get his uniform covered in miscellaneous stains a mere five minutes after putting it on.) and went about the production of a breakfast so that it would be ready when the ladies deemed it fit to seat themselves at the table, which, at least in Asuka's case, was going to take a while, as he had just passed her in the hallway as she strode toward the bathroom with a joyous hum.

Today, their meal would consist of fried eggs, salad and sausages, alongside the obligatory bowl of rice and a little soup as an appetizer – a two-course breakfast fit for the defenders of the Earth. Of course, he also placed a can of beer on the table to prepare for Misato's arrival.

Lately, Shinji was beginning to think that he was getting the hang of this whole cooking thing, at least judging by the ever increasing frequency of Misato's praise, although she'd always had a rather idiosyncratic definition of 'tasty'.

He would simply have to hope that today's servings wouldn't be too much of a failure – In any case that should become apparent in about two minutes, for no sooner than Shinji had finished preparing the first portion and decoratively arranged it next to the can of beer he had already preemptively placed on the table, he could hear the door to Misato's room sliding open.

Even though he would not have thought it possible not too long ago, and still found it somewhat disturbing if he cared to think about it in more detail, he barely reacted anymore as his barely clothed guardian staggered over to the table in a zombie-like, still half-sleeping manner; The can of beer that she opened first thing upon her arrival could generally be expected to fix that.

And indeed, what followed next was her usual morning ritual consisting of a hearty gulp, the ensuing scream of joy including a few happy tears which marked the onset of a frantic cheerfulness that even hyperactive gradeschooler would have envied.

“Say, Shin-chan...” she commented, as she put down the beer can or exactly as long as it took her other hand to bring her bowl of soup to her lips and take a sizeable gulp out of it, too. “...did you do something different with the soup today?”

“Yes, I did!” Shinji confirmed with a smile, delighted to learn that his efforts had not gone unnoticed. “It's got fish-flakes in it, Ritsuko-san gave them to me.”

But before either of the two had the opportunity to make any further comments, their attention was claimed by a loud shout of “AAAAHHH!” echoing from the direction of the bathroom, which was promptly followed by the noise of several doors being opened to make way for hurried steps, until Asuka pulled aside the curtains that led to the small bit of hallway that led to the bathroom to engage in what appeared to be her favorite activity: Complaining vigorously about everything in sight: “*Why is the water so hot?!*”
“I’m sorry...” Shinji replied, even if he didn't get why she was addressing that complaint at him and not, say, the local janitor. He was just glad that she had at least had enough sense to sparsely cover her X-rated body parts by wrapping a scant, red towel around her body; He would rather not have a repeat of a certain painful incident that had taken place not too soon after Asuka had first moved in.

But from the looks of it, his attempts at quiet submission did little to spare him from the Second Child's wrath: Quite the opposite, for some paradoxical reason he had failed to divine, it only seemed to make her angrier: “Yeah sure! No matter what's going on, you apologize just to be sure! Do you seriously think that everything is always your fault?”

From her perspective, things looked like this:

She rather liked the cool, determined Shinji, not the boring, lame facet of his personality he tended to display by default. Thus, she wanted to use a little provocation and 'well-meaning advice' to coax him into displaying his more attractive side – of course, as with all things, she felt a certain ambivalence about this: On the one hand, such a softie was unlikely to ever mature into a serious rival and would allow her to push him around at her leisure and convenience (for example when she felt like venting her frustration about all those infuriating rumors going around at school), but on the other, he'd have to be a lot more mature and masculine for her pride to accept him... and some part of her really wanted to be able to do that.

Unfortunately, his cautious yet helpless “Uh...” did not make this any easier for her.

“With you, apologizing is almost like one of your reflexes... you must be very scared of being told that you effed up, eh, Daddy's Boy? Well, sorry then, because I'm not going to coddle you. If you want to apologize so badly, apologize for forgetting to get my shampoo! I told you to buy me some more, and now, it's run out!”

“But... there's still some left...”

“Are you an idiot? Do you really think that I'm going to use the same garbage that you and Misato use?” She would at least have assumed that he'd have the self-respect to use some proper men's shampoo. “I have a completely different hair type, and besides, I won't allow anything other than quality products to touch my beautiful hair!”

“Uh... I'm sorry...”

“And now you're apologizing again! Did you listen to anything I said for even just a second?”

“Come on, let him be.” Misato interceded with a wave of her hand as she judged the conversation to be getting a little out of hands. “This is just the way he is.”

“Just the way he is?” Asuka retorted, taking umbrage to the very concept. Without a hint of timidity, she pointed her index finger straight at her guardian. “Aren't you supposed to be responsible for him? You're far too soft on him! Do I have to do everything by myself?” She complained, deliberately enacting a sigh of condescending frustration before she turned back to her fellow pilot and made him the next target for her pointed index finger.

“Now listen up, Daddy's Boy! If you always give up right away, nothing is ever going to change! If you never stand up for yourself and let others walk all over you, you're only proving that you lack the courage to do anything!”

Now this development was rather adorable as far as Misato was concerned. Asuka, the great pedagogue. So now it wasn't only Ritsuko, but the Children themselves dissecting and criticizing
everything she did. Next thing she knew, Asuka would probably throw poor Shinji onto a couch and attempt to psychoanalyze him. Too bad that all her great speeches and complaints never left Asuka any time to point her eager fingers at herself. She wasn't wrong in her claim that Shinji could probably use a little more self-confidence, but it was equally true that her own ego seemed in dire need of a trim...

“You know what you call a guy who won't even stand up for what he knows is his good right?” she continued alongside continued index-finger gestures. “You call them a coward. And there is nothing worse in this world than cowardly little boys! That's why I'm only interested in real men. Get it? Get it?!”

“Uh... sorry...” Shinji replied, seeing Asuka attempts to 'housetrain' him as a mere underlining of how he didn't stand the ghost of a chance. Any moment now she would start gushing over Kaji again, perhaps right in the next sentence...

Asuka herself was anything but pleased by his reaction: “You can't be serious-!”

“Oh!” Misato then commented casually, interrupting the redhead in mid-sentence. “Your towel is slipping.”

Of course, Shinji failed to spontaneously manifest the precognitive powers he would have needed to foresee the blunder that was ultimately a consequence of Asuka's worked up state and her usual carelessness, and for that there could only be one punishment: A slap across the face.

Honestly, the only reason he didn't score another roundhousekick was that he'd recently saved her life.

And well, so it came to pass that the poor, unfortunate Third Child had to go to school with a visible, red handprint on his face – that is, if he could even reach the school without sinking into the ground out of shame for that entire incident and the gossip that would undoubtedly follow the state of his face.

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“Project Kronos, hm?”

The pictograms on Kaji's screen refused to make sense.

Here, in the silent darkness, surrounded by cables that, due to their red and blue coloring and the glistening, sticky coolant they were mostly coated and partially submerged in, bore some disturbing resemblance to living veins and arteries, he had succeed in sneaking a glance at one of the most highly classified databases in this complex and every file and folder on it, no matter how well hidden – That is, he could see them, but not open them.

He had to commend good old Rit-chan on this, she had done anything but a half-assed job. Every single folder would requite at least a dozen passwords and description keys to be read, and as of now, he didn't have access to any of them.
Finding answers would prove to be a lot harder than he'd hoped, but at least, the names of the folders could serve as a list of keywords to investigate and rough outline of just how much knowledge was still hidden from his view. Not that the projects' names were particularly helpful. Most of them were named for deities or contained symbolic allusions to mythology, which, at best, served at a testament to the hubris their inceptions had entailed.

Still, while most folders had either existed for years or been created very soon after the Fourth Angel's appearance, but there was a single folder labeled 'Kronos' that broke that pattern: The oldest files contained within dated back to just a few weeks before the first attack.

That was an oddity, which made it a suspicious point to investigate. It could possibly mean the occurrence of something unforeseen, something that could serve as a weak link in the chain. Or perhaps, so he thought, it might contain an explanation for the insanely timely discovery and summoning of the Third Child...

Two weeks before the battle... had there been any notable incidents around that time?

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Though she had ordered the Uniform for this school well in advance, it had not yet arrived, leaving her no choice but to provisionally don her old one and wear it for her first day of class in this new city. She'd feared the attention that her apparel seemed fated to draw, but once she arrived, very few seemed to take notice of her presence, even though she felt like she was swimming through the air more than she was walking through it: The strange air of these unfamiliar places was more like a sticky, viscous fluid to her uncertain, cautious little steps that could only traverse it with great effort, her small pair of feet never straying too far from each other.

She felt swarmed and besieged by the ever-increasing number of students that wore her new school's uniform, particularly as their number and density steadily increased the closer she came to the building, and the closer she got, the more she could hear them talking – Did they hear that they were to receive a transfer student? Did they wonder what a stranger like her was doing here? Were they, perhaps, chuckling to themselves about her appearance?

Oh, she hated being seen by others.

And yet –

While she firmly believed to feel their burning stares on her back in one moment, the next one had her doubting if anyone had noticed her at all. Was she not thoroughly unremarkable, if not completely invisible?

Weren't the others already arranged into groups, deeply immersed in their own conversations that she wouldn't dare to participate in, for fear that her voice would fail her within the very first syllable, like it had done so many times before, at so many different schools?

Exactly because she knew that she didn't have what it took to pull this off, she kept her distance and made sure to avoid those clusters of pretty, popular girls who would curiously swarm around to ask newcomers eager questions. She had learn to keep to the shadows and maintain a heedful distance from anyone who might entrap her in conversation.

She was so very tired of herself.
Her inner sufferings and insecurities remained hidden from view; All they could see was a strange, silent girl that was, at most, worth a cursory glance, but rarely ever a second one. That was all anyone ever saw and would ever see of her: Her mere surface, her ugly body, her hapless gestures and her quiet little voice.

If first impressions were all that really mattered, she would lose out right away, and she'd never learned how to amend this. So it was the same in every school, no matter where she went – She hadn't taken long to realize that the problem lay with her and not with the others.

She was the only one to blame if no one could see how her soul was slowly burning up like a comet in free fall as she entered the school grounds in the belief that she knew beyond all doubt what awaited her there.

She was the only one to blame if she had hidden herself away, and she only wondered why she hadn't been more consequent in that and just stayed in bed, instead of coming all this way to suffer through the inevitable.

She could have chosen to call in sick today, and it would not have been a great lie. Even now, she believed she could feel the low pounding that was slowly but steadily pumping all life from her form. She couldn't have said why, but ever since she had come to this town, she couldn't shake the feeling that it had been getting worse and worse.

But in the end, it was merely discomfort, no sharp, acute pain that would have justified troubling her father and staying home, lest he feel bound to staying home with her.

No, the last thing she wanted was to be a burden to anyone else ever again...

Since she had nothing to add, it was the least she could do to take as little as she could.

Thus, she made herself step into this new school's lobby as it would be expected of an obedient daughter and looked for the shoe locker labelled with her assigned number. As she opened it to retrieve the slippers she was supposed to use during her time in this school building, as always, cautious and fraught with an underlying fear that she might break something.

As she put them on – again, carefully and using as little touch as possible, as if she felt compelled to refrain from 'tainting' public property with her filthy hands – she overheard a conversation between a group of four students, which had just been joined by a fifth one:

“Good morning, Ikari-kun.” greeted the only female voice that could be recognized from the group's direction. 'Ikari-kun'. On her way here, the silent observer had found that name on the list of numerous girls, some of which had been gushing about his 'cuteness' – The mere idea that she might just be sharing this parcel of space with the local heartthrob kept her petrified and ensured that she painstakingly avoided turning around as she adjusted her new school slippers, hoping much like an Ostrich that they would return the favor in kind and refrain from noticing her.

Just the thought that the conversation was still going on behind her back was enough to flush her face with shameful redness. It wasn't as if she had been eavesdropping on purpose... she just happened to be close by... and the declining quality of the flimsy excuses she kept making for herself should fill her with shame.

“What happened to your face?” One of the boys somewhere behind her asked somewhat teasingly. He had a thick Osaka accent, but the boy who spoke next didn't, but he still spoke with the same,
congenially-teasing tone: “Another lover's quarrel with Shikinami?”

'Shirakami' was another name that she silent girl had picked up with some frequency.

Was she that popular boy's girlfriend?

No, that didn't seem right...

As the lonely girl rose to her face and turned away from the shoe lockers to begin the search for her new classroom, her gaze briefly grazed the nearby group of teens, though not without prompting a quiet, yet audible “Huh?” from her lips for which she immediately chided herself with shame. She could only hope that no one had heard it.

She really hadn't mean to... eavesdrop or... spy on anyone, let alone stare at them, but...

But still, she couldn't help but wonder. The group of youths she had just observed was composed of some rather diverse people that one would not expect to find in one place, but none of them really looked like your typical 'popular boy' and his friends – indeed, they looked more like the sort of people that you would expect to find at the edges of any given school's social hierarchy: First of, there was a girl that somehow managed to have an authoritative aura about her despite her freckles, twin pigtails and girlish purple hair decorations. Then, there was the boy with the accent who could easily be recognized as the local classroom jester – He may have been fairly tall, tanned and not without his share of muscles and wore his shiny black hair in a modern, hair gel-aided style, but the coolness points that might have added were quickly depleted by his unapologetic wide grin, his outward-pointing ears and the goofy way his school bag's carrying strap was somehow hanging off his head, not to speak that he seemed determined to disregard the dress code. And then, there was the short, freckled, bespectacled boy with a short, rounded nose and a messily worn school uniform, who didn't exactly conform to wiely accepted beauty standards either.

There was also a fourth boy with a rather noticeable, thick bandage around his head – He was not short, but his lanky build more than made up for it. With his stylish, chin-length dark hair he might have been the closest to the average schoolgirl's preferences, but since he had barely spoken and presented a much more serious demeanor than his more easily amused friends, it was implied that he, too, was not exactly your typical people person.

But it was this 'Ikari-kun' himself who surprised her the most:

Sure, he was attractive, but it was more that fragile sort of beauty that was only noticed on the second glance; On the first one, he might have been dismissed as somewhat nondescript.

He had little in common with the humorous, charming and masculine types that would be your usual high school heartthrobs. Normally, most of the girls she'd overheard on her way here might not even know the names of these kinds of boys, no matter how unfair it might seem.

The way he stood there, his uniform shirt neatly tucked into his pants, keeping his hands close to his body as if he didn't know what to do with them... the clear, apparent awkwardness in his reactions to his friends' teasing...

He looked more like the sort of person who would avoid the center of attention like the plague.

He looked almost, well... a little like herself.

“It- it wasn't like that at all, Kensuke, what happened was-”
Remaining on a friendly tone but beginning to display sure signs of feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the situation, he hoped to clarify this misunderstanding before anyone got the wrong idea.

But luck wasn't on his side.

Before he could even begin with his explanation, he was interrupted by a visibly annoyed girl who had apparently just entered the foyer.

Immediately, the silent girl in the distance realized that this had to be 'Shikinami' – She had long, red hair with a pair of very unusual hair clips in it – she didn't think that she'd ever seen anything like these anywhere before. As for Shikinami herself, she clearly must have had at least a few foreigners in her lineage, probably some Central Europeans or Americans.

But even clearer was the impression of her as the sort of person who always straight-up took what she wanted, and never hesitated to speak her mind, no matter what.

Exactly the kind of popular and successful student that the transferee would never measure up to... granted, the transferee may have been a good student herself, but if you were the kind of person that the transferee was, all that made you was some pitiful nerd whose introversion would readily be confused with arrogance.

This 'Shikinami' person was different.

At a glance, she could be recognized as the sort that everyone admired and looked up to. The kind that probably spent all day laughing about the less fortunate or popular girls.

The entitlement with which she moved and talked spoke volumes, but even so, her directness would probably have been considered an additional feature to her attractiveness.

If she was this boy's girlfriend, the rest of the school didn't stand a chance.

But fortunately (?) it did not appear that the two were actually an item – Quite the opposite.

Judging by the way she marched straight toward the boy and closed the distance between them without reacting much to his obvious discomfort, it looked more like he was a regular customer on her list of people to pick on – Or, perhaps, she was simply very pissed off at him right now and made no pretense of hiding it – After all, she had no reason to do so.

“It wasn't like that?” she repeated, ostensibly finding something insulting in these words. “I'll tell you what it was like: This idiotic peeping top got to see me naked this morning!”

“What? Is that true, Shinji?” Kensuke immediately asked.

Interestingly, he sounded more envious than appalled.

“It was an accident!”

Kensuke, of course, doubled down on this: “What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means that it was her own da-... that it was actually Shikinami-san's fault.”

“Lazy Excuses!” the Second Child retorted. “Either you looked at me, or you didn't, and you definitely did!”

“Well, yes, but...”
In the background, Hikari had already come to her own conclusion: “I thought you were better than this, Ikari-kun.” This situation was looking anything but rosy for Shinji... this was all one huge misunderstanding, and Asuka was just making it worse and worse... perhaps, she was determined to convince the student body beyond all doubts that they were most definitely not a couple, which, in the context of Shinji’s kinda-sorta secret admiration stung more than the slap had.

Especially since Asuka continued to express her dislike of his person: “Bah! If you didn't look away of your own free will you have no one to blame but yourself!”

“But, uh-”

Since Asuka had insisted on filling as much of his field of vision as she possibly could with her undoubtedly cute, but still distinctly angry face, he only noticed the small speck of blue in its periphery out of the corner of his eyes.

In a rare instance of overlooking the deadly danger right in front of him in favor of his curiosity, he glanced past Asuka's fiery crown of hair to discover the presence of none other but Ayanami Rei.

She wasn't walking particularly fast, but rather steadily, wearing her usual school uniform and carrying a bag with her. She kept her gaze pointed straight ahead without allowing anything else to catch her attention, as if she knew of no other directions.

Though she had missed out on the class trip for reasons much like Asuka's and Shinji's, he'd barely seen any of her this week and when he did, it had been at NERV whenever they had both been called there for synchronization tests or the handling of the incident – even their one 'private' encounter by the swimming pool had taken place on NERV property, prompting Shinji to wonder if he had truly made that much progress in fulfilling his aim of getting closer to her.

After the incident on the Futagoyama, there had been all these feelings, and in the heat of the moment he had found himself earnestly talking to her and taking her hand before he even knew it – but in a normal, every day situation, his regular hangups reasserted themselves, making it distinctly harder, and knowing her, he could hardly expect her to initiate contact on her own accord...

Like ever so often, Shinji struggled to take the second step before the first one, standing frozen in the threshold, unable to reach the decision to go on and contact her without hiding behind a pretext... and just like that, a full three weeks had all but passed him by.

Sure, once school had started up again, they had resumed in their brief morning dialogues, simply because they had become too much of a habit by now.

They were quiet, pleasant, peaceful moments in his turbulent life that had come to be dominated by loud, forward people like Touji, Asuka and Misato, but that didn't change that they barely ever went beyond 'Hello, how are you?' and the like.

Yesterday, Rei had reciprocated the question. That was probably a success but not a huge one, especially considering how incoherent his answer had been.

Today, it seemed that he would not be so lucky: Though he saw her walking past the building, it did not seem like she intended to turn in order to enter the school's foyer, remaining outside the mesh wire fence that lined the school grounds... which raised the question of what she was even doing here....

“Hey, Daddy's boy! Are you even listening to what I'm saying? What are you even looking at!”

If there was one thing that Asuka Langley-Shikinami couldn't stand, it was being ignored. She
hated the mere idea that something could be more interesting than her, particularly, if it was the object of her secret wishes that was looking right past her.

“Uhm... it's just... Ayanami is over there.”

Somewhat taken by surprise, Asuka swiftly turned around to confirm it, and indeed, there she was: The First Child, going on her way in an almost mechanical manner, carrying out her orders like a robot without even taking the time to say hello to them.

“Where do you think she's going?” the Third Child asked, apparently all busy trying to make sense of her.

Unacceptable! Being ignored in favor of that... that arrogant bitch was the last thing Asuka needed today. Not only did that idiot Third Child fail to notice the obvious, no, now he was flat out ignoring her while she was standing right in front of him, and at that, for the sake of her bitterest enemy... did he want another

“She's not coming to school today. She's only here because there's an entrance to the geofront around here. They'll be needing Wondergirl at headquarters today, for an activation experiment with Unit Zero. Apparently they've managed to put that rusty bucket back together, though one wonders why they even bothered, now that the prototype is thoroughly obsolete...” she explained.

“Aha...”

Which meant that Rei would soon be following the two of them into battle. Perhaps, there would soon be three of them ready to face the enemy at any given time.

It would be good to have plenty of reinforcements.

“Hey! Are you ignoring me again? Don't space out on me like that... It's like you have no remorse at all for what happened this morning! Don't think that this won't have consequences!”

As Asuka seemed to be nearing a meltdown with every passing second, Touji made the courageous decision to protect his friends from further bruises by grabbing him from behind and pulling him away from their enraged classmate.

“Cut it out, you two!” he implored with a somewhat forced smile, hoping to defuse the situation.

Kensuke, who, at first, had seemed a little perplexed, but then quickly picked up on what his friend was trying to do, likewise produced his best conciliatory smile, and added: “Right! You can finish your talk later without causing a commotion here... Come to think of it, the bell should be ringing any moment now, isn't that right, Nagato?”

“Uh...” Nagato, who had never been a lover of crowds and could barely believe the events that had just taken place in front of his eyes, decided after some brief looking around that the best course action would be to simply nod, in part due to some home that it would get him away from Asuka's brashness and all this talk about naked girls.

“There you see it!” Touji continued, as he grabbed his still rather intimidated friend by the shoulders to prevent him from remaining glued in place. “Let's go, Shinji!”

“Uh...”

Without wasting further time, Touji, Kensuke and Nagato (who couldn't quite decide if he was) absconded their friend to safety before Asuka had the opportunity to break his neck.
However, she did not let him get away without yelling “You Coward!” after him.

Hikari chose to comment the whole incident with a sigh and stepped toward her friend, turning the topic of the discussion toward the general idiocy of the juvenile human male.

---

As it had taken place some time before the first battle, back when everyone was still in the uncertain state of uncertainty and preparation for a threat whose return had still been doubted, Kaji had initially not paid much attention to that particular report, but now, he couldn't help but find the reports of that supposed terrorist attack suspiciously vague.

Directing his questions to his superiors at the internal affairs bureau merely confirmed his suspicions – Had this 'terrorist attack' been nothing more than a coverup to hide a different secret?

His best move would probably be to 'test' the gentlemen from SEELE by playing dumb and reporting the incident under the pretext of having found proof of rogue actions on Ikari's part. Even if there was a good chance that they would be speaking exclusively in cryptic metaphors, if there was a chance that they would tell him something, he had to take advantage of it...

---

“By the way, guys, did you hear that we're supposed to get a transferee?”

The four boys had been on their way to their classroom when the innocuous question above was injected into their conversation, by none other than Kensuke, who, as always, appeared to be ahead of them in the information department.

“What, for real?” Touji exclaimed in surprise. “So far it's been looking like we're getting less and less with every passing week. I was positive that Nagato would be our last transferee.”

“Do you think they'll be somehow involved in the angel situation?” Nagato asked with a hint of concern.

Kensuke kept his calm smile: “Nah, most likely, she'll be in the same boat as the three of us, and her parents work for NERV.”

As they spoke, none of them noticed the silent girl whose feet shadowed their steps, clad in long dark socks and observing as the lively noises of their conversations drowned out any audible sign of her existence, wishing that just once, she too might be able to belong somewhere...
“Hello, I'm new in town and I'm glad to meet you all.” the transferee stated once she was done writing her name onto the table.

Unlike Asuka, who had confidently smeared her name all the way across the table, the newcomer's thin, simple writing seemed confined to a narrow clearly delineated row as if she were afraid to cross some sort of invisible boundaries.

It occurred to Shinji that a long, long time ago, before a number of days that already felt longer than it had actually been, his own name on the blackboard must have looked somewhat like that.

Mayumi looked to be the sort of girl who had one day been convinced that she was somehow ugly in defiance of any objective reasons, and had longed to disappear from people's views ever since this day – It was apparent in the hesitant sound of her voice and the visibly nervous manner in which she appraised her new classmates while she tried her best to manage a smile in spite of her awkwardness and insecurity.

You could tell from the posture of her shoulders, and the way her hands were holding on to each other in front of her body as if she wanted to comfort herself or simply didn't know what to do about her hands and the sweat on them.

It was not hard to imagine where the transferee might see her alleged flaws: She was a good amount taller than most other girls and Shinji even suspected that she stood higher than he did – At least, he'd heard that tallness was something girls sometimes felt ashamed of even though it was, in actuality, anything but unpopular with the gentlemen, and similar things could be said about the feminine curves of her hips which some may have considered 'pudgy'.

She had long, shiny black that had been cut off straight just a little below her shoulders, or slightly above her eyes in the case of her forehead bangs. Most of it fell heavily down her back, but left and right of her face, a few strands hung onto her chest, whose dimensions were on the upper side of average. Her eyes were a pretty light grey, but required some large, round eyeglasses for optimal functionality that she may or may not have seen as a further negative, along with the rather pale skin on her slender limbs and a single beauty mark to the lower right of her lips.

Wearing what had probably been the uniform at her old school, consisting of a moss green folded skirt, a white blouse and a yellow sweater vest, she looked kind of cute.

In actuality, Shinji thought she was rather cute, she could easily have made it into the top 5 list of the cutest girls in class. Or at least he thought so – something about her hesitant manner and seemingly fragile exterior pulled at his protective instincts...

“Welcome to our class!” the old teacher greeted her. “So, where are you going to sit? Right, the spot next to Horaki-san is still free, would that be okay with you?”

“Of course!” Hikari assured them, as always on her best, exemplary behavior.

In almost no time, Mayumi had sat down on her new spot, hung her bag onto the hook intended for it, and turned to Hikari in order to greet her with a smile that was awkward but still endearing in its sincerity: “It's nice to meet you.”

“It's nice to meet you, too!”
Then, class had started, and, as it often did, derailed into a lengthy retelling of anecdoted concerns Second Impact that would have been hard to follow even if Shinji weren't hearing them for the millionth time, knowing full well that a sizable chunk about it was merely propaganda.

Too many other things were taking up space in his thoughts, and the new student was just one peripheral part of that. More out of simple carelessness than any malicious motivations, he had dared to take a closer look at her once everyone else was back to either paying attention in class or nodding off on their tables – Or at least, that had been his intention, for as soon as he diverted his glance in her direction, he realized that she, too, had been looking in his direction for reasons unknown, and thus immediately noticed his wandering eyes.

(He was after all, unaware that he'd caught her attention earlier in the Foyer.)

But rather than smiling, simply looking back or somehow getting angry, the bespectacled girl frantically looked away like she'd been caught doing something dirty before the Third Child had an opportunity to do exactly the same.

He just hoped that he hadn't made a bad first impression – not that he hadn't always been an 'expert' at these: When he'd first met Misato, he'd ended up running out of the bath naked, in Rei's case, he'd ended up accidentally groping her, not to speak of Asuka... despite his ongoing efforts to soothe the waters, he couldn't seem to stop offending her.

Wondering if he was still upset at him, he let his glance wander a few rows ahead to where her seat was. How long would it take this time until she'd be willing to resume speaking to him in way, shape or form?

Well, her reaction to his repeated failure to look in a discrete, inconspicuous way led him to suspect that it was still going to take a while – As soon as she noticed him, she stuck out her tongue at him.

At least he could rest assure that the third spot in the classroom that might attract his attention to it would not meet him with any sort of negative reaction... for the table there was empty. It was Rei's.

Just about now, it's owner should be arriving at NERV to take part in this experiment... and though he liked the thought of having her by his side on the battlefield once again, he had not forgotten that it was this exact type of experiment that had caused her initial injuries that had left her wrapped in bandages the first time he'd seen her.... admittedly, last time it had gone off without a hitch and she had been able to contribute to the fight, but he couldn't help but feel a little worried... Last time, the activation experiment had taken place on an afternoon and he'd been able to watch alongside Misato (or perhaps, they had arranged things to keep him on site in case of another mishap) but now, he wondered how long it would take for him to find out about a catastrophe if one were to take place...

---

What was to be merely a pretext or a lie turned out to be the surprising truth – none of the men of SEELE's inner circle knew anything about this 'Project Kronos', and so, it was easily concluded that it was indeed one of Ikari's misdeeds.

“If that is the case, I might be able to-"
Kaji's offer was rejected. Apparently, it was deemed unnecessary for him to take any further action – Did this mean that the old men already suspected him?

No, no, he shouldn't let this disquiet him. This was merely SEELE's modus operandi, their tendency to leave individual underlings in the dark as much as possible – They preferred to have many independent little agents manufacturing little building blocks for a greater whole that only they had the blueprint from. Just like a real soul, or real consciousness, could not be localized in any one specific part of the brain, SEELE liked to keep their subordinates as decentralized as they could afford, limited only by the number of resources, facilities and skilled personnel...

They wanted to minimize the chance that any one person could work out the truth (like, for example, himself), or perhaps it was supposed to avoid a scenario where any one individual – such as Ikari – would be able to amass too much power while making himself far too indispensable to get rid of.

Nonetheless, even a will as absolute as theirs required a means by which to act upon the world: If they thought that they could resolve the issue without involving him any further, that meant that SEELE had to have another agent embedded deep between the ribs of NERV... but whom? Who could it be?

Simply put, as things were now, he had no means to find this out.

The matter was out of his hands... if he wished to get closer to the truth, this left him with but a single choice:

He had to warn Ikari.

----

Once, in the good old days before Second Impact, there had been this wonderful tradition that school would end early if the summer heat exceeded a certain threshold – or at least, that was the legend told by old children's movies, wherein the blessed students of the past would be relieved from the burden of class to spend the best and sunniest days eating ice cream and splashing around in the local pools.

With regards to the weather situation that had asserted itself after Second Impact, this would have meant that school would be out early every other day, so that it had been decided that the old rule no longer made much sense. Of course, a modern city like Neo Tokyo-3 had air conditioning in all its classrooms, but that wasn't much use to Touji, Kensuke or Shinji when they were stuck outside for their physical education classes.

Nagato had been fortunate enough to be excluded from PE due to his head injury, though that had Shinji wondering just how much longer it would take until it was healed enough for him to participate – Even Rei had rejoined regular PE classes ages ago, and yet, he didn't think that the cast around the younger Mitsurugi's head had become any thinner in all the time he'd been going to their school.

Then again, Shinji had to admit that he didn't really know how long this type of injury generally took to heal... or what type of injury it even was.

One way or another, the final result was that the 'idiot quartet' was one man short as they baked in
the sun next to the school's running tacks.

Had Nagato been here with them, he might well have objected to their current activities, for nearly as soon as they'd caught their breaths after running several laps across the sport grounds, the sweaty boys had found their solace in the sight of the swimsuit-clad girls who were themselves busy in and around the school's swimming pool.

“Always all this jogging!” Touji complained. “Meanwhile, the B-class gets to play basketball and the girls get to cool off in the swimming pool. I think I could turn green with envy!”

“By the way, guys...” Kensuke then began. “Have you thought of something to do for the upcoming school festival?”

“Meh. I can't see the point.” Touji opined. “Our fathers are far too busy to show up.”

“That might be true, but I can think of at least one person who will most definitely show up...”

“And who would that be?”

“Well, of course, Misato-san! It's practically part of her job! Think about it: Anything remotely related to the education of our dear friend here is part of her duties. Short of an angel attack, she's practically guaranteed to show up.”

The mention of the M-word immediately caught Touji's attention. “You sure? That changes things dramatically...”

At this point, Shinji, who had been busy with his own thoughts either way, tuned them out completely, thoroughly distracted by the swimsuit-clad girls who took turns jumping in the water, swimming around in it with various techniques, or simply conversed with each other.

This time, Rei was, of course, not among them.

But this time, it was Mayumi who caught his attention, much like she had back then – She wasn't standing aside or sitting somewhere by herself, but stood in line with everyone else who was waiting their turn to swim their rounds, but she wasn't talking to anyone, and kept her gaze lowered, as if she'd much rather be anywhere else than stand up there among all these people... She looked lonely, and he would expect that she might secretly long to talk to some of the other girls much like he had once wished that he had the courage to approach Rei back when he had been new.

She stood frozen in the threshold, afraid to take one step after the other.

Hence, she remained just as alone as he had been during his first few weeks at this school. “The transferee... she looks a bit like me, doesn't she?”

Except, that he now had a fair number of people around him, while she was standing there all alone.

And Shinji knew enough of what it was like to be all alone to know that no one deserved this.

But no matter what half-baked decision he might have come to as he thought these words, it disintegrated into thin air when Mayumi seemed to notice him of all sudden.

She turned in his direction, an anxious twitch went through her entire body, and then, she turned
away and hastily removed herself from his field of vision.

Just great.

Yet another girl that must be thoroughly convinced that he was a total pervert within hours of meeting him... Discouraged, he lowered his head...

“Heey, what's so interesting up there?”

Kensuke's sudden question was probably owed to his evident lack of attention to his and Touji’s conversation, but at least, he didn't seem to have caught onto what had just taken place.

“Uh... nothing, really...” he answered.

As it might have roused his friends' suspicions if he kept avoiding their gazes, and didn't feel like discussing his concerns, he chose to look at whatever Touji was looking at – though Shinji had not expected that direction to lead him to the very same class representative whose abrasiveness the taller boy so loved to complain of.

She was actually fairly good looking, but not exactly Shinji's type... much unlike the person who must have noticed them and jumped in their line of sight to mock them with another hearty “Bleeeh!”

Great.

No need to check on Asuka separately – She was most definitely still angry: “What are you looking at? Are you staring at me again, you Perv?!” she shouted vigorously, not concerned that the volume necessary for him to hear her all the way down here would expose half the school to this conversation – All peacefulness aside, this was too much even for him.

“It's not like I was looking at you!” he retorted – it didn't sound as fiery as he'd initially intended, but at least, he'd jumped to his feet in order to communicate his opinion standing on both legs.

This might have impressed her, if she didn't regard his statement as a kind of outrageous sacrilege that couldn't possibly me true.

(She was not so unattractive that he'd be uninterested in her of all people, right?)

He expected her to believe that he hadn't been looking at her? Bah, humbug!

(He hated being ignored more than anything)

“Yeah sure! You can keep your excuses to yourself!”

“That's no excuse, it's the truth!”

“As if! At the very least, you could act like a man and admit it!”

Determined to tell him exactly what she thought of him in both word and deed, Asuka reached for a nearby broom.

“Hey miss loony, you do know that you could hit someone with that, right?” Touji interjected, as he'd never particularly liked the Second Child to begin with.

“Exactly!” she'd responded immediately. “Though not even this broom might be enough to stuff your big mouth!”
Since Touji had apparently taking over the fighting, The Third Child retired to his seat with a sigh and hoped that the two would stop making such a spectacle of themselves sometime soon.

At least Kensuke acted somewhat reasonable and did not seem particularly pleased with the local war craft: “Oh, what peace and what quiet...”

----

Of course, he didn't reveal just who exactly had revealed the existence of “Project Kronos” to SEELE.

But by the looks of it, both Fuyutsuki and Ikari already had a plausible suspect, and it wasn't him.

In fact, he got the impression that these two already suspected who the second agent could be... how Ikari could remain this calm in the knowledge that his organization might be this badly compromised was a mystery to him – After all, it looked a lot like his dear project, the magnum opus for whose he'd been pulling strings in the dark for years, might find itself on shaky ground.

But perhaps this was the personality one needed to have to survive in this kind of position.

That man never showed an ounce of weakness – that much had become very clear to Kaji a long time ago.

---

With a thin grin, the woman known as Asahina Najiko closed her phone and put it back in her pocket. It seemed like she would be able to to that thing she had been longing to do, and that, much earlier than she would have thought.

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Regarding the barney during PE class, it sufficed to say that Touji and Asuka were still busy exchanging insults by the time they had both changed back into their school uniforms and made their way back to their classroom, where Kensuke and Nagato barely succeeded in talking them down before the teacher arrived, narrowly avoiding a scenario where she'd demand to know exactly what was going on leading to their thorough humiliation.

Luckily, she ended up leaving the classroom without ever finding out what the fuss was all about.

Despite his courageous volunteering as an arbiter, even Nagato was only told that he 'didn't really want to know' once he asked for details of how the quarrel had started.

But after yet another teacher had come and gone, the bell rang to announce the lunch break, and Shinji didn't really know what to do with it – Touji, Kensuke and Nagato had bid their farewell to
make their way to the cafeteria, but Shinji didn't have much of an appetite... or perhaps, he simply wanted to avoid a confrontation with either Mayumi or Asuka.

Thus, he'd remained behind in the classroom, together with a small flock of girls who were using their break to play cards. Usually, at least Rei could be relied upon to stay behind as well, invariably spending her lunch breaks sitting at her usual spot besides the window as she always did... but today, she was busy with something else.

He idly wondered if they'd already begun the experiment down in NERV HQ.

Who knows, they might even be done with it by now.

It then occurred to him that, at least in theory, he could just go and ask – The closest access point to the geofront was pretty much right around the corner, to ensure that they could be carted off to headquarters in a manner of minutes if an angel were to attack during school hours... If he kept a brisk pace and didn't idle around, he might manage to go down and check on her and make it back before the lunch break would end, or at the very least, he should not be tremendously late.

He'd never considered it before, but it might actually work...

But if he wanted to pull it off, he had to leave right now. For once in his life, he had to quit hesitating and act fast before the limited window of opportunity would close.

Perhaps... just maybe... this might be his chance to follow that first step that he'd taken after the battle on the futagoyama's molten slopes with a second one.

He didn't waste another second in getting a move on, but still didn't quite dare to run in the hallways, at least not while he couldn't be sure that he was all by himself. He much rather tiptoed across the school corridors, the streets, and eventually, the facilities down at the geofront – He was not actually supposed to leave the school grounds at this time, and even if he worked here and had a valid security card to get him around the facility, no one had asked him to come here, and none of the adults knew of his presence.

Anyone who knew who he was was bound to ask him uncomfortable questions.

Even though it was noon, he felt much like a thief in the night on some kind of cloak and dagger mission... so, the shock hit just that much harder when he came face to face with just not any, but the authority figure.

He'd found the upper facilities of the geofront conveniently empty, but once he got to NERV HQ, his luck deserted him before he could even enter the pyramid's central elevators in the ground level foyer, where their doors opened to bring him face to face with the last person in this whole, wide world that he wanted to be answering questions to.

He was met with his highest superior, the nightmare of his childhood and, last but not least with his own father, all those functions unified in the shape of a tall, broad-shouldered man in an imposing, jet black uniform who stood before him like a wall, dwarfed him like a tower and coldly stared down at him through oval, tinted glasses:

Commander Ikari Gendo of NERV.

Shinji was completely at his mercy, feeling very small and lost.

Frozen in place, he already understood that he would not be able to board this elevator.
His consciousness flooded with the urge to simply turn and run, run, run to the ends of the earth, without ever looking back, just like he'd done on that day three years ago.

Swallowing, he used every morsel of willpower that he might have gained during the last weeks and moths, and forced himself to look into the eyes of the man who was ultimately little more than a terrifying, dark-clad stranger.

He stopped himself from considering if anything had changed since he had been that helpless, lost child from back them, though his cries from back then very much echoed through his consciousness.

He didn't know if that even 'counted' in any way, but by now, he was very sure that he no longer wanted to be locked in that moment.

His eyes shot up to face that star-crossed day's distant shadow, and were answered by the rough, deep, dispassionate voice of an unkempt old man:

"Shouldn't you be at school?"

The Third Child's first instinct was to tell him that that was none of his business – He hadn't forgotten how laughably irrelevant his life had been to this man just last week, when he'd been ready and willing to sacrifice him, Misato, Asuka and many other innocents to correct a mistake, offered them up as bargaining chips to fire, volcanoes and bombs in case one of his gambles were to turn awry... but then, the boy realized that the man had just spoken to him, and, at that, expressed some however passing interest in the going-ons of his person in a way that had little to do with his function as an EVA pilot... Did his father actually care to make sure that he stayed in school and made the most out of his education, or was he merely so pathetic that he would try and convince himself of that?

Whichever of these may have been the truth, the mere possibility led the Third Child to hesitate and reconsider his answer, so that it morphed from the spontaneous, thoughtless eruption of emotion he's first had in mind into a regular, functional statement:

"I... I heard that the activation experiment for Unit Zero is taking place today, a-and I thought-"

"Unit One will not be involved in the experiment. You have no business in headquarters right now."

*That callous bastard...!*

The elevator doors closed before Shinji had any opportunity to react – Ironically, he had good reason to believe that that man had been headed in the same direction as himself.

His face did somewhat contort in anger, in good part, because he had again been treated with such cold rejection, but...

Some part of him could not help but note that this had almost, no, a factual improvement by their standards, or at least his standards, if he considered how he had been completely unable to look him in the eye or speak a single word when they had encountered each other in a similar manner on the day after the first battle.

He was even hesitant to label it a bad or even a good conversation – the hive of swarming little voices in his mind seemed to bend over backwards to either embellish the encounter or badmouth his hopes.
The one thing he could agree on was that there had been a conversation.

Perhaps the first one in years that had not consisted of orders.

With the mildest hint of rebellion lacing his gestures and expression, he continued on his way. He could still make up his mind after he was done checking on Rei.

---

When he arrived in the vicinity of the test chamber, he found that the actual experiment had yet to take place – Rei had merely been summoned way in advance so they could subject her to some extensive but routine tests and checkups to get those out of the way while everyone else was still working on the instrument calibrations and the technical prepping of the Evangelion, with that last point having taken up way more time than initially planned for because they were still struggling to minimize a feedback problem in the interface, whatever that was supposed to mean – Shinji had merely heard the reports of the omnipresent computer voices and deduced the rest, so it wasn't like he could ask anyone to elaborate.

But be it by mistake or oversight, the universe seemed to be slacking in its efforts to make his life as hard, complicated and awkward as humanly possible, so that Shinji was lucky enough to find Rei in the changing rooms; Most mercifully, she was even finished changing an already wearing her plugsuit.

When she heard him enter, she reacted at most with a minimal whiff of mystification as she briefly turned her heard to ascertain who had just walked in.

By the time he'd heard the automatic door closing behind him, she was back to staring straight ahead into the void in her usual manner.

Shinji did not let this discourage him; He was already used to this trait of hers and knew that it did not necessarily mean that she refused to pay attention to him.

He could not overlook that she had his father's old glasses resting next to her on the changing room's central bench.

Consequently, he stepped further into the room (it didn't help that this was technically the girl's locker, even if Asuka wasn't here, and Rei was highly unlikely to bring it up to him) and sat down alongside her, though in this context 'alongside' meant that he chose to sit at the edge of the bench that was a little closer to her than the other one, facing in the same direction.

The room left between them would still have been enough for an adult man.

There was a file of lockers behind their backs that ended somewhere between the spots they were seated in and formed a clear, sharp line of division that neither of them dared to touch, let alone cross with as much as the hems of their clothes.

Rei did not seem to see any reason to look at him and the Third Child felt sheepish about looking straight at her now that she was in such immediate proximity to his person and sealed in that white plugsuit that underlined her feminine curves and still made her look even more fragile than she usually did, as if were made of porcelain.
Surprisingly, it was her who spoke first, thus sparing him the frantic scramble for something to say:

“Why are you not at school?” she asked.

It was a simple, genuine question without a hint of accusation.

“You know, my father just asked me the same thing...”

“And what did Commander Ikari say about your presence?”

“He told me to go back to school... I guess.”

“Then I am going to tell you that very same thing.”

“B-But...!”

“There has neither been an alert, nor is there any experiment taking place that would concern you. There is no reason for you to be here.”

“Yes, I know, ....but...”

What should he say? He'd already pretty much given up and risen to his feet, but that unfinished sentence was still hanging in the hair.

What now? The truth? That had worked last time, but the thing about truth was that it wasn't any easier to say just because it was true.

“I... I... uhm, the thing is, I was worried about you, Ayanami.”

So, there it was. The secret was out. Had he really said that out loud just now?

“Is that so?”

She'd spoken softly and flatly, and her expression did not reveal what, if any emotional reaction his words had caused for her.

“Don't be. There is no reason for you to be worried. I'm fine. You should go back.”

---

And that was precisely what he did.

What else should he have done?

While his steps had been quickened by hurry and tension on his way here, it was a cold, sober feeling that now led him to forget that he might still be expected somewhere.

Instead, he went about his way in a slow, lethargic manner, his gaze lowered and his mind regretting that he hadn't thought of taking his music player when he'd embark on his 'journey'.

By now, Rei was probably being called for the experiment, and if anything went wrong, he might not hear from it until Misato would return from work in the late afternoon.
He might have pulled off that whole thing about taking a second step, but he had probably bungled the third; Or perhaps, he'd just been deceiving himself with wrong expectations.

No matter how much resolve it had cost him, ultimately he'd just come all this way to bother her when she had more important things to do...

Much like with that conversation with his father, he didn't know what to make of this – It was always an unique challenge to try to make sense of Rei, and both of them could seem rather unapproachable at times...

It was hard to offer Rei any support when the dangerous experiment she was forced to take place in did not even seem to faze her, if she would accept being used as a human guinea pig like it was the most normal thing in the world... And perhaps, it *was* the most normal thing in the world, at least to her –

Even Asuka kept bragging about how she had been trained since early childhood, and judging by her assigned designation, she must have been recruited sometime *after* the 'First Child'.

There was a good chance that Rei had been putting up with these experiments for as long as she could remember and had never known anything other than the program. Even still, her fearlessness was enviable.

In that point, Shinji and Rei were very, very different. Even though she looked so fragile, her slight little form hid immense inner strength, always ready to do what must be done no matter the cost, never flinching before the horrors she was made to face...

It was very hard to protect or support someone like that.

But at least he'd made an effort to come here, to show her that he cared... unless all his impressions about her personality were mistaken, at least that ought to be something that she could notice and find respite in...

Different as they were, if he wasn't completely mistaken, there was at one thing that they had in common: They were both used to living in a very dark, bleak world, and so, they'd come to appreciate even the slightest bit of affection and even the weakest little light would brighten their lives.

He hoped that he'd understood at least *this* about her, for if it were true, there might come a day when they would be able to understand each other, and share these feelings like nobody else could.

---

After a workday that, so far, had been mostly dominated by paperwork, it seemed like Misato would get to assume her post in Central Dogma after all.

Rushing in, she wasted little time in cutting to the chase: “How did it go?”

“Successfully.” Dr. Akagi reported, taking the time to take a sip out of her coffee mug once she was done directing a few Instructions at Lt. Ibuki. “The feedback issues aren't fully under control yet and it might take some extensive fine-tuning until the EVA is running at peak efficiency, but broadly speaking, EVA 00 is ready for combat, and the general overhaul gave us plenty of
opportunity to do some thorough upgrading... you'll find everything else in the database reports.”

“Very well.” Misato acknowledged. “Now how about that thing I was contacted about? Something about a malfunction in the AT-field sensors?”

“We thought it was an error because readings like these weren't supposed to have any correspondence in reality. It looked like nonsense data.” Hyuuga explained. “But we've just checked the corresponding systems for the fourth time, and that strange signature is still showing up.”

“Well in that case, we'll have to accept that they do make sense. What kind of signatures?”

“Well, that is...”

“It's back again.” The bespectacled technician interjected before his blonde superior could finish. “It looks like an AT-field, but it's very weak and spread out over a huge area... It practically spans the entire city.”

“Can you analyze it?” Misato asked with a certain alarm.

Lt. Ibuki had been working on it before her superior even had the chance to ask:

“The pattern is orange. Everything else is identical to the last time we observed it.”

“Quick, check if there are any spikes in the field density.” Ritsuko ordered.

“If there are any, then their divergence must be too small or diffuse for us to track it over such a large area, or, it's confined to an area so small that it slips through our sensor grids.” Hyuuga opined.

“Could it be a sensor error after all?” Misato speculated.

“Perhaps not.” Hyuuga interjected. “We have a sharply bounded field density spike, no, the field has compacted itself. Radius is down to thirty meters... that hasn't happened before!”

“Pattern is changing to blue!” Ibuki exclaimed in alarm.

That alone convinced everyone in the room that they were dealing with something far more severe than a simple malfunction.

Those who didn't flinch into alertness had all levity fade from their faces.

“Is it an Engel?” Misato asked, her expression severe.

“Probably... No, wait, we have lost the target! The AT field has disappeared from all sensors!”

“The on-site scout helicopters confirm this.” Aoba informed them. “The spot where the target was being registered is completely empty... Or, to be exact, it's like nothing was ever there to begin with, the cameras at the pinpointed location did not register any changes, nor have we received any notification from any observatories.”

“So the angel... disappeared? Or was it an error after all?”

“Who knows.” Ritsuko commented, irritating her friend with her apparent nonchalance.

“What do you mean by that?”
“As humans, we are dependent on our five senses, and by extension, the instruments that we use to circumvent their limitations. One merely needs to trick these senses, and they'd already have succeeded at duping us into accepting an illusion. Sometimes, that doesn't even require deceptions. Everyone knows how looks can be deceiving, and how our first impressions are often mistaken.

Since the Angels are beings that exist to lead us to destruction, it only makes sense that they, at least some of them would use that weakness to their advantage.”

Misato dit not take long to catch her gist: “An invisible enemy?”

“Exactly. If we are to fully account for these readings, that appears to be a probable conclusion.”

“How probable?”

“According to the Magi...” the paused briefly to read the number from the smaller displays on her console. “...about 49%.”

The leader of the Operations Division paused in deliberation. The standard procedure upon the identification of an angel was to ring the alarm bells and ready the EVAs, but, where would you even send them in a case like this?

“Shouldn't we go on red alert and evacuate the city?” Hyuuga asked.

“Not yet. For now, make sure that there really are no sensor errors and send a research team to the site of that earlier localized pattern blue reading. If there's any further manifestations, try to analyze them insofar it is possible. If worst comes to worst... and if the Angel even exists... we might not be able to pinpoint it until it starts attacking us and causing visible damage. Therefore, I order that until further notice, at least one EVA pilot is to remain on guard at headquarters at all times.

Rei can't have gone far yet, she might still be in the geofront. Contact her.

And notify Commander Ikari, tell him to contact Dr. Akagi and myself to discuss further action...

---

“So you are saying that we are facing an invisible angel?”

The aim of Fuyutsuki's question was, in part, to convince himself of their absurd predicament.

“So it would seem, yes.” the scientist confirmed.

“Understood. Captain Katsuragi?”

“Yes, Commander?”

“I agree with your proceedings so far. Since we cannot localize the enemy, our best bet right now is to stay on guard.”

Even the last preemptive strike had been a risky gamble.

The old men still believed them to be unwise and did not need to know that he was following his own strategy on the matter.
“Since this angel intends to destroy us, it will be forced to reveal itself sooner or later in order to attack us. Once it does, we'll be able to destroy it much like its predecessors. Continue as before. The First Child is to remain on guard at headquarters until further notice.”

“Yes, Sir.”

---

“No, Sir, Captain Katsuragi has not been informed as of yet. She is set to formally receive the weekly surveillance reports on both Children under her jurisdiction this Friday, unless there is some incident of more urgent relevance. Should this be omitted from the report?”

“That won't be necessary, Lt. Asahina,” the Commander judged.

“I concur.” Fuyutsuki commented. “I see no reason to risk the unnecessary attention that a coverup could draw to the matter. I assume that Captain Katsuragi will come to her own conclusions; It's not like there is anything especially suspicious about a fourteen year old boy expressing worry about a classmate. You are dismissed.”

“Understood, Sir.”

After a brief bow, the woman in black turned to leave.

The pair of older men only resumed once the door had been closed for several silent seconds.

“Ikari... Aren't you concerned that she might suspect something?”

“You've said it yourself. Just an ordinary worried teenager. He was not supposed to be at headquarters, it would have been more suspicious if we hadn't requested a report.”

Fuyutsuki averted his gaze, turning toward the window.

“So it is certain that your son came here because of Rei's test?”

“The probability borders on certainty. By the looks of it, everything is going according to plan.”

Fuyutsuki had great doubts that this was something they should be accomplished about, but as usual, he kept his thoughts to himself.

---

Whether there may have been a theoretical possibility for Shinji to get back in time for his next class if he'd hurried up was still an open question, but at least in practice, he had not pulled it off today.

By the time he returned, he was almost half an hour late and didn't have any believable lies to show for himself.
He briefly thought of claiming that he'd had to attend to some NERV-related duties, but ran the risk that the teacher might demand a written notice from Misato, or that Asuka might rat him out. Fortunately, this particular teacher seemed to be more of a pragmatist and preferred to make full use of the remaining lesson time rather than to squander it lecturing Shinji or waiting for him to stutter out some kind of excuse – He was simply instructed to take his seat.

It probably helped that he was usually punctual and that the teachers generally had a more lenient approach to the EVA pilots.

This, however, didn't change that Shinji had no clue what the collections of letters lines and numbers on the blackboard were supposed to represent.

In order to soothe his conscience, he spent the next two lessons paying careful notice to class – that was, after all, another way to distract himself from his many worries.

Once the sound of salvation granted them sweet, sweet release from their last lesson for today, he chose to ask his friends for their notes on the first half of today's math lesson.

- He wasn't sure if he'd be able to make sense of them even so, but he figured that it was worth a try, especially given his current need to get his slipping grades back under control.

After reaching the decision to borrow Nagato's notes (As he had the greatest propensity for paying attention in class and the nicest handwriting, to boot) he hastily went about copying the parts marked with today's date into his own collection of notes as he was quite uncomfortable with making Nagato wait for him.

Once he was done stuffing his belongings into his bag, he rushed off to return his friend's notes.

Said friend awaited him on the schoolyard, where he was casually conversing with Kensuke and Touji.

“Oh, hi Shinji! There you are!” the latter greeted, waving eagerly as soon as he'd spotted the younger boy.

“Uhm... Nagato. Here are your notes. I'm sorry for making you wait.”

“Don't worry about it.” the younger Mitsurugi replied. “That's what friends are for.”

“We made sure that he didn't get bored while waiting.” Touji assured him.

“We were just telling him how we met you back in the day.” Kensuke added.

“Yes, they were.” Nagato confirmed with a tentative but friendly smile. “It was quite a story.”

“You said it...” Touji admitted. “If someone had told me back then that Shinji and I would ever be best friends, I'd have thought they were nuts. What can I say? First impressions can be deceiving. In a way, the same was true for you. Don't get me wrong, but when you were first transferred, I thought you were some snobbish teacher's pet type of guy, like the sort who thinks they're too good to talk to us lowly mortals, but, you probably just weren't sure how to approach us. Now that I know you better, you've turned out to be a pretty considerate guy.
Or look at Kensuke here: At first glance, he looks like a big nerd. Well, actually, he **is** a big nerd, but he's not one of those misanthropic wannabe hermits who don't care about other people's feelings. He's actually a pretty reasonable person... or well, at least as long as there's no giant monsters or vintage battleships around.

“Hey! It's not exactly a challenge be more reasonable than you!” Kensuke countered. “Unlike you, I happen to be an only child, I had to entertain myself with *something*. I can't just get on my little sister's nerves whenever I'm bored. Besides, one shouldn't throw stones in a house of glass. If I didn't know better, I could even confuse you with one of those empty headed braggadocious jocks.” he joked.

“Well, if some asshole picks on my sister and tells them she'll get her big brother if they don't leave her alone, I'd better make sure that she's got some convincing arguments ready!” Touji explained, posing to highlight his biceps in order to leave no doubts what exactly he meant by that.

“Don't worry though.” Kensuke appended with a smile. “As you said, first impressions can be way off. You had me fooled right until you kept that unpleasant fourth grade from dipping my head into a toilet...”

“Then, this means...”

“Yep.” the bespectacled boy confirmed. “That would be the story of how Touji and I first met, all the way back in grade school. Also a bit of an adventure, even if it cannot compare to any kind of story with Giant Robots in it.”

“Uh, strictly speaking, the EVAs aren't actually robots... but never mind. What are you all doing this afternoon?”

“We could plan for the school festival.” Nagato suggested.

But despite his earlier enthusiasm about the possibility of impressing Misato, Touji shook his head. “That's a good idea, but it's not gonna happen today. It's my father's day off and we promised my sister that we'd all come to visit her.”

“I'm all booked out as well.” Kensuke admitted. “I finally convinced my old man to take me to that Aeronautics Museum...”

“I see...” Shinji replied, endeavoring to conceal the surge of melancholy he felt at his friends' mentions of upcoming family fun time.

“Then we can decide later, we still have a few days before the festival and besides, I should probably catch up on my studies, I'm still somewhat behind, especially in physics...”

“Then how about you come to my place to study?” Nagato suggested unexpectedly. “Perhaps we could help each other out and do our homework together.”

Shinji felt like it would be somewhat shameful to accept this offer – In the face of the clear difference in their average grades, it was crystal clear that the younger Mitsurugi would end up doing most of the 'helping out'.

“I, uhm, I wouldn't want to impose on you, I mean, you probably have to do plenty of studying yourself, and I wouldn't want to take up your time...”

“You're not a burden.” Nagato clarified firmly, standing up straight to make full use of the few centimeters by which he surpassed Shinji's height.
“Quite the opposite. I would be honored to welcome you. Actually, I- I’ve been meaning to invite you over for quite some time now.”

“Really...?”

If that was the state of things, it would have been just as shameful to refuse him, so Shinji decided to go with the option that Nagato himself seemed to insist on.

Besides, he was unlikely to find the necessary peace and quiet to study at home as long as he shared that home with a still-angered Asuka.

“Alright! I'll just phone Misato-san, just so she knows that I'll be staying out late...”

“Okay then! Have fun you two!” Touji shouted out as he waved goodbye.

“I'll come up with some plan for the school festival by tomorrow, alright?” Kensuke promised as he, too, went on his way. “Have fun!”

“You too!” the younger Mitsurugi responded.

It was honestly a little astonishing. Perhaps, it was simply that he knew him better now, or that he felt safer expressing himself around them, or perhaps he had honestly changed.

It still felt somewhat unfamiliar, to see the once ever so stiff and formal Nagato sporting a frolic smile and even allowing himself a minimal sort of wave with the upper part of his hand.

It was a nice feeling, to know that you'd helped someone.

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1. So, what revelations might be awaiting Shinji at the Mitsurugi Residence? Find out in Chapter 2.10: [The Hidden Depht]

2. As you may have noticed, the next few chapters will involve some content from the tie-in game “The Second Impression”. I haven't exactly played it but I've seen some walkthroughs. For those who don't know it, it's a lot like “Girlfriend of Steel” except somewhat closer to the tone of the original and the great, great advantage that there is a Rei option. As you may have noted I've tried to incorporate content from most of the different routes along with some original material.
It would be Shinji’s first visit to the Mitsurugi Residence.

He’d visited Touji’s and Kensuke’s places once or twice before, though the two clearly preferred to meet if not somewhere in town, then at Shinji’s place, lest they miss any potential chance to sneak a
glance at Misato – Even if that also meant a higher chance of running into Asuka as of late.

Nagato, by contrast, had only recently become what one might consider a full member of their group and hadn't been there for the initial series of turbulent events that had led them to each other. Insofar, this invitation was probably a good thing, as well as an interesting opportunity for Shinji to get to know him a little better.

Misato had immediately agreed as she always welcomed the sight of the pilots maintaining their social contacts and taking the time to do regular innocent kid's stuff. Since Shinji had brought his phone and Misato could easily find out the Mitsurugis' adress and phone number with a single call to headquarters, there should be no problems in case they needed to contact him because of an emergency.

In comparison, the conversations the two had led on their way to Nagato's appartment had almost been more of a challenge, as the Third Child had never been particularly interested in politics and the like – He already had enough things to worry about without including the big, immovable processes that were leading the world on a tightrope dance at the edge of destruction.

Shinji's knowledge in that regard was limited to what he might occasionally pick up on TV, radio or internet, and his opinion of most controversial topics was rather wishy-washy.

For obvious reasons, such discussions were seldom started when the four of the were all in one place, but Nagato seemed to have expected that he would be the type to keep informed about these serious topics, or at least, that he would welcome a chance to discuss them in a setting where it wouldn't bother anyone else.

Shinji just kept nodding and hoped that his new friends wouldn't notice that he was relatively clueless. If he was somehow disappointed, he didn't show it.

Not that this meant much – If anything, it was yet another testament to the older boy's superior patience whose stoic calm was at times enough to look beyond even Asuka's constant provocations.

His statements about the complexities of the greater, wider world that Shinji had always seen as a big, confusing and hostile place one could easily get lost in were somber statements of detailed reasoning yet dispassionate nature as well as mildly concerned contemplations far disparate from the curses and complaints often associated with debates.

Shinji chose to regard this as a positive trait of Nagato's, though he could imagine that Asuka would have chided him, too, for not expressing himself in a more energetic or decisive manner... though if she had in fact been here, she probably would have invested her limited time into the mocking of Shinji's limited intellect.

By the time the boys reached their destinations, his replies had only exceeded the domain of nods one-liners a few times.

The Mitsurugis lived in an apartment complex that was not ostentatious, but certainly on the side of greater comforts, displaying an upscale, modern design on both interior and exterior.

Judging by the sheer number of doorbells with blank tabs beside them, the building appeared to be mostly vacated, much like many others inside Tokyo-3, including the one Shinji himself lived in, though unlike the Katsuragi household, Nagatos family appeared to have at least a few neighbors: Every three or two stories, one of the three to four apartments per floor would be listed as occupied, though this amounted to only six in total.
The two boys' path led them into a spacey elevator with a shiny black floor of black marble and through it, to the sixth floor, which was located at about half the building's height.

The buttons in the elevator suggested that the building contained both an underground parking and a basement complex, from which individual rooms or spaces could be rented alongside the apartments themselves.

Like Shinji's own place, the Mitsurugi residence had an automatic metal sliding door – all it took for it to open was for Nagato to pull a keycard through a slit in the wall.

"Is this really okay?" Shinji asked hesitantly, still unsure whether he should actually follow its resident inside. He wasn't sure if the obligations and significances of crossing this threshold were all clear to him.

Nagato seemed surprised about the question, though he was able to downplay if not completely conceal this, along with a certain sense of doubt lacing his measured features.

Beckoning him with a nod and as gesture, Nagato motioned for Shinji to enter first.

The apartment was nicely furnished, but not exceptionally large. Beyond a small wardrobe which offered a space to take of coats and shoes, they were met with an open area that combined the facilities of a kitchen, living room and dining room, from which three doors branched off, all of them neatly labeled with small, hand-carved wooden signs: One of them, in the shape of a tiny bath tub, was simply labeled 'Bath', the sign on the next door resembled a motor bike and, judging by its written tag('World's Best Dad'), must have been a gift, and the last contrasted the others by being a simple rectangular plate of stainless steel, with the words 'NAGATO'S ROOM' engraved in capital letters, which suggested that even though Mitsurugi senior seemed nearly as eccentric as Misato, he had a much better feeling for what boys their age might find embarrassing.

And his son's gratitude did not merely extent to gifting him grandmotherly wooden sign, which, despite what the NERV employee's rebellious hair length seemed to suggest, were something like his great weakness, and as such omnipresent in his kitchen despite the lack of feminine figures in his household - "Pots", "Plates", "Cutlery", every drawer had its own little wooden sign, often carved into a matching shape.

There were coffee mugs as well ('No #1 Dad') which he'd then go on to use to show the world just how proud he was of his junior, for example right now, as he sat on his desk, sorting through a plethora of files and reports full of numbers and diagrams.

Though he seemed to have been absentmindedly sipping at his coffee as he worked, Mitsurugi Minoru immediately put down his mug as he heard the boys' steps drawing nearer.

"Oh, Nagato! Welcome home!" he greeted with a broad, jovial grin. "And... oh, did you bring a visitor?" he seemed surprised about this.

"We wanted to work on our studies. Is it bad today?"

Smiling, the older man shook his head.

"Of course not! I keep telling you that you could bring some friends home with you. And you're helping out another student, too. That's practically something for me to brag about. But isn't this our Third Child?"

"Uh...yes..." Shinji confirmed.
The long-haired man got up from his seat and eagerly shook the EVA pilot's hand. "I'm honored to welcome you, Ikari-kun. Make yourself at home!

We've met a couple of times at headquarters. My name is Mitsurugi Minoru."

"Nice to meet you, Mitsurugi time."

"Nice to meet you, too!"

Throughout the whole greeting, Shinji's thoughts were not quite in the present, and he hoped that it hadn't shown. It was just the sheer casual banality with which this man had conversationally announced how he was going to 'brag' about his son as if it was the most normal thing in the world that had been deeply shocking to him, his sudden awareness that he couldn't even imagine this, to just... come home one day and incidentally find his father sitting at a table there. The older Mitsurugi was wearing a partially buttoned down white shirt and light skinny jeans that seemed to take a few years off his face. He made an all different impression compared to when he'd don his labcoat and his NERV uniform, way more insouciant and natural, more like a man that was only a few years' Misato's senior than an eccentric researcher or overly enthusiastic family man.

Shinji couldn't recall the last time he'd seen his own father in anything other than his NERV uniform. Though he was ostensibly right there in the room with the Mitsurugis, Shinji felt as if he were on some distant star, looking through a telescope to observe a distant, unfamiliar Sphere at the other end of the universe.

"Well then, good luck with your studies, you busy bees~" Mitsurugi noted, patting his son's shoulder in acknowledgment.

Shinji didn't think that he had ever received a single affectionate touch for as long as he could recall... no pats on the shoulder, no hugs, nothing...

He had, after all, been raised not by a family member with whom there would have been a certain intrinsic familiarity, but by a teacher, who was a trained professional doing his job for a salary. In this setting, any touch would have been improper.

Or no, that was no longer quite right.

Not since his arrival in Tokyo-3.

It may not have anything that happened on a regular basis, and most cases had involved embarrassing mishaps, but he could no longer claim in good faith that he did not know what human closeness felt like.

But still, compared to what most others took for granted, he knew laughably little of it.

Nagato's room was possessed of generous dimensions and numerous windows, all of which were, however, equipped with dark curtains that limited the influx of light which would otherwise have been very prominent during the daytime.

Apart from the occasional metallic surfaces, the furniture was kept if not black, then in dark colors, and the carpets continued this pattern.

The large bed and the desk, a black rolltop desk that could have passed for an antique were it not for its ample size, raised the suspicions that minimizing cost had not been a major deciding factor in their selection.
The numerous and diverse lamps draped in little groups on various free surfaces added a more personal touch.

What really attracted Shinji's gaze, though, was a grand pianoforte crafted from dark wood, stored away in a dark corner of the room as if to not draw attention to it.

"It belonged to my mother." Nagato explained, well aware of where his friend's gaze had strayed.

Shinji himself, feeling somewhat 'found out', went through some hesitation before gingerly speaking the question that had been on his mind to begin with: "...Do you play?"

That would be quite a thing, if they'd both secretly harbored an interest in classical music in all the time they had known each other, and were only finding out now.

But the bandaged boy spared him the embarrassment by shaking his head.

"Not really..." he admitted, not without a drop of melancholy in his voice.

"I tried to learn once, but, I'm not really suited to it. It's not like I'm not musical, but... When I was a small boy, it did not really hold my attention, I mean, a piano- back when I was a child, I used to think it was kind of old fashioned, I was more interested in learning something a little more modern... ironically, that was a keyboard for me. Almost the same, one might think, but the differences are there. Or perhaps, I just wasn't rigorous enough with the practice. As a small boy, I didn't fully understand that I wouldn't see my mother again, and now that I'm older, I'm all the more aware that I barely knew her. I thought that, if I started playing, I could meet her somehow, but in the end-

Excuse me. You probably don't wish to hear this. This isn't what you came for, after all. I'm truly sorry for the outburst..."

Looking rather self-conscious for a moment, Nagato reached into the breast pocket of his shirt to retrieve his reading glasses and place them onto his nose.

"We should probably start..."

But those last words didn't quite make it into Shinji's consciousness. Something else had captivated his attention, a commonality, a flaw of his own person which, once recognized in another person and seen from the outside, seemed only human and a feeling he'd felt very alone with up to this day.

"It's alright."

"Hm?"

"...it's not that old-fashioned, I mean, plenty of modern music has pianos in it, they never really went out of fashion..." The Third Child attempted a smile. "Just look at me! I play the Cello."

"...is that so?"

It was true that he hadn't made this fact known to very many people. He didn't want to draw attention or rouse expectations he would be unable to live up to.

"Don't think much of it, I'm terrible. My old teacher kept saying that I'd inherited my mother's talent, but I'm pretty sure he only said that so I wouldn't be disappointed. It's not like I need someone to tell me to notice that I'm no good..."
He used to be my mother's music teacher, back when he was younger. From what I've heard, she was a real prodigy, and that's how he came in contact with our family in the first place. He would tell me about her sometimes, but for me, she always remained something like a large shadow...

"Then..."

"Yeah, I'm the same as you. Except that I started early and still never got the hang of it..."

Behind his narrow reading glasses, Nagato's eyes were wide.

Was this the same expression Kensuke had received back at that campfire? It was strange to find himself in the reversed role, actually... changing things and doing others a service rather than just standing in everyone's way.

"So, uhm, weren't we going to get started?"

Nagato nodded with a subtle, yet clearly perceptible smile.

"So, what did you get for problem number two...?"

"I gave up on that one. I'm afraid I simply don't get it..."

"Then let me see... that's actually quite good."

"Those are only the basics."

"That's still the part where most people get stuck, if I may say so."

"Well, this, uhm..."

"So then. Let's continue..."

"This is the part where I got all confused. We're supposed to use the one formula if it's negative and the other one if the result is positive, but haven't got either of them memorized..."

"They'll probably be supplied on the test paper anyway. It's not as hard as it looks as long as you can remember the basic procedure. You just have to use an inequation to calculate the values for which the function becomes negative or positive... wait, I'll show you..."

"Maybe like this...?"

"Exactly. See? You almost worked it out by yourself. You shouldn't give up so quickly."

"Why do you keep asking me if you can do it this well?"

"I... wasn't sure, and besides, I'm not exactly doing it well..."

"Almost all of this is right, though, apart from some little slips of attention here and there, and those are probably just nerves."

"That's only because you explained it to me, Nagato..."

The younger Mitsurugi couldn't help but chuckle. "Shinji, there's no one who can learn this sort of thing without having it explained to them first. There's no shame in asking questions."
"I just don't want to bother anyone else, or, look like an idiot asking stupid questions..."

"Shinji, the teachers are *paid* to answer 'stupid questions'. They'll probably be glad to see that someone is interested in their lessons for a change. It's actually remarkable that you can do this just with a little explanation. You've got a good head on your shoulders, you just have to be more confident."

"Hello, you hardworking boys!"

The two of them had just taken care of math, physics, literature and their homework when the door opened to reveal Nagato's father.

"Fancy a little brainfood?"

"Uh, I... I really don't want to impose on you..." Shinji answered cautiously. His doubts regarding his own father and the mild intimidation he felt in regards to the older Mitsurugi's outgoing nature further complicated the usual tightrope dance between coming off as either greedy or ungrateful.

"No need to play it humble! The pizzas are already on their way. I took the liberty of ordering you a salami pizza since most people generally like that flavor. Is that alright for you?"

"Yes, Thank you very much."

"Don't worry about it! After all, every single person in this town owes you their lives several times over. The least I can do is buy you dinner."

His following laughter matched his long hair and informal manner of expression.

"Besides, any friend of Nagato's is a friend of mine. You can go ahead and let me serve you something to drink, the table is already set and if the phone operator is to be believed, the pizza should be here any moment!

Contrary to popular belief, I think that even education should be enjoyed in moderation."

Nagato himself simply smiled. "Thanks, Dad. We're coming right away, just let me finish reading this paragraph."

In the meantime, Shinji caught himself nearly putting away his pens though he had intended to continue working after the break – Even though the man of the house didn't seem like the sort to be overly fussy about correct procedure, Shinji hadn't really had a chance to embarrass himself in front of his friends' parents before – by the looks of it, the fathers of Touji and Kensuke were both very busy men of whom he'd only caught fleeting glimpses so far, and though he was already familiar with Rei's guardian, he barely 'counted' as he doubled as Shinji's own father.

So far, the elder Mitsurugi seemed to have a positive opinion of him, but that could probably be ascribed to his being an EVA pilot.

One way or another, they found the table already set when they left Nagato's room – Shinji had stood in wait for his friend to finish reading.

As for the older man, he asked them what drinks they might want and swiftly served them – Shinji gathered from his casual and well-prepared actions here that he must have taken over the household duties for lack of a spouse.
Shinji himself decided on some orange juice, whereas Nagato contented himself with a glass of mineral water while his father opted for a cold glass of lemon-flavored beer.

No sooner than everyone had moved over to their seats, the doorbell rang.

"That would be the Pizza." the long-haired man concluded. "Wait I sec, I'm just gonna-"

But Nagato had already risen to his feet before anyone else got the opportunity to do so.

For a split second, Shinji had been considering to go himself lest he come off as a lazy mooch, but his doubts as to whether he would find his way back had kept him seated.

"I'm going. I'll be right back."

And before Shinji even had the time to blink, the younger Mitsurugi had already departed towards their Pizza, which meant that Shinji was now alone with the elder.

"Don't forget to take the cash with you, Nagato!" he called after his son – before turning straight towards Shinji. "And as for you, there's really no need to be so shy."

"Uh... thanks... anyways." Shinji answered for lack of anything better to say.

"Not all! I should be the one thanking you, without question! You've done a lot for us."

"That was just because I had to, it's not exactly my achievement..."

"I don't mean your piloting. At least, not that alone."

Shinji eyed him dumbfoundedly.

If it wasn't this, then what? What else had he ever done that would be worthy of notice?

"I've got my very own reasons of being thankful to you, boy. As you probably noticed, my dear junior is a bit... reserved. It didn't help that he's been bullied over his good grades on some of his old schools. Children can be cruel sometimes... And because of my work concerning the project, we had to move a lot, sometimes to very remote areas, so he never really learned how to blend in with others his age. Even at home he's all alone, since I'm so busy. He's been very lonely at times, and this is the first time in years that he's ever brought a friend home with him.

He's told me everything about you and the other two, and how you went out of your way to include him. I owe you one for that."

Shinji... didn't know what to say.

"Did I embarrass you? I'm sorry. I can imagine that Commander Ikari would have made sure to drum the humility into you... if the way he acts at work has anything in common with what he's like at home, he must be a pretty strict father, right?"

If only. That would at least imply that his Father had some concern about Shinji's manners and upbringing.

How would Shinji even know what he acted like in private?

Perhaps he was strict with Rei – but if he was, it surely wasn't in your usual 'go and clean up your room!' kind of way.
In any case, as far as Shinji himself was concerned, it would seem that his father couldn't care less about what he did or didn't do.

"No, I don't think he is."

"Well! That's not that surprising either. It's not like my own home life is anything like people probably imagine it... I still wonder what it is that I did wrong – and try as I might, in the end I've never been able to replace Nagato's mother. I was very hurt by her death myself and maybe... maybe I was too absorbed with my own grief to help Nagato deal with his – even though he was the one who found her, that day, and at such a young age, too...

– And with my work, even I wasn't even there for him as much as I could have been.

You know, when my wife first died, I considered sending him off to a boarding school, where he'd be looked after by qualified people, and be around other gifted children on his own level.

Sometimes, I wonder if I didn't make the wrong decision back then..."

"No way!"

Shinji was just as surprised about the intensity of his reaction as the man sitting across him. For once, the long-repressed feelings inside of him refused to be restrained.

Before the the NERV researcher had revealed this train of thought, he'd always pictured the Mitsurugis as being the exact opposite of his own family, a diametric counterpart, but now...

Could it be...?

"There's no way that could be better, Mitsurugi-san...! I mean... Don't you see how important you are to Nagato? He has nothing but praise for you!

It's because of you that his life isn't... worse... than it is..."

"It's okay kid! Thanks. I suppose you're right..."

Nagato's father pointed an understanding glance at the many gifts that decorated the room.

"By the way, now that we're talking of fathers and the like... I don't suppose you could put in a good word for me with your old man?" he asked with a grin, perhaps in an attempt to lighten the mood of the conversation before Nagato could return and inquire about their long faces. "Just casually mention what a nice and hospitable guy old Mitsurugi is when you get home, okay? I could always use a raise or a better post."

"I'm afraid you're asking the wrong person for that, Mitsurugi-san..."

"What do you mean?"

Normally, Shinji preferred avoid this particular subject, but this near perfect counterexample threw as much fuel into the fires of his anger and disappointment as it took to loosen his tongue: "My father and I... aren't speaking with each other. We barely have anything to do with each other at all! When I 'get home', I will be heading to Misato's place. That's where I've been living, ever since I arrived in Neo Tokyo 3. – Ah, 'Misato' is Captain Katsuragi's first name. In any case, I'm staying with her.

The person you're asking me to talk to is basically my superior, and nothing else!"
The loathing in his words was quiet and subdued, but audible nonetheless.

"That is..."

One could imagine that the older Mitsurugi had some variety of thoughts and feelings about this – for him, this must have been an abrupt encounter with the path not taken. But before he found the time to gather his words, the door swung open to reveal his son with three cardboard boxes full of pizza in tow, inadvertently scattering the heavy, gloomy mood that had started looming over the room as he moved in to deposit them on the table, and as if by some unspoken agreement, the topic of conversation shifted to trivial small talk such as the current subjects being covered at their school and the terror of the second child, and everyone proceeded to have a good time, which didn't change that some things remained unsaid, as, perhaps, they should.

"So, I'd say that's enough for today." announced Nagato after he'd allowed himself to flop down on his bed in exhaustion. "It's getting rather late, too, we wouldn't want Katsuragi-san to get worried."

"I guess you're right..." Shinji agreed, already in the careful process of putting his things back into his schoolbag. "Thanks for everything again."

"Don't worry about it. If you ever have problems with your schoolwork again, you can always ask me for help."

"...Thanks. I'll be going then-"

"Wait a bit!"

Nagato sat back up and pulled something out of a drawer in his nightstand. "I've got something for you here."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's call it a token of friendship. I've been wanting to give it to you for some time now, but I suppose I chickened out so far... I've noticed how you always carry that old-fashioned cassette player with you, and I guess it made me think of something you might enjoy."

In his hands, the boy with the bandaged head held a collection of dusty old cassettes which he eagerly presented to the Third Child.

"They used to belong to my father. He was a bit of a rebel back in his youth, and I suppose you can still tell by his hair. I asked him and he said you could have it, he's got all of this as MP3s anyways."

"I – can't accept this..."

"I insist on it."

"What kind of music is this, anyways?"

"Mostly Grunge and Nu Metal, I think. Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Tool, Linkin Park, that type of thing. My father tried to spark my enthusiasm, but I'm afraid this was never really my style, but, I can imagine that you'd like it. I'm sorry if you already have all of these..."

Shinji wondered where Nagato had gotten that impression of him.

To be honest, the repertoire of what he kept blasting his ears with mostly included ordinary pop
songs, the sort of which the radio played every day. It was his own selection thereof, chosen from
the more downbeat corners and interspersed with the occasional piece of classical music, but he'd
always shied away from everything that was considered hard loud or rebellious. He'd have worried
what his old teacher would think of it.

As for the bands and artists Nagato had just listed, he was only familiar with the names, in part
because of the older, wealthy people that had occasionally frequented his teacher's place and their
complains about the 'nihilistic' and 'anarchist' media that was supposedly spoiling today youth.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but, what makes you think I would like this?"

It wasn't a complaint but a sincere question, an inquiry into how he was being perceived –
nonetheless, the reply seemed to disarm Nagato for a moment, but then, his expression changed
into a melancholy smile.

"You just seemed the type, I guess. Like someone with a sullen, rebellious streak...

You know when I first saw you, my first impression was that you were someone like me. Someone
who's had to bury certain dreams a long time ago, a deeply sad and resigned person..."

It was hard to believe that Nagato would describe himself as such with a smile. It was painful to
look at him, and Shinji wondered if Misato had felt the same looking at
him
when they first met. Somehow, this seemed to make her behavior back in the day more comprehensible.

"But when I got to know you better, I came to realize that we're more different than I thought. You
probably think that you should have given up, but you haven't.

I think somewhere deep down, you've got a lot of anger going on... or, well, that was just my
impression, and so I thought that maybe some angry music would be something you'd like-"

It surprised Shinji that someone would see him this way – it didn't fit his own image of himself and
made him wonder where Nagato could be coming from.

"You know, one thing that we do have in common is that we can be somewhat reluctant around
others, and how we try to be as polite as possible out worry that we could be doing something
wrong..."

"I know... It's just like Shikinami says, I'm a wuss..."

"I used to think the same of myself when I was younger... and you know what my father told me?
'Nagato, stop talking nonsense. You're just a nice person and you don't need to be ashamed of
that.'"

Shinji wished that he'd have someone who could have told him such things.

"Whether it's wanting to be liked by others, or to avoid fights, those are both perfectly normal. It's a
natural part of living with others as part of a group.

Actually, it couldn't hurt Miss Shikinami to follow your example and act a little more agreeably.
On the other hand, I've made the experience that you can't really be happy if you're always playing
some part. At least in the quiet of your room, with your music and your computers and so on, or
whatever your hobby is, you should be able to be your true self."

"Is that so? I don't know, especially about that 'true self' part – just because it's 'true' doesn't mean
that it's always good. For all you know, my 'true self' could be the worst person imaginable!"
"Are you afraid to find out?" Nagato replied. "Don't worry. I'm positive that your true self has to be an impressive, interesting person. Maybe a bit more intense than you're comfortable being right now, but- I'm sure you're a great person."

"And how could you possibly know that?"

"Because you do great things. That's the only way you can ever know any person – by their actions."

If only...

"I... I'll give the cassettes a listen. " the Third Child surrendered, packing them into his bag. "Thanks, Nagato. It was an interesting experience to come here... I think. Really, thanks."

Nagato sighed in a fond manner. "How many more times, it's me who should be thanking you. You're always welcome here. Should I ask my father to drive you home?"

"No thanks, I'll manage. ...but, Nagato, there is one thing I've been wondering..."

By the time Shinji spoke those last sentences, he was already standing in the doorway.

"What is it? Ask away."

Shinji believed that they should now be sufficiently acquainted for this not to come off as nosey.

"Please don't think anything strange about this, I was really just wondering, but... wha happened to you?"

Nagato took a moment to realize what he was referring to.

"Ah, you mean the bandage? That happened some time before we moved here, a couple of months ago. My father brought me with him to the lab to watch his big experiment and on this day of all days, something went wrong. There was an explosion, and I barely made it out. Some people even died... and well, I guess this kind of injury takes a good while to heal."

Walking home in the fading dusk, Shinji couldn't help but incredulously look at his hands as he opened and closed them, sometimes slower, sometimes faster.

He barely recognized himself in the person Nagato and his father had been speaking about.

Could he really make this sort of difference?

There were many people whom he wanted to help, many whom he wanted to protect, but the whole thing sounded preposterous... The great hero that everyone else seemed to be talking about barely resembled him. It was all one big misunderstanding, owed solely to his being an EVA pilot.

If anyone had gotten it right at all, it was probably Asuka – He was a weakling who couldn't even stand up for the things he cared about.

All his good intentions were utterly worthless if he couldn't enact them in reality.

Everyone had all those huge expectations of him, and the day his streak of beginner's luck ran out, he'd be forced to thoroughly disappoint them – He'd practically had it prophesied to him, not that he needed a prophecy to know it. If Asuka didn't tell him, then the next available mirror would.
He'd always been deeply afraid that people would hate him, but now, he was beginning to realize that being unjustly admired might be more terrifying than being justly hated.

Everything was so vague and uncertain...

When he arrived back home, he found the table covered instant meal packages. In his Absence, Misato must have 'volunteered' to provide Asuka & PenPen with something resembling Dinner and especially the former assured him that she was none too happy about that, as if his general existence wasn't annoying enough.

Was she seriously still upset about what happened this morning?

She usually burned herself out faster than that, or maybe that confrontation had been the last straw?

He'd never understand her...

One way or another, his own path led him straight back to him room, where he intended to listen to some Nagato's cassettes before going to sleep.

He put the first one into the player, plugged the headphones into his ears, leaned back and pressed the 'Play'-button... and then, it was as if he'd finally found the words to describe the feelings that he'd been harboring for a long time, but never found the words to express, and he knew that he wasn't the only one with these doubts, or with these feelings.

As soon as this night has embraced him, its mysterious ways send him back on his journey.

Loose and silent amid the contracting darkness, unsure of what to become, he found himself in the black depths of an ocean, where no light shone.

There was nothing but deathly silence, and both the bottom and the surface were far beyond his sight – and that's exactly why he had closed his eyes a long, long time ago.

There was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to do.

There was nothing but the trickling sands of time and the process by which he slowly adapted to the cold of his surroundings.

It was no wide, open darkness, but a small, enclosed one, and he had no reason to suspect that anyone would ever find him here

- So why did it take little more than a tiny glittering, a premonition of brightness to rouse him from his curled up position in the middle of the vast nothingness and lead him to strive toward the source of the light, open wide, rising like helium, higher and higher, toward the light and the gold and the many wonders he'd never known before, surrendering to the sun like a moth to a lamp although he knew that he'd only get burned?

The reflection he saw as he neared the surface wasn't anything he would recognize, but he didn't get to examine it in detail before it was extinguished, either through himself breaking through the surface, or the sound of his alarm clock...

The day before, he'd set his alarm particularly early; He'd considered to meet Nagato at his doorstep, in part to give back what he had received, but also for a chance to be alone with him. He
wanted a silent minute to confirm to Nagato that he'd chosen exactly the right gift and appreciate a quiet moment together in ways that the rest of their little group wouldn't.

The other two were indispensable for purging the air between them of the melancholy it sometimes acquired; It was just that for each of the three, there were a couple of things that could only be discussed under four eyes.

Admittedly, another part of Shinji's motive was to evade the still-seething Asuka. The more time passed without resolving their differences, the more he feared that he may have driven her off for good.

Nagato was conceivably flattered by the gratitude but true to himself he was somewhat reluctant in expressing it.

Again, the topic of discussion went over Shinji's head, but this time, he managed to work up the courage to ask follow-up questions, resulting in the slightly older boy apologizing profusely and insisting that he hadn't meant to come off as arrogant. Nagato had himself considered to explain the topic, but he'd been afraid that he'd sound even more like a know-it-all if he did this. He wasn't really familiar with what most others would regard as 'normal' topics.

Shinji merely replied that it wasn't Nagato's fault if he didn't understand it and that there was no reason to apologize.

No reason to apologize, hm? Was it that what Asuka had meant back then? Then again, it had been a whole different thing in a whole other context and it wasn't like he understood any of this...

Nagato spoke then with sudden severity: "But there is one thing that I can't stop wondering, Shinji... Yesterday, my thoughts were in a whole different place, but that's precisely why I can't help but notice it today. You mentioned that you lost your mother, just as I did."

"Uhm, yes..."

"And you know how Touji always tells us how his father is always busy and how there's no one but him to look after his sister... and, remember that time we were at Kensuke's place? There was no room in that apartment for a mother.

And the Second Child lives with Katsuragi-san, just like yourself, so we can probably assume that she's an orphan as well. I've never really thought about it, after Second Impact, it's not that unusual, but now that you, too...

Tell me, Shinji, what of Ayanami? Are her parents still alive?"

Shinji didn't understand what Nagato meant, but he had a feeling, a half-conscious observation he'd never dared to pursue any further.

"She lives on her own, and her legal guardian is- he's the Commander of NERV."

"As I thought." Nagato's expression darkened, and he turned to look directly into Shinji's eyes.

"Do you know of anyone in our class whose biological mother is still alive?"

No, he didn't.

Incapable of denying the self-evident truth that shone at him from all possible angles, Shini gaped at his friend.
"What... is the meaning of this?"

"I don't know. And hearing that you don't know either worries me even more."

When he saw the panic spreading through the EVA pilot's face, he felt duty-bound to add something more to that: "From a sober perspective, all that means is that there must be some connection between our class and the project, beyond just you three being part of it. That explains what Kensuke told us, about how this class got so few new students when the city's population was still growing, and why we're the only ones to get new students as everyone else keeps fleeing to the countryside. And since I was placed in this class myself, that would mean that whatever this means also concerns my own person.

But ultimately, the upshot of this is just that our lives and our safety depend on you and the other pilots. In that sense, this is nothing new."

Great. Another piece of disconcerting knowledge that he couldn't discuss with anyone.

First the visions inside his EVA, those strange dreams, 'The World is Wrong' and now this...

"Why... why of all people do I have to know all those terrible things I can't talk to anyone about!"

"Perhaps, so you can use that knowledge to save us all?"

That must have been Ichijou Yui's thoughts as well, and the reason why she'd approached him in the first place. He was trying to 'use' this knowledge but, that meant that it all depended on him.

On him, who couldn't stop earning Asuka's wrath when it was her heart he was after, on him, who couldn't manage to become a support for Ayanami, on him, whom even his own father couldn't stand the sight of...

That Asuka didn't spare him one glance upon his arrival in the classroom was barely surprising. It was Rei's absence that shook him with a small jolt of fright when he first noticed it – what if yesterday's experiment had gone wrong after all?

No, in that case, Misato would have told him, if not yesterday evening, then this morning. She was absent all the time, it was barely anything special for her, not that this was a reason not to be worried, especially given all those pills she tended to keep on top of her fridge...

Absorbed in his brooding, Shinji barely noticed the lessons rushing by, and since he didn't feel like explaining his sour mood to his friends, he decided to depart toward the school library before the sound of the bell had time to dissipate in full.

He'd never really been there, but he knew that it existed, and he knew what door supposedly lead to it – His usual spot on the school roof would have been too obvious, and libraries could, almost per definition, be reasonably expected to be quiet, secluded places.

The greatest advantage of a silent place associated with Nerds and loners was undoubtedly that the chance of running into Asuka there was probably below zero; If she were to find and mock him on top of everything else, it would be more than he'd be able to take right now.

But even if he was correct in his assumption that Asuka would treat this sort of place like the Bermuda triangle and that his friends would look for him on the roof, he neglected to consider that he couldn't possibly be the only one among hundreds of teenaged students who was currently looking for a bit of piece and quiet, so that he allowed himself to sink into his thoughts beyond the
degree that would be advisable if one wished to avoid collisions with one's fellow students.

Thus, Murphy's law struck again when a likewise distracted girl with a couple of books under her arms and another in front of her nose happened to be walking into his general direction: Baboom!

The literature immediately began its journey to the floor, where they scattered themselves openly before her feet.

Shinji instantly expected reproach and sought to apologize, but to his great surprise, whatever bookworm he'd nearly mowed down preempted him with her quiet, adorable voice, mumbling a hasty "...E-Excuse me!"

Feeling no less guilty, Shinji immediately followed up with an "A-Are you alright?"

Crap! Why did such things keep happening to him?

You'd think he was the clumsiest person in the galaxy...

Fortunately, the unfortunate girl immediately assured him that she was just fine, and immediately inquired how things were on his end.

"It's okay..." he answered, making a point to sound friendly.

And then, well, then she slightly turned her head to the side and surprised him with a beaming smile.

"Thank goodness..."

He was immediately taken with her.

It was the sort of simple, genuine smile that the beautiful and radiant ones of this world had long since forgotten, a gentle, unpretentious gesture not intended to demand a particular response.

But he thought that he'd seen her before somewhere, with that long, black hair, the beauty mark under her lips and the light grey eyes that shone even through her glasses.

Recognition began to trickle into Shinji's consciousness, but didn't fully arrive until she bent down to gather up her books. "I'm really, really sorry." she repeated, even though it was him who had crashed into her.

"I should have been more careful..."

There! Now he remembered!

"You're..."

Yamagishi Mayumi, the girl who'd transferred in yesterday.

"Oh right, we're in the same class."

Aww.

That smile could melt him where he stood. He better get his gentleman act on, perhaps he could still salvage the blotched first impression from yesterday.

"I'm Ikari Shini." He bent down as well in order to look her in the face. "Do you want me to help..."
"It's fine, it was my fault anyways..."

"Uh-Uh. You can't have been the only one who was spacing out..."

"I'm really, really sorry-"

"There's no need to apologize."

Now, Shinji intended to defuse the awkward situation by gathering up her books as fast as possible, but unfortunately, Mayumi had the exact same idea, so that her fingers were reaching for the same book at the same time and as such, brushed against Shinji's.

Frightened by the foreign unfamiliar sensation of warmth, both pulled back their hands reflexively.

"I-I'm so sorry!" was all Mayumi could manage to say, avoiding his gaze in shame.

Shinji himself, alas, could not string any coherent words together: "Ehm... Er... Well..."

Quick, quick, something to talk about...!

"Uhm, were you going to borrow these books?"

Great, the dumbest question on Earth.

"Well, yes, I, I like books so that's why-" feeling that his presence was at least halfway tolerated due to her answer, Shinji took it upon himself to gather the remaining volumes. "...So that's why?" he repeated with interest as he handed her the books. It seemed like the simplest way to answer and to signal that he was paying attention to her and hey! She actually turned her face back in his direction, even if she kept her gaze lowered and her expression suggested that she found this whole situation deeply unpleasant.

"So nothing, really..." Intent on escaping the gaze of other humans at least for a moment, she was the first to rise to her feet, even though he follow her swiftly.

She used the split-seconds this afforded her to compose herself and put on a smile, lest he read something accusatory into her discomfort.

"Uhm, Thanks alot-"

"Don't mention it." Shinji answered with a placating smile that he hoped would relax her a little. He'd expected that it might not work, but Mayumi's actual reply was unlike anything he'd imagined or played out in his mind.

"Uhm, yesterday, at the pool... You were looking at me, weren't you?"

"Eh... Eh... Ehhhh!"

"I – Is fine, I really don't mind, uh..."

And well, with those words, she darted off like a startled hare, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Great, so now she thought that he was some perverted peeing tom and a careless ruffian who runs into people. He should be ashamed.
By now, he was beginning to wonder whether there was some yet undiscovered law of nature that sharply increased the possibility of embarrassing accidents whenever he was in the vicinity of pretty girls... on the other hand, her reaction hadn't been as straightforward as a simple 'you pervert'.

Then again, it was hard to say what opinion she'd been meaning to state, given that she'd had some difficulty expressing herself.

It was strange...

All in all, this Mayumi person left him with the impression that she was fairly shy, and then there was all this apologizing, even though he was the one at fault.

Was it this what Asuka had meant?

The Events sparked chains of thought, but didn't really lead those to any firm conclusions, except perhaps that the first impression he'd had of this girl, the idea that she was like him somehow hadn't been completely wrong.

Mayumi didn't allow herself to move until she was certain that she'd heard the door slamming shut behind her.

Only then did she sink to her knees, wrap her arms around the pile of books she was carrying, and loudly bemoaned her own piteousness.

That boy... that 'popular kid' that neither looked nor acted like one... he must think that she meant to call him a pervert or something, which wasn't what she had wanted. This hadn't turned out the way she wanted it to, quite the opposite if anything, and on top of that, she'd embarrassed herself and, she'd run into him too.

Serves her right for daydreaming. All she really wanted was just- It was so hard to put into words. She shouldn't have tried in the first place.

It was just that Mayumi always hated to be looked at or even noticed by others – she feared their dismissive judgments and their condescending laughter, the fate that invariable awaited her... but when this boy, who was suppedly popular with the local girls, had chosen to look at her of all people back at the pool, it had been different, different from all the other times – for once, it was almost a delight to have been watched, to have been chosen among all the beauties around as if she wear someone special, even someone beautiful and desirable...

It was perhaps the first time in her life that she'd been the target of flattery, and she'd thought he should know that, but when she'd stood before him, she'd simply ran away without managing a single coherent sentence.

Now that she'd though, if only for a moment, that something could change, everything staid the same and she was all the more tired of it for it, tired of it all, tired of her paralyzing speechlessness, her ugliness, her incompetence and that constant discomfort that sapped her energy – today it was even worse that yesterday, to the point that she'd been sorely tempted to ask the teachers more a moment to go outside and catch some fresh air... she couldn't even think of the last time she hadn't felt awful.

But it was no use complaining, this awful day was about to continue, and she had to get a move on if she had any intention to do any more reading before the bell signalled the end of recess.
Holding on to one of the many bookshelves, she rose to her feet and looked around for the entrance to these still unfamiliar rooms... and then, all the books slid out of her hands and were scattered to the floor with a series of loud 'thuds.'

She felt a pain that made her wonder how it could exist in this world, almost as if someone had detonated a nuclear warhead in her stomach whose fiery mushroom cloud now burned like a newborn sun.

Memories spilled forth of long-denied, abominable occurrences and long-forgotten, ill-remembered times in which she'd found herself somewhere with no memory of how she got there and no explanation that she could have given in case of questioning adults, a buried chest of quiet, whispering voiced that assured her that she'd never be happy ever again, and that everything she had ever known was marked for destruction, doubting, questioning, accusing voices that had been nourished by her fears.

Her hands moved over her ignited center – what was this? What could it be? Where could that horrid pain possibly be coming from, what organs were supposed to be in that spot again?

Helplessly, she fell down on all fours.

She felt as if she were about to burst open like an overripe fruit, as if her innards were to spill out with nothing to hold them back... she was hot, she was nauseous, and everything around her seemed to be blurring together – She couldn't even seem to breathe, for some kind of hellish pressure seemed to be driving the air from her lungs as it had transformed itself into a viscous liquid, or even frozen into sharp crystal spines that were now piercing her tissues from the inside.

She'd already begun to make her peace with the certainty that she would just die here and never know what hit her when the ordeal took a turn for the worse, exceeding even her wildest dreams and darkest fears.

There was this stirring, this gross, biological sensation in her innermost, an agonizing, dribbling contraction.

By the time she fully recognized what it was, her school uniform was thoroughly drenched in her own cold sweat: A heartbeat. It was a heartbeat, a foreign, thundering heartbeat that wasn't her own.

She knew that this could not be, but as absurd as it may have sounded, it was real, and every single of its was akin to being crucified and broken on the wheel a thousand times.

She wanted to scream, but she couldn't. Her mouth was wide open and her face contorted, but no sound would escape her lips, as if they had been muted by a remote control. The certainty that no one would come to her aid even though she was inside a school building, technically surrounded by hundreds of students felt like ice in her veins; she'd wanted to hide herself from view, and so hidden she was to remain as she tumbled to the floor and prayed for a quick end – it's not like she'd ever had anything to keep her in the first place.

"No more..." she whimpered, her pleas barely more than a strangled rasp escaping her throat.

The pain was like an incandescent light that outshone anything else in her consciousness. Her flimsy excuse for willpower and such an absurd self-flagellating eho as her own were all too easily overwhelmed – Who was she? What was her name? Who or what was important to her? There was nothing in Mayumi’s life that would have been worth holding on to in spite of this agony – her mind was blank, completely bleached out save for this soul-splitting pain and a plea that sweet death
might take her, or that she might at least find release in the tender embrace of unconsciousness – there had got to be a point at which the pain would be too strong to be felt continuously -

But the entity whose infernal heartbeat had taken possession of her was yet far from done with her and most certainly not contended with making her writhe in pain – The being had known her for a long, long time.

It had watched her grow up, and it still had plans for her, plans that required her to become a tool for the destruction of her beloved world.

Wait, beloved? No.

She had no real attachment to this world, nor to any of the people that dwelt within it – After all, none of them had shown themselves to be attached to her, at least not enough for her to refuse the sweet arms of temptation in their name, especially if they promised an end to her suffering as she lay smothered by the heavy crushing presence that came over her and demanded her soul, or rather, came to take it back.

Drunken with pain, she was incapable of resisting the alien being's commands, and whatever may have remained of Mayumi within her fleshy shell had long since begun to attribute all of this to a fever dream – or perhaps, the person called Mayumi Yamagishi had been the dream, the scattered memories of her life nothing but a convenient fantasy to offer respite from the truth – or, if she had existed, she was most certainly dead now, she had to be, it simply wasn't possible that she'd ust be able to stand up after all this as if nothing had happened, not without leaving her corpse strewn across a nearby corner, and she was almost certain that that's exactly what she would have seen if he were to turn around now – except she wouldn't dare, she was far too afraid to look bad, and that left her with nowhere to go but forward.

Onwards, march, march, just as the Angel of Illusion commanded it – First in a stagger, hem, increasingly with an almost frightening normalcy, she was sent into motion – how could it be that no one could even see how she was buring up on the inside?

……CLOSER...

She kept on putting one foot in front of the other.

Her skin had acquired the coloration of fresh printing paper.

She knew that she'd arrived at the school with her bike, she'd certainly be much faster if she took it.

……CLOSER...

What was she even doing?

She felt it right beneath her skin, the beast that was just about to awaken.

……CLOSER...

Approaching Asuka was no easy feat.

This wasn't something Shinji had fully appreciated before she'd decided to give him the cold shoulder for a while – Even though he'd known her for quite a bit at this point, he'd never walked up to her seat during recess in order to talk to her – usually there would be very little need of that, as Asuka had never been too reluctant to come to him when she had something to say to him.
Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea after all to avoid her this morning – it would have been far easier to confront her in the safety of their shared apartment with Misato there to serve as an arbiter, or, at least, one-on-one on their way to school than it was now that she was standing in a crowd of girls with Hikari at her side, eagerly trash-talking some random celebrity's allegedly 'slutty' clothing.

But it couldn't be helped – by now, he had given up hope that she'd eventually come around on her own.

"Uh, Shikinami-san, do you have a minute?" he asked reluctantly, calling into the crowd which promptly fell silent – once again, all eyes were directed towards him, and it occurred to him that he should have recognized this as as terrible idea.

It was too late to go back now though.

"What do you want?" she retorted immediacy, no less hostile than she had been this morning. "Have you come to ruin yet another day for me?"

As usual, she got straight to the point and straightened out her back as she spoke so she could look down at him from her full height.

"It's not like that..."

Gathering all the wits he could muster, he forced himself to look her in the eyes and spill the beans right away – for even if she didn't, she'd insist on extracting a satisfying answer from him.

"I... I wanted to apologize to you!"

"Apologize?" Crossing her arms in front of her chest, Asuka eyes him sourly.

Wasn't that exactly what she'd been telling him not to do?

Still, it was a marked improvement to see that dork make his way here and come speak to her in front of all these other girls, enough, perhaps, to justify listening to what he had to say.

"So..." he began soon after they had arrived on the school building's roof. "Are you still angry because of what happened yesterday morning?"

Asuka couldn't believe her ears. How much more obvious did she have to make things for him to finally get a clue? She was going out of her way to make it clear as it was.

"This is not about that stupid thing from yesterday! And even if it was, it's not like listening to you talking is going to change what happened. I don't need your useless dramatics!"

"I know!" Shinji countered. "I know I can't undo what happened, but I still want to apologize..."

What else could he do at this point? It wasn't like he could turn back time!

He was just trying to be nice and get along with her, which was more than what could be said about her.

"Save your breath!" Asuka spat, without even pausing to think. "I'd much rather prefer it if you acted like a real man for a change."

"What does that even mean?!"
Before Asuka got around to explaining the difference between him and a 'real man' in gratuitous
detail, the 'peace and quiet' of the school roof was interrupted by a shrill noise – or
rather, two sources of such noises.

Immediately, the Children exchanged a knowing glance – the very fact that their phones were both
ringing at the same time left little doubt as to what awaited them...

"Analysis complete!" reported Lt. Ibuki. "Pattern Blue confirmed. It's an Angel, and it's the exact
same one we had on our sensors yesterday!"

Aoba forwarded the target's position to Misato – it had appeared in a rural area some distance
outside of Tokyo-3.

"Understood. All hands to battle stations!"

"Aye Ma'am!" Hyuuga confirmed.

"What about the Angel's power? If it could move without being noticed, why didn't it sneak up to
our doorstep? What reason could it have to manifest outside of the city?"

"Who knows..." Akagi speculated. "Perhaps it's a trap and it's waiting for us to attack."

"Well I'm sorry but I'd rather not wait and see what it does. What's Commander Ikari's thought on
the matter?"

"He told us to proceed at your discretion." Hyuuga detailed.

"Alright! What's the status of the Evangelions?"

"EVA 00 has been on standby all along and is ready to go. Units One and Two are being brought
online as we speak."

"And what about the pilots?" Misato inquired.

"They're already in their plugs and awaiting orders."

"Very well. Connect me to the children..- Shinji-kun? Asuka? Rei? Can you hear me?"

The enemy's capabilities are still unknown but we have reason to suspect that it can somehow
bypass our sensors. It wouldn't be the first time that we lost or only barely escaped a battle because
the enemy displayed some unforeseen power that we weren't prepared for. That's why one or two
of you are going to stay behind in case the vanguard is taken out faster than we can do something
about it. Above all, we have to avoid a situation in which all three of you are put out of
commission all at once. Are you following me so far?"

"Whaaaaat?" Asuka bristled. "So not all of us will participate in the fight?"

"That would depend on the strength of the enemy."

"And which of us gets to go first?"

Well. That, indeed, might be the million dollar question.

Rei had the lowest synch ratio and EVA 00 was still plagued by technical difficulties so they could
forget sending her out on her own. The same was true for Asuka: Left to her own devices, she was
sure to fall victim to her own recklessness, and sending out both girls together wasn't even worth considering. Of course, both of them had proven on various occasions that they could be expected to work with Shinji, even though it may have taken some prodding in Asuka's case... it might make sense to send out Shinji and Rei to keep the potential for squabbles as low as possible while reserving Asuka's considerable fighting power as an ace up their sleeves, but then again, one could never be cautious enough with those things.

"I think it may be best to send out Shinji in Unit One first of all." she finally decided. He was, after all, the most experienced in terms of actual combat and while he might be liable to lose his nerve, that was far less likely if he knew that reinforcements could be sent right away. And if something did go wrong, the girls would be able to bail him out.

"Unacceptable!" Asuka complained. "Why am I not being sent? Of all the pilots, I have the greatest chance to take it out by myself! The most dangerous parts should be my job, not that of those two little children!"

"That's exactly why you're staying behind." Misato explained. "In case something goes wrong, you'll have to be our secret weapon."

Asuka wasn't all that convinced. "Bah!"

And so it came to pass that Shinji was sent to face the enemy on his own, with only Unit One itself for company.

Armed with an oversized rifle, he spotted the creature behind a hill, observing as it spun around its axis in silence.

It's lack of overt attacks only served to further the Third Child's irritation – He knew that Asuka and Rei could be sent to his aid at a moment's notice if anything were to go wrong, but the antsy mammalian fear circuits of his brain would prefer it if he could see them.

It had been a while since his last Solo sortie, he felt reminded of his earlier deployments, in many of which he hadn't exactly splattered himself with glory – he supposed that being allowed back out here by himself could be seen as proof that he'd regained Misato's trust in full since his early blunders.

The angel itself was shaped like an oblong ellipsoid standing on its tip, with six insectoid legs that ended in tiny five-pronged claw-studded 'hands'. As Shinji had come to expect from the likes of it, the creature's main body was no less bizarre: Upon closer observation, the Angel's body consisted of several disks that appeared to be spinning around the same axis – that aside, there seemed to be nothing physically connecting them, and one could discern that their inner sides coruscated in different colors, forming a rainbow along the length of the creature. The disks of themselves were composed or at least covered in hair-like bristles, resembling the coat of an insect such as a bumblebee.

Shinji thought back to what Yui had told him, but it refused to make sense – She'd said something about a power outage, but as far as he could tell nothing of the sort had happened. She'd also spoken about Asuka hatching a plan, but now, she wasn't even here, though there was at least one part of her warning that was still applicable to the current situation: Her assurance that 'shooting should work for once'.

So, Shinji released the safety on his rifle and took aim... but at what?

The creature's structure was fairly straightforward, but it was the most crucial part: Where in the
world was the core? He couldn't see it anywhere.

"Misato-san? Where do I shoot...?"

It was not Misato's, but Lt. Ibuki's voice that sounded from the intercom: "We can't locate the core. It must be further on the inside."

*What* inside, though? That thing was practically see-through.

"Perhaps it will be easier to find once we've shot some holes into it." the leader of the operations division suggested "Try the center and both poles."

"Roger."

Shooting was supposed to work for one, eh? He would have to take her voice for it. Resolute, he emptied a whole salvo into the being, generously filling its center with center with bullets while giving priority to its middle and its ends – if one considered what results a failure would imply, it couldn't hurt to make sure.

There were sparks and several booming impact sounds, so there could be no doubt that the projectiles had struck – he hadn't missed the angels, and the bullets hadn't just phased through it either... so why wasn't there the slightest sign of damage to be seen?

The angel didn't show the slightest dent, not even a stretch...

And it was no longer inactive, either. Leaning to the side as if it wanted to join the tips of its component cogs on its left, it prepared an attack that turned out to be a broad, wide-area laser beam in the shape of a cross.

Shinji barely managed to dodge, but the ground he'd just been standing on was now burned to ash. The being shot again, forming a sun-like halo of ash-crosses around it which Shinji only barely managed to evade – he'd never had the fastest of reflexes but the adrenaline, past experiences and the training he'd received since his arrival were beginning to prove effective.

Even so, his successful dodges were enough to for the angel to switch strategies – and odd wobble went through its shape, leading up to the central segment detaching from the fold of its disk-like members, speeding towards the still kneeling Evangelion like some kind of lethal frisbee.

Despite or perhaps because of the worried shouting clamoring from the control center, the Third Child managed to duck just in time – and more than that: While the violet giant's body had essentially been made to throw itself to the side to avoid the hostile disk, its young pilot had actually succeeded in catching it, grasping it firmly with Unit One's right hand – that didn't mean that its motion has stopped, quite the opposite, the object seemed to spin faster and faster even while held in the EVA's hand, likely in an effort to escape; The friction between the test type's palm and the alien body part it was grasping rapidly filled all involved surfaces with heat, and even sparks could be seen flying, and the angel's bristly surface painfully dug into the giant cyborg's hand – but Shinji seemed determined to end this and held on tight, pulling up his other arm in order to spray the disk with all remaining bullets in his weapon.

No effect – the recoil even pushed the beast's detached center from his grasp, allowing it to wriggle free of his grip and rip a portion of flesh out of the Evangelion's palm in the process.

The hand was still largely working, but it hurt like hell.

"It's no use...!" Misato concluded. "Try another weapon!"
Damnit. This was nothing like that Yui person had predicted it. He was truly on his own then, but the foaming panic that he could feel building up in the rushing of his veins was a distraction he couldn't afford right now.

"I need to go to him! I was mistaken about something important, and now he's got wrong information! He's counting on me!"

"What are you talking about, girl? There's a fight happening out there. Do you want to die?"

"No one is going to die if only you'd let me get to him!"

"'Him'? Who are you even talking about?"

That, of course, was a question which Yui Ichijou couldn't really answer, but even if she could, it was probably pointless by now – If she remembered the proceedings correctly, Shinji Ikari must have been sitting in his EVA by now, or at the very least, have reached NERV headquarters where she could hardly get to him without fighting her way past half of NERV's security, which was impossible for her in her current situation – She was familiar enough with the routines of NERV's security agents to make her way to Shinji on the surface, but the same couldn't be said about the civilian police force that had apprehended her just a few days earlier. – that's what she got for getting herself caught.

The well-meaning patrol officer had caught her loitering in the middle of the night and dragged her to social services, where they had decided to place her in a foster family until they'd determine her identity, but she doubted that they'd find any records of a person who had never existed in this particular world.

Her movements had been far less restricted when she'd still had her device, but without it, she was something she had never been before: just an ordinary girl with no special powers or abilities, and the however benevolent actions of the authorities made it all too clear.

There was nothing she could do, she knew it, and it frustrated her to no end.

The creature had brought its Vessel as close to itself as it could afford without putting her in danger, but now, it needed its strength for the battle.

On the furthest outskirts of the city, where it bordered the fields, a silent, pale girl with long dark hair and big round glasses could be found half-leaning on her bicycle, with no real memory of how she'd gotten here – all she could recall was a tremendous amount of pain and an overwhelming sensation of heat. She still felt nauseous; the steady, agonizing throbbing in her stomach made it difficult to stay on her feet.

The wind blowing through her dark hair called her attention to the deluge of sweat that clung to her skin and clothing - and despite it she was shaking with cold chills; Breathing felt hard, as if there were a pressure on her chest, and she felt so weak as if she might faint at any moment – the cool of her bicycle chassis was the only thing she could really cling to for some sort of orientation, the rest of the world seemed to blur before her eyes.

What was even going on?

This wasn't her new school... but why would she even be there, in such a state as this? She must have gone outside to catch some fresh air, or perhaps to go home, but this wasn't her home either...
Eventually, she won against the smothering, pervasive sense of fatigue that clouded her consciousness and had a look around her surroundings, but as soon as she did that, she really wished she hadn't.

Before her was a ravaged battlefield which hosted a battle between an enormous demon in purple armor and something resembling a skyscraper-sized rainbow pipe cleaner – by the looks of it, the fight had been going on for a while; Much of the landscape that might once have been as green as her immediate surroundings had been transformed into a melange of ash and mud, and strewn across this dark arena that marred the valley like a scar were a variety of spent weapons that meant nothing to the girl, but signified far more to the boy at the helm of the war machine.

At this point, he had pretty much tried everything: Guns and rifles from a variety of calibers, energy weapons, blaster, bazookas, miniguns, spears, tridents, halberd, sables, even a flail – at the moment he was swinging around a sword but it, too, didn't seem to be inflicting any lasting damage.

He'd come to realize one thing: The Evangelion's titanic body knew no fatigue. But this merely put them at a stalemate, as this creature still refused to take any sort of damage.

Admittedly, he had been able to prevent further damage to Unit One, but the battle seemed to be dragging on forever, and even though he believed to have seen the occasional squirt of blood spraying from his opponent, he still couldn't find that goddamned core.

"Let me go!" Asuka demanded. "Wanna bet that I'll find that stupid core in less than five minutes?"

Misato disagreed: "I don't think we can 'find' it like it's some sort of Easter egg. I mean, Shinji keeps slicing that thing like it's a Salami, if the core was somewhere inside, it should be cut to ribbons by now."

"This is cheating!" the Second Child bemoaned. "Could it be that this thing doesn't have a core at all?"

Dr. Akagi disagreed: "That's impossible. The core is the part of an angel that contains its soul. It's where its power source is held. And angel can no more live without a core than a human can live without a brain. It has to have one."

"Yes, but where?" Misato replied.

Hyuuga had to admit defeat: "Our scans still haven't found it. It's like it simply isn't there."

"Could the angel be hiding it somehow?"

Dr. Akagi replied firmly, schooting down Misato's speculation: "Impossible. No matter how well it might be concealed, Shinji-kun should have hit it by now."

Then, of all sudden, the young female technician let out a sharp exclamation: "Oh my god..."

"What is it, Maya?"

"Down there! We have a trespassing civilian! And it's a student at that..."

Shinji felt the blood freezing in his veins – he was experiencing a rather unsubtle Deja Vu and for once, it had nothing to do with any sort of prophetic dreams. It was hard to overlook her, considering his interface immediately had her identified, marked and zoomed in without his lifting
She stood there next to a bicycle, half-terrified half-confused, frozen in place as she overlooked the battlefield, and he could imagine all too well how the sight must be tantamount to hell, especially for such an extremely shy girl.

He'd certainly been hoping for some opportunity to correct the blotched first impression he must have made on her, but this was not what he'd been picturing.

"Mi-mi-Misato-san..."

"There's an entrance leading to a shelter right over there! Bring her there and don't neglect your cover!"

Good. Orders. That spared him from having to figure out what to do, though it was still up to him to do it – He could forget jumping toward her position, even the Evangelion's regular steps caused incredible tremors – it was easier to forget now that he'd become much more nimble in his use of this biomechanical war machine.

Careful, almost on tiptoes, he did his best to move in her direction as cautiously as he could, but his efforts were spoiled when the Angel once again sent its middle segment hurling toward him. In order to stop it, he was forced to sprint forward, landing on his side – He didn't have to look at her to guess that Mayumi may well have been knocked off her feet, but at least he managed to protect her from worse by stopping the of the speedy approach Angel's disc by impaling it upon the blade of his progressive knife.

Much to his surprise, he could clearly see the cut he'd left in the Angel's flesh – his earlier impressions of having seen blood were not mistaken – the creature's physical substance was not at all imprevious to physical destruction.

But then, how?

His question was answered before he could finish posing it – pretty much as soon as he'd succeeded in drilling a hole into the disc, the flesh began to close around the knife; He had no choice but to hurl the knife into the distance along with the projectile.

That, however, should have bought him the time he'd need to get to Mayumi.

Without wasting a further second, he extended one of the Evangelion's hands toward her.

"Come. I'll get you to safety."

"I...Ikari-kun?"

"It's a long story... just come!"

Far too blanked out to even think of asking questions or talking back, she meekly followed his instructions so that he was able to deposit her at the entrance of the next bunker.

Of course, he couldn't see how she'd collapses almost as soon as she'd stumbled through the entrance gate.

"Shinji-kun, take care of the target!"

Of course. How could he ever forget it.
He would handle it, especially now that he'd understood – his attacks so far hadn't been ineffective at all, at least not all of them – it was just that this angel had some crazy fast regeneration powers.

"Misato-san! Please, I need a flamethrower... and a rifle with explosive shells, I think I've figured out how to beat it!"

At first a bit perplexed by his sudden enlightenment, the operation division's leader nonetheless didn't hesitate a single instant to authorize her young ward's request.

It was the explosive rifle that he got a hold of first.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

And just like that, the seemingly invincible angel was marred by three big holes; The absence of large portions of its mass clearly visible for a moment – that is, before it grew back together in a manner of seconds.

"I see!" Akagi exclaimed, unsuccessful at hiding her considerable enthusiasm. "That could actually work!"

"Well done, Shinji-kun!" Misato, expectedly, praised the boy with fiery vigor. "Keep going! Don't let up! I don't think that thing is gonna back down until you've destroyed every last scrap of it!"

The younger Ikari did not need to hear this twice.

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

He fired without reservation – he knew it would all be in vain if that thing was given the time to grow back together, so he was none too stingy with the munition;

When he'd emptied his magazines and left the angel reduced to a lattice of many bubble-shaped holes which nonetheless still defied gravity, it tried to swerve to the side to attack him but could move itself back into its original position in order to finish the move.

Justified by the laws of merited fear, he grabbed the flamethrower, cranked its output up to maximum and aimed it directly at the messenger's remains.

Then, there was only light – and the distant sound of a heartbeat.

When the blinding veil of the spherical explosion dissipated, it revealed a compact crater than had been melted into the ground... and a basically intact EVA 01.

It barely needs mentioning that the command center erupted in praise and jubilation – Misato in particular made no secret of the great pride she felt.

As far as Shinji was concerned, the whole thing rather embarrassed him and he was grateful that they probably couldn't see his rapidly reddening face.

Sure, a part of why he was doing this was that he'd been longing for people's approval, but... he didn't feel like he deserved this.

He almost wished they wouldn't do this, except, that didn't seem quite right either. He didn't really know...

It was like what he'd heard at Nagato's place, everyone seemed to be piecing this image together, this idea of a hero who had very little in common with him.
He could barely believe that he'd pulled this off at all, it was more like a … coincidence, if it weren't for Misato, he probably would have lost his head several times over.

It seemed ridiculous – Even Asuka had some nice words to offer for a change: "Not bad, Daddy's boy! Not like I wouldn't have thought of it in your place, but hey! You almost seemed like a proper pilot today! Sure, you'll probably never match up to my level, but if you keep this up, you're well underway to make up for your lack of preparation!"

But for all the praise, Shinji didn't really know what to make of it, as long as that one man remained silent as a statue.

"He might not look the part, but it does seem like the boy got at least some of his mother's brilliance... don't you think so, too, Ikari?"

The Commander didn't answer, but he did lift his head beyond its usual position half-hidden behind the hands he'd folded over the table, as if to get a closer look at the screen.

Something in his expression seemed to deviate from his usual harsh, strict look, though even Fuyutsuki couldn't have said how exactly it was 'different'.

Perhaps it seemed a little more, well, neutral.

When Mayumi came back to her senses, she felt cold and depleted, but surprisingly, the pain had receded – indeed, she hadn't felt this free of it in a long, long time, it was as if whatever discomfort she'd felt in the recent past had completely vanished, like it had never existed anywhere other than in her perceptions to begin with.

Much of what she'd experienced that day was too dreadful to give it further thought, but as she dragged herself back some, there was one thing that burned itself into her mind: That boy... Shinji, or whatever his name was... had saved her life.

Following both the battle and the following debriefing, Misato summarized both in a few words: "Great work!"

She made a deliberate choice to let that statement percolate a bit, however, that wasn't all she had to say: "Now, I wish I could leave all of you to your well-deserved rest after this, but..."

"But what?" Asuka demanded to know.

Somberly, Misato explained: "Rei and Unit Zero are still under orders to remain on standby in headquarters."

"HĀĀĀĀ? But why?!” the redhead exclaimed. "But we already beat the angel, didn't we?"

"The order came directly from Commander Ikari."

"Too bad!" Asuka's voice and the condescending way in which she leaned over to Rei with a snotty grin said much about her badly-feigned sympathy and even worsely concealed spite: "Well, it's not like we're too badly interested in your affairs..."

Without even blinking, Rei replied tonelessly: "So it is."

She didn't even have the courtesy to turn in Asuka's direction or look her in the face, and the way
that weird girl insisting on continually ignoring her existence drove her up the heights of the walls.

"And what about me?"

"You can go back to school, as always, Shinji-kun."

He felt somewhat guilty about that.

"Er, well then, good luck Ayanami."

"There is no reason to worry."

She said that so lightly... If he and Asuka would be able to keep up their normal lives despite the situation, the only because Rei would remain behind in their stead.

She'd be all alone in headquarters while the rest of them would be having fun and hanging out with their friends... even though it didn't seem like Rei did either of these things all too often, even when she wasn't stuck at headquarters. She'd told him that there was no point in worrying about her, but to be honest, that didn't really convince him and besides, what if he wanted to worry about her?

"Cripes!" Asuka commented as she stretched her limbs as bit, drawing Shinji's attention back to her. "We spent the whole day soaking in LCL, and I didn't even get to fight an Angel!"

Ponderously pulling at her chin with her fingers, Misato cautioned her to reconsider: "Better be careful what you wish for."

"What do you mean?" asked Shinji.

"Well, there's a chance that Asuka might get the fight she's looking for. When the Angel exploded to day, we didn't see the usual 'Sea of Blood' phenomenon we saw all the other times, and there wasn't a pillar of light, either. Besides, we never found the core. That's why Rei was ordered to stay behind in the first place. The Commander suspects that we haven't seen the last of that angel."

"So what!" Asuka declared without a care in the world. "If that thing dares to show it's ugly mug around here again, we'll just beat it again! We have more than enough fighting power to do that, considering just one of us was enough to take it out the first time!"

"Yeah, that's probably true."

Misato wished she could be surer of this, though.

"I've kept my eyes closed, so how come I can't sleep...?"

Shinji had tried every possible position, but even blocking the traffic noises out with music hadn't really helped.

About half an hour since he'd laid down, Shinji finally gave up and stared at the ceiling in resignation.

What was it that was keeping him from rest?

Was it what Nagato had told him? Was it the things he'd said about himself, about Shinji, or about their class?
Was it Yui's prophecies, and how they'd been correct last time but off today? In the end, he'd still won, so why did this worry him?

Or was it... because of Asuka?"

("Not bad!" - "It's not about that!" - The sight of her breasts spilling out of her nightgown...)

Or, because of Ayanami?

(That smile... he hadn't forgotten it. "See you later." - "There is no need to worry.")

Or was it... today's battle? After all, it had been a matter of life or death, and given how hopeless it had seemed at first, it was surprisingly that he wasn't much more worked up about it.

Not to think of that monster, that fat, headless rainbow bumblebee...

He'd seen worse.

...seen worse? That way of thinking seemed remarkably unlike himself, but it was still true.

This wasn't about the battle, which was almost frightening in its own way, but the real cause of his restlessness lay somewhere else.

It was just that he still, well...

"Now listen up, Daddy's boy! If you always give up right away, nothing is ever going to change! If you can't even stand up for what's important to you, and allow others to walk all over you, it's just proof that you don't have any confidence in yourself!"

Yeah, that was it. This was about yesterday morning, not so much about what Asuka did but what she'd said. He'd been reminded of it because of Nagato... and because of Mayumi.

...proof that he didn't have any confidence?

Well of course! Why would he be confident anyways?

He knew better than anyone that he wasn't exactly worth putting one's confidence in.

'Unstable', as they said at NERV whenever they thought he was out of earshot...

Misato kept telling him to have more faith in himself and... Nagato had done the same, as had everyone else – even Asuka told him this, in her own kind of way. Especially Asuka.

But...

"Yeah sure! No matter what's going on, you apologize just to be sure! Do you honestly think that everything is always your fault?"

But he just didn't feel comfortable trusting himself, or anyone else for that matter. He knew exactly that he was going to fail and disappoint everyone, including himself, and everyone would leave him once they realized that he wasn't worth sticking with.

(He recalled that tall, dark silhouette at the train station, the distance between them increasing with every step...)

That had always been a fact to him, one of the pillars of the world: He always did everything no
matter what, so it was only appropriate that he should apologize – That's what you were supposed
to do when you did something wrong, right?

But at that, he had to think back to his encounter with Mayumi – she hadn't wasted a second
considering which of them had ran into whom and immediately declared herself to be the guilty
party... the very thing Asuka accused him of doing.

It was clear to him that Mayumi wasn't the one to blame, at least not the only one, so why would
she apologize?

Well, perhaps for the very reason he'd just outlined, the same reason why he did it: Because he
didn't trust himself. Perhaps it was the same with her – he didn't trust himself to do anything right
and what more, he could never be sure that he hadn't made some mistake that he wasn't aware of,
so he was always ready to apologize for some unseen mistake.

It only made sense – so what was Asuka so worked up over?

She'd told him to act like a man and stand up for himself... for himself? What sort of bad joke was
this supposed to be? Sure, the idea of it sounded nice, but even if he had the courage to do it, how
could he go through with it in good conscience when he felt ashamed of all that he was?

How could he, when he knew he would fail and disappoint everyone who'd ever had those high
expectations of him?

To do any of that, he'd have to be much stronger.

If only he were stronger, he wouldn't have to have all these doubts. He'd be able to win Asuka's
respect, and protect Ayanami – if only he were stronger, he might even change the future of this ill-
fated world...

But wait. Perhaps, he was looking at this the wrong way.

Sure, he wasn't the sort of hero some people thought he was, but he had helped Nagato find his
place in their class, and today, he had without a doubt, saved Mayumi's life. He'd protected Asuka
and Ayanami as well... and Touji & Kensuke, too. Through his efforts, this whole city, no, the
whole world had been kept from being destroyed many times over.

He hadn't done it alone, but who could, considering the scope of the task?

Perhaps, this meant that he had already become stronger than he used to be, even just a little bit...

Those changes... and the things people were saying about him... they were ultimately good things,
right?

In actuality, it didn't even matter whether he was stronger already, the important part was that it
was possible.

He'd already made a difference for the better, and not just in such small things as Misato's diet.

So there was, at the very least, the possibility for him to become stronger.

He had to become stronger.

He might not be the hero they expected right now, and perhaps he would never be, but at the very
least, he had to try to change himself.
Perhaps that's why he had come here in the first place, and why he'd agreed to pilot the Evangelion – because he wanted to change himself and his life.

He had to become stronger, so that perhaps someday, he wouldn't have to apologize for himself anymore, so that he could look in the mirror without feeling ashamed or disgusted.

So... how about Kensuke's masterplan for the school festival? How will Kaji's investigations succeed? And will Asuka get her chance to kick some angel butt? Find out in Chapter 2.11: [The Second Impression]
I'm just a teenage dirtbag baby

Like you

-Wheatus, 'Teenage Dirtbag'

---

The dream that chased him this night was much like its most recent predecessors, a mixture somewhere between one of those prophetic visions and a regular dream. It didn't show scenes of destruction, but rather a medley of fantasies, wishful thinking & some of the topics that the young EVA pilot was currently concerned about, much like a regular dream would – this time, it didn't even certain around particularly crypic or fearsome things, which was a relief considering how much crap he had to deal with in his waking life these days, things that could have driven grown men to despair, let alone shy teenaged boys.

Still, there were a few things about it that were 'off' and simply beyond what ought to have shown up in the simple waste products of his subconscious, there were people whom he'd never seen before, but still found so familiar as if he'd known them for ages, not to speak of the general sense of uncanny familiarity that accompanied everything to do with these visions.

At this point, he'd simply started to accept it – in hindsight, he could have sword that he'd seen Mayumi in one of these dreams long before he could have any memory of her face, even though he'd only met her a couple of days ago – just as it had been with Asuka.

In the beginning, the dream had seemed rather harmless. He was wearing his apron, which, for some reason, was orange with an AT-field like print-pattern on it as opposed to its usual uniform green corner, and was peacefully cutting vegetables to prepare dinner for the Katsuragi household, for example, some carrots and scallions.

Just as he was mostly done with his task and just about to slide the veggies into a pot, he heard the sound of the living room door sliding open in a sudden, rapid fashion. Looking up from his culinary masterpiece to see who it might be, he heard the sound of the living room door sliding open in a sudden, rapid fashion. Looking up from his culinary masterpiece to see who it might be, he found himself quite baffled.

There was something puzzling, even random about the sight before him: It was Rei, and for some reason, she was wearing her plug suit, complete with her interface headset.

Holding on to the door frame, with her gaze slightly lowered, she presented a sight that Shinji
couldn't help but blush at, even though it made no sense – Shinji would have expected to see her at NERV or even at school, but here? What were the odds of him just finding her standing around at his apartment.

He was glad to see her of course but he couldn't think of any reason for her to be here.

“Uhm, Hello Ayanami.” he greeted her, in a friendly if somewhat guarded manner.

“What brings you here?”

She looked up, directly into his eyes.

“Ikari-kun...” It was her voice, but it didn't really sound like her speaking.

She'd spoken his name deliberately, slowly and full of feeling, as if she were at the very least hoping or the salvation of her soul. She said it like he'd always wished she would...

“What's the matter Ayanami, is everything okay?”

Instead of giving a logical answer, she stumbled in his direction, sending him to the heavens with yet another slight motion of her rosy lips: “Ikari-kun... Ohh...”

One pornotastic sigh/moan later, she seemed to be pulling a dramatic faint worthy of a victory heroine, prompting Shinji to leave the vegetables behind in order to offer his arms as a landing strip.

“A-Ayanami... what's going on?”

This was getting seriously weird.

A few adorable whimpers later, he could feel her shuddering in her arms, ostensibly working to pull herself together as her hands reached out to grasp his shoulders; She looked up to him with huge, longing eyes.

“Ikari-kun... I... I need...”


“I need you do do something...” she said, lifting her shaking, angelic hand, which in the glove of her snow white plugsuit almost appeared to be made out of porcelain. Tenderly, she grasped one of his hands with her own, detaching it from her shoulder.

“What is it, Ayanami? What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to... do me.”

And then, without wasting any further time, she placed his hand on her taunt, roundish breast, which, through the thin fabric of her plugsuit, didn't feel all that different from how it would in the nude. Needless to say, his hand had bitterly missed her boobies since their last fortunate encounter and was overjoyed to meet them again after such a long and arduous period of separation – if these were a comedy, he would be passed out on the floor with a nosebleed by now.

The tingly sensation spreading throughout his body was unreal; just from that single touch, he felt hot and cold all over – his attempts to knead and stimulate her breast somewhat where closer to involuntary twitches carried out by his fingers while his mind had just blown a hole in the ceiling as it was being shot to another Galaxy – and it soon dawned on him that this was only the
It was Asuka, who for some unlikely reason was wearing nothing but a rose-colored apron, and
playfully menaced him with a playful evil smile as she slipped one of her long and lovely legs
between his own. Thanks to the usual illogic of dreams, he could see all this even though she was
supposed to be standing behind him... and what about that warm sensation on his right thigh?

Misato, in her red uniform jacket and some of the lacy underwear he sometimes had the duty of
washing. She was sitting on the floor in a pose reminiscent of a cat, hugging his leg and taking it
upon herself to lick across the tiny hairs on his skin with her tongue, even though he'd been 100%
certain that he'd been wearing pants just a moment ago.

But if she was sitting to his right, whose were the fingertips that were gently stroking across the left
side of his loins?

...Rei again? He'd blame it on some kind of double vision if she wasn't wearing a whole different
outfit, to be exact, a very loose-fitting hospital gown. At least her expression resembled what he
had come to expect from the First Child he was familiar with, so he hadn't gone completely gaga
yet, which was vaguely comforting.

“Oh Ayanami, I didn't know you had a twin sister....”

“I do not. Probably, this means I am the Third...” There were indeed three of her, as there was
another blue haired girl sitting next to her and looking up expectantly, clad in, of all things, a black
plugsuit.

“If Ayanami Rei were here, would she wish to copulate with you?”

“I am right here.” the Rei-like person in the hospital gown replied. “Does that answer your
question?”

“I think so.” the one in black replied. “So what's next? Are there any orders from the commander?”

“Too hell with the commander!” the self-professed number three commented. “Another Ikari needs
us now.”

Oookey. There is something like too much of a good thing. If Shinji's head didn't explode right
then and there, then only because the laws of physics did not apply in dreams. But not even the
power of imagination could keep him from losing his footing.

His landing was surprisingly soft if one considered that both Asuka and the kitchen counter should
have been standing behind him – but rather than colliding with either of them, he eventually wound
up in a laying position.

Dazed, he looked up, and instead of his familiar kitchen, he found a butt naked, silver-haired youth
casually smiling down at him without a care in the world.

If he'd thought that his face had hit peak tomato before, he had evidently been wrong. He was
certain that his fingertips and toes must have been paper-white as most the blood was being needed
in his face, and ...other places.

“Oh... it's you, Kaworu-kun.” He concluded, even though he had no idea how he could possibly
know the stranger's name if he'd never seen him before in his life. Ironically, this was currently the
least implausible thing about this whole situation.
In violation of all common sense, something told him that the boy’s unperturbed calm smile was one of the last oases of normalcy.

“You're not wearing any clothes, Kaworu-kun...”

“Why shouldn't I be?” he asked, bemusedly. “There is nothing to be ashamed of.... and that also goes for you, Shinji-kun.”

“Exactly! Don't be so shy!”

Another girl, someone he didn't know. Short, reddish-brown hair, freckles and a pink towel.

“M-Mana-chan...”

The soft landing just now?

Yeah, that was her lap.

“Do you remember the last time we saw each other?”

Of course not.

Except.... yes.

“Why don't you return the favor from back then and take off your clothes?”

“Exactly, Ikari-san!” cheered another girl, a somewhat older one with long brown hair. Her accent, facial structure and the shape of her chin all had something familiar about them, though he couldn't say what. She was wearing a blue neckerchief and a white dress so short that he didn't need any helpful Deja Vues to guess that she normally wore something beneath it.

“As your assigned medical officer, I prescribe some serious undressing! Regular sexual intercourse is supposed to burn calories and improve one's mood!”

“That sounds like a great idea to me! Don't you also think so, Shinji-kun?”

Mayumi. Heaven knows why she was addressing him by his first name... or why she was still wearing her glasses even though she was otherwise naked.

“Here, let me help you.”, she proclaimed, cautiously unbuttoning his uniform shirt... who knew where his apron had disappeared to – oh, right, there it was. It was being thoroughly sniffed by yet another nude girl – this one, he had seen before in a vision, the one with the red plastic glasses, blue Alice band and galactotastic mammaries.

“Your scent is really delicious, puppy boy.” She spoke in a slow, sultry manner and not without occasionally licking her lips. “Smells like LCL, teenage hormones and freshly cut green onions~”

Ooookay. Could someone please tell him where the nearest insane asylum was? He'd like to turn himself in.

Of course, his subconscious was nowhere near done with him: Despite all unbelievable transfigurations that both himself and the room had been subjected to, he now again felt Ayanami’s weight on his chest, clinging to him as if she'd been there all along, plugsuit included – so it was the first version of her, or was it actually second ? – in any case, the one he knew.

She was observing his face with her lovely Ruby eyes, and the words she said were, to his ears,
like a promise of a magic land of milk and honey: “Do... me...”

BAM.

The usual Deja-Vu symptoms were overshadowed by the far more physical aching of his skull.

When Shinji finally made a tentative move to open his eyes, he was not met with a rather frisky Rei (well of course not), but rather, with the old familiar ceiling of his room, though it seemed to be a bit further away than usual.

Thanks to a mixture of residual tiredness, his aching head and the slight confusion that usually accompanied an all-too-sudden awakening, he needed a while to realize that the towering shadow at the edge of his vision field was his bed, and that his pillow had seemed a bit harder than usual because it wasn't a pillow at all, but rather, the carpet on his room's flooring.

At least, part of the blanket had been kind enough to follow him when he'd rolled out of his resting place. Ouch.

He decided to consider the dull pain on the back of his head as the just divine punishment for his dirty thoughts.

He should probably be ashamed – for one thing, he'd barely known Mayumi for two days, and he'd already incorporated her into his perverted fantasies. Not to think of how she might react if she ever found out – she'd probably scream & be traumatized and everything -

Or, if Asuka were to find out due to some crazy twist of fate...

She'd be furious about her own involvement, no doubt, but he didn't even want to consider what she'd say about the presence of that boy – heck, he didn't want to consider it.

Cold shower. Right now. No Delays.

----

After this rather undignified start to his day, it was hardly surprising that the Third Child had a rather Zombie-like look about him when he finally stumbled past the bathroom door, where he was met with a supremely displeased Asuka whose patience had long since run out.

After voicing her complaints in a swift yet effective dressing-down, she briskly dissapeared into the bathroom, slamming the door for effect, and none of it made this terrible morning any better.

Bizarrely, he was now faced with the prospect of cutting up some actual vegetables for the morning soup, but there mere thought of it caused both his blood and the memories of his dream to rush into his head.

Toast!

For today, the good old toaster would have to suffice for the task of procuring their breakfast.
Curse those hormones, and curse that thrice-damned puberty! Why couldn't it result in something nice for a change, like for example a nice little growth spurt, or how about a deep, manly voice? Perhaps then he'd have a theoretical chance of scoring in real life for once... you'd think his genetics would have been amenable to this, given that his old man was a sheer skyscraper of a man – the only reason he didn't keep running into door frames was probably that even the buildings had the sense to stay out of his way.

Life could be so unfair!

Since this day had already begun under unfavorable auspices, Shinji thought it for the best to avoid further misfortune by using Asuka's usually lengthy time in the bath to produce a placating breakfast as soon as possible, but once he got a good look at the table, it became obvious that he'd have to clean it up first – It was covered in the leftovers of diverse instant meals and several mostly empty bottles whose remaining contents had probably long since spoiled in this heat, and last but not least the empty but nonetheless still greasy plastic boxes from yesterday.

At least with the latter, he knew where they had come from – not even Misato could have been lazy enough to make him cook dinner after the exertion of yesterday's battle, so that she'd planned in an extra stop on the way home in order to get all of them some fried noodles with duck and peanut sauce from the local Chinese takeout.

Unfortunately, her suspiciously generous offer to clean up the packaging herself turned out to be little but hot air.... seems like he was stuck with the job for now.

That, however, did not account for the empty cup of instant noodles, the package of Fish&Dip complete with an empty bag of sauce or the likewise empty can of beer. At least, this particular pile of trash had been left behind with an explanation on a little piece of paper that now also littered the table: “Good Morning, Shin-chan!” (There was a little heart scribbled here.) “Just so you don't worry where I've ended up, I forgot to tell you that I got the early shift today! Have a nice Day! - Misato.”

He didn't think there could have been any other culprit.

With a sigh, he went about filling the local penguin's food bowl with a bit of Tuna before he moved to dig out the sliced bread and clear up the chaos on the table. At least, he now knew that he'd only have to make two portions, of which he did manage to finish one by the time Asuka left the shower in spite of the delay caused by the cluttered table.

Naturally, he didn't even expect any thanks – Asuka briefly complained that the honey on one of the toasted bread slices was going to make her fat (the other was covered with cottage cheese and decorated with some herbs), but she ate it nonetheless.

It was about then that the toaster spat out the other two slices with an audible 'bling!'; and this was the moment that Asuka chose to ask a question that had been clinging to her tongue for quite a while now, but had not yet managed to pull free of it due to various circumstances:

Now, after she'd seen a display of his more competent side just the day before, as he was busy spreading the toppings on the bread and therefore incapable of spotting any uncertainty in her eyes, she at least began to consider to stop beating around the bush: “You seem to be out of luck. With the First stuck at headquarters like this, we'll never get to see whatever cute little project the two of you cooked up.”

Why did she always have to tease him?
“It's not like that... Who told you that we're on the same project?” Even though his back was currently turned to her, his pupils still slid to the side in shame as if he were avoiding some unseen eyes in the kitchen wall. It was simply the force of habit at this point.

Having failed to even consider the thought, he felt beset by sudden guilt – He probably should have asked Rei to work on some project together – after all, who else was going to do it?

Of course, in the end, it wouldn't have mattered anyways, from the looks of it, Rei wouldn't be able to participate or even attend the festival at all...

These broodings were quickly sidetracked by Asuka's surprisingly surprised reaction, though: “You're not working with her?” Perhaps he was more loyal to her than she'd thought. “That's great! Then you can help with my project! I mean, of course I have all the skills needed to complete the project on my own, but unfortunately, there's only one of me – I'm one of a kind, so to speak, and the festival is tomorrow... Simply put, I could use someone to help me with the menial tasks so that I get everything finished in time.

Don't worry, it should be easy enough even for you, all the parts of the plan that require much thinking will be my responsibility.”

“Why don't you ask the class rep to help you? Aren't you two friends?”

Shinji wondered why she was asking him of all people. Didn't she have lots of willing admirers? Or did she simply get a kick out of pushing him around and barking orders at him?

First she called him a spineless wimp, and then, she attempted to draft him as her personal gopher like she couldn't wait to make him carry her stuff or something...

“Are you an idiot? As the class representative, Hikari's going to be busy organizing the logistics and everything! I can't just bother her over such a trifle!”

But she could bother him, apparently.

“What sort of project will you even be doing...?”

“That's classified! Top Secret! You'll find out soon enough. But rest assured that it's gonna be way cooler than anything you or your stupid friends would think of!”

And as soon as she'd finished speaking, she stuffed the last remainder of her toast into her mouth and took off without sparing him any further glances.

She hadn't even thought to ask him if he had signed up for anything else, let alone if he even wanted to take part in her mystery project... and 'mystery' surely meant that she herself had no clue what she was going to do...

Despite all this, Shinji wore a thin smile as he finally moved to address his own breakfast. Probably, Asuka wasn't even capable to ask for another person's help in any other way than this.... anything else would be considered beneath her.

But that didn't change that she'd actually asked for his help. He was glad enough that she'd dropped the cold shoulder act, but that she'd actually want to work with him, albeit for a fairly trivial matter, well, the implications of that brought a pleasant warmth to his cheeks.

But either way, he'd have to hurry up and eat if he didn't want to be late for school.
Ultimately, Shinji had left the apartment with a slice of toast in hand; Asuka had been so quick to dash for a reason, as it was getting somewhat late.

He tried to cover the distance to the school as briskly as he could, but there were certain limits owed to the fact that the Third Child had never been all too athletic.

When he passed the alleyway where he'd previously encountered Ichijou Yui, he paused briefly, half expecting her to jump out of the woodwork and explain the errors in her prediction, but she didn't show up, and he didn't have the time to wait or her.

Perhaps it was better this way.

Asuka must have reached the school by now – and Shinji wouldn't have been surprised if the same were true of his friends, in any case, he did not encounter them on his way.

Instead, he became involved in a whole other unexpected meeting: Just as he passed a small bookshop that he'd often walked past without ever really taking note of it and was about to do just that once again like he must have done it hundreds of times before, it's door slid open and revealed something that immediately grabbed his attention: A bespectacled girl with long dark hair, carrying a small pink bag containing several books.

It was Mayumi.

As soon as she'd stepped out of the shop, she looked at him with huge eyes and expressed her surprise at finding him here of all places with a most likely involuntary “Oh!”

By the looks of it, it would be up to him to address her. “Eh... fancy meeting you here, Yamagishi-san!”

He donned his nicest smile. “Uh, don't tell me you got up all early in the morning just to come here and look at books.”

“Well, yes... These here are new... and who knows if they'll be sold out in the afternoon...”

“You're probably right. Still, you must really like books if you'll drag yourself out of bed so early just to buy some...”

Okay, that probably sounded hella awkward. Still, if it did, it didn't change much about Mayumi's slightly nervous, but nonetheless genuine smile.

“Say, Ikari-kun... Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Would you mind... walking to school with me? Just for the rest of the way?”

This question sparked no small amount of agitation, and Shinji tightly gripped the strap of his school bag in order to give it an outlet other than his face or his voice.

Never before had a girl asked him to accompany her on the way to school – Sure, he'd frequently
walked home alongside Asuka, but that was for rather more pragmatic reasons given their shared places of work and residence – this type of ceremonial offer was a whole different animal...

“Yes of course, Yamagishi-san. I'd be glad to.”

“Thank goodness then...”

“Really?”

“Well, uh, it's much nicer when you walk together, isn't it?”

She didn't confirm this from her own experience, but she could imagine after all this time observing how happy all the other students seemed to be.

Shinji, however, knew the difference all too well: “Yes. That's very true.... So let's go then, it would be bad if you were late on your second day at our school.”

Mayumi just nodded.

Side by side, they walked beneath the golden sun which at least for the moment, seemed to be shining especially for them; Even the prospect of arriving late didn't bother them to badly, it would be forgettable compared to the novel, unexpected yet fulfilling experience of this moment, simple as it may have been.

After a while, Mayumi decided to open a conversation: “Mh... Thanks a lot. And sorry...”

“For what? What do you mean?”

“Thanks for... saving me... and sorry... for being in the way.”

“It's okay, don't worry about it. It's just what anyone would have done, it's, uh, part of my job, so to speak.”

None of them really knew how to continue the conversation, but they didn't have to either. The subtle blushes on their smiling faces said all that needed to be said.

Shinji guessed that he could now consider her a new friend despite any earlier embarrassing incidents, or perhaps, even, something else...

He supposed that saving their life would have that effect on a person, it wasn't the first time he'd witnessed the, uh, phenomenon.

She was definitely right that it was... way nicer to walk this path together, and he hoped that today had been a sufficient demonstration for her.

Babum, babum, babum...

As with all soaring heights, it was unavoidable that one would eventually be reminded to look down and be reminded that all dreams must end one day, and the steady throbbing in her innermost brusquely pulled Mayumi from these cloudy heights back to her place in the shadows.

She'd been unusually free of discomfort since yesterday and even now, the pain was only a faint ghost of what she'd felt yesterday, but this clear, evident sound of a heartbeat far away from where her own heart should have been refused to be rationalized away –

And as if she were suddenly mocked by laughter from behind a veil, she realized what she had just
done: She'd actually talked to someone, and actually said what she'd meant to say. She'd asked him to stay at her side.

She always thought she lacked the courage for that, but, the impression that he was somehow like her, and the knowledge that he'd been looking at her earlier made everything a lot easier, somehow...

Carefully, she placed a hand on her pulsating abdomen.

“What am I even doing...” she thought to herself. “This isn't like me at all...”

Her companion's mildly concerned “What's the matter?” barely registered in her consciousness. The throbbing seemed to fill out her entire form, like water fills a vase.

“What... what is this...”

“Yamagishi-san, are you alright?”

And then, it was suddenly over.

“Yeah, I'm fine... Let us go.”

---

At this point, Shinji wouldn't have remotely believed that anyone could possibly get jealous over his person – and thus, he made no attempt to conceal his arrival alongside Mayumi.

He did appreciate it when the teacher showed up soon after him (Somehow they'd made it in time), but only because Touji wouldn't get the chance to tease him about his plus one – He had taken that risk, however, since he didn't want Mayumi to think that he was ashamed to be seen with her. He knew that she had a tendency to take the blame for anything... and he also knew what that felt like —

Even so, he did not even suspect what Asuka experienced when he showed up with a girl in tow and calmly took his seat after he'd taken off that other chick's bag in an artful display of gentlemanly gallantry and showed her where to find the corresponding hooks on this school's preferred model of desk.

So far, Asuka had barely taken note of that girl... who was she even? Dammit. Granted, seeing him with a more or less normal girl was far preferable from having him fuss over that antisocial First Child, but he was supposed to be interested in her and her only.

When it came to winning over that loser, she hadn't thought that she'd have any rivals at all, let alone this many! Nor had she ever really considered that she might lose him to a rival – Though his infatuation with her was aggravating, the First Child was no more a real threat than their household toaster.

But technically, he'd been fairly popular with practically half the school all along – she just never took it seriously, considering he was oblivious and socially inept enough to ensure that nothing ever happened... until now, that is.
What did they even see in him?

Alright- alright, she knew better than most that he had his strong points, but, still.

She'd have to find some way to get his attention... and such an opportunity presented itself when the teacher decided that it was once again time to quiz his unlucky students on the latest topics, a situation that habitually led to most of the class shivering in fear and praying that one of the smart kids would be called to answer today – or at least that it wouldn't be themselves.

Correspondingly, there were widespread signs of relief when the teacher chose Asuka as his first victim – and usually, it would not have been unusual for her to spit out the right answer without delay, but today, for whatever reason, she'd been sufficiently lost in thought for the teacher's voice to forcibly snap her out of it and leave her appearing mildly startled, if only for a moment.

“You mean me?”

“Yes, you.”

Then, she read the question displayed on the screen in front of her nose – and swallowed.

Of course she could probably have solved it on her own given some time to think (or so she told herself), but she simply decided to make use of the old teacher's mild senility in order to draw some of Shinji's attention – the old geezer occasionally forgot to turn off the internal messaging system beforehand, which effectively defeated the point of questioning the students *individually* – Asuka clicked on the relevant button and – Bingo!

Today was again one of those auspicious days!

'What the hell is the answer?!' she types swiftly.

Naturally, the Third Child was quite surprised when that little message appeared on his screen. All things considered it was rather typical, though: Always with the bragging, but whenever things got though, she'd be like 'Hey, Third Child, come and fix this mess! Rescue me o ye knight in shining armor!'

He was aware that this was pretty much cheating, but on the other hand he couldn't just leave her hanging, that didn't seem right either. He looked at the question – mercifully, it was about one of the topics that he'd covered in his little study session at Nagto's place, so Asuka could officially count her butt as saved.

'It's answer C.'

“Answer C!” she echoed immediately, as if by remote control.

“Very well!” the teacher praised. “I see that you take your studies very seriously.”

“Well, we've got this saying in Germany. *Ohne Fleiß keinen Preis*: No effort, no reward!” she grinned, beaming like a Christmas light.

What was *that* supposed to be now.
Effort? More like hypocrisy, but by now he was used to it (and also, complicit.)

It would be one thing if she'd at least deigned it appropriate to return the favor when he turned out to be the very next person on the teacher's radar – The very moment the question appeared on the screen, he knew he was screwed. Ironically, the question that would affect his own grades was the one he had absolutely no clue about.

He couldn't even say if he'd been when this topic had been discussed – out on a battle deployment perhaps? Soaking in LCL during a synchronization test? Simply too taken with whatever big question of the universe he had been pondering at the time?

In any case, he couldn't have named the answer to save his life – that is, until it appeared on the lower corner of his screen.

Was that Asuka? Or perhaps Touji? Maybe Kensuke? Nagato was surely far too conscientious for this type of mischief, so who?

When he tentatively looked around, no one seemed to be expecting it... that is, until his line of sight passed Mayumi's seat lead him to find her looking straight at him.

It made sense that she would have acquired the occasional piece of knowledge from all those books she was reading....

Man, her smile was cute.

Surely relieved if a little bit guilty, he finally gave the correct answer.

That was a close one.

---

"Hey, Shinji, do you have some time?"

Looking up from his hastily finished notes after the end of class, he discovered his three friends assembled around his table. "Mh, sure, what for?"

"Planning of course!" Kensuke declared. "I came up with a cool idea for the school festival!"

Oh right, he'd almost forgotten about that... "I see."

Then, like a bolt from the blue, they were unexpectedly interrupted by a female voice: "Stop it right there you stooges!" It was Asuka, and she made her intentions very clear by possessively slamming down her hand onto Shinji's desk.

"I'm afraid Daddy's boy here won't be able to fit you dumboes into his schedule. He's already promised to help me with my project!"

Anything other than impressed, Touji crossed his arms. "Is that true, Shinji?"

"Well, I guess I didn't tell her no...."

"What's that supposed to mean!" Asuka complained. Not that the other side was much more
pleased: “You traitor! Pick a side already!”

“You can’t do both at once.” contributed Kensuke, his choice of words less drastic but his actual statement not very much different.

“Why don’t we just all work together?”

But though Shinji’s request had been cautious and conciliatory, he really should have known better than to expect it to work: “No way!”

For once, Asuka was in agreement with Touji, turning toward her flatmate to chew him out: “Exactly! You’re just making excuses because you’re too much of a wimp to make a decision! And there I was thinking that you were finally starting to act like a man... This is an all-time-low even by your standards!”

But beneath the mask of her anger, Asuka was deeply insulted, if not a little hurt – why couldn't he just own up to his actions for once in his life?

Shinji, for his part, was cursing his reluctance at saying ‘No.’ to things.

It was then that Nagato chose to intercede, perhaps in the hope that he might still lead this matter to a pleasant resolution: “Just calm down for a moment! Shinji’s right when you think about it. Making peace is always the best way to resolve things, and didn’t we just discuss that we need a girl anyways?”

They needed a girl...? This did make Shinji wonder what sort of project Kensuke might have cooked up there, but even so, he generally preferred to infuriate as few people as possible and predictably appreciated Nagato's efforts in that direction: “He's right. I mean come on, be honest, you're probably not even sure what your ‘mystery project’ is supposed to be yet. Working together would be convenient for you as well!”

That was the last straw. Now he was honestly accusing her of having no plans – and the worst was that she couldn't deny it.

“I do have something planned!” she insisted, nonetheless. “I even went out of my way to pick something where even your lackluster talents would have some room to shine, and you just leave me hanging? You’re so untrustworthy and unreliable!”

“Oh really? What is it then? Because I haven't seen you prepare for anything!”

“I... I was going to make cakes and snacks for our bake sale!” she lied.

It was the first thing that had come to her mind – for weeks, there was a flyer hanging on the pinboard right next to the staff room, informing the student body that they urgently needed someone to contribute provisions for the hungry crows of gawping parents, siblings and other relatives that were expected to arrive – A boring routine job that not many people signed up for as most of them wanted to do something more creative or original.

“Food spoils you dum-dum! There was no point in preparing anything before today... And besides, it’s not like you’ve been all that productive so far!”

“Cake? That's supposed to be your great big mystery project that is so much better? Even I can tell that you only just made this up!”
“Nonsense! Don't blame me, it's not like I could do anything else if I was gonna work with an idiot like you! Baking cupcakes is all you're good for, except you won't even help me with that! You know what? I'll just do it without you! I don't need you for this, if anything, it will be much easier on my own!”

And then, she turned and left.

“Whoha.” Touji commented. “Seems like she really doesn't like it when anyone stands up to her ego... What on earth possessed you to go along with her?”

“Well...” Shinji hadn't really meant to piss her off again. He'd hoped that this might be an opportunity to win her affections or at least appreciate that she'd apparently trusted him to help her. But that now speculative thought did little to stop that sobering feeling spreading through his chest.

“She never really asked me.”, he answered, not technically lying but concealing his disappointment.

It was really unfortunate that his friends and Asuka didn't get along – not that he could blame them, given how she tended to treat them.

Even now, Touji seemed relieved at his words: “So that's how it is!” He laughed. “We get it. That egomaniacal Barbie only ever hears what she wants to hear.

Kensuke agreed: “And here I was getting worried that it might be something worse. Just a misunderstanding I see. Sorry bud.”

Even Nagato didn't seem to inclined to defend her today: “We all know that Shikinami-san can be rather... dominant at times.”

A misunderstanding then. Hm.

Perhaps that all it was – she always expected him to pretty much read her mind and to mystically anticipate her every whim, but she wouldn't make the tiniest compromise for his sake.

Sometimes it would seem like she almost accepted him, and the next moment, she'd act like she couldn't stand the sight of him – If she thought she was so much better than him, why couldn't she just leave him in peace? It wasn't like he didn't welcome the thought of hanging out with her more, but the least she could do was to give him the tiniest, faintest indication that she actually liked him, or at least didn't simply hate him.

He could really use it.

“So, anyways, what was that about the project?”

---

Kensuke's Masterplan ended up taking the 'idiot quartett' to the local music hall: “If I remember correctly, Touji, you once took guitar lessons back in gradeschool, and Nagato told me quite recently I might add, that he plays the keyboard. As for me, I suppose I'd take care of the drumset
and all the editing and computer stuff.

Once we're done recording I'll tweak the mix and add some synths so that we can sell people some CDs or load it onto their data sticks.

I don't think that we can come up with more than one song in this short time, but we could throw in a couple of covers, and if we add a few remixes we might be able to fill an EP.”

“Guitar...? CD? You mean we're going to perform as a band?”

“Exactly!” Kensuke confirmed.

“But... I'm not really all that musical...”
“Didn't you tell me that you play the Cello?” Nagato interjected. “I thought the two of us resolved that we would endeavor to be a little more confident in the future.”

“But... I'm not very good at it... and a Cello doesn't really fit into a garage band...”

Kensuke, however, was quick to contradict him: “Hogwash! If anything that gives us more memorability points.”

“And besides, I don't think any of us are virtuosos.” said Touji, appearing fairly laid-back about the risk of public embarrassment. “It's a school festival not a talent show. In the end we're just doing this for fun!”

“So you really think it would be alright? I don't want to spoil everything for everyone by hitting the wrong note or anything...”

“Meh. You can give us a demonstration play and we'll see what we can do for it. But that's for later, right now we have a much more urgent issue to take care of.”

“And that would be?” asked Touji, not too worried by his bespectacled friend's conspiratory demeanor.

“We need to have a girl. Else we risk looking like one of those late 90s teenage synthpop boybands...”

“There are plenty of manly all-guy bands.” Touji insisted. “In the worst case we'll just get a louder guitar.”

But Kensuke didn't seem convinced: “Let's face it. We don't exactly have the right ingredients for a hard rock band, and besides, the number of our potential fans will double if we had a cute girl on stage.”

“Well, none of us are cute girls.”

“Which is exactly why we have to get one!”

Nagato considered to remind him that one couldn't just 'get' girls as if one were buying a bag of rice, but he decided that it wasn't worth the trouble.

“Get one? And where would we find one? They don't exactly grow on trees in case you haven't noticed.”

“That's where Shinji comes in.”
"Me?"

"Yes, you!" Kensuke repeated. "You're the one who's popular with the ladies!"

"Am I?"

"Sure you are!" Touji insisted. "Don't think we didn't see the babe you brought with you this morning!"

"It's not like that..."

"Come on, you've got to know one or two chicks that might be willing to be our singer if you used some of your charme on them."

Shinji didn't know what in the world convinced the two of them that he even had such a thing as 'charme', still, he meekly considered who could be eligible for the part. "So you want a pretty girl to sing in our band..."

His first thought would have been Asuka, who was universally accepted to be attractive by most of the male student body, but for obvious reasons, she was not an option.

"It's a shame that Ayanami isn't here. I feel pretty bad about her being stuck at headquarters while Shikinami and I get to have fun doing school projects..."

"Don't bat yourself up about it." Touji advised. "I doubt she's very upset about the school festival thing, I never got the impression that she's into that sort of stuff. Last year she didn't even attend."

"Maybe she was sick that day, or maybe she was busy at NERV, just like today."

"In any case, she can't sing in our band if she's not here. Got any other ideas? How about your new ladyfriend from this morning? She was pretty cute."

"Yamagishi-san?" Shinji considered for a bit, but ultimately seemed to reach a definite conclusion. "You know what? That's not a bad idea..."

----

"Me?"

Much like Shinji had suspected, they had found Mayumi in the library.

"Yes, please!" Touji implored.

"Very much so!" Kensuke continued. "With you as our lead singer, our project will be saved!"

Mayumi wasn't sure what to make of the two loud boys who proceeded to bow to her in an exaggerated fashion.

A third, more subdued fellow was standing off to the side, and next to him was... that boy.
“But... I'm sure there's many girls here you can ask that would be better suited for this. I'm not even
cute.”

“Shinji! That's you cue!”

The Third Child swallowed nervously. “But, uh, we've decided that we'd like to have you on our
band! And that's not true at all, about you not being cute...”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes! I do!” he assured her.

Sure, he could have been lying, but he had been looking at her that other time.

“Oh, Thanks, but... I'm not sure if I have the courage to sing in front of so many people... and I
might not be any good at it...”

“This isn't about being good. “ Shinji replied. “The point of this whole... school festival thing is to
have fun and enjoy ones' youth while it lasts. We're not trying to be superstars. You should have
more confidence in yourself.”

Yeah... it did feel good to share the unbelievable mercy he had been given. It was almost enough to
convince him that he deserved it.

“Well, I suppose I can... give it a try?”

Touji's rejoicing was imminent: “Does this mean you're in? YAY!”

“Thanks for your time, Yamagishi-san.” - that was Nagato, who probably felt obliged to contribute
something more civilized and/or reassuring, but nonetheless wore a thin smile as he watched the
EVA pilot explain the details of their plan to their newest band member.

By the look of it, Shinji had been taking his advice to heart – still, Nagato found it hard to believe
that he could be so oblivious of the light that surrounded him.

The Third Child may have been reserved and often full of doubt, but beyond that, he was a pretty
accepting guy in his own way, and his circle of friends reflected that.

----

Pulling her legs close and placing the small of her feet on the seat across from her own, Asuka
managed to fill two benches of the bus all by herself.

She did it because she was worth it.

The bus was otherwise tightly packed, but who cares how old, frail, pregnant or exhausted from
work any of them were, she was different from this whole lot. And besides, the last thing she
wanted right now was for some creep to sit down beside her and restrict the movement of her
elbows as she was furiously pressing the buttons on her handheld console.

Keeping her gaze low and trying her best to tune out whatever annoying irrelevant conversations
were taking place on this bus, she channeled her urge to physically disrespect the Third Child's
face into vanquishing her virtual enemies.

Who did he think he was...?

Who did he think he was, that he could simply forget about her like that?

---

Since she was to be ready for departure at all times, Rei had not taken off her plug suit for as much as a single moment, not even now, as she waited in a modestly sized, windowless room, sitting atop the bed which, aside from a heavy, wooden bookshelf and a desk of similar make, was among its only furnishings, reading a thick book by the dim caramel light of a reading lamp.

Next to her, atop the deep crimson bedsheets, there was an entire pile of such books, thick, finely-printed scientific volumes that she'd brought to occupy her time while she remained here.

Apart from them, she's brought a pillbox filled with her usual medications, a spare uniform and a certain little case containing a pair of broken eyeglasses, and nothing else.

Now one could have been inclined to mistake her current location for whatever quarters had been assigned to her for the duration of the current situation, but this was not the case – in truth, this room, hidden deep within the bowels of NERV HQ, served a wholly different purpose.

She was aware that Commander Ikari owned a mansion on the surface, but he rarely found the time to return there, often resorting to this simple, spartan chamber whenever he needed to provide his body with a modicum of sleep.

This was also the place to which he summoned those with whom he wished to converse in private, insofar as a person like him could even be said to have a 'private' life - These days, he only ever seemed to set foot on the surface when he was leaving for yet another business trip.

At times, he had also summoned Akagi here when she seemed to be tiring of getting her fix in his office, though she was the only one involved who would have seen these meetings as personal in nature – As far as he was concerned, it was yet another aspect of his work toward the great purpose, perhaps one that was a little more unsavory than the average, but not by much, and not anywhere near the worst things he had done.

Today, he had instructed Rei to await him here, and that was exactly what she had done. Since the need for her to be ready for deployment at all times forbade lengthy experiments, she hadn't had much else to do for today, aside from a few routine Checkups with Dr. Akagi – by now, she had finished the books she'd brought with her and was only thumbing through this one's pages in order to revisit a few paragraphs that had caught her attention.

She did not mind waiting here, as it didn't really represent too much of a break whom what she usually did. Whether it was here or elsewhere, her days would be spent executing her assigned orders and then waiting until she would be needed again.

The only significant difference to her usual routine, insofar as she would have registered one, was that she couldn't converse with the Third Child, though her presence here meant that she was set to spend somewhat more time with the Commander – For example, it was not usual for him to summon her to his breakfast table.
And there he was, speak of the devil.

He stepped through the door and scanned her with a quick glance.

Almost immediately, her features softened into a smile, and his own, too, lost some on their usual saturnine expression.

He inquired as to how she was faring, if she was adjusting to the situation, and how her last checkup had turned out.

She asked about his own welfare.

His answer was brief and noncommittal.

It was customary for her to answer just a briefly and unusual for her to ask such questions of her own, so he wanted to know about the reason for her query.

She stated that she had wanted to know... and that the Third Child frequently quizzed her about the matter.

Silence.

He decided to question her about the current state of the plan – that is, for the parts of it that pertained to how things were going between the two children.

Rei didn't really seem to know what she was expected to answer to that, but noted that the boy in question had sought her out before the experiment on the day before.

The Commander informed her already knew.

She asked whether the current state of things represented a problem.

He denied it.

Then, his gaze shifted to the books and he asked to know how far ahead she was, to which she replied that she had them all finished.

He thought this good and stated as much.

It shouldn't have been surprising, if one considered that just about anything that NERV dealt with today, including the works of those ever-annoying women, was, in one way or another, built upon the genius of a certain woman – and if one considered the... connection between her and Rei... well, again, it wasn't surprising, that the girl had potential.

He found it as promising as he found it heartbreaking.

He asked Rei if there were any portions of the text that she still had problems with, or questions about.

He never went as far as to sit down beside her – for if he ever did that, he would have been lost for good.

Instead, he remained in a relative vicinity and instructed her to pass him the book whenever there was a need for him to see it.

She was reaching an advanced level of understanding – most of her questions had more to do with
wanting more detailed explanations and further information in order to comprehend something to her satisfaction than they did with any true difficulties in understanding the texts.

He told her to place the books back onto the bookcase and reached for one that was somewhat dusty because he usually avoided taking out of the shelf – Yet, he couldn't have thrown it out along with everything else because he still needed it as reference material.

“Read this.” he told her. “You should be able to make sense of it by now.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She received the rather thick, black tome and examined its title: 'About the new possibilities in the field of metaphysical biology – by Yui Ikari.'.

“Is there a connection?” the girl asked in a barely discernible tone of mild surprise.

He did not look at her as he answered.

“Not in any manner that would be relevant to you.”

“I see.”

“You may go now.”

---

“Uh, that was...”

“Absolutely perfect!”

Shinji didn't even get a chance to properly begin his sentence before Touji preempted him with a very clear verdict – While he may have had his initial doubts about the efficiency of recruiting a female band member, Mayumi's little musical demonstration had soon reversed his opinion to a point where he half-seriously lamented that Shinji had seen her first.

The others weren't exactly regretting the new addiction, either: “She's got quite the voice, doesn't she?”

“Impressive indeed.” thought Nagato, who honored the bespectacled girls with a few motions of subdued applause. “We're lucky to have found you, Yamagishi-san.”

Shinji agreed: “I'm honestly surprised that you're this good. You might have discovered a new talent there.”

“I don't know... I mean, thank you guys for saying all that but I'm not sure if this is good enough for me to sing in front of so many people...”

“Sure it is!” Touji insisted as he got to work on some of the electronics. “That is, if I get this mike working. Darn those tangled cables!”

“Careful Touji! That's not the speaker but the amplifier for your guitar. Don't break the socket.”
“Sorry. I'll be sure to keep that in mind...”

“Are we experiencing technical difficulties?”

All five of them were rather astonished when a tall man with long hair and guitar case on his back stepped into the room like a superhero summoned by a signal light.

Shinji was the only one to recognize his face, though it took him a while to put him into context now that he was wearing a white T-shirt and a short black vest instead of the NERV uniform the Third Child was used to seeing him in.

“Aoba-san! What brings you here?”

“Let's just say that a little Birdie told me. Which basically means that Captain Katsuragi asked the security people if you were doing anything for the school festival, and then sent me to help you with all the sound engineering and guitar stuff.

Consider it a sort of 'reimbursement' for taking up your practice time with yesterday's battle.”

“How sad a world would this be without Misato-san's generosity~”

Kensuke was inclined to agree: “If we have this cool guitar dude on our side, our show has to be a success!”

“But wasn't Touji supposed to be the one playing the guitar?“

“Consider yourself my apprentice, kid.”

“I feel honored.” answered Touji, uncharacteristically humbled at the prospect.

Nothing left to do but to get started then.

While Aoba provided Kensuke, Nagato ans especially Touji with lots of useful tips and tricks of the music-making trade, Mayumi and Shinji (who, all things considered, was probably the most artistic of the bunch) secluded themselves in a corner of the room to whip up some song lyrics in a creative frenzy, and before long, they managed to get to the actual recording part way faster than they'd expected and were able to spend much of the available time practicing both their original song and those cover versions they had been thinking of doing.

All in all, it turned out to be an all around pleasant undertaking during which they all got to have their fun and their chances to shine.

In particular, Touji's sense of humor had made great contributions to the chill, amenable atmosphere during the event – Even Mayumi, who was a vintage shrinking violet most of the time, felt inspired to bold artistic contributions, not just through her singing, but in devising the lyrics, whose finalized version had sprung almost entirely from her pen.

Even for the more humble about them, there was plenty of positive reinforcement to be had, and though some may have been reluctant to truly believe it, they all certainly enjoyed it.

There were even moments where some of them were genuinely impressed with what they never knew they could do.

It was only after they'd successfully cobbled together some halfway acceptable sound and recorded
their 'dress rehearsal' as the designated CD version when they realized that their efforts had eaten up most of the afternoon

Kensuke remained behind with Aoba, who'd volunteered to help him with the sound editing software, Nagato, by contrast, excused himself quickly out of a desire not to worry his father who was bound to be coming home sooner rather than later.

The remaining three could afford to take their sweet time in strolling out of the building and take the time for a little causal conversation, until Touji bode them farewell and, perhaps quite deliberately, left the last two all to themselves as they stood in the warm light of the early evening, their eyes unavoidably drawn to each other.

“I just wanted to say... thank you. Thank you for everything. It really meant a lot to me.”

“Same here. Thank you for participating. It was important to me that you wouldn't be left all alone, because I know what that's like.”

“Thanks again. For everything.”

And then she left, unwilling to expose her face any longer – she felt the warmth under her cheek announcing what no doubt must have been a far too obvious redness that she wouldn't be comfortable showing, not when she couldn't be sure that he felt the same.

Shinji stood there a while, looking after her as she walked away, but once he did move, it didn't take him long to break into a hurried jog – It occurred to him that there was one more thing he could do, if he should manage to reach the next supermarket before all the shops closed up.

He'd been to the pinboard next to the staff room in order to write their project into the corresponding list, and, knowing Asuka, she'd probably done this sometime after their altercation, but she really had registered for the baking project, and all things considered he regretted that their argument had turned out the way it did.

---

“Inspektor Kaji, you are one of my superiors in this organization, do you really think this is appropriate?”

“Appropriate?” he tried to go for the cheeky methods an places his hands on the railing that the woman before him was leaning on, leaning in towards her but not yet touching her.

“Of course it wouldn't be appropriate, but who really cares what about that? All's fair in love and war.”

“If you remove your arms right now, we can agree that this never happened.”

Realizing that her disinterest was very much genuine, he did just that in this very instant, backing out of her space with a quiet, understated apology.

Once he did that, she continued along the path as if nothing happened, without even saying a word.
“Tough luck eh?”

“Mitsurugi! How long have you been here?”

“Probably longer than you'd like. So you're interested in Asahina?”

“Not really. My actual target is the lady down there.” he announced, motioning a casual wave downwards past the railing adjacent to the two men, where a pair of women could be seen discussing something in the lower level – One of them was Dr. Akagi, and the other was, of course, Misato.

“I was wondering if she'd get jealous.”

“Which of them?”

“On the right.”

“You mean Captain Katsuragi? I don't know, she seems kind of unapproachable and utilitarian, like she's the workaholic type...”

“Nothing could be further from the truth. She's more of a 'work hard, play hard' sort of person once you get to know her. Weren't you the one who told me not to waste any chances if it was the right person? Even so, it's always a bit aggrieving to have one's advances rejected, even if they weren't too serious...”

“I can't deny that. Actually, I've tried m luck with her as well – Asahina, that is – but she wasn't very receptive either. I suppose she's not interested in a relationship right now...”

“What, you, Mitsurugi? After all your talks about 'The One'?”

“It's true that I still miss Kikyou, but my wife is gone and she's not coming back. Please don't get the wrong impression, it's not so much about the carnal pleasures, but I do get lonely, and that was even more true when I was stationed up in the arctic.

Besides, I have a son and he's been without a mother figure in his life for so long. So I started seeing this woman who worked at Bethany base. We spent many nice evenings together and she was practically my girlfriend, but then, she ended the relationship out of the blue and disappeared soon after. The word was that she had been transferred, but no one knew where.

So, I get altogether tired of the arctic and request a transfer myself. Best thing I ever did, considering that Bethany Base ended up blowing up just a few weeks after I left. You were there when it happened, weren't you?”

“Yeah, I was, I was sent there on a few transitory assignments while I was officially stationed in Germany. “

From his experience as an investigator, Kaji recognized this as one of those moments where, when you listened to people in a sufficiently friendly manner, they might tell you things. “So, she just disappeared off the face of the earth and you never saw her again?”

“Well, that's the thing. Around the same time as I transferred in, Asahina-san was given a high-ranking post in the security division. So I meet this woman, and she looks identical to my ex-girlfriend. She's wearing her hair differently, but it's definitely the same woman, or at least, she looks like her.
I tried to talk to her, but she acted like she'd never seen me before and certainly wasn't interested in going out for a drink.

I realize how this sounds, believe me, I'm not enough of a crazy stalker to badger someone who's not interested in me, I have a son to raise for pete's sake, and even with my ex-girlfriend I was never really that sure how seriously she took it all, especially since she broke it off like that. I've stayed out of her hair ever since, but I can't get over how they look exactly the same.

My memory might just be playing tricks on me, though. Maybe this is just me wanting some closure...” Mitsurugi sighed. “In any case, I need to be going. My son must be waiting for his dinner.”

“See you around.”

At first, Mitsurugi made a convincing show of leaving, but just five steps further, he stopped in his track and turned back to face Kaji.

“Tell me, Kaji-san... What's your opinion of Commander Ikari?”

“That's not an easy question. I'm still undecided on a lot of things concerning this whole undertaking. He seems like a man hellbent on accomplishing his goals.”

“I don't doubt that, but don't you think...”

“Are you going to ask me if I think he's insane?”

“Insane? Nah. I've got not quarrel with insanity, we're all a little mad these days and so is this whole wide world. But sometimes, I find myself doubting if he's even human.

It turns out my boy has made friends with the Third Child. That poor, abandoned, forgotten child. It's a crying shame if you ask me. I know you're not a father, but as a man, you should understand to land your first into the face of the man responsible...

The fact that an organization like NERV is being led by a person like him worries me deeply...”

---

By the time Shinji made it home, the sunset was in full bloom and generously spilled its golden-orange light across building's facade.

Loaded with shopping bags, it took him some effort to get past all the doors involved in getting to his particular apartment, but thanks to a few balancing acts and creative uses of his elbows he ultimately succeeded in negotiating them.

He found Asuka in the living room, sitting on on the couch, quiet, downcast and as close to outright sulking as he could picture her being capable of.

She was playing with her hand-held game console, and though this activity may at first have been intended to vent her anger at some virtual pixel creatures, the flames of her fury had long since faded by the time that Shinji arrived, leaving behind the cool ashes of listless disinterest – Even the sounds and lights coming out of her device no longer really engaged her, except as a distraction
from the tarry mass of raven thoughts congealing at the back of her mind – which still left her so
distracted from her surroundings that she didn't notice the sounds of her roommate's return, and for
a while, he did nothing to change this, reluctant to start a conversation after they'd parted in anger.
Eventually, he managed to scrape together the courage to address her, though it may have taken
him a while – He'd realized that there was no point in expecting *her* to break the silence.

“Shikinami-san?”

Her glare resembled an omen of impending doom for as long as it took her to recognize the
shopping bags in his hands. Then, however, her face morphed into a genuine unconcealed
expression of surprise unlike any he'd ever associated with her face.

The bags themselves were filled to the brim with baking ingredients: Flour, Sugar, baking paper,
chocolate overglaze, syrup, marzipan decorations, sugar pearls, cookie cutters, fruit for cake
stuffing and last but not least a couple of huge plastic containers for airtight storage and easy
transport.

“You wanted me to help with your project, didn't you? I mean, I get it if you're mad and don't want
me to-”

“Of course I'm angry, you dunce!” she retorted, back to her usual energy. “So get yor backside into
the kitchen so we can get started, it's already getting late!”

----

“Shikinami-san... Be careful with the knife, if you keep holding it like this-”

“Cut it out. I get that *you* may be stupid enough to need an instruction manual about how to use
something as simple as a knife, but you shouldn't make assumptions about others- OUCH!”

“I'm terribly sorry! Let's me see for a bit....”

“Don't freak out on me now. I'm hardly going to die from such a small cut. Don't act as if I'd
accidentally hacked off my finger or something.”

“But what if it gets infected!” the Third Child replied, all the way from the bathroom where he was
now engaged in a nigh-panicked search for the package of waterproof band aids he believed to have
seen here once upon a time. “Besides, it's hardly hygienic for you to keep working at this without
covering it up. You know, because, germs and stuff. We should probably wash it with water,
too...”

Asuka signed.

Fine. She'd stand still and let him fuss over her if he so insisted.

Knowing that little pervert, his rambles about germs were probably just an excuse to not only touch
her hands, but hold them under running water to boot.

Held in his, her own hand felt uncomfortably small and clumsy as he briefly sprayed her with
something that may have been a disinfectant or a modern version of an ointment (not without
dutifully warning her that it might sting) and the carefully wrapped a band aid around her nicked finger.

She wasn't supposed to feel all mushy from having someone taking care of her, she didn't need to. She was very much capable of taking care of herself and what did it matter if he decided to be nice to her, or actually thought of her even if it meant doubling his school project related workload?

There was no place for such sentimentality in the hard, competitive world she lived in.

But enough of that – it wasn't as if she'd shown this weakness in front of a serious rival – Sure, considering that he'd gotten his EVA through nepotism, his achievements were not to be underestimated, but the very idea that he would ever measure up to her was a total joke.

“Why were you even cutting up this cheese?” he then asked once he was done with her finger.

“Are you an idiot? Obviously for that cheesecake we're supposed to be making!”

Okay, that was a little extreme. All the way throughout their baking efforts he'd very much begun to suspect that she had very little experience with baking or cooking, but he didn't think that it would be this bad.

He'd have to let her down gently...

“Mh, you know, it might be called a 'cheesecake', but in reality, there's no actual cheese in it, except curd cheese if you count that.”

“This makes no sense!”

“Says the person who signed up for a baking project when she doesn't know the first thin about baking!”

“Well, how was I to know that you'd pick today or all days to discover your musical talent! You're an excellent chef and believe me, I would know! Believe me, the difference was quite clear when you decided to stay out with your buddy’s the other day and left me to eat Misato's barely edible junk!” she spat this out as if it were a kind of insult, but upon closer inspection, it was a real honest compliment – If not more.

Had she just admitted to actually relying on him?

Or did she simply see him as a kind of property that she was entitled to push around whenever she felt like it?

He didn't really want to ask, for fear that her answer might heavily imply the latter, but her comments concerning his culinary skills had been considerably less ambiguous.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Don't let it go to your head. It's still not exactly the manliest of talents, or the most essential of skills. The Elite--” and as she said that word, her right arm made a pompous gesture toward her own chest. “- has no need to do menial things like these. Excellent people can afford to have others cook for them, people like you, for example.”

Shinji decided to take this with a smile, though he couldn't help the pendulum swing of melancholy that inevitably seemed to follow it.
“Well, I suppose no one would blame you for the cooking thing, most people at our age can't really do it yet. When you think about it, it isn't necessarily a bad thing, it only means that you didn't have to learn it, because your parents always looked after you. If I'm honest, it almost makes me a little envious...”

“My Parents-? What the hell are you talked about?”

“Your mom? I think you mentioned her? I-I'm not sure, I get that something like missing your parents is a bit too 'un-glamorous' for you, but...”

“Nonsense! I have no idea where you got that idea from, but I haven't been living with my parents since I was, like, five years old!”

“...Eh? How come?”

“Well obviously, because of the Evangelion Program, you idiot! I think I mentioned the part where I've been training ever since I was little? Unlike you, for example.”

This hit Shinji rather bluntly now, and with little preparation – it wouldn't fit into the mental image that he had of her, nor did it seem to match the self-assured, dauntless and seldom truly distressed manner in which he saw her barge through life day in, day out.

It didn't even match the casual, nonchalant tone she was describing it, and yet, he thought he felt anger rising through his being, and an urge to defend her in spite of all their differences and mutual misgivings:

“So they just... handed you over?” She didn't even seem to grasp why he suddenly seemed so shaken, or why he struggled to string his words into sentences: “Did they just give you away because the people from NERV came to your doorstep and asked? Even if they needed you to save all of humanity, this sounds cruel. Why didn't they at least-”

“Hold your horses, Daddy's boy!”

Asuka pointed her outstretched arm and index finger at him, and laughed.

“You're an A-grade drama queen, do you know that? There's no need to turn everything into a soap opera!” she retorted, confusing him completely. “They asked me, and it was my decision, no one else's. I decided that I would be devoting myself completely to my training and education as a pilot.”

“Maybe they did, but, how can a five year old be expected to decide such a thing?”

“I wasn't just some five year old!” Asuka clarified, as if his words has been meant to criticize or even insult her. “I was me. My father and my stepmother were the ones who kept insisting that I was still a child, some bullshit about me not having 'enough free time', or, that too much was being expected of me while neglecting my 'emotional development', and complaining how I should see kids my age for 'social experience'; They were almost as bad as Misato with all that talk about how I had a 'right to a normal life'. Bah!”

She said all of this with the utmost scoff, as if it were the most absurd thing she had ever heard.

But she'd said 'stepmother', which painfully reminded Shinji of Nagato's suspicions.

“A 'normal life' is something for normal people. It's right there in the name. It has nothing to do with me. If anything, it's for people like you or my parents. You lot may be able to afford such
privileges, but I'm different from you!"

Yeah, there could be no doubt about it – He would have given almost everything for his father's attention, but she seemed to have left her parents of her own free will.

“I'm not like you, or them, or anybody else here. But they didn't get it. Everyone at NERV could see it, my tutors, the researchers, but not Misato, no matter how she acted on the surface, she always saw me as a child. I'm not a normal child. I'm a lot more mature than others at my age, I don't need anyone to fuss over me, and I certainly don't need to be with other kids!

They wouldn't even understand me, I mean, you're the best proof of that.

I mean, it wasn't as bad as it could have been, at least my parents understood that I had to be at NERV, but even they kept calling me and making me visit them, as 'moral support', or so they said. Once in a while, they'd just hijack one of my weekends, or sometimes an entire week, and they would keep buying me toys and dragging me to all this kiddie stuff, disney movies, the zoo, the circus, you name it!

You wouldn't believe how annoying that was! Well, ever since my old man kicked the bucket, I just have to deal with the occasional phone call from my snotty, pretentious stepmom...”

The sheer indifference with which she spoke about her parents was startling.

Shinji had seen her talk to her folks on the phone and it always seemed like they got along well enough, but now it seemed as if she didn't even like them very much, and she didn't seem much fonder of Misato, even though they cheerfully interacted in day to day life with seeming fondness, but as he heard her speak now with cold, sober eyes, it seemed like those bonds were no more special to her than the superficial friendships with the disposable flock of girls she'd surround herself with at school and just for a moment, he was tempted to wonder if there was anyone left in this whole world whom she saw as anything other than a bothersome annoyance or a practical obstacle.

(But that's how it was.

As far as she was concerned, both her parents had been gone for a long, long time.

By the time her father had passed away, the emotional bond between them had been long since severed, and for her stepmother, she'd never been let inside her heart in the first place.

Inside, she'd walled herself off many years ago, so she'd felt barely more than a little pinprick.

Or at least, that's what she'd made herself believe in order to live up to the standards she had set for herself.)

“You can probably imagine that yours truly had way ore important stuff to do than to pick up a cookbook. I mean, if I'd wanted to, I could have taken my stepmother up on the half-hearted offer she made that one day, but that would have been a waste of my time, especially since she picked the day before a big activation experiment to ask me. And she didn't even come to watch, can you believe it? Not that I'd want her to, but, the thing is, she probably didn't even realize how it was any different from my usual synchronization tests.”

She laughed. “You know, I was born like this. I wouldn't agree with that cheesy adage about how it's 'lonely at the top', but sometimes it can be frustrating that there's almost no one of my own level around. It's like being surrounded by goldfish! None of you normal people ever understands!”
She sighed. “For example, look at us EVA pilots. You and the First got a little lucky and had some useful connections, and so you got to be pilots. With a little practice, you even got pretty good, and I'll admit that you surprised me there a few times, but even so you're still miles from my level."

What I'm trying to say is, that even though effort pays off, there's a fundamental difference between you and I.”

She made a further, pompous gesture which surprisingly ended in a sigh and then, changed into a smile. “...nevermind. I suppose that, as another EVA pilot, you are the closest thing to an equal that I can currently get my hands on. And your being able to cook turned out pretty useful.

You know what? Since you didn't forget our project altogether, I'll be lenient with you and forgive you about this morning, or the one before. I'm feeling merciful towards you because of that time you fished me out of a volcano.

So then, let's get to work! I'm not really that crazy about cheesecake anyways, and certainly not after what happened. Don't you have some better recipe?”

“I guess we could go with something else...” he began as he looked through the pile of printed-out recipes he'd found online. “How about Black Forest Cake? Just in case you get homesick after all.”

“Where'd you get the idea that I'm from the Black Forest?”

“That's in Germany, isn't it?”

“Yeah sure, but did it ever occur to you that Germany has more than one patch of trees in it? Then again, considering how many people you've got stashed away on these tiny overcrowded islands here...”

Strange Feeling.

Asuka had spent this whole conversation talking about how they were supposed to be all different from each other, but in the end, the Third Child felt as if she'd come a tiny bit closer to being within his reach – perhaps because she'd said that he was the closest thing she had to an equal right now, or perhaps rather because it was somehow... comforting... to learn that this whole 'trained since childhood' deal came with its own share of drawbacks for example, that she'd never found the time to do such a simple, ordinary thing like baking cookies or cakes.

But it also made him think.

All this talk about a 'normal life' and how she 'couldn't afford this privilege', unlike him. What privilege? Looking back at his upbringing, it would never have occurred to him to describe himself as 'privileged' in any way, except perhaps in the strictly economic sense. All of his life, he'd only seen the things he didn't have while others did: Friends, Family and a purpose to justify their being in this world.

His life had not exactly been 'normal', but as he considered it, this mainly had to do with his being himself. A different, stronger person may have managed to build a less than merely superficial bond with his teacher and made friends with the other kids in the village – a chance that had gone to waste because he happened to be his cowardly, unlikeable self, but, at the same time, a chance that couldn't be taken for granted:

If Asuka, the Second Child, had endered the program at the tender age of five, it seemed to follow, just by logic, that Rei had been recruited as a mere toddler. In her case, he didn't even have the faintest idea what happened to her parents, and all things considered, it wouldn't be surprised if she
didn't either.

She didn't have a single picture of them in her apartment; The only thing resembling a memento had belonged to his father. But whatever her story may have been (he didn't have the courage to ask details), it didn't seem like she had ever gotten such a chance at a regular, carefree childhood – and in hindsight, that would seem to explain the soldier-like attitude she displayed at times, her penchant of talking about 'orders' and accepting the dreadful things she was made to endure as simple parts of her workload.

Asuka did have that chance, but she'd given it away, traded it in for the burdens of an EVA pilot before she was old enough to understand the full weight of what she was giving up – Even now, she barely seemed to have any concept or awareness of what she had lost, but that was because she had a warrior's heart;

It wasn't easy to notice when she'd shown up looking him, leaving him to gaze up at her from far beneath, as if she were some omnipotent, capricious goddess with no capacity for hesitation or fear, but the closer he'd come to being able to look her in the eye as a comrade, the more he recognized them as the eyes of a lone fighter, a human being much like himself – Was this not a first for her as much as for him, in all of its unfamiliar normalcy and everyday madness? Had she not come to a foreign land on her own to find her first real friends here? Was she not also inexperienced in things that almost everyone else took for granted?

It was just that their respective inexperience showed itself in different areas, because he'd been lucky enough to experience some things that neither she nor Ayanami had ever known in their lives, or at least, he'd received the opportunity;

And that made him think.

Until now, he'd had no doubt that his father had sent him away because he didn't want him. There had never been alternative – his endless broodings had circled around whatever reason there may have been for that, and the resulting feelings of rejection, abandonment and unwantedness, but not so much about the circumstances of their parting itself. They'd always seemed synonymous. But now, this fundamental axiom of his thought was coming into question.

He thought of Nagato's father, who evidently loved his son, but still had considered to send him to a boarding school, for completely different reasons. He too had spoken about the prospects of a 'normal life'.

He also thought of his arrival here in Tokyo-3, and how he'd only been summoned because Rei happened to be injured at the time of the Fourth Angel's arrival. NERV needed pilots so badly that they couldn't let him go once his talent had been uncovered, but what if Rei had never been involved in that accident at all? What if he'd never been called to Neo Tokyo-3 and no one, himself included, would ever have found out that he possessed this rare ability?

He could have lived in peace, without ever hearing the word 'Evangelion'!

Could it be that his father had once stood at that same crossroads and chosen the same path that the elder Mitsurugi had ended up rejecting?

Could it be that he'd only been sent away so that he could have a normal life, far way from the project?

Perhaps, he only treated Rei more nicely so differently in order to make it up to her, because he felt
bad that he couldn't afford her that same privilege...

No. Nonsense.

This was just him hearing what he wanted to hear. If it were like that, his father would have started spending more time with him once he'd been forced to become a pilot as well and that had not happened.

The simplest, clearest, most apparent explanation was still that his father flat out didn't care.

“Hey! Quit spacing out! The cake needs to be done by tomorrow!”

Called back into the present by Asuka's complaints, Shinji adjourned his musings until further notice: “Alright, I give up. Let's get this over with.”

After some time, they succeeded in filling all available plastic storage boxes with cakes, tarts and cookies. It was a fortunate that their oven was spacious enough. Granted, there were a few portions of dough that ended up in the garbage chute for various reasons, but Asuka learned fast and had a vested interest in proving herself useful, and after all, it wasn't like she was too stupid to use a rolling pin or cookie cutter.

They succeeded in procuring a sizable pile of pastries which they stacked on top of the dining table lest they forget to take it with them the next morning.

Expectedly, Asuka left him no words of thanks when she retreated to her room, but being allowed to serve as a sort of confidant for her was reward enough for him not to mind that terribly much.

Even so, he couldn't help but sneak a contemplative gaze out of the window: By now, even the last glimmers of the sunset had finally faded, and after working on not one, but two school projects, he found himself in a fashionably matching state of content exhaustion, but in between all those musings about the value of a 'normal life', he'd come to realize that there was at least one more thing he ought to do today...

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“Just as I thought...”

After two hours of typing and code-breaking, Kaji arrived at a definite conclusion: Until she was transferred to NERV headquarters soon after the Fourth Angel's attack, the woman called Asahina Najiko had simply not existed.

There was absolutely nothing that would constitute unambiguous proof of her presence anywhere on this world: No group photos, no records of either reprimands or commendations for exceptional achievements, not data about her schooling or any previous employers one could have phoned for confirmation – and the same was true for that 'Ueda Nadesha' person Mitsurugi had described: It
was as if she'd come into existence to work at Bethany base, and then vanished back into the void when her time here was over – and her profile pictures spoke a clear language, it was, without a doubt, the same woman.

And Bethania Base wasn't the only place she'd been to, after some further digging, he found mentions of 'Asahina' in the databases of almost every single NERV branch, though he was by now fairly sure that this wasn't her real name.

Whoever she was, she'd worked at Massachusetts, Nevada, Berlin, Siberia, and the Chinese branch... each time under a different pseudonym. Getting data from the Golghata branch proved much more challenging but fortunately their personal files weren't as closely guarded as their project information – And it turned out that 'Asahina' had worked there, too.

The timeframes she'd spent working at each of NERV's many bases lined up neatly into a consecutive timeline with just one significant gap, a hole of two years which she might well have spent on the ever-elusive Tabgha moon base.

From this data alone it was impossible to conclude who she really was, but with NERV's rigorous security being what it is, there was no way that no one had ever meant before, which meant that it was being deliberately ignored, perhaps on orders from the very top.

Whoever she was, the people she reported to had to be very influential – And once that became clear, there could be no doubt that she was SEELE's second operative.

So, what did that mean for him and his further actions?

He doubt that the interior ministry would be very interested, they had little interest in the interior spats of the conspiracy.

Should he tell Ikari? Kaji had the feeling that he probably already knew, but this might be a way to test it, and who knew what Ikari might reveal. Or, he could play dumb and inform SEELE that he'd found a suspicious person, just to confirm his suspicious, but there was no guarantee that they would actually tell him anything.

In any case, he would need to be careful around Asahina (or whatever her real name might be), lest she blow his cover.

He was just one man – a single, unattached man with no remaining family and an overall expendable role to the organization that was largely irrelevant for battle deployments – He had no doubt that those at the very top of the organization's pecking order could have him executed at a whim.

1. The whole “orgy dream scene” at the beginning is inspired by a similar scene from “Chobits” in which the protagonist has a dream in which he is chased by all the attractive ladies in the vicinity. One shouldn't neglect the funsies.

2. That Asuka's father has since kicked the bucket is explicitly noted in the proposal materials, though it can also be inferred from the show proper in that it's the stepmother who calls & that he already seems all gray in that one vague shot we see of him in a flashback. Of course, she's supposed to be telling a heavily lensed, filtered and sanitized version of events here, but that's as close as a normal human quasi-intimate conversation with her as Shinji gets at the
moment. You must at least be a level 4 friend to unlock the rest of my tragic backstory etc.

3. As for what part of Germany Asuka is from... personally, I headcannon her folks as suebian, mainly because the south has the most redheads. This would place Kyoko in a long & proud tradition of engineers and inventors, and allow for the cute spectacle of Asuka lapsing into a distinctive accent when she's particularly worked up. (Everyone Else: “We can do everything except speak Standard German.” Asuka: “Hold my apple spritzer. * breathes in * Zzzzzzzzz.”)

4. Even after this eventful day, our dear Shin-chan mentioned that there was something important he had to do. .. Find out what it is in chapter 2.12: [UNTOUCHABLE]
Ich seh' Dir ins Gesicht doch spüren tu ich nichts

Denn Dein Körper ist gefroren und erstarrt

Ich muss schon prüfen ob Du noch am Leben bist

Mit kalten Händen berührst Du mich

Doch ich fühle nichts

So wie ein Engel der aus Stein und Eis besteht

Meine Gefühle hinter Panzertüren

Nun gefangen nimmst

Jetzt liegst Du neben mir

Doch ich fühl' mich ganz allein

Und Deine Schönheit blendet mich

(Wie ein grelles Licht)

Du fasst meinen Körper an, doch spüren tu ich nichts

Doch mein Feuer kommt über Dich

Und Du wehrst dich nicht

Gib mir mein Gefühl zurück

Du bist viel zu kalt für mich

Gib mir mein Gefühl zurück

Und denk' immer daran: Ich liebe Dich!

-Welle:Erdball , 'Gib mir mein Gefühl zurück'
I look into your face but I don't feel anything

For your body is frozen and rigid

I do need to make sure if you're even still alive

With cold hands, you touch me

but I don't feel anything

Like an angel made of stone and ice,
you now take my feelings captive behind armored doors

Now you lie beside me

but I feel all alone

And your beauty blinds me

like a glaring light

You touch my body but I don't feel anything

But my fire covers you

and you don't resist

Give me back my feelings!

You are far too cold for me

Give me back my feelings!

And always remember that I love you

There was something he had to do.
After the numerous and varied errands of the day, he was convinced of that beyond all doubt, for he'd come to realize that regardless of whatever may be the case concerning his father's intentions, there was one obvious truth: He'd been able to fill this day with 'civilian activities', enjoying the afternoon with Mayumi and his friends and the evening with Asuka, and that was a very precious thing – but one he was only fortunate enough to have because someone else had gone without it:

Ayanami Rei.

While everyone else in their class had spent the day with their friends, perhaps working but nonetheless having fun, she had been stuck at headquarters, all alone and far away from all such merriment, attending to her duties before anything else, much like she'd done it all her life.

It wasn't fair that she alone should have to spend the day all by herself...

And so it came that he made his way to headquarters without being summoned there, now for the second time and again for the very same reasons; And when he thought of it in this context, it was hardly surprising that he and Rei hadn't grown that much closer even though he'd wanted to – So far, almost every interaction between them had taken place because external circumstances had brought them together, whether it was school, NERV or various errands like the one that once led him to her doorstep. He'd wanted to approach her almost since the first time he saw her, but so far, he hadn't really found the courage to do so.

But since he had decided that he would do what it takes to become a stronger person, this was probably a good place to start.

He didn't know how much of a difference it would make, much of the time he didn't know what to do with himself when he was around Rei, but... he at least wanted to say hello, just to let her know that someone had thought about her.

His steps were still cautious – though it was his second time doing this, he still felt like he was entering a forbidden place as he sneaked through the corridors of NERV HQ, wondering what he was even doing here.

He'd marched all the way here without plan or purpose, barely taking the time to explain his absence with a hastily written note and avoiding Asuka as he did so, telling her nothing.

In that sense it had been fortunate that she'd retired to her room right away: She didn't get along with Ayanami, and he didn't know whether he would have been capable of stating his intentions and going forward with them despite the disapproval she was almost certain to express, not to speak of lying to her or insisting that wherever he was going was none of her business.

Luck had gotten him so far, but by now it had run out – NERV HQ was an enormous building complex, and Ayanami could be pretty much anywhere in the geofront.

Sure, there were a few places he could check but that wouldn't be much better than throwing a dice at each inter junction, he might even end up missing her narrowly.

He should probably ask somebody where she might be, but if he did, wouldn't he be expected to explain his presence here?

He looked around, taking in the particular corridor that his wandering steps had brought him to. If he wasn't mistaken, he should be fairly close to Dr. Akagi's office.
She would surely know where Ayanami was at the moment, and besides, though she was Misato's friend their own relationship had remained mostly at a professional level, so she was less likely to tease him about it than, say, Misato.

So yeah. He still wasn't sure if this was the smartest option, but it was a path, a direction he could follow. He just hoped that Dr. Akagi would actually be at her office, otherwise he'd be pretty lost here.

But he didn't want to think of that right now. If that should be the case... he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

His worries turned out to be unfounded: When he arrived at the office and pressed the button to open the door, he found the blonde scientist beyond it, who, conveniently enough, seemed to be on a coffee break judging by the mug in her hand.

Due to the automatic door's hissing noise, she immediately noticed his presence and glanced at him in mild surprise.

“Oh, Shinji-kun. What brings you here at a time like this? Are you looking for Misato?”

“Not really, it's just, uhm, you know how Ayanami is supposed to stay at headquarters to stand guard? In case the angel isn't really defeated?”

“Don't worry about that. If the angel shows up again, our alarm system should recognize it in time. It's enough for Rei to stay here, and even that's just a cautionary measure. You should make good use your time off and go to bed early so that you'll be well-rested tomorrow morning.”

It shouldn't have been surprising – in the end, she'd never seen that... construct as more than a test subject, or even an object: A machine created to perform a function. Machines were created in order to carry out certain tasks and make human lives easier, and thus, it seemed natural to her that the machine should do what it was made for, so that the 'real' people didn't have to bother with it. To suppose that someone might have worried about that homunculus' feelings seemed about as likely or reasonable to her as to wonder whether the coffee machine in her office might be feeling used. Dr. Akagi wasn't a sentimental person, even when it came to real people, so the boy's purpose wouldn't have occurred to her until his words revealed it:

“I know that, but, uh...” He swallowed. “I just felt I should check up on Ayanami, since she was the only one who had to stay behind-...”

So that's how it was.

Akagi had to admit, she almost had to suppress a shudder. It was more than a little unsettling to see what effect that mere lump of matter could have on men, this impossible dream with only superficial resemblance to a real woman.

Father and Son, both neatly wrapped around her little finger... Just earlier today, the Commander had canceled one of their meetings in order to 'keep her company'. She didn't even want to know what that meant.

And then, there was the strange order that he'd given her at that same time, an instruction to let his son be if he were to seek the First Child's company – supposedly, an integral component of the scenario.

Who knew what he intended to do with that construct, she didn't particularly care as long as that abomination stayed away from the one man that ought to have been her own. She hated to think
what he might be doing with that pallid little flesh-automaton behind closed doors.

Donning her many masks, she proceeded to action, a veneer of professionalism with a package of superficial politeness on top, so that she would look a little more like what she'd like to be. She chased away the thoughts she didn't want and tried in vein to convince herself that there might well be more innocent explanations for everything.

Most likely, the boy was only feeling drawn to the outer shape of that empty shell, and even then, not in that way – It might be some subliminal recognition of his mother's features that drove him to worry about it as one would for a family member; Poor, well-intentioned, misguided child. Not that she lost all too much sleep about what might happen with that hateful woman's child.

“Ah, so that's how it is.” she stated, faking an understanding smile. “Rei is down in the armory right now. I can take you there if you want, I meant to go there anyways in order to discuss something with Misato.”

“Thanks a lot, Ritsuko-san. Let us go then. To the armory, I mean.”

She took the time to empty her coffee mug before answering: “Fine.”

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“Oh right, you've never been down here before, have you?”

That was true. An endlessly long escalator not much unlike those seen in other areas of NERV HQ led them deeper and deeper under layers of concrete and metal, passing by countless rifles, knives and a multitude of projective- and melee weapons that were, for the most part, suspended from the ceiling in special scaffolds that were probably meant to help with getting them to the surface in a timely manner whenever they should be needed.

This entire gallery of arms was at least building- if not skyscraper-sized, and organized into multiple 'blocks' or 'stories' all around them.

To his right, he could recognize some of the axes Asuka liked to use, to his left, he'd recently passed a patched-up and modified version of the particle gun he had used against the sixth angel, prompting him to remember that they were supposed to have returned it, though he thought it wise not to voice that observation.

The journey continued, and while they had ostensibly arrived in the armory itself, there was no trace of Rei (or Misato) to be found yet, leaving Shinji to wonder how much further they would have to venture – this hall was every bit as spacious as one would expect it of an armory meant to house giant-sized weapons meant to fight a war with three gigantic biomachines, though its dimensions made it evident how far down the megastructure of NERV HQ really went.

“So...” Dr. Akagi asked suddenly, perhaps to make some use of the time spent in transit. “Would you say that you've managed to adjust to your EVA by now?”

“I guess so, yeah...”
“That's good to hear, considering that all of our survival depends on it.”

As if he needed to be reminded of that. He wasn't lying when he said he had 'adjusted', in the sense that he was no longer an obvious liability on the battlefield and capable of moving his EVA in a satisfactory manner without suffering much in terms of side effects as of recently, but that didn't change that he wasn't really cut out for this type of strains or burdens.

He supposed that he had adjusted insofar as it was possible for him, but at the same time, he didn't expect that he would ever able to shake off his instinctual fear of those war machines, and all this while he still didn't have the slightest clue what the EVAs actually were.

He'd tried not to think of it but the fleshy eye from his first sortie had burned itself rather firmly into his memories – None of them would tell him anything about it, and he didn't dare to ask – but, he had been in that very same situation since the very beginning, and right now, he found himself a very convenient position, alone with someone who probably knew and would likely continue to remain in his vicinity while this escalator ride lasted and no one would be able to interrupt them – with both of the holding on to the escalator's conveyor-belt-like railings, he might not even have to look her in the face to make his inquiry.

He didn't seriously expect an answer, but it shouldn't have been unusual or suspicious for him to want one.

“Uhm, Ritsuko-san?” He began, nonetheless cautious but still very much pensive. “What are the EVAs? I mean, what are they really?”

“Hm...” for a moment, she seemed to be searching for an acceptable way to put it into words. “That's a very good question. First of all, they were the only means we had to defend all that which remained of our world after second impact. Whatever else they might or may not be, whether you will fin out one day or live out your days without ever knowing.

If there is one thing you should know, then know that we had no choice but to create EVA, even if it involved staining our hands.”

“Yeah...”

That hadn't been a straightforward answer, but it wasn't like he'd felt a strong, driving need for one – ultimately, he wasn't the kind of person to insist on the truth no matter what. He couldn't stand the strife, conflict and unease that such a philosophy brought with it, and if he were to be honest, he couldn't claim in good conscience that he was terribly curious for the truth as long as there was still some equilibrium left to disturb within his own little world.

Perhaps he was simply a coward. But even so, even if he wasn't actively looking for the answers, he couldn't help but ask himself these questions, and while they weren't precisely replies, Dr. Akagi's answers were still ominous enough to fall over his thoughts like long, dark shadows of vague outline: No other choice? Even if it meant staining our hands?

What was he supposed to say to that? What was that supposed to mean?

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Meanwhile, our familiar trio of technicians consisting of Ibuki Maya, Hyuuga Makoto and Aoba
Shigeru were dutifully overseeing the analysis and processing of all the data recorded during the last battle, so that it may be fed into the system in order to further improve its analytic and predictive capabilities – accordingly, the soundscape in Central Dogma was almost completely composed of eager typing and the occasional gulping of coffee – at least, until Lt. Ibuki hesitantly spoke up:

“There's something strange about this...”

“What is it, Maya?” Aoba inquired.

“Well, under closer scrutiny, the energy pattern of the angel's explosion doesn't match the ones we've observed with the other angels... at all.”

“But haven't the Angels so far been different from each other in many things?” Hyuuga commented. “Both the range and progression of their disintegration have proven variable.”

“Yes, but the abnormality is in the pattern of the energy distribution – the same one that kept creating those pillars of light. It was always the same apart from its magnitude, in the fourth, fifth and sixth angels – only this one is different. Sempai has been expecting something like this – It means the enemy is really still out there...”

---

After a lengthy escalator ride, Shinji eventually arrived at his destination; Ritsuko-san had continued a little further, down onto a catwalk that was part of the titanic weapon's scaffolding and most likely intended for maintenance purposes, where Misato had been awaiting them, somewhere close to the outer walls. Shinji wondered if she'd noticed him.

As far as his own errand was concerned he'd gotten off earlier at another catwalk that hung a bit higher in the air, suspended on the 'level' just above the two women, and next to him stood the reason for his arrival, complete with her white plugsuit and a white tin helmet identical to the one he himself had been handed earlier – Down below, Misato and Ritsuko were also wearing some.

All things considered, he probably made for a rather pitiful sight – after all, he'd supposedly come all this way in order to support her. That's why he made the effort, right?

So why was it so hard to find the words now that he had finally arrived?

He couldn't even bring himself to look her in the eye – and sure, she didn't seem to mind much, but that merely increased his sense of shame; It should bother her, so hiding behind the happenstance that she didn't felt like taking advantage.

He wanted to turn toward her, he did want to speak to her, but somehow all he ended up doing was to hang onto the railing that separated them from the plunging depth of the armory and watch as a huge rifle he may have personally emptied on the day before was being reloaded, while the thoughts and feelings he had toward this girl that stood just half a step behind him continued to burn themselves up, trapped on the inside of his being.

“I wonder what Misato-san and Ritsuko-san might be talking about...” he mused into the ether, trying his best not to ponder what he was even saying, for fear that the words might dry up in his throat, even those incidental, irrelevant sort of words.
He wanted to have said something at last when he left here, something other and better than just nothing. He didn't have much reason to suspect that she would respond to that, but much to his surprise, his attempts did end up sparking the beginning of a conversation, or something sufficiently like it.

He was almost a little startled when the background humming and droning of miscellaneous machine noises and distant announcements was joined by a barely audible, soft little voice, and that did lead him to turn to face the First Child, not as a deliberate choice that he'd finally enforced, but as an incidental kneejerk reaction to the feeling of surprise.

“Shouldn't you be in bed? You have school tomorrow.”

Here we go again, back to her asking about him, as if he were the one to worry about, when there was so much reason to presume the contrary. “It's fine. I'll manage.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you even eaten dinner?”

The way she kept thinking of everything but herself left him with a constant feeling that he was imposing on her, as if he were doing her an injustice by as much as interacting with her – whatever his intentions may have been, be they of the altruistic sort or simply a desire to make a new friend, he kept feeling like the whole interaction took place only for his sake, because he'd insisted on it, not because she actually got something out of it.

“No, but-”

“You could visit the canteen.”

“Mh, I suppose I could...” he repeated, smiling nervously. “But I'm afraid I didn't bring any money.”

“That will not be an issue. I will have them put it on my tab and pay at the next opportunity.”

When the First Child decided on that sentence, she probably didn't anticipate its consequences, nor could she explain the odd symptoms that her simple request (or rather its contextual implications) would evoke in her fellow pilot.

When the color of his face began to resemble EVA 02's armor and his voice descended into helpless stammering, she was experiencing at most slight uncertainty, and while she was merely innocently wondering whether she may have done something wrong, the Third Child would have needed a far more generous helping of question marks if he were to write down his thoughts: Did she really just invite him to dinner? Was he having one of those weird dreams again? Shouldn't he be the one paying? If he let her pay, did that make him appropriately modern or just a mooch? Had he just been asked out on a date for the very first time? Did it even count as a date, under these circumstances?

The NERV canteen wasn't exactly a fancy restaurant, and besides, they were just in their school uniform, or plugsuit respectively, and no one really brought any gifts... apart from the food of course.

Should he have anticipated this somehow? Was he expected to be prepared for this? And what should he say? What the devil was he even supposed to do? Would it be selfish to say 'yes'? Would
she get sad if he said 'no'?

All of this way way too complicated, and it had to happen out of nowhere, so late in the evening after a long and exhausting day.... or should he have seen it coming?

After all, they had held hands before. For all he knew, Rei may have been waiting for an opportunity like this just as long as him...-

He supposed he could always ask her if she intended this to be a date, but he didn't really want to experience what might follow such a question, fearing the prospect that she might find the suggestion disturbing, irritating, disgusting or otherwise unfavorable – or, even worse, that he'd get little more than an uncomprehending stare.

Perhaps he was just reading too much into it, and he was getting this worked up about about little more than a thin-skinned balloon of wishful thinking and hot hair....

When his reply came, it was hasty stammer, brought on by the sudden awareness that she was, by now, looking straight at his face with a rather direct and possibly mildly questioning look. “Thanks a lot...! But I wouldn't want to impose on you, I mean, it's your money after all...”

“Don't worry about it. I rarely use more than a fraction of my allowance. Let us go.”

----

So it came to be that Shinji found himself seated across the first child on a table which they had all to themselves, just a few minutes after her invitation.

Admittedly, the round, white table in question was anything but small so that they were well outside the reach of each others arms, but a certain intimacy was nonetheless present, given that the canteen was rather empty at this hour and that Rei had chosen a somewhat remote corner of the room to get seated – it was a quiet spot next to one of the huge panorama windows beyond which one could see the structures at the top of the geofront hanging further into its expanse like metal stalactites, bathed in the orange shine of artificial light and its illusion of eternal sunset.

Though they'd left their helmets down in the armory, Ayanami was otherwise still in full piloting gear; 'Remaining on standby' seemed to involve staying in her plugsuit and interface headset whenever possible. He wouldn't be surprised if the only times she'd taken it off in the last few days had involved visits to the ladies room, and possibly for sleeping.

All the more reason for Shinji to feel an urge to slap himself for not bringing any cash – She said that she didn't have many expenses and having seen her apparent, he didn't find it hard to believe.

Wherever she went, she only ever seemed to have the bare minimum of what she needed to have, even though the ones responsible – presumably his father – seemed to have left her enough financial resources for her to remedy that state.

So why didn't she? It didn't seem like she featured very highly on her own list of priorities. It was generally considered a good thing for a person to be humble and altruistic, but this went far beyond that...

He'd wanted, nay, almost felt compelled to care about her in her stead, to look after her beyond
what she thought necessary, but in the end she ended up the one doing something for him instead of the other way around...

There was so much that he wanted to say or do, but he didn't know how.

If this was supposed to be a date, it was certainly a rather quiet one; Perhaps, it was because none of them really knew how dates were meant to work.

But there was one glaring inconsistency that didn't fit into this picture, an obvious detail that would have jumped out at any outside observer –

Apparent as thought it was, the figurative elephant in the room resisted being stated out loud for a duration of several minutes, which Shinji mostly spent rearranging his food around his plate as he glanced out the window, distracted in deep thought.

Yet by the time he'd succeeded in moving about a fourth of his meal into his mouth in between brooding and poking at it, he resolved not to leave that grievance unresolved and donned the best of his smiles: “Say, Ayanami...”

“Yes?”

“Aren't you going to eat anything?”

The contrast was a bit startling: Whereas the Third Child has a whole plastic tray in front of him which was generously provided for with a mug of tea, a plate full of glass noodles and a little salad dish, the blue haired girl had merely acquired a drinking glass with a little cardboard coaster underneath and a straw inside, filled with some indefinite cheap soft drink – and it was largely untouched.

If one considered the many errand of the day and the great dedication with which Asuka had kept the fruit of his labors away from his mouth (which only meant that she'd done all required 'testing' herself) one would expect that Shinji's own plate would have been significantly emptier by now, but given this apparent imbalance, every bite tasted of shame.

Sure, she might simply not be all that hungry, but then why had she invited him?

Was she simply unaware that inviting someone to dinner commonly implied the intention to share in the meal oneself?

He still remembered how awkward he'd felt that first time he'd sat across Misato after years of lonesome lunches, especially since she'd been a rather... energetic person to start with, but he couldn't really imagine that Rei would have the same hangups. She seemed more removed than anxious.

For a moment, he hoped that her outstanding answer might yet provide him with an explanation, but it turned out as sparse as he should have expected it from her, no matter how much he longed for each of the words which, at best, rolled off her lips like tiny streaks of wax from a candle, escaping by the milliliters at most.

“No, I'm not.”

“Why not? If you don't like the stuff they have down here, I can get you something from the surface...-”

“That won't be necessary.”
“Ah, so you're just not hungry. Or...” and his voice notably took an a much more somber tone as he considered the alternative. He couldn't have overlooked how often she was absent from school, even where there were no missions or experiments to contend with. “...or are you not feeling well?”

“There is nothing to worry about. It's just that I've already had my evening meal earlier.”

“What, all alone?”

So he'd simply been too late. If only he'd shown up five minutes earlier or something, he might actually have made a difference...

“That is not unusual. These past days, the Commander made a few requests for my presence as it was simple to arrange while I am stationed here, but tonight, he is required at a meeting with the Committee.”

He had no idea which committee she was referring to, but he didn't really feel like asking about it. The idea that she often got to have dinner with his father while he didn't broke his heart and it wouldn't have been fair to let her notice – so, he didn't stop the source of his questions and answers from drying up when any remaining words he may have wanted to give her stuck in his throat.

As it turned out, getting close to her was not an easy task.

Whenever he tried to reach and support for her, he felt as if he were grasping a thin air, affirming his hesitant affections before a Fata Morgana and his attempts at dedication to a sculpture of ice and stone.

It was as if he were a small child with a fleeting puppy crush on the eternal ocean itself, only able to decorate a tiny fraction of its border region with insignificant sandcastles as its nocturnal blackness sucked all hope and confidence from his being.

The rest of the ‘date’ took place in complete and utter silence; Apparently, she didn't see any reason to direct any further communications his way.

Without taking more than a few gulps from her drinking glass, she dutifully remained behind until he was done. Then, she excused herself with a brief goodbye and left.

He didn't follow her – what would be the point?

It was unlikely to change anything.

Instead, he remained seated at the table, like a planet who had lost the center point of its circles without anything else there to pull at him and motivate him to budge.

She'd left about half of her beverage behind and though the idea of letting it go to waste somewhat vexed him, he didn't dare to touch it.

At this point, the whole idea of good manners and how how things 'should' be were too engrained for him to touch something that was supposed to be someone else's out of his own initiative, even if the person it had belonged to was unlikely to find any further use in it – and besides if he drank from it, certain bits of children's TV show logic might suggest that this would count as an indirect kiss, which could only further the disrespect.

So all he could do was to sit there as if paralyzed, watching the lights going out all around him.

Rei... there were all those things she'd said, everything she did or didn't do...
Admittedly, it would have been easier to name thing things he didn't drive himself mad with worry about, or the human beings that he didn't find daunting to approach, but Rei was an entire category of her own; He could hardly stop thinking about her since the first time he saw her, enough so to make him wonder whether there was a particular reason beyond the usual ones one might suspect.

Some of the things that had taken place between them could be considered milestones for him, around the events leading up to that time he got to see her smile at him.

In a way she had been the only person to ever accept him without anything to gain from it or any expectations tied to it, or at least, that had been his perception at the time. He might be reading something into it, after all, they'd only just gotten to know each other at the time, insofar as he could be said to know her at all – And yet, sometimes, when he observed her with only partial awareness, from the corner of his eye, at the edge of his field of vision or as he was about to doze off in the classroom after a particular bad night, he had the slightest sense that there was something very familiar about her, nothing more than a half-conscious inklng that seed hard to justify upon his return to the waking world unless he deliberately made an effort to hang onto it, and even if he did, he didn't really know what he was supposed to do with that feeling.

“Hello Shinji-kun! I'd heard that you'd come here, but I thought you'd gone home already. Might I know what you're pondering so intently~?”

Misato. She'd just sat down across him, setting down the drink she had apparently just gotten and greeting him with a friendly smile.

Though he didn't feel like explaining himself to her right now, he thought it fortunate that she'd shown up – She would probably distract him from his thoughts, or at least get him back home, both of which ultimately implied the same results.

Having almost forgotten her question over his surprise at her arrival, he answered it more as an afterthought. “Nothing in particular.”

“You're not fooling me, Shin-chan! I bet you were thinking of your secret crush!”

His response consistently entirely of helpless stammering “Ehm... ehm...”

Why did she always have to tease him? It didn't help that he had indeed been thinking about a girl.

Misato, meanwhile, just reacted with an amused chuckle. “My, my, there's nothing to be ashamed of. It's right about time for you to start showing some interest.

After all, having someone you love is pretty cool. It's one of those things that can give you the courage to keep on going in hard times. Believe me, I know that from experience.”

“From experience? So you do have someone you love, Misato-san?”

That would be the first time he heard of it.

So far, he'd only heard about her allegedly regrettable relationship with Kaji. Be it because of her heavy workload or messy personal habits, so far it didn't seem like Misato had much success in that area despite her attractiveness and gregarious, flirty personality.
Did someone ask her out?

...well, apparently, it was complicated. Her answer turned out about as vague and cryptic as Dr. Akagi's statement about the EVAs. Rather than deny everything, telling him that it was none of his business or cheerfully confessing everything about her new suitor, she acted almost a bit bashful, playing with the little spoon in her beverage in a manner that seemed rather unlike her – the drink itself was suspicious, a simple tea rather than her usual dosage of either caffeine, perhaps because she meant to hop straight into bed now that her shift was over.

“Well you know, that's not easy to say...” she recounted pensively. “Sometimes it can be hard to figure out one's true feelings.”

“Is that so?”

“I'd have thought that you would know this better than anyone... I suppose it should be easy to figure our or out thoughts, feelings and wants, we experience them all the time & our own are the only ones we can see firsthand. But if knowing ourselves was so easy, how come we sometimes find ourselves regretting decisions that we were completely certain of at the time?

Perhaps we can only really know what we felt once everything is over, when we can look back at our decisions from a distance. But if we want to move on with life, we can't help but make decisions based on what we believe to be our true feelings. But, if we can't know those for sure, we might end up doing or saying something based on something we will later come to find we were mistaken about.

Our decisions or words would have been based on false premises, which would make them the same as lies – Even if we didn't mean them to be, or weren't even aware of it at the time...”

She carefully framed all of her cup with her hands, as if she were hoping for it to warm them. “If you think about it like that, this would mean that we're all liars...”

Did she mean to imply that she... regretted dumping Kaji? Or at least that she wasn't sure anymore? After all her complaints about him?

Shinji really didn't know what to think of this... it wasn't like he had any actual experience with the topic.

Lacking further options, he chose this moment to finally rise to his face, pick up his tray and put it away, hoping that the discussions concerning matters of the heart would follow it into the disposal wagon. He found the whole situation uncomfortable, perhaps in part because he also found his guardian rather attractive, though he realized that it was comparable to some little kid's crush on a teacher or musician – the unattainability had been part of the deal from the get-go and not something he'd ever expected to change.

He knew his place and though he'd be a little sad at first, he would probably be glad for Misato if she should finally manage to find herself a man. Shinji wouldn't mind if it were Kaji – he seemed likeable enough and Shinji felt that he could probably get along with him even if he and Misato were to move in together.

But that didn't make the topic any more comfortable to discuss and truth be told, he didn't like to see Misato all deflated and melancholy, it seemed unlike her, so it seemed like the role of distracting the other person from their worries would fall to him for a change.

“Let's just go home, alright? You're probably tired, and your shift should be over by now, shouldn't
“Yeah, that seems like a good idea. Good thing we ran into each other here so I could drive you home. It's pretty late already, and you wouldn't want to be all sleepy during your school festival, would you?”

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The contraption on top of the tube in the center of the Dummy Plug Plant's main room may have seemed like it extended forever, but it did not.

The spine-like continuation on top of the tube lead to a brain-like mechanism of wires and tubes, itself connected to further tube-like contraptions hanging down from above, but even if one were to further 'zoom out' from that area, one would have found the glyph-engraved area around the tube to be a circular plateau at the bottom of a conical indentation, surrounded by higher ground all the way up until the dark, unlit glass container walls, apart from one path surrounded by a groove which led to that same center – and above the brain-like machine that some may have known to resemble similar constructions within the shells of the Magi systems, there was a similar shape resembling an upside-down cone with its tip cut off to house the 'brain', fitting the lower floor's geometry like a lock fits and key and suggesting that the entire contraption could be lowered to fit into the floor, perhaps by the twisted, torque-like shapes above the tip of the central contraption's 'head' that distantly resembled a 3D model of proteins highlighting barrels of helical structures – but even that was not the end. The room extended further, up the dark walls beyond whom largely liquid contents lurked in darkness, up the central columns and the pillars at the sides of the room to their very top, the room was still not over, and indeed, outlasted both the central column and the pillars both of which ended in large, disk-like structures of about the same height that were themselves covered in symbols.

The outer ones were connected by catwalk-like connections presumably housing cables, forming a hexagon containing a six-pointed star, and both the cylindrical flexible area just above the 'brain' and the spaces just below the disks radiated an eerie red light.

At about the same altitude, the tanks ended, topped off with a ring-like level of flooring with some currently closed apertures and one single deviation from its uniform, reflective black surface: A small, cabin-like installation, a rectangle enclosed by a wall on one end and a railing with a kind of shower curtain on all others, but nothing resembling a ceiling of its own to top it off once it reached the height of an average small room but not more than the incomplete approximation of one, containing little more than a few banks of instruments with various attached cables, tubes and cords, some hospital-esque metallic shelf on wheels stuffed with medical supplies and the occasional towel, as well as a plastic box in which a handful of clothes had been deposited, themselves the belongings of a girl who stood barefoot upon the plastic lattice floor of the cabin, covered only in the little brown towel resting on her head, standing still as a second figure got to work to her – She was standing next to laptop she'd placed on one of the medical instruments, taller, fuller in maturity, fully clothed adorned with earrings of paint, working away at the girl's pallid body as if it were yet another apparatus, another meat-based wetware circuit in which human science had drawn some of its inspirations from mother nature – Or perhaps, not quite in the same way.
If she'd been working on one of her machines, or even any other girl, she'd have been meticulous and exact like the consummate professional she was to the world, but as Dr. Akagi pierced the rubber top of a small glass bottle with a syringe and pulled its contents up into it, she didn't do it with the usual care or diligence, but almost deliberately negligent, with something like a thin, sadistic smile, almost as if she were silently praying for a tiny but lethal error in the dosage, a switch-up or bottles or some other careless misstep without doing anything to actively cause it.

She felt no sympathy for the frail, pale girl whose body she had just thoroughly examined, and considering what she'd just brought into this room, the wrath that she felt at the First Child's mere existence burned hot beneath her only subtly affected facade.

How could she not have noticed the book she's been carrying with her, how could she not take note of its author's name as the EVA pilot had deposited it cover-side up before disrobing?

'By Yui Ikari'. Of course. The fake blonde could guess all too easily why that perverted old bastard would slip this to his pretty little frankenstein-plastic-barbiedoll. She had no other proof, but it was obvious to her: Now that the fruit he had sown was finally approaching ripeness, he probably wanted to provide this cheap imitation of life with some input in order to get her to behave more like the original.

As if the book would help – the mindless thing wouldn't even complain when there was something wrong with her, she had pry all possible malfunctions out of her. Quite possible that she'd just sit in a corner and rot if there weren't anyone to order her around.

But one wondered if the Commander was even able, or willing to see that – If he weren't so incredibly proud of his little creature, he would hardly dare to provoke her, who should have been his lover, in such a brazen, humiliating way.

Much like the blossoming curves that the silent girl with the inhuman soul had somehow managed to grow in spite of her diseased, barely-living state, this book was a herald of the time when he wouldn't be needing Akagi anymore... and he dared to throw it right in her face!

It was this anger that drove her as she jammed the injection needle into the flesh of his favorite toy without making the slightest effort to avoid causing pain – it wasn't as if she was going to complain – indeed, she could probably have beaten that horrid thing black and blue and asphyxiated her with thin wires before she'd even think of calling for help.

And that was precisely why she hated it.

"The remaining readings are all normal," she explained, more to the ether than to the naked homunculus standing before her, its skin white as the plastic of a shop dummy, if 'naked' was even the right word – When Ikari and Fuyutsuki had assembled their oversized blow up doll, they had forgotten to imbue her with any sense of modesty or shame.

Clothing was something for humans, it was only natural for this lump of vat-grown meat to be uncovered when its function demanded it.

Despite everything, the tone in which Akagi spoke to it could almost have been mistaken for congeniality, though it was little more than the expected professional politeness'd grown accustomed of using: "You're not feeling anything else unusual about your body, are you?"

"No."
Akagi put the syringe down into a kidney dish and reached for a package of band aids.

“And you haven't noticed any irregularities in your consciousness either?”

“No.”

She placed the bandaid onto the construct's arm. Its surroundings were visibly covered in needle scars – the need for injections was great, while the regenerative capacities of the artificial human left much to be desired.

Disparagingly, the scientist eyed the clothes the synthetic girl had cast off before, presumably her pajamas given that it wasn't her plugsuit.

The thought of losing to something like that was ridiculous and brought forth malice:

“Oh my, poor girl, still stuck wearing this boring underwear...” she mused with an insincere smile.
“How would you like it if I got you some cuter ones?”

“There is no problem.”

Aha! That would teach that bastard a lesson, and show him than she was just as capable of provoking him.

But why wait until the next time he felt like unwrapping his love doll if she could speed things up? She thought it worth the risk to one-up this: “Why don't you ask commander Ikari to buy you some?”

“There is no need.”

“I see.” Damned brat. The worst was that she wasn't even resisting her on purpose... “We're done for today. Get dressed and go to bed, you need to be well rested in case you're needed tomorrow.”

And of course, the artificial child did as she was told, obedient as a robot – but not without picking up her book first.

How much more would she have to suffer because of that girl?

---

Half asleep and yet floating suspended between waking and dreaming, Mayumi was trying to find her rest despite the painful throbbing inside of her, which had resumed in full force since the nightfall.

In a thin, innocent pajamas of soft pastel pink, she lay hidden under her covers, surrounded by darkness, with both hands holding her aching midsection.

At first, the pain had made it hard to find rest, but once they'd tired out the girl to the point where she could no longer resist her exhaustion, it only served to make her dreams wilder, faster and filled with intense colors.

As the throbbing extracted small whimpers of pain from her, the drowsy remainders of her consciousness seemed to connect to something, as if every beat of that dark heart was a wrecking
ball slamming into a gate of steel until it finally burst.

She found herself dreaming of a little train wagon, and even though she didn't recognize this particular one, she'd been on enough train rides for her mind to accept it as an usual situation for her life.

As much as the impression that these were the memories of someone else surrounded the edges of her perception like an immaterial phantom sucking all the warmth of a room, they could have been her own, given how often she'd found herself in this same situation, feeling these same feelings.

It was only a few days since the last time it happened, herself riding on a train that was meant to bring her to some strange new place, her only comfort being the book she was clinging from – and she'd always have a book with her.

She liked books. The stories usually centered around brave, strong people mastering the toughest of circumstances and accomplishing great, exceptional deeds – And even the fearful, weak people in those stories often found protection, or at least, someone who would protect them – Even the protagonists of the darkest, bleakest stories were worth being discussed or interesting in some way. There might be flawed people, even evil ones, but very few boring or uninteresting people, for then, it would be a bad story.

That's why she liked to hide away in those imaginary worlds – they were much more worthwhile than the terrible life she had to put up with every day when she wasn't sunken into a story – and even then, it wasn't even her own fantasies that she retreated to, but the stories of other, exceptional people – She was not the sort of person who could tell a story, or who would be worth telling a story about.

There was nothing special or worth mentioning about her; She only ever existed in the backgrounds. She wasn't a praiseworthy person, not the sort who could smile to others and make them happy. She found it hard to express herself with words and so, she'd usually remained silent – and that's why no one would ever learn of her fears or the frantic, agonizing feelings inside her.

But, that silent person who always kept to the background...

Mayumi hated her.

She couldn't stand the sight of that person!

Her mother may have been that same kind of person, always quiet, always keeping everything to herself, never expressing anything of her suffering – at least, until that day her young daughter had found her with opened wrists.

She hated people like that.

She could understand the impression others would get of her, or why they wouldn't want to be around her. Such a person deserved to be made fun of, deserved even that time a boy had threatened her with his pocketknife just to amuse himself – indeed she sometimes thought it wouldn't be too bad if such a knife were rammed straight into her.

As it was now, her life was no better than that of a fish in a bowl: She couldn't smile, or talk or be with anyone-

Except that there was a part of her that disagreed with that, a part of herself she hadn't even been aware of that chose to contradict her with a single image, representing many things that went far beyond the last days with the example of a boy who seemed to share the same suffering, know the
same loneliness and share the same scar, but had somehow still managed to seat himself across her.

She didn't even know she could do such a thing as give backtalk, even if it was only to herself, and not particularly convincing.

The memory of his face was probably meant to be a 'living proof' or perhaps just a simple memo, a note to call the events of the last few days back to her memory and get herself to admit that she was very much capable of laughing and talking with others if only she found the opportunity, that she'd been noticed already and might go on to make herself a lot more noticeable at the school festival, to confirm her existence in front of all of her new school.

As for Ikari-kun... yeah, it seemed like he might be a little bit interested in her, but what did that even mean?

What guarantee did she have that he and his friends wouldn't desert, abandon or betray her in the end? In the end, everyone left her, just like her mother had.

The only ones who never betrayed her were her beloved books...

Not fully understanding the reason for her tears after her addled visions remained behind the veil that masked the gate to the land of dreams when she was half awakened by her own sobs, Mayumi could not shake off the almost prophetic certainty that sunrise would bring tragedy with it when it returned to disperse the darkness.

In the end, singing in front of a large audience at the side of a nice boy was something she had never been meant for.

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1. The Exchange between Ritsuko & Rei at the end is largely styled after that one omitted scene from 2.22. And yes, it's the exact same location that ends up being ReiQ's 'quarters' later on.

2. So, the big day of the school festival has come and several plot threads are still dangling in the air. Anything could happen. Find out what exactly in chapter 2.13: [Empty Promises]
Love, love is a verb

Love is a doing word
Fearless on my breath

Gentle impulsion
Shakes me, makes me lighter
Fearless on my breath

Teardrop on the fire
Fearless on my breath
Nine night of matter
Black flowers blossom
Fearless on my breath
Black flowers blossom
Fearless on my breath
Teardrop on the fire
Fearless on my...

Water is my eye
Most faithful mirror
Fearless on my breath
Teardrop on the fire
Of a confession
Fearless on my breath
Most faithful mirror
Fearless on my breath

Teardrop on the fire

Fearless on my breath

You're stumbling a little

You're stumbling a little

-Massive Attack, ‘Teardrop’

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And many, many more.

People he knew. People who knew him.


It all droned past him like a movie or play which he'd already seen so often as to be able to recite it by heart. The various figures danced across the stage as it's narrative told of many events, some of which he already knew, some of which he shouldn't know yet, some that he should never have found out about, and some of which he desperately wanted to erase.

Sometimes slowly burbling along its way, and yet sometimes moving with almost painful, abrupt motions, the story unfolded like the plot a Greek tragedy, and at the same time, unfurled even
further, allowing him to see what could be considered the inner source code which drove it forward, the hidden thoughts, the basic motivations, the sincere, heartfelt words which had remained unspoken:

“Please don't abandon me.”

“Please don't give up on me.”

“Please don't kill me.”

The whole tale was akin to a twisting maelstrom of deepest despair and sweetest ecstasy, as if someone had ripped a single great hole into the fabric of the world, thus weaving hell and heaven together.

And Shinji? He found himself at the whirlpool’s very center, helpless as he was being subjected to all these absurd events, and yet, right now, he also felt as if there were a certain distance between himself and the madness that had been taking place, as if he were observing it without really taking part in it, watching it like a movie or a memory, from some distant place at the end of it all, or perhaps above it.

What sort of place was that supposed to be?

Well, Shinji was sure that he had never been there, and that what was about to take place there was supposed to be physically impossible. According to the circumstances he was aware of, they couldn't have been at the same place at the same time, and certainly not in this place. The whole thing was insane and impossible, but while he might take the greater madness as a given, it was this simpler, more mundane kind of impossibility that irritated him the most -

The kind of impossibility that might not have been apparent right away just by looking at the unassuming scene before him – Sure, he'd never been here insofar as he knew, but it looked like a perfectly ordinary auditorium or assembly hall, with an unassuming stage framed by unremarkable plastic curtains, a normal wooden floor and a few spotlights that did not seem out of place in such a room.

Upon closer inspection, he could spot strangely familiar details like the green 'exit' sign above the door, a group of light switches, a couple of different stage design background painted onto large canvas screens. Tape demarcations on the floor which denoted how the folding chairs that were currently piled up in a corner were to be arranged in case someone came around to see a play – but at the moment, there was no one here for whom the chairs could have been spread out. The room was closed off and entirely empty, save for a single, distorted cone of light and the one folded-up chair tethering at its edge, bordering on the line between light and darkness, betwixt being and nothingness.
There was no one here but himself – and he wasn't even entirely sure about that last bit.... all of this seemed strangely familiar, in more than one way, as if there had not only been a previous visit to this place, but also some other, unrelated incident, something to do with EVA 01. Something that wasn't supposed to have happened yet.

The words 'before' and 'after' seemed to have lost their meaning, as if the laws of time had been suspended at this exact place – and that was precisely why he wondered whether he hadn't smashed this place into tiny shards with his own two hands, only to be warmly received by everybody else – or, hadn't he actually spent a good while wandering the wastes by himself before being joined by Asuka? The end of the story seemed to be the blurriest part of it all, and no matter how hard he thought to look, any notion of 'afterward' refused to emerge, not a single image of scene that could be said to have taken place long after sorrow and loneliness returned into this world with joy and uniqueness in tow.

Nonetheless, he was certain that he was the one who ended this, whatever particular forms 'this' might have taken.

And just as he's formed that thought, there was a sudden change, a squeaking of the door followed by a further cone falling inwards, toward the folding chair which so far had been the only point to be illuminating, casting light onto a long stretch of the wooden floor which was now split evenly between light and shadow along with the chair.

Suddenly realizing that he was sitting in the aforementioned chair, Shinji followed the long shadow of the person in the doorway all the way to its source, only to be met with his own image, complete with his Cello by his side.

“I don't know...” he reflected upon himself, admitting to himself the doubts which this confusion had led him to: “Maybe I was to weak, or my convictions not honest enough. Perhaps I never stopped fooling myself and simply tried to tell myself that I'd learned from this. Or maybe all the insights I thought I had found were illusory to begin with.”

“I thought we'd agree to let go of that attitude.” his counterpart at the door replied in an almost jarringly calm voice that seemed almost amused in a childlike manner and all the more out of place for it. “You should know better than anyone else why you made the choices that you did. And if it was that decision which ultimately guided your actions, it doesn't matter what other fears our doubts you may have had. In the end, what matters are your actions.”

“Well, I know, and that's terrible...”

“Terrible? Don't you mean wonderful?”
“In any case, if it is like you say, then I know what I decided, and it wasn’t this.”

“Exactly.” His other self chuckled once again. “Only a sullen toddler would assume that their will would immediately become reality. That doesn't change that will is an important precondition for change. But we've been through this a thousand times, haven't we?”

“Yes, but... what's happening here?”

“Since I am you, don't know this either. What make you think I would have the answer to that?”

Shinji lowered this gaze. “Well, you're here, and I don't know who else to ask.”

“Ayanami might know the answer.” speculated his reflection.

“Ayanami? Why her of all people?”

Once again, his counterpart in the doorway appeared unduly amused.

“What's so funny?!” Shinji exclaimed, at once accusing, uncertain and somewhat ashamed to find himself in the dark about this.

“You just asked me another question.”

“And you can't tell me, right?”

“Yes. I can.”

Surprised, Shinji looked up at his counterpart.

“But that's exactly the point. Why are you asking about something that you already know?”

And then, it struck him like lightning, rushing past him like the squeaking screeches of a videotape being rewound, if not a single, inhuman scream, a song consisting of a single, terrible sound, penned in his very own voice.

There was a multitude of grotesquely familiar faces turning around in unison.

Gazes that seemed to notice him, but held no recognition.

One and the same impossible grin where no soul should have dwelt.

One and the same, always the exact same face, a face that much resembled his own, a face that ought to have been confined to the blurred, incomplete recollections of early childhood and still appeared to him every day at school.

A face he had seen laid out before him in the size of a mountain rage, split in two, sliding apart, the eyes burst open like a ripe cherry on a rainy day, the same, revolting smile he'd once glimpsed beyond the glass; Disturbing images and belated realizations mixing with what had once been moments of innocent togetherness, brewing into a toxic sludge.
The face of the enormous corpse he'd seen in his visions, the face of -

No. That couldn't be, and even if it were to be true, he wouldn't know it. He didn't even recall his mother's face, he must have mixed something up.

It was as if there were some amorphous dark lump in between the circuits of his mind, and some part of himself which took great pains to keep it there, so that he wouldn't make that connection, so that he wouldn't draw that conclusion, to ensure that he would never recognize that face.

And yet, the shadow's mere presence already told him more than he could ever want to know, extinguishing all interest in pursuing the matter into further thoughts or questions. It sufficed to suspect that the things hidden beyond that particular veil had once felt unbearable even compared to his current situation.

But none of that could take away his fear.

“But what... should I do...”

His counterpart pushed himself away from the part of the door frame he had been leaning against and stood up to his full height, wearing a pleased smirk on his lips.

“For once, that's actually a sensible question to be asking yourself. What should you do? What do you want? What would you like to happen? Do you want this to end?”

“Yes I'd want that, but I can't just-”

“Then think about what you can do. Who am I? Why am I here? What tools do I hold in my hands?”

At least that last question was easily answered – as he had noticed pretty much straight away, his double was carrying the case containing his cello, and after following his shadow to its end, he could conclude that the same was true for himself – what more, it appeared that someone had thoughtfully placed a music stand next to his chair, complete with the sheet music for a piece he'd been practicing as of late, as if to ensure that there would be nothing left for him to do except to open the case, take out his instrument and start playing.

Since this seemed to be what was expected of him in this place, and since nothing (least of all his own brain) provided him with any alternate suggestions, he did exactly that, lifted the instrument from his case, and made a spontaneous attempt to coax the first few bars from the strings.

He did this without great expectations, and did not get beyond the first few notes before capitulating with a sigh. He had known from the very beginning that he wouldn't be able to do this, and that this fact would never change.

Which tasteless joke of what moody fates had chosen to lay this monumental task at his feet?
There had to be thousands of others, if not *hundreds of thousands* who would have made more suitable keepers for the planet's destiny, so why him?

---

"Why you? Well, because we'll probably be late, just because you're such a sleepyhead! "Asuka responded angrily, hands clasped while she stretched her arms out for a moment. "So hurry up now!"

Still a bit sleepy as he followed his roommate on the way to school, Shinji would have liked to do so, but found himself hard pressed to follow through in practice, given that the Second Child had "granted" him the "exclusive principle" of ferrying several boxes filled with pies and cakes.

Even at moderate speeds, that noble task demanded a none too insignificant balancing act, especially since he had so noticeable difficulties to look past the tower of pastries and had to transport a large, unwieldy instrument case at the same time which, optimistically speaking, at least provided a counterweight to the various baked goods.

Asuka, who, as one might tell from her complaints, was somewhat ahead of of him, wasn't carying the slightest amount of pastries on her person, unless once counted that one cookie in her lunch box – Apparently, it was a man's job to carry things.

Like much else about her, this too was drenched in thinly veiled hypocrisy – Woe betide the piteous fool who dared to suggest that anything was "a woman's work" in her presence, but when it was the other way around, she'd gladly go along with it, at least, until she got hungry and demanded that her food be on the table, regardless of whether or not it would be considered 'men's work', as long as she wouldn't get stuck with the rather... modest... cooking skills of their only female roommate.

But in the end, he didn't mind it *that* much... He was glad to be walking to school with her.

"... sorry ..." he started, thus a little submissively. "... It's just that I ... haven't been-

"Oh, save your excuses! Didn't I tell you to quit apologizing all the time?"

Yeah, she was probably right about that ... He hadn't really put any thought into it, but, as he realized afterwards, had been blindly following his habits.
Changing oneself was not an easy task. Heaven knows if it was even possible.

Following after Asuka, his gaze lowered insofar as the boxes of pies allowed for it, he wondered if he would ever be able to cross these few steps of distance between himself and the redheaded EVA pilot.

He very nearly took that step when he half considered mentioning those dreams whose bewildering, sometimes horrifying intensity had taken their toll on him;

He would go to bed in order to bed to calm down and rest, only to be haunted by these wearisome visions that lead him to wake up drained and exhausted, drenched in sweat as if from some manner of strenuous exercise.

Then, during the day, he was plagued by questions about what that all meant- he had not met Yui for a while, heard nothing of the supposed serial killer, and even the "the-world-is-wrongs" had become noticeably fewer – but even if he dared to hope that this meant that everything was back to normal somehow, he still felt insecure, left to himself in the uncertain darkness. Under these circumstances, it should not come as a surprise that he found himself feeling somewhat battered, even if the last few battles had been relatively successful and uncomplicated; He'd never had the strongest of constitutions to begin with, and it wasn't as if he could change this -

In any case, Asuka would be just about the last person from whom he could expect any sort of sympathy or concern.

“Oi! Shinji!”

Due to the confusion often associated with being brought back down to earth from the distant heights of thought, Shinji only managed to assign the incoming voice to his best friend after said boys' waving arm had crossed his field of vision often enough to be perceived by his still half-absent mind -

But even if his reaction was humble, subdued and not particularly exuberant, the change from troubled to anticipatory followed swiftly enough once that basic recognition had taken place – especially since it wasn't just Touji.

The enthusiastic greeting had probably been his idea, but he wasn't the only one who appeared to have been expecting him – Everyone was gathered together in a veritable pile. Kensuke, Nagato and Mayumi might not have been energetic enough to make their rejoicing quite that public, but all their faces lit up notably once they realized that he'd spotted their group.
As crazy as it might sound, there were actually people who seemed happy to see him.

Shinji didn't think he'd ever be to get used to it, or even to fully believe it – in the time it took him to accept this reality and process it enough to take the first step toward them, the small group had already swarmed forward to surround him.

"What do we have there?" Kensuke asked directly, turning his attention to the plastic containers in his friend's arms.

"Oh that…"

Would you be angry if they found out that he had helped Asuka with her project?

"Well, would you look at that! It's the rest of the idiot quartet!" The Second Child spoke up. She strongly felt that none of those present were paying nearly enough attention to her, and worse yet: For some reason, they were all raising a fuss over her worthless roommate, leaving her to find herself just a tiny bit ignored, and that did not cheer her up in the least.

That girl's presence did not do much to mollify her, either - Asuka had not left her out of the welcome by accident.

Of course, it was far below her to remember the name of someone who might as well have the word "loser" written all across her forehead and seemed more concerned with books than people. And yet, she'd been the one to arrive at the classroom alongside Shinji yesterday, and that was something that Asuka, hadn't – or rather couldn't overlook, no more than any other self-respecting person.

Thus, she answered her classmate's question with a boastful gesture: “This is our contribution to today's school festival. Originally, I had planned to do something much more impressive than just baking cakes, but since everyone else was too lazy, I was forced to sacrifice my precious time for the common good...”

The boys quickly suspected that the sacrifice had been mostly on Shinji's part, and the Third Child's rather unimpressed expression only served to confirm their theory.

“Though I have to admit that our Daddy's boy helped me out a bit...”

Did he just hear that right?

“...at least when it comes to carrying this stuff.”
Alas! It was not to be.

“Is that true?” Touji revolted. But not for the reasons his cake-laden friend would have guessed at first: “Sorry buddy, but how can you let yourself get pushed around like this by a girl?”

“It's commonly known as 'being a gentleman’” Kensuke explained, somewhat amused at his friend's slightly old-fashioned views. “Still, it does speak of rather low moral character that she would abuse her roommate's kindness in such a brazen manner…”

"What exactly are you implying?!” came Asuka's angry retort.

Since Kensuke was no fan of pain, he had initially intended to end this exchange on peaceful terms, but before he had the opportunity to do so, he was preempted by a certain hotheaded friend of his: “Exactly what you think!”

To supplement his provocation, Touji made a point of blocking the redhead's path as Shinji watched helplessly. He half attempted some conciliatory gestures, but stopped himself halfway through when he realized that they wouldn't be of any use. He still didn't know how to cope with larger gatherings of people, even if they consisted entirely of his own friends and close acquaintances – It would be one thing if he had the time to focus on each of them individually, but as things were now, even this small crowd of five proved overwhelming.

By the time Asuka was threatening to “teach them a thing or two about low moral character”, the whole exchange had unquestionably gone sour.

Mayumi seemed to be thinking much the same and looked to Nagato for help, but for all that he might have looked like a sensible older person from a distance, he was no more experienced in dissolving escalating quarrels – ultimately, his good upbringing urged him to defuse the impending fistfight, but he knew both parties far too well to hope for a peaceful resolution.

So, he opted for a diversion instead: “Perhaps we should... er... get to school before we get scolded by Horaki-san?” he suggested, bravely moving into the inner circle of the commotion towards Shinji and the towering pile of boxes in his arms. “How about we each take one of these before any of them end up on the floor? After all, we all want us to have enough food for the school festival, right...?”

In complete agreement, Kensuke went ahead and reached out to receive another box of pie, hoping that this would move certain others to do the same – Asuka was a lost cause, but perhaps Touji could be convinced to stop egging her on – To his credit, he seemed to recognize the futility of continuing the argument, or at least, conceded that he didn't have it in him to punch a younger girl in the face, even if she was an exquisite pain in the neck.

All things considered, the least troublesome option was to help transport the sweets with only a little grumbling.
The last to come along in order to relieve the EVA pilot of his burdens was Mayumi – not because she was lazy, but more because she didn't dare to be so close to Asuka, the cake was immediately taken from her.

"No, thank you!" Captain Shikinami replied decisively. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of my project myself. That would be the day, as if I'd risk letting you touch the hard fruits of my labor and watch as they end up to the ground. I bet you'd like that!"

Clearly unsettled by the hostility, Mayumi looked at her empty hands.

What was that... premonition?

Not so long ago she would have been worried about it, but now it seemed negligible, yes, certainly a product of her own insecurity or something like that, perhaps just an imagination; the sun was shining, the air was fresh, the big day had come, and everyone around her was in good spirits...

Shinji, who was carrying one last cake, had a brief internal debate about whether it would be ruder not to let her carry anything or to give every last box away and stay behind empty-handed. (That he still had to carry the case with his all too bulky cello led him to feel tempted in this regard...)

Ultimately, he decided that any answer to this question would essentially be unneded if he kept standing around here in deep thought while the rest of the group kept moving towards school - his friends would wait for him, but Asuka wouldn't..

How did they get so far all of a sudden?

Well, after yesterday's efforts and sleep quality, this should not be surprising.

Thus, he made sure that he held the remaining cake firmly in his hand before hurrying after them.

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After all instruments, cakes, etc. had been unloaded onto some of the empty school desks, which were still sufficiently available even after the ever-shrinking II-A class had recently been moved to a smaller room, the "idiot quartet" (plus Mayumi) decided to use the remaining time until the teachers' arrival for their very own meeting and arranged themselves around what would normally be Mayumi's seat.
There were more than enough free tables and chairs, especially since the other students had also gathered into small groups for similar purposes - someone had even taken the time to express his anticipation of the coming party by scribbling on the blackboard, which among other things had been decorated with the words "Party! Party! "Party!"

"We're ready for the big day," Touji finally concluded, ending the discussion about the last organisational details.

"Yep." Kensuke confirmed. "And don't worry, after I've mixed them, our CDs are absolutely perfect!"

Shinji assented with a brief sound. "Mh-hm."

So everything came together – basically, they only had to wait for the beginning of the festival and start playing.

Strange that he didn't ask himself whether Misato would actually come, but rather whether she would like it, and even that without great fear of failure.

Even that his father wouldn't be here seemed like a simple fact on the edge of his wareness; instead he stood up straight, his arms crossed in front of his chest, for the first time in his life really feeling something like pride without wondering if he was allowed to do so.

One might think that what he saw when he turned his gaze to his left was enough to imply that the answer to this question was "yes" - Mayumi also stood in an atypically light-hearted posture, making no attempt to hide her height in any way; her face radiated, her hands held together at the fingertips in a rather cute way, and that this might well be another achievement of his triggered feelings he had long since longed for without really knowing it.

"Well, let's do our best."

"That's right."

She was so cute when she was happy.
He wished she would smile more often.

BAM

It happened so quickly that you couldn't really describe it properly - as soon as Shinji had registered and processed the first sensory impressions about it, it was over.

What remained were echoing cries, furniture that had fallen over and an excited mass of panic-stricken pupils. The content of the room must have crossed a line where the largest percentage of people stopped acting according to the rules of reason and yet obeyed it all the more by falling into the kind of basic herdlike behavior that could be simulated in a computer according to simple mathematical models.

The baked goods to which the Third Child had sacrificed hours of his life were soon flat on the ground like a handful of mud thrown around by a small child, and a countless numbers of shoes stomped through amidst the agitation, spreading the splashing masses even further, forming an universe of speckles on the floor.

It was kind of creepy to see his occasional trips to the edge of death bleed into what he considered his "real life" without warning - when he dismally tore himself from place where the shock had hurled him to sometime earlier, he saw himself actually standing up and following his friends to the window instead of just staring with his eyes wide open; one could have been forgiven for believing that it was Touji, Kensuke and Nagato who belonged to the local elite defense group.

It was them who seemed to have kept their nerves under wraps and set out directly to assess the situation while many of their fellow students were shouting in all directions.

Strangely, the many events that had taken place here in recent months seemed to have steeled them more than the one who had actually fought the battles.

Shinji had reacted, but the whole thing hadn't really arrived in his head yet... Was that... an earthquake?

No, of course not.
He was surprised that he was still considering something "normal" like that.

If his previous experience was not sufficient to recognize what this was, he should at least have been able to learn it from the conversations of his classmates:

"It was an explosion." Kensuke had already recognized this almost immediately after rising back onto his feet.

"Was that a bomb or something?" Touji asked, supporting himself with his forearm against the window pane to be able to see through it better despite the radiator on the wall.

"No." Replied the military Otaku. "...This is..."

Yeah, what was that?

The alarm that sounded shortly afterwards made it essentially obvious.

It was just that Shinji hadn't wanted to admit it.

Not now.

Not today of all days.

Not on a day like this, which according to the miniature of the world order in his head had actually been destined for something completely different.

Why did something like this have to happen today of all days and mercilessly destroy everything he had so carefully planned and prepared?

The Third Child almost wondered why he couldn't just have his normal life with his normal events, but the question was insane.

His normal life had been the empty, silently rippling time with his teacher.
This here, all here, everything here, in what was now called his life, was bought and payed for with his blood on the battlefield, and its Altar demanded another sacrifice.

This was the kind of cursed existence he had lead here, and once Asuka demanded that he look it in the face ("Daddy's boy! Let's go!") he couldn't deny it anymore.

"Good luck, Shinji!" Touji called after him. "Yes, and take good care of yourself!" Nagato added. "Show that thing what the EVA's made of!" Kensuke concluded.

But when the door fell shut behind the pilots not too long after the end of that sentence, there was nothing more to hold the student's attention and delay the inevitable panic - there was speculation as to whether the shock meant that they hadn't noticed the angel before it arrived in town, and whether this in turn meant that the angel could overturn the school building like a domino at any given moment.

Even though some concerned students - including Nagato and - surprisingly - Touji as well - tried to counteract this - there were also students (including Kensuke) who did not notice much of the panic, ironically, because they were stuck to the window front trying to catch a glimpse of the monster of the week.

Everyone had questions, nobody had answers, and everyone was talking out of turn.

What nobody noticed in all the confusion was that one a girl had not gotten up again after the shock wave had thrown her rudely to the floor - even those who had almost become her bandmates were too moved by the unfolding drama to look around for Mayumi.

To their credit, they had no real reason to suspect that their newest classmate would still be trembling in pain on the floor - the shock wave was far from strong enough to break human bones and they could not suspect anything of the pain that had swept her from her feet just before the explosion resounded, as if the bang had not happened somewhere out there but right inside her.

While the symptoms had turned out unusually mild the last few days, at least compared to what they were normally like, the bloodcurdling pain had now returned in full force, so much that it seemed to exceed even the attack from the day before yesterday by a far margin. At the time she had thought that nerve cells that were sending this pain to her brain must surely have been firing at their upper limit, the sensations that tortured her now exceeded all limits of her imagination.

She felt no unusual warmth on the hand she had pressed against her midsection, but this was in complete contradiction to the perception from the inner side of her body, which felt as if it was ablaze with flames; She felt the heat seemingly pumping through her body and leaving, paradoxically, as cold sweat, and it refused to end; she felt like the Burning Bush from the Book of Exodus, the divine apparition that kept burning without crumbling away.

What she went through must have been the torments of hell; she had given up rationalizing it away as something earthly. The agony sat so deep within her, and gripped her so intensely, that she began to doubt whether its cause was really to be found with a dysfunction of her body, and was slowly converted to the thought that it had to be her bare soul, yes, the naked essence of her being in whose deepest reveals the pain must be lodged.

She felt as if she were seeing herself burning up, ridiculously fast and yet agonizingly slowly in the glistening corona of the sun, like a moth in a lamp; the weak, fragile materials from which her
body and mind were made were simply not made to contain such a thing.

Just as well, one could have tried to accommodate nuclear fusion in a cardboard box. All that she was, all that made her whoever she had been, burst and groaned under the pressure of the awakening might that seemed to be looking for its way out of her.

She almost expected her skin to break open like crumbling clay to release the light behind it, leaving behind only a drained and dried-up cocoon, except that would mean an end to her suffering, and such clemency would not be granted to her.

The battle raging in her boiling insides remained hidden from all observers behind the form of trembling young girl who supported herself with one hand from the ground and pressed the other firmly to the source of her perdition.

Her glasses had long since slipped from her seat down to the floor, and her long, black hair had also followed the commands of gravity and fulfilled its mission to cover her pain-distorted face like a curtain.

But despite all this, this wretched scene was only a small part of the confusion, the individual components of which had already gone into a state of complete chaos.

At least until the door opened as if it were the heavens, and none other than Hikari appeared behind it to issue an authoritarian order:

"Everybody quiet!"

Amazingly, everyone quit talking, and even those faces who had stuck to the glass turned away from it.

"What's all the fuss about? What are you still doing here, anyway? Didn't you hear the alarm? It's not the first time. What are we doing all these evacuation drills for? Now, line up in double rows and leave the building in an orderly fashion!"

Strange.

As much as Touji used to make fun of her for acting like a mother hen, it seemed to him now that she had dispelled the chaos as easily as Moses parted the floods. Not that he knew much about mothers and such, he had never really had one; She had died when his little sister was still a baby and he himself little more than a half-pint.

Even so, the way she'd acted right now reminded him if not of a mother, then of this one child in a group of fictional orphans who would try to take care of the others and hold the group together against an unforgiving world.

Due to the fact that his father and grandfather had to make money for his family, he had often been left to care for his sister, who had in turn always felt the need to act mature and reasonable to make it easier on her caretakers - he had to admit that despite his best efforts, little Sakura would probably make a better authority figure than himself, a state which had been on full display,
when she scolded him for his somewhat unorthodox and, looking back, simply not correct methods of venting his frustration.

Seen from this side, the stupid, bitchy chick, whom he had only ever perceived as moderately annoying for years seemed almost... admirable.

Or maybe Asuka was right and he had spent a little too much time in the sun.

To be honest, the latter seemed more likely.

Either way, now that the class was mostly arranged in a reasonably orderly formation, it became clear that someone had not been able to register Hikari's arrival – the one exception being Mayumi.

She had certainly noticed their steps and words, but would have much preferred to be cut off from the noises and sights around her. They merged into a wild swirl of glaring sensory impressions, which in its current state simply overloaded her too much for her to process it.

This infernal pain had literally burned away her consciousness, she was still in the same pose supported by her arm, she was still trembling and whimpering, but she didn't really notice any of it, all higher functions such as feeling, thinking and reacting had temporarily switched off in the face of the all-drowning stimulus from the deepest, oldest parts of the brain.

Touji, who was the first to notice her situation and promptly reacted by squatting towards her, finally roused her attention with some shouting and a careful shake of her right shoulder.

She would have expected that this pain would somehow stop if only she had somehow been torn out of her rigidity, but only under the assumption that this agony couldn't possibly be real.

As she straightened up and turned to the four classmates who, at a time when they could not determine anything more precise, had gathered around her - Shinji's friends and the class representative, it was hard for her to just sit there; She felt the sweat running down her face in beads.
"...Are you all right, Yamagishi-san?" asked the class representative, clearly worried.

"Did you hurt yourself when you fell?" added Touji, whose big, masculine hands were unexpectedly careful at holding her upright.

"...No..." pressed Mayumi across her pale lips. "I just... I don't feel so good..."

"It's no wonder." Touji stated, reaching out his hand to her. "I know all of this can be pretty intense. But I'm afraid you'll have to get used to these fights in the near future. It's a common thing in this town."

She hesitantly took the hand offered to her. The contrast between her exhausted pallor and the tall boy's bronzed skin was fairly blatant.

As for him, he somehow felt his big brother instincts tingling, even if the girl before him was the same age as him.

Standing up unfortunately meant that the aching tissues in Mayumi's interior had to move and shift against each other, which made her wince at every movement.

And whether it was because of their similar histories or a hint of face, Touji and Hikari both ended up reaching to support their newest classmate at the same time, leading their arms to brush against each other behind Mayumi's back.

Yet neither of them had the time to concern themselves with that happenstance, it was neither the right time nor the right place - in fact, they wouldn't notice that their limbs had touched at all until after they had parted and registered a sudden lack of warmth in certain spots. But this would happen much, much later; At the moment, their main concern was to support Mayumi and get her to the nearest shelter along with all their other classmates.

Even with only one hand to gesticulate with, Hikari had a good grip on the surrounding crowd.

The nearest access point to the geofront was not far.

"Don't worry..." Kensuke said with a smile to the troubled girl. "Shinji will fix it."
"Ikari-kun....?"

"Yeah! You've probably heard of it already, he's going to ride this super-cool giant robot and beat up some gigantic critters!" the freckled boy explained, gesticulating with his right fist, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "And not just him. Shikinami too. You know, the bitchy foreign girl."

"Aida! Do you really think it's appropriate to insult Asuka while she's out there risking her life for us?"

"Alright, class president... Oh, and then there's Ayanami."

"Aya...nami?"

"Yep." Confirmed Touji. "Another girl. A little weird, but it's nice once you get to know her. Or at least that's what Shinji says. But he's pretty much the only one she ever really talk to... You shouldn't have met her yet, the poor girl is on some kind of patrol mission right now. She was pretty much assigned to fulltime guard duty on the very day you arrived..."

That last bit made Mayumi listen up, insofar as her weakened condition allowed it.

The thunder of the mighty heartbeat inside her seemed to be drowning out her surroundings with every passing minute, slowly but steadily.

That... that couldn't be, could it? This coincidence, this... impression, this hunch that was coming up inside her... The way she had found herself at the edge of the battlefield, the uncanny precision with which her pain attacks seemed to coincide with the emergence of the monster.

Her knees were soft as butter, everything around her seemed to turn and run into each other, while her perceptual capacity was increasingly taken over by the foreign heartbeat.

It was a struggle to stay on your feet and stumble along the path her classmates were taking. Her strength seemed to be dwindling almost exponentially, as if it were flowing unhindered out of it like some volatile, steaming liquid from a shattered vessel.
"Really... since I came...?"

"Yo." Touji replied. "But don't worry about it. It's not unusual for her to be absent, and you probably wouldn't have gotten to know her much even if she'd been here. Like I said, as I said, she's a little weird and not really sociable."

"That's true..." Hikari added. "I made an effort to try and integrate her more into our class at the beginning, but I couldn't really figure her out... It's good that she seems to have made at least one friend for now... And it's nice that you made new friends so quickly, Yamagishi-san. I was a little worried at first... Even though nothing came of it in the end, it was pretty cool that you tried to involve them in the project. I didn't expect such exemplary behavior from you boys, you're usually not that... mature..."

"What's that supposed to mean..?!" Before Touji's indignation could be turned into an argument, Nagato decided to redirect it it and make sure everyone stayed on topic: "Thank you, but when it comes down to it, it was Shinji who invited Yamagishi-san to join us. I guess it's just like when he asked to others to spend time with me back in the day..."

"He can be really thoughtful sometimes." Hikari agreed. "And to think that I would have taken him for a loner back when he first transferred in..."

"That's exactly why." Kensuke assessed. "I guess he just knows what it's like to be on your own, so he can relate..."

"But wait..." Touji followed up on this point. "Aren't you in league with Shikinami?"

"It's true that Asuka-san often complains about Ikari-kun, but I think deep down she actually likes him."

"Are you serious?" Touji replied, lightly barbed. "Even a blind dude could see that she can't stand him in the slightest. She practically goes out of way to make his life harder..."

"Maybe, but in doing that she's going to see him and spending time with him... I'm her best friend, I can tell. Us girls can tell that sort of stuff, don't we, Yamagishi-san? ...Yamagishi-san?!"
While she had tried with steadily diminishing success to keep her eyes open and her head upright up until that point, Mayumi was barely conscious at the time when her companions stopped in their tracks – It hit them that she hadn't been participating in the conversation for quite some time at that point.

She muttered something unintelligible when Hikari and with her the whole nicely ordered class ceased their forward stride, but her voice was too weak and too quiet to be understood.

"This isn't just the shock of the bang, is it...?" Touji noted, speaking out the obvious. Hikari reacted immediately and laid her free hand on the forehead of the sickly bookworm. "Oh, my gosh, she's burning up... We should be taking her to the school nurse right away..."

"Except she's probably already in the shelter..." Kensuke realized.

"I know that, too." Touji clarified. "But what the hell are we supposed to do...? This has to happen now of all times..." As a rather emotional person, he only managed extremely miserably to hide his worry.

"Well..." Nagato spoke seriously but with restraint: "Kensuke just said it himself. The school nurse is in the shelter like everyone else. So the shelter is the place we should be going, immediately. There will surely be enough people there to turn to, panic won't help us now. We have to go, the fight could be starting at any given moment, and you must have heard about the devastation from day before yesterday..."

"Makes sense." Touji took care of the weakened girl, who didn't seem to notice what was happening around her anymore. She didn't quite seem to understand what he did when he carefully laid her on the floor to pick her up and bridal-carry her from there, but because of her condition, he could not resist him very much - he felt a bit awkward about lifting up a girl like that, especially one that seemed to be his best mate's new flame. He kind of felt like he'd have to apologize to both of them afterwards – but it wasn't like she would be able to walk very far on her own in her current condition.

Hikari, however, noticed in an almost frighteningly sudden way that Touji with Mayumi in his arms almost had something heroic about him, like a knight in shining armor.

The train of uniformed students started moving again, this time in even greater haste.
Kensuke, too, looked over the pale girl with a ponderous glance. "It seems like our project would have been doomed to begin with, even without the angel's attack..."

And though Mayumi just barely registered his statement on the verge of her delirium, she began to have her doubts about it, even if or precisely because her ability to think clearly was very impaired at the time...

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When Misato reached her associated platform in Central Dogma, there was already a busy hustle and bustle all around, not that she hadn't expected it. She had practically come stumbling through the door and was now exhaustedly gasping for air, indicating that she had obviously hurried all the way here out of sense of guilt - her getup made it clear that the alarm had caught her at a very bad time, and likewise indicated that she had left everything behind to rush to headquarters - apparently the head of the operations department had just been getting ready for her protégé's school party, which had of course been cancelled by now.

She was in one of those tight Chinese dresses with the decorated clasps and the lateral slits reaching from the bottom to the hips, a so-called qipao, which she first had to find out through strategic googling so she could order it online - ironically, she'd bought it especially for today's festival which would now never take place. The flatteringly cut, shiny-black garment with its golden closures and the red floral print on it had been intended as a kind of "fan service gag" for the boys, but felt patently ridiculous now that she actually had to look professional. The red uniform jacket, which she had put on quickly in order to soften her perceived nakedness, would perhaps have mitigated the effect if there hadn't been more embarrassing details, such as her only partly finished hairdo, the high heels, which she was now carrying in her hands rather than on her feet and distinctly ruined, semi-transparent footies, or her lips half painted rose-red which she had been adorning just as she'd been rudely disturbed by the unexpected ring of her cellphone, judging by the slight smudges documenting that fateful moment.

Through Aoba's involvement, the matter of the school festival had also become known all around headquarters, which is why even among the technicians a certain dismay spread when the outfit reminded them of the obvious, which hung in the air between the five people on the platform, but nevertheless remained unspoken - apparently they could not even grant these children this little degree normality – But such was the nature of tragedies, they made short work of any plans they made contact with and refused to show up on an orderly schedule (with the possible exception of hay fever and the female period)

"...What about the EVAs...?" Misato asked immediately, still out of breath.

"EVA 00 is manned and ready to launch." Hyuuga reported immediately. "The other two children
are already on their way into their plugs."

"Very good. Situation report! What's our status so far?"

"According to the sensors, it's clearly pattern blue." Reported Maya.

"The reading just showed up on block ten, out of the blue, right in the middle of town. Evacuation and bunkering operations are underway." Hyuuga continued.

"The angel has not yet taken action to attack, but it's positioned almost exactly above the main shaft." Aoba finished the report.

"Hm..." it came from Misato, who had meanwhile folded her arms and thoughtfully fumbled around the sleeves of her jacket. "He seems to have used his 'invisibility' this time to sneak up on us... Does that mean this thing is serious now?"

"In any case, it means that the last fight must have served some purpose..." concluded Dr Akagi.

"The EVAs are ready now." interjected Ibuki.

"Good." Misato replied with satisfaction. "Launch EVAs 01 and 02 and deploy them at a safe distance... I think shafts 9-D and 9-C should do it. Eva 00 stays behind for now."

"Understood, Captain."

"Okay." Asuka clarified now that the 'boring' details of the briefing were complete: "I'm telling you in advance, daddy's boy, don't get in my way. This time it's my turn, last time you took next to forever to bring that thing doen! I will give the angel a swift, painful end!"

"Don't underestimate it..." Shinji warned, distantly worried about his impetuous comrade.
Apparently, no one ever told her that pride goeth before a fall. "You're the one underestimating me. You want to bet I can get the monster in ten minutes tops?"

Shinji sighed."...This isn't a competition, Shikinami..."

"Spoilsport!" she moaned, almost childishly offended.

"Well, at least we're rid of First Child, so we can both have a lot of fun out there together," she said in an aggressively giggling manner, emphasizing the 'fun' as if she meant something much more indecent than saving the earth.

She was basically making fun of him again. But still, she said 'we.'

"I think you can make yourself a little useful by covering for me."

"I'll do my best."

"Well, I should hope so!"

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Even if the largest of them had been retracted beneath the surface, the remaining skyscrapers of Tokyo-3 still formed something like a forest for objects of the size of angels and Evangelions to move in; Unlike last time in the open field, the pipe-cleaner angel was not as easy to spot despite its enormous size.

Shinji and Asuka did not see it at first glance, but had to look around first and orient themselves, since Misato had deliberately placed them some distance away for their own safety. Finally, they spotted the insect-like creature floating directly over the entry point to the main shaft.

Shinji shouldn't have been surprised to find that it had completely regenerated itself, showing no trace of the damage from the last fight.

It was discouraging, especially when he recalled how difficult it had been to damage the monster
at all... Had his efforts been completely in vain?

No, no, that line of thinking wasn't going to be of any help, and Misato and Asuka would probably tell him the same.

He had decided that he would become a stronger person from now on, and what better way to start than to destroy the angel for good this time.

He still didn't know how to accomplish that, but at least the angel didn't seem to have done too much to take advantage of the favorable position afforded to it by its mysterious invisibility - at headquarters, they had initially considered sending up EVA 00 as a vanguard to stall the angel with conventional weapons, albeit ineffective ones, until Shinji and Asuka arrived, but in the end none of this had been necessary - the being seemed content to simply rotate on the spot in a passive manner and wriggling its limbs at seemingly arbitrary intervals. Shinji didn't know whether to classify them as legs or feelers – Anything concerning the 'legs' of a floating creature was a purely philosophical consideration anyways.

After the experiencing of the angel's tenacity in the last fight, Misato had equipped the Second and Third Children with the only weapons that had worked last time, i.e. a flamethrower and a machine gun - There had been no dispute about the distribution of the weapons since Shinji still felt more comfortable with a ranged weapon, while Asuka of course could not resist the brute force of a flamethrower.

You could tell from the intercom's video feed that she could hardly wait to get going - when she pointed her gun at the target right after leaving the EVA elevator, Misato warned her not to do anything stupid, and Asuka, of course, took every kind of criticism as an insult.

But even Shinji felt anxious to destroy the enemy once and for all, albeit for other reasons. He couldn't wait for the exact second when the danger for him, his friends, comrades-in-arms and the rest of humanity would finally be over.

The transmissions from the depths of the earth gave an idea of why Misato hesitated to give the order to attack - she too did not trust the way in which the angel seemed to be presenting itself on a silver platter.

Somewhere she had the feeling that the beast was mocking her, even though she could think to herself how meaningless this assumption was – That thing might was probably not even aware of her existence, let alone the concept for mockery. It knew nothing of her hatred and the reasons for her revenge, which may now have led her to project the human qualities of an adversary onto the
beast - she might as well attribute lightning and thunder to angry gods, but the monster's indifference provoked her all the more.

"What's it doing?" Misato asked in the approximate direction in which most of her colleagues were gathered. "It's right above us, so why isn't it attacking? Is it waiting for us to make the first strike?"

"The MAGI don't understand, and neither do I" Dr. Akagi admitted that she had been maltreating the keys beyond the shoulders of her slightly worried looking young assistant for some time with growing frustration. Ritsuko tried her best to hide how unpleasant it was for her to speak these words - admitting helplessness meant exposing oneself to criticism and showing weakness, which did not at all fit the idea of herself as the one responsible for sorting this out.

"Alright. It's not everyday that we get to hear you say that." Misato admitted. "That does have me worried. ... What exactly is it don't you understand exactly?" Despite her question, although she didn't really hope to get a grasp on it before the nearest person with a PhD did..

"Well, on the outside, the angel looks as if he were standing still, but according to these readings, it's been slowly but steadily building up nearly enough energy to tear a small hole into the universe ever since it appeared - And I have no clue as to where all that energy might be going. The target's metabolism, insofar as an angel can be said to have one, is running at full steam. Its internal energy and temperature are steadily increasing, and the process as a whole seems atypical for angels as we've encountered them so far.

"Could it be charging up some kind of a particle beam?"

"Not unless it intends to self-destruct. There is nothing to suggest that the energy spike is being projected out of the angel's body."

Disbelieving, Misato and the Children looked at the messenger on their respective screens. But then, at least the former seemed to have come to a decision - every other emotion in her face gave way to consummate professionalism.

"Whatever it is doing, it most certainly isn't going to change our situation for the better..... I suggest we interrupt while we still can."

"As a scientist, I regret that we will never know what end result of this process might have been
like, but you're probably right..."

"Good. Have you found the core yet?"

"No... Even the readjustments we made to the sensors this morning proved useless... The mysteries compound. With this level of activity going on, the angel would have to producing a ton of energy, which should have rendered the location of its power source patently obvious, but..."

"The core is still unaccounted for, isn't it...?" The Head of Operations didn't like it any more than her colleague did, but none of them could tell how much time they had left.

"Attack!" ordered Misato.

"Finally!" Asuka exclaimed, right on cue. Before her superior had finished talking, and without paying the slightest attention to Shinji, she unlocked the flamethrower and jumped, light-footed as she channeled titanic amounts of force from the Evangelion, moving the massive colossus around her as if the tarmac of Tokyo-3’s streets were nothing but a single giant trampoline, leaving behind deep footprints and broken pavement at every step, as if she could destroy everything she touched.

She bridged the distance only three jumps, taking full advantage of her high synch rate. Despite the humongous size of the EVA’s hefty body, she made it move with all the grace and fluidity of a delicate, incredibly perfectionist ballet dancer, and just as Unit Two's toes touched down on the ground for the final time, she grasped the flamethrower's activation lever, having previously pointed its muzzle straight at the angel during her deadly freestyle dance.

She was tired of that damned Third Child taking all the credit and playing the big strong man all the time – This was the 21st century after all, she was perfectly capable of protecting herself. That she did not win the last fight was not her fault, but that of the idiots that hadn't even given her the chance to participate. Now that she was on the battlefield, she would finally seize the opportunity she had so often been denied or deprived of : She would finally get to show them what she was made of.

The grin on her lips craved the applause she had been imagining for years before her arrival here.

In a fraction of a blink of an eye, her grip around the lever solidified, then she quickly and irrevocably pulled it down, her facial expression changed to a wild, predatory grimace.
But the great slayer was denied her allotted prey.

What saved her life were not the shouts of "Asuka, stop" from both Third Child and several voices from headquarters, but her own reflexes, conditioned by years of training:

Had it taken even a fraction of a second longer for her to react, EVA 02 would have been impaled in multiple sensitive places.

As it was, she only managed a rather ungraceful rear-drop drop rather than an orderly duck. She hit the ground, pricked by a lot of small traffic systems and overturned cars, left lying there with the grace of a piece of clothing lying on the floor of a student stall.

A loud, cracking sound had triggered her primal flight drive, something somewhere between crackling plastic and the breaking of an eggshell.

Only when the worst of the pain had faded did she come to look up and realize what she had just retreated from.

And as she did so, her breath caught in her throat, right there between the trickles glass, dust and concrete debris, shocked by her previous ignorance of the broad, pointed spines that had almost pierced her EVA right where a person would have their vital organs. If she had tried to sit back up before realizing what had happened, she might have died a few hundred milliseconds ago.

She wanted to grab her flamethrower, but at some point she had dropped it involuntarily and now, it was just outside the reach of the EVA's red hands.

If she wanted to get away from those spines, she would be forced to crawl very slowly, very carefully and very low from under the angel - she was at the enemy's mercy... but it remained almost more static than before, without the slightest movement, without the slightest hint of sound.

"What... happened?" Shinji asked confusedly.

Admittedly, he had seen what was happening much more closely than the ladies and gentlemen at headquarters, but that didn't mean he understood it. He wanted to go and do something the way he had planned to, but how could he do that if he had no idea what was even going on?

In one moment, Asuka raced past him to attack the angel, and in the next, the angel's bristles had expanded into hard, firm thorns or spines by the surface of a dark ellipsoid that had formed when....
the angel suddenly expanded like a bolt of lightning, out of the blue, to a multiple of its original size, penetrating the adjacent buildings with its body and spines.

With the naked eye, one could not determine whether anything remained of the area that had just disappeared into the ellipsoid. Looking into the angel's body, one could still see to some extent how the spines continued inward beyond the shell-like, semitransparent layer, but the further one tried to follow them with one's gaze, the more they seemed to sink into the diffuse darkness within.

At first Shinji thought that the angel's sudden expansion was an attack directed at Asuka, but once she had dodged it and begun her retreat, the angel remained inert once more.

"What the hell... is that?" Misato demanded to know.

"According to MAGI, it's very similar to the embryonic stage of the last, ninth angel."

"It's... regressed?" Misato asked.

Her colleague shook her head. "No. I'm afraid it's the exact opposite..."

"The... opposite...?" Misato repeated, thinking hard about what her friend might mean. She thought she could almost feel the solution in the back corners of her skull, but could not really grasp what particular point she was meaning to imply.

But the realization experience hit her even harder when Ritsuko spoke it in her place:

"It's development isn't moving backward, Misato... It's moving forward. It's undergoing metamorphosis, much like an insect."

Asuka suspiciously eyeballed the angel, having since escaped from its vicinity. "Yuck, that explains a lot...!"

"You mean it's like a butterfly? The form we have fought so far was a larval stage, this is now the pupa or the cocoon, and when it breaks open..."
"The fully developed adult insect appears, the imago..." completed Dr Akagi.

"Ew, bugs... Why can't you come up with less disgusting examples?" Misato moaned. "You could have compared it to a tadpole and a frog...."

"Captain Katsuragi." said the scientist, speaking the name firmly to remind her friend that she was on duty and had to behave accordingly. "Because of the strong similarity between the cocoon phase and the embryonic stage, I strongly advise against attacking or otherwise disturbing the target in its current state. It's possible that any wrong move could lead to Third Impact... it's just like the Ninth Angel."

"Except we don't have the means to move or capture it this time." Reported Aoba. "In its present condition, it's larger than anything we would be able to transport or secure. Besides, the crysalis might break open if we try to separate it from the buildings in its perimeter."

“...which of course could mean a Third Impact..." Misato stated soberly. "So we have no choice but to wait until it's ready for us!" Their anger could be clearly seen in the scornful undertone of their summary of the situation. "Great, so the angel got us right where he wants us..."

That's when Misato heard the subcommander's voice coming from behind her.

"But if Dr. Akais suspicions are correct...then the angel's body would have to be in the process of restructuring itself, perhaps even in a state of partial dissolution... If they're watching the angel during the metamorphosis, shouldn't they be able to find the core?"

Hyuuga shook his head. "Impossible, sir. Right now we can't even tell if the target even has a core... Our sensors can't penetrate the cocoon..."

"Then it is impossible to predict how long the metamorphosis will last?" Misato asked.

"Well, mh..." Lt. Ibuki did not sound very certain. "Due to the problems mentioned before, our estimates might not be very accurate, due to the heat radiation pattern emanating from the angel's cocoon, the MAGI believe that it will be a lengthy process.”

"They believe it?" Misato asked in more perplexed a way than she had intended to. "Since when can computers believe anything?"
Ritsuko decided to relieve her young assistant of the burden presented by the question:

"The way MAGI works is modeled on human thought processes." she explained without disclosing more about this topic than was absolutely necessary "Moreover, their internal architecture is designed according to the Trinity principle, which basically means that they consist of three independent supercomputers... and if they do not agree 100%, one can say with some justification that they do not 'calculate' or 'predict' the result of the calculations, but rather 'estimate' or 'believe' it. Most scientific applications nowadays usually provide probabilities instead of concrete values anyway".

"Computers that believe..." Misato shook her head. "Since the angels have returned, I somehow feel more and more inclined to believe even the most scandalous rubbish... Just be careful that your electronic friends don't come to life and take over the world... Anyway, what exactly do you mean by 'lengthy'?"

"At least several hours." Reported Maya.

"Then there's no reason for the kids to stay out there waiting..... Until further notice, we'll leave the scheduling of the battle to the Tenth Angel. Lower your alert from blue to red. Also, I want that oversized cicada out there under 24-hour surveillance. If that thing moves a single µ, I want you to set off the mother of all alarms!

...Any objections, Commander? Subcommander?"

"No." Ikari just answered. "Just make sure the pilots are always ready for action. They all have to stay on site at all times."

"Understood, sir."

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"Tell me, how is Yamagishi-san?"

"Same as before..."

The word Touji had chosen was a rather flowery euphemism, not to say a small, well-meaning lie,
in relation to what he was trying to describe.

The worry on both of their faces originated from one and the same subject: Their newest classmate, Mayumi Yamagishi.

The boys had gotten her one of the emergency blankets from one of the supply boxes that could be found in the emergency shelters at regular intervals, and once the class representative had managed to track down the school nurse and take her to see Mayumi, she had left them some medication for her fever. Actually, the little remedy should have lowered the bookworm's body temperature by now, but instead it had even risen by a full degree - and not remained about the same, as Touji had just tried to suggest to Hikari.

It was now at 41°C Celsius - Mayumi could hardly have chosen a worse time to get sick.

Accordingly, Hikari and the boys had tucked her in and put a cloth soaked in cool water on her forehead, but so far none of the measures seemed to have noticeably improved the condition of the pale, weakened girl.

The runnels of water flowing from the damp cloth over her face united with the sweat droplets which were at home there; And even though the nurse had assured that she was only sleeping, she had not woken up since her condition had taken its noticeable turn for the worse on the way here, but occasionally, she had muttered something vague which none of them understood.

But even without the detail he had concealed from Hikari so as not to worry her any further, since she had already had enough to babysit more or less the whole class, her concern was visibly great, so that she settled down next to Touji and her recumbent classmate. "Oh, dear..."

Of course, she saw the situation as her area of responsibility.

"...I'd better get another damp cloth..."

But Touji declined: "No need, class rep. I took care of it myself a few minutes ago..."

"Should I take over for you?"
"Thanks for the offer, but no thanks. Don't worry, I'll be fine, I've had some experience taking care of the sick after sitting at Sakura Chan's bedside for a several months..."

"Sakura-chan? That's your sister's name, right?"

"Yep..." Touji confirmed, leaning back slightly on his arms to contemplate the ceiling of the shelter. "Please don't tell Shinji, he's probably still blaming himself for the whole stupid thing, but to be honest, the doctors aren't sure if she'll ever walk again... They were quite optimistic a few weeks ago, but when they wanted to start physiotherapy, it turned out that her bones had grown together in an unfavorable position... She'll probably have to go under the knife again sooner or later..."

"T-that's terrible..."

Hikari was too modest to claim that she could understand this while her own sisters were sitting safely in the shelters assigned to their respective schools at that moment, but the very idea of having to cart little Nozomi around in a wheelchair sent cold chills down her spine. "I'm terribly sorry for you..."

"I know. If only that could help my sister..."

"Don't be so pessimistic, buddy! Nothing's for certain yet, maybe she'll get well after all." That was Kensuke, who had just arrived at the makeshift 'camp' at ayumi's bedside with Nagato in tow.

"Aida-kun! Mitsurugi-kun" Hikari took note of their presence.

"There you are!" Touji continued. "...So? Did you find out why this is taking so long?"

Kensuke pulled out his faithful multifunctional camera with a grin, demonstratively pulling the antenna a bit further apart. "Apparently they stopped the fight because the newest angel has turned into an oversized porcupine and are afraid that it will blow up when they nudge it... Looks like it's gonna be a long time..."

"Damn..." Touji murmured looking down at the delirious schoolgirl.
"So I take it from your reaction that Yamagishi-san is still not doing any better?" Nagato inquired worriedly.

"No, unfortunately not..." Touji replied. "This is like the worst possible timing. Under normal circumstances we could have taken her to a hospital long ago or at least to her parents... I guess that's what it means to be living in a war zone..."

"You two, can't you go and see if you can find the nurse again?" Hikari suggested.

"We'll try." Nagato, insured. "I was about to look for her anyway, for... other reasons." He ran his fingers through his hair strands to make room for his palm, before placing it right where his forehead was still hidden behind a bandage.

"What is it, Mitsurugi-kun?" Hikari wanted to know.

Actually Nagato didn't want to talk about it, was not the time to bother the others with small concerns like that, especially since his problem was infinitely milder than Mayumi's situation. It was his own fault for mentioning it, but now she was interested and worse, beginning to see it as a responsibility.

"Oh, it's nothing..." he tried to play it down anyway, forcing himself to smile.

"Just a bit of a common headache..."

"Go ahead and swallow whatever the lady tells you to," Touji replied. "One sick person is more than enough!"

Yes, he knew that, there was not actually any need to tell him that...

When he considered that the scars hidden under this bandage were the handwriting of a brain surgeon, there was a possibility that it could be something else, something that a simple school nurse couldn't fix...

The strange thing was that the wound had been surprisingly painless until just the moment before,
and it wasn't really a classic headache either, but felt more like a kind of echoing heartbeat, a deep resonance in the process of starting up as a response to something else...

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What, two?

The being classified as Leatha grinned amused amid strands of twitching flesh.

Once upon a time, she would have called this a surprise.

As she was not able to continue her work anyway, she decided that it might be worth taking a close look at the whole thing.

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1. Imagine Misato's Qipao like the one in that one ANIMA artwork

2. So, it seems that the Angel is making our heroes wait! The nerve! Seems like Misato will have to dig out some board games to entertain the pilots until the Angel deems it fit to dignify them with its presence. See how that goes in Chapter 2.14: [Before The Storm]
I'm a soldier, born to stand
In this waking hell I am
Witnessing more than I can compute
Pray myself we don't forget
Lies, betrayed and the oppressed
Please give me the strength to be the truth

We are facing the fire together
If we don't, we'll lose all we have found
Save your tears
For the day
When our pain is far behind
On your feet
Come with me
We are soldiers stand or die
Save your fears
Take your place
Save them for the judgement day
Fast and free
Follow me
Time to make the sacrifice
We rise or fall
"UNO UNO!" Asuka shouted triumphantly as she laid the last card in her hands onto the pile in the middle of the table as slowly as possible, full of gloating, to the background of Misato's exclamations of "Oh noes!"

Considering her initial refusal to engage in „undignified children's crap“ such as board and card games, it appeared that the young lady had protesteth too much.

Only by issuing an order and reminding her of the last time she'd neglected her cooperation goal had Misato been able to persuade (or rather, force) her to participate, but before long, she had hit a lucky streak and appeared to be relishing it immensely, though her enjoyment was without doubt much compounded by Lady Luck's evident disdain for both Shinji and Misato.

The idea of playing games to kill the time until the final battle had been Misato's.

After straightening out her hair, finishing her overdue paperwork and reviewing the few morsels of scientific data that Ritsuko and Lt. Ibuki had been able to extract from the angel silent outline, she'd decided to check up on the pilots, who had been accommodated in a small room near the cages while the angel kept biding its time.

There, she found exactly what she had feared: The pilots were each in one of the corners of the triangular room, as far apart from each other as possible, and occupied themselves with everything except their fellow pilots - Shinji hung onto his walkman, Asuka sat in front of her handheld console, and Rei quietly devoted herself to reading a thick doorstopper about some scientific topic.

Since the room was completely unfurnished, they sat on the dark floor, far away from the NERV emblem in the middle of it, where the frosty vibes diligently produced by all involved reached their highest concentration - as Misato then learned from Rei, whom she had asked because she could probably be considered the most neutral, reliable source, this constellation had come to pass when Shinji had tried to involve Rei in the conversation he had been having with Asuka, who took offense to that. This had sparked an argument between Misato's protégés who had then moved into their respective corners and had left Rei where she had been all along. At first, Shinji had attempted to appease Asuka until his patience could take no more – in a way, it was almost impressive that Asuka had succeeded at reaching its limit.
In her constant effort to inoculate the three with social skills, she had then called Rei a good girl and announced that they would all spend some quality time together to strengthen the cohesion of the pilot team, and that they were owed a little fun and games to make up for the lack of school festival.

Their initial reactions had been fairly discouraging: Asuka stubbornly crossed her arms, Shinji’s expression suggested that he’d taken the announcement for a bad omen, and while Rei had not protested, she hadn't looked all that enthusiastic either.

Regardless, Misato had put the blue haired girl in charge of supervising her comrades in her absence (since she appeared to be the most mature one of the bunch in this context) and returned a few moments later with a stack of board games and card decks, everything from Uno, Skat, Monopoly, Chess, Queen, Four-Wins to the Settlers of Catan and the latest creations of the Ravensburger home entertainment company, including the Game of the Year from 2014, which Misato had praised many times.

As described before, Asuka ended up enjoying herself despite her initial protest, especially since she could never resist an activity in which one could defeat others.

Nonetheless, Misato was horrified to discover that none of the three children even knew the rules for Ludo - Did those three actually expect her to believe that they had never seen a board game in their whole lives?

To be honest, her own relationship with fun and games had very much broken down after second impact and not been rekindled until much later, but at least she could recall a time before, whereas these children had been made to lead the lives of soldiers from an early age, or even been raised with that goal in mind, which only increased the weight on her conscience now that she was undoubtedly leading them down a path toward yet more suffering.

That's why she felt all the more obliged to do her best to offer the children at least a touch of normality and took the time to explain the rules of the game to them while trying to foster conversation at the same time, trying to start up a casual chat about their school lives while they sat here dressed in their plug suits, ready for a battle that could start at any moment.

In that regard, Asuka was one of the easier ones to handle, she was already very talkative by nature, the only challenge was in making sure that she didn't start bullying anyone else.

She had a much harder time trying to get any conversations out of Rei, who seemed to communicate entirely in one-liners when the topic didn't concern her duties as a pilot.

It wasn't even shyness, but rather... Well, Misato couldn't really name it, she was different from any
other problem child she had ever heard of. A truly strange girl. Misato couldn't help but consider how little she really knew about her. Of course she tried to build up a good working relationship with all the children, and she'd never encountered any real problems with Rei, but she couldn't say that she understood her either, and blaming it on the fact that they simply didn't live together felt like a cop-out.

From the surveillance logs, she knew that Rei never ever seemed to bring anyone home with her and tended to spend most of her afternoons alone at her room, but at the same time, it didn't really seem to bother her or make her unhappy in a way that would affect her performance and availability as a pilot.

With the other two pilots, there had been a clear deficit in supervision and guardianship that made it easy to justify inserting herself – One could easily argue how it was better for both their own interests and those of the project if they were live with a trusted NERV employee to watch nurture and motivate them rather than being left to their own devices, but in Rei's case, there wasn't as much of an obvious gap for Misato to slip into: The girl always did what was asked of her and though the commander might not have filled or taken care of all of the classic parental roles, they clearly had some kind of bond between them.

Either way, it wouldn't do her any harm to spend a little more time, and it certainly couldn't hurt for her commanding officer to get to know her if only to better assess her mindset – Yet despite all the many tasks that brought them to the same times and places, Misato couldn't read her at all, even after all this time.

During a round of "Trivial Pursuit" it became apparent that although she had mastered scientific and technical subjects well beyond what a girl her age would have learned in school, the First Child did not have the slightest idea about movies, sports or pop culture -

To the extent that she couldn't say which famous sci-fi franchise was associated with the Sentence "Luke, I am your father."

At this point, Misato couldn't help laughing out loud because she had involuntarily imagined the Commander in a certain Star Wars cosplay – something she soon regretted when the Children worriedly asked her whether she was alright.

She couldn't really deny that she totally deserved the embarrassment.

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The angel left them enough time to try through pretty much everything Misato in Misato's collection, and as time went on, at least Shinji and Asuka definitely loosened up a bit and in the end, they all had a great time together.
This morning, all three members of the Katsuragi household laughed together, and perhaps came a little closer to strengthening their bonds – admittedly, there was a good chance that any good cheer shared between herself and the children was of a purely superficial nature, but at least it had served to give them all a chance to relax and forget about the slow crawl of time while distracting them from the imminent battle.

No man knoweth neither the day nor the hour when the dreaded alarm bells would finally go off, but in her opinion, the least they could do was to make use of the time they had left – As things were, no one could say for sure whether today wasn't the very last day left in the history of mankind.

As far as Rei was concerned, Misato was at a loss. She hadn't complained or given any indication of being bored, but neither had there been any signs that she had been enjoying herself in any way. Misato's endeavor to involve her in a longer conversation had been fruitless, and even Shinji, seemed to have a knack for it, could only establish limited communication with her...

Misato honestly didn't know what to make of it.

Rrrrrrrrrring!

In the end, the once viscous flow of time had passed them by much too quickly, almost as if finding an acceptable middle ground was an impossibility, an arcane point as difficult to find as certain parts of the female anatomy, and as easy to miss as the point of neutrality in acid-base titration.

Knocking over a couple of pegs by accident as she reached for the jacket she's previously removed, Misato immediately picked up her phone and told Asuka to be quiet again, especially since the call might be important just as the redhead had begun to argue the somewhat dubious claim that her pieces had been 'right there'.

"...Katsuragi here. Any changes in the angel? - Oh. Yes, Commander."

Even if the man was only present over a telephone line, Shinji could not help but freeze in his tracks.
He hardly dared to breathe, for fear that any noise he made could reach the other end of the line as a disturbance.

Asuka had not such qualms and asked rather loudly if the battle was about to start, which, for Shinji, was almost physically painful to observe.

"What? Yes, I understand. I'll tell him. Yes, of course, sir. Yes, he is."

'Him'? Considering that he was the only male individual in this room at the moment, it suddenly occurred to Shinji that his father might have actually asked for him, almost as if he gave a damn.

No, no, he had to tame those reactions, it would do no good to harbor expectations, to imagine things that would never happen, and conceive of questions he would much rather choke on than actually ask.

"Rei?" Misato then turned to the aforementioned First Child after she had closed her cell phone again. "Yes, Captain?"

"The Commander has requested your presence. He says he's done with his meeting and wants to invite you to lunch. But make sure to report to Ritsuko first."

"Understood."

She walked silently out of the room.

Misato understood this even less – try as she might, she couldn't really figure out the relationship between the First Child and her superior.

From the similarities in their body language and their (absence of) facial expressions, one could be led to suspect that the two were somehow related. There were all kinds of small things, like an affinity for sitting at windows and staring out of them, or the way they always stuck their fingers together while leaning forward over a table....

Had there been any overt physical resemblance, Misato might have been tempted to conclude that she might be the Commander's secret lovechild or something, but since they didn't look particularly alike, the issue might not be that conveniently clear-cut after all.

He did treat her more warmly than almost everyone else, but that was no a particularly high bar to
set, indeed, there were times where his treatment of Rei seemed downright callous in ways that should have been incompatible with anything other than professional pragmatism.

Faced with Shinji's clearly unhappy face looking past her at the door through which the First Child had just disappeared, she noticed that, frankly, she was a little bit angry... The boy could use a little positive attention from his old man, if not for his sake, then at least for "strategic" reasons... or were these only her personal unfulfilled wishes that spoke out and clouded her judgment?

Anyways, she'd better distract the boy before Asuka had the opportunity to pound on him like a shark following the scent of blood. She really needed to come up with some idea to curb the girl's ego, for her own good as well.

"On the subject of lunch... I think we could use a little snack as well. I guess we're limited to the NERV canteen because you have to be ready and so on, but it's better than fighting on an empty stomach, right?"

It wasn't a lie - she had completely forgotten all about the time and the hours normally scheduled for lunch were almost over - so a little snack couldn't hurt...

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"Wait a minute, kids! I'm just gonna grab a coffee!"

To be honest, she would much rather have a beer now, especially since it had been a while since the last one. But unfortunately, she was on duty now and would stay that way for quite a while.

She could literally feel the imaginary little devil pricking her shoulder provocatively with its pitchfork over and over again in tune with the slight pangs of craving evident in the rest of her body.

But the world wouldn't save itself. "And please, try to get along for a while."

Of course, as far as Asuka was concerned, that warning went in one ear and out the other.
She now sat alone with Shinji at a table near the large windows from which the remainder of the geofront could be seen below them, which might well have been the same one he had recently been sitting at with Rei.

Maybe she was looking for a fight, or maybe she just wanted to make her opinion heard, and to force individual to listen to what she had to say, preferably someone who wouldn't think of complaining back at her.

Well, actually she just wanted to chat with him and enjoy his company, but her own twisted ideas made that scenario tricky to realize - Even a trained psychiatrist would have found her a tough nut to crack, let alone a somewhat shy 14-year-old boy.

"Honesty, the First Child is such a self-important cow. Did you see how she walked right past us as if we were nothing, all so she could go and suck up to the boss?"

That didn't really help in lifting Shinji's spirits.

All pretenses of good cheer that might have been left over from the board games has vanished the moment Rei got up to leave.

He knew where she'd been going and he's really rather prefer it if Asuka didn't keep reminding him of it – but at the same time, he wouldn't dare contradict her or tell her to stop. Was it because he was a coward? Or was it because he was actually such a lowly piece of shit that he managed to be jealous and resentful of someone as... pure as Rei.

This wasn't at all in accordance with his supposed resolution, but what was the point of it anyways?

What if his father really just didn't care...?

What if his attempts to get his attention were a Sisyphean task that had been doomed to failure from the beginning...?

He... he didn't want to think about it...

"Hello? I'm talking to you, Daddy's boy, I need you to listen to me and shut the fuck up. Or are you
too good to sit here with us lowly mortals in this plain old cantine? I bet you’d rather be with your Daddy and his pretty little princess somewhere on the executive floor!"

One of these days, she would make another remark just like that, and he would oblige her by crawling into a hole, curling into a ball and laying down to die.

But could he blame her?

She didn’t understand... The older he got, the more Shinji was convinced that ignorance must be a kind of bliss. How h would like to have her kind of worries!

"It's... it's not like that..."

Asuka decorated her condescending half-grin with a slightly suspicious look.

"Don't fuck with me, Third Child. Don't think, even for a second, that you're capable of that."

Always that arrogance of hers, wearing him down just by placing herself so far above him... He’s deluded himself into thinking that he’d somehow been getting closer to her, but in the end she didn't even use his name and only took note of him as a rival pilot... If only he had his stupid Walkman at hand right now!

He really didn't want to hear it anymore at this moment... In the end she only managed to fan his anger, the quiet simmering which threatened to lose its latent character at any moment – He didn't want to end up saying something he might well come to regret at a time when he could no longer recant it.

Couldn't she just leave him alone for a few minutes?

He just didn't feel like dealing with her now... but as usual, she seemed unable to even fathom the concept that not everyone was always crazy about her 24/7.

"Of course it is ". She continued, rubbing more salt into the wound.
It hurt, but if he would try to explain it to her, she'd only laugh at him.

To show any sort of weakness in her presence was like painting a big, colorful target on his own body.

"I mean..." She held her laugh back, showing him exactly how ridiculous she thought him to be. "Please don't get me wrong, I mean, you've been getting the hang of it lately, but don't think they made you an EVA pilot because of your blinding awesomeness..."

"If father really wanted to do me a favor..." he spoke without thinking or considering the possibilities, the mere mention of which would be too painful for him. "...then he wouldn't force me... to do something awful like this !"

Just now, he's sounded much more emotional, angry and tormented than he had intended. He hardly dared to look at her and instead stared at his hands resting on the tabletop, which he repeatedly opened and closed in a nervous gesture.

"Hmph! Yeah, yeah, just go and play the cute little victim, but don't expect me to buy it!"

Suddenly she looked straight at Shinji with eyes wide.

"The self-pity act might be enough to get Misato and the others to kiss your ass, but don't expect any pity from me! So you say you were forced into awful things? Says the little prick who everyone here confuses with a big hero!"

His words made her so mad... This little idiot had no idea what real life was and what real suffering was.

And he didn't even have the courage to open his mouth and say something, but simply looked at her with wide, shocked eyes.

Apparently he hadn't been expecting her response – It must have hit a nerve. Good. It was supposed to. And now that she'd struck gold, she wouldn't back off without taking her sweet time to twist the knife.
"I bet you secretly get off on playing the martyr! I bet you love it when everyone makes a big fuss about feeling sorry for you!"

"N-No...!" Shinji protested in horror. "If... if I don't do it, then--"

"Oh, we both know that nobody really gives a damn about the end of the world! You're doing all this just to have your own ass gilded, so you might as well stop pretending like it's different and show the world your true face!"

"It's... it's not like that..." His reply was a hasty, reflexive move to defend himself, not something he was remotely convinced of. No wonder Asuka only needed one question to crush his last resistance: "So what's your real reason then? If I'm wrong, then why do you pilot??"

That was the question he'd been asking himself all along.

He was shocked by her indifference, how blatantly she'd thrown her disinterest in the entire rest of the world into his face, how thoughtless and selfish she could be, but who was he to blame her?

What could he possibly say to counter her accusations that wouldn't just amount to digging himself deeper? How could he even be sure that she wasn't actually right?

What if he truly wasn't any different from her? How would he know?

And how would he know that this wasn't simply what she wanted him to believe, to assure herself of her own superiority, or just to prove that she could screw with him and get away with it?

All she ever did was to play games with his feelings...

Why. Why. Why...

He really couldn't say.

Maybe... maybe she was right...
Which meant that Nagato was wrong.

Perhaps all those heroic traits that Misato, Nagato, Touji, Kensuke and Mayumi believed to see in him were just misconceptions, lies even. Maybe he really was nothing but a selfish that had tricked everybody around him to the point that he was beginning to believe his own lies-

He knew full well that he wasn't the hero they thought he was, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

He had never consciously pretended to be something he wasn't, but it was just like Asuka said – His excuse weren't believable.

“It can't have been that awful to have this transferee girl following you around. You think she'd be interested in you if you hadn't swooped in and saved her with your EVA, like a knight in shining armor? You'd be nothing without it. I had to earn this, but you? You've had this huge privilege just dumped into your lap, and you don't even realize it!”

Don't cry. She didn't want to cry.

Not in front of this Daddy's boy, not when to do so would shatter the fiction that her words were exclusively about him.

"Now you listen to me! I hate nothing more than fake people who are as phony as you!"

And Misato.

And the First Child.

And herself.

But at least he gave her the satisfaction of exerting power over him. That's a good boy. Maybe that idiot was finally learning his lesson.
Oh, look at that, seems like he was about to burst into tears - Stupid wimp.

Serves him right.

He was so ungrateful, so stupid that sometimes she felt like beating him up until he stopped moving - Maybe one of these days, he would learn not to cross her...

"I..."

That was almost a sob.

The question remained unanswered.

Was that really...?

Sure he... wanted to be noticed... he didn't want to be alone, and... to be appreciated.

But didn't everybody?

Wasn't it just human?

Was a person not allowed to wish for love and affection?

"I think I'll kick myself a horse! Have you two been fighting again?"

"Whatever." Asuka returned brusquely and pulled out her Gameboy.
Misato sighed.

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Even visiting the boy's room was a matter of some tension in the current situation - you couldn't get rid of full body clothes like a plugsuit quite as quickly and put them over again as ordinary trousers, and there was always the possibility that the alarm sirens could start blaring just when he would be occupied by the uh, completion of such business.

That's just how crazy his life had become.

On his way back to the small lounge he dawdled a little, partly because there was no real motivation to pull him back there - he did not want to see Asuka now and he did not want to deal with Misato's well-intentioned advice and questions. All sorts of details caught his eye, but it was only in front of a glass pane through which one could look into the cage of EVA 01 that his steps stopped completely.

There it was, his weapon, ready for a mission that would come sooner than he would like it.

Yeah, his life had gone crazy.

He could not deny Asuka's accusations because he was really not sure... not even about himself...

He could not even rule out that the whole world was "wrong", as all these warnings were trying to suggest to him.

It was all so much, so hard, he wished someone would approach him and take this burden off him, but for that he would have to tell that someone everything, and that, he could not do.

That would be crazy.

So he had nothing to hold on to... nothing he could really follow... And wasn't that just the new
normal nowadays?

Would he have to keep on fighting forever...?

Would he suffer more and more...?

Despite all the time he had spent in this place, he still knew very little about the mysterious enemy floating above the city... or about the machine in which he was put almost every other day.

Usually, he would simply be called and sent into combat or testing as if he himself were nothing more than a piece of automation, nothing more than a suitable interface between the Evangelion and the command center.

At times, he didn't even understand half the things Dr. Akagi said.

By that point, he had involuntarily wrapped his arms around his upper body as a freezing person might, but he only really became aware of it when the sound of footfalls shook him from his reverie, causing him to flinch.

The pale, barely noticeable reflections on the glass pane told him enough - distorted spots of black and red and blue and white. His father and Ayanami.

He did not dare to move, frightened even by the thought that the very sound of his breath might draw attention to him.

Every thought he could get a hold of ordered him to flee, but he could not move a muscle, only his heart was pounding like crazy, and even its sounds only added to his humiliation.

He remained standing rigidly like a statue, hiding the agitated, restless wildness within his static form.

He did not see the girl looking briefly in his direction as she and her companion walked past his back.
He didn't turn around.

The glance that the commander shot him without turning his head, only with his deep blue eyes so similar to him, remained safely hidden behind his non-reflective sunglasses in the dim light of the corridor.

Had Shinji been able to see through it, he would have felt like looking into a mirror;

But the only reflection that he did not evade was the one in the glass in front of his face, which showed him only a foolish, lost child that he did not want to see.

The robot behind it was no consolation either - his reaction did not begin immediately after the steps of the two had faded away - He could not stand the thought that they could still be in the vicinity, aware that he had failed to notice them just because of his own carelessness.

He could not quantify how long he stood there until he was sure that all sounds that he could still hear in any way had to have come from his imagination.

Only then did some envious creator seem to press the "play button" again to gloat over how the boy at first only slowly came out of his rigidity, his arms only narrowly wrapped around his body like the faded spirit of a hug, like a blind man trying to imagine the colours of the sunset in vague descriptions without being able to "grasp" them properly....

A hug... no one had ever hugged him in all the long fourteen years of his life, least of all the man who had just walked past him like he'd done many times before. He had no idea what it felt like...

Before he knew it, he was sobbing and whimpering softly, barely aware of the few tiny amounts of glittering, warm liquid that had collected at the corners of his eyes.

If he had remained alone, he might have sunk down crying at this point, or he might not have; As it was, the question would remain unanswered. He was surprised by the presence of another person and thus felt compelled to orientate himself to what this someone might think about
him and his actions.

Not that this was made easy for him by any coincidence of fate – As mentioned previously, he was not used to any kind of touch in the slightest, and certainly not in significant other places than his hands, his only reaction to the actually well-meant, supportive hand on his shoulder was to shy away instinctively.

And that's how the person behind him – revealed to be a now somewhat remorseful-looking Misato still standing with her arm outstretched – got to witness something he would most certainly have hidden if he'd only had the time to think about it properly: His reddened, tear-stained face, warped by the pain and suffering he'd pushed aside for so long.

"Shinji-kun? Is... is everything all right?"

She didn’t even have to ask.

Not only because the answer was damn obvious, but also because she should have known him well enough by now to know that he would certainly not want to answer this question.

She could not have failed to notice how his hands reached for the glass pane behind him and, perhaps unconsciously, pressed flat against it. The closer she came, the more he leaned against the wall.

She took a step forward and opened her her arms in his direction, but his body stiffened even more, just like that of a lost child who wanted to run away from a scary thing that it didn't understand, or perhaps like some small, ridiculously cute little monkey that had fallen from its familiar tree and had now been cornered by a frightening predator. The slightest movement of his hands on the glass wall leading to the cage left behind a barely noticeable trail of sweat; Only then was Misato aware that it was he was afraid of her.

It was difficult not to see it as a personal rejection, as a sign that she had not yet managed to gain his trust to a sufficient degree, as proof of her failure.

Somewhere in the depths of her DNA, between tons and tons of gene scrap and harmful predispositions sat a maternal instinct preparing to take the lead; she didn't want to push him any further, but that was something to be understood on more rational level terms, and she had always been more of an emotional person.

It was difficult for her to stop her arms, instead of really pulling them back, there was a kind of embarrassed sinking.

At least he seemed to have calmed down a bit - or was he just trying to control himself with all his strength?

It wasn’t hard for her to imagine why someone would run away from her, and knowing she knew she was supposed to be above it didn’t make it any better.
"What's the matter...?" she asked carefully, trying to get a warm smile. "...are you feeling down because your school festival got cancelled?"

She could have slapped herself - of course it wasn't such a small thing... She could tell just by looking at him.

She seemed to have interrupted him just as he was about to burst into tears.

"...Or is it because of something Asuka said when you had a fight?"

She felt ridiculous. "We... we really need to talk to her, don't we...? About the way she treats others..." She didn't buy that bullshit herself.

How superficial did she have to be to think a little childish argument was the cause...? It wouldn't make him feel like he could talk to her. Or maybe it was the opposite, maybe he didn't feel taken seriously... For these children, this kind of cute "kids stuff" was their hard, daily life and the hardest struggles they had known so far... Or no, that wasn't quite right anymore.

She could not claim that to be the truth when she could see the EVA looming behind him right behind the glass. She knew only so much about the worries of ordinary youth because of the way her own adolescence had been taken from her... and now she was about to do the same thing to three children of exactly the same age.

"Is it... because you're afraid of the fight, Shinji-kun?"

It was a good thing she didn't know that she had interrupted him at the very moment he thought he had pulled together enough courage to trust her with the question that bothered him so much. In the end she would only have reproached herself more and intimidated him even more in her attempts to get the words out of him.

Of course, his need to share his worries and fears had not diminished in any way, but taking the easy, more predictable route of blaming it on the fight was too tempting for a weak person like him.

"Yes, that's... that's it... that's okay, I... I know there's no other way..."

"How many times. If you make it sound like we forced you, you'll never-"

What was the point of that?

She could just as well have given him a written request to feel miserable and misunderstood again, and to do something stupid, as he did when he rushed towards the angel without consideration for losses and ran away not much later.

Of course she wanted him to understand, otherwise she wouldn't do him any favors, but, the real question was... Was this the time? Was it the right place?

Not even this terribly false woman she had seen herself become could have been serious about letting him march onto the battlefield like that.

"I do know, Misato-san..." he replied, with some subliminal irritation. "I know it's my own decision and so on but..."
Again, the question remained stuck to his tongue.

He could not ask when all this horror would be over because he was afraid of the day he would lose his place with the people here, and with it, everything he had ever been good for... He hadn't really noticed how much EVA had already become an integral part of himself, whose loss would be as destructive as chopping off an arm or a leg.

There were so many, sometimes conflicting things that he was terribly afraid of – Sometimes it seemed like the whole world was against him, and even when that wasn't the case, he couldn't see more in it than just a few scattered points of light.

"I... I know..."

"Yes." Misato said, doing her best to sound warm and understanding.

"I know it's hard for you, and it's not fair. And I know I've told you a thousand times that you have to hang on... But..."

She carefully grabbed his right hand with both of her own.

The head of the operations department could really feel the muscles in his fingers tightening and cramping under her touch, but the recoil that she had almost expected never came, yes, he even actively connected his fingers to hers... it wasn't the first time, so what had she even been afraid of?

She just had to take the next step very gently, very carefully.

"But think of what we're doing all this stuff for."

"Yes, I know. It's about humanity, the lives of all three billion people in this world..."

"It's way more than just three billion."

"I know, there's also the animals and everything-"

"I'm sure Pen-Pen would appreciate your thoughtfulness, but that's not what I mean. It's about far more than three billion people, much, much more... No one can say exactly how many... Do you understand what I mean?"

"Um... what, Misato-san...?" he asked insecurely.

"Well, I mean all the people that might be born after us if we can save this world. I'm talking about the future, Shinji-kun."

"The future...? It just feels like a word... I... I don't feel like there could be anything else after this. When I try to imagine it, I see nothing..." Shinji confessed in a rare moment of honesty. It was above all Yui's words that gnawed at his soul here. "And even if I tried to imagine it, I wouldn't know what to look forward to... What kind of a future would even be left for me? Nothing gets better anyway..."

"Now you're just getting yourself worked up. Step back, take a deep breath, and you'll know that's
not the case. Even this morning you seemed to see things differently... Listen, Shinji, you're only fourteen. You're practically still a child."

"Exactly... That's the problem... If I know anything about the future, it's just that one angel after another will come, and that I and the others will have to fight again and again and keep putting ourselves in harm's way... I know that my future is full of suffering, pain and loss..." Oh, my goodness. Now he was beginning to to sob. "So why should I think about the future? Is it really the same as running away if I just want to take a break from that once in a while? Do you want me to live in fear all the time?"

"No, of course not.. Not at all, Shinji. You are in a difficult place in your life right now, not only because of your work as an EVA pilot, but also because of your age, but... Even if it is hard for you right now, I want you to keep in mind that this will all be over sometime..."

"...What do you mean...?"

"I don't know if we've made this fact sufficiently clear before fact until now, but... Why do you always think we always take care to number the angels? Because only so many of them are coming... None of them know how long these struggles will last, maybe months, maybe years... But someday, one distant day, we will have freed ourselves from the angels and be able to defeat them all and live in peace again."

She wasn't sure if in her case she really meant the angels or rather a certain man whose ghost had been haunting her for the past fifteen years, but it probably made little difference to the final analysis.

It came down to the same thing.

"So, Shinji-kun..." she started to detach one hand from his to dry his face with her sleeve. "...save your tears for the day when all these bad things are far, far behind us."

That should have comforted him, but instead it frightened him.

"But... what will become of me if no one needs me anymore...? What... what will I do...?"

But Misato just smiled, "Well, whatever you want."

"Whatever... I want...?" He seemed confused, overwhelmed.

What he wanted was to be able to stay here with the people he knew.....

"Yes, of course, anything you want. If this future comes someday, it's only because you'll have fought for it with your sweat and blood, right? Then it's only fair if it were yours and yours alone... Your life will be only yours and you'll be able to do with it what you want without worrying about NERV or the fate of the earth. When it's all over, you'll be a hero, and I don't know if you've bothered to read through all the boring paperwork, but when it's all over, you pilots will receive enough financial compensation to last you till you're old and grey."

To be honest, her first thought upon seeing those sums of money was that they must not be expecting to actually have to pay them (or at least, had reason to believe that there wouldn't be too many surviving pilots), but it was not a lie, and besides, all is fair in love and war, even if Misato could not have said which of the two cases she was referring to.
If that's what he needed to hold on to right now, then for the moment, she'd gladly present it him with a castle in the sky, even if she had to pay for it by enduring the occasional sting of guilt, and shoulder the awareness that the future she'd conjured up for him was little more than dolled-up hot air.

Not so long ago, Ritsuko had informed her what the boys's real prospects looked like... and that's before taking into account all that vague ominous conspiracy stuff lurking in the periphery. In truth, she was in no position to promise anything him... So how was she doing anything other than trying to placate him with fancy words, like training a circus horse with a carrot-on-a-stick?

"You'd be able to buy your own house at fifteen."

"You think so...?"

"Yeah, sure, especially considering how cheap the houses are here, now that everyone's on the run... Well, once you've saved the world, everyone will come back here straight away, of course, but I'm sure you'll find a place somewhere. The building we live on is almost completely empty, and the ones on our floor all have balconies with a nice view."

Only now did it dawn on him what she alluded to. "So... I could stay here? Here in Tokyo-3? With... all the people here, without having to fight...?"

"Yes, certainly. No one will deny you that... So, do you think that you can beat up up the angel up there tonight or whenever he plans to attack? That'd be one less obstacle between you and the life of your dreams..."

The boy nodded a little hesitantly, but still showing a hint of determination.

Since he still seemed a little insecure, Misato decided to prevent any further doubts.

She just had an idea.

"Come with me. I was looking for you because we were all wondering why you were taking so long..."

"What, even Shikinami?"

Misato giggled. "She almost wanted to come and get you herself! I guess she loves teasing you."

"It's not like that, Misato-san..."

"Okay, okay. It's all right. It's all right."

Since his mood seemed to be improving slowly, she decided to refrain from any further playful pestering.

"Even Rei is back by now." She told him instead. "The Commander just dropped her off, so you just missed him..."

Well, not exactly.
But he didn't exactly want to talk about that.

Misato interpreted the lowering of his gaze as his typical reaction to mentions of his father and left the subject alone.

He was only too grateful for it and tried once again to bring his face into a halfway presentable condition using his free hand- He’d rather not deal with Asuka calling him a crybaby on top of everything else-

Instead, he clung more firmly to Misato's hand and let himself be led back into the small, triangular room, where Asuka and Rei sat on the floor, not too far from each other, just where Misato had left them, though Asuka, who had since dug out her handheld game again, had made a deliberate point of facing the opposite direction.

Unlike the quiet, blue-haired girl who closed her book when the other two arrived, the Second Child didn’t seem to want to look at her roommates either, which she had to do when Misato and Shinji sat down on the floor across from them, and first stretched and leaned back a little.

"Okay, I figured that since we have to stand guard here for now, we might at least use the time for a little team building exercise, so we can get to know each other better."

"Are we in kindergarten?" Asuka was outraged. "I think I know more than enough about these two dupes here by now."

"That's not exactly a ladies' way of putting it." Misato scolded.

Asuka's answer consisted of little more than a vaguely offended "Hmpf!"

"Let's do it like this: Let's go clockwise, just the way we're sitting now, and share our plans for the future!"

Asuka was dumbfounded. "Huh...?"

"Let's hear all your goals and dreams! For when you guys grow up, I mean. You've certainly thought about that, haven't you?"

I want you all to know why we're doing all this here and what you're fighting for. In the end, the reason we're all working so hard here is so that you and your classmates can have a world where you can grow up and make your dreams come true... So what are your big plans? What are you gonna do after the angels are defeated...?"

"Why don't you start with yourself?" Asuka retorted. "Or are you afraid that we'll laugh at you when trying to tell us that you still plan on finding a husband at your age...?"

"VERY FUNNY, Asuka." Misato warned, trying to silence her roommate with a razor-sharp look.
"I already have a job."

"Yes, and so do we. That's such a stupid question! 'What are you gonna be when you grow up.'... Unlike most of the average silly people my age, I've already grown up, I've already become something, and I did it way faster than most people, if I might say.

I'm a Captain, a member of an elite unit that controls highly specialized combat machines, and I've saved all three billion asses on this planet more than once! What else do you expect be to accomplish? Is it enough if I run for Chancellor, or would I have to be the first human on Mars for you to be satisfied?"

There was already a noticeable pinch of anger in Asuka's words - and rightly so! What she wanted to be later on? Misato better be kidding! It should have been obvious that she was not a silly little child anymore. It wasn't her fault that she was still stuck being fourteen. She had trained all her life for nothing but this time, these moments, this opportunity here.

She didn't even want to think that all this could become useless one day...

At least she succeeded in making her self-proclaimed guardian leave her alone and turn her attention to someone who really needed it:

"Aha, I see... The young lady is very ambitious. How about you, Shinji-kun? What are your big plans?"

"I... I never... really thought about it..."

Back when he lived with his teacher, one day had been like another and it had never seemed like anything would ever change. Past, present and future had little meaning if they were all uniform. Altogether he had never been a dreamer or a planner - he let the days come, tried to bear them somehow and hoped that they would soon be over again. His teacher had thought he might have what it takes to be a virtuoso, but he didn't want to mention that here, they would only laugh at him anyway, it sounded ridiculous and artificially snobbish... and he also realized that that wasn't true... he wasn't so stupid that he would believe such transparent attempts at comforting him out of pity and obligation. To set goals, you needed the skills to achieve them, and you could never truly escape the possibility of failure..

No thanks.

Ambition was something he simply did not possess. He was glad he just managed to get through
What would be the point? Everything he did was determined by others anyway. His father had sent him away, his teacher had suggested that he learn the cello, his father had brought him back here and had also put him in the EVA...

"Are you stupid or what...?" that redhead girl had found something to talk about again, and probably, he deserved it no other way.

No matter what she said now, she would most likely be right. "How can you have so little ambition!"

She jumped up to look down on him and pointed with her right forefinger exactly between his eyes. "Listen! If you don't keep up and don't have a competitive spirit, you're going to the dogs, kapitsch? Nowadays only talent, diligence and competitiveness count, just because you were lucky here thanks to your your daddy, you should not assume that you will continue to get every handed to you, you idiot! Real life is a little different."

"Well, our Asuka has a point here, even if I would like to say that besides everything you have already mentioned, soft skills also play a certain role, such as team spirit and manners... and I'm afraid Shin-chan is way ahead of you when it comes to those."

"Says who! Why don't you check with the school to see which one of us has the most-"

"It's all right, Asuka. You don't always have to make everything into a competition, success is nice and all, but you should always realize why you want to be successful and make sure you're not missing out on the finer things in life because of it..."

"You'd know a lot about those, wouldn't you?"

"What are you implying?!"

"Uh..."

"Yes?"

In view of the two obviously irritated ladies who clearly demanded an answer, Shinji had to swallow before he could think of speaking further.

What he originally wanted to say had long since evaporated from the twists of the old raisin in his skull, so he was forced to turn on his creativity to come up with something new.

Seeking help, he inspected his field of vision, grateful for the light blue spot in the corner of his eye, which quickly sparked a good idea.

"Um... aren't we going to ask about Ayanami's plans?"

Of course he had been seriously interested in the answer to this question, it was a practical opportunity to learn something about her personally, especially since he could not imagine at all what she would probably answer.

Nevertheless, he began to regret his words a little when the glances still fixed on him moved on just
as quickly as they had come, and shifted to the white-clad, porcelain-like form of the First Child - it really had not been his intention to somehow put her in a pickle.

Parallel to the lively exchanges of the Katsuragi household, the blue-haired girl had been sitting there quietly and motionlessly, if not slightly bent, staring slightly at the floor, in a subtle way that probably only Shinji was able to distinguish from her usual apathy - and he wasn't quite sure that he wasn't just imagining something, and expecting such a reaction from her where none was actually present.

Ironically, he was only now to realize that despite their frequent quarrels, something like a togetherness had developed between the inhabitants of the Katsuragi flat. Although it forged from such disparate components, they led to a shared sense of community, which, in turn, had just now caused someone else to be almost forgotten about, like a slightly dusty, decorative ceramic figurine.

Rei herself did not think much about something like "belonging," of course, and what was actually going on with her at that moment and delaying her answer was in fact very different from what Shinji suspected there - it was just that at that time she knew a few things more than the other people present in that room.

Some things that were far above their security clearance. The question as to what was to become of her in the future was once she had never considered before in her life, because she had known its exact answer from the very beginning, without even the slightest room for uncertainty.

For her, the steady approach of Third Impact had been a basic fact of life, like the fact that the sky was blue, the ocean red and the trees green, so that it would never have occurred to her to question her Creator's plans either - according to her worldview, it would be like doubting the return of the morning at night and cursing the Almighty for taking the moon disk from the sky in the evening.

She had always known that Third Impact was coming, and that she would be the one to trigger it. This is how the Commander had planned it, and this is how it had been prophesied eons ago.

So to think about a time afterwards made as little sense to her as the question about a point more northern than the North Pole - time in the classical sense would not exist beyond this fateful day, and least of all for her, considering the role she would play - Shinji and the others were speaking of a future that would never come.

This thought did not cause her any feelings of guilt or remorse - fulfilling her task was a matter of course for her, almost as if it were a natural event that simply happened to affect her - and you did not resent the storm on the horizon, even if you took precautions to avoid it. Even if she had thought about it, the Commander's words would soon have come to her mind, words which hadn't spoken to her, but uttered in her presence, about the fact that there was no other way.
And yet, the thought was that the others were probably looking forward to things that they didn't know to be impossible might have put a slight damper on her moon - even if she could not have said why. She didn't attach much importance to it anyway.

But now an answer was demanded of her and without this having been a conscious decision based on certain principles, but rather because she had always been obedient and basically honest by nature, it did not even occur to her to quickly invent a lie; so she revealed the truth as far as she did not have to conceal it: "I never saw a point in making such plans. I doesn't make sense to make decisions about circumstances that have yet to be determined. No one can predict how much damage the angels' attacks will cause, and it is very likely that some of us will not be alive at this time, including myself."

She said that without much emotion, as if she were reading a page from the emergency regulations booklet. It did not matter more to her either, it was simply a fact that her existence would end shortly after the arrival of the last angel - it seemed incomprehensible to her how suddenly the facial expressions of the other people present suddenly changed before she had even stopped speaking.

"Yes yes! Careful that you don' cut yourself on that edge!" Asuka burst out angrily. "Just be as pessimistic as you want, that doesn't make you any cooler, nor does it make you smarter or better than us! Are you implying that I can't get my job done, little princess?"

"Asuka, stop it." Misato interceded. The unembellished, sober truth had little to do with the calming sunshine fantasies that she had spun together for Shinji, and when the silent girl voiced it, it had hit the bull’s eye with her.

But the most intense reaction was that of Third Child, who immediately moved a little closer to his blue-haired comrade and apparently felt obliged to talk to her. This time he overcame his entrapments much faster than on the moonlit launching platforms at Futagoyama.

"A-But Ayanami...! Don't say that..."

Misato could imagine that he had understood the truth of her words as well as she did. But even so, the boy tried to play the strong man for her - albeit quite unsuccessflessly. He was simply not made for it and was too concerned by her words to be able to hide the fact that he realized their implications and simply did not want to admit them. "...You mustn't..."

Rei looked at him in minimal astonishment. In a sense, this situation reminded her of the incident on Futagoyama - once again she didn't know what to do with his emotional outburst, although her
meagre knowledge of human nature was now enough to imagine that he was somehow expressing concern about her person.

That in itself was something she could remotely associate with warmth and security, but made sure that she didn't want to be the reason why he was so... out of her mind, and didn't help her much without her knowing the reason for his reaction.

"...What's the matter...?" she asked.

Somehow this didn't have the effect she had hoped for. She began to wish that she was more familiar with such situations and interactions.... Until now she had never required such skills to carry out her tasks but now they were all the more missing.

"I'm... I'm scared too, but-"

"Scared...? You think I'm afraid...? Then you can rest assured. I am not afraid." Said the First Child, apparently completely calm. It seemed hard to see who was supposed to be comforting whom.

"Then why... why do you say such a thing...?"

"It is the truth, isn't it...?"

Misato could see clearly that Shinji was at his wit's end and finally no longer knew what to say - so she decided to take the initiative and save the situation before Asuka, who had been looking at the two for some time with an unreadable facial expression, had the opportunity to make one of her usual snappy comments.

"But Rei... of course, what you're saying is the truth, as unfortunate as it may be, but... What if we actually pull it off, and you all survive? What would you do then?"

The blue-haired girl turned her unfathomable eyes in her direction, but remained silent.

"You... haven't thought about it either, have you...?"

Rei nodded.

Misato sighed, "Well... all three of you are still young, so you still have quite a while to think about it... But you know, Shinji-kun... Asuka... Rei... I want you all to know what we are doing it for and that you know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. It's not hell. Purgatory, at best."

"You are and remain an eternal optimist, aren't you, Misato?"

"R-Ritsuko!"

Neither the children nor their superiors seemed to hear the hissing of the automatic door, through which the blonde now entered the room sipped slightly at her coffee cup - it was a bit strange that she was carrying another cup of coffee in the other hand, even though its function was soon explained when she passed the second cup to Misato.

"Here, a little refreshment for you."
"Thank you very much."

"You're welcome. I just wanted to see how you were getting along with these little monsters." Joked Ritsuko.

"It's fine... You'd better tell me what the angel's doing."

"So far nothing. I'm afraid it's gonna be a while."

"Darnit..." Misato commented.

"What is it...? Are you starting to get withdrawal symptoms...?"

"Very funny..." quipped the head of operations.

Although he didn't protest loudly, Shinji's enthusiasm was pretty limited - he had already got to bed late yesterday, and thanks to the angel he might have to remain on standby until three in the morning or so today... and then there would be a fight on top of all that, with a tough enemy who wouldn't give him a centimetre...

Asuka, on the other hand, remained calm and rose to find a practical solution: "Then I guess they'll bring me a coffee too...?"

"No way!" Misato nipped the whole thing in the bud before Ritsuko had a chance to answer. "You're too young for that."

"Hypocrisy! You always drink tons of this stuff. And of much worse things!"

"I'm afraid you're a rather modest role model in this respect." Ritsuko added jokingly reprimanding.

Misato had understood and was already sufficiently embarrassed - sometimes she really wondered whose side her supposed "best friend" was actually on. Remaining outwardly relaxed, she now pulled out her forefinger: "Even the good old Saint Benedict is said to have told his monks: Stick to what your superiors say, not what they do. And besides, unlike you, Asuka, I'm an adult!"

"Oh, really? Sometimes I have my doubts..." said Asuka and Ritsuko unison. "And besides..." continued the former. "Should you have slowly realized that I stopped being a little child quite a while ago!" She put her hands on her hips to emphasize their curves. "...drastic situations require drastic measures!"
Ritsuko shook her head with a smile.

"Well, before that happens, we should probably give you the chance to take a nap..."

"But... What if the angel attacks in the meantime...?"

"Hm, that is indeed a problem..."

"Or maybe not." Misato spoke when she also stood up from the floor.

"How about you take your naps in the EVAs? As far as I know the control chairs are supposed to be comfy enough, and it's warm in there, too - If the angel shows up, all we have to do is send you a little noise over the intercom, and you're all ready to go!"

----

When he thought about it later, it seemed very strange to him how quickly he had found his way into a deep, highly restful sleep, despite the tension that came with the expectation that he could be called into battle at any moment, and also the fact that he had to be content with the heart of a gigantic biomechanical war machine instead of a cuddly bed, a being in front of which he had always been horrified, and in whose inside it stank and tasted latently of blood.

Not that he was complaining about getting a bitterly needed good night's sleep, but the whole thing was undeniably uncanny - this eighty-meter monster was not supposed to be comfy, there had to be something really wrong with him for him to find a claustrophobic-looking metal capsule relaxing - and even worse, it seemed to him as if this was the most restful sleep that his constant visions, schoolwork, his duties as an EVA pilot and last but not least the general condition of his nerves had allowed him lately, no matter how grotesque it sounded...

Just before falling asleep, on the threshold between slumber and wakefulness, it was almost as if he had been welcomed by warm, soft arms made from a of pouring cozy warmth, and at the very edge of his consciousness he even thought he heard the sounds of lovingly purred lullabies that triggered a recognition somewhere in the depths of his soul...

Actually, he was supposed to dismiss it as a dream or imagination, perhaps a side effect of being connected to the EVA while asleep, but he had already sunk too far into his dream world to do so at the time, too close was the bubbling and whirring of the knowledge that he might not be living
through all of this for the first time...

The voice that seemed to whisper to him that this had meaning was none other than his own, and the melodies of her voice continued in those of his cello as this dream continued exactly where the last one left off; He was sitting in this chair, in this shady music hall, which he was not allowed to know and yet had to know, and struggled, although the illuminated sign of the exit was hardly far from him... This situation... that was a bit like... how he constantly exposed himself to all this suffering and went on, and yet did not leave, although he had had the opportunity.

Is that what all this was about...? The key to interpreting the metaphor that some higher power was trying to communicate to him?

The way he struggled, had struggled and would still struggle, desperately seeking words of appreciation...?

The sudden sound of applause almost seemed like an answer to his unspoken thoughts, which made him pause instantly.

He hadn't said anything... Those thoughts hadn't had a chance to leave his skull and get through to anyone else, and yet there was applause, an outside source, from outside this closed room...

Instantly he looked in the direction from which the unexpected praise had come, into the dazzling bright light of the entrance, where the silhouette of a short-haired woman stood with one hand at the door frame and seemed to look towards him.

He was deeply astonished, on the one hand, because there was suddenly a strange person standing there, but there was also something else going on subliminally, something that let him know that this was important, that no other person could simply step into his dreams, and thus also implicitly that she was real, and not just one of the many webs and representations of his inner universe.

On the other hand, beyond his amazement, he also felt a strong emotional response building up in him, an aspiration that almost seemed to break out of his fingertips, a kind of knowledge that she knew the answer, that she was someone who could help, that he was so happy to see her, and that she could actually use the short time he had with her, and that she could fix everything.

Part of him seemed to want to leave the rest of himself there to jump up and hug her, but his
present self, his ignorance of this woman's identity, and the notion that she might not actually be here, that this is what should have 'happened' if he didn't deviate from the déjà vu impressions that now seemed to dissonantly hang in his field of vision, made him hesitate... and already a blink of an eye later their vague appearance seemed to have disappeared, and he was not a bit smarter.

At that moment the vision ended and did not return, just as little as the feeling of exhaustion and effort, the sweat and the déjà-vus that otherwise brought with it, yes, even the usual restless storms in his own soul seemed soothed by a divine balm and evaporated in favor of a vague one, a pleasant impression of peace and security, which he had not known for a long time, an afterglow of innocence, security and carelessness, like a sun-soaked memory from a time when everything still seemed to be in order...

Was that human warmth...? It couldn't be... The very thought was absurd. Why would she be here?

And yet, she was. He had never felt her consciously, but she seemed to have always been here, and only through his own excitement and carelessness had he not yet noticed her...

So beautifully warm... and almost weightless... almost as if a familiar person with a well-meaning nudge wanted to force him to simply drift through the sheer endless expanse of the connection and disappear into the depths...

"Don't worry, my boy. You're doing very well so far. There's nothing to be afraid of. This time... I will give you the bright future I promised you..."

---

That night, Mayumi Yamagishi's body temperature far exceeded the level at which human beings remained viable. Due to all the interference and distance, a certain accumulation of entropy could not be avoided - the Angel of Illusions had to run the source of his power at full speed to complete his transformation and take possession of the promised land for his peers.
Even more curious and physically confusing was the fact that the student's organism did not stop functioning – Under normal circumstances, her insides should have been cooked through a long time ago.

Depending on how on defined it, a parasite was a creature that tended to weaken its host, but it was generally not in their interest to kill it, and as an intelligent parasite the ambassador was able to conserve this shell - at least as long as he still had use for it.... He had no pity for the Lillim, they seemed to be all their own symbionts or parasites anyway, sucking, milking and eating each other, or feeding each other; The way in which they were almost as likely to destroy or support each other was almost disgusting.... It did not trust these beings to have enough spirit at all to distinguish existence from non-existence - they were not much different from their distant relatives, those green entities that stuck statically to the sky in a place to live from the sun - in his opinion, these were even to be classified as higher life forms similar to the angels themselves, because they existed at least apparently autonomously...

This bizarre, disgusting world of the descendants of the Lillith, who constantly ate herself up and bathed in her own excrement... It deserved to perish.

___________________

(1) Are Ravensburg Board Games even a thing outside Germany? Eh, we can say that Misato got introduced to them while she was Asuka's supervisor at NERV Berlin.

(2) For even more tales from „The Hard Life Of Shinji Ikari“, be sure to check out chapter 2.15: [IMAGO]... when it's translated, of course.
I am my own parasite

I don't need a host to live

We feed off of each other

We can share our endorphins

[...]

I own my own pet virus

I get to pet and name her

Her milk is my shit

My shit is her milk

Doll steak!

Test Meat!

Look on the bright side, suicide

Lost eyesight I'm on your side

Angel left wing, right wing, broken wing

Lack of iron and/or sleeping

[...]
Protector of the kennel

Ecto-plasma, Ecto-skeletal

Obituary birthday

Your scent is still here in my place of recovery!

-Nirvana, 'Milk it'

----

The flickering dance of a distant light on the surface of an endless expanse of water, seen from below.

A state of floating, a gentle warmth, exactly tailored to the temperature of his body, not too hot, not too cold, just right to make him forget where the limits of himself stopped and where his surroundings began, almost as if he were one with the light and the water.

Weightlessness.

There was nothing else he needed, nothing he could have asked for, nothing that could have ended the blessed state of his young soul... He believed he had known this before, in a vague, distant past buried so deeply in his heart that he could only grasp it in moments of twilight like this; far, far in the past before he even knew he existed.

He willingly let himself drift, surrendered the deep, yes, he wasn't really awake enough to resist it and didn't feel anything that could have aroused a desire to do so.

At this point his own sensations began to merge with what lived at the bottom of these depths, but he could neither recognize nor distinguish it, the transition was fluid and hardly recognizable due to the very nature of this place.
For him the journey simply went on, further and further back, while that which belonged to him, and that which could not belong to him simply flowed seamlessly into one another.

There was the echo of a heartbeat, a lot of constant sounds that he could not classify, and distant voices whose stream of words he did not really try to follow, as if he did not know they were different from the other noise, or that they could have a special meaning.

The voices came and went, but soon he could make out the two whose words never seemed to end, one of which for some reason sounded much more distinct and clearer than any other.

That alone should be enough to realize that she had to be important and special in some way, but try as he might, he could not seem to recognize her. He thought he'd heard her before, not just on further incidents in Unit One, but far before.... And there was the other voice, deep, male, sometimes dominant and sober, sometimes trembling with devotion, most of the time a little defiantly provocative, as if its owner constantly wore a confident, untrustworthy grin on his lips. Regarding this second voice he initially believed to have recognized something, but the part of his brain that would have been responsible for this recognition only spat out a brief "This cannot be" to the conscious part of himself, without helping him in any way with identifying this man, so that the two people and the distant, subdued echoes of their conversations remained two strangers to him.

The muted sounds of their language, on the other hand, became more and more composed into sentences that he could understand as time went on:

"The child will have to live in the world after the Second Impact... in a... real hell..."

"But if you want to live, paradise can be anywhere. He'll live, and that's why he'll have a chance to be happy every day."

"I supposed you are right..."

He kind of felt like he'd been here before. For real, not like in these confusing visions and the accompanying déjà-vus, much more intense but at the same time much more difficult to grasp, a light-soaked childhood memory that warmed him even then when it seemed to fade; She literally dissolved into light, disintegrating into a sower of liquid gold that gradually surrounded him completely, and finally dispersed, though not without leaving behind a finely distributed afterglow of her gentle warmth, where Shinji finally found the LCL in which he had fallen asleep yesterday; he woke to find his body rolled up into an approximate ball, his legs pulled up, his arms wrapped
around his body, his head supported on said arms, a single bundle, floating a small distance above his steering seat, suspended in the LCL.

He had firmly reckoned that his next awakening would come abruptly when the angel appeared, but instead of being carted onto the launching pad with his EVA while he was still lolling about three quarters in half sleep, he became part of a gradual, natural awakening after he also got the time to generously stretch out his body and slowly rub the sand out of his eyes and wonder what he should be doing now.

The first thought according to the situation would be to use the time and sleep a little more, but after that Shinji didn't really feel a need... in fact he felt rested to an extent that he hadn't really experienced in a long, long time.

What time was it, anyway? Had the morning come?

Anyway, it seemed very strange to him that they hadn't somehow called him to fight... had he missed that somehow, or had something happened...? Had Rei and Asuka ended up killing the angel without any action on his part, and they had let him snore on with his little sleepy head...?

Misato would probably do that.... The view of the cage that the interface didn't give him much to work with (EVA 01 was currently facing the wall) but showed no communication windows, so he decided that it might be quite good to ask about the situation; However, before he presented himself to anyone, he thought it necessary, driven by a neurosis, to place himself appropriately in his control chair.

Now that the Third Child was back in his proper place, it was time for him to contact his superiors, but even while he was struggling with himself a little, whether he should say or do this or that, the desired communication window opened by itself, as if he had called it with his thoughts.

"M-Misato-san-!"

As soon he saw her face, he knew that the time to rest, although generously measured, had finally passed.

"Good morning, Shinji-kun." She greeted them curtly, without the wild enthusiasm that normally accompanied them through their lips.
"H-Has the angel come out?"

"Not yet, but according to Ritsuko's thermal scan, it could emerge any minute now.

Get ready. We'll launch you to the surface."

"O-Okay..."

---

It was not as late as Shinji had first thought it would be; when the three Evangelions reached the surface, they still had the dawn at their backs.

From the talks of the technicians, which took place in parallel with those involved in the launching of the EVAs, Shinji could deduce that their attempts to find the core of the beast during its restructuring had unfortunately borne no fruit.

Thus, the guessing game was soon to continue.

Apart from the sun, all that awaited them on the surface was the still empty city, where the chirping of the cicadas was the loudest of all noises; sneaking in from the woods at the edges of town and the occasional path of greenery. The cars, whose noise would otherwise undoubtedly drowned them out, all stood still....

At least the arrival of his fellow pilots seemed to alleviate the dominance of the annoying insect sounds; It was hard to tell with Rei, but Asuka seemed to have slept just as well as he had, which was synonymous with her being in the mood to talk; it also helped that the next fight was just around the corner, which Second Child had always seen as an invitation to brag about her skills and rave about her upcoming heroics.

In Shinji's perception, Captain Shikinami's words, the contents of which he could imagine without, blurred into the background noise; he listened more to the channel from the command center, from which he rather promised himself that he could be told when and how exactly the attack on the angel would now take place; Especially since the still motionless elliptical cocoon of the Angel of Fighter Intuition, which Shinji only possessed to the extent that it would not have been right any more to claim that he had none, not too many starting points.
He had heard very little about the strategy, if there was any at all; After the experience of the last fight, Misato had decided to bring in the big guns in the truest sense of the word: Shinji was carrying a gigantic Gatling rifle equipped with explosive thermite ammunition, while Rei was carrying a device of similar proportions for which Dr. Akagi had a hard to pronounce scientific term, while Misato had referred to it by the much more catchy monicker "lightning globe cannon". Asuka had called dibs on fre flamethrower right out of the gate.

It had taken about this calibre of weapons to seriously harm the beast before its metamorphosis.... Now that there were three of them, Shinji should have felt more confident, but the longer the wait had stretched the strings of his nervousness, the more his attention shifted away from the two EVAs and their firepower, and more towards the two girls inside of them who were now sharing his lot in harm's way.

Much to Asuka's annoyance, the nature of the enemy once again forced them onto the defensive; they had to wait for the Tenth Angel to comfortably leave its delicate state.

But if they had been shot to the surface, it was because Dr. Akagi and the other technicians had rightly assumed that the ambassador would not keep them waiting for long: With a sound that was half a screech and half a scratch, somewhere on the threshold from organic to inorganic, the previously completely silent, motionless oval suddenly came to life; the darkness beneath the surface suddenly seemed to move as if it wanted to contract itself, uncertain about what it was to become, and at the very top, where the egg of the apocalypse turned towards the firmament, the semi-transparent, gloomy shell seemed to break open at first; However, the regular form of the "fractures" quickly revealed that it was a deliberate biological process, more orderly than breaking open an eggshell by a hatching chick; the symmetrical, round opening of the structures, which turned out to be multi-layered in depth, rather resembled the adaptation of an iris around a widening, dark pupil.

"Scan the inside!" Misato ordered, almost jumping up a little bit along with her near-instantaneous reaction. "What's the matter with that thing?"

"I-I don't know," Hyuuga replied, not without signs of shock as he turned toward his superiors. "It's unbelievable... like the angel's signature doesn't register at all!"

"It doesn't register...?" repeated Misato skeptically. "That can't be... what is the status of the sensors? Could it be any use to recalibrate the sensors or somehow filter the measured values?"

"The sensors are not measuring any sort of values. There's nothing to filter- According to these readings, there's nothing to measure, as if the cocoon were hollow..."

"What... what does that mean...?"

"I can only think of one possibility." concluded Dr. Akagi, who had just straightened up again after leaning forward to look over Lt. Ibuki's chair, on whose back one of the fake blonde's hands still rested.
The otherwise cool-eared scientist let herself be clearly heard and visibly worried - a sign that the head of the operations department had already considered to be a valid excuse for her own concern.

She pressed for an answer, wishing that her friend and colleague would come to the point for a change before her bubbling creativity had the opportunity to imagine heaven knows what instead of being able to focus on finding a solution.

"I can't help but think that the angel got involved in the first fight to analyze our approach and has now changed accordingly."

"W-What are you saying?"

"It is not impossible. In fact, even the fourth angel demonstrated the ability to improve and adapt itself... the ninth angel, too, was perfectly adapted to the inside of the volcano, perhaps another example of this ability... Even the most essential laws of quantum physics say that nothing can be observed without being influenced at the same time... The angel must have noticed our attempts to find its core and now, it has done something about that...".

"Can they really think so far ahead?"

"They don't need to. The angel simply registered a process coming from the enemy and put a stop to it, regardless of whether it understood its purpose or not.

"But... if the angel could shield itself against something as innocuous as our attempts to scan it, then..."

"Yes." Dr. Akagi confirmed what her colleague no longer needed to say, since the worried looks of the staff already made it clear that everyone had noticed the long shadow of that certainty. "...In this case... the fighting abilities of the angel must undoubtedly have adapted to the weapons of the EVAs. It is to be expected that... the few measures with which we were able to make the angel flee last time will be completely ineffective. And we don't have many further measures, especially since we won't be able to track down the core anymore... No, it's impossible that Shinji didn't even hit hit it even once during the last fight. Probably the core was never within our reach to begin with..."

There was little about the situation that could have been motivating - And the knowledge about the exact meaning of Dr. Akagi was clearly visible in the faces of those involved, most probably among the more sensitive members of the NERV crew like Lt. Ibuki and of course the Third Child, who wondered in the meantime whether what he felt were sweat beads under the gloves of his plugsuit or simply symptoms of his fear.

Not even Misato was unshaken, silently cursing Dr. Akagi's inability to express the whole thing in a less final and pessimistic way, even if she couldn't think of any nicer way to put it... Nevertheless, it didn't really take a rocket scientist to know what was going on in the pretty little head situated inside EVA 01's entry plug... and how the equally certain lack of such thought processes in the Second Child could lead to other problems.

Even though she managed to clench her errant fingers into a fist, she was interrupted before she got to say something that might have persuaded her colleagues to pull themselves together somehow, she found all her plans crossed out with a thick black line composed of nothing less than another screech from the angel, a terrible sound like scratching chalk and squeaking railway wheels,
announcing the return of the angel of illusions, a warning herald for the daylight to which he now showed himself in his renewed shape.

In the dark opening of the angel cocoon's, half-stuck into a building and reminiscent of a birth canal due to its elongated elliptical shape, a dim outline arose, an outer line of reddish glow, which at first seemed to stand out only very slightly from the surrounding darkness. But then the vermilion edges of the alien shape became more definite, the outline clearer and clearer the more the horror inside approached the exit of his nursery; Yellowish accents appeared on the edges of the finally confusingly tenebrous, shadowy form, like the windows of a great ship, which was seen passing by at night like a floating city, and yet a shade, the presence of which one could not be quite sure of on the lightless shore - could it be those distant Night Wisps that lured sailors to their deaths and, having lured them to the seabed, gave birth to legends and fairy tales that retained the deceptive character of their mothers; The bright edges of the angel seemed not to illuminate the darkness which surrounded them, and even if they had, they would not have been able to prevent the immaterial being from appearing shrouded in night even in broad daylight; for it was truly the angel of illusion.

The insubstantial ambassador exposed his purest, perfect form, largely formed by an elongated structure resembling the abdomen of an insect, which was covered on the underside with a greenish, white spotted armour, and which ended in the thin, filigree rest of the body, up to the slit-shaped opening as its widest point, with its bizarre resemblance to certain parts of the human body.

Perhaps the core would have belonged here, if it had been visibly embedded into its surface like with many of the other angels.

The remaining, thin part of the angel's body showed a complex structure that could not be recognized at first sight due to its dark, elusive texture; it seemed somehow painfully two-dimensional like the graphics of an old video game; On closer inspection, it revealed a short, rod-shaped torso, from which two thin arms, physically impossible, branched off and formed into discs with yellowish spikes, from which thin arms then again led to a small, partly diamond-shaped structure, which, with a little imagination, could be interpreted as hands permanently sealed in a position of prayer, but at the front of which one could watch what one could best have called the face, the mask-like structure with two eye holes and a "beak", as known from other angels.

There was also something else about the shape of the ambassador that was typical of angels, albeit of a very different kind; from his back came a long, straight structure, the meaning of which became even clearer when the angel began to move.

His first movements were not cautious and testing as that of a being trying to get used to a new, unfamiliar shape, and too jerky and purposeful to conform to the stretching of a yawning, freshly awakened human; it was most reminiscent of a snake trying to wriggle out of its old skin.
A few of these twitches and it paused, perhaps in a moment of pain, when the structure on his back split with a disgusting biological noise and the angel first spread his wings, now clearly recognizable as such, like a butterfly that had freshly survived the pain of rebirth; With a short delay, the spiky discs on his "elbows" began to spin rapidly like the gears of a machine, whereupon the now perfected being thoroughly stretched out and gave out a cry of triumph, which, both by its tone and by its component aiming at the sixth sense, as if it meant to freeze the Third Child's blood right there in his veins and cause them to shatter in that hard, cold form.

"So this is... the angel's perfected form..." The shock hadn't left enough LCL in his lungs to give this phrase much of a tone; It hurt to even look at that thing for more than a short time; It didn't look like anything that would belong in this world, at least not in a variant of it in which people like himself could exist; It was a herald of the bizarre future it would bring if no one were to stop it; A future to which no human being would have access.

This time he could really feel it, perhaps because he had learned it over time, or perhaps because he now understood the implications of these struggles better than he did sometime in the beginning; he felt just how profoundly wrong everything about this creature was.

"I want you three to open all-out fire on the angel at the same moment."

"Roger." Confirmed Shinji.

"And be extremely careful... No one can say what powers the target might have now that it has changed..."

"Pah. If it thinks that it could scare me by turning into an oversized dragonfly, it's flattering itself! That our daddy's boy had problems with this critter doesn't mean anything. Now that I'm here, you can't even compare that. Come on, you lame ducks! Let's blast it!"

One or the other may have wondered for a moment when exactly Asuka had been pu in charge, but she had a sufficiently dominant presence that her naturally obedient fellow pilots still followed her instructions, if only to avoid further noise.

Since they ultimately did what she had ordered, Misato decided to postpone any scolding until later (i.e. never) and focus her attention on the target, which had moved on from its initial position above the cocoon, so that it now floated about the height of an ordinary detached house above Tokyo 3's streets, surrounded to the left and right by skyscrapers.
Captain Shikinami stormed forward with her fiery red Evangelion, stopping its massive form close to the target object with quite astonishing precision and turning the lever that released the flickering flames from their house-sized vessel, a real firestorm that enveloped the angel in its entire volume until one could no longer recognize its contours within the glowing embers, yes, went far beyond and blackened the surrounding skyscrapers wide with soot. Collateral damage could not be avoided when the enemy was such a tough nut to crack (in the present situation, even Godzilla, the honorable patron saint of collateral damage, would have been an option to consider, if only he could break through an AT field), so that even the hail of explosive cartridges that Shinji still contributed could not be very considerate of the surrounding architecture. But such a storm would, of course, always be missing something fundamental if there was no thunder, a grievance that Rei swiftly averted by use of her lightning cannon, whose blue-white glowing projectiles burst through the discharges they brought with them, breaking masses of windows or entire glass fronts of the surrounding buildings, simply by flying past them; the construction of this weapon had been inspired by the particle beams of the angels; direct contact with metal or concrete would melt clean holes into it.

The various types of bombardment often caused the fire to flare up again, often in the form of a skyscraper-sized jet flames; Asuka was ultimately forced to jump back with Unit Two to protect herself from the scorching results of her own work, but not a second before she had blown all her fuel into the angel's direction; the other two Children, too, had only been equipped with limited quantities of ammunition, but had not hesitated to sink even the last bit of it into the target; The result was a single, flaming inferno that also overturned several skyscrapers, yes, almost mowed them down like blades of grass, but if you were dealing with beings who could ring in the end of mankind if they came only a few hundred meters further down, a little overkill couldn't do any harm, especially if it was to be expected that the already tough beast was now much tougher; Still, it had just been hit with a multiple of what it had fled from in the last fight, and the three had of course tried their best to neutralize the opponent's AT field as thoroughly as they could.

 Accordingly, Asuka followed the lightening of the smoke curtain with an expectant grin of triumph - her male colleague seemed much more sceptical, as it turned out, for good reason, for if he hadn't stood just a little farther away from the angel than the Second Child, none of them could have avoided the fast, yellowish object speeding toward them.

Even the trained pilot only narrowly escaped, and even then, she couldn't prevent the angel from grazing the armor around EVA 02's head, thereby damaging one of its bettle-horn-like protrusions.

It was one of those jagged projections on the angel's "elbow arches" - the creature seemed able to lengthen and stretch it considerably, and had aimed directly between the eyes of the red colossus.

Where others would now have shown something akin to a self-preservation instinct and tried to escape from the reach of the spikes, Asuka showed the heart of a fighter and was already pushing her Prog knife into the angel's spear before it could pull it back; her EVA's arm must have reached a speed no less inhuman than the angel's, as if it were limited exclusively by the speed of Captain Shikinami's thoughts, which might not have been too far from the truth given her high synch rate.

But even that heroic feat didn't help her in the end - The vibration-enhanced blade glided right through the dark, shadowy body of the angel as through dense November fog, deceived by its appearance of materiality...
One would have been similarly deceived, however, if one hadn't believed that the other spikes, which the angel now aimed towards EVA 02, wouldn't be able to tear very real holes into the slim form of the biomechanical colossus, but in spite of Asuka's quick reaction which allowed her to elude them largely guided by her trained instincts, she found herself fallen on all fours with her back to the ground; She had gotten away from the angel, but it followed her, leaving behind the last remnants of the still smoking source of the fire - to the complete shock of most of those present - Even Asuka's self-confident facial expression got its slight wrinkles and cracks - the ambassador was completely unharmed, yes, not even dirty, as if he were gallantly giving the middle finger to all the laws of this reality - As a passionate gamer, the Second Child felt almost tempted to shout "Cheater!", even if the rest of her personality would not have allowed it at a time like this, of course, simply because of the possible reactions of her environment.

Still, this was patently ridiculous; Everything she had ever learned about physics in her life told her that this thing should have died a Rasputinian death no later than half a minute ago.

It should have been smeared across the ground as a pitiful puddle of gunk instead of threatening her with its spikes whilst the damage she could inflict upon it in her unfortunate position barely exceeded those that could have been achieved with sticks and harsh language.

Luckily, or perhaps unfortunately, - to answer, it would probably have taken a philosopher, even if Asuka herself tended strongly towards the latter - Shinji chose to intervene - or at least, he tried to. Shortly before he reached the Redhead's EVA, the binding worry that had made him rush like a wild Viking ran out in mid charge, right in the face of the enemy, and he stalled, failing to satisfactorily repress his knowledge that he had neither a plan nor the courage necessary to repress his lack thereof.

All momentum came to a stop and did not rebuild itself, even if the more noble parts of himself pushed him ahead, yes, begged him to do something; if you had a bizarre sense of humor, you could have imagined a whole horde of little homunculi running around in his brain, waving their arms in panic as they frantically tried to shift responsibility away from each other even though they were all equally helpless.

Then, an action, determined but clumsy: In his perplexity he resorted to using his emptied weapon as a projectile, grabbing it by the barrel with the Evangelion's hands and hurling it with considerable effort in the direction of the angel - but that which he had wasted on strengh for lack of time and out of the habits which made him act in accordance with the sobering experiences of physical education despite the monstrous force which the Evangelion would have afforded him anyway anyway, was now missing in the department of precision, so that the unorthodox projectile, which had never been built very aerodynamically anyway, flew past the actual target of his trajectory by a hair's breath – and therefore, still off-target - and instead landed pretty much exactly on EVA 02, at least with enough force to bring the red Titan to the ground.

"Fucking idiot! Are you trying to kill me?!"

"I'm sorry, I... I just wanted..."
"You can tell your excuses to your grandma! Your aim is atrocious!"

"I would recommend to postpone your conversation. The target is -"

"Mind your own business, princess!"

"Second Child, duck."

Ultimately, it was Rei who, either in wise anticipation or strictly following some directive from her training (presumably the latter), had thought of leaving a few more rounds in her cannon in case she failed to bring down the enemy, and after cranking up the intensity to the maximum, fired them over Asuka and her loud protests, and though she neither injured nor moved the monster back in any way, she still distracted it long enough to give the Second Child the admittedly short time she needed to get up and run with EVA 02 for the integrity of both their butts - the creature was probably quite capable of drillng one of its pesky spines right there into the Evangelion's back that it would shatter the entry plug, and Asuka was quite attached to her life; Without much thinking she hurried away to put as many buildings as possible between herself and the enemy, which turned out to be a fruitless endeavor, as the angel constantly mowed Asuka's protective wall behind her.

For another reason than the obvious, Shinji began to curse that he had thrown the rifle - he could have at least misused it as a club now. Shinji made an attempt to substitute it with a broken piece of a skyscraper, but given that it had already been damaged and never been designed for this kind of mechanical strain to begin with, so that it crumbled in the hands of the violet Evangelion on its first attempts to swing it around.

The falling debris, however, along with interesting insides of the skyscraper such as desks and filing cabinets, which seemed absurdly tiny from Shinji's perspective, as if they had been made for ants, released what had been buried below the piece of building - the flamethrower that Asuka must have hurled away at some point - Shinji doubted that it would still spit fire, but he was happy to get a solid piece of hard metal between his fingers at all, so he didn't waste time complaining about the lack of blades, but stormed right out to bash the angel over its skull in gold old street thug fashion - or over what Shinji had just spontaneously classified as its skull. Knowing that this would hardly occupy the angel, he just wanted to add some more damage by wildly stabbing the target with the Prog knife (not because he expected any kind of success from it, but because in his current panic he simply lacked the skills to come up with something much better) but by the time he had pulled out the knife, he already needed it to fend off some quick spines of the angel, who had aimed to pierce the EVA almost where a human would have had his heart - he managed to parry the attack, but not without being thrown away by its sheer force - piquantly enough, in Asuka's direction, where he once again buried her EVA inelegantly under his own, thereby driving his chances of ever making her his girlfriend fall into the negative numbers.
As he was in a slightly better position, because at least, there was no one on top of him, he still saw it as his duty to make the bad situation right, since he had been the cause of it; in retrospect, he couldn't say how he had done it; it must have been mostly adrenaline; the next thing he remembered was stumbling through the rubble of the battlefield with an EVA 02 under his arm (kicking and screaming).

EVA 01 may have possessed the Herculean strength needed to drag its red sister unit around, but it was limited by his pilot, who simply lacked the skill to run around with a very bulky and resistive item under his arm, while his roommate screamed her ears out over the intercom – Briefly distracted when he spotted Rei approaching them with EVA 00, probably intending to take part in the fight as well, the panicked EVA pilot stumbled over his own feet again and found himself hanging upside down in his seat, after he had knocked over the few buildings that had still stood in this area like dominoes, along with Unit Zero.

It was hardly necessary to mention that Asuka was anything but happy, even though or perhaps because the clumsy rescue was probably the only reason she was still breathing.

The fact that the angel didn't even bother to give the sad pile of hopelessly twisted Evangelions the coup de grace, but rather leisurely passed by them, presumably to break open the entrance to the main shaft, probably said more than enough in and of itself.

Even back down at headquarters, they couldn't help but roll your eyes - the Subcommander's palm met his face again, Dr. Akagi sighed deeply, and Misato felt tempted to giggle. Not that the situation hadn't been far too serious for that, but that was precisely what provided a wonderfully humorous contrast to the little children squabbling over trivialities.

Well, if you get into bed with a toddler, you can expect to be pissed on the next morning, as Kaji had once said, quoting a Spanish proverb, and if you use teenagers to control your biomechanical fighting machines, you know...

At least the head of the operations department was spared from returning the dear little ones back to the actual agenda, since Shinji already had that covered - not that he behaved particularly maturely, his voice was a single pleading whine: "Misato-san, the weapons don't work...".

"Don't you have something that has more power?" Asuka finally asked. Despite the circumstances, she seemed to be able to think more clearly, if not more purposefully: "Maybe some kind of EVA-sized fly swatter?"

"Hm..." Misato pondered, scratching her chin involuntarily. "Good point. Do we have something like that?"
She looked over to Dr. Akagi. "You told me about that $N^2$ rocket launcher last night..."

"Aha, so that's what you were discussing yesterday in the armoury!" Shinji stated without thinking that he might have kept it to himself - not only because he didn't want the two of them to think that he had overheard them somehow, but also because Asuka might ask him just what he had been doing in the armory at NERV yesterday - she didn't like Rei very much, unfortunately, so that she would surely see it as a kind of "betrayal" that he had been worried about the First Child, not to speak of his not-quite 'date' with her (he considered this fact... or assumption to be in a Schrödinger-esque superposition state)... But Asuka had apparently paid the specifics of his remark little mind, because she had something, much, much more interesting on her mental radar that he would ever be - it was the word "rocket launcher" that made her eyes shine like little stars.

"Did you really just say "rocket launcher"?" she inquired enthusiastically. "Oh yes! That's great! I want to fire it, I wanna, I wanna!" she declared, stretching EVA 02's arm far upwards like a zealous pupil in a classroom, pushing EVA 01 down a little more abruptly than necessary to be able to make this gesture at all - this skilful cold shoulder did not go unnoticed by its intended recipient.

"It should be me! Unlike these flunkies here, I already have experience with rocket launchers!

"You have... experience with rocket launchers...?" Shinji repeated somewhat perplexed. It didn't sound very believable, but his experience had shown that any realism was out of place when it came to Asuka.

"Are you stupid or what? Of course! Do you really think they made me a Captain for shits and giggles? I told you I had real military training... With machine guns, bazookas, mortars, cartridges, and yes, rocket launchers too."

"Real... actual... rocket launchers..." Shinji replied, oscillating somewhere between shock and disbelief. Sure, he regularly handled rifles himself, but real weapons, as they were used in real wars, that was something different again...

Asuka seemed to enjoy his reaction very much. "Oh my God, your stupid face" she giggled, "Of course I mean real rocket launchers! What other kind of rocket launchers are there, toys maybe?"
The idea of a petite, red-haired little girl with a gigantic mega ratchet had something very surreal and yet scary about it - Somehow Asuka's constant death threats had just noticeably gained in substance... Good old Freud could surely have enumerated other interesting reasons for this, why it sent cold shivers down his spine, all of which would question his masculinity to live with a girl who could handle rocket launchers, but it was enough for him that the girl in question was absolutely crazy.

But this was neither the time nor the place, after all the angel was on the advance.

"So...?" Asuka continued. "What about the rocket launcher now?"

"Well, I'm afraid there's a problem with that..." Dr. Akagi admitted. "There's a reason why we didn't send you right out with it."

"Then I hope it's good and valid," Asuka replied.

The fake blonde sighed, "Designing and building the weapons for the EVAs is always such a challenge. Because of the humanoid form of the EVAs we were forced to produce classical weapons in much, much larger scale... that alone is a challenge, but as bizarre as it may sound, it is always a balancing act between enlargement and miniaturization."

"...miniaturization?"

"The weapons don't just have to be big enough for EVAs to use them, they also need enough firepower to harm an angel...and even the EVA-sized Weapons are sometimes far too small for that. With these rocket launchers it wasn't really possible for us to find this balance... So the device is very big and bulky, so it will probably need two EVAs to set it up and operate it... two EVAs and a lot of time."

"...which the angel will give us." Completed Misato. "It's almost at the main shaft and I doubt that the door mechanism will buy us any time at all..."

"Then where's the problem?" Asuka replied. "It seems that having these two amateurs around is going to be useful for a change- I guess they are better than nothing... There are three of us! If two of us install and operate the launcher, there's still one of us left to serve as a diversion!"
"And who might that be?" Misato's question was of a purely rhetorical nature, judging by the rebuking tone. "This is far too dangerous! Apart from maybe the rocket launcher we do not have any weapons capable of even producing a scratch on that thing... Whoever gets to be this so-called distraction would be a sitting duck on a silver platter!"

Asuka had to admit that she was slightly stung by the criticism, which in her opinion was overly harsh and, to make matters worse, even justified, and what more, it was of a strategic nature, a field that had been a special favorite of hers for years now. She would be lying if she had pretended not to be offended, and thus, for a moment, Asuka forgot about her desire to preserve her pride, and vigorously countered without much thinking: "That's why I will do it!" She was nevertheless quick to hide her anger behind arrogance: "It is, so to speak, my duty, considering that I am the only real adult here... And adults have to watch out for the little children!"

"Negative. I will go."

...The nerve of her! For once, there was a real opportunity when there weren't any unforeseen circumstances preventing her from proving her ability, and the commander's little princess dared to snatch that opportunity away from her!

Not only did the First Child have the audacity to make herself out to be the selfless as an excuse to snatch the most important role, no, she hardly spoke any louder than it would have been necessary for you to hear her speak, as if the irrevent gesture with which she had just stomped hard on Asuka's fingers and challenged her destiny wasn't even really worth her attention, as if the Second Child was just a crushed beetle on the underside of Rei Ayanami's boots, and that made her beyond furious.

"Oh yes, will you?" she spat back to the pilot of the Blue Evangelion. "I'm sorry, but the last time I looked at it I was the best pilot here!"

"Exactly. You're the one with the highest sync rate and have experience with the weapon we're going to use, according to your own statement. Therefore it is more efficient if you fire the weapon. In addition, it is likely that both the evangelion that acts as a distraction and its pilot will be severely damaged. At the present, it is to be expected that many more angels would follow after this current, so it would be very unfavorable if we were to lose our best pilot and our most modern Evangelion. Ikari-kun is still needed because he is the only one who can control Unit One. Thus, we don't have a satisfactory replacement for yourself or the Third Child at the present moment.

Unit Zero, on the other hand, is a prototype primarily developed for testing purposes, with a partially immature system architecture. Its loss would be the least detrimental under the present circumstances." Rei ratted the whole thing down rather monotonously, similar to what she had done with the schedule for Operation Yashima at the time, without reacting in any way to Asuka's open hostility.
And that made the red-haired pilot's rage boil even more so than the fact that she couldn't find any mistakes in the reasoning of this little blue-haired robot...exactly like a computer, with a silicone heart, as if she had swallowed a calculator.

Why was the daddy's boy unable to see that? What did he hope to get out of spending time with that bitch? The only one who would feel anything was Asuka herself, whose anger and jealousy got new firewood when the Third Child reacted to the First Child's suggestion with shock and incomprehension and struggled to grasp for the right words to address it somehow.

"B-but Ayanami... *you're* our backup!"

"A replacement will not be necessary if you both remain unharmed. And as for myself... there will be no problems in that regard, either."

"A-Ayanami...!"

"Pah! Let's let her! If she wants to play the heroine so badly, that's her problem! It's not our job to save her from her own stupidity," said Asuka, not quite managing to channel her anger and disappointment into a facade of superiority.

"I wanted to fire the rocket launcher anyway... in this respect she was even right, who knows, maybe she will finally start to respect my abilities..."

At the latest there she had her grin back, and grabbed EVA 01 at the wrist without further ado, which she then dragged behind her along with Shiji, almost as she often did when she was on her way to school with him.

"Misato-san, send us the rocket launcher through the next shaft! And give the poor princess something to shoot, so that she her showing off won't weigh us down!"

"Um......" Touji grumbled as he put his hands together above his head to be able to stretch his arms better. "Having to sleep on the floor of the shelter is the absolute worst! It's as hard as concrete, and these thin emergency blankets don't make it any better..."

While he now stood up to stretch his tense body to its full length, his freckled buddy was just about to come out with one arm under his own blanket to feel for his glasses, which he hoped hadn't been
crushed by anyone during the night.

"Well..." Kensuke commented, sounding visibly sleepy, after he thought he had found the vision aid in question and pulled it to himself under the blanket, probably with the aim of putting it on his nose. He sat up, still without removing the blanket from his head. “I'm pretty much used to it..."

He pulled the blanket down from his now visibly messy hair, somewhat reminiscent of an eccentric inventor - and changed his facial expression to one of astonishment before the light had a chance to fall on his previous face.

Skeptically, he grasped his face where his sense of touch confirmed his suspicion.

"Hey, Touji, can it be that those aren't my glasses at all?"

"Yup." Confirmed Touji slightly amused. "Looks like you accidentally got a hold of Nagato's. Yours should be somewhere.... Hm... yes, where actually?" The hand with which the tall boy had run through the sparse possessions that the two had carried in their school bags came up empty.

A rustle came from below another blanket, from under which Nagato promptly surfaced – It seemed like he had woken up a little earlier and had been occupied with some of his little puzzles. He had a schoolbook lying next to him, but had apparently not been able to read it - presumably because he had grabbed the wrong glasses and didn't want to wake the others up to go looking for his own.

After each pair of glasses had been returned to their respective owners, however, the thoughts of the three boys quickly returned to their actual problems: "I wonder what is taking so long up there... Do you think Shinji and the others got beaten up, and it took them this long because they're preparing a counter-attack?"

"If only I knew... What would I give to got upstairs and get a look at what's going on up there..."

"You just want to get a look at the fight."

"That too."
"I only hope..." Nagato finally contributed to the conversation. "That all three of them are well..."

"Speaking of that..."Touji inquired at this point. "How's your head?"

"When I woke up, I still felt it a little out of sorts..." The dark-haired spectacle wearer indicated exactly where with his hand. "But right now, everything seems to be fine again..."

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" Touji was happy. "Let's hope that Yamagishi is also doing better... Where is she anyway? Wasn't she sleeping somewhere around here yesterday?"

"Why so quiet?"

The being described as Leatha did not bother to move her lips; only the true language would reach her goal, the kind of which the beings she had taken the form of were not capable at all.

She could not tell how much this individual knew about the existence of her offspring; Probably more than its brothers, if only because it had dared to take one of her children as its vessel.

She could see it, a naked, glowing sphere, burning like a star, wrapped in the flesh of a pale Lillim girl with long, dark hair, for those who could see it, or had the technology to track it down.

You could see in her eyes that it not been her own will that had carried her here; she was in a waking state, because that was a necessity for her body to move, but she lacked awareness, her already weak mind had been overwhelmed and banished to the depths of her brain, where she probably wandered in a labyrinth built by the architect of her cage out of her own suffering and doubts.

It was solely the will of the ambassador who had carried her here.

But it didn't seem to be part of the will of the being that the girl turned to the naked, blue-haired woman who was sitting on a table a few metres away from her.
Leatha had once learned to wear robes and the meaning it held; but since then her understanding of things had grown and she had understood that she was not the kind of being that needed to shamefacedly cover herself, at least not when there was no need to pass as another kind of creature.

The room they were in, even though neither the angel nor the escaped test subject really knew about it, happened to be the classroom where the Children often spent their mornings.

The only order the ambassador had given was that his core be brought closer to the battlefield - that this had now been done by visiting this exact location must be attributable to some remaining remnants of the host's consciousness, but the angel, whose goal of getting closer to the battlefield had indeed been achieved, saw no more as a cause for concern than Leatha's presence so close to the source of his life.

His meat puppet, however, stood unimpressed in front of the window, letting the arms, which her Master did not need, hang limply, almost as if she wanted to follow the course of the fight... of course the being had no need for that.

Only a short time ago she would not have been able to do such a thing, but in the meantime Leatha found this quite amusing.

"Come on. You must have sensed my presence... Answer me. Use the voice of the Lillim child..."

Not a word came back.

Leatha rose and approached the object of her interest, looking herself through the window at the battlefield, where the blue perversion - EVA 00, as she was now able to attribute - fought a hopeless battle; The bad copy of Adam fought with a single knife against the ambassador's six spears, barely able to defend itself - the blue Cyclops was forced into the defensive position, already limited by the superhuman speed of the enemy to at best parry and otherwise retreat; The weapon which the one-eyed Evangelion had carried had long since been shredded by the spikes of the angel, and nothing it could do now was able to harm the son of Adam... especially not when his soul was far, far away from the form against which the chosen children fought.

It was ridiculous... Leatha clearly felt what it was, what was inside the distorted reflection of the ancestral father and guided its movements... At the innermost of the many vessels of flesh and
steel, there was a vessel almost identical to what Leatha herself used as an anchor to this world... but that which it contained should have no problem to put down such a ridiculous opponent as this ambassador with her own AT-field... so why should the venerable primordial mother make use of the ridiculous wall of souls that this failed copy could erect...?

Leatha would still have to think about it in peace... perhaps this riddle also concealed the explanation for her own existence, which she had recently begun to question... because it was her nature to contain this knowledge, she could see that she did not lack much to complete her understanding...

However, she did not need to expect these answers from the ambassador; He remained silent, untouched by the presence of a comparable existence.

"So you remain silent... is it that you do not understand...? You are a child Adam... Communication should be unnatural for you... but you should be able to do it just by taking control of this Lilim vessel... It's more like you don't want to, isn't it?

Leatha's grin broadened; the answer, whose absence could have disappointed her, was written broadly over Lilim's back turned towards her.

"It would probably fascinate these children to know that they seem to you just as abominable as you do to them... The hatred that the old gods have dictated to us goes as deep as their fear that we could become their equals... Where are the gods now? They have left us to ourselves... but you don't think so far, huh? You are a proud, arrogant child, aren't you? Not so much different from the soul that burns in the blood-red descendant of Adam... You would find it offensive to use the voice of a Lilim... or perhaps... you are not so different in the end, from the Lilim which you so abhor... Proud beings abhor those who are weak minds... The voice of the child, which you have made your nest, would not be worthy of you, would it?

The angel remained silent, but that was an answer in and of itself.

"I could destroy you now and here, you know that, don't you? As far as your kind can know anything beyond what you have always known..." again no reaction.

Again no reaction.

"But you seem very sure that I will not do that, don't you? Proud child... with you, that would be a
waste of my strenght..."

And with that, Leatha turned to leave.

"Where... am I...?"

When Mayumi wanted to lift her eyelids, they felt heavy; she suddenly realized that this was not her first thought; everything around her was a heavy, black mist, like layers of heavy, dark cloth, each of one of which would have let the air pass on its own, but all together formed a coffin or a shroud, pressing and pulling down, as if the air had suddenly become liquid or completely solid, drifting pointed crystals into the walls of her lungs.

It could certainly no longer be described as heat, the relationship to the most glowing, oppressive summer days, no matter how dull and sluggish they might leave you behind, could only be revealed by longer reflection; It seemed like a completely different feeling, as if there was an ocean above the sky, and under its cruel hammering pressure, everything blurred, until it was hopelessly mixed, like a vortex of watercolours, in which all too wild experiments to produce new, radiant shades had left behind only an ugly, indefinable grey-brown.

Whether she was dreaming or awake could no longer be said, and both had lost their meaning some time ago; the few impressions she perceived rather reminded her of the former.

She reached out, searching for something warm, firm to hold on to, but there was nothing; she had the impression that there had been something, but even the warmth it had left on her had given way, even if her cruel sensory impressions often tortured her with a mirage of its presence, which was inevitably triggered in her arms; if only it would stay commited to deceiving her up to the end...

It was wrong and petty to wish this for herself, but that she was wrong and petty, she had gotten used to it; the unsteady stream of her thoughts made it difficult at the moment to grasp when; she was simply confused, lost between life and death and wakefulness and sleep like a piece of driftwood in a wild vortex. She could not even have really said what she felt.

Against a dream spoke the noises that seemed to dazzle her on the outside, breaking loudly into her world where she didn't want to be; Oh, if only she could stay in that state forever, sunk in the depths where nothing could disturb her slumber; Oh, how much this darkness frightened her, the darkness, and the unspeakable possibility that this would be all that was yet to come; Half the time
she couldn't even say what the many images rushing past her were all about; Half the time she
couldn't even say what the many images rushing past her were trying to say.

Mother, father, school?

All meaningless consequences of words in her ears that flowed in on her and everything was just
worse and yet didn't let her go and they held by an assertion that they were important that came not
from themselves but from their own core, if only in response to them.

As if she had been sucked into a black balloon or spat into an empty room, in her own little time-
space continuum, outside of which everyone had forgotten her, erased from everything else as if
she had never existed... or hadn't her life been like this before, before she came to this bizarre
place...?

There were pictures of cars speeding by and bright lights, a street with happy children, painted girls
and couples who made her think of all the men she should have kissed.

She stood separated from all this by a pane of glass, a pale mannequin that couldn't move but could
very well cry, longingly looking over the insurmountable gorge in the shape of the street, without
knowing where she was going; Once there had been something, but she could no longer say what,
and she also could no longer say whether they, this monster of the day before yesterday and the
person across the street, were not just words and dreams, scattered in the minds of those who told
her stories, each so different that she could not comprehend herself.

Perhaps they all belonged to one of those stories her mother had always told her, from those big,
thick books, where her name still throned in her ornate girl's handwriting.

Her mother was a little woman who had smelled good; in the evenings she had sat by her bed and
led her into the realm of dreams with a wealth of songs and stories seemed almost infinite. Mayumi
couldn't tell where the many pictures in her head that showed this woman smiling came from; she
had never smiled much, and always said that she felt so lonely alone in her house, without a job
where she could find recognition and people to talk to; she had only her little daughter and a
handful of relatives to call her.

She had spoken about disappearing into dark holes and how the man by her side who had
somehow never spent much time in her house would not see this, but he only accused her of not
taking good care of the little one and of being ungrateful and disgusting; a few times she wanted to
throw him out, but she couldn't manage it; a few times she stormed away when he said she had to
obey him, but she always came back until she didn't. She had registered for a place in hell and got
Mayumi herself didn't quite understand what had happened yet, but she was very lonely without her mother's company, so she sat down in front of her books; that's how it started, with the books; though she had never been able to finish reading those particular books;

"What are you doing? Put that down again immediately!" It would always go that way; He would yell at her and look at her with firm, wild eyes; He often instructed her to sit down so that she would have to look even higher to meet his glare – that was also one of the reasons why she had given up on it with time. After the death of her mother, he had changed completely, even though she could not have said what he had been like before.

"But...these are mamas...-

That was the first and only time she had contradicted him.

Like a furious gorilla, he grabbed her, by her hair, if necessary, tore her trousers off, because she was too scared to do it herself, and he interpreted this as a sign of resistance, and struck her.

Over and over again, and when she screamed, he shut her mouth with his hand, not paying much attention as to whether he left her tiny nose uncovered or not.

"Don't make such a fuss, Mayumi! Do you call that beating? The little slap on the butt? I'll show you some pictures of children who were really beaten! Where are your bruises and broken bones? I do that here with my flat hand, that hurts me more than it hurts you! Why do you force me to do it? That is quite normal, as if one educates a dog. Since you apparently don't understand any words, like a dog, you just have to make sure that you understand it differently..."

Then when she lay there, small, broken, trembling with fear, with liquids escaping from fear of death on every part of her body, she swore never to contradict him again.

Not when he said that she had to let him embrace her, although she was already trembling when he was in the room, and not when he told her what her future had to look like. She always said yes, nodded at the end, no matter what she felt.

In the end... it had come so far that most of the time she hadn't felt anything at all. And why should
she be the one to feel something? All she did was because someone else told her to.

And so she became more and more of a coward; she could never say all the things she wanted to say, not to him, not to the others at school, not to anyone.

Whenever she spoke, she felt him beside her, his searching, dissatisfied looks that plunged her into deepest shame.

She despised herself, that ugly, insincere person who could only flee into fantasies... The pain of the past and the agony of the here and now crushed her. There was no spark of warmth at all in this world anymore, at least not for her... there was nothing left for her...

And yet, when she noticed the dripping of her own tears, only somewhere far away, the memory of the last time that she had shed such tears naturally came up, and back came this picture of this street, only that she could see what was on the other side, another shop window, with a boy who appeared as immobile and waxy as she herself. Who was that again?

She could not find the knowledge about it in the chaotic ruins of her soul.

But suddenly she remembered why she was in pain.

How disgusting.

The Angel of Illusions hated having to use the vessel of this Lilim, but it was even more disgusted by its salty deposits, so there was nothing left for him to do but to wipe them out of his eyes by using the girl's hand.

It was a good thing that this other being was no longer there to comment on him – Is vessel seemed to be a greater perversion than the Lillim creations with whom the ambassador was currently struggling, and what was inside of it was so strange that even as he tried to touch its essence, he had felt something that, even if he could not name it, was not much different from the human emotion of fear; he wanted nothing to do with it. Whatever that thing had been, there was no reason to worry about it - it would soon enough perish with all the other brood of Lilith, once the ambassador would finally finish what both his father and his brothers had begun before him.
"I don't want to complain, but are you sure Yamagishi is here?"

"Everyone who thought they might have seen her said that she disappeared in the direction of the entrance leading up here – she's new to this place, remember? Where else should she go but to school?"

"Why should she go anywhere at all when she was so miserable yesterday?"

"For the same reason we did... She was probably worried about Shinji and wanted to see the fight... She must have been feeling better this morning." "Are you sure?"

"Are you sure you're not the one who's looking for an excuse to watch the fight, Kensuke?"

The person addressed grinned a bit. "I admit, this is one of the reasons... But..." and he seemed a bit more serious again. "It is and remains the case that you, me, Nagato and the class rep meticulously searched the whole shelter for her. If she were still there, one of us would have found her by now."

"You're right..." Toji's expression also darkened noticeably. "We absolutely have to find her I am the last one to whom you have to explain how dangerous it is out here..." It was hard to overlook that the boys's thoughts were with his sister as he stepped through the abandoned corridors of the school, closely followed by his buddy - the energy that his hand transmitted to the doors whose associated rooms he checked for Mayumi's presence was a little too much not to have been fed by any kind of anger. "To think that she would go up here in such a state... Can't imagine what might happen to her id she passed out again... If anything happens to her during the fight, Shinji will go nuts."

"No need to assume the worst yet. I bet she's somewhere close by, maybe right here," Kensuke commented relatively confidently, swinging a door open in a slightly dramatized way to underline his words.

But he hadn't seriously expected that he would find the missing girl behind it, so that didn't immediately get why his buddy stormed right past him into the room, and only after a few seconds followed him when he understood the reason for his actions - afterwards he wondered why they hadn't looked right here - their and Mayumi’s own classroom - after the roof, which they had
already checked, since it was actually the most obvious place.

Neither of them had any idea how close they had been to a quick death - Leatha, who hadn't been very far from this classroom when they entered the school building, had first thought of taking their lives, but then decided that she preferred to observe them for now.

As soon as the two boys had discovered the transferee, they had run straight to her and it didn't take long until they were standing right next to her.

Touji, who first arrived, felt that she wasn't really paying attention to him -

Although she must have surely noticed him by now, she kept staring right through the glass pane, which somewhat irritated him, though he chalked it up to the assumption that she must have been more interested in what was going on behind it. So he put one hand directly on her shoulder and spoke to her in a tone of voice that was understanding, but still somewhere reprehensive, altogether serious, atypical and mature, with the air of an authoritative older brother.

"Yamagishi-san! Finally we find you. I understand you're worried about Shinji, but why didn't you tell us first before cleaving the shelter? Come on, let's get the hell out of here. You won't believe how dangerous this is. Kensuke and I really have to tell you what happened to us once... But first let's go back. If somebody notices we're gone – and by somebody, I mean Nagato and the class rep – there will be lots of trouble... Believe me, I'm speaking from experience..."

By now, Touji had begun to realize that something was definitely wrong here; the absence of an answer made him look at it more closely, and what he saw were pale chalky skin covered with sweat beads and empty eyes, apparently reddened from crying and still bordered by a few lingering teardrops.

But before he could ask any questions, his attention was completely taken over by his friend's words, and what she was referring to was able to hold on to them permanently: "Holy shit! Look out the window!"

Touji had taken it for granted that Kensuke wouldn't miss out on a chance to take a look at the fight; the reason for his own horror lay elsewhere.

"Isn't that... an Evangelion...?!” he stammered with his eyes wide open.
"Yep..."

"Which one is it? I didn't know one of them was blue..."

"Can't you tell...? It's Ayanami's. The one with only one eye. I'm not surprised that it needed a new paintjob after almost getting melted by that one Angel... Looks like they even gave it a bit of an upgrade, it didn't use to have those cool shoulder fins."

"...But... if that's Ayanami, then..."

"Yah. It looks like she's in a lot of trouble... That thing's really got her cornered..."

"And that over there must be the monster of the week... I can barely tell where it ends or begins."

"Yes. They really seem to be getting more and more bizarre, as if someone had announced a competition for modern art..."

"It's not like we've seen enough of them to tell."

"I have my sources." Kensuke said.

Touji wanted to think of a clever comeback, but both boys quickly erased everything that had been in their "working memory" as a weak but noticeable shock rocked the foundations off the building, and led them to follow what was happening beyond the window pane as if spellbound;

The angel had attacked EVA 00 in a way that gave his pilot no other chance than to duck - she could have parried if another simultaneous attack had not occupied her knife, and shortly thereafter followed a barrage of three spines that had left three parallel holes in the skyscraper bordered by the angel's back.

The battle of the two divine life-forms had raged for a long time, burning a wide aisle through the buildings of Tokyo-3, but ultimately a single Evangelion with only two arms and a knife could only hold out for so long against an Angel with six sharp spines, especially if the former had no means to inflict any permanent damage on its enemy.
EVA 00 was on the ground, while the ambassador hovering above him let his prickly "elbow apines" slowly circulate, almost as if to satisfy his sadism as he took his time to savor his triumph and to rejoice that he could shred the blue titan at any time, thus determining the time of his annihilation.

For a moment, it looked as if the silent, blue-haired girl had taken her last few breaths. Impulsively, Touji tore open the window and shouted to her that she should leave; ignoring the part of his mind that could have told him she couldn't possibly hear him at that distance, especially if she was sitting in her EVA, thus shielded from the modest performance of his vocal chords by countless layers of metal and artificial flesh; Even though he didn't really know Ayanami and honestly found her quite a bit odd, he couldn't bear to see a person he knew - a young girl at that - being ripped to shreds before his eyes.

This concern turned out to be unfounded, however, when Touji, and of course Kensuke, who had pushed his head past his friend through the opening of the window, witnessed a sight that, on the one hand, answered her unspoken question about what had become of the other two pilots, and silenced the fear that they might already have been defeated and had left their blue-haired colleague as the last survivor, but on the other hand caused Kensuke quite some deep regret that he had not thought of taking his camera with him.

But perhaps this was for the best - after all, it worked to the advantage of the teens who remained at the school that the freckled Otaku, by not being busy filming it, was able to immediately recognize the artificial daylight flooding their field of vision for what it was.

He spoke the syllables almost respectfully, as if he was standing before a god who, by the mere sight of its glory, could cause their mortal coils to combust on the spot and hurl their souls straight up to the heavens, especially as he understood that what he saw out there could well seal his fate if he did not succeed in tearing his eyes away from the very spectacle that he had always wanted to see;

At that moment he was willing to pay the price for a few seconds, but ultimately came to appreciate his friend's impulse to pull him away from the opened windows, and then drag him down to the floor where they both covered their ears.

The shock waves the explosion brought with it could still be felt even in the school building; if the boy had tried to remain standing, it would have swept them off their feet.

Tables and chairs fell over and the windows were blown out of their frames as glittering shard dust.
When it seemed to be over, Touji’s first concern was Mayumi - she wasn't on her feet either, but he didn't have the impression that she had ducked or lost balance in the shock wave - it looked more like she had somehow collapsed.

But before he could think about it any further, his attempts to stand up were turned to pieces by another shockwave, which again pushed him lengthwise to the floor, where the newly added glass grains awaited him eagerly. Gravity was a harsh and unforgiving mistress – Feeling the sting of more than a few scratches he didn't really try pull himself together, but it was painful anyway, since the time he’d wasted in reacting to his unpleasant landing meand he'd missed his chance to cover his ears when a whole storm of these massive explosions struck the three children.

The only thing about all the chaos that interested Leatha was the girl's collapse. She did not have to be near them to take notice of it- she was not that kind of being. Was it that the ambassador was so severely struck by the reason for this glow that he had lost control of the girl's body for a bit, or were the two opposing organisms so connected that the Lilim child felt the angel's pain as if it were her own?

No, it couldn't be. But the alternative was simply ridiculous... should this girl really be capable of such a thing? What a wretched fate that would be, if her will were just enough to hinder the foreign influence on her vessel, but not to become mistress of her senses again... And what could have caused this change, at that exact moment when the attack took place?

Was there a connection between this girl and one of the chosen ones?

In any case, the reason Leatha didn't take the first two alternatives into consideration was also made clear to the technicians at NERV headquarters, even though Lt. Ibuki initially didn't believe what her screen wanted her to know.

"It’s no use! The target shows no sign at all that it is damaged in any way!"

"COME OONO!" complained Asuka, who was still sitting at the handle of the skyscraper-sized rocket launcher, waiting for it to stop smoking in order to push the last bit of ammunition into it, even though it was now clear that this would only serve to vent her aggressions. "This is no fun anymore!"
The Third Child, who had helped her with the securing and alignment of the cannon pipe, was clearly struggling with a sense of panic - This rocket launcher had been their last trump card, and all they had accomplished was to draw the angel's attention to himself and Asuka.

At least they had managed not to damage EVA 00 - Rei had managed to get away with not much more than a slightly singed outer armour by turning up her AT field on the first shot and moving away from the possible impact area of the next missiles with the first shock wave, but if the angel had immediately attacked her again, she would certainly have missed the time to get herself into a fighting position - but the other two Children were also anything but ready to fight and so involuntarily left it up to the angel to free them from the bulky weapon by impaling it with one of his spikes, lifting into the air and with the help of all other spikes and tearing it apart in the air above them, so that the (compared to Evangelion's) small metal particles (whose size was still sufficient to demolish cars) rained down on the two children, who didn't need long to realize that they would probably be next themselves if they didn't dodge its assault sometime soon - the spikes, who would have lead them into the grave together with their Evangelions, ended up missing, in the case of unit 02 completely and with Eva 01, whose pilot was still inferior to his colleague in reaction speed and synch ration, at least leaving some scratches on the armour, but only grazing the biological parts which were actually connected to the Third Child.

Like their blue-haired comrade before them, the two could barely defend themselves without any larger weapons at their disposal, and had no other possibilities but to avoid the spines of the angel by more or less acrobatic means.

So much for "not running away".

The direction of the fight might have been determined by the Children themselves with their rather aimless escape, but its speed and rythm were completely in the hands of the angel, who constantly herded them forward without even giving them a picometer.

By then, even Asuka was getting visibly tense, even if it didn't go as far as open fear, worry or panic, but took the form of clenched teeth - she couldn't have missed the truth that all other people in the battlefield and command center had already grasped: If this enemy could have been destroyed by any of the methods at their disposal, they would have done so long ago.

These words did not yet make it past anyone's lips, for to speak them out loud meant to surrender to them, and nobody wanted that, least of all Asuka.

"Daddy's boy. Wondergirl. Hold your ground. I have an idea." And with that she ran away, not only away from the attacks of the angel, but from the battlefield itself, not wild and panic-stricken, but determined and purposeful - knowing that it would probably be absolutely pointless to ask her for an explanation, Shinji decided that at least he didn't want to be to blame if whatever she was up to
went wrong - she should do it herself.

So he stood up to the angel with the knife raised, aiming to cut his ring-like arms to cut his head loose in case the spines should leave him; It helped that Rei distracted the angel by firing at it from behind - apparently she had discovered one of the many storage units built into the buildings along the way and pulled out a rifle from it - it also quickly turned out that one of these had been Asuka's target when she returned with a loaded machine gun - she couldn't bear to stand in front of the enemy without a gun, even if it ultimately served only psychological purposes.

"Damnit ," she scolded, trembling with frustration. "It's like fighting an illusion!"

"Illusion, hm...? A picture... also a possible meaning of the Latin word "Imago"..." Dr. Akagi pondered, half cynically, half smiling about the gallows humor value of the situation.

"Fascinating."

Ah, Ritsuko, ever lovely, ever charming! If it had ever occurred to her to apply for a football team as a cheerleader, her mere presence would probably have been enough to smash the boys' motivation to such an extent that they would have lost every game without exception - or secured victory for them by plunging the opposing teams into depression.

It irritated Misato without end.

But while she was quietly clenching her fist, it was Aoba who finally asked the inevitable question. "This thing is immortal, isn't it?"

"Oh, please don't say such a thing..." it came from Maya who looked to Dr. Akagi for help in the hope that she would say something against it.

But not even Misato was able to do that, no matter how much she wanted to.

Fuyutsuki found his words, but they were by no means comforting.
"It seems like this could go on for seven days and seven nights, if not forty..."

"Exactly." confirmed the Commander. "The angel may not be exeptional in its offensive power, but since it doesn't seem to take any damage, that is completely meaningless. It is designed to slowly and steadily scratch the life out of its enemy."

"A death in a thousand cuts..." Fuyustsuki summarized the words of his superior. "Even if we can still effortlessly keep the angel in check, even if we will be able to do that for a long time to come, only what can bleed can die."

"Then, Ikari...is this the true power of the fruit of life?"

______________________________

(1) So that particular Angel seems to be a toughie! But perhaps our protagonists will have a shot at defeating it in chapter 2.16: [You Are Your Own Reason For Being Born You]
2.16: [You are Your Own Reason For Being Born You]

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Hitomi wo tojireba kitto omoidaseru
Inochi ga mebaeta toki wo

Mabushii hikari ni
Sotto michibikarete
Shukufuku no uta wa
Sekai ni hibiite-ita

Daremo ga
itsu shika wasureta
Kiseki wo
tsutaeru tame ni Kimi wa koko ni iru

Bokura wa tenshi ja nai kara
Ikiru koto no itami no naka de
Jibun no yowasa wo mitsumeru toki
Hajimete yasashisa no imi ni kidzuku yo

Dareka ni awaseta egao tsukuranaide
Sunao na kimochi de
Namida wo nagasu koto mo yuuki sa

Bokura wa tenshi ja nai kedo
Kibou to yuu tsubasa wo hiroge
Kokoro ni kizanda kanashimi yori
Tashika na nukumori de dakishimeau yo

_Hitomi wo tojireba kitto..._

- Hikami Kyoko, ‘You are your own reason for being born you’

[:]

If you close your eyes, I'm sure you'll remember

The moment your life awakened

A song of blessing

Echoed through the world,

Gently leading

To the brilliant light.

You are here

To convey the miracle

That everyone forgot as time went by.

We aren't angels, so

In the midst of the pain of living,

When we look our own weakness in the eyes,

We begin to realize the meaning of gentleness.

Don't fake the smile you gave to others.

Sincerely

Letting your tears flow is also courage

We aren't angels, but

We can spread the wings called courage,

And embrace each other with a definite warmth,

Instead of with the sorrow engraved on our hearts.

If you close your eyes, I'm sure...
"Oh no, you don't!" Asuka hissed, never ceasing to pierce the unimpressed form of the angel with more and more ammunition. "I refuse to give up as long as there is still the tiniest drop of blood left in my body!

She shot and shot and shot. "Don't you dare give up, is that clear, Daddy's boy? Don't you even think about it, neither of you two!"

Meaningless as it seemed, she continued her attack, and Rei didn't let up either, even though it might simply be because nobody had told her to stop yet.

Shinji still had his prog knife in his hand, but he wondered if there was a point in fighting any longer...

For what? For the future, Misato had said, and Yui's words had been similar.

Sure, the concept made sense, but Shinji had never been a particularly rational person.

He couldn't feel anything beyond this hopeless battle.

Hadn't his whole life been nothing other than such a hopeless battle, particularly these last few months...?

Yes, that idea would seem to match his feelings quite well.

At some point, Asuka had thrown him a gun which he barely managed to catch, and then used it to fire almost mechanically at the target.

He'd lost track of time a long time ago – perhaps he might have been able to tell its course from the sun's wandering across the sky, but the countless small car-sized cartridges he occasionally stepped on or took notice of as they crossed his field of vision were much more present in his mind - even if
they were to defeat this angel, NERV would have to buy new ammunition, even thought he always heard Misato rant that the budget was so tight, and regularly heard Rei tell him that his father had gone somewhere to negotiate more money... Maybe last week's business trip had been his last, because neither he, nor Rei nor Asuka would ever have need of bullets again, and there was no need to save them precisely because they would continue to prove ineffective.

But what else was he supposed to do?

All that was left for the Children to do was hope that this invulnerability of their enemy had some limit, and continue to shoot at it until it either collapsed, or someone in the command center had a better idea, or the armory was empty, which would probably mean that the creature would rudely move them aside and march straight into the terminal dogma, so that they would either become victims of the self-destruct mechanism, or of Third Impact.

It went on and on and on, and Shinji wouldn't even know how long this fight had lasted - since he had barely used his actual body except for the occasional operation of the control levers, he couldn't even rely on any signs of exhaustion for estimation, and asking Misato and the others at the end would only embarrass them.

The only positive thing that could be said was that the fight still appeared to be a kind of stalemate - the angel hadn't yet managed to scratch any of the EVAs too far beyond the armour (that would probably strain the budget as well) even though Shinji had long since lost track of which girl had saved his ass how often, and how often he had returned the favor to them again – Near misses were more the rule than the exception.

Distantly, Shinji noticed what kind of a part of town they were in and considered that his school was only a few (evangelion) steps away from here - for a change, that would be a building that wouldn't miss too terribly if it were to get torn down - but he took that thought back immediately, as soon as the alarms in his interface started flashing - civilian alarms in one of the windows – that one particular window - Well, the window itself wasn't really special, were it not for the fact that the one right next to it was the one Rei used to stare regularly at the schoolyard through, and that the people who showed up in the window would not have been out of place there if it hadn't been for the state of emergency...

Even in the crew back at headquarters it didn't take long to recognize that particular bunch:

"Aren't they... those two boys from the other day..." Hyuuga asked.
"Exactly. "confirmed his long-haired colleague. "And this girl who was with them is the same one from the day before yesterday."

Misato sighed: "They must have been a bad influence on her... You'd think they would have learned their lesson the last time.... damn it, as if we had time for something like that..."

It was worrying that the lives of three schoolchildren were in danger, but Misato's worries had to do mainly with the fact that this could cause yet another schoolchild to do something stupid...

It felt like she had her priorities reversed, and that the ultimate outcome of the whole situation seemed to want to tell her that she was right made it better; The list of accusations she was likely direct at herself in the mirror tonight was also extended by the fact that whatever the correct course of action would have been, she had done nothing to achieve it before the angel preempted her - Of course, the Angel of Illusion would never have risked collapsing the building where his own core was, but among the many people in and around the battlefield, there was no one who could have known that.

"It... it's coming straight at us!

"I told you to hurry up and get the hell out of here!"

"Those would be stupid last words!"

"Oi Daddy's boy! What do you think you're doing?!"

"If we don't do anything, the others at school will be AAAAAAABBBBAH.

A single moment of panic-induced carelessness was enough for what had previously been narrowly avoided countless times to finally come to pass: a sting of the angel, that razor-sharp lance of frozen light, finally found its target, breaking through AT field, plastic and metal, and finally reaching the flesh of its enemy; the intercom filled both the command center and the entry plugs of the other two EVAs with a single, prolongen scream from the Third Child's throat.

What went unnoticed amid all the noise of all the worried reactions was how a certain dark-haired girl sat up among her companions, who were paying her little mind as they stared out the shattered window, calling their friends's name.
Her eyes were wide open; every trace of the veil that clouded them so far, every semblance of emptiness, was gone; The grey windows of her soul could not have been a bit fuller, filled to the brim with tears and wild, confused emotions, most of all the cruelly crisp comprehension that had now broken into her world, piercing her tender soul her like an ice-cold knife, inoculating her with the exact understanding of what was going on.

The pain in the middle of her body had not diminished in the slightest, she was still standing there strangely bent, her hands pressed against the source of this strange heartbeat, but a deeper, more violent pain had mercilessly brought her out of her trance, the exact knowledge that the person who had thrown a light into the dark hell of her life was now in grave danger.

"What... what is that... inside my body...?"

While this thought was still bubbling over, putting together the many hints it had received in the last few days, if not in its entire life, to a conclusion that it could not believe any more than she could deny it, most of her consciousness was, however, occupied with the actual reason for her "awakening" – She had managed it just in time, to force herself into a more or less upright position, to run to the window, tear its bent frames open and lean out as far as she could without falling, to witness EVA 01 crashing to the ground, crushing a few smaller blocks of houses beneath her.

The word she wanted to shout, the name she wanted to shout, got stuck in her throat, and the fingers she had stretched out longingly sank down.

Only remotely did the reactions of the two boys reach her, their frightened warnings, their relief that she seemed to have come to her senses, their endless questions and requests that they all flee urgently.

She had made a decision, and if she listened to them, it would only further discourage her.

She was too anxious, too hesitant, too weak to hold on to her goal if she did not pursue it further on the wave of this feeling. If she failed to hold on to her will, she would undoubtedly sink into darkness again, and then she would be lost.

So it had to go as if in a single movement; Still with the same momentum that Touji and Kensuke had used to prevent her from leaning too far out of the window, she broke away from their arms - Kensuke was not much more athletic than herself, getting away from Touji was more of a challenge, but he simply hadn't expected that action from her and was visibly confused by what he had just witnessed on the battlefield; She had her raw emotions, which had been so completely unleashed for the first time in a long time, and even her pain was only fuel for her decision.
When she no longer felt their fingers on any patch of her body, she paused for a moment to take another close look at the two boys whom she herself visibly surprised, as if she wanted to capture their faces somehow... She knew enough about the human ability to despise themselves to guess that these two might never forgive themselves for failing to stop her, but that she herself, if she tried to do something good, could leave nothing but destruction behind, only encouraged her in her decision - she now knew exactly what it was that she had to do if she wanted to end this struggle and all this suffering, and she was ready to do it.

There wasn't even a choice to be made.

"...Aida-kun, Suzuhara-kun ... I am sorry. And could you please tell Mitsurugi-kun and Horaki-san that I am sorry, yes?"

"Y-Yamagishi-san?"

And then she turned around and ran.

"Yamagishi-san!"

"What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"Wait, wait!"

The two didn't waste a second before stumbling after her, but found themselves confronted with a problem on the other side of the classroom door.

"Where... did she go?"

Did Touji pronounce the obvious problem, briefly looking in both directions which the hallway extended into.

"Do you think we should split up...?" Kensuke suggested. But Touji just shook his head: "No way. 
Then I have to search this battlefield not only for Yamagishi, but for you as well.”

"But... if we go in the wrong direction, we won't catch up with her... And we can hardly leave her out here in her condition..."

"Believe me, I know that too, but there are only two of us. What are we going to do the next time there's a fork in the road?"

"But where are we supposed to go now?"

"You two aren't going anywhere.”

The two boys froze when they heard a female voice behind them - and it wasn't Mayumi's voice.

This was supposed to be empty and abandoned during the fight, wasn't it?

Even before they had turned around to see who they were dealing with, they were surrounded by bullish men in black suits and dark sunglasses, led by a similarly dressed lady who wore a blazer and a tubular mini skirt instead - Asahina Najiko to those who would recognize her. The two students did not belong to those people who would have known the name, but were familiar enough with the sight of the whole company to immediately recognize them as "The Security Monkeys of NERV" (as Touji had entered them into his inner dictionary).

"I think you've already caused enough inconvenience on this mission. Didn't you learn anything during the last debacle? This is a battlefield, not a children's playground. We have a mission to escort you to the nearest shelter. Please do not resist. Note that further misconduct of this kind will result in criminal charges, and that you have only got away with it so far because you have received privileged treatment as part of the Third Child's social circle, and for his sake alone. Please follow us."

Touji had to swallow at the sight of all those muscle-bound gentlemen who didn't seem to have any eyebrows twitching unscheduled, but he believed that a real man shouldn't let himself be intimidated so easily, which is why he tried his best to stand self-confidently in the way of the security guards.
Even if his fear was still quite apparent.

"We planned to go back down there ourselves, but this is not a good time, sister. Unfortunately we still have something to do here. Once we've done that, you're welcome to join us downstairs."

Kensuke just didn't wipe his hand through his face for the sake of courtesy.

"I think you kids are not aware of your situation here. We are quite authorized to resort to more severe means of ensuring compliance."

"Pah! Catch me if you can!"

Toji didn't even get the chance to worry about making it past the human safes in black - it was the lady who stopped him effortlessly and gave his ego a particularly deep scratch.

But he would worry about that only very, very much later; As they were taken away, the two reluctantly walking boys were not able to think of anything other than Mayumi, who had to be wandering around somewhere on the battlefield, and Shinji, whose fate they still knew nothing about - Perhaps he got up right away and had continued the fight against the angel without delay while they'd both been busy with other worries – but it was just as possible that he was being wheeled to NERV's infirmary at this very moment...

The actual situation was probably somewhere in between - When he first felt the pain, the Third Child already expected that next thing he would see might end up to be the white ceiling lamp in his "favorite" hospital room, but instead the pain just stopped, and with it, all the other sensations - there was one more shock, but after that Shinji found himself in a dark plug that seemed pretty cramped compared to the airy screen layout of the interface.

The absence of reverberation of the pain he had felt in his chest a moment ago was just as effective in distorting his face as he tried to rise from the back of the control seat against which he had been pressed as the distinct present of that same pain, and the shock of the very physical impact on the floor had been enough to make him sit up with clenched teeth as Misato's distinctly emotional questions about his condition reached his ears.

He didn't get a chance to answer her before she asked her colleagues about the damage report.
It was Dr. Akagi who replied, "Could have been worse. Only a flesh wound as far as the biological components are concerned. The pilot is well. To put it simply, we have a loose contact with some of the mechanical components. Have EVA 00 and 02 lure the target away from there so we can send a repair crew with some spare parts... It will take a while, but the way this fight is going, it might be worthwhile to repair the EVA on the spot."

"Would that be possible...? You from the technical department are always prepared for anything."

"We have to be, after all, the fate of the world depends on it."

"All right, did you hear that, Shinji-kun? You can eject the entry plug if the corresponding electronics are still working."

"But... What about the angel..."

"Unit zero and unit two will engage it in the meantime."

"Exactly" agreed Asuka. "I can manage here quite a while without you. See to it that you get your scrappy test model repaired so that you can make yourself useful."

"I... I understand, Asuka... Misato-san..."

While Dr. Akagi was in a hurry to contact her best mechanics, there was still a thought that wouldn't go out of her head, a detail that didn't make sense... Looking at the damage reports, you might think that the angel had aimed straight at the core of the Evangelion... but until then the attack had never come. It almost seemed as if the tenth ambassador had been stopped by something....

The more the time went by, the harder it was for Shinji to shake off the feeling that his own worries were devouring him from within;

He sat, still in his plugsuit, on the very edge of the "construction site" that had built itself up
around the back of the violet Evangelion, where numerous orange-clothed technicians scurried like
an ant colony, each of them undoubtedly accelerated by the fear of a Third Impact, working as fast
as the transport of the spare parts delayed by the devastated roads would allow - only he alone
could do nothing to advance the process, and it drove him crazy - Asuka, Rei and the angel had
long since moved their fight to another part of the city, which was a good thing, because the repair
work was not endangered by further explosions and the like, but it also meant that the Third Child
had no idea what his fellow pilots were doing - did they continue to hold the position without
interruption, or had the angel perhaps pushed them into a corner while he was unable to help them?

This sense of powerlessness was killig him; Bursting with tension, he occupied himself with
opening and closing his hands again and again in order to rob his colourful ideas about the girls'
situation of their fertilizer.

If only EVA 01 were already repaired...

But even if the repairs were done this instant, what would that actually accomplish?

What was he supposed to do?

This whole fight looked so hopeless, all they did was shoot at it with everything they had without
ever making any process. It didn't seem as if any of what they had done so far had even the tiniest
effect on the angel - it was just like Asuka had said - as if you were fighting against an illusion;
whenever he attacked the thing, it didn't even feel like he was hitting anything other than empty
space; His weapons seemed to be sliding off into nothingness without encountering any resistance.

Was everything he had gone through so far supposed to have been in vain, nothing but unimportant
details that had been destined to nothing but lead to this hopeless situation?

He knew what a failure would do, but he didn't have a solution to this problem - if there was, he
would have to come up with it himself, and he had never been good at thinking under pressure -
Even a simple math test had always been good enough to reliably switch off the higher areas of his
brain that were tragically most needed to do mathematics, not to mention carrying the fate of
mankind on his shoulders.

What had he actually been doing when he had tried to convince himself that he could become
stronger...? In the end he was just sitting around, at a loss and waiting for someone to offer him a
solution that would never come – all while two certain girls whom he had actually wanted to
protect were alone with the monster.
So far the balance looked quite pitiful, and every word of criticism that Asuka had ever shouted in
his direction seemed to at least double in significance with every second that this grievance lasted,
especially those unfriendly words whose purpose in their time had been to question his masculinity.

But before he came to complain extensively about how much he hated himself and his inability to
do anything worthwhile, a soft, quiet voice ripped him from his thoughts: "Ikari-kun...".

Now, as he turned his gaze to the side, he might have expected to see one of the technicians who
might want to let him know that EVA 01 was ready again, or that they needed him for something
else, but the person he saw was probably the last one he expected; "Y-Yamagishi-san...!" he
stammered in surprise, quickly, and above all a little alarmed, setting himself up to look her in the
eye.

It was a little surreal to see his new friend, who thus far had nothing to do with all these strange,
NERV-related, stories, standing so close to this construction site in an ordinary school uniform. If
anyone were to discover her here, there would certainly be trouble; moreover, he was a little
embarrassed to be seen by her in something as revealing as his plugsuit, but that wasn't by far the
main problem; for the only thing that could make this situation worse was that yet another of the
people important to him was somewhere on this battlefield.

Nevertheless, the question arose as to why she had come here at all, and what that facial expression
meant.

"W-What are you doing here...?" he began, clearly unsettled by the lack of this knowledge. "Hurry
up and go find a shelter! It's is dangerous..."

She seemed to have expected these words already, and while he was speaking gave the impression
that she had decided on a course of action from the beginning and would not listen to them; but
while that "only" visibly unsettled him and directed his thoughts into worrying loops, the next
thing she did should completely overwhelmed him, shocking him down to his core: It was a full
body movement in which she threw her arms in front of her and held them out as if they were
stained with blood all over; after that she looked a good bit smaller, she didn't stand upright
anymore, her legs were curven inwards, her upper body was bent, every detail of her body
language absolutely begging and pleading; Maybe it was unfair that she had come to him of all
people, but he was the only person she knew could turn to without him laughing at her or
dismissing her as crazy. So it was him to whom she made her desperate wish:

"Please kill me! You have to kill me, I beg you!"
"W-What are you saying all of a sudden...?!"

"I get it" she shouted, apparently trembling all over her pale body.

"This monster is inside of me!" She pressed her arms against her body to support her statement, the face distorted by despair. "This monster's soul is hidden right here! I get that, so please, kill me!

At that point, how her knees became soft, and she sank down sobbing and whimpering, falling on her knees in front of his feet, burying her face in her hands, which in turn partially disappeared behind her long, shiny midnight black hair.

She became increasingly hysterical.

"I know it, for sure, so hurry up and kill me!"

"I can't do something like that..."

"It doesn't bother me! I hate all that anyway! I hate to show myself in front of other people's eyes and to be seen... I hate to let others see into my heart and to let me see them... And I hate that pathetic person I am! And if you, that foreign girl or anyone else gets hurt inside me because of that thing, I'll just have to hate myself more!

So please... please... please make sure that everything finally ends!"

He was utterly dumbfounded - not only because of the magnitude of her words themselves and the sheer amount of despair she seemed to have accumulated in her short life, but also because he saw his own moments of desperation reflected in her, his darkest hours, which looked quite different from another angle and stirred up completely different feelings inside of him... But it was precisely in this resemblance that the solution was to be found, the words he could say to calm Mayumi's bleeding soul; He didn't even get to panic about what she had said; it should have been an unacceptable situation, but how was this any different from the struggles that were his daily bread?

"Don't say such things..." he began, surprised himself at how easily the warm, gentle words came off his lips, and how he didn't have to fake his smile.
"None of this is true, and regardless of whether you like yourself or not, this whole thing is not your fault... We all do things for which we feel guilty, things that torture us, make mistakes for which we are ashamed... I mean, look at me... I... I'm so horrible that I'm almost happy that I'm not the only one who has to struggle with such feelings, and now I'm going to cry too, although I'm supposed to comfort you..."

The old paths of tears, which over the years had become like riverbeds in a building, had long since begun to flow again, no matter how hard he tried to stop them.

After several attempts to wipe them away with his hands had been foiled by how quickly the next ones followed, he finally gave it up in favor of concentrating on continuing to speak: "And if you do something wrong, then it's only natural that you somehow want to make it up to me and... apologize... But you don't have to apologize for being in this world, and you certainly don't have to apologize for having feelings!"

"E-Eh...?"

"Why should you have to give up your life? Why you, out of all people? It's not fair, not even if it was to protect this entire world! Who gets to decide that you're not worth protecting? Besides, destroying these monsters is still my job! It's bad enough that I have to do it, but why should anyone else suffer? You did nothing to deserve this!" he made clear, though still trembling inwardly, with an increasing undertone of determination.

It was strange... As soon as there was someone else offering to take up the burden under which he had ached and groaned so much, he found himself holding on to it with hands and feet.

For the first time, he felt like it was almost a good thing that he happened to be chosen to be an EVA pilot, if only because it had enabled him to speak these words right now.

"Hurry up, go into a shelter and don't worry anymore, you hear? I'm definitely going to destroy that thing."

"C-Can you do that...?" She looked up at him - and probably found what she saw quite confusing - Another wave of emotion poured over the boy, as if he were supressing desperate laughter; somehow the most hopeless, hardest of all questions had managed to flood him with relief.
"Can I win? You ask me if I can win... Oh, Yamagishi-san... just look at me... do I look like a big hero or something...? I'm just a schoolboy, and there are big monsters out there... I don't feel like I'm being especially brave or something... From the beginning, I never fought because I thought I could win, but because I had to win.... This fight here is actually not a bit different..." The insight probably hit him just as hard as it hit her, and left him with a strange feeling of lightness.

"Exactly this here is actually... just like all the other fights I have survived so far, yes.... Actually, I've defeated the same thing before, and now I've got Shikinami and Ayanami with me... so it would be silly to think that we couldn't defeat it, wouldn't it? So don't worry."

For a moment, which somehow seemed to last forever, they stood opposite each other after she had risen to her feet again, not breaking eye contact for a second.

Then there was an announcement that his presence was needed to restart the Evangelion, and the two said goodbye to each other with a short nod.

When the LCL rose above his head again, making it so clear that he was on his way to the next battle, he felt almost reassured, as paradoxical as that may have sounded.

"Ayanami... Shikinami... I'm coming."

By the time the violet Evangelion's massive form rose from the ground again, the night had fallen all around it.

"Shinji-kun, we've have taken care that your friends are brought into a shelter. Units Zero and Two are west of here – they're still keeping the angel in check, so go to them and keep supporting them. We'll send you a new weapon via weapon shaft A-96... choose one."

After ordering and finally receiving a bazooka from Misato without much thought, the Third Child didn't waste any time rushing to the aid of his companions, who were still busy taking the target under constant fire when he found them.

Asuka's greeting was rather harsh at first: "You certainly took your time, daddy's boy! If she tried this hard hard to keep up her usual sense of superiority, the long fight must have been pushing her to her limits ever so slowly
"S-Sorry..." the Third Child quickly gave up and joined the line of fighters with Unit One, releasing his weapon and taking part in the hail of bullets that still constantly pelted their enemy.

So he was there, fully in action again, and willing not to lose in any case - but that alone did nothing against the sheer invulnerability of the enemy...

"The target still shows no signs of damage, and neither do our attempts to find the core show success." Reported Aoba.

"The damage to Units Zero and Two so far is small individually, but if you sum up their effects, it's hard to say how long the EVAs can withstand this kind of uninterrupted combat mission...".

"All of you, don't give up!" Misato tried to spur the children on despite the unfortunate situation.

"The thing must have a weak point somewhere!"

"Well then find it already!" Asuka retorted rather unimpressedly as she unloaded yet another salvo of explosive ammunition in the direction of the angel.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see what was happening - they were all worn down and tired of a thousand little aches and pains that they had to feel constantly and with every movement... yes, they were all slowly getting tired – That is, all of them except for the angel. But even it seemed to have had enough of playing with his prey, and like a hungry predator that had driven his next meal to exhaustion, it seemed to have reached the conclusion that it was time to end the whole thing.

Without any prior warning, it rushed forward, once, twice, stinging the victims, to whom it gave greater priority at the time, with ease as it swirled through the area; then when it was Shinji's turn to be thrown against the next best skyscraper (or, respectively, against the first thing on the track that EVA 01 slithered along after its crash landing that was stable enough to slow the biological combat machine to a halt), he had no eyes for his own pain; He hadn't had the time to dodge in the first place because he had been too busy worrying about the girls, and even now, when he was feeling every bit of sharp debris in the back of the EVA as if it were his own, his mind was taken with a single question:

"Shikinami! Ayanami! Are you all right? H-hold on...!"
"I can... still fight..." he heard to his left, where EVA 00 laboriously picked itself up from the pile of rubble onto which he had been thrown, at first a bit wobbly as it tried to stand - Both Rei and her EVA were undoubtedly at their limits, and Asuka was almost forcing herself to stand upright by sheer willpower, her condition hardly any better: "As if I... would give up so easily...". If she couldn't even manage to hide her pain anymore, or didn't care about anybody else seeing it, it had to be pretty bad... Both of them were clearly at their limits.

So obviously, he had no time to be lying around- the enemy was not going to wait for him.

But when he tried to get himself back on his feet, very much feeling how the involuntary flight had affected his evangelion - he noticed from the corner of his eyes that a third person who was important to him was in danger of losing their life on this battlefield.

At first he didn't want to believe what he was seeing, but when he zoomed in closer via interface, his fears were confirmed - She stood high up on one of the few remaining skyscrapers in this area, nothing more than a fragile chopstick before the participants in this fight, at lofty heights, where the cold night wind almost had to be cutting into her tender cheeks, and so, so tiny compared to everything around her; How she had gotten up there, the Third Child should never know - Perhaps someone had forgotten to close the door behind him in all the confusion of the evacuation.

What was certain was that she was standing up there.

And that she was on the wrong side of the security guardrail.

He was the last one who would not immediately understand what that meant - He himself knew the seductive promises of the deep, which he had almost surrendered to a couple of times, most recently when he had run away from Misato's apartment after the fight against the fifth angel.

A single look was enough for him to understand what she was up to, and his guesses very much hit the mark;

Yamagishi Mayumi was through and through finished with the world.

She stood at the edge and had no intention of ever looking back again.
At first she had hesitated, cowardly as she was, but when she had seen how these three people, who were so much braver than her, were being forced to suffer simply because she was still this world, there was nothing that could have changed her mind.

What was happening down there was wrong.

That others should suffer to save someone like her was just plain wrong, through and through.

No, actually it was her who was wrong.

It was wrong that she was still alive, at the expense of others, or at all.

A person like her who did not show herself to others and did not want to be seen either...

A person who did not let anyone into herself, who could not give anyone a home in her heart, except for this monster... had done nothing to deserve being in this world at all.

She hated all of this, she hated feeling, hated being in this world, hated everything she was.

To think that a life like hers, in which she had done nothing but be a burden to others, could be used for something as beautiful as the salvation of the world...

The second her feet had separated from the concrete and she understood that there was nothing left to hold on to, she was infinitely grateful for that...

Until the fall she had so longed for came to an abrupt end before gravity could unfold its full deadly effect – and nowhere else but in the minibus-sized hand of Evangelion Unit 01.

Shinji knew he had to say something, to do something so that she wouldn't try this again he took his eyes of her for a moment (This kind of responsibility could drive an adult man crazy, not to mention him.) but he could hardly keep his own horror in check.

"Y-Yamagishi-san... Why... why did you do that...? Why did you try to die, Yamagishi-san? Why...
There's no one who can't just live another day if nothing else stops him... so why would you want to be the one to do it yourself? If even someone like me, such a... cowardly good-for-nothing like me... manages not to run away and keep trying... then a nice person like you should be able to...- I mean-

Even if you don't know what lies ahead of you... whether tomorrow will be a good day or a bad day... if you live, then after tomorrow there will still be another morning, and then... everything could be different! So, please, Yamagishi-san... You... you must not run away... At least not until... until we have tried everything..."

"But... why... why should I try...? Why should I be here...? Am I allowed to do that at all...?"

"I... I'm afraid that I cannot tell you something like that..." He tried to force himself to smile for her sake. "I... I don't even know why I am here myself... but... maybe.... Maybe you are simply here... so that you can be yourself...

I'm glad that you're here! I've only known you a very short time, but I think that I understood and learned quite a lot... because of that..."

"I...Ikari-kun..."

Then, a voice came buzzing through the intercom: "Shinji-kun, it's coming."

"I understand."

After the Third Child had placed Mayumi on the roof of a nearby skyscraper as gently as the limited time allowed, he prepared to lure the angel as far away from there as possible, which also included reading his weapon for attack.

Then, there was an unexpected contribution from Lt. Ibuki: “Wait! Stop! I'm getting a second signal!”

"Signal confirmed" reported Hyuuga. "Pattern blue. It is an angel."

"T-That can't be... A new enemy?" Misato replied alarmed.
"No, it's the same signal, the same angel... According to the MAGI, there's only one being, but with two bodies..."

"Two bodies? Like that time with the eighth angel...?"

"Hm, it can't be...?" Dr. Akagi murmured thoughtfully, with which she immediately raised a lot of questions with her colleague. "What can't be", she continued at once.

But Dr. Akagi decided to confirm her suspicions before she said anything about it: "Run a scan on this girl from Shinji-kun's class!

"Ye-Yes!"

And before they knew it this small, pixelated image was able to answer all the unsolved questions of the last days in one fell swoop - at least for Dr. Akagi. At last, she had the grace to explain her enlightenment to those who did not share it: "Now I understand.... The energy core of the angel we have been searching for so long... must have been in this girl's body all the time..."

"The... core of the angel...?"

"We already saw it with the last angel, didn't we? They adapt to the places where they are 'born'..."

"But how... how on earth did this Angel get inside that girl?"

"How do they get in anywhere at all? Into a volcano? Into the sea? In the end a human body is nothing but a lump of matter... Do you know the story of Koshei, the Deathless...?"

"Uhm,... I beg your pardon?"

"It's a Russian legend in which a magician became immortal by putting his death in a container and hiding it far away from his actual body... Like the phylactery of a lich."
"You mean some sort of... Horcrux?"

Considering the seriousness of the situation, Dr. Akagi made a concerted effort not to roll her eyes. "Yes, you could put it that way. The only conclusion that I think makes sense is that what Shinji-kun and the others fought against all the time was nothing more than the angel's 'shadow'; its real body was hidden inside this girl all the time, where his core is... that's why our attacks couldn't harm it at all..."

"But... do you realize what you're saying there?"

"Indeed. Maya, get me Section Two. Have them take this girl into custody immediately. Mitsurugi? Prepare lab seven and call in some medical personnel."

"But... this girl, what about her...?"

"We'll do our best. Misato... for this to work, the Children and you will have to keep distracting the enemy's more dangerous part for as long as it takes us to perform the surgery. We'll be relying on you."

As soon as she had finished speaking, she also activated the one-person lift, which was supposed to take her down to the afore-mentioned labs - even the older Mitsurugi, who had his place of work on one of the lower platforms, should have set off immediately, but although he had jumped up immediately, somewhere on the way from his chair to the exit there seemed to have come to him a thought that stopped all the processes of his existence.

So that... was the fate of a person who came into contact with the body of an angel...

"Mitsurugi-san? Is something wrong? You look pale..."

"N-No, it's nothing..." he said to his colleague before doing what was already overdue and making his way to the lab; some work and concentration that would require it was probably the best way to repress his frenzied thoughts...

"Nagato... "
Misato breathed deeply. "Okay, did you hear that? The end is in sight! You only have to hold out the angel for a while, and then it will all be over!"

"A-Aber... What about Yamagishi-san...?"

"Don't worry, Shinji-kun. If Ritsuko says that she is doing her best, she will do nothing less. Leave it to us and just concentrate on the fight, okay?"

"Got it!"

So that was his job now, the little piece he had to contribute... There wasn't a big impossible job on his shoulders anymore; instead, there was a real chance of victory.

He only had to keep up this fight for a little while longer, just a little bit more...

If that's all it took, he would almost do it gladly.

Rushing towards the enemy, bazooka in hand, he was ready to do anything in order to do his part - He shot and shot and shot as if there was no tomorrow, paradoxically, because he now knew that there might be one after all - without any further dithering, he went on a merciless offensive... and realized far too late that he had neglected his cover for a brief but fatal moment...

Should he end up like this, killed just before the finish line by a carelessness that had sprung from a premature sense of triumph? He saw the attack coming, but he couldn't do anything about it - Maybe if he had had a sync rate more like Asuka's, or at least the reflexes of someone who had trained for years, but as he was now, an escape was almost impossible... Should he be doomed to disappoint them all on the last few feet of the home straight? Misato? Asuka? Rei? Mayumi? His father? Now?

Now, when the light at the end of the tunnel seemed so close?
Shinji needed a moment to realize that it wasn't him who had just been hit, but the angel, which seemed to have gotten blasted with a load from a plasma cannon... just like... the one Asuka seemed to be carrying it at the moment...

"Watch out, you lame duck!"

"S-Shikinami!"

"Tut tut! Don't forget about the two of us just because you were trying to pull a superman in front of the transferee!"

"Unit Two, the target is still alive."

"A-Ayanami...?"

"Come on, stop staring holes in the air and get up! Or do you want to crawl away and let us girls do all the work...?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Is it just me..." Maya pondered somewhere down in the command center, looking at her instruments and then back up on the big screen in the Central Dogma where one could see the three Evangelions preparing themselves to attack the target all at once. "...or have all three of their synchronization rates just gone up a fair amount?"

The last thing Mayumi could remember was the voice of the boy who had just saved her all over again, this time from herself.

Far from the explosions and the hail of bullets that comprised the raging battle, she had lost
consciousness to the overwhelming power of this monster, right where the pilot of the violet Evangelion had dropped her off.

The quiet footsteps that had triggered her awakening had already silenced themselves by the time she was able to register them, so that when she began to move again, she was not aware of any company.

She still couldn't quite believe that there was as much as one person alive in this place; even though it took her some effort, she sat up and unbelievingly palpated her still extremely existent, still warm face.

Only now did she become fully aware of the implications of what had just happened.

"I...am here..."

She had to repeat that again to let it sink in properly.

"I... I am still alive..."

She was almost shocked that she was happy about it.

But now her company decided to make herself noticeable by a quiet but clear clearing of the throat, inviting Mayumi to discover the darkly-dressed woman who had joined her along with a flock of muscular-looking men.

"NERV security." She explained her presence. "If you would be so kind as to follow us?"

The last part of the fight was no less grueling than the hours that had preceded it, but it was no longer this eternal pouring into a bottomless barrel.

The pilots had no reservations about squeezing even the last bit of juice out of the Evangelions'
muscles now that they knew their efforts would not be in vain and that an end was near.

Asuka liked to think that she had been the one to dispense the death blow - even though it was probably because Dr. Akagi had happened to be driving a metal rod into the angel's core somewhere in an operating room in the depths of the geofront at about the same time at Asuka's final attack; The angel's core had been all too easily distinguishable from the girl's flesh by its steady glow and crystalline structure.

But whatever the cause, it remained undeniable that the angel said its farewell to this world with one last, shrill cry, before both his body and his core burst into a fountain of blood at the same time. Akagi and her colleagues, as well as some of the remaining Tokyo-3 skyscrapers, were sprayed with a strange pattern of blood speckles that almost resembled a mandala, and not something that had been accidentally created; once again, a cross-shaped column of light towered over the now visibly taken-away city area of Tokyo-3, creating a rainbow along with the rain of blood;

The Angel of Illusions was finally defeated.

The euphoria and relief that spread through the Central Dogma could have been compared in good conscience to some of the great moments of humanity; in a certain way it was one of them, because the future of all three billion people and all other life on this planet had once again been secured; this time only until the attack of the next angel, but that's as close to 'secured' as it would ever be.

In many places you could see the numerous technicians jumping for joy on their platforms and falling into each other's arms - Hyuuga in turn produced a neat, though not quite age-appropriate, "Yippieh!", while Ibuki hugged her faithful pink cuddly cushion for lack of person to jump on.

Aoba was a little more reserved and altogether less the type for big euphoria, but also he smiled, and Misato was just happy that it was finally over.

"Dear heavens!"

"Applause, applause" she then heard from behind her, coming from a male voice whose owner had just stepped on the platform.

"K-Kaji!"
The person addressed just grinned. "Here, catch!"

When Misato had caught the projectile more out of reflex than because of any joy about its appearance (not that she was now in the mood to argue with him), but then, she found between her fingers, to her great surprise and even greater joy, an ice-cold can of her favourite beer, on the surface of which she could even feel the thin film of water, consisting of air humidity condensed by the temperature (and, as Misato secretly suspected, by the irresistible attraction) of the can on its outside.

The joy that she felt when she saw such a splendid specimen was intensified by the fact that she had had her last can yesterday morning and had therefore already felt one or two withdrawal pangs in the course of the day... But just when she saw herself tempted by this apparent gesture of heavenly grace, to spontaneously offer her ex-boyfriend a sense of forgiveness - at least after she had opened this golden gift from heaven and drunk it empty - he showed his true face and the diabolical intrigues it enabled him to perform:

"But, but, Katsuragi, you are still on the clock!"

When she realized that she would be forced to stare at this wonderful can all the time while doing the monstrous piles of paperwork that would inevitably follow each of these fights, having the pleasure of slowly and agonizingly watching her perfectly cold drink slowly but surely leave the ideal temperature range, it reminded her quite brusquely of how why exactly had done herself the favor of ditching this particular assclown.

"Oh, come on..." sulked the head of the operations department, while she tried to prepare herself for the sight of her desk.

Even if it sounded silly to worry about something like this if they'd just narrowly escaped the annihilation of mankind, they had very much destroyed a considerable portion of the inner city during the long fight, so that when the towering stacks complaint letters were practically unavoidable.

It was to be expected that the city, which had already been beset by a steep decline in population, would soon be a good deal more empty – She couldn't even blame these ordinary citizens: If she found herself suddenly bankrupt because a house or a shop that hadn't been fully paid off and was her only source of income had fallen victim to the battle, she would probably want to complain as well, even if there was nothing else they could have done – and there was only so much she could personally do for those people: She was in charge of the combat operations, not the insurance money or the restoration of the infrastructure, and she didn't see how it would help anyone if desk collapsed under the weight of the strongly-worded paperd...
Eventually, however, her thoughts returned very quickly to the present to fill her face with bright red color when the man responsible for the whole beer debacle didn't seem to have enough, and even decided to ridicule her in front of her superiors by turning to the top platform and actually waving. "Hey, Mr. Vizecommander," he shouted painfully loudly, leisurely stomping on the already strained nerves of his ex-girlfriend like the oaf he was. "It's fine if Katsuragi does all the paperwork tomorrow, right?"

"W-What are you doing...?" she hissed in his direction, in the lowest possible volume which was still able to convey her anger convincingly.

Of course he continued to speak full volume without worrying much about the embarassment he might have been inflicting on her: "Wy so uptight? That's not like you at all"

"We're at work, you blockhead!"

"Look who's talking." Ritsuko added, sighing.

"So, what do you say, boss?" Kaji asked once again, apparently completely unconcerned with Misato's earlier protestatiopn.

Overlooking the whole spectacle, Fuyutsuki decided not to think about it any further... he would have expected something like that from the children, but... sometimes he felt as if he was the only one around here who was still thinking about saving the earth - yes, actually he was probably the only one who cared about it. What Ikari and the others understood by "saving the world" had very little to do with what common sense would say about it.

If he was honest with himself, even he couldn't claim with a clear conscience that "saving the world" was truly what he was working towards; sometimes he tried to rationalize it away by saying to himself that Ikari's plans were the lesser evil, sometimes he just admitted that he couldn't resist the idea of seeing this particular woman again any more than the darkly dressed man at his side; There was no point in fooling himself. He didn't have what it took to fight for the salvation of the world, and even to blame it on his age would be little more than an excuse.

He could only hope that one of these young people had received this gift in his place.

"That won't be a problem. Take the night off. It's more important that you take care of the pilots anyway."
If the commander had an opinion on all this, he didn't express it; He was often accused of running this organization with a stern hand, but after the enemy was defeated he saw no reason for stern leadership; in the end he had no love left for trivialities like paperwork and PR, and didn't see why this decision required his involvement; he didn't care much what Fuyutsuki would decide. He had more urgent things to do himself, so as soon as he heard the announcement that the Evangelions had been recovered without a hitch, he got up from his seat without comment.

1. Today's chapter quote is the 'official' song from the game! I recommend checking it out, it's beautiful

2. So the angel is vanquished, but what does this mean for the future of our protagonists? Find out in chapter 2.17: [Trophy]
2.17: [Trophy]

I stepped into a room of clocks that all told different times
I stepped into a mirrored world that mirrored all our crimes
You keep picking at the scab and I'll keep selling the plaster
You keep telling me that I'm bad
But I keep on getting better faster

You hold me down and you hold me up

You can't communicate
You brought me up just to bring me down
I've nothing left to say

I've lost, I've lost my innocence
I've found my self-belief
And in a cup of loneliness
I've found instant relief

You hold me down, you hold me up

Oh Daddy, are we out of luck?
You brought me up to bring me down
You shut me in, you shut me up

I'm gone, I'm gone to heaven
I'm gone, I'm gone to hell
If nobody could see I'd hold my hand out to be held
wish that you could just admit
you did bad things too
of criticising me
So I don't look at you

You hold me down and you hold me up
I can't communicate
You brought me up just to bring me down
I've nothing left to say

[...]

I've lost, I've lost my confidence
I found my self belief
And in a cup of loneliness
I sailed a thousand seas

-Marina and the Diamonds, 'Scab and Plaster'

"Aaaaaahh... Every hurts!" Asuka complained, generously stretching her muscles that were sore from all the long hours spent in her pilot seat.

"Just so that we understand each other, I call dibs on the bathtub as soon as we get home!"

Her words didn't really get through to the ears of the boy who was sitting next to her on an examination bench, waiting for Dr. Akagi's arrival.

The same Dr. Akagi who was currently in the same room, if behind an opaque curtain, examining and, if necessary, taking care of the First Child, until she would be done with that and therefore ready to proceed to the other two Children.

In the time that it took to get her out of her plug and down to the infirmary, Asuka had realized that she had spent most of the day fighting one single, long fight without being able to afford the teeniest break, so she found something new to complain about every five minutes, constantly stating how much she wanted to rip off her plugsuit off and wash the LCL out of her hair before the stench of the substance burned itself all too deeply into its substance.

Shinji himself no longer really had the strength to respond to any of this. Even if he had been given free access to the bathtub, he doubted that we would have had the ability to drag himself anywhere but his warm, cozy bed by the time he'd get home.

At first, he had been fairly restless, owning to a slew of missing answers - He couldn't tick off this fight as a triumph until he could say for sure that everyone involved was well - and that included Mayumi. Therefore, he had asked about her pretty much as soon as he had arrived.

No matter how much he might have needed that night's sleep, and how thoroughly he might have earned it, his fluttering little heart couldn't find any peace until the good Doctor arrived and led him to see the shy transfer student with his own eyes, if only through a pane of glass onto which he had to press his hands and face to even begin to make out anything on the other side.

Even after his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, he had to concentrate in order to make out her chalky pale, limp body in a spiderweb of all the cables, tubes and machines - at second glance, her paper-white skin certainly clashed with the darkness of the room, no matter how much it was obscured by clothing, hair, electrodes, and even one of these breathing masks.
"Will... will she..."

The rest of the question remained stuck in his throat, no matter how much he wanted to hear the corresponding answer, but the blonde scientist easily deduced the only thing he could possibly have meant.

"Her organism was... fortunately not as closely interwoven with the core as we had initially suspected... Although she must have carried the core inside her for a very long time, she will be able to survive without it, even if she will probably have to take medication to ease the transition for quite a while... Besides, containing the core was quite a strain on her body, and now that it is gone, she lacks the mechanisms through which it used to keep its host alive -and then there were all the adhesions we had to remove..."

"But you... you did say..."

"Yes, she will most likely survive. Don't worry, Shinji-kun. All I wanted to tell you is that she is still weak from the operation... So you won't be able to visit her at the moment."

Satisfied with that answers, Shinji had then followed the fake blonde back into the examination room - but the connection between his open concern for Mayumi and a slight but marked increase in Asuka's constant complaints very much eluded him now that the exhaustion was beginning to overtake him right on the heels of his shortlived relief.

It didn't take long for Dr. Akagi to deal with the two of them after that - they all had bruises and similar little aches and pains that weren't really worth the effort of any sophisticated treatment; Indeed, she mused that the most appropriate prescription here would be a good night's sleep.

Asuka was given some band-aids for mainly psychological reasons, but that was basically it.

But once they made it past the doors of the examination room, they were met with something of a surprise: They were being awaited, and not by just anybody - they had almost expected Misato, and Kaji wouldn't have surprised them either, but never in their lives would they have expected to meet Commander Gendo Ikari in person here, his impressive silhouette far surpassing all of theirs.

Immediately there was as much traffic between Shinji’s nerve cells as on a highway during the summer holidays, countless thoughts were racing around in confusion - Was he here because of him? Was he going to ask if he was all right or even... no, he better not even think about that, in the end he would just wind up feeling alone and disappointed. Wasn't it much more likely that he had a complaint or was otherwise dissatisfied?

Whether it was one or the other, he couldn't read from his face; Those sunglasses hid his eyes and made Shinji feel like he was standing in front of a concrete wall that was so high that he wouldn't see its top end if he were to crane his neck as far back as he could.

In that fraction of a second, he imagined endless possibilities in his head, whole universes that grew out of different reactions to each one of them, a tree of alternatives and the alternatives of alternatives that shot up so quickly that one might think he wanted to grab the sky...

Time seemed frozen, the Third Child lips sealed, it was one of those moments that one could believe would last forever, if not for his throbbing, beating heart to assure him that the clocks were still ticking, and his greedy, yearning, bleeding heart, that betrayed the slightest glimmer of hope flickering inside his chest despite the many, many walls he had erected it against this cruel world, leaving it it wide open, an eye-catching, colorful target, ready for anyone who wanted to drive a spear into his innermost, to be disappointed, to shatter and suffer, until the splinters of his soul,
held in place only by a mountain of duct tape, were finally crushed to a blunt dust.

Then, when he had revealed everything he was and surrendered it completely, even though he was ready to give up the whole world around him in favour of what had always been the reason for his desperate, helpless actions, a thorn of fear broke through his being when he suddenly realized that his father seemed to have sought out his gaze... or was this just his imagination? Should he be ashamed now?

Had he perhaps just ruined his great chance? The chance to be seen, heard and noticed...?

He didn't know what to do, just stared in complete helplessness, completely at the mercy of those sunglasses, hoping that somewhere behind them were the eyes he wanted to be seen by, that his heart wouldn't burst at the next word, like a balloon of glass.

It was also a bit of defiance and protest that made refuse to look away, the will to show that he was no longer afraid of that look, that it took a little more to intimidate him.

Just keeping this eye contact demanded more from him than a game of arm wrestling, yes, perhaps more than the whole previous fight.

Was there... a movement in his face...? Did he want to say something...?

Whether might or might not have happened, Shinji would never find out; Instead, something crazy took place. All these invisible symbols, these tiny signs of imposed, implied distance, were traversed like the thin air they truly were when Asuka walked a few steps forward, facing the leader of NERV head on, standing close enough to the taciturn man could not have stretched her arms without touching his dark uniform.

The crazy thing was, Shinji felt himself flinching fearfully as if he had let her climb into an enclosure holding some sort of carnivorous predator, even though she acted as if all this border that the Third Child didn't dare cross simply wasn't there.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Commander!" she greeted him, sweetly as sugar, surpassing even her best theatrical performances from school. "It's nice to meet you here! I suppose you still want to give us some feedback about the fight...?"

"No, that's not the case." He answered briefly. If there was anything to resonate, positive or negative, then Shinji couldn't hear it.

Even so, what Asuka did unnerved him, he somehow had the irrational fear that she could be devoured whole any second, and only because, as always, she wanted to inflate her own importance and it should really have been clear from the very beginning that this would eventually be her undoing, but there was also a kind of envy burned inside of him - how did she, a complete stranger, just go and talk to him when he, his own son, could do nothing more than standing here as if he were rooted to the floor?

He wanted to say something, do something, but there was nothing else for him but to watch Asuka try to out suck the praise that she wanted to hear out of her superior's lips, while Shinji himself had nothing else to do but to quietly devour the very words he had wished to speak for so long. "Well, I guess there's not much to comment..." Asuka said with a smile. "After all, we have performed one flawless Angel removal right there!"

"The enemy is defeated. That's all that matters."

Shinji didn't know what to do with the sentence, could imagine countless negative as well as
positive interpretations; unfortunately, the older man's facial expression wasn't very revealing.

Asuka, who was, well, Asuka, decided to read it as praise, and her face lit up accordingly, but Shinji didn't really feel all that motivated by it and he didn't even get to think about it when the head of Nerv revealed what actually brought him here by walking past both of them and turning to the third EVA pilot who had remained silent until that very moment.

"Rei."

"Yes?"

"Let's go. You must be tired."

And then they just left, as if the other two Children were nothing but thin air.

Shinji lay in ruins.

It hit him like a slap in the face, so hard, violently and yet inevitable that he forgot to cry.

Oh, of course.

Of course, it wasn't because of him; He must have been imagining things.

Unaware of his inner devastation because his appearance had not changed, Asuka turned to him as if nothing had changed and began with her usual gossip: "There she goes, our little princess, without even sparing us a glance!"

I'm telling you, Third Child, that girl is up to no good!"

In another situation he might have replied that what she had just done could also be described with a sentence containing the words "superior" and "suck up", but at the moment he didn't want to say, hear or see anything more.

Captain Shikinami had her very own interpretation concerning his silence: The exact one she wanted to hear. "It's hard to believe that he'd even ditch his beloved little son for that doll... I shudder to think what her intentions might be..."

Ding ding dong, that must be the hypocrite alert again.

But Shinji was already so deflated from her first sentence that he didn't even begin to process the second one.

Did she really have to rub salt into his wound..? He almost didn't listen any more when she started talking again... All the more he was surprised by what he heard: "...But don't worry, cheap slime will never be able to compete with real talent and real hard work, and the old man will notice that soon enough, especially if you keep up the good work. You actually seem to be starting to act like something of a real fighter... so just keep going! If you have ay doubts, you can always try to do everything in the same way as I do".

That also left him with nothing but his own speechlessness, even if it was a speechlessness of a different kind.

Perhaps his reaction would have been similar if he had been able to hear the words that his father had been considering for a moment.

But how he would react if he knew what was going through the head of Dr. Akagi, who was still in
the examination room, but heard their conversation through the crack of the door which the exhausted Third Child had failed to close properly, well, that would have been a very, very different story...

Once Asuka and Shinji had scrubbed the LCL off their skins and changed back into the clothes they had arrived in - their school uniforms, to be precise - Misato wanted no time in collecting them and directing them towards her car so she could drive them home, but not without making sure to get some snacks into them first.

"I'm sorry it's just some candy from those vending machines, but I don't think we'll have much luck with the pizza service before all the rubble has been cleaned up downtown... It's a good thing we live on the edge of town..."

The pretzels, juice cans, and chocolate bars were more than enough for the two children, especially now that they realized that they hadn't eaten a decent meal all day and didn't take long to develop the corresponding appetite when they smelled the sweets and pastries.

Under these circumstances, even Asuka's usual objections about maintaining her figure were thrown out the window - in fact, Misato was surprised to find that the Children were so busy scooping in a few calories that there was miraculously no argument between them on the way home... Or did that have a completely different reason?

Misato tried her best not to giggle.

It almost seemed as if the calculations she'd been pursuing when she decided to stuff the two of them into her apartment hadn't been entirely fruitless, in more ways.

Even if she had to be aware that the had only won a single battle, but by no means the war - somehow it should be possible to get the two to actually use each other's names.

In the end, Shinji's day ended as his days usually did, with him looking up at the now rather familiar ceiling, now in a loose undershirt and shorts, staring up thoughtfully.

A lot had happened since the last time he got around to do this, even though it had been barely two days. It had become quite turbulent, this life of his...

Yes, now it occurred to him that as of today, it had been exactly three months since his arrival in this strange town... He thought back to this vision with the stairs, and how he had looked down from the top of them and discovered someone down there...

When Mayumi had kneeled before him howling and trembling, he thought he recognized this person at the bottom of the stairs - not her, but someone like her, someone who was once very similar to her...

It felt like so much more time... Three months ago, he could never have imagined then that he would one day be in a position to give comfort and support to someone else... He would probably hardly recognize himself...

He had learned the meanings of friendship, family, and love, and had made many other new experiences, all things he had not known before... completely new dimensions that had been added to his thinking...

Actually... he could rightly claim that he had at least... become a little stronger, hadn't...?

At least he could say that he had gotten to know himself a little better.
Strange that he had only noticed that after encountering Mayumi...

"We recognize and ourselves by recognizing others", hm?

He believed that he had heard somewhere before...

It wouldn't have been right to say that he understood the full meaning of that, everything still seemed very vague and uncertain to him, both that thing about growing stronger and... about the future. But he believed that he was a little closer to it now and that he knew on which path he had to walk, even if he wanted to understand what he did not understand yet.

This here could well be the right path.

To expect that the should be spared the visions for a night was probably too much to ask, but at least today's was relatively harmless.

He saw himself again sitting in a room with his cello when suddenly the door opened again - but he was not frightened at all, as if he had been expecting this for a while and already knew who owned the ever-growing shadow that moved in the cone of light of the entrance door as he approached.

"Good morning, Ikari-kun!"

"G-Good morning!"

Aha. Then he was expected today. Then no mysterious alter egos or strange, applauding women awaited him today, but simply the good Miss Langley-Soryu.

That she was the more pleasant variant already showed how crazy these visions had become with the time...

Stop. Wait a moment. Of course, he meant the good Miss Langley-Shikinami.

How did he come up with 'Soryu' anyways?

No, the real question was, why did she use his name, and why didn't that seem to surprise him in the least?

Anyways, she strolled past him, sitting down casually on a second chair, which he could have sworn he hadn't been there before and unpacked a violin he had never seen her with before.

"So, what are we playing today?

"The Pachelbel canon." He knew for some reason.

"Of course you have it easy with your cello! All you have to do is play arpeggios."

Well, at least one thing was still normal: that Asuka, whatever her last name was now, could always be relied upon to find something to complain about.

He didn't even try to make sense of how she started to play despite her earlier complaints - he had become so accustomed to her contradictory behavior by now that he even found it somewhat cute at times.

Now Shinji, in his youthful naivety, had hoped that his great heroic deed yesterday would be followed by the beginning of an exciting romance in good old superhero film style, but reality caught up with him way to school with Nagato as its herald, who had learned the sobering facts
from his father: One of the many buildings that had been destroyed in all the chaos yesterday had apparently been the Yamagishis' new apartment, and the fact that his own child had been involved in the fighting was reason enough for Mayumi's father to consider some real estate far, far away from Tokyo 3.

So the "epic love story" between him and Mayumi was supposed to be over before it really started... And to think that he'd been beginning to worry about what he should do in case she might ask him out...

It just wasn't fair, but it probably couldn't be changed; After all, his life had never resembled that of a typical 'hero'.

So the Third Child had no choice but to curse his life with a deep sigh and think about the best way to say goodbye to her.

He also didn't recognize a possible connection between the news of Mayumi's imminent departure and Asuka's atypical good mood, even though he appreciated her attempts to cheer him up in her own way, even though they had a tendency to make him embarrassed rather than happy.

"And, and, how was that again about my balls...?"

Touji sighed, finally giving up in the face of the persistently cheerful nag that Kensuke could sometimes be. "All right, all right, you're right. I admit it: Balls or no balls, these guys from NERV security are professionals..."

"Well, there you go." Kensuke beamed.

"Nevertheless, this security lady was creepy..."

"That's the same chick who came to get Shinji back then."

"Okeh, okeh... Speaking of which, it was a good thing that neither Mitsurugi nor the class rep found out about our little road trip to the surface..."

"The bad news is that our parents will most certainly now be tonight... And to think I had finally convinced my father to buy me these limited collector's editions of these model warships... By the way, including a scale model of the IJN Shikinami."

"What...?" Touji, who had just been in preemptive mourning over next month's worth of pocket money, suddenly found himself laughing out loud. "There's a warship called "Shikinami"?"

"Yap."

"Oh my God... That must have been a pretty scary warship."

"Well, actually the ship was around a long, long time before 'our' Shikinami..."

"Her fearsomeness transcends time itself!"

That was all it took for both boys to break out into loud laughter.

"And to think that we met her on a warship of all places!" Touji snorted.

"That was an aircraft carrier! The 'Shikinami' was a destroyer, that's something else altogether."

"You know, Kensuke, as far as I'm concerned these are all just big boats with cannons on them. On
the other hand, our "dear friend" from the West is indeed quite... destructive."

In this manner, the boys continued their daily walk into the holy halls of education, though the usual way to school looking anything but "usual" - destroyed buildings to their left, destroyed buildings to their right, only the school had remained intact apart from the broken window fronts, as if to compund their suffering.

They couldn't get too excited about the possibility of its destruction, given that they had been inside the building for a portion of the battle, but neither did its continued existence give them much cause for joy.

One might have expected that they would at least get a day off after half the city had been reduced to rubble and ashes. But on the other hand, these fights here were almost part of everyday life by now - if one were to grant a sabbatical after each and every one of them, normal life in this city would come to a standstill - so the show had to go on, and precautions had been taken to make this possible - Since the very large, central buildings had been hidden deep down in the geofront at the time of the fight, at least a certain minimum of infrastructure was sure to remain intact;

It was important to keep the economy going somehow, especially with another major wave of evacuations on the horizon;

Even so, there had not been enough time for reconstruction. Some areas of the inner city were still closed down because the disposal of the angel's goopy remains was still ongoing.

A restless hive of public workers had cleared the streets the night before, just in time for morning rush hour, and even though some of the unfortunate buildings were still lying on the ground as untouched rubble, one could see with a single glance across the skyline how the areas in question were more and more overgrown with cranes and scaffolding like a rock covered in lichen – but as of now, the contrast between the battered buildings and their dazzlingly pristine siblings which had been hidden away in the geofront was still quite apparent.

For all that had been done to keep their lives here pleasant and comfortable, there was no denying that it was still a war zone.

One of these "amenities" designed to keep them rooted in harm's way was the policy that as long as the school was still standing, there would still be classes.

So, the boys ended up back in their classroom, its windows still busted and its blackboard still announcing the supposed school festival, but of course, some joker had since aptly decorated the festive writing with a big, red 'X'.

"So much for our band then..." commented Touji.

"I guess we should have expected this..."

"Right..."

"By the way, is there any news about the transferee?"

"She's still in the hospital, but we probably won't see her again... It seems like she lost her house, and now her old man apparently wants to buy one that has a lower probability of being trampled by giant monsters."

"I guess there's nothing we can do..." commented Touji. "This town must be cursed... By the way, where's Shinji?"
"He's right over there." Reported Kensuke, pointing to a bunch of girls without much enthusiasm.

From the looks of it, they couldn't wait to hear about the next episode of Asuka's Dramatic Life, and of course, she would never have passed up the chance to bask in their attention as she spun them a yarn about yesterday's fight, making sure to embellish her own role in the events at every step of the way.

By the looks of it, Shinji had been dragged along to serve as part of the exhibit, and unsurprisingly enough, judged that his best shot at a painless escape involved just letting her do as she pleased until she got bored of it -

As one would expect, the Third Child didn't look very energetic in that role - At first Touji felt tempted to tease him about it, something among the lines of 'Why the long face when you're so popular with the ladies?' but the reason for Shinji's lack of enthusiasm quickly became apparent.

"And then I finally flattened that slimy giant insect creature like an ant under a hiking boot... Of course I could have done it all on my own, but this time, Daddy's boy here actually provided some useful support for a change!" Asuka pointed to Shinji with an expansive gesture. "He must have been taking my advice to heart!

I know he really doesn't look that way (and most of the time you're not wrong about going by his looks), but if he wants to, he can be a lot more courageous and manly than you'd think!"

Shinji couldn't tell if that was sarcasm or just more of the usual mockery.

"Oh, so the rumors about you two are true...?"

"I admit that he would definitely be a better choice than 99% of the brain amputees at this school, but my heart chose Kaji-san a long time ago!"

"...Poor Ikari-kun."

"It must be a one-sided love."

"How tragic...

"Oh yes, girls, have I ever told you about Kaji-san? He really is a man among men..."

Touji had to hold back his laughter. "Geez! Poor Shinji... Well, at least Shikinami is busy and leaves us alone."

"Oh yes," Kensuke agreed, leaning back in his chair with pleasure. "Peace and quiet are simply the best!"

"So you helped to save Yamagishi-san?"

"Yep. Even though Dr. Akagi did most of the work."

Nagato's otherwise rather rigid facial features relaxed to a rare smile.

"I'm really proud to have a father who works on such great things as the salvation of mankind..."
While the sink full of dishes he was currently working through gave him a convenient excuse, they were not the only nor even the most prominent reason that led the elder Mitsurugi to avert his gaze. Even just from his son's voice, he could hear the smile toward which he'd turned his back, and if he were forced to face it outright, he would inevitably have to deal with the fact that he was utterly undeserving of it.

He'd been there to watch as they had cut open that pale, weak little girl – she must have been somebody's daughter, too, making it all too easy to imagine Nagato in her place, and to picture a future that appeared more certain with every day.

So he turned away, for a great many reasons, but chiefly, to hide his own facial expression.

When they'd first moved here, he'd been so grateful, so relieved, but now, he was beginning to hate this uncertainty and this false sense of peace that pervaded it.

He'd never wanted to be stuck in this situation, all he'd ever wished for was to see his son's smile again – alas, he had lacked the foresight to comprehend that he had not so much bought it back as merely borrowed it.

Or perhaps, he has simply refused to see it.

In any case, it was a sin, another reason to hide his face in shame.

He hadn't even thought to think of the long-term consequences, most likely, because the alternative would have been giving up.

If he'd chosen differently back then, they would never have had this time right now – Nagato seemed to happy as of late, perhaps happier than Minoru had ever seen him since the death of his mother.

So why wasn't that enough to silence his goddamned conscience?

If you knew that hard times were ahead, wouldn't it be reasonable to enjoy one's good fortune in the present?

Didn't every life end eventually? When had knowledge of death ever robbed the people of the ability to know joy?

Were humans truly such aimless, absurd creatures that they could only have hope because they could not see death standing right behind them as it slowly but surely encircled their necks with its scythe?

If he recalled it correctly, this was the third time he had entered NERV headquarters without having explicitly been asked to do so, but he wasn't completely sure either – Had this place already begun to register as 'normal' to him?

He would guess that it depended on whether or not he would have further reason to come here by himself.

At least the reason that brought him here this time was different than the last two times: He’d gone off to see Mayumi right after school - it was a happy coincidence that he had remembered the location of the bookstore where he'd come across her not too long ago - so he at least didn't come
empty-handed. Of course, he could only hope that Mayumi didn't already own the two books he
had bought and carried in the same brown bag that the salesman had wrapped them in, and that she
would like them even if she didn't already have them.

He didn't really know what she might like, so he'd simply asked the store owner for his
recommendations; He had also briefly debated with himself whether he should look for a shop
where he could buy something like a string or a ribbon to at least decorate the simple brown bag
with a bow, but ultimately came to the conclusion that he didn't want to waste half an hour looking
for something that might not even be around in that neighborhood, and had made his way to the
headquarters, where he first had to face the problem of finding the infirmary at all - until now he
had always been escorted there if not carried in on a stretcher, so that he had never really been able
to memorize the way to get there, and ended up having to ask a few passing NERV staff members
for the right way.

But once he made it to the infirmary proper, the staff immediately recognized him and led past the
corridor where his "usual" room was located, directly to Mayumi's room.

The nurse who had picked him up had also kind enough to tell him that Mayumi had experienced
no further complications and that she would probably be released tomorrow... which also meant
that this might be his last chance to see her.

What worried him, however, was the fact that he couldn't remember ever meeting this particular
nurse - did she just know him from hearsay and see a picture of him somewhere, or had she been
the one who had peeled him out of his plugsuit after he nearly got himself deep-fried by the Sixth
Angel?

The thought was... unpleasant and, despite the lady's really commendable friendliness, he couldn't
help but breathe a sigh of relief when she left him alone outside the door - Mayumi had been
moved to another room since yesterday, this time, one without see-through walls.

He hoped that this had something to do with her no longer needing all the machinery that was
sticking out of her the other day.

But now was the time.

The time for him to move his hand to the doorknob.

It wasn't that hard - making sure that his other hand was firmly grasping the books he had bought
and remembered that he had something to "deliver" here, so to speak, he began.

Yes, right, just like that, it wasn't that difficult at all.

Except that just when he had grasped the doorknob firmly and turned it about two-thirds of the
way, he heard footsteps. Suddenly afraid that he might be asked something he couldn't or didn't
want to answer properly, he turned around, at first without loosening his fingers from the doorknob
- behind him stood a tall, dark-haired man, wearing silver-framed on his nose.

The Third Child had never seen him before.

"What are you doing here?" the stranger asked brusquely.

"I... I... I'm doing... nothing at all..." he tried to explain, now moving away from the door.

"Well, let's hope so."
And then, the stranger took the doorknob into his own hand and entered without hesitation.

It didn't take Shinji long to understand who that might be, and seeing that this person seemed to be here to see Mayumi made him consider that a certain other person would most certainly not be here if he were in Mayumi's situation...

Even if he could have waited for this man to leave the room again, even if he could have hidden to avoid being asked questions, he had lost his will to proceed.

He had this feeling of not belonging, of being very away, which he just couldn't handle at this moment.

She had something that he didn't have, and he didn't like it; Of course he knew that this was a petty, lowly thing to feel, especially under these circumstances; When they spoke in the hallways on what was now the day before yesterday, he hadn't dared to ask Misato if she thought he was a bad person and the reason, as it became increasingly clear to him, was that he already knew the answer – He'd merely been too much of a coward to stand there and suffer to hear it.

Or, if it wasn't envy, then it was just uncertainty or despair - whatever it was, he suspected that this sensation would stop making sense if he really thought about it, and so he avoided it.

If he hadn't run away, he might have frozen into a statue and never left this place in his life, paralyzed forever by the heavy, tar-like blackness that threatened to clog the source of his feelings if he didn't somehow manage to shake them out.

A moment ago his thoughts had been full of goals, of the advice he'd give to Mayumi before sending her on her way, of great, important things, but at the moment, when he could no longer hold back the thought of that man no matter how hard he tried to repress it, with the worst moment of his life, one of his first and at the same time the most painful memories repeating itself again and again in his innermost like a record, like writing etched into his soul like a tattoo or a brand, a mark on his skin that could never fade no matter how much he tried to wash it away, he saw himself reduced to nothing but the same helpless little child he had been on the day he had been thrown away, like the residue sticking to the edges in a crushed beverage can that had been stuffed into a trash can in a half-hearted but crushing manner -

Like an object that had been used time and time again until it could never be used again.

He couldn't shake off the feeling that he could still hear the footfalls of the steps that his father had taken on the day before, in this corridor, in a straight line right past him, ever quieter with the passage of time, but never completely silenced.

And if it wasn't the sounds, then at least the wound they had torn yesterday still remained, bloody and fresh, and now that nobody was here to cling to, nothing prevented them from simply opening again;

No, he definitely didn't have the courage or the strength to visit Mayumi anymore now -

When he thought of his father everything he thought he had achieved became meaningless.

What was he even trying to convince himself of?

The distance between them had not become the smallest bit smaller.
What Shinji didn't know was that the man who had just entered Mayumi's room was nothing to envy her for.

His first official act upon entering the room was to slap his daughter right across the face. She'd been sitting up in her sickbed, propped up by a pillow, trying to read one of her books, but he paid no mind to any of that.

"Mayumi" he shouted. "Are you out of your mind?"

Even before the pain of the blow reached her brain, she had already sent a prayer to the heavens, not for him to stop, but out of a desperate need for him to to know, for his anger to be born of her leaving the shelter only.

What she'd done, she'd done believing that she would never have to explain t, that she wouldn't be around to deal with the questions or the aftermath – a deceptive feeling of freedom for which she was now being punished by the reality she had turned her back on.

Nevertheless, she was glad... that she was still here.

She had decided that she still wanted to be here and that she was happy about it, and not even the person before her right now could change that - she trembled, she had to cling to her blanket, her whole body language was submissive and fearful like a shrew ready to flee at the slightest motion, but still she forced herself to look him in the eyes again; Her eyes alone were like steel.

Even though she could already anticipate the storm of harsh words that was about to follow with clairvoyant certainty, it was painful to have to stand up to him - but she tried; it was not a matter of being particularly confident or controlled;

If she didn't end up bursting into tears or begging his forgiveness, she would already consider it a victory.

"I... I know I... shouldn't have left the shelter, but there was something I had to do."

"Oh, I know exactly what you were up to... you selfish, selfish piece of dirt. You think this world is beneath your dignity, don't you? To say that 'everything is too much for you' is very simple, young lady! What will happen to me and everyone else, what we feel when you pull off your great stunt, you probably didn't care how... I didn't teach you such insane nihilism, Mayumi! You're an embarrassment to both of us!"

Here we go again, the same old ritual; Now came the part had come where she was supposed to admit her failure and beg for his mercy, as if this were little more than the usual scolding for a bad grade, yet another 'grievance' she had caused him by being 'dramatic', even if he was the one going on a long tirade while her only contributions consisted of the words "Yes, Sir!" and much hasty, frightened nodding.

He still refused to consider the possibility that the mistake could somehow be his, that he might have done anything to hurt her...

He didn't even take her seriously, not even at a time like this. In his eyes everything she did, and every single one of her thoughts and emotions, was nothing more than just another a childish phase: Her big questions, her deep sorrows, her most important decisions... if he took it seriously, he wouldn't spit on it, now would he?

But she had decided that she had enough.
She wasn't the type who was able to hate or resent; Her weak, gentle nature was something she'd have to live with.

She wished no misfortune unto the many peers who had excluded or overlook them, nor even to this man, but she did not want to suffer anymore.

It was just as Ikari-kun had said: Why should she be the one who had to leave this world...? Why should she be the one to suffer?

She had always thought that she deserved this - and maybe she had deserved it before because she had put up with it, but if that would make the difference, it was within her power to change that.

It was a strange feeling as if she were standing somewhere up high, where she felt the cool wind on her skin, like she did on that skyscraper, but instead of the depths below, it was the sky that called out to her.

"N-no..."

It was not a big, dramatic declaration, indeed, it was almost a whisper, but only almost; quiet, but not so quiet that one might accuse her of trying to hide the words.

She had spoken quite deliberately, specifically addressed to the only person who was here to hear it. A person who hadn't heard that particular word for a very, very long time.

"What did you say there...?!

"I... I said no...!" Her whole body trembled and her voice did too, but no matter how much effort it took, she refused to turn her gaze away.

"What do you mean, no?!

"No means no... That's not right..."

It was strange to think about it now, considering what happened, but as she'd gotten old enough to understand what happened to her mother, she'd spent much time thinking about it. She couldn't understand why it happened, or why anyone would choose such a fate — the common sentiment often deemed to explain it as a matter of cowardice, arrogance or egocentrism, but the more she thought about it, the more she had felt that there were only two possible reasons why anyone might choose death.

One was found in stories about rulers, warriors, and philosophers who had refused some unjust judgment and chosen death on their own terms to deny their enemies the opportunity to make a spectacle of their end or to make them turn traitor under torture; It was the choice of a monk to self-immolate or go on a hunger strike, the decision of those who chose to protect those persecuted under cruel regimes even if they knew the price. These were acts done to protect one's pride or dignity, or some other higher ideal, it was the proof that man was not merely a machine driven by instincts, genes, and psychological factors, that they could even defy the most fundamental drive for self-preservation if they so chose, a fruit of the same ability that allowed one to become a martyr or to give one's life for someone else — Of course not every ideal that someone had been ready to die for was actually a worthwhile cause, and one could always debate whether someone's death would truly advance that cause, but there was always something noble, sublime about these actions that went beyond the lower virtues of this earth.

But most men were not heroes or martyrs.
Most of those who left this world by their own hands were simply lonely, misguided people who, in a dark hour, overcome by feelings that made it impossible for them to see beyond the pain of the here and now. In many cases, their judgment would have been further by addiction or disease; They were simply people who resorted to a desperate measure because no one had told them that it was okay for them to be in this world, or because something beyond anyone's control had prevented them from truly hearing those words.

People who had never realized their worth, who had not known that they would tear a hole in this world and would probably have stayed if they had known that their disappearance would make a difference...

Here, too, Mayumi could not see any arrogance or ingratitude.

It was just sad.

Her mother's death was a sad thing.

But she had never really been allowed to be sad - be it out of anger at the woman who had "left" him, or to chase away any guilt he might had felt, her father had never liked it when she'd wanted to talk about her mother ...

So, she had kept her grief within herself and hidden it away, and with time, she had learned to do so with all of her feelings - This man was not someone to whom you could afford to show weakness to, and through him she learned to perceive this world and the people in it as hostile and frightening, so that even when she met people in school who had nothing to do with her father, she had difficulties opening up to them...

But she had no intention to go on like that.

If she had learned one thing from the events of the last days, it was that letting her tears run free could also be a kind of courage...

The feelings she cherished were not always noble or right, but they were hers, it was what made her herself... and she'd had enough of being ashamed of herself.

That alone was enough to make that man stare at her with wide eyes.

All of a sudden, he was forced to face that the little girl he had wanted to keep away from everything, especially all that had to do with her mother, had somehow grown up without him noticing.

He told himself that he'd done what he did for her own good, so that she wouldn't follow her mother's path into nothingness, but the truth was that he simply hadn't wanted to deal with her; The way she used to cling to his late wife's possessions reminded him of the painful past and the gnawing doubts about what role his own actions might have played in the events.

All those years, he'd thought he was making a sacrifice by cracking down on her with all his might, to stop her from going the wrong way even if she wouldn't understand it , but in truth, he had merely been an obstacle, a roadblock who had kept her from flying like a Mafioso-style concrete shoe hanging from her legs... He had only stood in her way, as nothing but a hurdle - a problem which she had now finally overcome.

The determination with which she stared into his eyes, despite her obvious fear, showed him that she had just accomplished something he had never been capable of... He himself had always been a coward, unable to stand up to his own father... Perhaps that was why he had exercised such hash
control over his wife and daughter to at least have power in his own house.

That was probably the worst thing about his mistakes, that he'd gone on to make them even though he should know the pain he had been inflicting better than anyone.

Powerless, he took a look at his daughter and was forced to admit that she had become stronger than him.

The only thing that remained to be said was that the situation in the Yamagishi household changed significantly from that day on.

Would it have made the Third Child happy if he had known about that?

The question mark had its justification considering that he was presently in the process denouncing the substance or reality of every ounce of happiness he might ever have encountered in this city, going so far as to conclude that there was no reason to expect good things anywhere in the future.

The meeting with Mayumi's father, or rather the carefully repressed thoughts of his own father and the way he had simply walked past him the other day, had simply taken the wind out of his sails and left him behind like a drifting shipwreck, completely abandoned except for a few forgotten, stowaways who, by hiding, had never learned that they should have left the steadily sinking ship a long, long time ago.

Shinji didn't even care where he was running to anymore, he just wanted to leave, and be somewhere else instead, the exact details of that 'somewhere else' being wholly irrelevant.

Soon he wasn't even running anymore, but just walking aimlessly, even if he was careful not to stop, never knowing before the fact where the next step would take him, as if driven some an animal instinct or the curse of a witch, like a werewolf running after the moon, or a little child helplessly looking after the balloon it had accidentally released, painfully watching the colorful dot disappear further and further into the atmosphere, and not even receiving the opportunity to follow it until it faded because everything around him was pushing him to move on.

It was simply too much, too often, and always everything at once, in every possible way... His life had become an assault from all sides.

The earlier encounter had merely been the straw that broke the camel's back and shattered the fragile balance.

He couldn't stand it any longer, he didn't want to, he couldn't...

Only this morning, he'd thought his life was finally looking brighter... but was that an illusion?

He couldn't figure out this wild mix of feelings, and, now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't make much sense of his physical surroundings either - He hadn't been paying very much attention to where he was going, and now he had just as little idea where he might have ended up - The corridor seemed a little darker than most others, but he couldn't say much more about it either - His last few meaningful thoughts had taken place in the infirmary.

He had to be somewhere deep in the heart of Labyrinth, in fact, he wouldn't be surprised if some kind of Minotaur jumped around the next corner, given the current craziness of his life. The maze surrounding his body seemed like a seamless continuation of the maze inside his heart-
It was as if fate wanted to garnish its cruel work with a cherry on top. As if feeling depressed wasn't bad enough, he was now also lost.

At his own workplace, to boot!

As if having to put up with Asuka in the mornings wasn't enough punishment in and of itself!

He could very well imagine what she would say if she could see him now – he probably made for a rather pitiful sight.

If she were here, she would probably urge him to regain his bearings in some moderately uncouth manner...

"Ikari-kun?"

(1) Well, at least someone found him, so the next chapter will not consist of an increasingly moody Shinji looking for a way out of NERV HQ. Find out what happens instead in Chapter 2.18: [Flickering Image]
2.18: [Flickering Image]

2.18: [Flickering Image]

Disappear

Disappear

I'm sorry

For my selfishness,

Hoping you

never wake again

Sorry

But I am only here, only real

When you dream of me

The more I try to feel you

The more I disappear

Close your eyes

And make me real again

The more I try to feel

The more I disappear

Disappear

Again

I'm lonely,

In this conciousness

Hoping you'd

Come back again
Just like it used to be
Just you and me and a thousand moonrises
To be close again
I'll be anything
You desire

The more I try to feel you
The more I disappear
Close your eyes
And make me real again

The more I try to feel
The more I disappear
Disappear

The more I try to feel
The more I disappear
Make me real
Make me real
Dream of me

-She,'Make me Real'

So far, he'd been convinced that he had this unfamiliar corridor all to himself, so it was a moderately severe shock to hear a voice right behind him, however quiet it might have been.

Leaving his gloomy deliberations behind now that the outside world was demanding his immediate attention, he turned around briskly, half thinking that he might be imagining things, until he saw the owner of the little high voice standing before him in the flesh and remaining there even after he'd blinked a couple of times.

She had practically been standing a single step behind him, and yet, Shinji didn't have the foggies idea about when she might have arrived – one might almost be tempted to think that she had only
just appeared there without a sound, from thin air as if through some Star Trek-esque method of Quantum teleportation... she couldn't possibly have been standing there the whole time without him noticing, right?

He wouldn't have overlooked her that easily, right?

How would that even be possible when the bright, faded colors of her school uniform and everything about her, including her skin and that peculiar blue hair stood out amid the surrounding darkness to the point of almost looking unreal or out of place, like some faintly glowing ghostly apparition-

another detail that would have been impossible to overlook was the small cardboard box she was carrying with both her arms, revealing that she was probably about to bring her things back home after spending the last few days on permanent guard duty - Even Rei must have been too tired to accomplish anything in the few hours of the day that had remained after the battle, that is, anything other than to go straight to sleep wherever she had been accommodated for her stay at headquarters. 'Even Rei'? No, I anything, she should have had more reason to be exhausted than anyone else.

Only then did it trickle into his consciousness that she might actually be expecting some kind of answer while he'd done little more than to stare at her for a long time.

Sure, she kept looking at him in a calm and patient manner, but that was a double-edged sword – On the one hand it was a relief that she didn't seem to be angry, but then again, it provided very little indication as to what exactly might be going on in her head at the moment, or what sort of response she might be expecting.

"Uh... Hello Ayanami."

No reaction.

Great, he should have been expecting this.

Waiting for her to do something was pointless most of the time - who knows, maybe she was waiting for him to do something.

"Uhm...uh..."

His eyes fell on the cardboard box she was carrying.

Since he couldn't think of anything better at this moment, he chose to go with the next thought in his head: "Do you want me to help you with this?"

He thought he saw a little emotion in her eyes, as if she had focused her gaze a little more, but that was all.

Shinji had almost given up waiting for an answer when she finally spoke, just barely in the audible range, like the ticking of a clock.

"...With what...?"

"Well, with, uhm, carrying the boxes and such..." He produced the most charming smile he could
muster, though it was still tinged with embarrassment. "You were about to take all your stuff back home, right?"

"That is correct."

"Well, I could carry some of it for you, if you don't mind, of course..."

"I do not."

"Good! So where's the rest of it?"

"This is all of it."

The slight stretching of her arms was probably her way of telling him that he could now take the box, which he did, albeit somewhat hesitantly.

He had half feared that he would end up regretting his offer, because all prior experience suggested that girls always tended to have lots and lots of stuff, enough to fill many heavy bags and boxes, like the many piles thereof Asuka had stuffed the apartment with when she arrived.

Now, he was surprised at how light this relatively small "package" of Rei's belongings was - she hadn't even closed it, so you could see that the box wasn't even half full.

Most of its contents were clothes: Another school uniform, the little brown towel he had already gotten to know on his visit to her apartment, and a kind of hospital shirt that she had probably worn to sleep - there was nothing more except for his father's glasses and one of those assorted medicine boxes that old people occasionally carried around with them. No make-up, no little boxes, no electronic diversions, no private clothes, no other comforts and nothing at all that seemed remotely meant to pass the time. Nothing but the bare minimum -

Including some crumpled underwear she must have worn quite recently. The realization that she had probably been wearing some of those not too long ago served as a sharp reminder that the inside of this box was none of his business, and thus, he tried his best to point his reddening face somewhere else.

"Is there something wrong?"

"N-No...!" Actually, he had a hard time believing that she wasn't the slightest bit embarrassed or upset. Hadn't she noticed that the underwear was showing, or was she simply concealing her true feelings on the matter?

If the purpose of her apparent (?) indifference was to stimulate his conscience, it had certainly succeeded. "We, uh, maybe we should go."

Another one of those confusing pauses followed... Was she waiting for him to start moving?

That's when he remembered that he was technically still 'lost' – He had no doubt that Rei knew the way to the surface, but asking her for directions would involve admitting that he'd lost his way, which, frankly, would be an embarrassing thing to do, especially since he was supposed to be the one helping her out with her box.
So the current challenge was to get her to lead the way with the least possible loss of dignity.

He'd also have to do something about Rei's own dignity, perhaps by closing the box in an inconspicuous moment.

He did not dare to ask her that she had actually meant to display her used panties to practically everyone she might pass in the next few minutes – It might be related to how she didn't really seem to mind others seeing her naked - his policy on such strange events had always been to simply ignore them until they would leave him alone, and if necessary, worry about it in private later on.

Then, she spoke, suddenly and unexpectedly, breaking the awkward silence without prior warning: "Let's get something to eat."

Shinji was too nonplussed to even produce a flat “What?”. His mouth was wide open, but no sound would come out. Again his face changed color as the cause of his inner chaos silently observed the impact of her quiet words.

The Third Child had to prevent herself from taking a step back, not wanting Rei to confuse his simple surprise with a refusal.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked, after observing his inelegant fumbling attentively for a while.

"Of course not!"

"That's good."

And then she marched off, briskly, soldier-like, never stopping, never looking back to see if the Third Child was actually followed her, because it was completely sufficient for her to simply listen to his steps. He soon worked out that she was probably leading them toward the NERV canteen, where their last "Date" had also taken place.

The EVA-pilot decided that he shouldn't even bother with the wellspring of questions inside his head; The best course of action was probably to ignore the pounding of his heart.
She didn't run, but she did walk briskly, and if he were to stop to pause and think, it would be difficult to keep up with her.

What did this mean? What consequences might it have? What could she be trying to tell him? He might never find out, and if he was going to wrack his brains over it, he might as well do it afterwards, when he might just have a few more answers.

Of course there was still the option to ask her directly, but what if he had overlooked one of those things again that Asuka said should be obvious, another of those subtle hints?

Had he overlooked any subliminal statement of intent that could have told him if she was waiting for anything? Or perhaps, she just happened to hungry and there was no deeper meaning to be found.

When they reached the cafeteria, he still hadn't found the answer, and his intent to inquire about her reasons had been pushed further and further ahead.

The one thing in his favor was that he was actually carrying money this time, since he'd brought some in order to get those books for Mayumi – He's used the as of yet unapened brown package to cover up the content's of Rei's box.

On their way here, Shinji made up his mind to order the most expensive item this simple cafeteria had to offer, but Rei beat him to it, ordering a cheap sandwich and a glass of mineral water.

After that, he thought he would probably feel guilty if he ordered anything much fancier for himself, so that he himself decided on the same vegetarian sandwich, as tempting the possible addition of cheese or sausage might have been.

It would all be much easier if they had something like tofu or veggie patties in here, perhaps he should submit the Misato as a suggestion for improvement.

At least, he had successfully implemented the part of his plan that involved footing the bill

He would have liked to have carried Rei's tray for her, or failing that, to take care of his own, but unfortunately he had his hands full with the box and the books, so that Rei took over the task of transporting their food.

"Is this place acceptable?" she asked, pausing near a table.
She put down the trays as soon as Shinji nodded, which he took as the right moment to put down her box next to one of the table's legs.

Maybe he would have left it on the table for a bit if he had known that Rei’s next action would be to reach for it in order to take out her medicine box and retrieve a minuscule mountain of pills, capsules and tablets from its interior, only to swallow them one by one in a practiced motion, each one accompanied by a good sip of mineral water.

But even so, the pills were not the only things on her plate. There actually was a real sandwich right beside them.

Though he did not know which odd motion of fate he might be owning the pleasure to, it seemed like his plan of treating Ayanami to dinner had finally worked out (date or no date) and at that thought, he was almost able to smile sincerely again. Actually, 'almost' might have been an understatement.

There wasn't much conversation taking place, but he didn't really expect it either - he knew Rei; if he placed that much value on articulate chitchat, he'd be here with another girl. It wouldn't be fair anyways, to demand something he couldn't provide himself. Everything was fine just the way it was, right here, right now.

This was already far more than he ever thought he could hope for.

Date or not, if someone had told him six weeks ago that he would be having dinner with a girl before long, he would have diagnosed that person with an acute case of the gaga.

Watching Rei bite into her sandwich made for a pretty cute sight - she had a somewhat peculiar way of holding it.

He was so absorbed in his observations that he kept forgetting about his own plate – indeed, the only time she spoke was to ask him if he had any issue with the food.

Otherwise, she remained completely silent until she was finally done and placed her cup on her plate.
Next, she would probably get up to take the tray away, and that would spell the end for this potentially existing date – Not really what he would consider a fitting conclusion.

On the other hand, very little about this whole encounter had been anywhere near 'fitting' - They were sitting in a cafeteria, and he hadn't even brought a gift... or wait, maybe he had - the bag of books was still on top of the box of Rei's possessions. They had originally been meant for Mayumi, but he was pretty sure that he'd just blown his last chance to hand them to her.

Giving a girl a gift that had been meant for someone else certainly sounded like one of those cardinal mistakes that Asuka sometimes accused him of when she talked about how far he was from being a real gentleman, but Rei knew nothing about their original purpose – Which, come to think of it, made him sound like a deceitful bastard. But it sure beats letting the books catch dust in some corner of his room, or bringing no gift at all, right? Just in case this really was a date.

Time to get moving!

"Um... Ayanami?"

"Yes?"

"I... I have something... I'd like to give you..."

"Why?"

He hadn't expected to ask the question now, after all, it was considered commonly accepted practice not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but it still hit very hard considering his existing doubts about the supposed gift's 'detour'.

"Uh I... I've often seen you, well, reading books, and that's why I thought that... you would like it... if... you had some more books to read..."

Okay, that sounded pretty bumpy right now, even by his standards.
It seemed to him that the most sensible action at this moment was to let the books speak for themselves, and thus, he leant down to retrieve them.

Rei ripped open the brown paper the moment it arrived in her pale hands, and a fantasy revealing a thick fantasy doorstopper and a somewhat slimmer romance novel - he had been looking for something Mayumi would like when choosing the books, and now that he saw them for the first time since the store clerk had wrapped them up, he was beginning to doubt if they were equally suitable for Rei – Perhaps he might have chosen something else if she had been the intended recipient from the start.

"I just asked the store owner what most of the other girls are reading these days..." he explained, justifying his choices as much to himself as to Rei, although he couldn't have said whether the latter was truly necessary - he just couldn't figure out her facial expression; If he could recognize anything at all, it would have been a deeply pensive expression.

"I'm sorry if you don't like it... maybe I should have gotten something, uh, something else, maybe a non-fiction book or something, since you always read all that scientific stuff..."

She turned one of the books over to inspect the text on the spine of the book, but showed no other sign as to whether she was happy or not.

"Actually, you know what?"

"No?"

"Well, it's just, I was thinking of that talk we had with Misato-san the other day, and how you said that you didn't know what you wanted to be when you grow up... Have you ever considered becoming a scientist? I mean, you seem to enjoy reading about it, and you get good grades – besides, I think father would be proud to see you following in his footsteps."

Had started this sentence with a friendly, encouraging smile, but by the end of it, there was a clear droop in his body language, as if a lollipop had suddenly been pulled away from under his nose.
Even Rei could not have missed the sudden change in tone and posture, though she couldn't figure out what to do about it.

"What is it?

"It's nothing, I... I was just wondering if my father and I would get along better if we had more in common..." He smiled again, this time full of self-irony, a bizarre mixture of signs that were actually associated with joy, and those that testified to deep despair, which visibly confused Rei and caused processes and feelings that she didn't know what to do with.

"I barely even understand the little bit of biology and mathematics we do at school. I guess it's not surprising that father spends a lot more time with you. I'm supposed to be his son, but we have almost nothing in common. He probably thinks I' a disappointment. I mean, you'd think I'd be a little better at this science stuff since both my parents were scientists, but in the end, I guess I'm pretty stupid... "

Rei responded with a small reaction which he couldn't really make sense of at the time. "Both of them?

"Yes, my mother too... I thought you'd know that.... Did father never mention her to you?"

No answer.

"I should have known..." Now, the young pilot's voice was somewhat tinged with anger - of course. After all, his father had thrown out every possible reminder of Shinji's mother, all her things, all her pictures, all the memories they had shared, and of course, her son – everything had gone straight out the window!

As if it never had anything to do with him.

His father probably hadn't found any of it useful without his mother around – After all, it didn't look like NERV's taciturn leader had much interest in remembering her...

Still!
He could at least have left something for Shinji, a few photo albums, some collection of tiny trivial possessions that could have given him a vague idea what kind of person she had been – instead, he could barely recall her face.

Of course, there was nothing new or surprising about the older Ikari’s complete disregard for his son’s hopes and wishes –

It's not like he needed any more reminders of that.

Rei, however, had another inquiry: "What... was her name?"

Well great. Not even her name! Not even once did he deem it necessary to as much as mention her name” The question hit Shinji like a knife to the gut, making it abundantly clear that as far as his father was concerned, Shinji and his mother were a matter he had long since left behind.

Since none of this was Rei's fault, he gave her the answer she deserved, "It was Yui. Ikari Yui."

What the blue-haired girl did next would deeply surprise Shinji - he had expected some possible responses, most likely silence or some commentary to defend his father, but not a single one involved her reaching for her box of belongings and producing another object that he probably hadn't noticed before, because it had been hidden under the clothes: another book, one of the same thick, scientific tomes she would often carry with her, this time, about metaphysical biology, whatever that might be.

But the Third Child quickly decripted the reasoning behind her action when he spotted the author's name, even if he didn't dare to ask the obvious question before Rei beat him to it: "Is there perchance any relation to the 'Yui Ikari' who wrote this publication?"

Shinji could not answer that question, and he was ashamed that he could not.

"Can I see?"

Rei handed him the book.
He opened it, right in the middle, on a random page, without consulting the table of contents first; he just wanted a rough impression of what it was about. What he encountered was densely packed small print, one technical term after the other; in a normal book one could perhaps have deduced from the context what one or two of these words meant, but all the context that was there was itself a forest of technical terms, verbs, adjectives, nouns, subjects, objects and predicates. The only thing he recognized in this text in any form were the articles and prepositions.

What he had before him was undoubtedly challenging, advanced literature, and judging by the position of a small post-it label, Rei had already mastered a good third of it – Shinji didn't think he'd be able to understand it at any point in his life, even if he were to finish highschool, which was anything but a matter of course given the dangerous life he was currently living.

It was so ridiculously ironic - all his life he had wished to get his hands on anything to do with his mother, and now that he was holding what was undoubtedly important piece of her legacy in his own two hands, a part of her life's work that could have told him much more about her than a simple picture, it was of no use to him.

"I don't understand it... I don't understand anything about it... I don't know either... this might well be the only thing my mother left behind in this world, and I don't understand a word of it..."

Resigned, Shinji closed the book and gave it back to Rei.

He felt deeply frustrated, as if he had just completely disappointed someone – which he probably had, or would have, if his parents were here to observe his miserable failure. He was truly an embarrassment to both of them.

"That's not true."

"Eh...?"

"You yourself are also something that she left behind in this world, aren't you?"
"It is... very nice of you to say that, Rei..." 

She could not see why. She had only made him aware of a simple fact.

But it was certainly a relief that he seemed a lot less miserable after her statement. She found it rather uncomfortable to see him in such a state... it filled her with a kind of urge she didn't understand. Now that she was thinking about it, it had been that way for a long time. Perhaps it was the simple drive to stop him from being miserable.

She certainly didn't want to see him unhappy - and that only made sense, especially since he had hurried to her aid on their very first meeting and had consistently displayed what she could now recognize as worry over her person.

At first she found it somewhat confusing that he would be worried when she was just doing her job, but in retrospect everything came together... He seemed to spend a considerable amount of time thinking about ways to prevent her from experiencing unpleasant things – and if that was the parameter he using to cast his judgements, she might have to reevaluate her conclusion about the meaningless of his concerns.

Was she unhappy, then?

She had never really thought about it nor even attached any special importance to this question. So far it hardly seemed to be of any significance - it had little to do with her duties as an EVA pilot or the Commander's plans...

Was she happy then?

Probably not, she thinks she would have noticed that.

She thought she must have been happy when the Third Child took her hand at the Futagoyama's summit... And back when the Commander had saved her.
At the least she would say that being around either of them provided a certain respite.

So, if she could find a way to do the same for Ikari-kun...

Ah. After a short while, she thought of an idea.

"...The Commander says that his condition is no different than usual."

"...What?"

"Since you often seem to wonder about it, I asked him, and that was his answer."

Had she *told* the Commander that Shinji had been asking about him? He really hoped not...

And... had there been any questions? About him, about his life, about how *he* was doing?

Of course he could have asked her, but he already suspected the answer, and did he really need to hear it out loud?

Rei wasn't the kind of person who might soften the blow – if she were to answer at all, her reply would be nothing short of the truth in its full brutality.

"I guess... IT's good to know that he seems to be doing fine..."

He felt tempted to ask what else the two of them may have spoken about, but that was really none of his business, so he saw to it that the topic of conversation was shifted somewhere else:

"Anyway, if you don't like the books, I can also give you the receipt if you'd like to exchange them for something else... there's a small bookstore near the school, right by the big road with the catwalk across it..."
I'm not sure if you already know about it, but if you don't, then, maybe that would be a nice place to look for new books, after school or something...

Maybe one of these days, you could loan father one of *your* books rather than the other way around... Besides, I think there is also a DVD rental nearby if you'd rather watch a movie or something..."

On the way back to Rei's Apartment, the books that Shinji had purchased spent their journey *in* Rei's cardboard box rather than on top of it, though they still did a fine job of concealing the box' other contents from the public.

There was no further conversation; immersed in musings about his father, Shinji appreciated the silence; He appreciated being able to do that without the storm of well-intentioned questions he'd have to 'fear' from Misato, for instance, if she were at his side instead of Rei...

He didn't think any amount of entertainment or encouragement could have made this any less worse, but he was glad that he didn't have to be alone right now, and very grateful for the quiet company.

The closer they came to the rows of abandoned concrete buildings, the less his thoughts revolved around the dreary circumstances of his life as he spent proportionally more time looking at Rei, non-stop, incessantly, simply hanging on to the little details of her movement, or some tiny, teeny strands of hair dancing out of line.

He was almost ready to say something when he realized he needed to do it soon - one thing had led another and by now, they were already about to climb the stairs at the end of which they would find the door that would hide the First Child from his view until tomorrow at school.

Before he knew it, he was already on her doorstep and about to return her box.

If he wanted to say something, it would have to be now.

Just a few weeks ago, he would have just left now, and would have racked his brains about all the countless possibilities he might have missed, but he knew that he wouldn't find peace for days if he didn't break his silence...
He was prepared for the worst, but how much worse than it was present could it get?

"Um, I guess it's time to say goodbye..."

He seemed to have her attention, insofar as one could be sure of that when it came to her.

"But first I would like to ask you a question..."

So, she waited.

"It's not like I didn't like it, but, is there a particular reason you invited me for dinner?"

Great. The candidate just lost one hundred points! What kind of question was that supposed to be? It was probably another of those things that should have been obvious, but slipped right past him all the time.

He couldn't even imagine what she might think of him now – She was being nice to him, and he had to go and question it. Maybe the whole thing was supposed to be a date after all, and he had just revealed the extent of his own cluelessness.

But now that he had failed, he had no choice but to wait for her to answer. If she intended to give one at all, it seemed like she first needed a little time to think about it.

"I had the impression that you were dissatisfied with the fact that I had not participated in the meal on our last visit to the cafetera."

Then... had she done it because she thought he wanted it, not because she wanted it herself? Was she just doing him a favor?

"It was not possible that day. Dr. Akagi had scheduled an examination later that day, and she
explicitly instructed me not to eat anything in the three hours preceding it... But it was fine today.'

So she had... been with Dr. Akagi shortly afterwards?

Involuntarily, Shinji had to think of the mountain of pills she had swallowed in the cafeteria - what were they all for? Not to mention all the times she'd been missing from school... Just what might be wrong with her?

It seemed rude to ask directly, after all, it was none of his business.

 Nonetheless, he couldn't help but think that all the experiments, training and fights she had to suffer through as a pilot could only be exasperating whatever condition was already afflicting her fragile body – that is, if working for NERV from a very young age hadn't caused her poor health to begin with.

Was the ability to pilot EVA truly so rare that they had no choice but to force this fight on someone in her state?

Once more, he became painfully aware that they were truly finding a war -

But he never would have guessed the dark secret that could have answered his questions... Perhaps he lacked the drive that would have been necessary to investigate all the signs and seek all the answers. But maybe that's a part of why he was able to recognize a girl worthy of protection where most of the others had only seen a tool.

"Well then, I'll... I'll get going before Misato-san wonders what's keeping me so long...'"

"Don't worry, you don't have to be afraid of any repercussions. The commander himself said that he has no objections to our spending time together.'"

"W-What...?"

That he was her boss at NERV didn't mean that his father was aware of every little detail of Misato's private child-rearing practices, but that wasn't the point.
(Much, much later, he would come to consider that she might have overestimated the commander's sphere of influence because she still believed his inordinate involvement in her own life to be perfectly normal – or perhaps, she hadn't been overestimating anything at all...)

"He was informed about your visit to headquarters right before EVA 00's activation experiment and inquired about our meeting. -"

"And d-you told him everything!?!"

"His questions weren't very detailed."

The Third Child exhaled in relief.

"But he really... asked about me? And he said he didn't mind us spending time together?"

"Yes."

"You looove the way I look at you/ While taking pleasure in the awful things you put me through/ you take away /

when I give in /

MY LIFE, MY PRIDE is BROOOOOKEN"
Turning the headphones a little louder than any professional ear doctor would have recommended, Shinji stared from his bed, fixating the usual spot on the ceiling as he allowed the fast melodies of the guitars to wash his thoughts out of his head, and with them, the many questions and doubts that accompanied every single one.

Had his father truly asked Rei about his whereabouts, much like he often asked her about him? No. Wrong.

He had asked Rei who she was spending her time with, because he was interested in Rei. If anyone else had come around to see Rei, his father would have been asking about that other person.

On the other hand... Since the leader of NERV had apparently classified him as an appropriate playmate for his esteemed foster daughter, something most people would be choosy about... Didn't that imply that Shinji's father must have a somewhat positive opinion of him? Could it be...?

On the other hand... he had never shown any interest concerning his own circle of friends – Shinji would be very surprised if he knew who Touji, Kensuke and Nagato even were, and while he certainly knew about Asuka, that had more to do with her being the pilot of EVA 02...

Wait, was it even right to count the Second Child among his friends?

He'd certainly like to, but he wasn't sure if she saw it the same way...

Wasn't it more like she only "tolerated" him because they had to live and work together...? A while ago he thought he could have answered this question quickly, but now he was no longer sure...

In theory, he should have been glad that it wasn't a clear “no” anymore, but in practice, it just made everything more complicated.

At least back when he could be pretty sure that she simply hated him, he had a rough idea of how to act and what to expect...
What the Third Child didn't know was that his blue-haired comrade was engaged in a very similar activity at the time.

She, too, was laying on her bed, lost in thought, her gaze lingering not on the ceiling, but on the pale moon disk which was clearly visible through the gap in her curtain, especially when it was the only light that had ever illuminated her dark, colorless apartment.

From her bed, she could easily see her books and the Commander's glasses, which she had deliberately placed in the path of the moonbeams.

So that book had been written by the Commander's wife...

She had figured that must have had a wife at some point, since it usually took two people to produce a son, but even regarding the son, she'd known next to nothing until the day he appeared in Neo Tokyo 3.

The Commander had never mentioned either of them...but at this time, she didn't quite understand why it seemed to bother her; She didn't understand that she was afraid of being just a small, insignificant part of his work... for it made perfect sense that he wouldn't tell her about it. Why would he? There was no reason, and it wasn't relevant to her duties, either.

So why would it bother her...?

She had never paid attention wether things bothered her or not, since it had not been relevant to the project.

And there was that other question she had never asked herself before: Was she happy?

Now that she was alone, she couldn't really answer.
Most of the time, she didn't feel all that much, and even when she did, she had always let it pass, since it had never been important.

It made no difference... As long as she fulfilled her task and continued 'functioning', nothing made a difference, not even whether she lived or died...

If she died, she could be replaced -

If she had ever been alive to begin with.

Was she anything other than a mere object that was only pretending to be alive for a short while, until the plan moved on to the next stage?

It wasn't even a particularly good illusion:

It took all of Dr. Akagi's knowledge and skill to maintain the facade, and even then it was painfully obvious that she didn't look like anybody else, nor did she understand them very much.

What the true living considered to be the most important parts of life passed her by in the distance, and as the day of the prophecy approached, she felt her tentative existence starting to fade and disappear.

And then it came over her, in waterfalls and tsunamis, despair, pain and loneliness, mixed with an inhuman longing for nothingness that terrified even her –

Strange, heavy thoughts, so fundamentally different from everything she had ever known that no human being could have understood them, a supernatural melody that seemed intent to lure her to its source like a wispy ghost light.

She wanted to cling to herself and her life, but all she had were vague lies and blood-splattered sheets, a faded, colourless dream of a stranger who might one day awake to reclaim her soul.

She could not recognize or explain it, so there was nothing she could do about it.

She could neither talk nor cry about it, so he had no other choice than to lie there as the
painful feelings ran their course, observing their effects with distant curiosity.

Until now, she had endured it by clinging to her connections, to her purpose and to Commander Ikari. All this, all of this was real - Eva 00, the gloomy laboratory in the depths of NERV headquarters, water and moonlight... Is was them who had made her who she was and what defined her actions, not some faraway impression of a distant voice.

that was what she had done, what she was, what all her actions were, not some distant impression of a distant voice.

There was no way it could all be a lie....

No, the time she shared with Third Child today was no lie. All their shared memories felt so real, warm, crip and distinct amid the diffuse fog of her general existence.

These moments had belonged to her alone, to Rei Ayanami, and no one else, not one of the many building blocks from which her artificial existence had been assembled – and yet, it seemed like they rarely had anything to do with one another, he seemed to exist far away from her, almost as distant as everything else-

And in moments like these, she needed proof, something concrete and tangible she could hold and feel in her hands to assure herself that she was truly here-

Usually, it was the commander's glasses that filled this role, but today her ghostly hands reached for something else - it was one of the books the Third Child had left her, the somewhat thinner one.

Most people would hardly have recognized the letters in this darkness, but Rei was so used to the twillight that she could read it just fine – which, of course, meant that she had no reason to turn on the light; Besides, she doubted wether it would even still work.

She had little concept of comfort, so she didn't even bother to move hr single folding chair closer to the window, but simply remained standing in the moonbeam, continuing to read on her feet.
Strange.

The symptoms that the book's narrator seemed to associate with the presence of a certain male classmate somewhat resembled the strange sensations she herself would sometimes experience in the Third Child's presence. So far, she had assigned them very little importance because they weren't affecting her work as a pilot -

Besides, it was not unusual for her to experience the occasional malfunctions of her physical components – if they were at risk of becoming serious impediments, Dr. Akagi would have taken care of it during her last maintenance session.

Rei was all the more surprised that the protagonist of the book seemed to give very high priority to these signs and saw them as an indication that she and the classmate who seemed to trigger their appearance were meant for each other. Surely, that part was not applicable to Rei - she herself knew what she was meant for (Triggering the Third Impact), and that had little to do with Ikari-kun.

Still, if there was a possibility that this symptom complex could herald serious consequences, it couldn't hurt to have information about it.

In order to recognize and solve a problem, if one existed, one needed to know about its nature. Determined to acquire this information, and also motivated by a bit of honest curiosity, Rei turned the page...

The veils of the night led the Third Child back to this dark music hall that was familiar, yet strange -

Like last time, a new participant had arrived to join them.

This time it was Rei who entered the room with a viola in tow.

She walked past him and Asuka toward a third folding chair that, like the last one, seemed to come out of nowhere.

As in his waking life, Shinji found himself observing her in fascination, even if it was only from a distance; of course he had greeted her as she had come on, but he hadn't even expected an answer - Asuka, on the other hand, either found its absence very amusing, or
simply felt compelled to express her general dissatisfaction at Rei’s existence with a high giggle.

If Rei cared at all about being laughed at, she didn't let it show as the began to coax wondrous sounds from her instrument.

And just like that, it was all over and life continued as usual.

Back to school - Ayanami’s seat was occupied again, Asuka’s was surrounded by a swarm of girls as usual, and the seat that had been Mayumi’s for the last couple of days had gone back to being just another empty desk – Shinji hadn't been able to say goodbye to her after all...

Somehow he'd felt as if he owed it to her - He knew all too well that it couldn't be too pleasant to leave town with no one to show you that they'd miss you, even if she had only lived here for a very short time...

It was out of his hands now - he had asked Misato abou it this morning, but she could only confirm what he'd feared: She had already been released from the NERV hospital, and he didn't know where else to meet up with her - for all he knew, she could already have left the city.

In the end, nothing could ever be perfect – All things considered, he thought he had been able to do right by her: He had saved her life several times, shared many beautiful new experiences with her , and he'd even go as far as to say that they’d both learned some important new things in their brief time together.

Wherever she was now, whatever life had in store for her next – He hoped that she'd be able to live a better life from now out -

So it wasn't like the last few days meant nothing, even if they would never see each other again.

His efforts had not been in vain.
Victory didn't come cheap – large parts of the city were still in ruins, and though Misato had made a concerted effort to keep him away from newspapers and television, it was not long until he found out that many people had lost their jobs, their houses and their livelihoods. Even discounting Mayumi's absence, he could see with his own eyes how their classroom had once again grown noticeably emptier.

On the way to school, Asuka had been going on about how Hikari had been feeling somewhat down as of late because one of her childhood friends had moved away.

Last night she'd been too busy comforting the class representative over the phone to spend much time wondering why Shinji had come home so late, which had probably saved his hide – Shinji was a terrible liar and he had little doubt that she'd take it as a personal insult if she found out that he'd been hanging out with Ayanami.

On the other hand, it was yet another one of these moments where it suddenly hit him that Asuka was, in a lot of ways, not that much unlike any other normal girl who'd see it as their sacred duty to support their best friends.

Though she had always been popular at school, most of those 'friendships' had always been of a transparently superficial nature that left Shinji wondering if Asuka actually liked any of them, or if she simply liked the trappings of being popular – in a lot of ways, Asuka acted like her classmates were utterly beneath her. But at least in Hikari's case, it seemed like she was actually capable of acting like a proper friend with all the loyalty, empathy and supportiveness that would entail.

Knowing that was at least... encouraging, even though it would probably be a long, long time before he'd have any chance of joining that chosen circle.

Either way, people had had to move away, and he, the guardian of this city, naturally found himself confronted with the question of whether he could have prevented all this somehow.

But at least all these people had just moved away and were not dead.

Everything could have been much, much worse...

All in all, he had reason to be happy and even a little proud.
He had prevented much, much worse.

Accordingly, he showed the person approaching his seat with hesitant steps a good-humoured smile, even if their identity surprised him.

He had already noticed from the footsteps it couldn't be one of the "usual suspects" - the people most likely to visit his place, more precisely Touji, Kensuke and Asuka, would make a lot more noise.

Even so, he would have expected Nagato or even Ayanami rather than the girl he actually saw in front of him when he looked up from his half-eaten bento: Hikari the class representative.

"Hello Horaki-san! What brings you here?"

"I... well, I was about to accompany Yamagishi-san to the station because I didn't want her to go alone... and I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come with me. You were friends with her, weren't you?"

"Yes, that's... that's right."

"Well then... can you please come with me? I'm sure Yamagishi-san would be happy to see you and besides, I'd prefer not to go on my own, because... well... I was there just yesterday, with Ayumi-chan."

"Your friend who moved away, right? Shikinami told me about it."

"Yeah... So, would you like to come with me?"

She didn't have to ask twice.
It was an opportunity he hadn't dared to dream of, a last chance to say goodbye to Mayumi as she deserved - now that Hikari would be there, there was no big chance that anything would happen, but that wasn't the important part anyways.

The main thing was that he would be there to see her off.

"By the way, I'm really grateful that you came with me, Ikari-kun."

"Oh, uh... you're welcome. Though I'm a little surprised that you didn't go with Shikinami..."

"That wouldn't be such a good idea... I'm afraid Asuka is a little bit jealous of Yamagishi-san..."

"Jealous? Shikinami? Why in the world would she be jealous of Yamagishi-san...?"

"Haven't you noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Promise me you won't tell Asuka anything about what I'm going to tell you right now."

"Okay...?"

"I think she likes you."

"Who? Yamagishi-san?"

"Maybe her, too, but actually, I was talking about Asuka."
"W-what...? Did she tell you that...?"

"Of course not. As if I would just babble out something so confidential. But I am her best friend. I notice that kind of stuff."

"Are you sure that you're not misunderstanding something there? Don't be angry with me, but Shikinami can barely stand me... She always teases me and complains about everything I do... Even though I often wish that it wasn't like that...

After all, she, Ayanami and I are the only EVA pilots in the whole wide world... I feel like we should be able to get along..."

"Have you never watched any romantic comedies? Asuka may not want to admit it because she is a very proud person, but actually you mean a lot to her..."

"You really think so...?"

"I don't 'think so', I'm positively certain... and that's why... it's important that you make a choice and stick with it."

"A choice...?"

"If you feel the same way, you have to tell Asuka and by her, if you don't, you have to tell her clearly. You mustn't lead her on by any means, do you hear me? Asuka is my best friend... so if you dare to make her unhappy, you 're going to have a problem with me, understood?

Asuka might be a strong person, but she also has her sensitive sides. I know that very well, since I'm her best friend... Once, on a day when she was in a really bad mood, she told me that back when she was a small child, her father cheated on her mother. What's more, her parents ended up divorcing over it, and her father ended up marrying his mistress... and that's how she got her stepmother."
"W-What...? Really...? I knew she had a stepmother, and that she didn't have a very good relationship with her father, but I thought he just remarried after his wife died...."

"No, it wasn't like that. They definitely got divorced."

"But if that's how it is... why didn't Shikinami move in with her mom instead?"

"I don't know." Hikari admitted. "She doesn't talk much about her. But the point is that Asuka has a bit of a complex about how her mother was never able to win a man's love... or that's how I think she sees it.

You know, for a girl, her own mother is the first example of what a grownup lady is supposed to be like, and where she takes her concept of her own femininity from. And when you have to watch your mother being treated badly, as a girl you get afraid that you could be treated badly yourself because you are a girl... you take that very personally. That's why, for example, women whose mothers have been beaten often end up in bad relationships as well – Because that's what they think a relationship looks like, and what their place in it is. But of course, no one wants to end up like that, so there's a lot of people who act like tough amazons in order to reject everything that reminds them of their mother, and get very defensive so that they don't get taken advantage of, or because they find it hard to trust a man since the first one they knew as a child was such a jerk to your mom.

Do you understand what I am getting at?

What I'm trying to explain to you is... Asuka is terribly afraid of being betrayed by a boy the same way as her mom... That would really be her worst nightmare of all time.

So if you're thinking of pursuing her, don't do it unless you're really serious about it."

"I... I know I don't know Shikinami as well as you do, but I've been living with her for weeks, and I honestly can't imagine her having these kinds of complexes..."

"Maybe... But the're a more important question here: How do you feel about Asuka?"

"I... I don't know..."
"Didn't I just tell you to be serious...? Either you love her, or you don't."

"I... I really don't know... I mean, I don't think she likes me... She doesn't even call me by my name... And why would she...? What would a girl like Shikinami see a guy like me? Besides, we have nothing in common..."

"That wasn't the question I asked you."

"I know, but, it doesn't matter what I think or feel about her, I just don't think this could ever work out... As fas as I know, the one she likes is Kaji-san..."

"Don't tell her that I said that but..." She smiled. "From what she told me about him, he is twice her age. That will never work out..."

“It doesn't matter wether it works out or not. The point is that she likes someone else. Someone who's almost like the exact opposite of me.”

"Oh sure, I'm sure Asuka would love to have a super cool boyfriend to show off with, but that's just a crush... She likes all his coolness and the stubbles, not him. I think that when it comes down to it, she sees him more as a kind of father figure. “

"Father figure...? That's not what it sounds like to me..."

Hikari sighed, but her smile didn't disappear.

"Well, just think about what we talked about today, okay? Anyways, I don't get why Asuka complains about you all the time..."

"Um... what do you mean...?"
"At first I thought you really were the idiot she always describes you as, but now I realize that you can be quite sensitive at times... How is it that someone like you is hanging around with such simpletons as Aida and Suzuhara?"

"I wouldn't say that they're simpletons or anything..."

"Hm. I guess you just have to really get to know them, hm? Actually, as of late, I've been starting to think that you might not be so wrong about that..."

"I think it's... really nice of you to accompany me here..."

"Don't mention it." Hikari replied. "It's part of my duties as the class representative. Besides, I wouldn't want you to be waiting here all by yourself..."

Like many others who had left the city before, Mayumi awaited her train at the very same station that had been Shinji's crossroads a long, long time ago - he could still feel the remains of the gloomy memories that had been drawn up by the air and the concrete of the buildings, but saw them only as an incentive to fill this place with the echoes of prouder moments.

"It's... it's almost time..." Mayumi began, somewhat embarrassed, but undoubtedly happy - she didn't quite seem to know what to say, which words were worthy of being addressed to a person who had changed her life from the ground up.

"Well then... goodbye. Take good care of yourself." Offered Hikari.

"Yes... you too. And please, forgive me for all the grief I've caused you..."

"You're apologizing... again." the Third Child noted, smiling, because in the end everything had turned out alright, though he couldn't help wavering just a little at the prospect of their imminent farewell.

"Maybe... we'll see each other again some day..." Mayumi mused, while the train drove into
place, setting her long, shiny hair in motion by the airstream.

"But I want you to know that... seeing you and getting to know you have given me a lot of courage for the future... and I would like the same to be true for you as well, Shinji-kun.

"You... used my first name..."

"Oh, e-excuse me...!"

"...Again. It's okay."

"We'll see each other again," she added hurriedly when she realized that the train door had just opened behind her.

"Sure we will. As long as we're all still alive, that's always a possibility, isn't it?"

"Of course."

And then she got in and the door closed right on her heels. Instead of immediately looking for a seat, she first stopped behind the door to wave to them through the small window in the door, until the train had passed them completely and left them all behind with sincere smiles on their faces.

Yes... As long as they were all still alive, a lot was still possible...

So it happened that Yamagishi Mayumi dissapeared from his life almost as soon as she had stepped into it... But even so, this brief crossing of their paths had left its marks on both of them.

For one thing, he now believed that he might actually get to take part in that 'future' misato
had been speaking of. His problems were still far from being solved, but he was beginning to suspect where he had to keep looking in order to find the pieces that were still missing from the whole of his 'puzzle'.

And there was something else that Mayumi had left for him - even if the school festival had ended up falling through, one of the CDs once intended for it, recorded with Mayumi's voice and thus containing, so to speak, a small part of her, remained with him.

There couldn't have been a more fitting souvenir for their time together. Besides the CD, Kensuke also had the whole thing as an MP-3 file on his computer, but that was considerably less helpful if you preferred portable music device still ran on cassettes.

Luckily, he had noticed an old CD player between Misato's many piles and boxes of assorted chaos quite some time ago, so he knew where to find it now.

Originally the music was meant to be a backdrop to sweeten the task of doing today's dishes, but soon after he pressed the play button, he was much more engaged with the music than he was with the contents of the sink.

Mayumi really had a great voice, and the lyrics were beautiful too...he wondered if she had been thinking about him while she was singing.

This song alone, along with the added layers of meaning it had acquired over the last few days, enough in and of itself to drive the tears into his eyes, but the possibility that he could be the addressee also did its part.

Either way, the dishes were waiting, so it was time for him to grab the soap and -

Crunch. The door was opened loudly, undoubtedly with the intention of attracting his attention - that couldn't be a good thing... no, he knew pretty well what that meant, or more precisely, whose arrival it must be announcing.

"What kind of schmaltzy music is that?
Turning to her, even if only to counter something, was a deadly mistake.

"Oooch." Asuka giggled. "Whatever it is, it's clearly too much for you to handle.. Has anyone ever told you anything that men aren't supposed to cry?"

His first instinct would have been to apologize, but since his attention for that same kind of sentence was sharpened by Mayumi’s recent farewell, he stopped the words before they left his mouth, knowing what 'thanks' he would get for them.

So he didn't bother in the first place: "...don't tell me you're expecting me to apologize for it!"

"Pah! “The redhead spat, leaving the room just as quickly as she had entered it.

There she was, lowering herself to gracing him with her presence, and he took it as an invitation to get cocky! But he understood nothing at all.

He was simply and poignantly completely deaf to her mercifull offers and her generous patience!

She really ought to give up this waste of time and space once and for all.

Annoyed, grumbling and just a little bit wounded, she had marched halfway across the halfway on the way to her room before she noticed something astonishing:

Disbelieving, she replayed his word in her mind's eye (or rather, her mind's ear): "...don't tell me you're expecting me to apologize for it "!

That, she wouldn't do, not after all the time she'd spent trying to get him to stop the constant apologizing in the first place. Whether he really intended to change permanently, or (which seemed much more likely to her) simply believed he could impress her like this, it appeared that her words hadn't fallen on deaf ears after all...

It would take a long time for her to forgive herself for the obvious, distinctly real smile that made
her face shine like Moses' did when he was descending from Mount Sinai, touched by the glory of the Almighty.

The crazy thing was that for a moment she wanted to run straight back into the kitchen, but her pride wouldn't allow her to.

It was his own fault if he could not express his change of mind more clearly.

And she continued to hold onto her conviction that he was undoubtedly a wimp.

Still, stomping into her room didn't seem half as attractive to her as it had been the second before.

To satisfy her extreme paranoia for all signs of weakness, she did it anyway, ripped open the door of her room, and slammed it shut without having passed through, then tipped her toes towards the still open kitchen door as if the hallway were a minefield, and then leaning as casually and disinterestedly as possible against the moving part of the sliding door, only minimally squinting in the direction from which she heard music, typical kitchen noises and occasional sighs, not bothering to fight against her thin grin and the accompanying feeling of satisfaction.

Closing her eyes to concentrate on the sounds produced by the object of her desire would probably have been too much of a good thing, but she could also guess well what he was doing anyway.

"Well, what do we have here?"

Damn that Misato – Asuka was beginning to suspect that she must have been something like a ninja in a previous life.

If she hadn't forced her to deny everything loudly and end up to go to her room to vent her frustrations on the buttons of her Gameboy, she might have come over to ask this fool if she could help him somehow.

"But..." Shinji asked as he handed his roommate the washed plate to dry and put away. „I thought you hated spending time with me..."
In order to preserve her dignity, she had at least ensured that he took over the parts of the job that involved the possibility of coming into contact with the slimy leftovers of yesterday's food.

"Don't get me wrong, it really drives me crazy when you act like an idiot, but as long as you don't, I don't particularly mind you....

...Why are you crying again now? Stop it you wimp! That's nothing to get so worked up about!"

"Here. This is for you, Commander."

She held out the brown envelope to him, holding it up with her outstretched, little pale arms in a way that, bizarrely, unpleasantly - brought up memories of a two-year-old Shinj proudly presenting some of the first scribbles he'd been able to produce with the aid of thick wax crayons.

"What is that...?"

"Scientific journals. Some of the latest publications in fields relevant to the project. I hope they will be useful to you."

"They certainly will. But I would have procured them anyways... why did you do that?"

It was unusual for her to act on their own initiative, which made them suspect that the idea was not, in fact, her own.

"Ikari-kun suggested it. He said you might like it. Was I out of line...?"

"Not at all." He assured her, taking the envelope out of her hands and tearing it open right away.

She did nothing wrong. It was only that the sight felt much more familiar than he could bear.
"Here, for you, Rokubungi-kun!"

She had held out her arms in the exact same way; Perhaps, they had appeared a little less bright, and had been a little more meat on them, but the differences were extremely slight.

Her hair was a tiny bit longer and split on the sides of her forehead instead of falling into, the colors were different, warm chocolate brown and mysterious green, as if she had two living jewels in her eye sockets, shimmering emeralds decorating a smile like spring itself, and every bit as lost to the world as the season;

He did not believe that this world would ever again see colors that brilliant, nor such sunshine as the one whose warmth she had shared with him on that day.

There wasn't a single spark of warmth left in this world since she had left it behind.

She had been very young, then, in truth, too young to have any business at an university, and of course much, much too young for him, but he had stopped caring about those kinds of things a long, long time ago.

She had something playful about her, her very private pleasure that she alone had the privilege of seeing him like that, without his cunning grin, or the sinister, unemotional expression that had already taught so many to fear him, but embarrassed and clumsy, not knowing how to react to this friendly gesture, because he was not received a great many of them in his life so far.

"Well, you said that you could hardly afford your rent from your scholarship, and I would not bear the thought of you starving to afford all these books they make us buy."

"I'll pay you back. My next payday is in two weeks".

He didn't understand what led her giggle in response, but he knew that he had simply avoided her gaze back then, knowing he was unworthy to float in the haze of her orbit.
"Sorry if I-

"You don't have to apologize, and you don't have to pay it back. It would be quite enough for me if you would try this here."

Her smile, accompanied by her forefingers pulling playfully at the corners of her mouth, as if to display instructions on how he might go about doing the same. That and those books, those were the very first things that anyone had done for him and him alone.

"You really shouldn't be wasting your time with me... Everyone says I'm bad company and that I'm only after your sponsors' money..."

His predatory, self-ironic grin distorted his hard face.

"Really, you should listen to Fuyutsuki."

"I think I'm grown up enough to decide for myself who I spend my time with."

Overcome with feeling, he dropped whatever his hands had been holding at that moment - presumably it hadn't mattered anyway, he couldn't even remember what it had been, just that Fuyutsuki was somewhat upset about finding it in pieces the next day.

It has simply ceased to matter in the split second before he wrapped his arms around her, full of passion, with extreme devotion, fearing death less than the prospect of doing anything wrong.

It probably should have been the other way around, especially considering his impressivestature, but in the end it was he who let himself fall into her embrace, sinking to his knees as they proved beyond his ability to control.

As he kneeled in front of her, burying his hot, desperate face in the underside of her chest, she calmly patted him on top of his head.
How could he express it, this feeling that was so much more intense than anything he had known before, that had taken him over so completely that there was not much else left of him to stand apart from it and allow him to describe it.

"I love you too... I want you so much that it tears me apart... I want you, every bit of you, even the most disgusting part of you, even the deepest of your madness and the wildest of your dreams... I would kill for you, do you know that...? I could prove it to you right now, if you want it... I mean it seriously, be careful what you ask me... I cannot say no to you, and it already makes me furious that I have to die before you..."

The grip of his hands tightened, he literally clawed himself into the white coat that separated him from her skin. It was too much... He knew only too well that he was a sinner, but alone that he was allowed to be here, to make her bosom his refuge, where he was surrounded by her warmth and scent, could have been enough to send him to heaven; If he wasn't careful, his heart would surely simply stop beating, because it was not used to feeling such bliss, because that was more than it was built to endure, more than should be granted to earthly beings, let alone a creature like himself... If he wasn't careful, her mere light would purify and burn the unworthy filth that comprised his body, spirit and soul, until nothing would be left of it.

If he wasn't very, very careful, he would spend the rest of his life in her embrace, because nothing else on this earth could ever interest him after experiencing this kind of perfection.

"Of course... if I were to die then... I wish I could drag you along with me to the depths of hell... I don't want to leave you to anyone else..."

"And what happens..." she asked, thoughtfully brushing a strand of dark hair from his face. "If I die first? These are dangerous times... Don't think that SEELE will hesitate to get me out of the way just because my parents are members."

The mere thought was torture... he wrapped his arms even tighter around her, as if his life depended on it and nothing else.

"That is out of the question! I would, of course, follow you on the spot... but first, I would make sure to leave the ones responsible covered in parts of themselves that were never meant to see the light of day."

"Oh my goodness... That sounds like quite a mess... Looks like I'll have to come up with some way
to make sure that I never die..."

But he didn't feel like joking, and to make that clear, he looked firmly into her eyes, demanding, almost commanding, and glittering with wild delusion, revealing all the ugliness of his black soul in front of her, his greedy heart, his insatiable desire and his infinite helplessness, the way he was completely at her mercy, how everything he was hung on the single thread of her answer, as if she alone determined whether the earth continued to turn, the sun continued to shine and the clocks continued to tick.

"Marry me."

It was not a question, but a demand.

"I mean it. Marry me."

And she had just nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world, without even spending a Planck time doubting her decision, or even thinking about it.

"Come and have a listen, Gendo! Can you make out the baby's heartbeat?"

"I'm not sure if I hear anything at all..."

"And can you feel his little kicks...?"

"I'm afraid not..."

"What a well-behaved young man! He already knows better than to kick his father in the face."

"Are you sure it's not a young lady...?"
"No, it is a boy. I am quite sure. ...Why? Did you always want a daughter?"

"It's hardly important. Forgive me... You wanted this child too much, and I'm already proving to be a miserable father before she's even born... You must be wondering why you ever got involved with somebody like me..."

"Please don't say such sad things... I don't think a 'miserable father' would be too concerned with getting it wrong... Don't worry, everything will be fine... You just have to have a little more faith in yourself."

She took his hand and kissed it.

"Don't forget that I'll be around as well."

The last musician to arrive was a tall boy with silver hair and a broad smile on his face.

"You are LATE" complained Asuka.

"Sorry..." he replied, either failing to pick up on Asuka's hostility or choosing to ignore it.

"Shall we begin?

___________________

1. From this point onward, the rest of Act II will be mostly original material punctuated here and there by episodes 11-14, GOS and a few other tidbits from the various games and spinoffs. Next up is what could in hindsight be dubbed the 'ZOMG I broke reality' Arc which is something that kind of grew organically and that I would probably structure differently to separate it out from backstory chapters and setup for the next bit... or maybe not, since I was kind of going for the 'sum-of-its-parts' effect here but I'm not sure that I succeeded. In any case, brace for psychedelic weirdness and major reveals...

2. TL;DR: Within the next few chapters, Shinji is about to get an inkling of what's going on, and he is NOT going to like it.

3. On that note, see you again in Chapter 2.19: [Tournabout]
2.19: [Turnabout]

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I feel you
Your eyes staring from behind
I know you
Your type, playing with my mind

One more time
I don’t think so
One more time, messed up
I don’t think so
Once again,
I have to hold it back
Once again, passion
I have to hold it back

Hold back, don’t let
Anybody near me
I want to forget, never relive
I push you back,
Sorry, but I can’t
Before I engage, I want to revive

I feel you
Getting closer to my heart

When you leave -

I am letting down my guard

[...]

Psy‘Aviah, 'Attract/Reject'

---

For those with attentive spirits, the events that unfolded over the next couple of days might not have come as a surprise – perhaps, the trajectories along which they had been flowing all along had been hidden in plain sight, silently proceeding along the same course they had always been meant to take, neither drawing much attention to them nor having been particularly concealed.

Even now, their gradual, steady progress was unchanged. The developments were simply approaching the point beyond which they would be impossible to ignore, even by those who would have believed their logical results to be preposterous impossibilities not too long ago.

----

“I don't need any parents, or friends, and most certainly no guys.

When it comes down to it, we're still all alone in the end.”

I WANT TO DO TERRIBLE THINGS TO YOU

When Asuka first began to vye for the Third Child's attention, she though it would be a matter of a few minutes, an amusing, peripheral trifle to pass the time -

He was, after all a simple, hormone-addled creature and she could rightfully think herself far more attractive than any conquests a boy like him could reasonable expect to make.

The prize of his reciprocation would have been yet another competition to win, another pair of eyes
to turn her way, another means to flatter herself simply to prove she could.

But ever since the recent series of events involving that bespectacled transferee, she could no longer look past the steady divergence between that theory and the practice of her life.

He should have been falling at her feet a long time ago, and longer since forgotten like all the other little boys who had long given up on stuffing letters into her shoe locker, but that wasn't what happened.

Instead, she was increasingly forced to consider the jarring possibility that he might refuse her in someone else's favor.

The little wallflower might be gone, but the First Child was all the more present in her thoughts, every reminder of her existence pricking her like a thorn in her side as she went about minding her own business, and there could be ony one answer to that:

*This means war.*

There wasn't a competition in this world that the Second Child would have allowed herself to love, wether it was the battle for the highest synch rate, the attentions of her classmates at this stupid school or even something as trivial as the affections of that idiotic Third Child.

She would show them all, and she would win, just as she always had.

**WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME?**

“Shikinami Asuka? That super-cool girl from class A? What would I give to be just like her!”

“They all either want to be with her or be her.”

“Hands down one of the coolest people at our school. She's just one of those people who just *have* to be on the invitation list of any party worth it's salt. That is, if you want people to talk about it.”

“She's just got this exotic beauty. This cold sort of perfection that ordinary mortals like us can't
really hope to aspire to. In brief, she's the kind of person you inevitably meet once you stop being a big fish in a small pond, the sort that everyone meets sooner or later, when you first realize the cold, hard truth that there's always someone better out there. Some people can't handle that sort of realization, and so they run themselves ragged, frantically searching for some sort of flaw to justify their jealousy.

But try as they might, they're never going to find one: Shikinami Asuka Langley is perfect.”

“I tried confessing to her once, but I guess she values her freedom more than anything. She belongs to no one, and there's no one she could ever truly belong to.”

“There are some rumors that she's going out with Ikari Shinji. The same Ikari Shinji who's probably stolen the hearts of half the seventh graders without ever noticing -- Like I said, it's just a rumor and I don't doubt that the two of them would deny it straight away if you ever asked them, but it makes sense if you think about it... They're both EVA pilots after all. They even live together. If anyone else had taken Ikari, the other girls would probably have resented it, but since it's Asuka, it's not like any of us had a chance to begin with. None of us could possibly compete with someone as perfect as her, so it would be unreasonable to expect anything else. The two of them are in a league of their own.”

“I don't know... I always saw Ikari-kun as a reasonable, gentle and sensitive person. He might be popular with the girls, but he's not your typical heartrob. I can't imagine that he would like someone like Shikinami-san. Everyone keeps going on about how she's so perfect, but I think she's just mean. She's always so quick to make fun of others...”

“Sounds to me like you're jealous that she gets to share a flat with Ikari-kun and you don't! Or do you honestly believe that crazy rumor that he's interested in Ayanami?”

“Ayanami? That Ayanami? Is that supposed to be some sort of april fools joke? Come on, who started this? Was it Aida or Suzuhara?”

...  

“Yes. If I go on ahead, they'll probably laugh and snicker along with me, but none of them has the slightest clue. If they only knew, If they smelled the slightest whiff of weakness, they would rip me to shreds like a flock of vultures.I drive others into corners because I don't want to be cornered myself. That's just how the world works.  

Big fish eat small fish.
I'm not stupid.

I know they're not really my friends.

I know that I'm still all alone, even as they crowd all around me to hear what I have to say. They're nothing but stupid, vapid geese, and they're only here to try and see if they can pick up some popularity by osmosis.

There is no such thing as friendship. It's just the simple monkey drive to climb up the social latter, to suck up to the alpha monkey to enjoy the privilege of high status – it's basically the same as lust, except that it's directed at a person of the same gender.

I'm not here to make friends. There's no point to it. There's no point to family, either – that's just the selfish desire to procreate, to make a smaller version of yourself that you can mold to your desires like a doll, only to be dissapointed when it grows up and talks back to you.

The truth is that people are essentially selfish beings, driven only to pursue their own survival. That might not agree with your sentimental little feelings, but we're talking about facts here. Being overly sentimental is just the same as being stupid.

You can shut your eyes and cover your ears, but the truth won't care. Nobody cares. Not about you, nor anyone else. The faster you accept that, the better.

You can only run as fast as who's in front of you, so you have to be in front of everyone, you have to be the fastest, or the big, bad wolf is going to take a bite out of your arse.

....

“Shikinami Asuka? She's probably the sort of person that is born to be something special, destined to suceed! She's smart, good-looking, and athletic, to boot. She does well at school, speaks four languages, and she is, without doubt, the most popular girl at our school!”

LIE

SILENCE
FACADE

FAKE

SUPERFICIAL

TRUE SELF

REJECTION

STEP-MOTHER

GUARDIAN

WEAKNESS

PRETENSE

EXTERIOR

WALL OF DEFENSIVE

MASK

(Again, and again, like an insufferably squeaking broken record:)

“intelligent”
(Nights spent in front of those damned books, and those horrid equations that refused to make sense, dancing before her eyes)

“attractive”

(“I'm so, so hungry. God, that steak looks tempting right now... I mustn't give in- “)

“athletic”

(“I must. Not. Lose! Anything that can be won can be lost, and I can't take losing”)

“good at school”

(“Don't you dare act like I'm the same as you! We're not the same!”)

“four languages”

(“Why'd they make us learn French at that stupid Gramma School?!”)

“And she's not just any ordinary girl genius, no, she managed to accomplish all this as a side gig to saving the Earth!”

LIAR

“She's an EVA pilot, too!”

LIAR

“Wow! So cool!”
“To think that she's an actual Captain even though she's the same age as us. She must be a lot more mature than us...”

“There can be no doubt that Asuka Shikinami is a very special young woman. A chosen being.”

“There can be no doubt that Asuka Shikinami is a lone warrior. Even when she is surrounded by other girls.”

“Only one thing.”

“Now would you look at those foolish sheep, drooling over Shikinami like idiots!”

When Shikinami Asuka entered a room, she seemed to warp space like a black hole, leaving only one single direction for people to look in.

Unless some of the people in that room happened to be Suzuhara, and the rest of the little group that Hikari had unflatteringly termed the ‘idiot quartet’.

In fact, the fours of them didn't appear particularly impressed and stuck to their corner of the rooms, not moving from the tables they were sitting on nor the walls they had been leaning against.

The taller, tan boy with the noticeable kansai-accent didn't hesitate to detail his precise opinion concerning the redhead. Aida's choice of vocabulary wasn't quite as coarse, but the opinion he expressed was not much better: “Those poor dupes don't know what they're dealing with. That woman is so two-faced, it's almost a bit terrifying.”
Mitsurugi, ever the voice of reason, made some attempts to admonish the other two.

But let there be no confusion: Though he acted like a total square, was as much of a damned nerd as the rest of them – besides, his test score had outdone hers ever so slightly in last week's test, and ever since he had been giving Shinji supplementary lessons, Asuka felt increasingly deprived of the grounds to call him her favorite insult.

Besides, he was presently arguing that they, meaning Suzuhara and the others, shouldn't sink to her childish level.

Childish her ass! She hated that more than anything. The other two were just stupid little boys, but Mitsurugi could almost be taken for a serious threat.

Ikari Shinji, Third Child, designated pilot of evangelion unit 01 -

The greatest dunce of them all.

He just kept standing there, pretending to be lost in thought, observing her with his melancholy, midnight blue gaze as if she were a tower in the distance.

She knew he wanted her – he was quite obviously distracted, only muttering the occasional monosyllabic answer in response to his friends, neither agreeing nor denouncing them.

Idiot!
If he had a problem with her, he should be a man and say it to her face – and if he wanted her, he should leave his idiotic friends behind and come to her.

He could do so much better. He could be hanging out with the coolest people around if he spent his time with her instead, besides, she'd bet anything that she could probably tutor him a lot better than Mitsurugi, whose intelligence was at most slightly above average at most. He had no talent or anything, he was just a remarkably boring person whose uninteresting life left him with a lot of time for studying.

Even so, she had been surprised to learn that the two of them had been studying together – She always thought they spent all their little playdates reading depressing poetry or something.

Truth be told, she was rather offended that Shinji had not thought to ask her if they could do their schoolwork together, when she was right there – and besides, she had a far deeper understanding about say, maths, than any simple schoolboy could possibly hope to have. She might almost say that she was a little bit hurt by it. Almost.

For once, she'd found herself feeling generous and condescended to congratulate him for his grade on a test that she could have aced in her sleep after beating up twenty angels, and what did he say in return? “Why, thank you, Shikinami-san! That's very nice of you. To be honest, I think I would have flunked it if it wasn't for Nagato's help...”

Pah! One think he would have appreciated her recent attempt to explain thermal expansion to him, fanservice included.

VERIDICT: IGNORED

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME?

“Only one thing-”

LIE

I HATE BEING IGNORED MORE THAN ANYTHING
This morning, Asuka Shikinami had been met with yet another source of great frustration.

Not too long ago, her classmates had been flocking to her seat to hear the tale of her battle against the Insubstantial Angel. The widespread devastation had still been visible right past the classroom's broken window, and everyone wanted to know how it happened.

But with the reconstruction efforts had been proceeding at an exemplary rate and a new window pane in place, the Second Child was forced to find that her epic struggle had become old news over the weekend.

And old news is old.

When she entered the schoolyard during lunch break to give her usual little speech, she was asked to wait a little bit, by a girl, whose name she had never though worth remembering – All because she and the other girls couldn't wait to “finish hearing Aya-chan's story”.

This Aya, whom Asuka had never found particularly worthy of her attention, ha managed to catapult herself from that very position to the Second Child's alloted spot at the very center of this cluster of students, by virtue of accomplishing something which any idiot could have pulled off, but which in such a circle of teenaged girls made her akin to a venerable sage:

This saturday, she had gone on her first date.

As the say: In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

“What was it like?”

“How far did you go?”

“Is he like, our age, or older than us?”

“It is someone from our school?”

“I mean, there's a boy that I've wanted to ask out for ages, but I could never really work up the courage... Can you tell me how you did it? After all, things worked out for you!”

You'd almost think she had whored herself out for the sole purpose of getting to be the center of attention for one day.

This 'Aya' person must be very pleased with herself for managing to hog Asuka's rightfully earned
spotlight, but she shouldn't get too comfortable in it.

If she wanted to, she could have been going on dozens of dates this whole time.

The nerve!

This Aya person would have to pay.

Following her first impulse, Asuka balled her fists and took a deep breath, readying herself for combat – but that very breath got stuck in her throat, along with all the words she was going to say.

She'd been thinking of shaming and reprimanding that girl, to pop her bubble on her happy day and get the others to turn against her, but that was before she had fully grasped where she was standing – Not in the center, nor even close to it, and not outside the crowd, either, just another face lost in a thickly-packed crowd.

If she were to say something against that girl, would the others even follow her? Or would she end up becoming the laughing stock herself, and be forced to admit that she'd never been on a date.

She was genuinely not sure, and that uncertainty sent chills down her back. Who was she even, without that crowd standing behind her?

It was cold, so cold, to be buried alongside all those ordinary little people.

“Don't you dare say that I'm the same as you! We're not the same! There's no way!”

I HATE BEING IGNORED MORE THAN ANYTHING

Truddging home at dusk, Asuka had to suppress the urge to punch the air in random intervals.

Not yet.
Not yet, not while there were people around to notice. Soon, soon the concentration of pedestrians would thin out as she approached Misato's appartment in the peripheries of town, there would be ample opportunity to vent her rage.

“Asuka?”

Ugh. It was only Hikari.

Though she was anything but pleased to find the class representative eying her with that typical look of maternal concern that she'd only ever seen from afar.

It confused her, and she wasn't supposed to be confused while talking to her best friend.

I WONT LET ANYBODY TAKE YOUR PLACE

“Yeah? What's the matter?” she replied, nonchalantly.

“Uh, could it be that something's bothering you today?”

A forced smile. “Bothered? Who, me?”

[…]

“You're serious, aren't you? Well you can stop worrying, it's nothing. Where'd you even get the idea?”

“...let's just forget it.”

She didn't look like she'd forgotten anything. It rather seemed like she had decided to switch tactics: “In any case... I just wanted you to know that I' very grateful to you.”
“...grateful? I mean, I'm always glad when someone actually appreciates my hard work, but what for? Is this about last week's battle?“

“That, too, I guess, but... It's a little strange to bring it up now, but you must have noticed that I didn't use to be very popular in our class. It's only natural, after all, I'm in charge of keeping order – and I don't mind that. Someone has to think of everybody's future, even if they are a lot more interested in other stuff at the moment...

It's sort of the role I've always played, ever since I was small. Since I was the middle child, I was acting as a broker between my sisters, and since we don't have a monther and our father works long hours to support us by himself, I always ended up doing the chores and looking after everyone else. I'm not the oldest, but I suppose I'm the one who had the right personality for it. Whenever Nozomi had trouble with her homework, I'd be the one explaining it to her, and whenever Kodama would hzave a fight with our dad, I'd try to help them understand each other.

I guess I was just trying to keep our family together. Someone had to do it, and out of all of us, I was the most suited to it – and since I got used to acting serious and responsible all the time, it seemed natural that I should do the same at school – Besides, I wanted to. The other children were just like our family. We were all struggling to live in the world devastated by Second Impact. Nearly everyone was missing something or someone, and there weren't enough people to help.

I don't know how things were in Europe, after all, it's about as far from the south pole as it gets, but here in Japan, the areas was already vulnerable to natural desasters, and most of the cities were built by the sea – So there was a lot of destruction.

I still remember the first nursery I went to – it was little more than a halfway dry spot in the ruins of a crumbing shopping center.

In a world like that, I wanted to do anything I could not to be another extra burden that people have to deal with – Not even for out caretakers and teachers, or my dad. After all, he didn't even have a wife to help him with raising three daughters on his own.

Don't get me wrong, it's not like I ever regretted it or like I think that this wasn't an important thing for me to do, but as I got older, I kept noticing how the other girls my age were starting to put on makeup and do sort of frivolous things together. Sometimes they made rather unreasonable decisions, but even so, sometimes I can't help but envy them.

Even when they appreciate what I do, I feel like the others sometimes treat me like I'm almost one of the adults – I always end up being the chaperone or the mother hen, and sometimes I wonder if I'm missing up on my own youth. I've barely gotten around to just being a simple girl and just doing things for fun, or simply because I want to.

I certainly never thought that I'd ever get to be friends with someone like you.
But you just accepted me into your group like anyone else and showed me that being successful in life and having fun don't have to be opposites. Ever since we've been friends, I know what it's like to be 'one of the girls'.

I just wanted you to know how much this means to me. You're a very important friend to me, and so... I guess I want you can always come to me with your worries.

If you ever have a problem of your own, I'd do anything I can to help, so don't hesitate to tell me about it, okay?"

Asuka managed no response beyond a few confounded blinks.

“I don't really get half of that sentimental mush you just said, but you're welcome I guess? There's no need to read anything that complicated into it. I can't think of any reason why I wouldn't want you to be my friend. The more, the merrier, right?”

“Mh-hm!”

That seemed to have satisfied her concerns.

I could not say it. Maybe because it wasn't really clear to me back then...

I was, I think, a little overwhelmed by the difference that existed between myself and Hikari, even though we both lost our mothers...

At that time, my view of the world had no use, no space for the thought that I admired her just as much as she admired me, that she was even much more worthy of being admired than I ever had been.

It didn't, couldn't make sense to me then, not if I wanted to live up to my own standards - and maybe it was for the better, because if I had seen something in her that I didn't have, she would have had to become my rival – She, my only ally in this big, hostile world where the only law that could really be upheld was the law of the jungle.

Why I couldn't see how much easier things were because of the one time that I didn't automatically classify a person as an enemy, I can't say... But at the time, it prevented me from realizing her true value and trusting her exactly as she had trusted me.
Among all these piles of giggling hens, Hikari was my only real friend. In truth, she and this idiot Shinji were the only people in this whole place I ever really wanted to be with... and he of all people had to spurn me.

The way I was then, with all my peculiarities and limitations, I just couldn't understand it - Mutsurugi the uptight nerd. Suzuhara the perverted class clown. Aida the crazy nerd. Yamagishi, the anxious bookworm, and most of all, that antisocial doormat, the First Child! What could this whole bunch of losers possibly have that I didn't have?

What did Shinji see in them what he did not see in me?

I tried to convince myself that it was only natural for a loser like this idiotic Shinji to feel connected to his fellow human trash, but that wouldn't quiet this one, burning question that wouldn't stop bubbling out of some back corner of my brain and floating to the surface like a bubble in a drink of soda:

Could I be that in his view I was worth so little that even all these worthless people were preferable to me?

It was driving me mad!

I WANT YOU ALL TO MYSELF

“A date, eh?” she grumbled to herself, venting her rage by climbing all the stairs to the eleventh floor rather than riding the elevator up to her flat. When she reached the top of the staircase, she would have to conceal all weakness. “I'll need to get a date sometime soon. I can't let those little schoolgirls beat me to it! Where's Kaji-san when you need him? They always cram all our free time full of those stupid synch tests, but the one time I need a pretext to show up at headquarters, they miraculously choose to leave us in peace!”

THE MOST TRAGIC THING OF ALL WAS THAT SHE WASN'T EXACTLY LACKING THE CAPACITY FOR KINDNESS

THAT ONLY MAKES IT ALL WORSE

----

In his work as a bookseller, Tanemura Soichirou was not used to having to deal with any extraordinary events.
Though there were many such events to be found in the goods he sold, his work itself was a rather quiet affair - as a modest person who needed nothing more than a roof over his head to be happy, he had deliberately chosen it to be that way.

The small shop, located at a lucrative spot near a school full of young people who were always at the very least in need of school books, was his pride and joy and the pot where much of his love wandered - And in these trying times, after the tragedy of the Second Impact and the certainty that downtown Tokyo 3 was and would remain a battlefield, his dedication was bitterly needed.

The population of the city dwindled by the day, and many of those who stayed lost all the money they could have invested in books – Those who couldn't evacuate often endeavored to at least get their children to safety, further shrinking Tanemura's main base of customers which had already been decimated by the declining birth rates: Adolescent girls who never got tired of swallowing one big fantasy tome after another.

But Tanemura remained confident that he would succeed in getting his little shop through this war, until now he had always been able to pay his rent, and there were always rays of hope: Recently, for example, a commendable young man had come by here asking for a recommendable read for a friend - Tanemura only hoped that the congratulating girl would soon infect her boyfriend with her passion for reading...

And even if this very promising-looking bespectacled girl with the long, black hair hadn't come back, Tanemura's shop had gotten a new regular customer – an individual whom the elderly shop owner still didn't quite know what to make of.

Before she came into contact with him or even entered the store, he had seen her standing in front of it a few times, sometimes across the street, sometimes right in front of the shop windows through which he had spotted her - wearing the uniform of the nearby school mentioned earlier, a white shirt under a blue vest and matching miniskirt, but the first thing he noticed about her was her pale skin and the peculiar color of her hair - it was nothing new to see today's young people bleach their hair as a gesture of rebellion against the at times fairly conformist society of this chain of islands, but this was the first time he saw someone succeeding to this degree: Every trace of color seemed gone from it, and what little could be said to remain gave the impression of an outright blueish hue - besides, this girl did not at all look like a rebel or a delinquent.

Unlike many others in her age who tried to express their individuality through all sorts of accessories as much as the restrictive dress codes let them get away with it, this particular youth appeared completely unadorned, without jewellery, without make-up, even her socks were simple, her hairstyle short and functional.

Before he could begin to hope that she was considering to come in, he experienced something slightly eerie... despite all the distance and the pane of glass, the girl suddenly looked up and looked him straight in the eye.

Her gaze left no doubt that she had very much noticed him looking at her.

It was only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough for him to wonder if he had seriously seen those red eyes.

And finally she had disappeared without a trace in the time it had taken him to blink in surprise, as...
if she had never been there... no, rather it was this possibility that seemed most likely to him at first, that he must have imagined this ghostly appearance, that she must have been a concoction of the summer heat and all the agitation concerning the battle and his own, advancing age.

If that had been the end of it, he probably would have left it at that conclusion, if it hadn't been for one little inconsistency:

He would see her again, and the next time, that ghostly child showed no signs of disappearing.

Moments ago, she might have been looking at the special offers he had placed on a stand just outside the shop's display windows, but by the time Tanemura had become aware of her slight presence in the corner of his eyes, she was staring straight at him, and he was fixed in the cross-hairs of her crimson gaze, unable to shake off the feeling that there was something... missing, as if you were looking through the windows of the soul only to find a little post-it note announcing that the place was for sale.

He had to admit the irrationality of being terrified of a middle schooler, but even so, he had felt an undeniable shiver running down his wearied spine and a distinct lump forming in his throat, though he tried his best to swallow it, unwilling to turn his back on this... presence, almost praying that she would finally move on and stop haunting him.

There was something... off about her. Something uncanny... Something inhuman...

Oh, please, please, let her go away!

But when he realized the folly of squeezing his eyes shut while he was faced with what some Stone Age instinct leftover in the crevices of his brain seemed to take for something higher up on the foodchain, it was like waking up from a bad dream: He opened his eyes to find her gone.

But his peace was only short in nature.

The elusive phantom returned on the same day, this time not early in the morning, where one could forgive such lapses in attention, but in the broad daylight of the afternoon, and this time, she appeared just as suddenly as she used to vanish.

Tanemura had been rearranging some of his books (some of which he'd actually been fortunate enough to sell today) when he felt something warm brushing against his ellbrow and - to his later embarrassment - immediately flinched away when he realized who it was.

Looking back, Tanemura was positive that it must have been a mere oversight, but at the time, he was certain that she was not there five seconds ago.

The proper response would have been an apology, but instead he took a step back – Which simply caused her to turn her head in his direction.

Her facial expression revealed nothing but perhaps a faint curiosity.

He couldn't say why, but that moment filled him with a dread that didn't fit into the context of his relatively quiet, ordinary life, which had so far gone by without much drama or extraordinary events.

Fear like he'd never known before- all because of a little girl!
And yet, it felt a little like being trapped in that split-second of a car crash when you'd realize that there would be no way of escape, not the moment of impact itself, but those instants in which there is nothing left for you to do but to observe in reverence as your laughably certain doom draws ever nearer.

He couldn't shake this impression – some deep-seated, primal, instinctive knowing of something much bigger, much older, and much more significant than himself, a being at whose feet eons and millenia meant little more than a heartbeat, looking down at his tiny existence from lofty heights where even the rise and fall of empires passed by so quickly that it barely entered perception, let alone registered in its designs of meaning.

And if she were to do that feeling justice, she ought to have been an entity that had about as much to say to him as a plant could to a man, an existence whose thoughts he could understand about as far as he could himself be understood by an ant.

What he felt in that instant was not the blind, frantic fear of a little animal struggling to hide away from a predator in order to protect its small, measly life, but the respect of a worm for its master, the awe before the creator impressed into all layers of the creature. Rather than being consumed with, absorbed into, reduced to, trapped within the fragile self, his mature human ego was extinguished all at once like a candle, like in the tale of the mountain humbling itself before allah -

Which is to say that Tanemura took an immediate step back.

But then, the developmentally younger, fussier parts of his brain turned on him and insisted on rationalizing this raw reaction proceeding from his gut, exposing his astonishingly clear premonition as a vaguely justifiable hunch he was unable to explain.

What has gotten into him, anyway?

All he saw before him was a simple schoolgirl who seemed to have fallen victim to some bizarre fashion trend, nothing more, nothing less. All she'd done so far was to look at a few books with the possible intent to buy them, which, according to all reason, ought to have been in his best interests.

Having considered himself a mature adult for a very long time, Tanemura felt quite ashamed of himself.

What was he even doing?

She was just a middle schooler, no matter what she looked like.

"Are you looking for something in particular, young lady?"

Considering all the times he'd caught her lingering in front of the store as if she were pondering whether to buy anything at all, her request was unusually concrete and precise:

"I need scientific publications that are as relevant and up-to-date as possible, in the field of metaphysical biology, preferably on the topics of artificial evolution or guided apotheosis."
Tanemura looked at the peculiar girl visibly... flattened by this not exactly everyday demand - What could an 8th grader possibly want with a proper scientific paper about... whatever that was she'd just spoken about.

"Well, I think you might be better off visiting the library of the closest university. We aren't really specialized in scientific literature, so I'd have to order it first... "

"Do that."

The store owner swallowed. Just when he was beginning to convince himself that this child couldn't possibly be anything other than an ordinary schoolgirl...

Somewhat upset by all this, Tanemura led the strange girl toward his counter, where he then used his computer - an antiquated model with a tube screen - to search for her order on a corresponding online portal.

"...What are you interested in again?"

"Metaphysical biology. Artificial evolution or apotheosis." she repeated, almost soundlessly.

Tanemura's confusion was even more nonplussed when he saw the results of the search displayed on his screen in black and white.

"Are you really sure about that?"

"Why?"

"Well, here it says that what you asked for is all highly classified government material that I'm not allowed to sell or even stock unless you show me a valid security ID, and that can't be what you meant... can it?"

"Yes, it can."

The girl pulled her satchel onto the counter where the computer was standing and quickly pulled out a small card.

NERV access class AAA.

The little picture on the other side of the NERV security card clearly showed her unmistakable blue hair, so she couldn't have stolen it from her parents like this freckled boy who had tried pulling that kind of stunt a few weeks ago.

The card was actually issued in her name and, as the owner of the store noted when he disbelieved the card, that name was "Ayanami Rei".

Ayanami Rei, First Child, designated pilot of EVA Unit 00.

Some part of him still had to fight down the 'I knew it!' upon seeing some confirmation, something real and tangible that could explain his certainty that this girl couldn't really be just a normal child with a strange hairstyle – Even so, he couldn't escape further feelings of shame and doubting his adult rationality.
Ayanami Rei, First Child, designated pilot of EVA Unit 00.

This would imply that this girl had already saved his life several times over, along with the lives of every other creature on god's green earth.

"My, my, an EVA pilot!... What do I owe the honour to?"

She said nothing about that.

Tanemura hurriedly typed the combination of numbers on the ID into the confirmation form before turning the keyboard to the Evangelion pilot so she could type in her secret pin and select the publications she wanted to order.

"Well, as it stands you can certainly have it, as long as you can pay for it... It might take a few days to arrive, but I wouldn't be surprised if it got here tomorrow, since we are here in the future capital..."

The elderly shopkeeper had his troubles filling this unpleasant silence, especially since the First Child didn't make any effort to say anything and seemed content to stare quietly in his direction.

He didn't think he had said anything that could have insulted or unsettled her, apart from his unspoken thoughts, which he couldn't comprehend himself anymore - on the other hand, she was still somehow frightening with her rigid gaze, like something from these horror movies, something deceptively human-like that ought to be kicked until it didn't move any more – Of course, he pushed these thoughts back deep into the back corners of his consciousness.

Again the girl briefly opened her bag, this time, to produce a thick bundle of neatly stacked paper money.

"Is that enough?

The sight had its own somewhat stunning effect on the shopkeeper - he couldn't remember having held such a large amount in his hands before.

"Yes, of course..."

That was probably the understatement of the century. The bundle would have easily been enough to buy the whole shop - Had she not come in the late afternoon, the entire contents of his cash register would probably not have been enough to provide enough change for even one of these bills.

"But if you like, I can see if I still have a copy of "Nature" or "Science" lying around somewhere...- " Tanemura offered, half to soothe his conscience, half because he somehow felt as if he were about to be thrown into a volcanic crater if he did not succeed in appeasing the deity that dwelled therein.

"That will not be necessary."

And then she just turned around and walked away, without another word and without another look at Tanemura or anything else in his shop, making a beeline for the door in the manner of an
automaton bound to its programming.

The shopkeeper no longer knew what to think or feel, and even less what he actually thought or felt.

He knew only that he felt disproportionately exhausted for this time of the day.

----

The return of the blue-haired girl was every bit as quiet as her last departure had been, without a word she came through the door the next day, this time without stopping or pausing. Purposefully, but not really hurried, she proceeded to the checkout where Tanemura had just unsuspectingly served his last customer – most of the other patrons turned to her in amazement and for the first time confirmed to the shopkeeper that he hadn't gone crazy, that this strange girl was indeed a part of a tangible reality, and not just an effusion from the webs of his brain.

Silent as a grave she stood in front of the cash register, silent as a grave she watched him, a little intimidated at the prospect of having to turn his back on her blood-red gaze in order to produce the item she wanted, silent as a grave she took it, yes, almost tore it out of the elderly shopkeeper's hand, without speaking a single word, and just as silently, she also turned to leave as soon as she could have felt the envelope between her pale fingers, turning on the heel without saying a word.

Time seemed to stand still as she walked out of the shop, as if not only Tanemura himself, but every single person in this room was, without exception, pinning their eyes on the back of this... this alien being there, (a notion he could not wholly fight for all he supposed that he must be imagining it) as if the constant clacking of her shoes was the only sound that still existed in this world... until that too fell silent when she stopped.

She wasn't so far away from Tanemura's cash register, though the seconds in which she covered that small distance had felt like they had been extended into eternity, like a thinly spun paste - in fact it was the stack of books on a nearby display case which had brought her to a standstill, as he would only find out after a few more viscous droplets of time had elapsed, silenced instants in which any crazy explanation could have seemed equally – To Tanemura, it had seemed just as probable that she was about to do a backflip and then plunge the universe into complete darkness, until she turned her head a little bit to the side to inspect the stacked books, or at least, that's what it looked like.

In order to prevent further, exhausting silence, Tanemura hurried to her side.

"Are you looking for something in particular, Miss Ayanami?"

At first she just stood there, like she wasn't going to react at all, but then all of a sudden, she raised her hand, and Tanemura could not have fathomed what for until she formed with her fingers a simple, pointing gesture with which she then directed to a random romance novel for reasons he did not hope to divine.

"That, please."

"Anything else?"

At this point he actually got the impression that she was pausing to think for a moment.
"I would like..." she then spoke monotonously, "...to acquire the entire published materials of the biologist Dr. Ikari Yui."

"I'd have to... order that first..."

"That's not a problem."

And she was gone.

It didn't take Tanemura long to find the books and publications that were requested - this Ikari had apparently been a pioneer in her field at the time. But mixed in between the entries about her works were writings about her mysterious death, and the smell of conspiracy theories clinging to them, accounts of what seems to have been a huge scandal at his time, vague rumours about human experiments, and far more definite accounts of a trial, in which her co-worker and husband had been to answer for the whole thing as the person in charge of the experiment –

And even more rumours, diffuse whisperings according to which secret backers had bought the man's freedom in order to keep their machinations secret.

Reflecting back on it, Tanemura had indistinct memories of the event, or rather, its coverage on the news, but at the time he had dismissed it as media sensationalism, because as a simple down-to-earth man, he had never been enthusiastic about such speculations -

But now, he was privy to one additional detail which, all by itself, led him to thoroughly revise his opinion about it.

Indeed, as of this instant, he would have been ready to believe that this long-dead woman had risen from the grave to take revenge on her husband, and the piece de resistance that so changed his mind was nothing but a single image of her.

The picture showed her smiling warmly into the camera with an adorable toddler on her arm, but above all it showed her face, a face that wasn't nearly as unfamiliar to Tanemura as it should have been...

He ordered the books, swallowed hard, and cursed his creator for making the human memory so much harder to erase than the files on a hard drive.

----

Even if Tanemura chose not to think these not quite explicable circumstances surrounding their first meeting and would never comfortable with the subject, the upshot was that he somehow managed to win over a new regular customer.

Between these few points of quasi-paranormal liminality, his life had gone on as usual, and nothing had truly disrupted his old, familiar paths, or his regular routine of getting up, making breakfast, going to work and going to bed, and thus, he had no grasp on whatever it was that had made him
experience these horrible feelings, it just didn't make sense.

He couldn't name any concrete quality or feature about the encounter that could have made it so wrong or off-putting, and the consequence, the end result, had been normal after all:

This Ayanami girl regularly visited his store and washed money into his tills, nothing very unusual ended up happening, so it should be the most sensible thing to bury those initial impressions - It wasn't the last time, of course, he got the impression that this Ayanami Rei wasn't exactly...the most average girl on the planet, but why should he expect her to be?

She was the First Child, one of NERV's pilots.

That was as good an excuse as any – it wasn't even that he didn't like the girl - after dealing with her on a regular basis, he found reason enough to find her downright endearing, it wasn't hard to dismiss this... oddity as mere awkwardness yes, the longer he knew her, the more time went by, the easier it became to just imagine her as a somewhat withdrawn, shy, but basically nice schoolgirl...

Over time Tanemura also learned a few things about her, here and there, quite casually, for example that this boy, who had been asking for literature for a female acquaintance some time ago, had been none other than the Third Child (he had seemed so inconspicuous!) and that the girl's guardian, for whom the item she had first bought was intended to be a gift, was none other than the head of the nebulous organization that defended the city, but when Tanemura asked what he was like, the EVA pilot didn't know how to answer.

She bought a lot of different books, across all genres, from children's fable books to cult classics, ranging from selections which almost made one think that this girl had never read anything at all, to highly philosophical, renowned works of art and mountains of scientific literature, philosophical or religious writings.

The shopkeeper couldn't make heads or tails of her choices and finally gave up trying to learn anything about her, but found that she, for some reason he couldn't guess, had a predilection for stories, which dealt with artificial intelligences - clones, androids, cyborgs, golems, homunculi, living computer programs, and so on and so forth - which meant that she soon found herself at home in the dusty science fiction/fantasy corner (Would she turn out to be little more than a harmless nerd? The common prejudice that no women were hanging around on the Internet was long outdated after all)

Even so, she soon largely settled on critically acclaimed, high-brow choices, much more than one would expect of someone her age.

When Tanemura once recommended her a copy of 'Twillight' simply because many girls her age seemed to be crazy about it, she came back to return it on the same day.
One might wonder how she managed to finish each pile of books before coming to buy the next one, the sheer speed with which she conquered the mountains of literature, though it was only a little beyond what one would be used to after spending a lifetime dealing in hefty fantasy tomes.

Even so, it was apparent that she was a smart young lady – Just as that scientist must have been, before she was met with the mysterious circumstances of her death –

But as I said, that was an avenue of thought that he would rather not chose to explore.

In any case, it was not too uncommon for above-average intelligence to be dispensed without an appropriately-sized package of social skills. Really, the only thing that truly unusual about this girl were her eyes, and was it so far-reaching to suppose that they, too, could have its logical explanation somewhere?

The other day, the few shelves with the DVDs and BluRays had also attracted her interest. Once again, he had asked her if she was looking for something in particular when he had discovered her with one such disk in her hand, and she had only pointed at it with the other hand and asked: "...can you recommend a shop where I can acquire the necessary devices to play this?

After a short pause, he mumbled that there should be a small electric shop a little further along the street, but upon his comment that there would certainly be a larger selection in a larger shop in the center of town, she only said that this would not be necessary.

"Anything else?"

She took a book from one of the shelves and pointed at it with her free hand.

"Where can I get the appropriate furniture for storing those...?"

Did she really not have a single bookshelf anywhere in her home?

"No, I haven't had any use for it before."

Tanemura could never make sense of her...
something that was far beyond his understanding and would come back to haunt him one distant
day, returned to break him apart like a woodem chopstick...

But it wasn't hard to ignore.

-----

The box with the individual parts that would one day become a bookshelf stood unopened to her
left, next to the low little refrigerator with the pills and the beaker on it.

The books would have to spend this last night in several piles on the floor, complex biology books
next to Oscar Wilde's "Happy Prince", adjacent to a completely different prince from the pen
Niccolò Machiavelli, Shakespeare's Othello next to Goethe's "Faust", the "Sorrows of the Young
Werther" squeezed somewhere in between, over it a few more modern works like Behanndt
Schlink's "Reader" and Asimov's Foundation Trilogy, Fontane's "Effi Briest" next to "The Little
Prince" and the works by Michael Ende, flanked by currently fashionable and/or critically
acclaimed books of which the most recent was only published in 2014, but some also dealt with the
tragedy of the Second Impact, in several stacks, a few next to the bed, a few next to the drawers, a
few on the wall next to the fridge, apart from the few books that had been left open on the page
that the First Child had last read, which apparently lying around randomly in her vacuous flat -
onece assembled, the shelf would be well filled.

At the moment it wasn't the books that had attracted the attention of the owner of the appartment,
which now seemed a little less bare, but another object that was relatively new here: She had put
the small, old-fashioned tube TV with its ugly, grey plastic case together with the BluRay player in
her already mostly unused closet, mostly because she could close the closet door and hide the
compartment without disrupting the rest of the room and its own, cryptic order, which only its
owner understood – Rei had bought the cheapest device from the store because she had seen no
reason to buy a better one.

She was currently sitting in front of the flickering box, which enveloped her facial features in an
almost demonic, bluish light that extended into the already ghostly apartment as the only source of
brightness, and looked into it with apparent focus, without her facial features revealing any
reaction, which - at best! - went beyond barely noticeable thoughtfulness.

It was up to the viewer's eye to ponder whether the many colorful, noisy scenes full of life,
heartache, and emotion presented to her by the screen elicited any reaction at all.

A wild flood of images roared across the small screen, throwing dazzlingly vibrant lights into her
colorless face.

-----
"Then you're not afraid of death either?" the little boy asked disbelievingly, as he watched the imposingly-built man, if this literal fighting machine could even be described as such, whilst he searched the arsenal for something useful.

The Android made him wait for his next answer.

One could almost be tempted to think he was hesitating.

"I have to stay functional until our mission is accomplished."

The boy's reaction surprised Rei a little. Instead of somehow commenting on how "robotic" that answer was, he just sighed and said, "I know. I have to stay functional too..."

----

“KANEDAAAAAAAA!”

“TESUOOOOOOO!”

----

“KHAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAN!”

----

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

As deficient as Rei's knowledge of pop culture was, she was pretty much blindsided when Anakin actually joined the Dark Side.

She had felt somehow connected with him and his origins as the "child of the force itself" or as an artificial being created by Dath Plagueis, and as a chosen one who didn't quite get along with his role, he reminded her of Ikari-kun. Unknowing in many respects, she had actually watched the movie labeled "Part I", at first and continued from then on... Now she knew where this quote from Captain Katsuragi's quiz came from, though the whole thing left her with a bad taste in her mouth, though she couldn't quite say way...

Somehow she couldn't help but imagine Ikari-kun in Luke's clothes, herself as Leia and the Second Child as Han Solo, even though she felt inclined to revise this image in the light of later events and
revelations.

----

"Edward..."

The moment he heard her voice, unusually familiar and steeped in the ghost of a strangely maternal tone that did not quite manage to penetrate her apathy, the blonde boy immediately understood whom he was facing.

The thought of this possibility had long stalked him like a stubborn specter, and with every new secret revealed to him and his brother, this little voice in the back of his head became louder, this inevitable certainty that the extent of his sin weighed even harder than he had dared to hope.

Confronted with what he had done, he was unable to move an inch, and anything within his skull that was not completely paralyzed by the shock had already accepted his fate.

This was no more and no less than the punishment he deserved.

"Edward, why couldn't you make me right...?"

-----

"Minoru-sama... I'm sorry I worried you... Initializing self-diagnosis..."

"Mhm..."

"Minoru-sama... There was a slight loss of data... It is the data about your sister... I beg you, Minoru-sama... Give it back to me-"

"Anything else?"
"Uh...? The personal memory data is on my main hard drive, so it's still undamaged..."

"I understand... In this case... you don't need my sister's data."

"Hm?!"

"...my sister died... and I could not accept that. I just couldn't forget her, no, I didn't want to, and that's why I built you and made you look like her, as closely as I could remember her...

But despite everything... you are not my sister, and you never will be...!"

"...I'm sorry... If only I could be more useful to you-

"No, that's not what I mean!

...Nobody could ever replace my sister, but I realized ... that you are just as irreplaceable for me, Yuzuki!"

"I... I am irreplaceable"?

"That's it!"

"But... I am only a Persocom..."

"Yes, but... for me there is no other Persocom like you, Yuzuki. Even if you're just following your programming... There is only one you. So you don't need my sister's data.

The time I spent with my sister is one of the most precious memories for me, but... The time I spend with you is just as valuable to me...! And that's why I want to cherish this time as it is from now on, instead of just seeing you as a substitute for my sister... Little by little, more and more..."
"...although I can't replace your sister... do you still want me at your side?"

"I want you with me, Yuzuki, and no one else."

"...Minoru-sama..."

[...]

"Hideki... Chii is a perscom."

"Yah..."

"There are things Chii can't do..."

"Yah..."

"But... Chii still wants to be with Hideki!"

"Yah..."

----

...what's her status?"

"She's somewhat compromised by the experiments right now, but we should still be able to use her."
"I understand..."

"...Papa!"

"Nana. I have a request for you."

"A request? What is it? What should Nana do? Nana will do everything Papa asks her to do!"

"... "Papa"? What does she mean by that? She's not really Director Kurama's biological daughter, is she?"

"Of course not.

But Number Seven has been imprisoned in this laboratory all her life and has been subjected to painful experiments all this time... If she hadn't found something to cling to, something to support her, her mind would have collapsed a long time ago..."

"And that support... Is Director Kurama?"

"He's her assigned caregiver. That he is her father is her own confabulation. He thinks that in time, she would be needing his company less and less, but I'm not sure... Probably, it was only her desire to please him that made her survive all these hardships... Number Seven is obedient to the point of self-sacrifice and her vectors have never been directed against a human being - at least not yet..."

(At the point where Nana asked her "Papa" for his tie, Rei felt compelled to place her hand on the old glasses she had laid next to her, without looking away from the screen - it wasn't that she was afraid in any way that the most bloodthirsty or scary movies would have had to make a lot of effort to surpass the real life of a real human guinea pig.

(Lucky for her, because the shop owner had preferred to just give her whatever she wanted, instead of pointing out that she was far too young for some of the things she had taken with her, lest he displease this uncanny entity in the shape of a girl)
Rather it was the simple fact that she had done something on her own initiative, that she had never
done before, that for her equaled entering absolute new territory and thus aroused the need to take a
piece of her familiar world with her, a kind of protection. If anyone had been in the room with her
at that time, he would have noticed a thin smile on her lips.)

[...]

"Director Kurama... I never asked you... do you have a family?"

"My wife and daughter have passed away."

"I'm sorry, I-..."

"...I killed them with my own hands."

[...]

"Father... I wanted to meet you... all the time I spent alone in this dark room... I... I knew, always...
that one day my real father and my real mother would come to get me, and that... that all three of us
would be happy together forever...

I have waited... waited so long... and now you are finally here!

Father!

"I have caused the death of so many people... because of my own daughter... because I let you
live...."
I am the only one who is to blame for this...

...and that is why I will end it right now."

"...But... if that is so... then why did I have to suffer all these terrible things in my life? Then what have I been waiting for all this time...?

Why?"

"She is dangerous...Papa...Papa, we have to run away! “

"...'Papa'? Why is this girl calling you 'Papa' when you've left me alone all this time?! Why?"

-----

"When I was little, I always thought that my best feature was my long, black hair. But the people I trusted betrayed me and sold me to the organization, and that day I lost everything...

I could either die as a beggar or become a tool of the organization - I didn't have much choice.

I wasn't the only one, it was the same for all the others who joined.

Nobody ever knocks on the organization's doors of their own free will.

On that day, my body was cut wide open, I ceased to be human and became something else.

And my beloved black hair, my beloved black eyes... All colors were bleached out of my body, leaving behind only these shiny silver eyes...
I have no use for fancy food or a soft bed...

How pathetic..."

-----

...and so now of all times they stood before the sight of the seemingly impossible:

The blonde, young woman, who had served the crew of this ship until now as a cool, controlled first officer, did not point her pistol against the enemy, but turned back, and directed its muzzle right into the speechless face of her superior.

Hadn't she been the captain's most loyal, fanatical follower, had she not been ready to throw away her life without batting an eyelash just minutes before, in order to finally complete the mission of revenge to which the crew had devoted itself long, long ago?

She might have been the last person they would have expected to turn traitor, but the straight, outstretched arm that held the revolver was a sign of her usual cool efficiency in trying in vain to restrain her trembling emotions from seeping through.

"...I didn't care that I was only a substitute for your real daughter, whom you had loved... It was enough for me just to be with you...

Yes, until your daughter, Nadia, miraculously appeared before our eyes!

At first I was terribly afraid that Nadia would drive me out of your heart... But you stayed away from her and didn't tell her that you were her father...

You continued to burn with the thirst to take revenge on New Atlantis...

You remained the man I loved...
But...

Why did you have to return to being an ordinary father?

Why didn't you remain the man I had loved?

One shot will be enough to kill you...

Tell me why you did not ignite the self-destruct, tell me why you did not drag Gargoyle to his death!"

"I couldn't make the same mistake again..."

"A mistake? So that's what you call the time when you slaughtered your people and devastated your kingdom?"

"...Yes. I must atone for what I have done, It is only for that that I have lived on..."

"Then why didn't you ignite the self-destruct?"

"...For thirteen years you fought at my side... I see you as my own daughter, and did not want you to atone for my sins...

The reason that I could not do it was you, Elektra!"

"...that is not fair... I cannot shoot you any more..."

[...]
"Exactly... let's go back to earth. To your home..."

"But what are you saying, Nadia? We go to our home. You were born and raised there, weren't you? So we both come from the earth.

"Oh Jean..."

----

“If you want to know what is inside an Egg, you need to break it.”

----

"...have you been thinking about leaving Section Nine?"

"Tell me Batou, which parts of you are still for real?"

"Hey, are you drunk already?"

"Well, if we want, we can break down the alcohol in seconds thanks to an internal chemical control system. We don't get blackouts or hangover and can sober up at any time. This even gives us the opportunity to drink during work. People feel the urge to remedy everything they see as a limitation, all technical achievements follow this principle.

You and I represent the highest stage of this development. Our cyberbrains and cyborg bodies are characterized by sharper perception, increased stamina and responsiveness through faster and more comprehensive information processing, but we can no longer live without maintenance...

Well, I don't want to complain. You can get over that little bit of maintenance."
"The only thing we haven't sold section 9 yet are our Ghosts..."

"Yes, we could quit, but only if we gave the government back our cyborg bodies and cyberbrains and the secret information stored in them, there wouldn't be much left to resign...

The Human body and mind are composed of innumerable components that form a unique individual... My face and voice distinguish me from others, but my mind belongs to me. There are memories of the time when I was little and an inkling of the future. The huge amounts of information I process and the networks to which my cyber-brain has access, this is how I wonderfully create the consciousness of my personality.... And at the same time I realize that I can only move within certain limits."

"And that's why you throw your cyborg body into the sea like a stone?"

----

"Tell me Light... have you ever told the truth in your life, even once?"

----

"After some time, I had only one thought... what if that which I thought until now as myself is in fact just a fake which I created through my efforts?

What if somewhere in me, there is another me? My true self?

I thought that and I thought that it was bad, that I thought it...

That it was something I should never have noticed...

You took off my masks one by one. You were like light to me... and the light drives away the darkness.

Only by the fact that it exists, it indicates that there is darkness...
...that there's darkness in my heart... To be honest, I despised you for it... and that's why I rejected you...

"But why?! I helped you to see your true self, didn't I? So why don't you try to become more honest with yourself? Why are you still hiding your true self?"

"Well, what if he's the worst person imaginable?

What if I am like my parents? I am afraid of my own blood... I must not be a useless person – for the sake of father and mother!"

"You must love your adoptive parents very much, right Arima-kun?

But you know, Arima-kun, if you continue to put on a front like this, I don't think that you can ever become a real family... Real friends and a real family are people who love you as you are, even if they know your faults..."

----

And then, all of a sudden, her inconspicuous, dainty little body shook with a wave that tattled her clothes, splintered the hair ornaments that had accompanied her all the way here and held her braids in place, warping her appearance in the blink of an eye, and striking fear into the souls of her persecutors – suddenly, the soft, rose-colored hair of an artist had been replaced by a beastly mane, and in place of a detailed dress whose many gaps and incisions had formed only part of its complex structure, were a few shreds that barely covered anything more than a circus costume, and once soft, girlish skin seamlessly merged with dynamic whips and blades of crystal, which left behind severed cables and burst metal plates where it made contact with the enemy's war machines, stretching far beyond her distorted shape that, with all the rags and wild hair swirling around her, suddenly seemed to take up much more space.

There was a multitude of small, inexplicable signs of a physical metamorphosis, each of which would have told everything in a detailed photograph, reptilian pupils, pointed ears, fangs, and the ugly, crystalline marks that had cut their way out of their once tender cheeks, but it was the animal roar from the source of their otherwise so silent, high voice that made it more than sufficiently clear, that she had given up all attempts to fake a human figure, and neither did she stop long enough to let the sight be examined - Her blind, furious onslaught came with feathers, came with wings, and by no means of the kind one would associate with an angel - The crystal blades that
moved her with simplicity, dynamism, and intuition, like her own limbs, stretched and bent, not bound by conservation of form and mass – they proceeded from her claws like the most natural protuberances, and their support allowed her this predatory agility, whose wild leaps would undoubtedly have broken all the bones of a human girl.

Et was only when one of the Endlaves that she had shredded exploded behind her, and sent her flying alongside the heat and debris, that all those involved remembered her again and considered that she was still a physically tangible part of this world and critically outnumbered - but that alone did not prevent her from rising up again from the dirt and ashes, and like an aggressive animal, which understood nothing of strategy or chances of winning, forcing herself again and again up from the ground, in order to fling herself back at her opponents like a rabid harpy.

"I don't mind being a monster! I don't care that my feelings are just fake forgeries... I am still me, and therefore I will protect Shu...!

Even if I am only a fake... at least for myself I am... the only real one there is..."

----

"Lain! Why did you leave only me? Why did you leave only my memories alone? Why do I have to be the only one who remember all these terrible things? Do you hate me so much? I can't take it anymore!"

"No, that... you got that completely, Alice... I would never want to make you unhappy..."

"Liar! Look what you've done!"

"But you're all right now, aren't you Alice? You were my only real friend, even though we were never connected..."

"Where... what are you talking about?"

"You were my only real friend, only you... And without a connection, at that."
"C-connection? What kind of connection do you mean?"

"Well, the one to me and... everyone else..."

"Leave me..."

"I love you, Alice. Did you know that?"

"L-Lain, do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"Originally, all people used to be connected on an unconscious level... I just re-established that connection. Nothing more".

"L-Lain... you?"

"Hm... you could also say that I didn't actually do anything... Actually, it didn't matter what was real, this one or that one over there, I was always in both worlds. I'm a program designed to break the barrier between the wired and the real world."

"L-Lain you are a... *program*?"

"Actually, even you and the others are just applications. You don't really need a body, you know?"

"You're wrong."

"Huh?"

"I don't quite understand what you're talking about, but I think you're wrong... Your body may be cold, but you're alive... and I'm alive too, you see?"

My heart beats... bum bum, bum bum..."
"Hihi, but why is it beating so fast?"

"I guess that's because I'm scared."

"But you are smiling, Alice."

"Yes, but in truth, I've always been a big scaredy-cat... I don't even know why..."

---

"I think it was around the end of May... it was the first time I visited a public library, and I didn't know what to do to get a library card... And on that day the librarians seemed so busy that I didn't dare to ask them...

Besides, I'm not good at talking to strangers... So when I was standing there wondering what to do, someone suddenly called me and took care of all the formalities to get me a card... I just took the card and left without saying anything... And that person who helped me... that was you, Kyon-kun.

I... always regretted not thanking you properly for that..."

---

In retrospect, Rei could not say when it had come to be so late.

Had she been careless?

It wasn't the first time this had happened to her during this activity, she might consider desisting from it on days before important experiments.

(The phenomenon that time often seemed to fly by if one was entertained was not so familiar to her yet.)
The impression all this had left her with was... hm.

The many images flickering across the screen had actually provoked a whole lot of coming and going reactions, few of which Rei knew how to label - almost like a distant observer in her own soul, she had simply watched these sensations germinate, blossom and then wither again, letting them drift away like ships on the horizon.

It had taken her quite a while to even realize that the adjective she was looking for to describe her experience was “intense”, but with time she had become more and more certain of it... It was as if in these texts she had been granted access to the experience of some strangers far away, and found them filled with statements, questions and descriptions that she herself had always wanted to say in the same way, only that she had never found the words to do so – It was a confirmation that she was not the only one who asked herself such questions or pursued such thoughts... She had always thought that they were meaningless because they had nothing to do with her function, but here they were, long and wide and spread out on the canvas...

Maybe it was different when you had never been assigned a certain function – Though until now, she had always considered the others in her surroundings to be serving 'functions' of their own. The Second Child and Ikari-kun existed to control Evangelions, the Commander existed to guide NERV and to execute his plans, the class representative was there to keep the class in line...

It was only now that she was beginning to consciously appreciate the difference as well as the true depth of the gulf between them and her.

Many of these works portrayed the question of one's purpose as if it were one of the most important questions for a normal person to think about: Where they had they from and where were they going, and exactly what was the meaning of their existence supposed to be?

And if she kept in mind that he probably spent considerable time wondering about these questions, a lot of the things she had never understood about Ikari-kun made a lot more sense.

These past thinkers often dwelt on the question of where this meaning ought to come from... From God? From other people? Or was it something that people were supposed to give themselves?

Another point of contention concerned deliberations on the matter of how free one was to choose that meaning, how one could search for it or even change it.

Had the people around her given themselves their own meaning?
Rei had never paid any attention to such things and she did not believe that she would be able to say so right away...

She didn't know.

But that was probably not a problem. All these considerations were all very well, but ultimately, they were completely meaningless to Rei herself, weren't they?

None of it concerned her. She wasn't a human being, she stood outside this whole conundrum of meaning – She never had to look for her reason of being, since she had known it from the beginning, and she had known that it came from her creator, Commander Ikari. She'd never had to question if her creator really existed, for she saw him almost every other day, and when she did not see him, she would at least see his son, who was himself a proof of his existence.

She had always known where she had come from, and where she would be going when the endless circles of the human instrumentality project finally closed.

----

Instead of staring at the old familiar ceiling in his room, Shinji had made an exception and instead chosen to peruse the one in Misato's living room for very much the same purpose.

It hadn't been a conscious decision per se. Essentially, his return to the appartment had simply turned out in such a way that he had let himself sink into the wide open couch rather than locking himself away as he usually would.

After taking out the garbage and cleaning up the appartment, he'd felt a little bit tired, and since he'd dropped his walkman on the couch earlier, he saw no reason to go anywhere else, especially since he had the appartment to himself – Asuka was still out Misato would not be returning from NERV HQ before nightfall.

At first, the change in location didn't seem to make much of a difference. He lay there, staring ahead with his headphones plugged in, wracking his brains about the same worried that had occupied it the day before.

For a long time he chewed through numerous possibilities and implications in his thoughts, derived all possible conclusions from the given axioms, until he found himself going around them in circles as if they were lossoms of parallel universes springing up from the vacuum. To obtain further answers, to confirm or deny any of the theories he had spun into the air, he would need
more information, new facts, better questions and most of all, experiments to test it— but he had neither the courage nor the opportunity to carry them out, especially since he had not seen the primary subject of his mental wanderings since the whole thing with Mayumi, and neither did he have the means to seek him out.

(Or perhaps, that's what he used it a pretext to avoid dealing with the possibility that his father would refuse to see him...)

Either way his thoughts just kept sloshing around in his head, trapped inside his skull, without anything of consequence coming in or out of it...

He might as well have been standing in the center of the busiest square in the center of town, enclosed in a box of glass that not even the most muffled sounds could escape, alone in silence and somehow lost, trapped inside himself....

Those thoughts kept making his emotions rise to a boil and he didn't think he had any way to let them out, to get to a catharsis or to talk to anyone about it... Asuka would just laugh at him, Touji, Kensuke and Nagato wouldn't understand, and Rei... Rei was very loyal to his father and he didn't want her to make her angry by questioning her esteemed superior in front for her.. As for Misato... she would probably try hard to appear understanding and make all sorts of probing suggestions, and the last thing he needed was anyone's opinion on the futility of his concerns — he couldn't deny that there might be a point to it, but he just didn't want to hear it...

How stupid and naive could you be?

This one little comment by Rei about his father not having any problems with him and Rei spending time together... He must surely be reading too much into it. Maybe his father hadn't really thought about it and didn't particularly care who Rei hung out with as long as they weren't an ax murderer or a drug dealer....

And even if it did mean more than that, it would hardly be enough to erase ten year's worth of hatred, and the truth was that he could still feel it burning in the back compartment of his being, but he really, really wanted this sparkle of hope to real and true, against all reason, and just for that, he could have started to hate himself all over again... No wonder if Asuka thought him pathetic...

There ought to be a limit where a person with healthy amounts of self-respect should be willing to forgive, no matter what else the other person did afterward... or was this way of thinking resentful and childish...?
If only there was someone who could answer this question for him... or would this attitude only confirm that the things Asuka had said while waiting for the last angel to emerge from its cocoon had reflected the truth all too accurately...

He could stand this uncertainty no more than he could endure the fear that he would not like the answers he so longed for, and so, it was no coincidence that he made very few attempts to seek them out, but instead tended to leave them undefined as long as they did not force themselves upon him, like a cat in a box.

"I guess I'm... pretty pathetic, huh...?"

And all of a sudden, without him really being able to explain it, he spontaneously had the dull feeling that Asuka was about to make trouble for him.

"Of course you are!"

"Huh?"

His astonishment should have been directed at those sudden words, but what really startled him was that he somehow felt that he had known exactly what Asuka was going to say next, even if only for a tiny moment...

It was as if he had seen the same scene thousands and thousands of times, with each repetition leaving little more than a quiet reverberation, every one of them no more than the breath of a whisper that nonetheless summed to a clearly audible chorus which seemed to predict the redhead's words down to the smallest detail in her accentuation of syllables, almost as if Asuka were simply repeating whatever this echo kept saying.

"Hey! Don't ignore me when I'm talking to you!"

Before Shinji really had a chance to rouse himself from his consternation, or even to get into a halfway upright position, he already noticed his faithful little cassette player being brusquely torn from his hand and yanked away from him with a swinging movement, so that the headphones were removed from his ears in a much harsher manner than the manufacturers had ever thought to account for.

For a short time, the sight of the cables following the motion of her arm appeared to be followed by a trail of countless afterimages. Ghostly echoes detached from her skin and disappeared into it again once her motion had ceased... and the same was true for her subsequent disparaging look, which she next directed at the antiquated device. It seemed strangely familiar to him, like a scene from some TV series he'd been forced to watch ad nauseam.

He could practically still see the apparition trailing before his eyes, as material and solid as the Second Child who was standing in front of him at this very moment...

The way she had held his vassente player on its sides, between her right thumb and index finger, as if it were contaminated with some disease she didn't want to contract. One might almost think that she was wary of getting pregnant from it.

In any case, she lifted the device further into the air, with her arm outstretched and not without ever letting it out of the reach of her skeptical gaze, until she was able to classify the notes emanating from the severed connection between the device and Shinji's ears.
Her body was shaken by her typical condescending giggle, and as usual her gestures set her whole body in motion, and so, movements made the long wires to the headphones swing like pendulums and, in one case, slam against the couch, reminding him that his cherished little device was now pretty high above the floor.

It wasn't just the few fruits of his teacher's attempts to educate him that revolted against that idea (Electrical appliances were to be treated with care!) - It just so happened that this little humble Walkman, which he'd kept alive long past its experation date though his loving care, was a lot more to him than just any old gadget-

"Nine Inch Nails? Really? Are you serious? I guess 'Linkin Park' wasn't quite emo enough for you anymore... Now I know you really have problems!"

But... he liked this music...

"Th-That's mine, Shikinami-san... please give it back to me..."

It wasn't just the threat that she might destroy his prozed position, but also the otion that it was none of her business what music he liked or didn't like to listen to. He felt exposed, as if she'd just bared his very thoughts and feelings for everyone to see.

He just couldn't stand to have her making fun of it...

But what could he do?

He was completely at her mercy...

(Again, he felt the pull of these memories or whatever they were, but this time not quite so gentle-)

She kept mocking him with her laughter. "Alright, you can have it back, if you ask me very, very nicely!"

(...and the icy cold of her voice in the present reminded him of that one day, the only day he could possibly have meant...)

"...Please, Shikinami-san..."

(What was he doing here? So far, Asuka had been engraved into the loops and valleys of his brain as someone of whom he definitely knew: 'This person is much, much stronger than me'. But now that he considered it...)

And she laughed him down once again.

He simply did not understand... he had done what she told him to do, what else did she want?

(That's nonsense... He only needed to look at her once, her petite, slim body - she was built quite differently from him – with exercise, he could easily surpass her, and break her apart like a wooden stick...)
This helplessness...

(No, that's not it. He had done it before... once, far, far away, when she had spoken to him once too many in that same, cold voice, the straw that broke the camel's once and for all...)

"Are you listening to me, you idiot?"

"H-Huh...?"

"I asked you why you didn't throw this out old piece of thrash a long time ago! I mean, who still uses a cassette player these days? We live in the year 2015, if you haven't noticed it yet... Can't you use a normal MP3 player or at least a CD...?

Or do you know what? I'll buy you an MP3 player! I recently found a great electronics store in the city while shopping with Hikari, where they have really great equipment... I saw a really cheap one that will fit several thousand songs instead of the twelve or so that fit on such a stupid cassette, and you won't even have to rewind it! They've even got a very nice ice cream parlour next door, if you're still up for a little refreshment afterwards..."

And so she threw the old cassette player into the domestic waste basket in a casual gesture of complete, callous unconcern.

----

...so come on, get off the couch, say goodbye to your inner pig! You don't need that old thing anymore!"

That's it.

She wouldn't go any further.

She wouldn't get any closer to saying anything that could be construed as inviting him on a date. A grown-up woman, like she was supposed to be, should never give in so easily. She was already being dangerously blatant as it was, so he ought to get over himself and appreciate her generosity.

Could he not see that she had just offered to blow a considerable portion of her savings for him, could he really be so dense as not to realize that she had practically asked him straight-up to go out for ice cream with her.

She wanted him to go to town with her, and she wanted it now.
Don't argue.

LOOK AT ME, PLEASE LOOK AT ME!

What's with that look he was giving her?

What was that about now, was she not good enough for him?

And now...

If she didn't know better, she would think that she must have consumed some psychoactive substances without realizing.

Or could it be that this foolish Third Child had just stormed right past her like a kicked dog, giving her a wide berth in deference to her clear status as the local Alpha Primate, and then made serious efforts to dig through the waste basket and all the crap it contained therein order to fish out his antiquated walkman?

...he had walked straight past her.

NOTICE ME! DON'T PRETEND I'M NOT THERE!

Not to mention that he hadn't even responded to her offer.

What was that supposed to be?

Who did he think he was?
Her approaching, angry steps came closer, and he certainly raised his pretty little head to stand up to her, but in the end he didn't have the guts to look her straight in the eye. He didn't say a word.

Typical.

"Calm down, it's not like I want to rip out your eyeballs and eat them for breakfast. ... Can't you really manage five minutes without that stupid thing? It's almost like an addiction to you, isn't it? You might think you'd forget to breathe without that thing, like the whole tape is just like 'inhale, exhale... inhale... exhale...’...”

She laughed at him.

"You know, I can do that, too!"

He looked at her only wordlessly, his lips sealed.

DON'T IGNORE ME. DON'T YOU SEE THAT I NEED YOU?

(She was screaming inside)

I HATE BEING IGNORED MORE THAN ANYTHING.

"No wonder you're such a useless whiny wimp with no friends! Not even your own dad likes to be around you!"

(Wasn't that a bit too much?)

"You're anti-social, through and through... always tucked away with your sweet little headphones in the corner... you probably think you're better than us because you could control an EVA without
training... That we're beneatzh you.. but you know what?

In truth, you're nothing but a conceited bastard that nobody likes! Except maybe the other antisocial losers you like to hang out with, like Suzuhara or the First Child!”

(Oops?)

And then he suddenly stood upright to full size, even towering over her a bit, (Since when, actually? He was definitely shorter than her when she first arrived-) right in front of her, inches in front of her face, staring straight into her eyes.

(What the...?)

For a moment she could have sworn that she had seen all the way to the other end of infinity and back, a spark of something too strange to be found in the eyes of a 14-year-old boy...

Pah!

What... what was that about?

(“Hey, Asuka..." she said to herself. "You're not seriously afraid of him are you?”)

What a kind of nonsense... what in all...

"At least I don't always turn up the volume to full blast when I want to listen to something, forcing everyone else in the house and probably the rest of the neighborhood to shut up and bear it like a certain other person!"

(Now would you look at that! So you really do have it in you to get angry. For a moment I thought you were going to sock me in the face... But you don't have the guts for that, huh? No, you don't dare.)

The tension in her muscles that had balled her hands into fists eased up, and her clenched teeth
loosened up and made way for a razorthin grin.

(No, you wouldn't dare...)

She didn't even dignify him with a counterargument:

"Oh, shut your stupid mouth, Daddy's boy."

"But...that..."

There you go! His feeble resistance had been so easy to break.

It was no different from usual.

"Oh... Just leave me alone!

The next thing she heard from him was how he slammed the door to his room, and then some undefined noises, presumably produced by his hiding under his covers.

She felt strangely hollowed out - She was supposed to be laughing in triumph, or at least demolishing something in frustration, but somehow nothing happened.

The reaction wouldn't come – When she dared to look inside her chest, she found only a calm emptiness with a slightly sad undertone.

(What was that about?)

Her inner being was in an imbalance, but it gave her no indication of how she could gain satisfaction, how she could release that tension in any way.

Should she smash something?

Was there something she needed to get her hands on?

Should she get someone's attention...?

She didn't know it, she just felt worn out and didn't know what to do about it...
Somehow, she had not derived much pleasure from ruining the Third Child's day.

(And I didn't get my stupid date either... crap... )

Was it because nothing she could do outside of combat could undo his propensity for stealing her spotlight?

What else could be the reason for her disgruntlement?

(She almost felt a little tempted to press her ear to her roommate's room door and listen to see if he was crying his eyes out.

She wondered what the sounds of his suffering would do to her... Would they bring her satisfaction? Or...)

Angrily, she got her little handheld console, threw herself on the couch he'd been sitting on earlier (it hadn't yet lost all the warmth that his body had radiated into it), and vented her frustration on the A button.

Oh damn it, she simply couldn't stand to be in his debt, let alone that itchy feeling of having to apologize to anyone...

It was all because of that stupid Third Child!

None of this had turned out the way she wanted it to...

----

All of this had been easier once, or she had imagined it to be easier... She just had to be good with her EVA, and then she would get everything she wanted, wouldn't she?

It had always been that way and it should always have stayed that way.

She still had the best sync ratio out of anyone, didn't she?

She was the best at what she did, the best in the world, wasn't she?

So why?
Why didn't everything work out the way she wanted it to?

Why did she have to be rescued by this stupid idiot and not vice versa?

Why did he get to play the hero and not her?

He had done nothing to deserve it!

Those who tried hard and worked hard were rewarded and successful in the end, wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

Today's society was supposed to be based on merit – it was no longer enough to know a few influential people, right...? Right..?

Yes, yes, damn it, she was damn sure about it - but there was a time when she didn't have to be asking herself these questions at all... It used to be obvious.

When she opened her eyes in the morning, she would wake up in her room, almost bigger than Misato's whole apartment, and she would find it lined with indisputable evidence of her greatness, the most beautiful toys on the shelves, (even if she often politely refused them) the most expensive designer clothes in the cupboards, whatever it was, if she only implied that she wanted it, she would get it.

Because she was worth it.

Every morning she would get up from her king-sized bed, sit in front of her big, spacious dressing table and get to work until everything was perfect, nothing was out of line, and last but not least, there were always her interface clips, who had her very special place between all the cosmetics, and when she looked at herself in the mirror, with those fiery red corners sticking out of her fiery red hair like horns, with an expression of determination, she would know exactly who she was.

And every morning, she would indulge in anticipation of the day when she would prove to everyone why she deserved all this and much more.
Her arrival in Japan, when she would shatter the enemy on her first attempt, the countless voices cheering for her, the moment every single hour of training paid off, the crowd chanting her name, and the steamy affair with Kaji-san that would occupy her if the monsters were to take a day off...

With every day that passed, her expectation radiated more - she saw crowds throwing her into the air in admiration, a parade celebrating her arrival, and these images would keep the fire in her eyes burning after she left the room.

---

"Who's that kid there?"

"That's our Second Child! She is the pride and joy of the third branch, no, of Europe! Her synchronization and harmonix values have even surpassed the first test person in Japan as of this month!"

"What... this little girl? Impossible!"

---

When she saw other children, it would be completely by chance. It was not something that would happen on a regular basis, and when it did, it was only now and then and in completely by chance.

Perhaps she'd see them as she drove past in an armored Mercedes Limousine, as they were romping around in a meadow engrossed in some sort of ball game, stupid cattle without any real meaning in their lives.

All they did took place in magnitudes of importance that could be measured in by a schoolboy's ruler, while the going-ons of her life called for the supernovas and lightyears with whom the depths of the universe were mapped.

She was different from them.

That was actually the primary emotion encoded in her memory of those days.
There was nothing for her to discuss with these pointless peasants, any more than a human could have a meaningful conversation with a plant.

It never occurred to her that these playing children with their carefree summer joy could have anything she didn't have.

----

"But even prodigies like you have to play from time to time... what's your favorite game to play?"

"I have no time for something like games! After all, it's about the fate of humanity!"

"But isn't that very exhausting and stressful...? It must take a lot of work to do so well at school in spite of all the training...."

"Not really, no..."

"It's always said you become a genius with 1% talent and 99% hard work..."

"With me, it's the other way around. Mind you, one percent of saving the entire world is still a lot of hard work..."

-----

In a pair of jeans, a tight top with the imprint of a broken heart and a pink hairtie, the red-haired girl sat discontentedly at the long dining table, full of expensive crockery, cutlery, decoratively lined up food and lovingly arranged table decorations, discontentedly poking around in her food with her her fork.

"Oh, Asuka! You don't know how happy we are that you're finally coming to visit us... Your father and I have been meaning to have you over for a long time, but you always had your exercises when we wanted to visit you..."

What that stupid bitch didn't know was that it was all on purpose.

"Those aren't exercises. It's training." spat the girl.

"Uh... sure..." The woman seemed a little insecure for a moment, but quickly restored her mask. "Anyway, how's your... training going?"

"I don't know how it's any of your business."

"Asuka! That's no way to talk to your mother," the man at the table finally interfered.
"Exactly, with my mother!"

She got up and didn't even bother to put place her fork on the proper spot.

"Where do you think you're going, young lady...?"

"I still have to study. And besides, I can't afford to eat this greasy stuff. God knows what it'll do to my condition."

----

"Hello, Asuka"

"What do you want?" The girl looked through the crack of the door with cold eyes.

The woman behind it pulled out a bag. "I wanted to ask you if you'd like to try on these new dresses I bought for you!"

"And why is that?"

"Well, the other day you were talking about your test scores, and how you beat out that other girl in Japan... Consider it a reward."

"You can keep it!"

"Eh...?"

"Do you really think you can just buy me with fancy clothes and toys? Don't think I didn't see right through you. You just want to suck up to daddy. You're nothing but an impudent whore who made a move on an older so you could inherit his money when he dies... You may have fooled him, but I'm smart.

You must be very arrogant to think you can fool someone who has, like, twice your IQ! Leave me alone, I have to study!"

----

"Honey, can you please tell Asuka to go to bed?"

"Why, she's studying for school..."

Langley could not have missed the sudden drop in temperature in his wife's tone of voice.

"Did something happen, Cornelia...? Did you and Asuka have another Argument?"

He sighed.

"Anyway, it's almost midnight, she has to go to bed."
"But does she really, Sebastian? What makes you think we know more about that than she does? How can we be sure of what she needs at all? She might be a child, but she's so intelligent that normal people like us can hardly understand what she's thinking..."

"Isn't that pretty irresponsible for something coming out of a trained doctor's mouth?"

"That depends on how you see it... I may be a doctor, but even Doctors don't understand everything. That should be obvious from the very fact that we humans are still not immortal. I have my limits, both in my patience, and in my ability, as well as in my knowledge... at the moment, for example, I often think about whether it is possible for a child's brain to be so developed that it has lost every need for human closeness... Maybe this is what humanity will be like in the distant future. ".

----

Either way, that night no one was there to put the little red-haired girl to bed after she had fallen asleep over her textbooks.

But the next morning she would look at herself in the mirror, her hair a mess from the turnings and tossings of her unquiet sleep, her cheeks marked with angry red where the edges of the book had been, with hair confused from sleep, and her little body packaged in a floral dress that she had rejected as childish and cheap the day before, and punched at her reflection in her desperation.

Like one possessed, she ran to the door of the small balcony that bordered this room that she would never dare call her own, turned the door handle back and forth until the door finally opened, stormed out into the dawn to its outermost edge, and seized the railing angrily between her rosy fingers, as if she wanted to crush it.

The whole stupid suburban settlement out there, the stupid tweeting birds, the little cars and baby carriages, the idyllic gardens, everything and everyone here... they drove her mad.

"...Insects..." Her voice was trembling, just like the rest of her, the rage was incredibly real and unspeakably violent that it almost suffocated her before finally finding its way out.

"YOU'RE ALL NOTHING BUT STUPID INSECTS!"

----

"This time we got away with a slap on the wrist, but... all three of our EVAs sustained non-trivial damage. If that happens more often, it could significantly affect our ability to withstand further attacks in the future." Hyuuga had just been summarizing his report when his hair, just like that of his superiors, was blown aside as the small vehicle they were sitting in raced through the large, white-lit EVA repair chamber where other technicians were constantly at work. Surreally enough, the "treatment" for the damaged fighting machine looked like lot an oversized bandage.

"It wasn't that long ago that we were forced to give EVA 00 a general overhaul, and now we've already used up half of our spare parts again... and compared to some of the previous fights, this
could be considered relatively *moderate* damage ... It's hard to believe that the higher-ups can be so stubborn about holding onto the Vatican treaty at a time like this....".

"Exactly" Misato fully agreed. After a grueling day of work, it didn't take very much to agitate her. "How very clever of them to limit the number of Evangelions any country can possess to three, even if they are damaged..."

"We are currently giving priority to EVA 01, but even if the spare parts are delivered quickly, EVA 00 will probably take several more days..." Maya agreed. "We could theoretically send EVA 00 into battle just as it is, but what if the next target arrives before we had time to repair everything or to patch up the pilots? In that regard, we've already had a pretty close call with the Sixth Angel..."

As usual, Dr. Akai's perspective on the matter was distinctly cynical: "This treaty is the product of the egos of the countries involved in it... If you tried to renegotiate it, it would only lead to endless quarrels... And besides, we're already dealing with constant demands from Russia and Europe since they lost Unit Five... Politics breeds nothing but trouble..."

Maya sighed, "And who knows what else it may take before humanity is finally safe..."

----

After a long, long day spent dealing with all the trouble the tenth angel had left behind in terms of cleanup, repair and whatnot, Misato finally found herself back in the comforts of her home, and when she did, her only concern was to head straight to her room, to strip off her clothes down to the underpants, to throw her bag into the next available corner (where it would typically stay until it was needed once more) and to slip into something more comfortable.

On her way, she retrieved a cool can of beer from the fridge and spent a few instants touching its cool metal surface to seek relief from the summer heat, all while vigorously complaining about those same brain-melting temperatures and decreeing that the angels ought to be destroyed for their effects on the weather alone.

It was only after she'd poured some booze down her throat that she even took note of Asuka, who was squatting on the sofa with a grim look on her face and a game controller in her hands. (her Gameboy had run out of juice and she had stuck it to the charger cable in her room)

Engrossed in venting her frustrations upon virtual creatures, the redhead did not dignify her guardian with as much as a greeting.
"Huh...?" Once Misato consciously noticed this odd state of affairs, she blinked curiously into Asuka's direction.

"What's the matter? Why the long face?"

"I don't know where you get the impression that anything's the matter at all," the Second Child spat back, more or less answering the question.

Misato performed an A-grade facepalm that would have made Captain Picard proud.

"Please tell me you haven't been arguing with Shinji-kun again... Where is he anyway?"

"Moping in his room of course, that's the only thing he ever does. Maybe he'll calm down again by morning."

"Did you have to pick on him?"

"As if he ever needed a reason to whine... I don't understand why everyone is making such a fuss about it when he has a bad day, there's really nothing special about it. He's such a wimp, he'll barricade himself in his hole if you as much as look at him."

This comment was amazingly effective at wiping all the forced, jovial annoyance from Misato's face.

Again, she doubted whether she had achieved anything lasting in the last three months.

The best she could say was that "depressed" was no longer the Third' Child's default state, but noticeable deviation from it... But that didn't really calm her sense of guilt.
As for the object of her worries, he was currently trying his best to block out all surrounding sounds by burying his ears under a pillow.

He had noticed her arrival, but that was precisely what prompted his retreat – He didn't want to know anything, nor hear anything he would be expected to react to at this moment. He was plainly exhausted.

The boy had surrendered himself into Morpheus' arms quite some time ago in the hope that this day would finally end, but instead, he returned from the other side drenched in sweat... It hadn't been a vision, but the certainty that it was just a product of his own crazy life made it no better.

He had dreamt of this thing, the creature he had encountered on his futile escape after his second battle, and he couldn't shake off the impression that he clearly recognized it.

He didn't want to have to think about the things he'd seen, or anything at all, all he wanted was a deep, dreamless sleep that would give him a break from his existence, but he had long since lost whatever naivety would have been necessary to believe that he should be granted such respite.

He was so exhausted, but he didn't dare to answer the question as to what exact kind of remedy he desired for this.

In any case, he had little hope that the usual night's rest would bring him much relief.

He was so very, very tired of it all.

_____________

(1) If you recognized all of those Anime/ movie snippets, you win one virtual cookie. Yes, I am aware of the irony, my only defense is that meta allusions weren't quite as worn out back in the day.

(2) The bold caps text was meant to accomplish an effect comparable to the EOTV telops or the flashing titles used in the show, a 'narrator's voice' perhaps

(3) Around the time I was writing this I was reading a lot about the inner workings of reactive, narcissistic people with fragile egos – One could quantify this along the lines of self-awareness, freedom and soul being the things that come forth when we decide in the moment rather than being stuck in rigid patterns. But unlike the esoterics, I don't really think there is this metaphysical splinter that needs to liberate itself from the patters – fear of the future and pain from the past can distract us from the present, yet without an organizing principle to filter our perception and a conception of time, we'd just be reacting to our senses; We'd be just as mechanical as someone controlled by rigid ego patters. We ARE the pattern, what is essentially a lot like a machine learning algorithm running on the computer of our brain – It's simply a stochastic Boltzmann
machine rather than a highly deterministic Von Neumann Machine with clear divisions of processor, memory and program. But we're turing complete. We can program ourselves, to an extent. We can make sure we're a flexible pattern conductive to the things we chose to do.

As an unenergetic introvert I suppose I (like Shinji, I presume) feel a bit stumped, even put into question by the existence of high-pressure, high-energy people who don't see to have that limitation – but then, even those people find a way to get themselves in mental twists so that all that energy winds up going nowhere. IT's

(4) So basically, this was meant to be an exploration, not any sort of infantile bashing, but at this point it's a few years old and I realize that it might be imperfect. I got a review to that effect on the German version. I like following things to their cathartic conclusion but any aim can be done wrong, one may get carried away and cross from what has impact precisely because its wilder parts flow from common principles to what seems too over the top to be of import to anyone.

But even aknowledging that I do think it's important to aknowledge that at times, Asuka does canonically act like a bully toward her fellow pilots and not to make light of it – of course a counterpoint or counter-thought to that is that Asuka's friendship with Hikari is actually pretty interesting, precisely because of the ordinariness that often gets it overlooked. Here's this character who's reactive to the point of seeming mechanical, who can't bond with anyone because she can't allow herself to want them and immediately sees them as rival, and she has this ordinary friendship where she'll at times even comfort or defend her just like any girl would when it comes to their best friend (ep 17, 12 etc) -

It's something people don't bear in mind when they expect that someone, like for example Shinji, should have gone and solved all of Asuka's problems for her – this friend who wasn't a rival, had experience in taking care of others and showed great patience couldn't get through to her.

This isn't to say that it's “all her own fault” but, it's about the same level of responsibility as one might or might not assign to Shinji, anything else fails to treat her as a full human with a potential for both good and evil.

It's sure one of those moment that reminds you that people you see as twisted or disagree with can still have 'soul' and act out of common humanity. It reminds me of a story I read about this very suspicious, antagonistic man whose only friend was the janitor at the school he went to because he didn't see him as threatening. It shows the extent of his problems but then again, it WAS a friendship, a glimmer of light in a dark world. One dimensionality is boring, because it makes it insultingly obvious what needs to be done, which isn't always so clear-cut IRL

(5) Another goal was to play around with perspective in the way the anime “His and Her Circumstances” does pretty well. Similar things could be said about the segments with Rei – It's not so much about portraying her character a certain way as to explore what it might look like from various possible perspectives

(6) A thing with Rei is that a lot of characters have a lot of different, at times contradictory readings of her Gendo, Fuyutsuki, Ritsuko, Asuka...) which, more than anything, seem to be projections of their own hopes and fears on not quite an empty slate but certainly an ambiguos one – all the while she is painfully aware that others only see whatever meaning they've made her the symbol of and wouldn't notice if she, the person, is there or not. The most unbiased readings probably come from Touji and Kensuke, not the ones from ep 5 when they dismiss her as “that one weird classmate” but the more nuanced povs we see in eps 14 and 17/18 after they've gotten a bit more of an impression just by virtue of her being the friend of a friend.

Shinji's certainly ostensibly the first person to actively make a point of giving a fuck, but his
attempts are feeble, inconstant and possibly tied up with the mysteries surrounding his parents and thinking that she may be a key or an obstacle to that, which she also knows (ep 15 etc.)

It is sure worth contemplating what it was about him that, though he' not above being creeped out by the legitimately creepy aspects of it all, led him to at least as much interest as repulsion – maybe the part of him that's already understatedly drawn to the grotesque, the silent and the “empty unchaging void of space”

Unlike some people, I do not think that it in any way negates the very genuine care he has and the real warmth exchanged; It is simply a complication, as they exist between all the characters.

(7) Yes. He is beginning to realize. CotP will continue in 2.20: [At The Heart Of The World], in which being the chosen one continues to suck, as poor Shinji can't even take a nap in peace without some sort of metaphysical interruption.

(8) I remember having been quite proud of this chapter at the time, but it may have been overly ambitious – I'm uncertain if it aged well.
I linger in the doorway
Of alarm-clock screaming monsters calling my name
Let me stay
Where the wind will whisper to me,
Where the raindrops as they’re falling tell a story

In my field of paper flowers
And Candy Clouds of Lullaby
I lie inside myself for hours
And watch my purple sky fly over me

Don’t say I’m out of touch
With this rampant chaos, your reality
I Know well what lies beyond my sleeping refuge
The nightmare I’ve built my own world to escape

In my field of paper flowers
And Candy Clouds of Lullaby
I lie inside myself for hours
And watch my purple sky fly over me

Swallowed up by the sound of my screaming
Cannot cease for the fear of silent nights
Oh how I long for he deep-sleep dreaming,
The goddess of imaginary light
In my field of paper flowers
And Candy Clouds of Lullaby
I lie inside myself for hours
And watch my purple sky fly over me

If you need to leave the world you live in
Lay your head back and stay a while
Though you may not remember dreaming
Something waits for you to breathe again

Evanescence, 'Imaginary'

"But there's one thing I still don't understand... The same question that's been driving me mad this whole time... why did it have to be me...?"

"Why indeed... have you ever considered that it could be just like Misato-san says it is? That there's no reason at all?"

"If there isn't one, that would explain why someone like me would be chosen... No, just knowing that I was chosen ould make you think she's right ..."

"Someone like me...?"

"Someone as unsuitable as me. I'm not particularly smart, or brave, or especially reliable... why can't it be... I don't know, someone more heroic?"

"Heroic men are not the rule, but the exception. That's why they are special, that's why legends are told about them... sacrificing yourself for others is noble, but you wouldn't just expect someone to die for you, would you? It would be a big coincidence if the one person who can control EVA 01 is one of those heroes. “
"But almost anyone would be better than me! Touji for example, who would make a much better fighter, or Nagato, who is much more mature.... Kensuke would even do it of his own free will-

... 

"What all? All my classmates?"

His steps faltered, and for the first time since the incident with EVA 03, Misato believed she could recognize something of the boy she had come to know – affected and uncertain.

No, he didn't want that to happen to them, he couldn't stand the thought that they would be delivered one by one into this slaughterhouse called EVA... He should have known that his departure would condemn them to their deaths:

Rei, Asuka, and whoever else was there. Kensuke, Hikari and Nagato might as well be the next ones; He should have pictured the shattered glasses and their screaming fathers, their discarded hobby gear, their empty seats in class and the cries of their sisters... No matter how much he tried to delude himself otherwise, Touji, Hikari and Nagato would surely be next. Or was it Hikari, Kensuke and Nagato? Mana, Touji and Nagato? Kaworu, Hikari and Touji? Touji, Kensuke and Yui?

He couldn't really tell anymore if there had been a two or three messages on his answering machine, or perhaps just one, but his heart remained hard and closed-off, so blinded by his own pain that he couldn't see what he was doing, or what Asuka and Rei would soon be driven to because of him-

Asuka?

He hadn't even dared to ask about her.

The apartment, which had once been full of color and life when she was still here, was left colorless and gloomy, her empty room, the neat, covered bed that looked like a a hotel room after all traces of the last guest had been carefully removed by the maids, the chopping board and their spices that would have been his if it were not for the certainty that he could not bear to have her
fingerprints on his hands, or risk touching whatever stray, forgotten molecules of her sweat must have survived the constant washing and tidying up just for statistical reasons.

But while he might have been able to purge the apartment of her scent, the blood his father had stained him with - twice! - was never going away. Asuka's blood, Kaworu's blood, and even the blood of that girl with the parachute, who had met him only once before the incident and never done anything to deserve his anger-

What he knew for sure was that he had gone and left despite everything, his heart remaining hard and closed, blinded by his own pain and suffering.

... "Heroic men are not the rule, but the exception. That's why they are special, that's why legends are told about them... sacrificing yourself for others is noble, but you wouldn't just expect someone to die for you, would you? It would be a big coincidence if the one person who can control EVA 01 were one of those heroes."

He believed that last time he had answered something else.

"This is something else... I... I'm not worth dying for..."

He wasn't worth anything, nothing at all, he called for a girl who couldn't answer him, looked - as always - for understanding where he wouldn't get it, and it was just too much, he wanted something warm to hold on to, something that proved to him that he was still here, that he was still alive... he had thought that at some point, as the pain kept increasing, there would be a distinct border where what remained of his mind would go "crack!" and then you'd be ruined, that there would be relief in the arms of madness or even a light, heady freedom, because you wouldn't know right and wrong anymore because you would no longer understand what you'd lost, and you'd be free to lurk in the world like a ghost, lost inside yourself, grinning to yourself in silence and perhaps going about with a long knife every now and then.

But that's only what madness looked like in the movies, just one of his fantasies, an escape from reality, like Misato, Asuka or Ayanami would say, if you could even consider the person he had
spoken with to be Ayanami.

The reality was much more like the plight of a boulder at the shore, holding steadfast at first, but getting weaker and smaller with every passing wave.

There was no limit and no respite, only pain that kept building up, and every time you couldn't keep it all in anymore, it would break out from inside you, and you would be left to see the ugliest truths of your soul smeared across the walls for everyone to see, time and time again.

And ever after, you would be forced to look at the ugly results and struggle to reconcile them with the remnants of your conscience, it never stopped, and all the while, you'd have no chance but to live with what you had become.

He had to live with the memories of his moans, the beeping of the devices, and the sticky sensation of his palm.

In all the endless repetitions, he had never actually touched her, and he didn't know if that was his one last saving grace, or just a testament to his cowardice.

Perhaps, it was just because he'd finished rather fast, as he usually did, even the few times in the pages of the multiverse that he'd had the chance to do it for real, a rare few times before Third Impact, but usually afterward, typically with Asuka and almost inevitably resulting in an awkward disaster which never lasted all too long, if he could get it to work at all.

And perhaps this should not have come as a surprise for a rather young man with no prior experience, little self-confidence and fairly sensitive nerves; If it was anyone else (Mana perhaps, or else maybe Kaworu, Rei or Misato), they might have comforted him, or at least informed him that it was perfectly normal, but with Asuka, it was a different matter. It was always her who seduced him, whenever such an unlikely thing were to happen. Though he had often thought about it, he had never been the one to suggest it; He never felt ready for that, for...

, he didn't let a drop come on them, in all the endless repetitions he never touched them and he didn't know if it was the sign, that he had been yet to purify, or was just a testament to his cowardice, it had gone so fast, it was always fast, with him, it also hung on that every time he had really tried it, with Asuka and him, a few times sometime before the impact, mostly after, it always went too fast, he could never make it last long, if it was possible at all - for one young man with a lack of self-confidence and a sensitive nervous disguise it could easily happen, for all the others, Misato, Rei, Kaworu and so on, and even if they hadn't comforted him and told him they might have, that it was occasionally quite normal, but with Asuka - she had always seduced him, he had never been able to suggest it on his own, he had never felt ready to do it, for he was young and confused and did not know whether she loved him...

And he had always thought that he wouldn't want it to be with someone who didn't love him, though he had thought the same thing about his first kiss and the very few times he actually got his wish it had been due to Mana's initiative rather than his own.

When he was with Asuka, he was always afraid that she would mock him, that she would talk about Kaji, that she would laugh at him, as she always did...

He was so scared he couldn't make her happy-
But if that was the case, then why did he do it?

(The sticky-white substance on his hand as it slowly flowed downward down cemented once again that it was all real and unchangeable. It wasn't even the first time, mostly he had been in his room, the realm of his personal musings and fantasies, sometimes because something particularly exciting had happened on that particular day, sometimes for reasons as trivial as that he couldn't sleep, be it because he had fought an angel in the morning, or just because a particularly nasty math test was to take place the next day, and not only with thoughts of Asuka, there were also Misato and Rei and- )

....

"If I can't have all of you, then I don't want you at all, do you understand?"

Boiling liquid, clinking crockery, his shirt, the same as when he delivered her the interior of his mouth, the same room, the same clothes, the same penguin, sprinkled with coffee like blood stains, probably severe burns, if it wasn't all a dream and a farce, blisters as big as coins, disgusting above all because it made clear again and again what our consciousness registers as an object belonging together, namely as a human being, is only an accumulation of loosely associated hydrocarbons.

He had seen it in her eyes that she wanted to destroy him, that she craved to see his flesh and blood splashed on the ground.

Even when she rejected him, she still tortured him with her charms, her shorts which barely covered the beginnings of her buttocks, the nightgown that barely hid the mounds of her breast....

An ornament! Nothing but her mortal shell.

It was mere decoration that had deprived him of his wits - she should not have such terrible power over him!
It was only mother-of-pearl and alabaster, this skin and these breasts, the lips and areola on the aforementioned, the hair to which one could have compared all sorts of polished, precious metals such as red gold, bronze or copper, without being guilty of an exaggeratedly poetic description, the colour of her eyes radiating like that of Venetian glass - the sum of her beauty was nothing but her mirror image, a mere vessel that concealed a nasty soul within itself, paradisiacal on the outside, stone on the inside like one of those Baroque statues dramatically staged by light - How could he ever-?

"I... I want to help you... I want to be with you forever..."

He had never been a particularly rational person. Otherwise he could never explain why he had made his heart into a plaything for her caprices.

He knew only one thing: Even though some of her other accusations had probably been deserved, he believed that his feelings had been real...

"Oh, stop it! You think you can save me? You claim to understand me? Honor and respect me till death do us part?! You don't know your place! You only come to me because you're frightened of Misato and your father. That, and because wondergirl and homoboy have all kicked the bucket. I'm the easiest place to go, huh? Not a chance! I don't want to be your second choice!"

Silence, surf, a huge, bisected head on the horizon.

She kneels, he stands, the air is loaded with stench of blood.

"...and if you were the last man on the whole fucking planet...!"

She had meant it exactly as she had said it, no reason for her to repeat it now that the conditional premise had actually occurred.

Hers was the soul that had resisted the blending whirlpools of spirits the longest, mostly because he was in it.

"Oh, no, not with you, I'd rather die than do it with you!"
She had been the one to take his innocence, spoiled him and taught him to hate, she was the one who had kissed his lips and pushed her stupid breasts right into his face, so she shouldn't be surprised if...

Oh.

There we go again.

He really was the lowest of the low. He wasn't even worthy of being in this world, but he was probably too cowardly to pursue that to the logical consequence - He should have done it, should have held his breath in the lake where he had met Kaworu, never to return, he should have drunk in the dirty water into his lungs, he should have just kept walking forward until the water was too deep, until he would have had no choice but to drown, whether he chickened out or not... the water would have been cold enough for him to freeze to death – yet the next morning he was still there, in the midst of the decaying infrastructure, soaking wet, but still very much alive.

He couldn't even die properly.

He should have done it, much sooner, even then, when he had run away from Misato's apartment, on that precipice, he should have died, he should have been the one to get the parasite-infested EVA, he should have been killed by a piece of rubble during the angel's attack with the toilet paper arms, or he should have been shot by that soldier before Misato had the chance to get to him.

..."Rei, Kaworu and Misato didn't see it that way."

"YOU" he shouted, in the time of a blink of an eye, jumping up from his seat in his usual light-soaked train car when his likeness had joined him, the gloomy shadow with the red glowing eyes and a thin smile, like what he had presented to Misato in the shower room that one time, a gesture of defiance that was very much out of place and would probably have reminded old Fuyutsuki very much of his father's younger years.
He knew immediately what to do.

Like a rabid animal, he jumped on that false image of a lost future, grabbed his neck - out of old habit - and squeezed.

His face was distorted into a wild grimace, a bizarre grin that ran all over his face and folded it like paper, not much different from the one he was wearing when he first embarked to shred the strongest of all angels, bewitched by the first real experiences of power that had ever flowed through his nerves like a shark following the scent of blood.

Enough! Enough! Enough! Enough! Enough...

Oh, he was fed up with absolutely all of this!

"You bastard!" he yelled. The words came out, but they sounded like animal noise, as if they were the call of a beast whose roars just happened to sound like human language.

Tears dripped onto the hard face of his reflection below.

"You're a liar and a thief! A murderer and a horny instinct machine... You can't even stand yourself, and neither can your own father! You destroy everything you touch and shamelessly take advantage of everyone you meet! You are a coward, a weakling, an egoist and you lack everything that could be called a human heart! And you're a pervert, too! Man, woman, your own relatives, as long as you are pitied, all is right with you! You killed all your best friends... and the rest of the... whole damn world..."

The rage somehow ran out of steam, delayed like a lagging You-Tube video, so that his sobbing temporarily gained the upper hand. A rain on snot and water-

But then the anger returned in full force, and the boy's black heart pumped it directly into his arms, with which he briefly raised his likeness up from his seat only to send him thundering down again, violently throwing him to the ground.

"Why?!" the Third Child demanded to know. "Why are you here?! Why do you have to be in this
world?! How are you warm? Why do I have to feel the warmth of your body after all this? Why am I forced to put up with you... Can't you see that it would be much, much better for all of us if you just died?"

He could feel the lack of oxygen getting to his brain, it was a familiar sensation by now... Mostly due to the story with the shadow angel, but there were also the one or two times where he had been the one to stumble across the elder Akagi instead of little Rei. Still he noticed his narrowing field of vision only too late, because he had already half closed his eyes, but it was only right for him, he deserved death and especially this kind of death, Asuka would probably call it poetic justice...

That was just fine with him, it would end and no one would miss him, after all-

No.

He remembers how they threw him his schoolbag; he barely managed to catch it. A naked fist, presented in youthful impetuosity. "If anybody blames you for this, they'll have to deal with me!"

"I think you're a great person." While he receives the question in response, the other boy's face is often pale and serious, framed by a dark mop of hair and a bandage. Yet it becomes the stage of a smile when he reveals an answer: "Because you do great things."

Touji, Kensuke and Misato at the station.

"Actually, I don't mind..." Cheesecake without cheese, then the dishes.

Asuka's breasts, inches from his face.

Ayanami's smile.

Mayumi, as she receives the books, some of which he had picked up and collected for her. The very same train station.

"But... it's all because I'm an EVA pilot... In truth, it would be better for everyone if I never existed..."
"What?"

The first thing Shinji noticed were inevitably the drops of sweat on his face, a typical side effect of a frightening awakening. After all the nightmares, visions, and EVA battles, he knew this routine so well that over time he had noticed even the most inconspicuous details about it, the drops of sweat on his face, and the trajectories in which they ran down, the precise interplay of the muscles that brought his shocked facial expression to life, and the order in which the individual components of his consciousness "switched themselves on" in response to some vague notion of alarm.

These scenes were so much part of his life that he had already begun to expect the ceiling of his usual hospital room before he had even begun to process the picture before his hastily opened eyes - he didn't know why he would need to be in a hospital, but the various EVA-related accidents occasionally brought memory gaps with them, something he had come to accept so thoroughly since his arrival in Tokyo-3 that he was now really considering something as dramatic as amnesia as a serious possibility.

Three months ago, he had only ever seen it in movies.

Sometimes it was hard to convince himself that all this was real, and it didn't help that these events were in some way similar to dreams, in that one could often only remember them in fragments. The feeling afterwards was never satisfying, somewhere between the feeling of having to give an answer even though one had forgotten the question and knowing the question but forgetting what one wanted to answer even though the corresponding emotions were still there and were pressing for them to be expressed.

Either way, when he saw the ceiling of his room instead of a hospital ceiling, together with a slight but persistent feeling that something had to be clearly wrong here, everything was clear: He was also familiar with this situation. The vision had stopped, the dream had ended.

It was, as far as he could remember, something involving a jealous Asuka... Even the notion alone seemed ridiculous to him, like something that could really only appear in a dream... Like Asuka, who was lightyears above his league and wouldn't even put his name in her mouth, could ever be jealous because of him - he had barely gotten to the point where she no longer hated him out of principle, but only on a situational basis.
It was all the class representative's fault... What did she say the other day?

*How do you feel about Asuka? If you return Asuka's feelings, you must stand by her, and if you don't, you must tell her clearly. You mustn't lead her on, do you hear me?*

As if he *could* fool her about anything, even if he wanted to. She would see him through him at first glance... What he felt for her, of whatever quality it might be, was completely irrelevant. Nothing would ever come out of it and he deserved to be called a fool because he had recognized this from the beginning but was still addicted to her charms.

The idea that he should ever become Asuka's boyfriend, that she might *like* him, was patently ridiculous.

It couldn't be. Why should it? What did he have that Asuka could possibly want from him? He didn't know how the class representative came up with that idea, but she would have done better to tell him, for example, to come to school on time, because dream or no dream, that would soon be his main worry if he didn't stop staring at the ceiling soon... He didn't really feel like it, (Mayumi's free seat was nothing he particularly wanted to see now, and the same would have been true for the remainder of the vacated classroom) but he wasn't feeling quite depressed enough to just stay in bed.

So time to get up then.

As much as his body protested against being dragged from the warm, cuddly place into the cool air, he sat up, swapping the current contents of his field of vision, more precisely his ceiling, for the corner of his room in which the bookshelf stood, near to which his little green satchel and the individual parts of a fresh school uniform waited right where he had put them yesterday. Not far from there, on a small nightstand, next to a pile of cassettes, lay his faithful cassette player, and... his cello, with its box and music stand?

Did he forget to put it away yesterday? Usually, he always kept in the back of the closet because he was a little embarrassed about his hobby, it was quite possible that neither Asuka nor Misato had any idea that he had continued his regular practice sessions throughout the last few months; They would only ask him to perform for them, or otherwise make comments, perhaps even mock him, with or without malice, and he would not stand that, heaven knows what they would think about it.... - So he had never told anyone.

Or that's how it used to be - he had told Nagato, simply because it had been a different situation, since Nagato had had a similar experience, and they had probably both felt better after he had said
it... and that had resulted in Touji, Kensuke and Mayumi also hearing about it over the course of the whole school festival incident. Here too he could say that he had learned more about his friends in the process...

It did not seem right to keep his secret, he wanted to support Touji and Kensuke in their band plan, insofar far as this was possible for someone without musical talent.... That was fine with him.

Had the school festival actually taken place, it would probably have resulted in Asuka and Misato finding out, and he didn't think he would have minded very much, but there was much about the whole situation that had led him to put his reservations aside.

Yet despite everything, he would never have left his cello lying out in the open here, just as a matterof habit; Shinji was a neat, meticulous person, almost neurotic, and under stress, as long as it wasn't acute panic, he tended to cling to any kind of order like instructions, guidelines or habits like a crutch rather than neglect them out of haste or exhaustion.

Without a doubt, if this cello was not in its original place in the back of the cupboard, then there had to be a good reason for it, and if there was one, he should know it – had someone gone through his things? It didn't make sense, he was pretty sure that Misato had been snoring in bed long before him yesterday, and that all the beer she had consumed before was an unspoken guarantee that she wouldn't leave it sooner than absolutely necessary.

Asuka, too, seemed like a spurious candidate at best - on the one hand, because he couldn't imagine why she should feel the need to rummage through his possessions, apart from Hikari's abstruse conspiracy theories, but on the other hand, because she certainly wouldn't have made the mistake of leaving the evidence of her misdeeds lying around here.

Surely, she would have put everything back in its place to cover her tracks ... and now that he thought it right, the whereabouts of his instrument was not the only thing that didn't seem to be quite right here... Since he had moved into this room, or rather, the one that Asuka had eventually banished him from, the number of objects in it had slowly but surely increased, as various possessions had accumulated for various reasons, and in time, it would certainly no longer have fitted into the two boxes, the bag and the small backpack with which he had come.

But his room had never been as full as he saw it now. Everywhere there were small decorative elements, posters, several colourful stickers, some of which already looked a little faded.

One of those stickers had even made its way onto his little green backpack, and there was another bag in the same colour, carelessly flung next to the cupboard, without the slightest concern for the possibility that others might see it that way.

Even the books, which filled not only the bookshelf but a smaller shelf beside it, went all the way from a few worn-out children's books to various school literature and folders to all kinds of self-help books a male youth might find useful ("Handbook for heroes"") or "Dating Advice for Dummies" by R. K., to name a few.), and there were decorations and small personal touches everywhere, like this bobblehead alarm clock, which much resembled a certain penguin or these little wooden dolls on the shelf, which actually look like the work of an enthusiastic housewife, of whom there shouldn't be any in this household (if they weren't in fact action figures of some
franchise he did not recognize) of what, not to mention that portrait of that extremely lightly dressed lady in the back of the bookshelf - This room looked as if...

Yes, as if it had been inhabited for years by an essentially perfectly normal boy. It reminded him of Touji's room, in the sense that it looked, well, normal, even if it was again somewhere opposite, because he, well, had a different personality... that was probably the most bizarre thing, that despite all these mysterious changes, he still thought he could recognize his own style...

But as so often it was the elephant in the room which he noticed last - maybe Asuka was right in her continuous assertions of his stupidity and his supposed tendency to miss the forest for the trees. At least his strange feeling of having forgotten something to which he wanted to respond didn't seem to need much metaphysical explanation, especially since what had woken him up had been standing in front of his nose the whole time and was now quite annoyed.

"Well, did you finally return from your long journey to the land of dreams, you idiot?"

Shinji blinked in bewilderment.

Asuka?

"What the hell are you looking at?! Don't you have any words of thanks left for your old childhood friend after I go through the trouble to wake you up each morning to make sure you get to school on time?"

Just as he thought that at least her typical, bossy manner was exactly as it should be, she had to go and say something like this - what did she mean by 'childhood friend'...?!

Is this supposed to be another one of her jokes?

With her, you could never know...

She had often claimed he was a boring sadsack without a sense of humor, but at the risk of reinforcing that opinion he preferred not to laugh without being sure it was appropriate - he just couldn't figure out what the punchline was supposed to be.

"Are you even listening to me, you lazy slowpoke? You get up right this instant!"
Not giving him the chance to comply with this request on his own, she quickly pulled out her fist, fortunately not to smack him, but to rip off his beautifully warm blanket in a sudden motion - but that did not mean that he was spared her violence, especially since what came to light underneath did not appease her in any way.

It could have been described in many ways, but that wouldn't change the fact that the red-haired girl had witnessed a phenomenon that was commonly referred to as acute morning wood, but because of her slightly egocentric conviction that she had to be the reason for every single thing that took place under the big blue sky, she identified it as the result of a latent school uniform fetish on the part of her classmate, and felt free to decorate his virgin visage with yet another imprint of her right hand.

"Pervert! Idiot! Lecher! I can't believe you!"

A hello with a slap in the face... Why did it always have to be like this between him and Asuka?

Come to think of it, even their very first meeting had started out with a slap.

His almost apologetic-sounding complaints that something like this was quite normal at this time of day were simply ignored by the Second Child in the usual manner, after which she grabbed his clothes with one hand and his wrist with the other, and mercilessly dragged him both from his bed and from the room.

Except... that she didn't.

Her fingers penetrated through his arm like a phantom that didn't belong to this world and therefore couldn't interact with it... and yet Asuka's hand took something with it.

She had just pulled him to his feet, and it had happened that this image, this unsuspecting version of himself, detached itself from him and followed Captain Shikinami as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if he really experienced it every day, just as she had said, while his consciousness and thoughts did not come with him and remained in this room, first following the same movement as his other self, but then stopping as he realized what was taking place still holding out his half-extended arm in the direction to which the two had disappeared, long after the door had been slammed in his face.

It was as if he and this other Ikari Shinji had just accidentally occupied the same place in space and
time until the arcane quantum effects that had allowed this until now had been thrown off balance by something.

Neither he nor Asuka seemed to have noticed at all that they hadn't been alone in this room, or even had reasons to suspect it.

Insecurely, Shinji - the Shinji that was left behind - looked helplessly at his hands until the only possible explanation was clear to him... Though he has left the bed behind him, he was not yet awake.

"What... is all this...?" he asked into the room, knowing full well that neither of the youths whose quarrels he could hear from the hallways would be able to hear him.

Uncertain, the boy looked around this alternate version of his room which was strange yet familiar at the same time.

"Is this another... dream? A vision? A..."

"You can say it out loud. It's a memory."

There he was again, his shadow with the red eyes leaning next to the door against the wall; he felt a little like Peter Pan, only that his shadow followed him and not vice versa.

"A memory...? How can I remember anything that never happened?"

"You can't. You're quick to doubt your conclusions without thinking things through first... If you can remember it, then it must have happened."

"But... how can that be...? This is completely impossible... I'd never seen Shikinami in my life before she came here with EVA 02..."

"That's right. This is possible. That's why it's an illusion."
"But didn't you say it was a memory?"

"A memory of an illusion."

"What illusion...?"

"Isn't that obvious? It's an illusion you've created... this is all in your head, in case you haven't noticed it yet... Come on. I'll explain it to you..." Before Shinji even had the slightest chance to say anything, his other self had already grabbed his wrist and led him straight to where those answers seemed to be - right through the wall.

It was a strange feeling to simply walk through solid concrete like a ghost, similar to what you felt when a dream began to dissolve and you felt yourself plunging into great depths as you waited to wake up.

But what Shinji got to see on the other side of that wall was so much more unreal.

Yes, it was just the kitchen of Misato's apartment, as he saw it every day. He probably spent more time there than any member of her household.

But in this bizarre dream world Misato seemed never to have moved in here in the first place - for anyone else, nothing about this sight would have been especially noteworthy. It was a completely normal everyday scene, as almost everyone at home should know it, astonishingly mundane:

There was a woman there, tall but dainty, with light skin and short, chocolate brown hair, and she had taken his ancestral place in the kitchen.

She even wore his green apron, on top of a long skirt and a blouse, standing by the sink as she was placing the recently cleaned plates, mugs and chopsticks into a rack intended for drying them, and on the table there was a pink coffee machine that Shinji didn't recognize, but whose presence made sense if one counted this lady as a part of the household.

It was probably her who had set the table with these two long-emptied tea cups, smooth brown pottery, without a handle, as is customary in this country: One for himself, and one for the man who was still sitting at that same table.

He too was of impressive height, but otherwise, he could not have been more different from his wife - where she was dainty and graceful, he has a stature like an armored safe, broad-shouldered and awe-inspiring, where her skin carried the noble pallor of a princess, his was dark as ash.
Where she had fine fingers like a filigree clockwork, his hands were rough and calloused from his labors, and where her voice was bright and tender like that of a pure angel, his was deep like that of a demon, and whatever was immaculate like an ancient Greek statue of the gods in her was crooked and angular in him.

It was like gazing upon the king of the dead and his beloved Persephone!

A ridiculously perfect family idyll of which, to Shinji, seemed to spit in his face and mock him with merciless laughter.

What a cruel illusion, what a painful delusion, what a nasty torture had been imposed on him - How in the world was he ever supposed to get rid of this impossible dream, which, right now, felt as real as his everyday life?

The woman was a stranger to him, and he had hardly recognized the man either, because no matter how deeply his dark silhouette had burned itself into his heart, he had actually never really known him, at least not that way, not in such a domestic setting, he had always been denied the opportunity to see him sitting at his breakfast table in the morning and sipping his first coffee of the day.

Somewhere in the background, various noises suggested that his only son was getting ready for school.

In loose, brown trousers and an olive-green shirt, his hands free of bone-white supervillain gloves and burns of which his son knew nothing, he appeared not at all threatening, perhaps still a little awkward, but not broken, almost like a real father....

His face was hidden behind the newspaper, but Shinji recognized the crown of his head- it was the same slightly shaggy, dark brown hair that grew atom his own skull.

And the woman...? It didn't even occur to him to feel uncomfortable to see a stranger touching the things in his kitchen, because as soon he had recognized her husband, it became clear to him who she inevitably had to be... She wasn't out of place here, on the contrary, here was the place where she should have always been, right here with him, to cook for him, to hug him and to complain about his bad habits...

It should always have been that way, it could have been, if she hadn't been so cruelly ripped away from him, so long ago, before he has learned to think in years and months...

He felt it coming over him, all those feelings that had accumulated for years, the uncertainty about whether there had ever been even one person who had truly loved him...
He wanted to hold her in his arms; he had so much to tell her, and so much more to ask, but his voice did not reach her, and his arms glided right through her slender figure, while she talked to her husband, not words of rejoicing, but all the more part of this perfect, carefree little family world that had never been granted to him, in which the overall happiness was so self-evident that its inhabitants could afford to complain about the little things...

"...Shinji is such a lazy kid sometimes! He should be more grateful that Asuka-chan comes all this way to wake him up..."

'Asuka-chan' - so the Second Child really was a rather frequent visitor...

Strange how that voice somehow sounded like Ayanami's, just as high and gentle, but lacking the serious, fragile qualities, thoroughly replaced by a maternal warmth.

Actually, she even looked a bit like Ayanami, just from her figure and the back of her head, they even had almost the same hairstyle, even though this woman - his mother! - wore hers a little bit longer.

Here was his mother, scrubbing plates and complaining about his manners, like any normal mother, and his father, at the breakfast table with a cup of hot drink, like any normal father, replying to his wife's inquiries with his usual, dry "Yah...", as Shinji had only heard it from high up in the NERV command center and never in such a ridiculously normal context.

He seemed lost in his newspaper, it was almost funny in a way, which probably the last adjective that would come to his mind when he thought of his father... but laughing together was part of being a family, wasn't it...?

"But darling, you should be getting ready as well!"

"Yah..."

Shinji's mother sighed. "You really are just like your son!"

"Why don't you get ready first?"

"I already have! You know that Professor Fuyutsuki always complains to me when you are late."
"He just wants to flirt with you..."

"Stop talking nonsense and get dressed!"

...It was pretty obvious who was really wearing the pants in this household, right...?

Grotesque. Just abstruse...

Shinji pulled his arms back, but left them hanging in the air, close to the mirage of his mother which he simply could not turn away from, although he knew he should.

It wasn't fair that he had to see it all, although he knew it would never get to have it... In the meantime, Asuka had somehow managed, through methods about the details of which he didn't even want to know in the first place, to ensure that his local alter ego had put on his school uniform and dragged him past his parents into the entrance area of the apartment.

"Come on, hurry up!"

"I heard you, Asuka! Man, you can be a real pain sometimes!"

This version of Captain Shikinami, if she even still held any such position in this world, appeared to be a perfectly normal fourteen year old girl, just as this rather henpecked counterpart of himself seemed to be naught but a normal boy, so it was not surprising that he called her by her name and even voiced his displeasure – not anymore.

There was almost something reassuring about seeing this alternate Asuka slap him across the face for the first time in ten minutes. Her propensity to do that was just about the only thing around here that hadn't changed, much like the stiff, unhappy manner of Shinji's counterpart once she had dragged him to the door, pausing only to put her shoes in place.

The other Shinji's reddened face reminded him of his own first encounter with the impetuous redhead, though this other Shinji had of course known her for years...

Which also meant that this Asuka had had the time to make friends her own age and come visit them at their place for years and years.
Unlike the version he knew, she had never been trained as a soldier since early childhood, nor had she developed the same disdain for her peers.

Here was an Asuka who actually looked out for his wellbeing - of course she was still bossy, but if she weren't, she wouldn't really be Asuka.

Even so, what he saw here were two longtime friends teasing each other. Had the tragedies of her past been undone much like his own? Did this version of her also have loving parents waiting for her at home, allowing to grow up as a happier, more well-adjusted person?

To imagine Asuka as his childhood friend seemed just as wrong to him as the picture of his parents as a picture book family at a breakfast table – he had always viewed her as something strange and mysterious which had come into his little world and had thrown it into confusion, the supposed mysteries of the female sex incarnate.

But when you stripped that down and polished off its extremes, it was not wrong to say that the uninhibited yet familiar way that they acted around each other resembled the honesty and camaraderie between close friends, especially now that they were slowly beginning to understand each other.

Happily, Asuka waved into the interior of the apartment - a bit of hidden sadism remained, but the smile was amazingly real. "Goodbye, Mrs. Ikari!"

"Bye, you two! Have fun at school!"

What an almost surreal, completely impossible situation... Asuka, speaking to his long-dead mother in a friendly, familiar manner, as if she were already a part of the family!

Now that he thought of it, the notion wasn't even that strange.

Since they had both started living at Misato's place, the three of them had certainly come to develop a certain intimacy between them as one would find them between family members or comrades, almost as if Misato had come to be something like their parent or older sister.

Though to call Misato and Asuka his sisters would not be quite right either, considering the kinds of thoughts he had had about them – and the idea of them interacting with his long-dead mother just boggled the mind, considering that she had departed long before either of his current flatmates had entered his life.

They seemed to belong to completely different worlds.

Left behind he let his arms sink and looked after them, still hardly believing the situation, while
continuing to listen in on the impossible conversation of his parents...

"Say, darling, are you trying to memorize the newspaper?"

"Yah, I get it, Yui..." the older Ikari mumbled absent-mindedly, almost sounding a little sleepy.

A scene from a picture book!

Shinji would probably have burst into laughter if he didn't feel like bawling...

They all looked so happy, his parents with each other, his other self with his Asuka...

It looked so right, yes, it made him almost excessively angry that these possibilities had been taken away from him, that he was not allowed to be a part of it... - if he didn't know better, he would think he had landed in a thoroughly perfect world... how he would like to take the place of this other Shinji, or even better, to merge with him and forget that there had ever been anything other than that this; Surely, that other insane world with terrifying angels and Evangelions could have been nothing more than a distant nightmare that would fade with the morning...

Who knows, maybe it really was a dream, maybe he was the illusion here, and the boy who had just left the house was the real Shinji Ikari... his life looked much more believable, without building-sized monsters and biomechanical fighting machines... this was supposed to be an illusion, yes, or even just the memory of one, but the sun was shining and the birds were chirping... it seemed hard to believe, that something could be wrong with this idyll... and nobody should tell him that he was losing sight of reality – if he found himself wondering if it would really be so bad if he never found his way back, it was exactly because he knew all too well what was waiting for him on the other side, because he knew the horrors that had looked into his eyes -

Oh, if only this wonderful dream would last forever, no matter what would happen to the life that he had built himself up until now, if only he could simply forget to draw his next breath...

How hard it weighed, this big hole in his heart and the shreds that hung down from it...

He stepped back to avoid his mother's elbow, briefly forgetting that he couldn't have touched her anyway...
Much of this world seemed upside-down and impossible, but perhaps at least a part of this dream might have come true if only she had lived... if she had been there to show him what love is, he wouldn't have to wander about like a lost little boat whose anchoring rope had come loose from its pier, adrift and aimlessly afloat.

At least she must have loved him, even if no one else ever did... he often heard that mothers always love their children, no matter how imperfect they are and what mistakes they make... it would only be natural if at least she had loved him, that there was at least one person who had surely wanted him to exist in this world... and he couldn't even thank her for that by honoring her memory.

He couldn't even remember her face, nor could he understand her scientific writings... Yet another log in the fire of his self-hatred...

He would never have thought he would get to see her even once, to admire her from this closeness; For years, he had had no photo, not even a small, blurry one, and he had much resented his father for taking that opportunity from him, though sometimes, he felt almost convinced that he deserved nothing else, since he had not been able to preserve in his own memory even the smallest piece of her...

Now she was right in front of him, so close that he could have deluded himself into thinking that he could feel her warmth.

Should he look at her...? He kind of felt like he wasn't supposed to, but what was the worst that could happen...? This was a dream anyway, nothing he did here would have any consequence, and if he didn't look at her now, he would surely regret it forever. He had seen Asuka and Mayumi in these visions before he ever saw them in his waking life, so it was even possible that he might see his mother's real face though this was but a dream.

But when he finally managed to catch a glimpse of his desired objective, half standing in the kitchen furniture, all his movements came to an abrupt end.

"She has... no face..." he stammered into the atmosphere though his voice produced no actual audible vibrations.

The false image continued in its absurd impossibility, even though it had exposed itself before him, despite its gaps and holes, the delusion continued, peacefully doing its dishes.
Shinji hurriedly turned away from that sight, which was too abysmally wrong to be described by words, and shook himself, grabbing his upper arms with his arms crossed as if to protect himself from the cold... this radiant, warm world had just lost much of its shimmer.

"Wrong... Wrong... This is wrong..." was all he could produce, struggling to regain his composure... of course he could take his sweet time with that, he was essentially alone here, nothing of what he saw here could give him anything, or ask anything of him... He felt reminded of this image from his earlier vision, the one with this one folding chair on the verge of disappearing, the only thing that was inside the lonesome cone of light shining down from above, a circle of being in the dark, fragile like the globe hanging in space as single a pale blue dot...

Slowly but surely, he was beginning to think that perhaps Yui Ichijo's words about the supposed wrongness of the world he had come from were not all that far-fetched – Compared to this one, the more familiar illusion he lived in day by day seemed so much more well-crafted, carefully constructed even.

And surrounded by this perfect couple, who could still laugh together, he suddenly felt unspeakably lonely, in solitude of cosmic proportions, far from anything he could truly interact with... no, no, that wasn't quite true...

As hard as it seemed to find himself in this sea of well-camouflaged nothingness, he could not deny that there was at least one person here. His own shadow, that dark figure with glowing red eyes, who had been leaning against the wall in a corner for quite some time, arms crossed, in his blue plugsuit hardly fitting into the radiant scenery, as if he had been patiently waiting for this exact moment.

"Wrong is exactly the right word for it... This is a dream. A dream created by you... And don't get me wrong. Dreams are beautiful, they can be a great source of joy, sometimes they can even be instructive - this one certainly was. You couldn't live without them, and you hardly have a choice in that respect... In a sense, you can say that everyone has no choice but to live in their own little dream... but you must never confuse it with reality, or believe that you could use it as a substitute... That's a lesson I had to learn in the hardest of all ways, so I try to remind myself again and again of what I have decided, so that I might never again fall prey to the temptation to choose the easy path over the right one...

Of course, it's not really possible to do this all the time, sometimes it's a real struggle- but I can't let it all have been in vain.

I think I have come to understand Misato-san a lot better in the meantime... and I also understand this here: You can only build your ideas based on what you have seen with your own eyes and heard with your ears... So how could you imagine a face that you have never seen before...?"

"Then how can I imagine the rest of her...? I've never seen her before, so what's different about the face?"
"Are you sure you've never seen her? Having come this far, you should have noticed her by now..."

The silhouette from EVA 01, clapping to his music.

The warm voice that had called out his name, as early as his very first battle.

He froze as the things he was not supposed to have seen yet bubbled into his consciousness, including the countless incidents when Dr. Akagi had explained it to him in black and white... Away, away with the flood of images, he knew enough to understand what his other self meant.

And more.

He timidly pointed in the direction of his newspaper-reading father. “Does that also mean...”

His alter ego nodded. "I have no idea what he's like unless he's that dark silhouette or the commander of NERV... I just couldn't imagine what his face might look like at a time like this..."

For the first time, Shinji felt like he recognized something of himself in the dark figure, in more than just an outward manner.

"And there's more." His other self continued, pointing to an article on the newspaper as she illusory shade of Ikari Gendo continued to thumb through it.

The Third Child hesitantly approached it - even if it was only a dream construct who couldn't even perceive his presence, he still had more than a healthy respect for this man - and bent over to read the small newspaper letters.

"...Research post in Antarctica opens its doors..." he read out loud. "Wait, Antarctica...?!

"Quite right..." his shadow confirmed.

"Then this is..."
"Yes. A world where Second Impact never happened. A world where there are no angels or evangelions, a parallel world where Ikari Shinji is not an EVA pilot... Mother was already pregnant with us when the impact happened - so you and I would have existed regardless."

"But... even if we did, what are the odds that we'd end up living in the same apartment as Misato-san? There would be no Tokyo-3, and I probably wouldn't have met Asuka at all – she'd still be in Europe, she only came here because she's the Second Child... Besides, she spent her whole life in the EVA program... yeah, she doesn't act exactly as she does back home, but, if she'd really lived a whole other life, she should have a completely different personality..."

"Correct. That's why what you see here is a dream. You created it based on what you know and didn't think everything through... I know best that I'm not very good at thinking clearly under stress... You can't imagine a life where Asuka isn't part of your world, so you've found a way to build her into it, as you think she'd best fit into it...you have changed her role in your life a little bit to remove your inner conflicts about her, and you designed her counterpart to be the way you think she is when she is happy - by the way, this is also true for some other people we will see here...but don't be fooled: That doesn't change the fundamental lesson of what you see here...

If Second Impact never happened, someone else would have filled the role that Asuka has here, probably someone you never met, and conversely, someone else would have filled the role that you have in Asuka's life - but by and large, you could have had that life here. What you see here is a possibility that existed within you... When you were born, you would have carried the potential to become that boy you just saw, your parents could just as well have been those two people here, and given the opportunity, Asuka might have become that girl there.

It wouldn't even have taken the absence of the Second Impact to do that - if you had reacted differently to the same events and situations in the time you spent here in Tokyo-3 alone, you could have had such a world - not exactly this one, but one not at all that dissimilar... Speaking of which...". Again his hand was grabbed without his contribution, but this time, his shadow did it as Misato had once done it in the depths of Terminal Dogma. The other wasn't pulling him forward, but almost offering something like a gesture of support.

"This boy and that girl... We should follow them."

Shinji hesitated to move from the spot.

"Is that so...? Sorry, but... what you're talking about, that doesn't sound like me at all..."

His alter ego just smiled.
"When I was a child, my words, feelings and thoughts were those of a child. Now I am a man and nothing childlike has remained of me... Now I know the meaning of many things that I used to misunderstand, and I know where to find the answers to the questions that remain... I always thought this world was a big, noisy, scary place, but once I understood how it works, everything is easy."

If you saw this place as the deliberate attempt by a purposeful mind to create a perfect world, it began to make much more sense – And knowing of its taint and the taunts held therein, Shinji could have sworn that one might have gone insane just by looking at all this for too long, but since his dark image had suggested that he should learn something from it, he allowed himself to look.

Leaving the building that had become his home in the last three months, he couldn't help but notice that the neighboring balconies which he had only ever known to be empty and abandoned were now full of potted plants, plastic furniture and laundry in the process of drying - one resident had even filled his private vacation paradise with some artificial grass, a deck chair and a parasol.

The tram that this world's Shinji and Asuka had taken was late, which, according to the girl's complaints, was the only reason they had managed to catch it.

The Third Child – the only one to hold this designation in a world without eva pilots - had caught up to them as well, though he much doubted that it was an actual coincidence.

Perchance, the passage of time in a dream bent around the dreamer like space-time around a black hole, if it progressed at all without the deity of this world.

The train car was filled to the brim with happy people, fuller than the Third Child had ever seen it.

In the beginning, when there were more people left in the city, there used to be more passengers, though not enough to ensure that, just for statistical reasons, one of them would eventually have to have noticed a somewhat disheveled-looking 14 year old boy who never got out -

But as of late, it had not been uncommon for him, Asuka and/or Rei to have an entire wagon all to themselves.

Here it seemed unthinkable: The whole city seemed to be noticeably fuller, on the streets, in the squares, in public transport.
The multitudes were sitting or standing, the latter partly clinging to something, or not, women, men, students, pensioners, small children, even a few foreigners mixed in here and there, and they all filled the space with their noise, smiling, radiant, like the sun that kept shining through the windows.

From time to time, he thought that he could recognize a familiar face in the crowd – for example, he found the three technicians from the NERV headquarters further back in the wagon, though they must have followed other professions here of course - Aoba had his guitar case with him, maybe he had been successful as a musician here, and Ibuki had always been too delicate for the work at NERV anyway, so she was probably better off wherever it was that she ended up, perhaps more of a perfectly harmless position in theoretical research or engineering.

Nevertheless, the three of them seemed to know each other here and were in the process of having a lively chat.

"So did you ask her out...?" Hyuuga asked the young woman facing him.

"Uh, who exactly do you mean...?"

"Well, your crush! That scientist you told us about. Did you finally tell her how you feel about her?"

"Well..."

"You can do it, Maya!" said Aoba, placing a supportive hand on her shoulder. "She can't do worse than say 'no'."

The most familiar face of all was, of course, the easiest one to find, though the fiery red hair around it did its part to make its owner stand out - it was all the more surreal to see as many as three versions of himself in this wagon, once, close to the door, then, leaning against the opposite wall, there was the sinister image in the plugsuit, a potential possibility and yet, a mirage of what must never be, not much different from the version that belonged in this world, seated on a bench with Asuka - *his* Asuka.

She was still wearing her interface headset, but probably only because he had been too uncreative at the time to imagine her with other hair decorations; That, or to remind him how much her life as
an EVA pilot had determined her existence, so much that she always carried these symbols of her status with her, as if they were parts of her body, if not of her identity - Yet Asuka was so much more than just the Second Child! Here he could see an Asuka who was not a Second Child, free and without cares.

The trip to school still entailed the occasional quarrel, but it was a quarrel of a friendly sort – on balance, there was usually a smile on both their faces.

An Asuka who didn't have the pride of an EVA pilot and was therefore just a normal, beautiful, self-confident girl who was free to become his best friend - that alone should have been enough to make it clear that this could be nothing but a dream...

... 

The illusion had at least enough internal consistency that the late arrival of the tram incited the two children to pick up the pace once they had disembarked.

Asuka was, of course, faster, but her roommate - no, her childhood friend – followed closely behind.

It was significant to note that she did not have to drag him behind her to achieve this end, so either Asuka was a little slower in this world, probably due to lack of combat training, or the other Shinji was a little faster.

But even with the modest speed that their feet allowed for, they were still much faster than the beeping and honking masses of traffic, which moved past these two star children like a stream of honey.

The summer heat had brought a sweat to the boy's forehead, but all in all he seemed so used to this that he could afford to keep talking to the girl as he ran along the sidewalk.

"I heard we're supposed to get another new classmate today!"

"Well, it's no wonder, after all, this town is supposed to be the new capital next year. The
So, in other words, this was a city that grew fuller and fuller without his help, instead of one that emptied itself more and more, reminding him of the insufficiency of the imperfect accomplishments which had demanded everything he had to give...? If only...

"...I wonder what they'll be like...I hope it's a cute girl." Shinji heard his alternative self commenting, with a lightheartedness he had never known.

That wasn't really a subject he would talk about easily, especially not with Asuka, but whatever he was used to obviously didn't seem to apply here - if Asuka really was a longtime friend of his counterpart here, it only made sense that he would talk to her about something like that - but somehow the girl didn't really appreciate the trust he placed in her - you could almost think she was jealous.

It almost seemed as if some crazy celestial movie director had included a reference to Hikari's abstruse theory just to make this whole world a little bit more absurd.

But the absurdity had only just begun - the two of them were about to encounter that new classmate of theirs up close, and Shinji knew that because he slowly starting to feel like he had seen all this before...

Somewhere he thought he knew exactly what he was gonna hear next.

"I'm gonna be late..." he quietly repeated the distant echo of words in his skull.

"Oh, no! Oh, no! I'm gonna late!"

The first time around, he'd barely recognized the voice. It sounded profoundly different from any other time he's ever heard it – upbeat, shrill, almost silly, with much more tone and cadence to it, a difference almost like one between a well-known rock song and its acoustic guitar version.

"There is nothing worse than being late on the very first day," both Shinji and the late comer herself repeated at the same time, though his rendition lacked the moderate panic of the original, leaving only quiet, monotonous words.
Meanwhile, his counterpart from this world had no such premonitions to go by, and hence absolutely no idea of what awaited him – accordingly, he was so surprised that it almost bordered on a miracle that his eyes had not popped straight out of his skull: After all, what turned up from beyond the next bend in the road was probably one of the most peculiar sights he had ever witnessed, especially since he lived in a perfectly normal city without any EVAs or Angels to set new records of madness every couple of days.

Admittedly, the entity that just turned the corner would have been an equally confounding spectacle to all three Shinjis, no matter how many times they might or might not have seen it before.

Even this world's specimen, who was seeing all this for the first time, was beginning to reflect on whether he should have invested in a helmet for him to wear in Asuka's presence to limit the damage to his brain whenever she felt the urge to maltreat his skull or face, because, as of this moment, the neurons of his visual cortex expected him to believe that he was on a direct collision course with one of strangest girls he had ever seen.

She was wearing a school uniform which he did not recognize, consisting mostly of a yellow sweater vest and a long black skirt, and by all indications, she appeared to be in a hurry – her black school bag was swinging all around, particularly since she appeared to have a tendency to stretch out her arms as she walked... but all this was still fairly explicable.

The real kicker was elsewhere: At another place or time of day, he would have chalked it up to a trick of a light, but here in the bright morning sun, she inevitably looked as if she had actual, honest-to-goodness blue hair – And not just one or two highlights, but an entire thick, albeit short bob of it, down the roots and including her eyebrows like it had actually grown out of her head like that – but while the hair might have been explained by the marvels of modern chemistry, there was no excuse for the ripe-tomato-firetruck-red color of her eyes, all the more visible as they widened in horror the closer they came to each other as soon as she realized that neither of their speedy trajectories could be stopped in time to avoid the now inescapable trajectory – compared to that, the piece of toast between her teeth which wobbled dangerously at each of her steps was merely the icing on the cake.

But as soon as Shinji had formed an approximate impression of what she looked like, they had already collided head first, and all they felt anymore was the aching of their respective skulls.

It was bizarre.

On the one hand this scene seemed as unreal as a ridiculous comedy gag that would only happen in a cliché-storm of a Shojo manga, and certainly not in his life, but nonetheless there were all these little details that seemed all too familiar to the Third Child, like exact manner in which the two of them were brought down by their hopelessly tangled feet, the flock of birds that took off and flew away at the sound of the commotion, leaving a telephone pole (that exact same telephone pole) completely empty... there was something familiar about the broken city he could not see but
somehow expected, the wide red sea he felt so keenly that he did not need to see it, or even the way the pair of birds that quickly flew down to claim the abandoned toast, but the most ingrained resonance of memory took him right back to his first day in this city.... or even to the embarrassing scene in her apartment, once she landed right at his counterpart's feet in a somewhat compromising position – though of course it was not quite the same.

In fact, as soon as she became aware of her predicament, *this* blue-haired girl wasted little time hastily covering with her arms what the unfavorable placement of her skirt had revealed, and made haste to extract herself from what she apparently recognized as an embarassing situation, leaving behind her toast, which was probably no longer edible anyways, and waved farewell, wildly swinging her bag back and forth in the process - at least, her habit of running with her arms outstretched still bore some token resemblance to the First Child.

Visibly perplexed, but also vaguely taken with her, the Third Child's resident counterpart was left behind on the floor, blinking incredulously in her general direction -

As for the red-haired girl at his side, her expression looked anything *but* enthusiastic - even if she was so fundamentally different here that she might actually get jealous over him, there was apparently not a single world among the infinite variations of the wide multiverse where Shikinami Asuka would have a positive opinion of Ayanami Rei -

Even if this so-called "Rei" (if that was even still her name) ultimately bore little resemblance to the quiet, subdued girl that "our" Shinji had once known.

His counterpart, which had of course had never known her any other way, or any way at all, could not classify her behavior as anything atypical for her in particular, but had little problems with simply filing her away under "some strange occurrence", before Asuka brusquely grabbed him by the wrist, dragged him to his feet and made him follow behind her.

Both children marched straight through her two ghostly observers without even noticing that they had phased through their shapes.

"Quite a strange sight, isn't it..." the darker figure commented.

"I think I had trouble imagining what she would have been like if all these things never happened – Of all our lives, hers was probably most closely intertwined with the evangelion project... I thought she would probably still be a little strange, and maybe a little oblivious of social conventions, but now that I think about it, this version of her kind of reminds me of Mari."

"...Who's Mari?"
"Mari, Asuka and Ayanami... Maybe even Misato... I guess the roles they play in this world are somewhat changed from what we're used to, for the same reasons that everything else is upside-down here.

Because it's easier that way. Because it eliminates the conflicts in the way I see them... That's why Ayanami, who has always been familiar to me in a strange way, is completely new here without any previous connections to me - And Asuka, who has brought strange, confusing new feelings and sensations into my world has turned into someone I've known all along.

And that's how this strange world here came into being."

"Are you really sure that this world is the strange one...?" At first, Shinji was hesitant in his objection. He was not one to contradict others and there was something unsettling about the awareness that his first impulse had been to defend this dream world.

He didn't know if it was "right" to say this, but it didn't change anything about the surprisingly strong emotions he felt coming from within, refusing to remain silent any longer... and since this was nothing but a confusing dream anyway, the usual reasoning he used to make himself hold back were null and void here.

"There's nothing strange at all about a teenage girl feeling embarrassed because some random stranger saw her underpants... What an insane world you have to come from to think that this would be strange... All of it is ridiculous... angels, Evangelions, illusionary worlds... that's the part that makes no sense! What must be wrong with you to seriously think that the crazy world we remember makes more sense than this? You're really starting to scare me... none of this makes any sense... it's just crazy!"

"Then you'd rather have this world...? Is is not 'crazy'?"

As if at the push of a button, the image of the faceless woman he had seen at 'his' apartment shot straight into his consciousness, as did the chill he had felt when he first noticed.

He was forced to realize that he could not bring himself to call this a 'sane' world, either.

But what would he possibly say to this...?

He struggles to put together a meaningful sentence, but every point he could have argued defused itself in his own skull.
How frustrating!

His fingers twitched, but he didn't yet have the determination to clench them into a fist.

"None of these worlds make sense... Nothing. Neither of them does! I want you to stop this whole ridiculous circus, do you hear me? I've had enough already!"

"Now you're getting childish now? You should already know that it's useless."

Meanwhile, the illusory image of him had continued on his way even if the Third Child could not remember following him to his school.

The parade of the absurd went on, this time in the form of a tall, well-endowed girl who waved enthusiastically at both of them from the entrance of the school with a wide, sweeping movement that involved the entire arm, not embarrassed to wish him a good morning halfway across the schoolyard - ("Hi, puppy boy! And good morning, Your Highness!") His resident counterpart called her "Mari", Asuka teasingly referred to her as "Four Eyes", but Shinji had no real idea who the girl with the eye-catching red plastic glasses could possibly be, or how she had come to be friends with himself or Asuka, even though he suspected that although this idiosyncratic behavior was quite typical for her, there was something fundamentally wrong with her being here, as it had been the case with Ayanami and Asuka. Mari Illustrious Makinami, at his school, in the blue-white uniform that Asuka, Ayanami and the class president always wore, surrounded by a group of girlfriends, pursuing normal everyday life?

That just didn't make any sense... he couldn't say exactly when or where he had seen her before, apart from a few of his visions, but he had never seen her like that, she had never belonged to all of this....

Shinji was still thinking about it, when his image had long since reached the classroom and, despite his two counterparts leaning against the opposite walls to the left and right of the blackboard, he was with Touji, Kensuke and an unusually carefree Nagato, whose complexion looked a whole lot healthier, probably for the same reasons that he was not wearing any bandages.

They were chatting away without a care in the world, eagerly discussing the next best trivialities – the sorts of things the Third Child had often heard the former two talk about without fully understanding their meaning or being too sure that they both knew what they were talking about.

Here, the same kind of typical schoolboy concerns flowed naturally from his own mouth as if it had never been different - and as far as this world was concerned, this was probably the way it
always had been.

Perhaps that was what it meant to be a normal boy, blessed with ignorance and unable to worry about or even fathom such big, terrible things, living out his time as if it were a single, dreamlike summer day – and the same seemed to be true for this world's Nagato.

It was obvious from the doodles on the school benches, some jokester, probably Touji, had immortalized the words "IS+SAL" there, and next to it was, clearly in Kensuke's handwriting, a little discreet "BLERGH" and finally, from what must have been Asuka's pen, there were a lot of lines intended to render it all unreadable.

The brightness of the sun blinded Shinji from beyond the windows – What a generous dream world this must be, if the worst things he had to worry about were some embarrassing but friendly pranks from Touji.

It was no surprise then that his other self was indistinguishable from Touji and Kensuke, seamlessly participating in their silly antics. The closest thing to a voice of reason was Nagato, and even he wasn't nearly as serious as the one from the other world.

"Well, did you see it...?"

"Uh what?"

"That girl's panty!"

"It's not as if I was looking on purpose!" the blue-eyed boy asserted in a slightly acerbic tone that he usually reserved for his most confident, relaxed moments, usually when he was sitting opposite to Misato on the breakfast table, or how he used to act towards Asuka before he started being interested in what she thought of him – and even then, he would probably not have broken into a slight grin, gesturing to indicate a brief distance with his fingers. “I saw it all, just for a moment. ”

"You lucky bastard!... auauauaua!"

The class representative had apparently decided to discipline Touji for his frivolous thoughts by pulling at his ear.
"Stop talking such nonsense and water the flowers! It's your turn this week!"

"You know, sometimes you can be a real bitch!"

"What did you say?"

Surreal, just surreal, like a scene from the most ridiculous comedy flick, yet close enough to certain moments of his actual life to confuse him, too much for him to simply dismiss it...

All he could do was watch with wide eyes, unable to formulate a response. This was getting crazier and crazier by the minute.

"I'm afraid our friend Touji is going be henpecked once he gets married..."

"Believe me, so will you..." Asuka observed.

"Why would you say that!"

"I'm just telling it like it is!"

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Well, look at you!"

"You always open your big mouth, but-"

"Oh, shut up, stupid Shinji! You're being stupid."

While Nagato was still engaged in the future undertaking of smoothing the waves of chaos by appealing to the to the reason and decorum of all present, Kensuke already suspected that this venture would bring little success, and leaned out the window with a sigh.
"What enviable peace and quiet we are having today!"

What finally ended the chaos was the sound of squeaking tires, not of their own accord, but because of what they announced - once again Shinji had a slight déjà-vu experience, even though he could actually pin down its source for once – This was just like that one time Misato had come to a PTA meeting, just before the Jet Alone incident.

Only that he, or rather his alter ego, was not pushed aside this time, but on the contrary used his position to lean out of the window, practically drooling and showing a V-sign, staring at Misato's cleavage much like his friends while she was getting out of the car - and her top was revealing enough for the Third Child to ascertain that this version of her definitely didn't have any traces of the scar he had occasionally spotted under her clothes while she was passed out from drinking too much booze.

He didn't know if this Misato was as much of a slob, but even if she was, his reaction would probably not differ so much from that of the other boys if he had never seen the inside of her appartment - after all, Misato was still a very attractive woman, and this world had yet to provide her with ulterior motives.... He didn't believe that Misato's actual profession had even the slightest resemblance to that of a teacher, but he supposed that it fir the sort of unattainable crush he had on her, and it seemed fitting that she would still be a kind of authority figure in his life even though he lived with his parents.

In the background, Hikari and Asuka were complaining about the four of them being idiots - all four of them? Yes, Nagato was actually standing at the window, without the V-sign and with a less stupid grin, but there he was, with his eyes wide open - this Mitsurugi Nagato probably clashed much less with his father's easygoing personality.

How grand it would be to live in a world where this was the extent of his worries!

From there on, everything lost its cohesion, finally becoming too absurd, dissolving like a dream, whose dreamer had unmasked him as an illusion and was beginning to wake up.

There were only still pictures, almost like sketches, everything was getting exaggerated and mixed up and he had less and less of a feeling of being actually present in a spatial, physical way.

"...And here's the new classmate everybody's talking about!"
"Hi everyone, I'm Ayanami Rei! Nice to meet you... HEY, wait, you're the pervert who peeped at my panties this morning!"

"Hehhhhh?!"

"Shut up! You're the one who just showed them to him!"

"Hey, why are you even defending this guy? Are you his girlfriend?!"

"Of course not! We're just old friends!"

"Quiet, please, we're still in class here!"

"No, no, go on, go on. This is more exciting than my favorite show."

The voices were lost in the distance, and the images were increasingly swallowed up by the sunlight they contained, until finally only a faded, featureless plane was left - and then it was suddenly over.

It wasn't even a real transition and he didn't feel any aftereffect that he could have held on to somehow, and how could there still be signs of something that never really happened...

It was as if he had just opened his eyes, not even like after an awakening from a deepest dream, but more like he had simply blinked, one of those moments when time seemed to stand still for a moment only to rush past you like a gust of wind, leaving you nowhere in time when it was all part of the past.

The nondescript white surface, eaten away by dazzling light, had given way to the darkness of a very familiar theater room, only that instead of sitting on a folding chair, he saw himself looking down on a whole, even quite familiar city, which was a little too detailed and also... dynamic (Moving cars...) to be only a cardboard model on a table.
When Shinji looked a little further up and looked over the model, so to speak, past towers and skyscrapers, it inevitably led him to the person standing opposite him at the other end - His reflection.

"What... was that...?"

"I thought I had already explained it to you... First and foremost, it was a dream. Your dream... But it is also an alternate possibility for your life. A road not taken. Something like a parallel world... or maybe a distorted image of it. Anyway, the point is, it's what could have been..."

"...What do you mean? Didn't you say it was impossible?"

"In practice, but not on principle... Think about what you, the other pilots and all the possible candidates have in common..."

"According to what Nagato said... it seems that none of us have a mother anymore..."

"More than that. The one thing that should be the most conspicuous and yet so obvious that you have to look carefully not to lose the forest for the trees..."

"...Our age..."

" Exactly. Why children, when trained adults would be much better able to cope with the strain...? That's the same question you asked yourself again and again..."

"Why am I here? Why me of all people?"

"Your mothers were all pregnant with you when the Second Impact occurred. For some it was shortly before birth, the younger ones among you were only just conceived, but if the Second Impact had never happened, you would certainly have existed anyways. Under other circumstances, you could have lived a life that had absolutely nothing to do with EVA, you'd even exist in a world where EVA doesn't exist at all... You think that everything you're good for is piloting EVA, and that the only reason anybody is with you, why you're in this world at all... But that dependency only exists in your head."
No, even in your waking life, there's a lot more to you than just being an EVA pilot... you saw it yourself, didn't you? All the other qualities are enough to make you recognizable as yourself. And controlling EVA isn't all you ever do, is it...? You have your normal school life with your friends, with Asuka and Ayanami... I am you, so I know best..." 

His likeness laid his hands on the region of his heart.

"There are many different aspects in me... as well as in all other people. They are in constant change and can even be in conflict with each other. Some parts of me have nothing to do with EVA at all..."

"But you'd still have nothing if it wasn't for EVA... I never would have met Misato and the girls and... I never would have managed to walk up to Touji and the others..."

"It is quite natural that you have to act before anything can happen to you, and not everything falls into your lap by magic... For example, most people have to work and earn money to maintain their standard of living and their social life. But would EVA alone have been enough?"

"Huh...?"

"Asuka is also an EVA pilot, but she hasn't made friends with Ayanami, for example, and has built up a completely different life for herself... For one thing, she ended up becoming friends with Hikari rather than with Touji and Kensuke - because she is herself and not you.

EVA may have brought you together with these people, your work as a pilot may have made you visible to them, but you have made the connections... with your own virtues."

"That's not true... I don't have any such virtues! It was all... I don't know, misunderstandings, things that could have happened to anyone else..."

He reviewed it all in his head, as if he was working off a list - Misato? She had told him her opinion all too clearly. Touji, Kensuke and Nagato? They had the wrong idea about all this... Asuka? If they hadn't been ordered to beat up this one angel together, they would probably still be avoiding each other like the plague. Ayanami? He didn't deserve Ayanami.

"And even if what you're saying is true... I can't stand myself in real life. That's just how it is."
"Then stop it."

"...stop?! That's not how it works, it's not like it's something I get to decide... just look at me! It's obvious, isn't it? It is obvious that it would be better for everyone if I had never been born!"

In his frustration, he swept his arm wildly across the table with the city model and swept away all the little towers, all the little men and tiny little machines in ruins, barely noticing the noise they caused when they hit the hard parquet floor.

Demonstratively demolishing the model by planting his palms on the table, he leaned forward and looked his counterpart straight in the eye.

"Everything would be better if you just left us all alone!"

The other remained surprisingly calm, waiting out the entire outburst with all of its snot and tears and ugliness.

"Would you bet on it?"

"What?"

_________________

1. Yeah I just couldn't pick one version of the song in the quote, had to mash em all together

2. It's amusing to read the A/N of the original version and witness my naive younger self cheerily looking forward to Q... You know nothing Jon Snow 18 year old me...
I lost my spine
Inside the center of a star
And every day I wonder
Where the bad bones are
You'll die an ugly day
If you hit and miss
I know my own grand daddy
Worked so hard for this

It seems so sinful
Living like a porcupine
I know you're dreaming of
The time when you were mine
It seems so sinful
It seems so sinful
Oh

You kicked me out
And hung the rope
Down from the roof
The Christians came out
They watched me tie my noose
I spoke a silent prayer
They began cryin'
They knew that I'd applied to Hell
And they knew I got in

It seems so sinful
Living like a porcupine
I know you're dreaming of
The time when you were mine
It seems so sinful
It seems so sinful

Oh, it seems so simple now
It seems so sinful

Marina and the Diamonds, 'Sinful'
"It's obvious, isn't it? It's just obvious that everyone would be better off if I had never been born!"

"Would you bet on it?"

"What?"

He would not have been able to name the next thing he could remember, or if there was any transition at all, either gradually or suddenly – instead, it was more like the reverse of falling into a deep sleep, where one would have memories of moments in which one had tossed oneself into bed full of expectation and register a gradual drop in attention, but could never name the exact moment in which one's consciousness had been completely extinguished - there had been impulses, the distant recognition of places and events in an immense ocean of impressions and images, most of which were meaningless to him, vague associations which had triggered others and, over time, merged into more or less meaningful thoughts, and finally, coalesced into distant premonitions of an of ego, but no particular time of awakening, no place, no space and no time of beginning that he could have assigned to his stream of consciousness, in a way that went significantly beyond the usual disorientation of awakening...

At some point it occurred to him to use his arms to rub the sand out of his eyes, but he couldn't find them. He wanted to put his toes on the ground, but he couldn't feel anything, neither a clearly defined, cool surface under his heels, nor any feedback of contact with the ground, no defined field of vision with diffuse, but still present edges, no presence that shared his own space, and it should have been frightening, the horrid thought of being absolutely alone in the totality of creation... but somehow it wasn't.

Instead, it brought up a buried, primordial impression of warm water and soft, closed walls that he had once accepted to be the margins of this world, lacking even the ability to doubt it, or anything else.

Almost like...

He became aware that the image had not only just occurred to his consciousness; Instead, it seemed to have been here somewhere for a long time, but until now, he had seen no reason to distinguish it from all the others. Nothing had prompted him to linger on it longer than on any other sound or picture or impression, and also, when he looked at it more closely, he could no longer say what made it so different or what might have justified "hanging on to it" for longer...

Only much, much later, when he was more aware of the presence and course of his own thoughts could he classify the image as the entry plug of Evangelion Unit One, narrow, cylindrical walls whose metallic sheen was filtered through the LCL into a warm brown tone. But he couldn't find himself in this picture, no areas he had to reconstruct from memory because they were just behind him or otherwise outside his field of vision, nor any volume of space he couldn't see because he had occupied it.

"What is that... I've experienced something like this before... That was back then... when my body dissolved... It feels good... It's as if I'm spreading out and growing huge, ever further, ever further, everywhere..."
There were so many streams of more or less related lumps of sensory impressions and memories, and in none of them could he make out his own present, the point in time and space from which he would have been looking out at the rest... What he saw, he saw as in a movie or a dream, from some changing, distant perspectives from which he saw people acting from outside, as if he had become an omniscient narrator.

He could have been lurking in any of the pictures, in that little hut in Africa with its roof of corrugated iron, watching distantly as a woman he hadn't seen in once in his life turned an empty water bottle into a kind of skylight for her miserable abode – She was a total stranger, and yet, he could assign her countless words and impressions, what she had been thinking at this moment as well as the concerns that had occupied her attention that day, yet at the same time, he could just as easily have been in the middle of an intersection in a big city that, judging by the appearance of the many, countless people, was located somewhere in Southern China, very close to the shoes and boots that followed the road markings stepping over the asphalt, and at the same time, high above their heads, buried between the shining lights of the city, all with their own stories, overcrowded apartment buildings illuminating the streets with hundreds and hundreds of neatly arranged window lights and giving a young woman the feeling of being all alone in this world as she walked along a straightened river bank decorated with a walkway, while behind the majority of these small windows even lonely souls crouched and hurried past each other without the through-lines of their lives ever really touching.

He could have raced across vast plains of American cornfields along with the wind, until they finally gave way to red stones, hard mountains and oily smells, garishly painted girls who, on the occasion of the upcoming prom, courted the favor of their classmates who hid their envy behind their well-crafted masks, and many, many, many flags that meant something different to anyone who proudly hoisted them into the sky, though they did exist to unite others under their banner, and like the rain, he dripped down into the depths of mighty rain forests, into which not even the sun's rays dare to descend, to one of the last uncontacted tribes, whole societies unto themselves which did not even know that there was a world about to perish.

"This world is full of sadness, meaninglessness and emptiness surrounds people, loneliness suffocates their hearts..."

He followed a highway, and through the windows of a truck, past an aged car freshener, or perhaps from the back of a small car, where a little girl and her even younger brother looked out of the windows expectantly, he looked out at a wide, flat plain beneath a low northern sky.

The cloud-covered sky gradually gave way to a relief of smaller mountains, the valleys in between dotted with a smattering of small villages like dirt sticking to the cracks of a crumpled surface.

And the mountains, once wild and wooded, were now party covered in what must have been something like a field, looking almost as if someone had combed the mountains’ hair.

He didn't know it was a vineyard, but the truck driver knew it, these two kids had memories of how their parents explained it to them, and there were so many people who knew it, so that their voices, memories and experiences melted into a dull "This is a vineyard," without drawing his thoughts near to dwell long on their individual stories. It wasn't as if they were too many, no inability to process the details just from the sheer volume of knowledge and memory. Instead, there was simply nothing about the many individual stories that would hold him.

He saw the places more perfectly and precisely than he could ever have remembered them if he had traveled there himself and looked at them, every possible answer was immediately clear and he
understood much more about its history and meaning, including the reasons behind each and every
detail, far beyond what would ever have been possible with the knowledge that any single
individual could have accumulated over the course of his life of his one life.

A person who knew more about a vineyard and the exact variety of grapes grown on it might not
necessarily know exactly how the mountains themselves were formed according to the most recent
insights of geology, and none of them would probably be familiar with the exact history and
political relevance of the small villages surrounding it -

Perhaps there had been a time in the early history of mankind when that might have been possible
for a single person to contain all the knowledge of mankind, but those days were long gone, and
the more history had progressed, the more people had divided and specialized:

Because they were not one, they were different, and because they were different, they were
suitable for different things because of their differences, and then suddenly there were chiefs and
medicine men, kings, peasants and laborers, and with time, barbers came to be replaced by
hairdressers, dentists and wellness specialists.

When Misato was born, the field of computer science was brand new and at times still called
"cybernetic mathematics"; now there was media informatics, bioinformatics, business informatics
and already, these disciplines were again splitting into their own subdivisions, and the more people
specialized, the more knowledge was contained within humanity as a whole… but at the same
time, the role that would be left for any particular piece of the whole had grown smaller and
smaller.

As a drop in an ocean of billions, the individual had grown less and less important, ans all the
while, more and more dependent on society at large, and as a result, the consequences of a single
person’s disappearance had grown more and more minute.

By its combines powers, the collective could even sustain the weak and the sick who would
previously have been crushed by the millstones of evolution, and the difference between a useful
individual and a dud that contributed nothing to the big picture became increasingly difficult to
discern.

Shinji himself knew this uncertainty only too well.

It wasn't just the people: All higher life-forms like animals, plants and mushrooms had long lost the
purest, most original form, which is common to all life-forms, but at the very moment of
conception: A single cell.

Each of their lives was a work of cooperation, a collective in and of themselves.

But now that everything had become one, and all differences were blurred, he could see all these
things at once, everything humanity had ever known, and much more, because he was not hindered
by the difficulties of communication or the limitations of the human brain to link all this
knowledge and to look at the truth behind all truths, to look into the deepest layers of being and, as
it were, to scratch the roof of the world, and he could see the tree, the tree of evolution, whose
chains connected all beings of this earth with each other, the tree-like data structures that made
today's information technology possible, the tree of human specialization, the differentiation of its
languages and cultures, the tree from the legends of the North, whose roots penetrate all continents
and whose branches bear the burden of the firmament, the tree from the legends of the East, under
which a wise man found his enlightenment, the tree from the legends of the West, whose forbidden
fruits drove mankind to its first sins, and not least the trees from the hot lands of the south.
Ages ago, when the forests had retreated, and left only dry savannahs, there were those who followed the shrinking trees, and there their descendants had remained to this day - but those who ventured out into the new environment, left their familiar paradise and tried to make a life for themselves in the grasslands, received, for their courage, the crown of life, the great gift that the primordial mother had prepared for the boldest of her children; He saw the very idea of a tree, of which even the eponymous plants were only another example, and he looked even further... For despite all their diversity and division, the achievements that had pushed them furthest were always the ones that had bettered their ability to connect to each other - language made people what they are, Scripture covered abandoned lands with kingdoms and empires, the printing press brought light into the darkness of ignorance, and the Internet almost detached people's thoughts from their bodies, increasingly weaving billions of thinking, living people into a single, gigantic brain...

When people connect with each other, even the quietest of voices could become loud... Should the many, countless branches finally come together again to form a firm trunk, to form a full circle in full bloom?

A... double tree?

A bit like a double cone or a double pyramid, mathematically speaking, much more natural than a single cone...

"Misato-san, what is this?"

"This is your father's work."

"What, this?"

"That's part of it."

But how could he have ever known in which of these many memories, impressions and thoughts were his own? How could he even maintain enough of an ego to ask himself such questions, dissolved in this endless ocean of knowledge? It wasn't as if his thoughts and memories were so special...he wasn't as if he was so well known, or so good, or otherwise as an exception - there was nothing so special about a somewhat shy Asian boy. The vast majority of people lived in Asia, many countries there had quite a shortage of women, and it was precisely where the population of humanity grew most where the most young people would logically be found... the ocean of infinite possibilities diluted everything, and such a weak, insignificant person as him was swallowed up all too quickly...

Who he was, what his name was and what he had done in his life, all this dissolved like a drop in the ocean. He might as well never have been anyone to begin with.

"No one cares about me... so they can all just die. Nobody cares if I'm there... so I might as well die as well..."

But there was something there. A crystal nucleus where the first spark of consciousness could finally begin. When he looked at a place, perhaps the Chinese city, perhaps the plateau that gave way to the vineyards under this grey sky, he noticed it -

(in retrospect, it could only be the cloudy grey country. Asuka. Somewhere under this grey sky, between the white coasts in the north and the wall of mountains in the south, she must have been at home.)
He might well have been seeing the places before him through the eyes of countless people, a little bit of each; the cloudy landscape was puzzled together from the fields of vision of all the individual motorists, he saw this road junction in China through a thousand eyes from the crowd, a different one each second; for everyone who passed by and left the square, a new one came along whose eyes he could take instead, but who was it who chose the places, whose will decided to what the countless angles of vision should be united? And who was asking that question? That was him, wasn't it?

Yes. That was undoubtedly his own existence.

That was a lot compared to the previous half-conscious lingering, but still very little.

"What's that?"

"An empty world. A world with no one in it."

"A world of freedom."

"Freedom"?

"It's a world where nothing and nobody is there to limit you. A world of freedom."

"This... is freedom...?"

"Yes. But that's why it's an empty world..."

"As long as I don't do or think anything."

"Yes, as long as you don't do or think anything."

"But... I don't even know what to do..."

"But you're insecure."

"You don't have an image of yourself..."

"It's all so vague..."

"Much too blurry!"

**THAT'S FREEDOM.**

"It's a world where you can do anything you want..."

"But you're not satisfied..."

"Because you can't even think of what you could do..."

With nothing but his mere existence, his knowledge that he existed, he sat down on the wind and let himself drift. He did not have the impression that he would ever add anything new to the great mass of knowledge, feelings and thoughts as they were now - it was self-contained, but nevertheless he was free to search and chew the cud as long as he had the sense for it.

So he did exactly that, listlessly flipping through the pages in the Book of Mankind, now that it seemed to have been slammed shut once and for all.
It was all in the past now, and so he floated through it, essentially formless, without the power to really change anything, not really knowing if he was looking for anything particular or why. He was just there, without a reason or a task, like a leftover relic of a past era, looking around with his thousand eyes, which were nonetheless blind to the present.

There was no love and no pain here, nothing to which he had to react in any way, one moment was no different than the next.

How much time had actually passed? What had actually happened? How did he become like this? So many, so many questions, and infinite time to look at them...

What would happen once the questions ran out?

Because he had nothing better to do, he searched for answers, combed the past for anything to do with him, anything that could attract his attention in this endless nothingness. But how did you find something that might as well never have existed?

In the end it came down to seeing things he knew from the perspective of other people; it all seemed so strange and cold and different, you had to look closely to recognize the pictures.

The images from the eyes of the strangers were not particularly beautifully arranged and the fused perspective was ironically quite distant and impersonal, it all looked like from a documentary or a bad home video, not focused on anything in particular and devoid of any lens to suggest which parts of the image should have been the main thing.

There was a circling gaze, below the power lines, into the sun.

He thought he knew about power lines. He knew civilization. In the end, he had to conclude that he had probably not dwelt in the African countryside or the Indonesian rainforest, instead, it was scenes of technology that called to him, moving trains, monotonous urban housing blocks...

The first living thing he could spot was a little cat.

Ritsuko-san had had cats, it could be hers, or it could also be another one, any cat that any person could have come across by chance during a walk, who knows.

But he knew about cats, and he knew people who owned cats.

Anyway, this cat lived in a big city, and he also knew big cities, framed by high, foggy mountains.

He knew the mountains, or rather, he knew the city in between. It was a very big city, probably full with so many cats that the disappearance of this particular cats would hardly affect the total count, and many more people, not all of whom owned cats.

So one person less would make difference at all, even if he couldn't find himself, it was very likely that he would still find this big city in its place despite his absence, a big city full of a lots of people who never knew him.

The satellite dishes would continue to receive signals, the trains and trams would continue to run their courses, even if there was now an empty spot where he had often stood when he set out about his daily journey, and the sounds of daily life in the carriages would not necessarily be much softer.

Other people would walk under the same power lines in the morning and live in the same apartments, others would look out of the windows of some vehicle and the same big skyscrapers in the center would tower above everything else, and even that little swing from that one blurred
childhood memory that had long sat at the root of his mind would still exist without him.

Perhaps it would have swung back and forth in just the same strange way, as if covering the evening sun even when he wasn’t there to look at it, and his absence from the crowds of people on the streets would probably not be felt at all.

So he had found this city, among all the cities that existed on this planet, had found his way here and, he even had the feeling of having followed along a familiar, quotidian path, from an apartment by train into the city, and it had brought him nowhere. He had found nothing.

Nothing was there for him, nothing made him wish that he could intervene in this terribly cold, terribly empty world in any way.

_Heh, heh, heh._

It was just as he thought.

It made no difference whether he was there or not.

Everything was better off without him.

Why in God's name would he ever even think of wanting to return?

Why should he linger here at all?

He was the one asking questions, right? It was him who was looking around here and thinking, wasn't it?

Well, then he would just let it all be and fall silent forever, so that there would be no more difference between him and everyone else here, so that he could confidently forget that he even existed, or that he had ever been at all.

It had never made any difference to begin with, right?

_Com, sweet death..._

But just as he had almost turned his back on this world forever and renounced the last of its shadows, he saw a speckle of red in the far corner of his eye.

"_Oh, no, not with you! I'd rather die than do it with you!"_

Well, that was the best description for it that he could come up with. He had no field of vision, no eyes that could have had corners, he had no face, no laughter, no skin that could have demarcated the boundary of his being, no notions that he could have connected and assembled into a solid, tangible identity, no memories that could have told him his own story... perhaps, he had once possessed each and every of those things, but by now, he had it irretrievably lost them in this endless sea.

They were here somewhere, but he could not find them, not any more than he could have picked out the water molecules that had constituted a particular drop of water once they had been scattered across the ocean.

There was no room bearing his name at the door, no desk waited for him, nothing to call his own; Not here, not anywhere. His only clue was this city, and even that he had long since given up on...

Everything he had left was a tiny spark of consciousness, and even that spark would have been
extinguished in time if there hadn't been this one idea, this strip of red, which made the long
dimmed spark of his life flare up once more with full intensity, and seized his entire being with a
sudden wakefulness, a buried wish, long since dismissed as impossible, which was all that
remained for him now, at the end of all things, with nothing left to lose anymore.

Though he was certain of nothing else, he recalled a firm conviction that he still had to check
something before he left this planet, one last lifeline.

"I want to help you... I want to be with you forever... Help me, only you can do it ..."

He raced after the red light, with everything he had, all the strength he could muster, and he was
shocked at how much it still was, how much life he had carried in him to the end.

Had he been in the great, anonymous abundance of all mankind until now, he hastened towards his
goal, between the people, through the masses, into the heart of the city; Walls and fences could not
hold him.

This existence was full of knowledge and stories, some of them much more impressive and awe-
inspiring than the confused impression he was pursuing, but in the great grey mass to which it all
melted together, the bright red immediately popped out, and the small trace of evidence that its
existence had left was easy to trace.

She alone seemed to call out to him in this chorus of confusing voices, which formed only a
uniform, static drone, like a thousand bees or a hundred vuvuzelas.

Only her face in the crowd reminded him of life, reminded him of before.

In his eagerness to pursue the red girl, he didn't even notice how he tied himself back to a time and
a place without even intending to... He had to be where she was, he had to be there when she came.

Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense.

He followed her, twirled around the afterglow of her circles and drew his spirals ever and ever
closer around her, around the city block where she dwelled, around the building in which she lived,
into the space she called her own, her work, her acquaintances, everything that belonged to her
world... Though he couldn't find himself here, she was still there, she existed and gave him
something to which he could attach himself, a kind of anchor for his being, a center around which
he could spin his thoughts and chain the memories that belonged to him back together, one at a
time...

Her name was Asuka.

Strangely enough, when he finally found her, he couldn't find a shred of red on anywhere on her
person.

He had joined her in bed, coming to a rest right beside her sheets, like a curious bird or a waking
ghost, and he found her buried deep in her pillows, in the same yellow nightgown she had worn
when she had taken the innocence from his lips, almost a little dirty, used and crumpled she
looked, the clothes haphazardly throw on, the bed heavily rumpled, she was not even properly
covered; her nightly twists and turns must have exposed her. Anyways, the long hair that fell over
her pillows and the arms she had abused as supports for her head was deep black, as was most
people in this country... Granted, she looked a little older than he remembered her, maybe five or
ten years more, but that shouldn't have changed the fact that her many ought to be fire red... He had
heard once that some immigrants dyed their hair in order not to stand out in the at times rather
conformist society of his home country, but Asuka?

To be honest, he couldn't imagine that at all with her, she had always been so proud of standing out, and certainly not the type who would easily adapt. She didn't care if others stared at her, if anything, she enjoyed it...

This was supposed to be a world where he wasn't there, a world where everything was better, where everything was normal...

Ah.

She was moving.

Sluggish and certainly still sleepy, she began to stretch a little, as if only to find out if her body parts were still where she had left them the day before, before finally lifting her head and opening the eyes that were still half covered by her disheveled hair that fell over her arm, still half under the blanket.

She was evidently in a rotten mood, right from the moment she woke up.

"Morning. The beginning of a new day. Everything starts all over again... The beginning of a crappy day. I don't like it ..."

A little alarmed, but not without completely losing this sluggish, sleepy quality, she turned the blanked aside and looked around. "A dream...?" she asked herself, speaking apathetic, distant murmurs into the atmosphere, as if she wasn't really part of this room and therefore didn't have to worry about being heard. Her voice sounded grumpy and resigned, completely free of her usual enthusiasm...

There was her face, her nighgown, her long hair and her long legs, and yet she didn't even look like herself... the sight didn't fit her at all - or maybe it fit all too well if you took these last few weeks before the end as your reference material, when even her anger had finally burnt itself out, exactly like what appeared to have happened with the color of her hair.

Red fire gives way to dark ashes.

That was supposed to be Asuka, ten years later?!

Her apartment was ridiculously small and very ‘lived-in’, she had a pinboard full of things she couldn't hang anywhere else, right next to her bed, the closet was overflowing and in several places, drying laundry was hanging from the ceiling... Here and there, one could still make out things like a TV, a lamp that no one had turned off, and a door to a small balcony which was just as overcrowded with the various implements of life, freshly washed clothes and clothes still to be washed, and in any case the apartment seemed far too small for its occupants - and yes, there was more than one.

Pressed against the wall and thoroughly squeezed into a corner of Asuka's small bed, which hafobviously never designed for more than one person, was nevertheless a precariously-placed bedfellow, who at second glance might have been held responsible for the excess of clothes and space-consuming objects.

Still asleep deeply and firmly, he had his back turned towards Asuka, who had apparently not expected his presence, but quickly noted it with a sigh.

"Stupid Touji!" she complained in resignation, grabbing her head which was probably still plagued
by a slight hangover.

"I see... I must have got drunk on the way from work and ended up sleeping with that idiot again..."

The dark-haired man on the other side of the bed, apparently naked for the most part under the blanket, greatly resembled Shinji's former classmate despite the past ten years, and the clothes and underwear that Asuka had probably worn the day before lay between her bed and the floor underneath, exactly where she must have left them. It didn't look like she was wearing any underpants under her yellow nightgown, and there was an open purple condom packet on the floor.

The Third Child tried his best to remind himself that the sleeping young man there had never been his best friend - of course he still had both legs - and that the woman beside him had never met anyone by the name of Shinji Ikari.

No reason for hurt feelings, really. Hadn't he already given up on Asuka a long time ago?

But that it had to be Touji of all people, that surprised him, considering that the two of them couldn’t stand each other.

On the other hand, his own relationship with Asuka had also started in a rather antagonistic fashion.

But honestly, Touji? Why did it have to be Touji of all people...?

Had she just picked the next best person to call an idiot since her preferred victim wasn’t anywhere to be found?

Really, she was serious...?

Shinji wondered why that even hurt him anymore. There was nothing mysterious about it.

Of course Asuka would just be with someone else if he wasn't there... Even when he was there, she’d spent all her time pining after someone else.

Touji was of course not Kaji, but he was certainly very ‘manly’ as far as the old-fashioned conceptions of such things went, and that alone put him much closer to being Asuka’s type than Shinji ever was.

But honestly, Touji?!

Was he supposed to spend eternity just watching the two of them being happy together? Was that supposed to be his hell? If so, he wouldn’t stand for it-

But he might not have to.

Without bothering to wake up her boyfriend, Asuka turned to the side and began to put on the socks she’d left behind the day before, more or less listlessly.

"Lately, fucking is pretty much all we do when we're together... men! If you let them do it to you just once, th at’ all they’re ever interested in ... Sometimes I wonder if they even think about anything else..."

Checking her face briefly in a tiny mirror she found that the condom whose packaging was lying around on the floor seemed to have been used for the act itself, the little oral prelude or epilogue - she had been too drunk to know exactly - had still left its traces on her face.
But she didn't even have the strength anymore to get upset about how disgusting she thought it was. "Well, I guess whether you do it once or a hundred times isn't that much of a difference..." she mumbled thoughtfully.

Snatching a shirt that was lying around, (she didn't even seem to be sure whether it belonged to her or to him), she set off for the bathroom to "restore" her dreary face after the ravages of the previous day, or at least make it presentable for the work.

The bathroom was like the rest of the apartment, hardly more than a small cabin and far too crowded. The implements of beautification, whose number seemed to have shrunk considerably over the last decade, were mostly stored on the toilet box.

She held her hair up like a ponytail, so that it didn't fall in her face, and made sure to rinse her mouth properly (like that one time after the kiss). Just to be on the safe side, she searched her decollete for any remains of a "pearl necklace", and all the while, her self-pitying thoughts didn't really end.

They just kept flowing out of her, and he felt reminded of how she had announced how much she hated everything, first, as barely-restrained rage that had broken out of her after a long, long time, first once in silence, then in front of others and then again and again until it had finally lost all fire and became little more than a weak, repetitive whimper.

"Oh, that idiot..." she told her disinterested reflection, probably because there was no one else to listen to her. "...he's always beating around the bush and refusing to commit permanently, although we both know these are just lazy excuses to make do for the moment..."

Much to her frustration, she found that even the largest amounts of water would not help, and pulled some toilet paper from the roll to wipe the last remnants out of her mouth.

"But things are practically happening by themselves and before you know it, we're already living together! How did that happen?"

Shinji would like to know that as well.

---

"A dream...?"

Unlike Asuka, Misato hadn't changed a bit, at least outwardly, she still looked exactly the way he remembered her... dark hair, slightly tan skin, red clothing...

What he hardly recognized, however, was her apartment.

She woke up on the floor as if she were just another piece of garbage that was rotting here, with nary a distant hope of being properly disposed of at some point.

Above her she found one of these long, sticky flytraps, which hung from the ceiling lamp and looked almost more disgusting than its typical prey, she found her body half under her low table in the middle of a room which almost made Asuka’s cramped room look neat by comparison.

There wasn't a single square centimeter of floor that wasn't covered in dirt and paper, and the previously mentioned table was full of old beverage cans and instant meal packages full of indefinite leftovers that might almost have merited their own names.

But the woman below didn't seem to notice the stench any more, much like she quickly gave up on
her clumsy attempts to pick herself off the ground.

"What a miserable dream..." she murmured indistinctly into her dirty clothes from the day before, which she hadn't been able to get off in last night's state of intoxication. Her hairstyle was probably supposed to be something like a hair knot, but after various nightly upheavals about half of it had come loose again.

In short, the room looked even filthier than it did when Shinji first walked in, and the owner no longer even bothered to put on a facade of optimism... or was she always like that when she was alone with her thoughts...?

A few more times she tried to sit up, but she didn't really want to succeed, so she decided to stay on the ground for now.

Still quite foggy from the residual alcohol in her much-abused bloodstream, she decided to stare at the ceiling for now, looking into the light with narrowed eyes, as if she herself was a fly and the floor of the dirty apartment was the sticky trap that had proved her undoing.

IMPULSES.

IMPULSES that urged him to support this poor woman who had, after all, taken him in in his time of need and, in the very end, bought his life with her own; He wanted so badly to wrap her in a blanket and throw all the cans and bottles out the window in a high arc, along with all the other garbage.

His first instinct was really to just grab all the packaging and stuff it very eagerly into a garbage bag, just to make a dent in the disorder.

This was his territory, his kitchen and his living room, it almost hurt not to be able to touch anything, it itched in his non-existent hands...

No.

Nonononononono.

So what!?

So what if her apartment was dirty, at least she wasn't dead!

Even like this, she was better off without him!

"I wonder if it’s because of all the stress..." Her voice, which had often been so loud in its own annoying, intrusive, overly cheerful way could now barely be heard over the silence the rustling of the scattered wrappers.

For a moment he thought she would just fall asleep again or fall into a coma caused by liver damage, but eventually she got so upset that she could sit on the table supported in a halfway sitting position.

"Things could never work out with that man now...Absolutely impossible!"

Did she mean Kaji?

Was it him she had dreamed of? What was her dream about, anyways? And how about Asuka’s?

She grabbed a beer can which she hadn't managed to finish yesterday, and continued where she had
left off - the stuff was obviously lukewarm and not quite as edible anymore, but although she pulled a face once she tasted it, she swallowed.

"But I guess it's no use complaining about reality in your dreams..."

To prevent another drift into the deeps of sleep, Misato decided that it was probably best to rise from her resting place, even if she was forced to hold on the walls and furniture as she staggered toward the balkroom.

On the way she took a little break in the door frame and leaned against the walls, which she ended up regretting, because the noises she could hear through the said wall only seemed to contribute to her frustration and the mounting ache inside her skull.

"Ahhh... and of course the couple next door has to start the peacemaking ritual again!" She sighed. "Id’s guess they’re almost done with the foreplay..."

But as if the noise weren’t enough of an annoyance, as soon as she had managed to drag herself into the bathroom among other indistinctly murmured complaints, the phone started ringing again without her being able to remember where she had put it.

It was not beautiful, and certainly not dignified, the weakness and ugliness of human beings widely revealed, presented before him as on a silver plate.

Ah, the light morbid beauty of decaying things!

("No one can live without being surrounded by others.")

"No man can live alone."

"But yet everyone remains first of all an individual..."

"And that creates pain."

"And that's why there's sadness"

"And that is why we wish to feel the spirit and body of others..."

"And that's why we want to be one.")

Misato herself had at first tried to laugh at the ridiculous irony that seemed to make up her whole life, but as time went by she was probably growing numb to the humor of it.

Cursing quietly as she stumbled from wall to wall and piece of furniture to piece of furniture, she didn't really give the impression that it was too good an idea to leave her alone in this house, but what was he talking about?

She was already alone here, and even if he had been there with her, what could he do? (Apart from stuffing his ears and running away while she cried her eyes out)

She was better off without him.

This was better. For sure!

So what if she was very nearly tripping over her own filth! So what if she ended up on all fours, searching the ground for a simple miserable phone!
"The human body is made up of fragile and weak materials..."

"And also the human spirit is fragile and weak.)

What could he do?!

What could he possibly do about it?!

He'd only make it worse. Much worse.

If he were there, she would still end up lonely and depressed, he had been forced to watch her hiding in her room, replaying Kaji's last message over and over again... and it proved too much for him to deal with.

(Was it worse to have loved and lost, or to live with the thought that it was hopeless from the very beginning?)

In the end, it turned out that the phone she was looking for was lying right in front of her nose under the table she had just been lying under.

Between papers, empty packaging, indefinable crumbs and stinking clothes, almost buried under the low, cave-like table, which only theoretically offered her a kind of refuge with the reddish light of the small infrared lamp underneath, she pulled the ugly, beige, worn out telephone towards her without being able to pick herself up, really lift it up or at least sit up and leave this dirty hole.

She hadn't even heard who was on the other end of the line yet, but her expression on her face already indicated that she only understood this struggle as a tiresome duty.

Shinji was shocked.

He longed for some way to quell his ever-increasing doubts and insecurities, but he had no fingers to open and close nervously, nor eyes to turn away from the scene in front of him.

He wanted to silence his conscience by grabbing the next best piece of garbage and starting to clean it up - he wasn't a big fan of chaos by nature anyway - but which piece of garbage was the "next"? He could see all of them from any distance if he wanted to.

There was no fixed position in space relative to which he could estimate the proximity or distance of any items. He could just as well be anywhere, in every nook and cranny... but because he was in no particular place, one could have said just as well that he was nowhere.

He was not there at all, absent, unable to intervene, not at all connected with it...

All the memories that had settled in the walls of these walls like the penetrating stench of cigarettes... Hadn't he more or less decided that all this had been meaningless in the end when he had left this life behind him to become something else?

So where did that terrible pain come from, that feeling that his heart could burst into a thousand pieces when he saw that woman, who couldn't understand him after all, lying in her own filth...?

("You know, if you're always whacking your brains over everything, you'll never have any fun.")

This wasn't right, damn it!

The Misato he knew had always been unbearably optimistic, and so excitable that you could probably get diabetes from listening to her talk. He had never understood how she could laugh
even when there was nothing to laugh about, it always gave him the feeling of being far away from
her, and in the end he had seen that her smiles had probably not always been real either... she too
had her inner demons, her despair and so many differing sides which had simply overwhelmed him
towards the end, until she was finally out of the question as a source of consolation and
understanding, because she was rather another unaddressed task, another problem on a large heap
of them from which he had finally run away.

Maybe what he saw here wasn't so different from the person she was when she was alone and
didn't have anyone to put on a show for. Maybe the same was true for the Asuka of this world...

But no, he refused to believe that.

Despite all the doubts, Misato had been one of the last people trying to save this world until the
end... She could never be so... resigned, could she? And the same was true for Asuka, she was
always up in his ears, going on about how she was meant for greater things, she would never come
to terms with such a mediocre life of which she only complained silently and full of self-pity
without being able to change it in any way... .

Or had ten years and hard reality been enough to break them to this extent...?

Wasn't there a little bit of hope left in this world?

"Oh, hello..." Misato replied sluggishly. Only when she heard the voice at the other end did her
voice and the rest of her seem to really wake up, she laboriously pulled herself out under the table
and forced herself into a sitting, preferably straight position, as if half-heartedly seeking to look
neat in front of her interlocutor, even if she couldn't see her anyway. "Hello Ritsuko..."

It was true that the fake blonde often criticized the lack of maturity of her long-time friend, but he
had actually thought that Misato was largely resistant to counseling in this regard... or had she
minded all those things that he himself, Asuka and Ritsuko had constantly said much more than
she had she shown it all this time?

"Oh, you're asking about the next holidays? Yeah, sure, why not?"

If only he could hear what Ritsuko said on the other end of the line...

"But I thought you had other plans."

Oh yes, right, there was actually no reason why he should not be able to hear them if he willed it
so. He was by no means bound to that space, and even if he were, he might as well be close enough
to the phone to understand what was being said, yes, if he wanted to, he could even listen to the
conversation through Misato's ears... But that didn't solve his problems, nor that ever-growing knot
of doubt in his currently metaphorical chest. More and more he noticed how difficult it was to put
his current experience into the kind of words he had understood before - so much of it had been
determined by his experiences and the limitations of the human body that he could not describe
many sensations without speaking of a body he no longer possessed, and the new experiences of a
transcendent being that had thrown off the flesh and overcome time and space went beyond the
scope of simple, clumsy words that could mean anything and nothing and were so easily
misunderstood...

When he first learned to speak and think in words, his view of the world changed so radically that
all the early childhood thoughts from before became incomprehensible to him as if they were
written in an old file format that could no longer be read with the current version of the program.
Now that he had outgrown words, he could have lost himself in the newly opened infinity without
ever being able to return...

The temptation to just let go was quite great, but without understanding why, whether from a twisted sense of duty or something much, much less selfless, he couldn't manage to detach his gaze from that woman... yet.

"They're most definitely canceled. No doubt about it!" She accompanied her words with a brief, unseen gesture, which probably only served to focus her own thoughts. "As things stand now, it is impossible for me to go see my relatives. They'd just try again to arrange a wedding for me, and then I'd be done!"

He knew that Misato had often worried about ending up as lonely old spinster, the topic of marriage had always been a bit... sensitive, it was probably also one of the problems an active, working woman would encounter in a country where some stiff old traditions were still quite a lot more present than you would expect in the 21st century. It was generally called the "Christmas cake phenomenon", after the cakes that were occasionally used in this country for Christmas, the meaning of which was more like that of Western Valentine's Day around these parts - no matter how tasty the cake is, no one wants it after the twenty-fourth. Even if these unfortunate tendencies were increasingly on the retreat, self-determined, sexually active women still had to endure being called "sluts" once in a while, even in the most modern parts of this world, because even if one taught the new generations tolerance, all these old people would still not disappear into thin air, and whoever had a family might presumably be urged by them to submit to the old ways... since when did Misato even have any living relatives?

She had told him about her father, he was dead, but what about her mother?

From the snippets of memories that he had been able to draw from the great whirlpool of complementarity, he knew that the Misato, deeply traumatized at the time of Second Impact, was taken along on the reconnaissance mission that was sent to determine its causes, supposedly as the only witness, but in practice, rather like a kind of bizarre souvenir, pitied by the people involved in the project - which did not make it very likely that her mother had survived the Second Impact.

It would not be surprising, after all, the disaster had claimed half the lives of all mankind and it was very likely that Misato's mother had lived in a coastal city, simply because Japan was an island country.

The relatives she was talking about could as well be uncles or aunts, or maybe the Second Impact never happened in this alternative world either, which could have given any number of Misato's relatives a longer life.

But she didn't seem much happier for it, it seemed as if a certain number of circumstances and incidents had prevented her from establishing a real connection with them, not least the whole marriage issue... even though she seemed to have avoided her relatives and ran away instead of confronting them; doing that would mean responding to her arguments and worries, which would ultimately amount to one of two possibilities: She could tell them that she didn't think she really wanted or needed a man in her life, and that would have been a lie, she wasn't so strong that she wouldn't mind lonely nights, or she would have had to tell them that she was still hoping to find a man she really loved... and in that respect she had given up.

Or perhaps she had found this man a long time ago, let him go in her stupidity, and refused to admit it and make amends because of her pride.

No, she preferred to believe that love was just a fairy tale, to sit in the darkness rather than to think that she must be blind to whatever light was still out there.
She would rather believe that these two copulation-happy neighbors were just slaves to their hormones, by which they were driven to do irrational things in the name of ancient instincts that, thanks to condoms and contraceptive pills, no longer even fulfilled their purpose, rather than to deal with the possibility that there might have been something she was missing.

"But what is that? Do you still watch porn flicks at your age?"

"What do you think of me! That's the neighbors, the neighbors I say..." Misato had grabbed a bag by the way and started to half-heartedly stuff a little of the ubiquitous garbage into it. Not enough to make a difference in what the room had looked like before and after, but just a little bit scraping from the top layer to convince herself that she wasn't doing nothing, and even just as long as she was talking to someone whose opinion she could imagine very well, if she should ever see her personal garbage dump.

"Like cats in heats. Every single night! It's like they don't have anything else to do..." She found it hard to hide her bitterness. Hardly anything seemed to have remained of her inviting, playful warmth.

("I wonder if I'll also do dirty things like this when I'm as old as Misato...")

"Sounds like you live in a very lively neighborhood."

"You only say that because you don't have to live with it every day..."

"But didn't you tell me that your neighbor just recently gotherself a new boyfriend?"

"Yeah. And now they're living together... and they're so young."

It was above all the latter that she could not possibly forgive them for.

Sober and insensitive, she fingered through the clothes she had hung in the middle of the apartment, dresses she had never worn because there was never a suitable occasion, scarce underwear that she had thoughtfully chosen and in which she had always imagined herself in, in romantic reveries which had never come true after all... in the end she had been the first and only one to ever see this underwear, and she learned to appreciate the hollow joy of simply looking through it and touching the expensive, almost unused fabric, and looking at herself in the mirror over and over again.

"I think it's *because* they're so young."

"Nonsense. Men long only for a kind of substitute mother to spoil them, and women become addicted to the comforts this situation offers them... They are just two lonely people playing at being a couple..."

("We were basically just two kids... pretending to be a married couple.")

("Nonsense! That's just two lonely adults comforting each other!")

"That'll never last long, they'll probably make it past the honeymoon phase pretty soon..."

("Maybe one does it... to become aware of one's existence.")

"Is this analysis based on personal experience?"

("It's a nice feeling to be desired...")
"Anyone with common sense would think that... Why do you think mothers always find it so hard when their children leave the nest? Mothers need their children, without a child they cannot continue to exist as mothers. And it’s exactly the same with the neighbors. They look like fools!"

("It's an easy way to get fooled into thinking you're something "special"!")

"Aren't you just jealous because you don't have a partner to say good night?"

"Oh, shut up."

After the conversation, she wanted to get out of the room. It wasn't really urgent, not really worth it to be called an impulse, just a distant mood or desire, she would simply prefer ever so slightly to not have to see this hole, this empty nest, which had remained just as unused as her lingerie, just for a while, and the half-filled garbage bags were just such a lovely little excuse for it.

So come on, put your jacket on and get out, it's possible that the cool air may help a little.

Hastily she grabbed some previously packed garbage bags, which she hadn't found the time to throw out yet, almost with a fighting rage, be it to let off the frustration somehow or to convince herself of something none too convincing, in the end she didn't care and she hurried to get out of this particular spot and leave it quickly; The architects had given the railing to her left a ridiculously wavy shape, as if to conceal the fact that this was a cheap, run-down apartment building, whose inhabitants would surely pass each other lonely and anonymously soon after its completion, and she simply had no desire to deal with any gawking eyes at the time...

Too bad that she didn't hurry enough to get past the next door before it suddenly opened, almost clapping the ugly plastic into her face, and out jumped the last person whom she could have possibly wanted to see wanted to see. The very young neighbour, now again in jeans and a ponytail, almost directly in front of her eyes at a distance that almost forced her to interact with her somehow, even if they would both much, much rather just walk past each other.

Shinji saw the meeting from so many different angles, from the eyes of the two women and from a good bit further away, trying to suck out every gram of it to understand what was going on and what it all meant.

If Asuka and Misato knew each other in this world, then they wouldn't let it show - it's quite possible that they didn't know each other beyond that, that they were simply neighbours, or that they simply didn't recognize each other, after so many years and Asuka's dyed hair or perhaps at least one party pretended not to recognize the other and saw no interest in reviving old friendships.

It was followed by forced, slightly jammed, not entirely enthusiastic fake laughter and the periodic exchange of meaningless, civil trivialities about the garbage and the weather, and whatever was left of the Misato he knew, in that large, formless crowd he had become, felt a sting in the realization that her exchange with an Asuka she barely knew didn't go much deeper than the conversations they had had back when they lived under the same roof.

("Envious? Because of my family? That was just pointless smalltalk!")

But before long the corridors, the elevator and the local garbage disposal were behind them and the two women could hardly wait to go their separate ways...

Although it wasn't beyond his current ability to follow both at once, he decided to follow Asuka, perhaps because she was the one who first attracted his attention,
he didn't think it would bring him much more enlightenment to look at Misato any further, because he couldn't see (or didn't want to see) any sense in it and what he had seen of her (didn't point to the conclusion he wanted to see confirmed) probably hadn't caused quite as strong reactions in him as it did with Asuka... He had more than enough desperation of his own, but this spark of anger reminded him of what it used to be like to be alive.

( "You're lying! Anyone will do for you! You are afraid of Misato and the First Child... You are afraid of father and mother...!"
)

(But why all this talk about this unhappy relationship of hers, which could not come to pass in the reality he knew? As much as he tried to convince himself she was missing ‘the one’, that was just ridiculous, and he couldn't say that he would have done a much better job at making her happy. In the end, she was better off without the terrible things he had done to her, and she was the one who didn't want anything to do with him, unless one put much stock Hikari's crazy theories, which probably caused this whole ridiculous dream to begin with!)

So he followed her, watching her constantly with a kind of distanced fascination as she rode through the streets on an inconspicuous bicycle, a little too hasty for her safety, wiggling hastily in wavy lines, past the countless people who shared the streets, squares, and pedestrian zones with her, past other apartment complexes, shops, front lawns, and the omnipresent heaps of garbage bags now that the garbage truck was soon due to pick them up.

He looked at her from so many infinitely different angles, observed her in all her three-dimensional form, because he had nothing else to hold on to, or nothing else he wanted to hold on to, because he wanted to see his last doubts, reinforced by the sight of Misato, to be thoroughly dispelled, and who better to pop his bubbles than Asuka?

He already knew that he could only expect disappointments from her.

(And even though neither she nor anyone else saw it, she was still beautiful, her shiny hair fluttering behind her in the shape of a ponytail, her slender body and long legs, and last but not least her butt, non much concealed by her tight jeans ( though he had never actually seen Asuka wear trousers except maybe a pair of pajamas. ... she knew where her best features were and didn't hold back on presenting them) and her bicycle saddl e ....She'd probably find that funny, if she knew, he could hear it already: “ Lecher! Pervert! Idiot! I can't believe this! Even if you've melted into pumpkin soup, you're still staring at my ass!"

("Go ahead. Do it the way you always do, I'll even watch you do it!"
)

(And there was that look in her eyes that still looked exactly the same as the first time he saw her, the eyes of a lonely fighter who lied to him with the silent request that somebody should deliver her from this loveless existence, but in the end everything went wrong, she didn't need him, she didn't want to need him, and so in the end all her beauty was wasted in this dreary, barren world)

He looked at her as she struggled and continued on her way, without any sense of time, as if in the end, he might have forgotten when he had begun and why, and if there had ever been anything else before, as if the whole universe had shrunk to her and the spot of the world with which she was in immediate contact.

He had nothing else... (and he could have looked at her forever, and she would never see him, and he would never understand her or know what he should have done to save her, without plunging himself deeper into the abyss than he already did. )

Every now and then his gaze grazed the rest of the coarse masses around them, simply because
Asuka walked through it and sometimes Shinji paused to wonder if he hadn't seen a familiar face somewhere else, but he didn't really dare to turn too far away from Asuka, not believing that he would ever find her again if he lost her now, and end up sloshing around in this grey, monotonous world like a lost soul, even long after it had long since become impossible to find Asuka anywhere in it.

(Or maybe that was just a lazy excuse, because at the moment he simply didn’t feel the need to see other people who had once meant something to him in such miserable conditions, because he wanted to avoid the feelings that went with it - for a moment he thought he had seen Mari, with open hair, mouse grey clothes and all her colorful accessories gone.

Even her bright red plastic glasses had been replaced by much more neutral ones, and she just looked deeply unhappy, but he couldn't be sure that it was really her - He could hardly recognize her without the inappropriate getup and was no longer sure which of the women on that street he had meant to be, he could barely see the differences between them.

It might just as well have been a figment, a limited, confused human mind trying to cling to familiar structures, and therefore in its tendency to seek patterns that saw where none were.

It had to be a fantasy - if not even the devastated wasteland of his world could take Mari's light and laughter, then how could that feat be achieved by something as ridiculous as a little everyday monotony?

He saw her before him, radiant, no different than when they first met on the roof of the school building, untouched by time or darkness, ready to save a sinner from falling into a bottomless depth, jumped into a kilometers-deep abyss so deep that the ground could not be seen, and saved so much more than a single, worthless life that everyone else on that spooky, alien world would have crushed completely as a scapegoat, or for the mere purpose of self-preservation, and he could not understand why in all the world she would do it, just as well she could have jumped after Satan in his endless plunge into hell, because she herself did not want to give up the salvation of the unsalvageable, and condemned him precisely by showing him how exceedingly unworthy he was of this life, how obvious it was that he should not exist, and how pointless the deaths were, how he had brought about so much destruction by his miserable hands--

These memories were distant, confused, conceptual rather than real, and clothed in the fog of madness, even more than those who formed this world here, they belonged to a different path and yet broke through, in the omniscience of this place and the simplicity it had from there to calculate all further possible paths, oh if only he’d had this far-sight back then!

The pains of the past and the future, the agonies of the present and the never-been clotted together like the precursors of a deadly embolism, and everything in the diffuse, crumbly remains of his consciousness turned into impossible, pleading pain that would have robbed him of consciousness, before he really perceived it, the true common denominator of all the myriads of paths and possibilities, the pain of the same loss in infinite variation, the breaking and groaning of his brittle moldy soul, and the universal melody around which his silent cries twisted: Kaworu, Kaworu, Kaworu, Kaworu...

Anyway, if this woman was Mari, on the street in this city, then she had been an adult (like Asuka), like a normal 25-year-old woman, after ten years of normal, harmless life.

And Shinji couldn't get rid of the feeling, no, the stony certainty, that she was so much, much better off by this simple, self-evident fact alone than in any world in which he had a share.

Who was she again? After this sudden excurse into different times, if not entirely different
universes, it was hard to find the thread of her story again – He had not lost it, but the imagine in his mind was rather blurry.

He could no longer say why, the painful memories were like astral forms of light, contaminated by dark, decomposing stains (like blue mold in a cheese or the dark magnetic stains on the surface of the sun), and before he knew it, she had vanished back into the crowd and he’d done nothing to stop her from dissapearing in the blur

But he was sure (Yes! Really!) that nothing he could have seen of the everyday life of this not - Mari would convince him that she was not better off without him.

Even if the picture itself was too vague, the mere thought of an adult, unhappy Mari possessed such a visceral falsehood as that which had become of Misato and Asuka.

But from where he stood now, he could see her in a different wholeness, as Asuka and Misato and Kaji had seen her, unblinded by his own unworthiness and unwillingness to question her, because he personally lacked the right to do so, it was not quite impossible to wonder whether she was not one of the few who had smiled in his hell, because she belonged more into these diffuse gales of an uncertain future than she had ever belonged to a "normal", orderly world, and he had the unjustifiable idea that this world could be as much a hell and an imposition as anything else he had ever touched, a far worse ghost than anything in this formless soup of his and this grey city, and one that made it all look mild.

An unhappy, resigned Mari - Peter Pan in suit and tie!

At some point Asuka arrived at her destination, hastily chained her bike to a stand and ran off without hiding her frustration or the fact that she didn't like anything here anyway, especially cursing herself in silence, without real anger, it was more of a faded, passive-aggressive afterglow that only wasted the air she actually needed for her brisk run to the tram station.

"Ah, that stupid lady next door... Wasting my time on stupid chatter!

...so I won't catch that stupid 6:31 tram again..."

Heh. If there was one thing that she hadn’t given up on, it was her love of blaming everything that went wrong in her life on everyone else but her, as if it were impossible that she might simply have forgotten the time herself.

"Damn, she's really getting on my nerves!"

This time without a bicycle, she continued her journey, and again he fastened himself to her heels, and followed her hasty steps until they ended, at a copier in a large, tower-like office building that in many ways had resembled a large grey brick, with many uniform small windows on numerous floors, and Asuka's workplace was not even in the upper third of the skyscraper, on a large, anonymous office floor, as one of the tens of thousands of employees in one of Japan's many large corporations - Judging by her work uniform, she wasn't even a "real" employee, but rather one of those infamous "office ladies," whose sole purpose was to look pretty, smile at customers and colleagues, and occasionally pick up a cup of coffee or transport a stack of papers, and didn't look at all like a place that Asuka would willingly choose to work at.

If she did, then Shinji could, at most, imagine her as the CEO or manager of such a company, or as a globally recognized surgeon or rocket scientist, or something like that.

It was true that she probably didn't really know what to do with her future, because she had always
been so focused on her role as an EVA pilot, and that she wouldn't really be able to avoid having to re-adjust her overambitious, unrealistic goals at some point, but even if he thought about Asuka's future with those considerations in mind, he could only imagine her radiant and full of glamour, and certainly not... like this.

What he saw just didn't fit into his head, but it was there anyway:

Asuka, in a work uniform consisting of a white shirt, a blue vest and a matching miniskirt, whose color scheme looked suspiciously similar to her familiar school uniform, as she waited for the machine, in front of her to finally finish spitting out the desired number of copies, including the correctly pre-punched holes for filing so that she could carry them to where they were needed.

A *monkey* could do this work, before long, it might be fit for robots, but certainly not for Asuka.

The icing on the cake was that she didn't even complain anymore about being in this place... Some time ago she must have certainly done so, just as she had been complaining all along about everything in her life that didn't go as she had imagined it, be it her relationship or the meeting with the "neighbor lady".

But her work was no longer worth mentioning, it was now an old hat, which she accepted almost without grumbling after all this time, because it would take too much energy to get worked up about it. And what the Fifteenth Angel had accomplished with brute force (Also, lazy excuse, as she had been on the downward spiral long before), this world had probably accomplished through a steady decline. Slowly but steadily, it must have removed this wall which she had erected in her heart, as with emery paper.

She probably tried to bottle up her suffering for a bit, but once it broke out, she could never really keep it all in, her masquerade was half-hearted, in the end she didn't care, and before she knew it, she had revealed the whole story concerning her relationship to a co-worker, whom she probably couldn't even stand, while both of them were busy at the copier.

"Why don't you just split up?" said the other employee. "That would be the easiest thing for everyone involved."

"Yah..." Asuka said absent-mindedly, turning only a little bit to her colleague, as if it was a kind of annoying duty to look at the person she was speaking to. "I guess you're right..."

But only now, when worn-down northern beauty really looked at the other person for the first time, did Shinji realize who she really was:

At first he hadn't recognized her, in part because of the hair, which, like Asuka's, had swapped its once conspicuous color for an ordinary, deep black. This already made more sense, more than the other vision, for how could it have retained its original hair color if NERV and the angels and all that other stuff never existed and the labs were never built?

Of course, that still left the question of how she could exist at all – perhaps, his parents’ counterparts in this world had simply had a girl instead of a boy or something like that?

But when did anything about her existence ever need a logical explanation to appear before his eyes?

Even here she was not free from this sublimity that parted her from the surrounding world, as if she were a distant, ancient observer who was not really part of her environment, her observations and advice carrying something remotely teacher-like about them.
She wore the same work uniform as Asuka - her uniform! Some things never changed! - but had pulled an open white wool jacket over it, almost as if she could feel the falsehood, cold and emptiness of this world just as he did, and tried to shield herself from it. Further up he then saw her face and hair, which still had its usual dense, voluminous quality despite the colour change, although it was much longer than he had ever seen it, long, firm masses of heavy, dark hair like a curtain of old fabric, strands flowing down the shoulders like the stripes of cloth in one of these old mops, kinking and hanging where they could not form straight lines, and long, numerous eyelashes flanking their unfathomable, dark eyes.

Ayanami Rei.

Ayanami Rei, who, even for a short time, had a thin, bitter smile on her lips, of the kind that should express distant amusement about a grotesque irony of fate or even malicious joy...

What a strange world.

The movements of her facial features, which he had so often searched in vain, were there, but instead, behind her equanimous eyes, where once after a long search he had found a friendly soul, who had even met a girl who had been pestering her for months on end or a creature who had just been about to devour her with compassion and understanding, seemed to have lost something very important, broken or ripped out by circumstances he would never experience...

Sometimes he noticed that she was speaking with a cadence, but still had difficulties with determining where the pauses were supposed to go... but other things she said disparagingly and coldly, not out of ignorance, but rather in a deliberate, icy tone...

Was that here simply number three, and the personality she would have developed if she had had more time?

(There was something similar- an absence, and the suspicious way she had looked at Kaworu -)

Or had it simply not been possible for her to spend all these years among people without learning to react as she was expected to? Had it been impossible to overlook her own feelings for so long, whether he was there or not?

He took note of that, in another attempt to convince himself that his absence made no difference, but in the end he felt ashamed that he would use something like that for his own selfish comfort, and he couldn't help but look at it helplessly, this final result, this thoroughly embittered young woman, and his ignorance of what had happened to her... but did he have to know exactly?

Was it really that hard to imagine the gist of it?

She hadn't died, but the events that had taught a little about the way this world works hadn't been quite so pleasant (like homemade miso soup and a lovingly tidied room) and had broken her a little, perhaps one day she had noticed her inability to alleviate her own loneliness and despaired of trying to connect with others despite all her limitations, or maybe she hadn't been able to give herself a new task, living on as a useless relic of a plan best left in dusty drawers, until she had simply taken on a profession in which she would wear a uniform and have clearly defined tasks, much like what she'd been used to in her dour, impoverished life in the service of the project, but this time, without even the illusion of meaning... anyway, the sight of her made Shinji forget to deny that his influence had been important in her life and that he wished to... yes, what?

Talk to her?
He didn't think he would dare.

The way she was now, with her cracks and bumbs and everything she stood for, he wouldn't be able to look her in the eye anyway, he didn't even have to bother. He didn't deserve it.

(Or rather, he could not bear to be responsible for that. That he of all people had disappointed her so much... if he could turn back time and change everything, if he could prevent her from becoming that way, then maybe, but the way she was now...

It could sometimes be amazingly relieving to have given up. The prospects are getting worse and worse and the effort it would take to put everything right everything was growing and growing, while the last chances are dwindling and one finds themselves tempted to hate oneself for every missed opportunity, time and time again...

But if one had given up, then one did not have to suffer the uncertainty about the future any more, then one knew the result and did not have to make any more efforts, which would be meaningless anyway, and one would be free to spend the time up to the inevitable end as they pleased)

"That's a pretty cheap methodology... You try to leave everything vague and indefinite and smile as if nothing’s wrong, but you’re not doing yourself any favors there. There's nothing worse than a brooding, dissatisfied man. You never know what kind stupid things they’ll so... Like some kind of spoiled brat! “

She had said the rest more or less monotonously, but she spat out the last word - even this colourless Asuka, who herself was part of this crazy world, wouldn't have expected it: "...Senpai, did something happen ...? “

But Rei kept her secrets to herself and didn't say another word about it, and Shinji felt as if this whole bizzare dream was mocking him mercilessly and saying, ‘What do you want to know that for? Why should you care what happens in this world when you've left it behind of your own free will?’

And again in his existence this hot lump of guilt burned, though he had once been sure that it could never pursue him to this plane of being.

Wasn’t Asuka the one who had something against children? Judging by her reaction when he had suggested that the might make for a good mother, she didn’t seem to disdain tiny humans quite enough to use a comparison to toddlers as an insult.

How can it be that they had this conversation at all, Asuka and Rei at work, talking about their relationship problems, this almost natural sounding "Senpai", as if they talked like that every day?

The Rei and Asuka he knew worked together and wore the same uniform, but he should be damned if he ever caught them talking about their intimate lives... Rei was probably the last person Asuka would ever come to if she were having trouble with her boyfriend, because, as Asuka had made it all too clear to all who saw her regularly, she couldn't stand the reserved First Child in the least, and why not? At first glance, the two of them were exact opposites of each other ...the only things they had in common was that they were both EVA pilots, that they liked swimming, and that they were both very important to him...He had never really thought about how he came to be attracted to two very different young ladies, mostly because this situation had just happened without him choosing it consciously, but supposedly most people had a certain "type" or "booty scheme"... So where was the lowest common denominator between Rei and Asuka (And Misato, and Mari, and
Kaworu, and...?)

Or maybe it was different.

Perhaps the two opposing, irreconcilable desires in him had addressed him, perhaps it was quite different facets of himself who longed for them, opposing urges, parts or powers in his soul for which they had become patron saints... but what he saw here was not the harmonious union of these powers, not the settlement of his inner struggle which he had hoped to find through the dissolution of all barriers, but it was more like the war had run out of firewood, more like a result of attrition than it was a victory or a peace agreement... It was like a story whose great finale was simply over in the middle, boom, open end. The Asuka and the Rei he saw here didn't seem to like each other very much and didn't think much of each other's way of life, but they lacked the energy for a fight, it wasn't worth the frustration and the talk, and somehow getting along was easy... what did Asuka once call it? Simply ‘very practical’.

(He had to think a little of Misato and Ritsuko's rather superficial "friendship".)

The whirlpool of fiery red and icy blue had simply faded, the colors were gone.

There didn't seem to be a single spark of real, glaring color left here, everything in this place seemed as drained and washed out as under the light of a rainy day, and everything was so uniform, the buildings, the people, the flow of time, the trivial, monotonous activities of the two women, which would start again the next day.

They did their work, delivered coffee, occasionally made coffee breaks themselves, and he even got treated to the ridiculously familiar sight of a longer elevator ride with the two, with Rei waiting close to the door, of course, while Asuka was leaning against a wall further back in the cabin... It was almost comforting.

After work the two also went into town together (Asuka put on a black jacket in the cool evening hours, which in many ways was the exact opposite of Rei’s additional cover... He didn't think that it ever got quite this cold in the world he had known, not even at night...) and went shopping in a small grocery store all the time continuing their little conversation, which he continued to listen to as he pondered what, if anything, this might imply about his own world.

"What's the problem? You'll get your romance and on top of that, your sexual appetites are taken care of!"

"It's not romantic at all! Not in the least!"

"...maybe you won't know whether it's love or not... until you hang up the phone..."

"You think so?"

"When you do it, it seems to you that your only goal is to put your bodies together, and there is no warm, fuzzy feeling...

You're just ravenous for each other."

"You know... Every time I try to take a little distance from the both of us, I end up just confused and start wondering whether I like him at all..."

(That's almost like-)
"It's always the same pattern where I end up wondering if I'm not just trying to tell myself I love him..."

("Kaji-san!")

"I guess it won't last long... I tend to have a pretty short grace period."

("I left him standing in line in front of the roller coaster. The guy was so boring!")

"You're pretty cruel, but you're still get attached very easily, don't you?

But then you might as well keep a dog ... And you're the type who willfully and deliberately causes men to misunderstand!"

("Well, because I'm bored!")

"He's always quick to say he's just an idiot to avoid a confrontation..."

("Excuse me...")

"That's because he thinks you'll forgive him if the word "idiot" comes out of his own mouth."

"He's only doing it because he thinks he can always get my pity!"

(Yes, actually...)

"That's because he's afraid if he can't think of excuses. In the end, he only hurts himself."

(...these are the exact same problems that he used to have with her...)

"He's a real nuisance, he keeps calling me at work!

But if he doesn't call, it pisses me off so much!"

"Isn't that just your own selfishness?"

Finally, the last light on the horizon disappeared, the day ended, and it was time for Asuka to take the lonely path back to her small, filthy apartment, where she would undoubtedly fall asleep lonely and alone, regardless of whether she somehow anesthetized herself to distract herself from it, be it - again - with alcohol or with natural endorphins.

If she didn't drink before going to bed she would perhaps ponder the emptiness of her life for a moment and wonder where exactly everything had gone wrong, or what exactly might be missing from her life... It's possible that she even thought in a distant sense that it could be a young man she had never met.

It's quite possible that she had already accepted as a routine part of her daily routine to feel very unhappy at the end of one day and to be able to assume that it would be the same the next evening... with this knowledge she ran past these shops to her left and the bicycle rack on the right, the same path she had already walked a thousand times...

Asuka, oh Asuka, of all people it was her, of all people she made him wish that he was there, that he would exist here with her and could touch her, she made him wish a voice with which he could speak to her, something with which he could prevent her from running depressed into her apartment again now and starting the whole cycle all over again - something!
"Asuka..."

"Huh?"

Suddenly the young woman turned around and searched the dark street behind her with slightly narrowed eyes....

No, this... this couldn't... this couldn't... this couldn't... this couldn't... this couldn't...

How in the world could that be?

...what should he do now? How could he...

Had he been able to think more clearly, he might have much time pondering how he came to occupy a discrete point in space for a brief moment, as if the "camera" had turned away from her in wild spirals, swapping his view of her for the bicycle racks next to her and the floor, and only returning to her when he saw her from a distance, behind the far edges parked on the side of the road.

He moved away from her, like he was somewhere, and somewhere, there had been a strange voice which he hardly recognized, not only because he hadn't used it for so long, but because it had really sounded different, deeper, rougher, resembling his father's in a strange way, without equaling it entirely, a voice that belonged to a grown man who had gone through puberty a long time ago, almost like what he might sound like if he were as old as this older version of Asuka here, as if he had become part of her world for a moment...

( "You are nothing but the sum of the differences you notice between yourself and others..."

Whatever Asuka had heard, when she turned around, she found no trace of it.

Maybe she had just imagined something, maybe it was just a big coincidence that she had turned around just now.

Once again he had run away...

(Wait, again... ?)

At first he made a half-hearted attempt to follow her further, but in the end he let her walk into the night untracked, letting the torrential stream of countless pictures run free again, leaving it to slow wherever it may drift.

It made no sense to follow her any further... He needed no further proof of his inability to change anything about that world.

"I'm... I'm not here..."

It was this conclusion that finally opened his metaphorical eyes, and gradually began to pull himself out of his dream...

One could not yet call it an awakening, but in any case he began to understand - who he was, how he got into this state and why he had done it.

And how it came that he had not yet completely dissolved in this river of existence, why he had pursued this search, which had made him aware of his own existence...

("The first other person... is your mother. Your mother is someone who is not you, and just because
you realize that at some point, you realize that you exist.

A final answer was expected of him.

The shining white goddess who had fulfilled his wishes, was still waiting for a final confirmation.

**ARE YOU FEELING WELL?**

Once he had given this answer, it would no longer be necessary to form even a single word, and he and she and everything else around him would finally merge, without any hope of return.

It should have been what he had always wanted, the perfect way out of this horrible world and this dreadful loneliness... But nevertheless he hesitated to pronounce the last word, the very last word in the history of mankind...

"Tell me..."

"Yes?"

"What are dreams anyway?"

"Yes, dreams...."

Once again he looked at all these many people, each with his own inner universe, with his own desires, dreams and connections, and suffering, so much limitless suffering... And in this great multitude there were a few people who stood out more than others, who meant more to him, who were connected by ties of his own making...

He took one last moment to look at them as a way-bread for the journey, or as a kind of farewell, as one a weighing pan in his scale.

Again he looked at them from the point of view of the thousand-eyed crowd, as they stood there, like a stone in the rapids, sometimes visible, sometimes disappearing in the tide, these three women who had once meant so much to him.

Asuka, Misato and Ayanami, as he last saw them, these colorless, unhappy older versions of them, with their heavy, sorrowful eyes, almost as if they knew that this was the end...

The big question was still in the room.

**ARE YOU FEELING OKAY?**

"I... I don't know... I don't know what the reality is..."

"You can't see the boundary between reality and your own truth."

"I... I don't know where I can find my happiness..."

"Isn't happiness itself something of a dream?"

"Then... this isn't reality. It's just an empty world."

(Somewhere there was this other picture of a completely different crowd that sneaked so secretly into his consciousness...)

"Yes. A dream."
(The contrast to the one before was all too glaring, suddenly there were colors, the bright red of a pair of trousers, the clearly visible green of a neon sign, and all the blue in between.)

"And that's why I don't exist here..."

(At first he didn't really notice it, overwhelmed by all the colors that broke new into his world - they shone like bright daylight after an eternity under the earth-)

"You took revenge on reality with your own replica world."

(But in a small corner of the picture that was much, much more important to him than all the rest, and that accordingly became more and more the center of his considerations, there was -)

"And what's wrong with that?"

(There they were, exactly how he knew them, how he really knew them, full of color and-)

"You fled into a dream world and distorted the truth."

(Short, thick sky blue hair, and a bright white plugsuit that stood out from the crowd, a school uniform and red interface clips, this red uniform jacket...)

"Can't I dream my own dream?"

(He had found them again... The three women who meant more to him than anything else... that girl back there in green, with the blue headband and the long brown hair could even be Mari...)

"It's not a dream, it's your substitute for reality."

(No, no matter how frustrating they were and how many of these strange aspects they kept hidden from him, he preferred them to everything else...)

"In that case, where's my dream?"

"In the continuation of reality."

"And where do I find reality...?"

"At the end of the dream."

And at that point, the end followed swiftly, and thus, Shinji finally found himself in balance between heaven and earth - First he had almost expected that all too familiar hospital blanket with the explanation that it was all over and that this whole crazy drug trip was the result of a failed EVA experiment, but then he saw the moon above him through the surface of the red ocean and, as he looked down a little further, the naked torso of Ayanami Rei, tenderly smiling at him as the current tousled her hair.

She was bent over him and only when he looked further down at her did he realize that they had also united physically, perfectly joined like a key to its slot in the doorway - and not only in the obvious places: Her arms sank into his chest, and their thighs overlapped.

"Ayanami... where are we?"

"This is the sea of LCL. The sea of the source of life. In a world that has lost its AT-field, its physical form... In a vague, insecure world where you don't know where you end and the others begin... In a fragile world where you are everywhere and nowhere at the same time..."
In some places people had imagined Nirvana somewhat like this, the blurring of the self, the fusion with the big whole.

Shinji had never really believed in anything like that, it always sounded like nothing but pretty words to him, but when he saw it come to life in front of him, he began to doubt it.

He wasn't sure about anything anymore, if he had ever been sure of anything to begin with.

"Did I die?"

(If he was dead, was the person lying on top of him now the girl who had chosen death in order to vanquish the sixteenth angel? Had she been right here the whole time, waiting for him to come to her? The Long Lost, the Dolefully Missed, the Eternally Loved, the Finally Found-

"Not at all. It's just that everything has become one... Just the way you wanted it to be."

So this... was it.

Misato's necklace was still hanging on his fingers, an annoying weight that occasionally made itself felt when he moved - he hadn't kept his promise, so the little cross, this last relic of material existence in this highly abstract world, had lost all meaning... he let it go.

But still out of the same movement with which he released it and pushed it away, his fingers seemed to follow it involuntarily, as if they were unwilling to part that last spark of human warmth which Misato had left him.

But why?

Why had he done this just now?

"But... this isn't right..."

And then suddenly it was over and he found himself again in his ancestral metaphysical theater room, opposite his alter ego, all of a sudden, without a warning... Bizarrely, it almost felt like a return to reality... involuntarily, he brought his hand to the outer surface of his right arm.

He knew that this was still a dream image and not his real body, but it was, if not a solid matter, then at least a solid idea of himself - That was far more than he could recall having just mere instants ago.

Now suddenly being stuck back in a "normal" dream (as normal as these visions could be considered to be) left him quite overwhelmed; Overall, he could hardly believe how far his definition of "normality" had come to be twisted, but even if he couldn't say exactly what was "normal" anymore, he had far fewer problems with being fully convinced that what he had just experienced could only be absolutely abnormal - his other self, of course, didn't seem to be at all surprised or disoriented, rather, you got the impression that this dark shadow with the red glowing eyes and the partly burnt skin seemed to have waited patiently for this exact moment... but Shinji didn't let him speak at all and asked for an immediate answer, which his other self would probably have given to him anyway:

"What in the world was that all about?"

"I've told you since the beginning, haven't I? A memory."

"Memory-?! Of what? Of smoking some really questionable things perhaps?!"
That's not so far off the mark..." The features of his likeness, as far as they still existed, became hard and serious. "That can also serve as a kind of cheap distraction sometimes... But no, it was a lot more significant than that...

"Wh-what is that supposed to mean again?"

His likeness carefully inhaled and said only two short, toneless words: "Third Impact."

"W-what?" Shinji blanched instantly.

"That was a memory of Third Impact. ...but that wasn't what I wanted to show you... you saw it, too, didn’t you... that... illusion of sorts."

"The one where I... wasn't there..."

"Exactly."

"It was very different from the last..."

"Only to an extent. But do you understand...?"

"Understand what?"

"It took me a long, long time to understand that, but there's no reason why I should go the same stony road again... I've now realized that one part of growing up is learning to distinguish between the things that are you're responsibility, and what isn’t. To consider what you can do yourself, and to recognize and accept what you can’t do."

"I... I don't understand what you mean..."

"The vision. With Asuka. You just told me that everyone would be without you, didn't you? But were they really...? It's true that there are many, many things I could have done differently when dealing with her - I was probably pretty much the most unsuitable partner she could have chosen... But now that I'm older and can look at it all in a more differentiated way, I can only say that it wasn't all my fault either. Even a trained professional with a degree in psychology would probably find her a tough nut to crack... - To expect a simple boy to fix everything for her was never realistic to begin with..."

"That's why I'm saying it makes no difference whether I'm there or not..."

"Yes. You're right about that - Asuka would probably still have relationship problems, whether you're there or not - quite a lot would still be the same... it’s just that no one would know me, only my connections to all the others would have disappeared..."

"But then...-"

"I haven't finished... Essentially, it's nothing new. You musn’t run away."

"Yes, because it would be wrong and irresponsible, I already know that-"

"Hm... wrong? Irresponsible? Perhaps. But I know only too well that I'm a hopeless case in that sense... you would know. I have no right to tell you anything about morality or responsibility. I don’t have that right - And I only know what I have seen and heard so far... but that’s got to count for something.

Whether it's wrong or cowardly, I can’t really say – I still think about that a lot. But one thing I can
say for sure: it simply doesn't help. It's not worth it. I might as well save myself the pain. In the end, it only ever made things harder..."

"What... what do you mean?"

"Now think hard... You always stay out of everything, out of fear that you might do something wrong..."

"I don't want to... hurt anyone..."

"And there lies our most fatal mistake: You can do as much harm by inaction and ignorance as through deliberate choices. You think Asuka would keep her hands off all men just because you're not there? Do you think that that the battles wouldn't continue if you refuse to pilot your Eva? If you turned around and left now, who would take your place?"

Shinji averted his gaze. "The... That would be Ayanami..."

"Ayanami! Just be glad it's not the dummy plug..."

He wouldn't even think about it.

"The point is, bad things happen, whether you're there or not... but if you're there and you try at least once, you can at least say of yourself that you've tried your best... and my experience has shown that it's much better to live with it than with endless brooding over what might have been."

"Isn't this the same lame excuse anyway?"

"You can see it that way, but you can also do without making yourself unhappy... You long for understanding and recognition but you know in the end there is a person who has to understand and acknowledge you before anyone else can do it... or rather, so that you can see the recognition of others at all.

Can you imagine who I mean?" His shadow, inviting himself, walked a few steps toward him.

Shinji blinked helplessly.

Why did he ask him this question instead of just straight-up telling him the answer?

"Um... maybe our dad?"

But once he had said that, Shinji was met with a surprise... His alter ego waited patiently for the answer... and laughed. Not mischievous or arrogant, not distanced or amused, but actually a real, exuberant laugh... and that was only the beginning.

Before Shinji knew what was happening to him, his counterpart had already revealed why he had approached so far and carefully placed his arms around the body of the helpless Third Child to gently hold him in his arms.

Shinji blinked, drooping to himself. "What in all-

"Forgive me."

"Heh...?"

His alter ego almost tenderly put his head on his shoulder and began to explain almost lovingly.
"I wasn't always fair to you in the past, and I was always very, very mean when I talked about you... I have to admit that I really hated you once, but then I thought about it, and of all the mistakes a person can have, I think there could be far worse ones... So I'm sorry. I want you to exist. I want to be here. I wouldn't know who else to be..."

"A-But what..."

"I hereby give you everything I have, everything I know up to now, everything that has accumulated up to now... and even if I never thought that I would say this one day... I trust you to make the best of it..."

And then the other one opened his eyes again and looked directly into his own, and there was not much much left of that blood-red fire of anger – instead, Shinji looked into the eyes of a perfect reflection this time with a cautious, peaceful smile that was easier to recognize as his own.

"...so go ahead, pick up where I left off... where you left off... and take care of yourself, okay?"

_________________

1. But is that really going to be so easy? The road there is long and full of terrors. The next part of it will be called 2.22: [Enemy of the World] (as in, “estuans interius ira vehementi”)

2. Speaking of “ira vehementi”, those who haven't seen the alternate life action sequence for EoE (which much of this is inspired by) might want to check it out before crucifying me for blasphemy. You can still crucify me for blasphemy after you've seen it. But it's fascinating isn't it? Particularly the implications/analysis pertaining to Asuka's character. That was of course before Q gave us a different take on what an adult Asuka might be like under different circumstances, which makes it interesting to compare/contrast the two; She winds up pretty cynical but in very different worlds, in different ways and for different reasons. Q!Asuka probably can't much afford the luxury of relationship drama.

3. On the topic of rare but official material, someone on Evageeks has finally translated Rei’s scenario from Eva 2 and I find it very salient: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn6med28mqg I’m surprised that a lot of it is suprisingly close to my personal headcanons, particularly where the subject of Rei’s identity, inner motivation, and relation to Lillith is concerned... Like I believed those things for a reason but given how many ostensibly sophisticated people disagreed I always suspected that I might be wrong. Should’ve finished this darn fic a long time ago now it will just look like I got certain things from there – though I suppose I feel more emboldened to go even further in that direction. Then again I shall probably have need to vent and process once the fourth rebuild is out, so it’s not all bad that this old thing is this here. (For those not in the know the game had loads of input from Anno himself) For now, I’ll try to get the existing bits Englishified before continueing it tho.

4. In hindsight you can kind of tell that I wrote this soon after finishing Serial Experiments Lain XD
2. 22: [Enemy of the World]

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Hito wa mina, saru no magaimono
Kami wa mina, hito no magaimono

-Kubo Tite

All humans, imitations of apes
All the gods, imitations of men.

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SOUND ONLY

"Above the starry firmament, God judges as we judged"

This text, along with an assortment of symbols and emblems, was displayed the small, otherwise black screen of a laptop, since the usual representation as an array of monoliths was unavailable today – Even among high-end hotel rooms, very few indeed would have had a fully functional holodeck available for their tenants’ use – but even if they had been afforded their preferred means of communication, their chosen representations would not have betrayed any more individuality, and this was very much by design, representative of that ideal state which they hoped to attain.

One way or another there were no names, no faces, only the glowing white sigils on an unreadable black surface, any trace of personhood subordinated to demarcations of ideology.

There was the Freemasons’ chessboard, the pyramid topped with the all-seeing eyes of the Illuminati, and of course the crest of SEELE itself - The symbol showed a serpent coiling around an apple, against the background of a seven-eyed mask - An emblem that was not only a metaphorical symbol, but also a declaration of intent.

"Even the ancient Egyptians already recognized the symbol of two serpents devouring each other, as the union of the gods Ra and Osiris, the unity of both the origin and end of the universe, but Plato also tried his hand at describing the original state of all things: The first living being, he writes, had no need for eyes at all, because there was nothing else but him that could have been seen, nor did it need ears, because there was nothing to hear; and there was no surrounding atmosphere that it could breathe, nor could it have derived too much benefit from organs through which it could receive any food or rid itself of what had already been digested, since there was nothing that came to it or emanated from it... so it was created in such a way that his own wastes were his own food, and that all that he did, or all that happened with him, took place within himself and through himself, since the Creator should have seen that an undemanding being was far superior to one lacking anything, and, since there was never anything it had to take or defend itself from, the Creator did not consider it necessary to equip it with hands, nor did it have any legs or
any other apparatus of locomotion other than that motion which was ideal for its spherical shape, since it was the most suitable of all seven possible movements for thought and intelligence, and thus he was created to always move in the same way in the same place, within its own boundaries as a rotating circle. All other six forms of motion were taken from him, and since this circular motion requires no feet, the universe was created without feet or legs."

"And it wasn't just Plato, oh no, rather, this motif runs far through the landscape of thoughts and concepts that we humans have created for ourselves - in Nordic mythology, the Midgard Serpent was thought to encircle this world with its body, with astonishing similarity to South American myths according to which the world is surrounded by a great Anaconda, or indeed the snake Dan from African Benin mythology, which winds itself thousands of times around the universe, or the Anata Shesha from Hindu concepts, which is supposed to carry all the planets in its folds, though it is content to sing the praises of Vishnu - And alchemy also knows of it as a symbol of the primordial unity of opposing forces, and the unity of all things, in a sense, as an equivalent of the eastern Yin-Yang symbol."

"The Kundalini energy in yoga was also imagined as a snake that bites itself – as an Ouroboros, and ancient maps of Japan show the country surrounded by a great beast, so as to explain the cyclic nature of the earthquakes."

"And thought it was not depicted as an Ouroboros, even the Australian natives know the myth of the rainbow snake in their stories of the original state of the world, even after being cut off from all the other civilizations for untold ages - Even in Africa, the cradle of our kind, images of serpents biting their own tails are widespread, for example as the deity Oshumane among the Yoruba."

"And also the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl was often portrayed as such a serpent-ring, as well as the dark god Apophis, who for lying in wait at some indeterminate place behind the horizon to face the sun-god in their nightly battles, had been called the ‘world-encircler’...

Only very, very much later did the psychologist Carl Jung introduce the concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious, before Erich Neumann finally recognized these many snake rings for what they were: As an expression of something that has been stuck in people's hearts for ages, an ancient knowledge and an ancient desire. There was once a time far away when all life was interwoven, and even when ours, through the shackles of rationality and doubt and our infinite arrogance, prevented us from seeing the truth, we feel what once was, and yearn to return".

"It is only natural that we do not remember our early childhood - we are beings who begin to dream and gather information just before our birth, but if we could remember it, we would be lost - we could not exist. We would stare blissfully into the skies until death, lost in thought of the time when we were one with another, experiencing all sensations without entertaining foolish notions of separateness, and being free from all kinds of bodily hardship, without food and drink, dress and garment, or protection from the elements."

"The motif of the great serpent is deeply rooted in the human soul - no doubt about it.

We see it even into the most recent excesses of waste undertaken by the faithless hordes of today, in which the prideful visions of these fools come to full bloom:

Even the most recent waste of humanity, in which the visions of these fools come to full bloom, such as these gigantic particle accelerators, sometimes cannot help but take the shape of a ring -

The serpent is a constant, a throughline from Man’s newest works to his oldest – In Africa, excavations have found sites where rituals were performed in front of the image of a snake, dozens of thousands of years ago...
But it is not always the closed circle of the Ouroboros, oh no, the old alchemists already tried again and again to escape from the eternal cycle of death and rebirth and to keep themselves forever... It is the free, meandering snake, the Naga with its trident, which stands for the sin, stupidity and arrogance of the people who mistook themselves for gods again and again, and thought they could deviate from their God-given fate...

"And by allowing ourselves more and more to be tempted, we lost our way a long time ago...but we still long for redemption, for the return to this enclosed, perfect world, to the paradise from which we were expelled. We long for the lost innocence of childhood from which our knowledge separates us, and we hide the nakedness of our imperfect bodies and tear ourselves apart in search of someone who can stand the sight of our bare flesh..."

"Man is truly a sad creature..." with this, Ikari took part in the conversation of his superiors for the first time since it began.

"That much is true! But now that the end times are approaching, this suffering will finally become a thing of the past, and through the sacrament of annihilation man will finally attain the joy of rebirth, washed clean of sin and the filth of our earthly existence, exactly as it is written – and as we have longed for so long..."

"Even in the long night of ignorance, this desire for forgiveness and redemption never disappeared from mankind... It is written on our hearts, and we have long felt the approaching arrival of the glorious kingdom...... What you have been tasked with, Ikari, is not only the execution of a project which was begun over fifteen years ago, nor even the fruits of the work that this organization has been preparing for centuries in hope of the last day, but the ancient destiny of mankind that is so old as life itself... Be it the union with the body of the Messiah known from western legends... The ultimate union with the Brahman, the soul of the world, the God behind the many faces, or, what is probably most familiar to you, the entering into Nirvana after having freed yourself from the Maya, the illusion of individuality, or even the idea of getting rid of the delusions of civilization and becoming one with nature, of returning to it, and its self-evident order ow how things should be..."

"Yes, for only when the delusion of individuality is discarded can man discern his true form... The sons of Adam are already called into this world with access to their one true form, but we, divided into countless little shreds of God, must restore our unity before we can advance any further, for only when one has detached oneself from one's history and personal lenses can they see the truth, the one truth behind the truth!"

"Well said, for the truth has power because it is truth! The edifices of fantasy and illusion collapse before its purifying glow! The inevitable truth as it is written in the scrolls of the dead sea!"

Ikari kept many thoughts to himself. There were so many things he wanted to say to these gentlemen, but not now, not yet. "The truth hm...?" he pondered. "It must surely be pleasant to have such an absolute, unquestionable truth. I understand why you would go to such lengths to make it take shape... what pleasant thought that one might receive physical proof of their own righteousness... “

"What are you implying, Ikari?"

"What does it matter, Mr. Chairman? After all, the future is already written. What could I, or anyone in this world ever do to change it...?"

He didn't hear anything and he didn't see anything either, but he had great hope that somewhere far away, Keel might be choking on his own words.
"Then you must play your part well, Ikari" warned SEELE 04, the hook-nosed representative from France in yellow, if not everything deceived him.

"Of course. Can I assume then that you have considered my last request?"

"You've got a lot of nerve. You know, I keep getting the impression that you’re forgetting your place!" - The American. SEELE 03.

Under Ikari’s interlocking hands hid a thin grin.

If he got so worked up, then it must certainly be because he didn't like having to agree with his reasoning for lack of excuses.

"Then I assume the transfer of the Sixth Child has been granted?"

"There was no reason not to. It has always been clear that this war would be fought mainly on the front of the black moon...as long as Unit Three is still unfinished, we ourselves are limited in the possibilities for her training..."

"I agree. We should use our limited resources as efficiently as possible. Farewell. May the day of the prophecy..."

"...come soon."

The emblems on the screen gave way to a black screen and finally, the desktop, just as the Commander's thoughts returned from distant, lofty spheres of abstract thought to find themselves back in his lavishly furnished high-end hotel room. Beyond the window lay the skyline of an American metropolis.

The commander pressed a few more buttons.

Unlike the last one, the next transmission entailed a visual feed as well.

"Fuyutsuki."

"Ah. Hello. How did it go? I suppose the old men had no grounds on which to refuse to play along and were forced to agree?"

"Yeah. I'll take care of everything else myself when I get there. The same goes for our informants in Nevada."

"Don't you think it's a little early to venture out of cover again? We've just stirred up so much dust... You got the Sixth Child, what more do you want?"

"While it is helpful to reduce their abundant resources..." To gesticulate, he took one of the ripe figs from the splendidly filled still life of a hitherto untouched fruit basket the likes of which the hotel staff frequently put in the room for well-to-do guests. "...but by and large the Sixth Child has no real significance."

He admitted, playing around with the fruit. "She was commissioned, trained and given a Marduk designation largely as a means of appeasing the demands of the united states government, but there is no especially great part allotted to her in the prophecy – Much unlike the Fourth and Fifth Children, who still represent significant unknown variables..."

"Then why did we even request the transfer?"

"You’re always the one saying that we shouldn’t neglect out cover... Under the current
circumstances it would be impossible to completely conceal our contacts with informants in the states; It’s much more manageable, however, to fool the old men about what it is were are hiding from them... If SEELE’s spies are always watching, we should let them see exactly what we want them to see..."

There were a lot of questions that Fuyutsuki could have asked, but he could already imagine the answers he would have gotten.

To warn against playing with fire under the present circumstances would have been nothing less than a grotesque joke.

Struggling to find a lot of satisfaction in it, Fuyutsuki simply asked: "Then everything went according to plan".

"Yeah."

"Her plan or ours?"

Ikari seemed to have skillfully overlooked the latent accusation of his subordinate.

"The moment where the lines would diverge is yet to come... But these foolish old men..."

"Have, without doubt, graced you with yet another lecture on the ingenuity and brilliance of the scenario, haven’t they? How they love their own voices! They speak of humility and penance, but in the end it is but an externalized version of their own egos that they worship..."

"In the end, that truth of theirs is just one more farce that can be easily replaced by another..." commented Ikari. His thoughts were still with the words of his superiors.

"Death creates nothing."

And with those words, the small fig emphatically met its end. Ruby red stains where squeezed out of its dark form, marking the Commander's gloves like fresh blood.

"I'm surprised to hear that from you... Is your goal not very much the same? To return everything to nothingness?"

"No. It’s not a return to nothingness. It is merely a return to the beginning, back to the womb from whence we all came... nothing more than that. It is not the end of existence, but another way to exist. But to discard our current forms will be inevitable – Because there is no other way for us to survive.

It is true that the human body is a limited construction that has fully exhausted its potential. In our present form, we have no choice but to stagnate, or to discard these cocoons."

"You forget that it was only because of these forms that life in this world has developed any potential at all. There is a difference between us and the formless mass with which life began."

"It's true that our bodies were a useful crutch, but now they're no longer needed. It is no longer a secret: there is no function of the human body that cannot be explained by natural laws known to us, and even the mechanics of its soul are no longer beyond our reach... The body is a machine, and machines become obsolete with life. If this were to determine the limits of our capacity, then it would be as if some God who does not even exist had condemned us to failure from the outset. Yui and I just weren't willing to let that happen, and I thought you agreed with us, Professor..."
We were all one to begin with, the completion of our plan will simply re-establish that connection is all. Our individual forms simply impede the complete exchange of information, and information that is not passed on is meaningless. Mere data.

Why do you think so many people are careless with their personal information once they get an illusion of anonymity?

They do not like the unattractive consequences, but they want to be seen and to evade oblivion, and to reveal oneself is a cheap method to impress the content of ones’ soul onto others. It's an obvious human weakness that's all too easy to exploit."

"Are you speaking from experience, Ikari?"

If Fuyutsuki could adorn this dialogue with one of these garishly colorful text markers, he would probably mark the word 'exploit' in as squeaky a color as possible.

"I know you hate this world and its people very much, but not everyone thinks like you. Yui didn’t think like that. She tried her best until her death to thwart Selele's plans."

"Isn't that precisely what we are doing? You joined us because you agreed."

"In theory, yes, but I can’t help but fear that the difference we will make will be very limited indeed..."

"We can't afford this sentimentality and nostalgia at a time like this I've told you before. Certain options are simply not available... It is true that I have never seen much hope, neither for man nor for this world, but Yui once told me that she loves this world and this humanity very much and wants it to continue... She wished that it should never fall into oblivion.

And that is why I will do everything in my power to stop the old men...

I do not want to become "one with God", and certainly not a "child of God", I want to claim for us what the gods have denied us, perhaps for fear that we might become just like them... Humanity should develop further and find a new path...”. He proclaimed, pulling at the fingertips of his stained glove. "...even if the only means to achieve this is the forbidden union..."

What appeared under his glove appeared innocent enough: A bandage over the palm of his hand, not much different from the one he had worn after the incident with EVA 00, and yet Fuyutsuki knew only too well that there was something under these bandages that had very little in common with just a few ugly scars. One could recognize to some extent that the bandages seemed to go at least a little further under the sleeve.

"So you actually went through with it..."

Fuyutsuki had of course known what his superior had in mind and had long since learned that Ikari never took back his words when it came to his goals. He had also been informed that the Commander wanted this matter done before he left for this business trip to America, but to be confronted with the physical traces of the deed was something else.

It forced him to deal with the reality: At some point in the course of the last few days, this man with whom Fuyutsuki had been in regular contact, had abandoned his humanity. Without batting an eyelid, like a faded dream. He had had his body cut open and became something else, probably an unnatural hybrid creature for which there probably wasn't even a designated name, and Fuyutsuki couldn't even tell when exactly that had taken place – It must have been sometime before or after their last couple of conversations. He hadn't behaved differently, he hadn't sounded any different
and he certainly didn't look any different than usual, no paler, not older, not somehow inhuman - as long as he kept his gloves on, you might think that nothing had changed at all.

If he was in any pain, then Fuyutsuki could not tell. Regardless of the demoniac seed that was now resting in it, he had been using his hand quite normally.

"Is it safe for you to travel with it?"

"Dr. Akagi has assured me of it. It's currently inactive anyway - it'll take some time for it to fully assimilate."

In other words, until the poison had completely passed into his flesh and blood, until this... foreign body had become one with his flesh.

"Are you serious, Ikari? No one knows what might happen to you..."

"This is nothing compared to what she has to endure."

Trapped by herself in that monstrous colossus of botched flesh and metal.

But both men preferred to leave that unsaid.

Distantly Fuyutsuki suspected that this might only be an excuse, in essence both of them were only concerned with their very own longing for her-

But perhaps an afterglow of old, long ago dismissed jealousy made him judge unfairly, his counterpart knew nothing of the last few hints that the common object of her desires had sent him, nor of his persistent inkling that she may have chosen her exile of her own free will.

He had kept his mouth shut all these years - 'officially', because it was only a vague hunch, or possibly to respect the wishes of a woman who had thought it necessary, or at least right, to keep even her own husband in the dark... but probably most of all due to a wretched little desire not to give up the sense that there was a very special secret between the two of them, and truth that was revealed to only him.

"So we are not only going against SEELE, but against our very own creators..."

"It's only natural. What gratitude could we have to a Creator whom we have never seen and who, after our creation, left us entirely to ourselves and to the limitations he imposed on us? It's only natural to hate them. It is said that children can sometimes develop the most amazing abilities if neglected..."

"Neglected children, huh?"

Fuyutsuki was surprised that he hadn't choked on the irony of this statement.

Fuyutsuki could have swallowed the irony in this statement, and although he felt compelled to argue that humanity might do better to leave it’s childhood grudges behind, there was only a certain amount of hypocrisy he could endure in one day.

The old scientist had enough and said goodbye.

Meanwhile at the other end of the line, the commander had replaced his glove, but the old one had not been sacrificed purely out of fancy – even before its contact with the unfortunate fruit, the inside had been soiled with dark secretions.
Ah. He could feel the process starting.

He kept looking at his hand, right through the fabric.

He couldn’t quite stop.

"It's only natural that we should hate them ... Wouldn't you agree, Shinji?"

---

"That Ikari! He becomes more and more shameless in his provocations!"

"His intention is pretty clear – He's trying to hoard all the chess pieces in his hand and take them out of ours..."

"That he would be so presumptuous to reveal his renegade intentions so shamelessly..."

"Did he? Even he would not be so foolish. He appreciates his continued existence. I would rather know why it is that he found out about the Sixth Child! How much more does he know, and how?"

"And how much more do we want him to know?"

"There is nothing in Massachusetts that is not meant for his eyes. An intervention is unnecessary at this point – it would only arouse suspicion..."

"But there's no denying it: We have a Judas in our ranks, and Ikari could just be the tip of the iceberg!"

"Ikari has done nothing so far that would have been outside the parameters of the scenario, and there is no denying that we still need him... But there is no harm in subjecting his loyalty to a thorough review..."

"I understand. Contact Asahina immediately."

---

That she was different from the many people who were scurrying through the streets of Tokyo-3 every day was nothing new to Rei - she was an artificially created being, a clone, a homunculus.

She didn't even have memories of a moment when it had first become clear to her.

It had always been a given.

There was not a definite moment when someone had told or explained it to her for the first time; For her, it had always been one of the basic facts of life that she had taken for granted - of course, her young mind had at first gone through several simplified notions of these facts, and of course there had been moments, in which, through certain events or simply the passing of time, she was made aware once again of what that actually meant and what its implications were.

She was a copy, one of many, an exemplar in a series of biotechnological devices which had been created as a medium for the induction of Third Impact, and she’d had more than enough time to think further about what that made of her.

Even before she had been introduced to other children for the very first time, she had already realized that they would not be like herself, so she hadn't even expected to fit in.
She knew that the others were there, that they were going on their ways and circles and doing many things that she herself did not quite understand, but she had simply accepted that, too - All the people on the streets and the other children at their school desks were only tangentially related to her task, so there had never been any real reason for her to keep engaging with them; She had simply passed them by.

And yet it felt to her as if there were days on which she felt the abyss that separated her from all the others particularly clearly.

Today, after these nights she had spent with her nose in all those books, after all the DVDs and BluRays, after all these little insights into the worlds of other people, be it the fictional figures or the inevitable imprints of those who had invented them, it seemed all the more apparent how deep and how broad this abyss was, how fundamental the difference between them truly was.

Depending on how full the tram would be on any given day, she would either spend her usual ride sitting quietly in her seat without looking at anything in particular, or doing exactly the same while sitting close to the exit door, simply waiting for the end of her journey, which had never included any activities, thoughts or meanings apart from the motion from A to B.

But not today. Today, she had instead gone for a place at the window right after boarding, and spent the rest of the trip looking through it, thoughtfully, almost wistfully, connecting five of her pale, delicate fingertips with the cool pane of glass.

She had never really realized how many people there actually were in this city, even now, when the population had shrunk down again after the recent struggle and the resulting destruction.

Soon after the tram had left the remote parts of the city, where the nearest station to their home was located, they were virtually omnipresent:

Sparsely haired gentlemen in shirts and ties, decorated, painted girls, students in all sorts of uniforms, even the rare children of today, and only a few of them were alone - Where did not connect to each other through all sorts of small devices, they stood around in groups: Ladies with chock-full shopping bags talking excitedly, middle-aged men chatting exuberantly about being mad at their bosses, and not least, couples who were all but wrapped around each other, touching each other's mouths as if they wanted to drink each other's saliva - and even those who seemed to be alone were here because they were following some path of their own, to work, to go shopping, to the homes of others would surely bid them welcome.

The tram passed by morning traffic jams, driving unimpeded past the frustrated vehicle drivers, but even they were nothing other than testimonies of people striving to achieve their goals, working to earn a promotion, or the money to buy something, be it the objects of their desires themselves or just a means to an end.

Never before had Rei wondered if they all had their own little history, just like each segment of these long, colorful traffic lines was made up of single automobiles.

The glass pane only allowed the sounds of the outside world to pass through to a limited extent, but even inside the tram itself, the production of noise was going at full speed. There were all these different people and all the different things they talked about. Often, Rei was not able to assign a purpose to their conversations.
The different voices, tones and cadences merged into a single drone of noise, their colorful clothing blurred into a kind of abstract work of art made of colors without contours.

Some laughed, some were angry, and some a little bored, but there was not a single one of them whose face had nothing to say.

There was so much out there that she didn't understand, so much that she didn't know the reason for... she had never really got into it before, had believed that it was irrelevant for her and her task, and she still believed that...

It was all so loud and complicated, and in actuality, it had nothing to do with her, but one she assumed that these people were all searching for their destiny in one way or another, then the fog lifted a little - Even if this fact was still something like dry book knowledge to her, like a new word that she understood roughly, but would never actively take into her own mouth.

There were many things she didn't understand, but she wasn't blind.

She alone stood outside this endless large network of people; She alone belonged to none of these small groups, little spheres of conversation into which she did not know how to penetrate; Only this colorless blob that she called her ‘self’ was looking in from outside, as if through a pane of glass.

It was already painfully clear to her that the words ‘clone’ and ‘homunculus’ could mean something like ‘replaceable’ and ‘unnatural’, but the longer she lived, the more that they seemed to gain ever further meanings and connotations, and the longer she dragged her transient existence through this doomed, arduous world, the more she longed for the pale midnight moon which she had long since contemplated, and the clearer she felt the distant memory of that ancient, dreamlike voice whose songs called her away to where she really belonged, if such a place could possibly exist...

Wh-what was that?!

It couldn't be, could it?

She had only seen her for a brief moment, in the outermost edges of her field of vision, and yet Rei could have sworn that somewhere in this huge lump-like crowd, she had seen a woman who looked like she could be confused with her, for just one heartbeat.

She was older, her hair was longer and her clothes were as colorful as all those of the others, but the hair color left little room for confusion, as did the scraps she glimpsed of her face.

No, it couldn't be.

Objects that wore her face existed in abundance, but they were impossible out here on the street.

She was reminded of their hollow grimaces, which even reacted slightly and apparently processed data from their surroundings; They could even distinguish her name, but in the end did not truly recognize anything... Each one of them wore a broad grin, took pleasure in the joy of her ignorance, in which they learned nothing; Nothing ever happened to them. They did not change or develop in any other way, while she alone was locked out here with her melancholy, and-

At what point did she actually cover her upper arms with her hands like she was freezing or something?

The temperature was perfectly fine...
If Asuka's thoughts were represented by a video-game-like dialogue tree, the option to apologize would not even be grayed out, but altogether non-existent.

It wasn't even something as simple as arrogance: the possibility that she might be wrong, or that her actions could unjust simply couldn't be combined with her view of the world; To contemplate it would have required a painful change of perspective that would have confronted some of the pillars of her worldview with a wrecking ball... In short, it wasn't a process that her disagreeable rival would be worthy of, not when stood so deep in the swamp of his debt that it threatened suffocate her.

Paradoxical as that may seem.

It was embarrassing!

But she was merely stubborn, not out of touch with reality.

So the conclusion she had drawn was that she might have punished NERV's favourite mimosa a little too harshly, or that she felt a little bit of condescending sympathy for the wimp, and therefore would just pretend that nothing had happened at all, and ignore yesterday's humiliations.

(But she would not forget it. Forgive maybe, but never forget.)

So she pulled up her worst happy-go-lucky gin (How it sickened her!) over her face and made her way to his room to pick him up from dreamland - and all that only to find out in the end that his bed was empty as a thank you for their efforts - that wouldn't have been anything special, the Third Child was usually the first in this household to get up early in the morning, but not only was the bed was completely free of any fourteen year old dumplings, it was already properly made and the coat hanger, on which one would usually find a meticulously ironed school uniform at this time of the day had long since disappeared into the cupboard again, and a certain old school bag was missing from its ancestral place.

She turned around and took a few steps and got stuck somewhere in the process of forming an opinion.

(But wait - that was not what she would have done if nothing unusual had happened yesterday... what kind of ridiculous nonsense was she doing? She had no reason to feel guilty, damn it!)

He wasn't in the bathroom, but on the way she couldn't avoid passing by the kitchen.

His apron had long since been hung back on the hook, the stack of empty dishes left over from yesterday's dinner (Misato had decided to let the Third Child sulk in the peace of his room yesterday - Hah, she only ever avoided the responsibility of raising him to be a man!) , on the other hand, had disappeared without a trace, and in its place there was a spotlessly clean tabletop and two lovingly laid-out plates - Asuka assumed at once that the one that was not flanked by a beer can was meant for her.

So that was really a little overkill now, a man had to have his dignity:

Toast in fancy cookie-cutter shapes?

Partly topped with butter, partly covered with various creamy bread spreads, but universally decorated with half of a small crushed sardine and abundant garnish of salad leaves, herbs and similar garnishments, it looked like something out of these pretty pictures from a magazine or TV
show, not like something someone could do with his own two hands in his own kitchen with ingredients from an ordinary supermarket ... but somehow this certifiable dunce had managed it anyway, and the cute Bento box next to it, waiting to be taken away, promised to contain a similar little work of art.

The penguin snacking peacefully under the table did not escape her notice either – Pen Pen had probably been charged with the lucky task of destroying any remaining sardines.

"Dear god. There is such a thing as too much enthusiasm."

And yet, the guy who was responsible for all this was nowhere to be found – He must have woken up at some ungodly hour only to ensure that he could get as far away from her as possibly by the time she woke up, and it was to be expected that he would not stop avoiding her any time soon.

_Coward!_

Why did he have to make everything so complicated?

(And it almost took her a bit of effort to be offended, but the alternative was much worse.)

(Being offended was often the easiest option. If he was the one who had offended her, _he_ would be the one expected to win her back)

Mumbling angry murmurs about the Third Child, Asuka made her way to school.

(But she took the Bento with her)

(And left half a tuft of parsley and the last half eaten toast on her plate, so he wouldn't get the impression that she had enjoyed her breakfast.)

(Oh, _verflixt and zugenäht!_

If she didn't soon find a way to settle this stupid debt, she would end up going crazy!)

---

Leaning against a wall overlooking the central dogma, Misato had finally found the time to look through the stack of papers she had been carrying around with her for a while after a long, tiring day spent at her desk - something about it was apparently pleasant enough for a change to conjure up a broad, proud grin across Misato's face.

"What's so funny if I might ask? You look like a little girl who just got her very own pony." Her blonde colleague sounded rather amused, though she did not look away from her screens or take as much as a second to pause her fingers, which were constantly speeding along her keyboard.

"Oh, it's just that Shinji-kun and Asuka seem to have gotten their grades back under control. I already like the results of these last few tests much more than the ones before..."

"Whoever would have guessed..." commented Ritsuko, still not fully acknowledging the fact that her colleague attached any importance to the two pilot’s grades. "I'm not that surprised about Asuka, but Shinji-kun too?"

"I'd ask that question the other way around if I were you... honestly, I'm a little disappointed with Asuka. It's true, her grades are above average, but they're not as good as they could be. She probably thinks that she can afford to be lazy because she's an EVA pilot. Or because she's smart."
"I mean, she’s not wrong. Besides, her work as a pilot has priority."

"Yes, but it doesn't have to be one or the other..."

"And what about Shinji-kun?"

"He says a new friend of his helped him study. Seems like he started hanging out with someone who’s a pretty good student..."

"Smarter than those two who ended up in entry plug with him? This is not a big challenge..." the fake blonde remarked bemusedly.

Misato couldn't help but giggle. "That's probably true, but still, those two have done a lot for him in their own way..."

"Who is this new ‘distinguished’ friend anyway?"

"A certain Mitsurugi-kun."

"Mitsurugi Nagato?"

"Exactly. How did you guess?"

"He's the son of Mitsurugi from our department..." the scientist explained with in a faintly disparaging tone. "Passionate family man, that one. It’s like he can't help holding pictures of his boy under all our noses and telling us all about his kid..." ‘s latest accomplishments. Dr. Akagi shook her head. "Parents. They can be so obnoxious sometimes. Yes, for them their rascals are probably the sweetest satanic rascals in the world, yet they are no different than all the other thousands of drooling, stinking, screaming brats, of whom there are already far too many. Especially after the catastrophe of the Second Impact our resources are scarce and the destroyed environment cannot support as many people as before. And they always think that they are entitled to privileges because they work so hard, when it was their very own decision to procreate! When it comes down to it, they only want to spread their own genes, and I fail to see anything especially selfless about that.

They might as well be bragging about themselves!

Why do you think that parents turn their back on their children if they don't correspond to their ideas of how they should be? It's pure narcissism. And then you have to watch a human being with the capacity to look past lower instincts and think logically let themselves self be tempted to become a slave to their own hormones...

It costs a fortune, it ruins your body, it's stressful, you lose the best years of your life and in the end all you have to show for it is some ungrateful brats that will have you carted to the old people's home for your trouble.

I’ll never understand why anyone would do this to themselves."

"Well, you know..." Misato replied a little thoughtfully. "It's easy to say something like that, especially when you're young and you're making big plans, you want to study, work and pursue your career, but then the biological clock starts ticking and you notice it all, what you once thought to be sentimental old wives' stuff tales was actually true, and suddenly your stomach contracts, as if to complain that it is so empty, and all you can think of is babies, babies, babies, no matter where you see them... Or so the old wives keep saying."
"And of course once you have one, even the most ambitious woman will be transformed into a docile mother hen... No thanks."

"I mean I kinda get what you’re saying. It’s not like either of us would even have the time for a baby with the way we lead our lives, or the kinds of jobs we work. And babies have to be taken care of! It’s a big responsibility, not something you can do on whim. You’d have to be ready, and settled, and mature and everything..."

"Oh, then you'll actually admit to being immature?"

"Do you think this is a good time to make fun of me?" Misato retorted, sulking. "I thought I could have a familiar, friendly conversation with you... After all, we’re in the same boat here."

She sighed, "In any case, there’s no point in even thinking about it with the way things are now. I still have Asuka and Sjhinji to worry about and besides, it takes two to make a baby. Who would the father even be?"

"Maybe he's a lot closer than you think... And I'm afraid you're on your way to becoming a mother hen even without him."

"What are you implying now?"

"You said you were ‘a little disappointed’ by Asuka and ‘totally proud of little Shin-chan.’" Ritsuko snarked. "I hope you're still aware that you're the children's commanding officer. You need to be able to make objective decisions."

"I know, I know!" Misato said. "I know that, too. But that doesn't mean I can't worry about their future future. As you yourself once said, supervising them is also part of my work. Going to their parents' evenings is just as much a part of it as commanding them in battle... Now that we're at it, they're going to have another meeting, it's supposed to be a kind of career orientation event... I hope that with the conversation we had the other day, three of them would at least have given a little thought about the future by now - The Commander asked me to go there on Rei’s account, too, because he apparently doesn't have the time...".

“For Rei?” Dr. Akagi raised a brow. "Wha would be the point?"

"Well, as I have already said, if the children have to take part in these struggles, it is probably to earn their future, right?

I'm just saying, even if we can't avoid them being affected by what they’re going through, that doesn't mean we can't try to keep the damage down..."

"Is that what you like to tell yourself? Hm...If so, it can only be beneficial to your ‘noble purpose’ if you don't forget to bring in Asuka and Shinji-kun for their regular checkup tonight..."

---

For the first time since he had come to this city, he had no doubts, no fears, and nothing more to lose.

He could think about all the other times and Misato's wise speeches later, but what could not be denied was that at least this one time, he was here because he wanted to be.

So why in God's name would he hold back?
He was a citizen of the 21st century with a biomechanical war machine that could confidently be classified as the highest achievement of contemporary science, but just as well he could have been a caveman with a spear - All the pretty masks of manners and civilization were burnt away now, and the ape named Homo Sapiens showed itself in its most primordial, true form, and above all, Man turned out to be - who would have thought it - a carnivorous predator.

There hadn't even been a real period of ‘ramping it up’ and getting used to this new state of being, there wasn't any time for that: it was rather more like tailor-made parts snapping into place. In their anger, the boy and the beast were the same, and so the synchronization rate had already raced up high upon first contact - the restraints were brusquely pushed to the side, meter-thick walls of concrete and metal were smashed as if they were made of paper, until the big hunter finally had his bounty in his sights and jumped at it with a shrill battle cry.

In one word: Berserker.

You could call it a family resemblance.

With one well-spiced blow, he threw the mask-like face of his enemy to the side, seconds before he could have blown up Misato and the other NERV technicians away with his laser attack.

The boy could feel practically the monster’s face bending under his knuckles - well, they were actually EVA 01’s knuckles, but he could no longer tell them apart from his own. Everything else would only be an awkward discussion about semantics; But he thought of "his arm" and meant that of EVA 01. He had almost forgotten himself in the small capsule, forgotten that he had never once displayed such uncharacteristic anger in public, and he certainly hadn’t thought about anything as far-reaching as possible onlookers and reactions - His thoughts went no further than three seconds into the future, until the next blow, until the next kick, and yet they were crystal clear within this limited period, clearer than they had ever been, now that there was no panic and no uncertainty to glue the gears of his mind together.

Intuitively he understood what had to be done and what he had to do to achieve it - the ease with which sentence fragments strung themselves together was new to him, though he hardly bothered to think them through to the end.

Of course, the launch pad!

He hadn't even realized how three-dimensional his mental map of headquarters had been.

All right, let's go!

Without leaving the beast the slightest breeze of time to counterattack, he smashed it through another wall and took full advantage of the momentum to press the angel against the next one.

He felt the tension in his arms, the rebound from the impact against the wall, everything so intense, so much, much more real than the deceptive, relative seclusion of the entry plug.

But there was one difference between his own arms and those of EVA 01: The former had a limit, but the power of EVA seemed boundless, far beyond his wildest dreams or the mere imagination with which he conjured up their power like a warlock calling demons from the depths of hell.

It always seemed as if he could still grip harder, hold firmer, hit stronger, whatever his heart desired, better, faster, stronger!

The ever-increasing plug depth and sync value indicators could have been a warning, but he only registered the alarm bells as annoying beeping in the background that gave him no reason to pause.
Even when the angel managed to blow off the EVA’s right arm with his laser when its pilot, in a moment of inattentiveness, had taken too much time to strike a blow, that did not change who obviously had the upper hand in this fight: the pain only became the latest fuel for his anger, as if the ambassador had tried to extinguish fire with gasoline.

Exhaling a bone-chilling, primeval scream that he might have released into the world with or without his injury, he kicked the monster and pinned it against the launch pad which his remaining arm.

That was so easy!

So this was supposed to be the opponent that the likes of Asuka, Rei (and even Mari) couldn't defeat, the one who almost burned Misato to ashes?

This thing here? Seriously?

There was nothing left of all the inhibitions that had made him their captive for lifetimes, and yet he wasted no time in such a vain contemplation as the realization that it must have overtaken them all in its ability as a pilot. No, his thoughts were quite somewhere else: This misshapen tooth with an old Halloween mask for a face and arms made of toilet paper!

No matter what the target really was and if it had any concept of revenge, he would show it what happened to those who dared to even hurt a hair on the heads of the people he cared about!

PAH! PAH! PAH!

Take this, and this, and this!

In your face!

One for Asuka, one for Mari, one for Rei and one for Misato!

When the two titanic fighters were finally thrown to the surface of the geofront, Shinji immediately took advantage of the impulse still propelling the two masses of flesh by grabbing the enemy and relentlessly ramming him face first into the ground - trees collapsed and an avalanche of dust rolled over the forests of the geofront - and before it had settled, the Third Child continued his attack as if possessed by madness, merciless and brutal.

At least the sweat that this efforts had produced must have belonged to his own body, but that was now meaningless.

The shark smelled blood.

One punch, and one more punch, and one more punch, BAM! BAM! BAM!

The boy's otherwise tender facial features were distorted by an almost sadistic grin, as if he was filled to the brim with diabolical giggles that simply refused to stay confined any longer.

Throughout his life he had struggled with feelings of absolute helplessness, but now, he felt the boundless power that flowed through him, a previously unknown, alien sensation that completely overwhelmed him.

Oh this sweet certainty to really be able to do something, yes, to be doing it right now at this moment!
Well, let's see. Time for a little game. How much brute force might this angel be able to endure before he died?

And that's exactly what the boy was about to find out.

He hadn't liked the ugly face of the angel to begin with anyway.

So he grabbed right in the middle and pulled. And pulled. And twisted, pulling out a whole tube of muscles and tendons between the crumbling parts of the mask-like "face".

Just a little more, then it was done!

Just a little bit further, and the creature would be dead, no matter if it consisted of frozen light, it could just as well be made of fruit gum as far as he was concerned!

ZING! ZING!

...zing?

Judging from the resistance that the ambassadors’ tough flesh of the ambassador had put up thus far, the boy’s next attack should have been the coup de grace, the last pulling that would eventually have turned into a rip... Only that this conjunctive remained as such -

The order for this motion was properly sent off from the movement centers of his brain, but the Evangelion’s fingers did not respond – Nothing responded at all, no single part of the violet colossus: The bio-mechanical creature sunk down like a wet sack while its pilot experienced something akin to being thrown into cold water with a sudden brutality.

Just right now, he was immersed in the heat of the fight. He had felt the tensed muscles right down to their smallest corner, the EVA’s position in space and its... bloodlust, as one would have to call it. Seconds later, he found himself in a well upholstered armchair with the slippery, sweaty controls in his hands.

Under other circumstances, this could have been extremely disorienting, and to be honest it was, but he didn't have the slightest time to deal with it now and forced himself to search the interface’s displays for an answer - just in time to see several zeros flashing before the whole interface disappeared, leaving only the narrow darkness of the cyllindrical entry plug, alone in the darkness.

"The battery... ran out?"

He blinked, but the naked wall of the entry plug was still there.

Shinji was speechless - how could that even be? That could never have been five minutes! These batteries were supposed to last for five minutes!

He’d heard it again and again: Five minutes! Five minutes maximum, and one minute at full power.

And **one minute at full power**.

Oh. Oh. Oh.

Now also deprived of the possibility to escape reality by dismissing it as impossible, Shinji had no choice but to look it in the eye: He was completely helpless.

He couldn't say what happened next, but even with the LCL as shock absorber he had to grip the
operating levers tightly to avoid being thrown out of the seat - a kind of counter-attack, he suspected: the angel must have noticed that his opponent had run out of juice.

A jolt, then a shock, as if from an impact, and then another bang, resounding and powerful - he almost had to force himself to remain in a halfway seated position, the fixture above his thighs prevented him from being sent flying, but holding on was torture on his arms, especially the right one, which had already been affected at the beginning of the fight - It had tinged and burned as a phantom arm might, and he’d probably hardly noticed it in the heat of battle: It must have been the battle frenzy, which was now inexorably retreating, making way for his gradually emerging panic.

But in the end it was only the shocks and his attempts to stay in his place despite them (one wondered why), no more and no less - No doubt that the pain he would have endured if the EVA were still active would have been incomparable, but even so he would have chosen the pain over the darkness without hesitation - It was better than this ignorance.

The EVA might have been cut clean in half, and he didn't know it, didn't know if there was any chance or if the monster had already passed him, marching on straight to the end of the world, while he was unable to lift this pile of meat from the ground to stop the enemy - No, wait, he was still there, still very close - Bam! BAM! BAM!

The rhythmic attacks threw Shinji back before he was done sitting up – he had become a plaything, a tiny, fragile stick figure in a mountain of dead flesh that was about to be extensively destroyed.

It was ridiculous how quickly all the shaking filled his skull with pain - it was a play ball, a damn rubber toy for the angel!

And this observation would prove to be the breaking point - too new, too fresh were the last few experiences of complete helplessness in, yes, this very cramped cabin!

All the ignorance, all the knowledge, all the fears and the futile courage, all this suddenly began to boil and bubble away, the neurotransmitters in his brain practically foaming until any state other than complete panic became physically impossible.

At first there was a rather crooked scream of complete overload, fluctuating in tone and volume, followed by wild attempts at moving his feet, which were stuck in the fixture – the lack of room to thrash about in did little to diminish his frantic struggle.

Then, he finally succeeded at snatching hold of a thought resembling a cause-and-effect relation.

There followed a panic, endless pulling and pushing at the control slides, forward and backward and forward and backward, stained with a river of twisted words, they were so close together that he had no time to breathe in between, which led to even more panic and so to even less breathing pauses, without point and comma: "MOVEMOVEMOVEMOVEMOVEMOVEMOVE! MOVE, YOU STINKING MONSTER, OR EVERYONE WILL DIE AND IT WILL BE MY FAULT! I CAN'T STAND IT!"

For a moment, the volume fell and he sobbed - That was the first time he had taken responsibility after running away from it for so long, and now it weighed heavily on his shoulders, shattering, cracking everything he was under its weight like the entry plug cracked beneath the angel's attacks - He had often suffered agony in this plug through the connection with the EVA, but it had never been so close to its physical annihilation before, never so close to the Angel's destructive power as now, when the plug splintered like a laminated glass, ready to fall apart at any moment - A gentle
rain of metal splinters trickled into the LCL - Was that now the final curtain on human history?

At the beginning of this journey he couldn’t really imagine the “end of humanity”, it all sounded like a lot of abstract nonsense in which he could not have figured out the causal connections if they had not been explained to him in advance - just words.

But now, after losing his best friend to one of these beasts, his conception of the apocalypse was a little more concrete... Exactly this pain, multiplied by some crazy number... including the guilt. He had failed, the one time where it actually mattered, the one time where he was really needed, he had failed abysmally!

The whole world was too vast for him to truly grasp it, in the end it all blurred into a diffuse Plasticine mass of people, but amid the great uncertainty, the few people he had come to know as more than just statistics stood out all the more.

Misato...Asuka... Ayanami... Kensuke... Touji... Dr. Akagi. The class president. The technicians from the headquarters, Misat’s Assistant Hyuuga and whatever the other two were called...

He must have disappointed them all...

It seemed like a karmic punishment that he should fail in protecting them, after all, wasn’t he the one who had carelessly turned his back on them just mere hours ago?

Oh, no, he couldn't take it, not again, not like this.

He didn't want this!

Shinji was at the extreme end of what he could endure, his shirt stuck to his chest soaked in sweat and LCL, his arm still hurt from the bloody wound of the EVA, and his face was covered with snot and tears - and he screamed, pleading, begging, on the edge of despair, loud enough to set his lungs on fire:

" MOVE !"

And then it happened, violently and yet gently, under hellish agony and heavenly bliss, as fluids dripped from every part of his body, that the thing awakened.

She answered him with a trembling heartbeat from the most primordial depths, shaking at the first memories that had formed the foundations of his consciousness, and for the duration of a moment he sat there, recognizing, experiencing, holding together for one more instant, like one of these cartoon characters who had just been sliced to ribbons with a sharp object, but not yet fallen apart, and then-

("It's all right, Shin-chan, it's all right. Mommy is right here with you, and she would never let anything happen to you...")

("I've been waiting for you for a long time. For you, and for this moment.")

("Well then, don't you have a battle to fight? Wait, let me give you a hand.")

-There was only instinct.

Shinji's wish became the birth cry of a flickering glimmer of consciousness, new as the day and too
foreign to have belonged to any element of the Trinity involved in its creation - all traces of humanity had been released into the sky with this last cry, and not a single one remained.

The resulting creature was an existence that was still interwoven in flesh and blood, but would have been able to condemn this whole world with all of its its thousands of souls to the fate of annihilation, or to save them all from doom, all with merely a thought – The embryo of a God.

The once extinguished eyes of the beast awoke with the light of a thousand suns, and in a fraction of a blink of an eye the violet Titan had cut the angel's arm into strips with its bare hands as with five knife blades, before his powerful hand seized the paper arm just above the "shoulder" and dragged the angel to himself.

Unbelievable as it seemed, the angel of power trembled in the face of his reborn enemy, and from its mouth, which had been long-since stapled shut with the armored plates, escaped one of the most sinister noises men had ever heard, a hoarse roar, similar to a painfully creaking sound of grating that made the blood freeze in your veins - a devastating kick followed, sending the angel hard against the ground where it chafed along the ground for hundreds of meters, plowing a strip of desolation through the landscape, so that the angel’s arm, which the awakened being had held fast, naturally tore, apart from the piece directly in the hands of the colossus, for which it would now find a completely different use.

And so the impossible truth was revealed here in the geofront before all, as the violet monster pressing the angel's shreds against the stump of its own arms – the two beings should have been too different for their bodies to be compatible with each other, but they were: The EVA was able to assimilate the ambassador's tissue perfectly, such that the flesh that now bubbled out of the stump revealed the true shape of the Titan - The metal and rubber of which the colossus's armor had been made did not grow back, and so the spectators of the fight came to see the Evangelion’s true, unprocessed shape - The arm seemed much wider than it had ever looked with its shackles on top, and it was absolutely identical to the muscular arm of a human female. If one had only seen a picture of it, and nothing to suggest the proportions, it would have been indistinguishable the limb of a human being - what followed had more in common with the slaughter of cattle than it ever resembled a real fight.

Since the restraining bolts that had sealed its mouth shut were finally broken, the violet colossus freely uncovered its bare, human-like teeth, and picked up where it left off before the brief blackout, complete with a blood-curling howl which terrified onlookers all across geofront: A metallic, "processed" sound, which nevertheless had a decidedly organic note to it, as if one had turned the bellow of a camel through a synthetizer, and like everything about the creature, it radiated a clear aura of power and strength; An angry Titan, a determined Asura, a rabid Jotunn, determined to finally overthrow the gods from their thrones and reach their power...

The angel of power, faithful servant and right hand of the Creator, immediately understood that he had to destroy this creature, this living offspring of heresy as soon as possible now that it had awakened - but it was already much, much too late for that.

The ambassador's attack was effortlessly thrown back with just one hand, with such force that it completely shredded his remaining arm - The AT field, which was supposed to protect the angel from his own razor-sharp limbs that had now become projectiles never really had a chance - after all, you couldn't be the ultimate shield and the perfect lance at the same time - His lance, his offensive abilities, were stronger in the end and tore deep, gaping cuts into the angel's body, from which his blood now shot forth.

But even if the enemy was already down, the EVA, or whatever had become of it, was just getting
A rough, metallic sound which yet resembled the cries of a monkey, it escaped the monster's throat; like a solo primate, it wriggled with its arms before embarking on its journey on all fours, moving and using its joints like a wild baboon, mercilessly stomping the vegetation into the ground.

The angel, whose face was already half-torn, made a last, desperate attempt to cough up a laser beam with the last of his strength, but the beast crushed the remains of his face without any effort, simply wiping them aside with great brutality, like a crumb of dirt.

For what happened next, there was certainly a logical explanation, which, once you had decorated it with comparisons and scientific models, might have dampened your fear and provided you with good reasons for why your initial suspicions must have been an understandable yet harmless misunderstanding -

But for now, no onlooker could have described what they saw without implying that the violet colossus had sadistically narrowed its eyes.

The mouse was trapped and the kitten had enough of playing.

The woman knew what had to be fetched and why, her creation knew how, and their interests intersected there, even though the artificial body lacked the will to strive for anything by itself - but that was what the other two components were for, acting again in complete unity.

The sound that followed instantly filled many of the listeners scattered throughout the geofront with sudden nausea, an organic, sucking sound, the opening and closing of jaws - opening its mouth as wide as the size of its jaws allowed it, so that it could take a good bite out of the angel’s mask-like grimace - and another, and one more, until nothing was left, and even then it kept going, bending over its defenseless prey, eating of it and raising its jaws to look around now and again to ensure that its meal would not be interrupted, as wild animals did, smacking its lips, moving its tongue, blood on its teeth;

In short, it was horrible.

The taste of blood from the inside of his mouth--

But this power! This incredible power!

Nectar flowed in the ambassador's veins and he had meat made of ambrosia.

With each bite it swallowed - The Core, this spiral thing? - this incredible new strength could be felt more clearly as it flowed through the new creature.

Somewhere, perhaps only at the later contemplation of the memory, a few half-faded shreds of knowledge bubbled up to the surface, somewhere between the legend of the Wendigo, about which the boy had once read on the Internet, or the story about the six-hundred-year-old nun that his teacher had once told him - wasn't there a western myth as well, according to which those who ate the flesh and blood of God were to attain eternal life? At the time, he didn’t finish reading the rest of the text because he’d thought that it sounded quite cannibalistic.

But... that was kind of what this felt like.

Finished with its grotesque Eucharist, the giant reared up to full height and stretched its muscles - the sheer force of its movement broke both plastic and metal, shattering further parts of the armor.
around it, and it felt its new freedom, the air on its skin, and a wild cry of triumph echoing through the geofront...

The birth cry of a newborn god.

Those simply weren't the memories of a human being, nothing that could have been processed by a limited human brain or contained inside a weak human mind, certainly not by one who was already close to bursting apart... He might lock it behind a door somewhere in a distant corner of his being, but it was so much, too intense, to be held back completely – it would come forth drop by drop, creeping, the whispering voice of madness, yes, if he only so much as thought about what had happened, he would feel the contents of his skull running hot, this sheer brutality, the naked, unprotected instinct: A piece of it had belonged to no other than himself, and another belonged to...

(A gentle clap. A lab coat, short hair and open arms)... he didn't even want to think about it...

Always, always this fear, always this uncertainty and all these questions that nobody could answer... no, maybe there was someone, but he hardly dared to face her.

Why...?

Why him? Why did he have to go through these horrible things, why did he have to carry around this knowledge and these memories alone?

...

Plopp.

Plopp - Plopp.

Plopp.

Freshly fallen on the block sheet, about one-third of which was written in increasingly crooked writing, the surface tension gave them the approximate shape of a lens, but soon the sheet began to absorb the drops of liquid into itself - this didn't make the notes much more illegible, as they were in any case only an incomplete copy of something that the teacher had long wiped off from the blackboard without much of a chance for it to have been written down.

The teacher actually didn't write particularly fast, but today, all the characters simply seemed to blur in front of his eyes, today, even the sound of chalk on the blackboard itself was distraction enough, without any need for his chattering friends to be involved, and even if they had been, he had scarcely been able to enrich their conversations with more than the occasional mumbled ‘Yeah’ today?

"... Ikari-kun?"

His face was as pale as the pigmentation of his skin would have allowed for. It lay buried in his hands, his hair glued onto his forehead by cold sweat.

" Ikari-kun! Are you listening to me?"

He tried to raise his head a bit, out of the palms of his hands, wiping away the sweat and tears with his descending fingers.

He forced his eyelids to move from their places, but his view remained limited to a small strip of the world, not even constant, because it was difficult for him to really keep his head upright, dream images mingled in between, static-like stripes of a woman in a floral blouse - Even though he
wasn't quite sure if they were not, in fact, the actual reality... Whatever reality might mean in this context.

"Ikari Shinji!"

That was enough, and suddenly there were no more trees, no geofront, no EVA 01, just simple sunlight, a classroom he knew quite well, and a rather irritated looking teacher.

"S-Sensei!"

"Ikari-kun." She repeated again, as if to make sure to communicate that she was deliberately holding back her anger. "I'm aware that your work as an EVA pilot must be quite demanding, but I do hope you know that this topic will be covered in our next exam? If you need to sleep, go ahead, but please don't do it in my class!"

"I'm... I'm very sorry, Sensei, it will never happen again-"

"Save your excuses! Better turn your book to page 95! And the rest of you, too, hop hop!"

The lady in the corridor - Asahina - one of the many black-clack security staff stationed in and around this school (officially) for the safety and (mainly) the surveillance of the pilots, just sighed.

"How exceedingly shameful... Oh Father, how you must turn in your grave! If only you could see this disgrace."

... The school bell soon sounded for lunch, but it brought no salvation - the Third child had unpacked his Bento, but left it on his table untouched.

He had no appetite, and a full stomach would have only made his exhaustion worse - Not only had these visions robbed him of his last nerve and his last shred of sleep as it was (It getting ridiculous. Not even an involuntary nap on his school bench was safe anymore!) This morning, to make matters worse, he also had to get up early in order to avoid Asuka.

And that's exactly what he was doing right now, staying away from her, outside the classroom where she stood next to Hikari with a bunch of girls, indulging in the latest gossip of the morning.

Though she was still far from being the only reason - - his stupid quarrel with her, the lessons, the lunchbox he left behind, all these were only trivialities in the face of the impossible truth that had revealed itself to him, ironically not in battle with some strange creature, but in the depths of his own consciousness, and the presence of this knowledge in his heart gave him the feeling that it could burst at any time from within, this heavy, scorching hot load that he would love to throw away.

The icy certainty, the sheer meaninglessness implied by it, already separated him infinitely from all the others in that room, so it hardly made a difference if he physically distanced himself from them as well... except that he would longer be forced to look at them.

All of them.

They couldn't understand it, he couldn't possibly say it, and even if he could have...
He... he’d let them all down, hadn’t he?

They... they were all dead. That was the only logical conclusion.

They were dead and yet they laughed and ate and talked, completely ignorant, with false calm in
their eyes, and in the end they would feel obliged to worry about him, their so-called "hero", who
would have gotten even more than he deserved if they had thrown a boot after him.

No, no, no, no, he couldn't stand it, not now, at least not right away.

Out, out, out of the classroom, he could not stand to see anything anymore and neither did he want
to, not even the silent red pair of eyes that worriedly looked after him from an empty table next to
the window as he left- Especially not them.

He was so confused that he didn't even think to take his Walkman with him.

Further and further away, up, up, up the stairs, just away - his familiar retreat on the roof would
probably do just fine. The combination of the light breeze touching his skin and the sweat still
sticking to it finally brought with it a slight invigorating coolness, as did the cold metal of the
railing to which he clung until his knuckles were white, just to feel that it was massive, that it was
real, that it had substance and actually filled part of the room.

Since the school was sitting on a hill, he could see a good part of the city spread out in front of him
from up here, and the fact that the damage caused by Angel of Illusions only remained visible in a
handful of places did not manage to improve his state of mind - yesterday that might have been
possible, yesterday, he would have taken heart at the sight of the half-rebuild building that had
been crushed beneath his EVA in his attempt to protect the school and his friends inside it.

But he wasn't protecting them, not really.

They were dead.

If nothing else got them first, it must have been Third Impact. Dead!

How ironic that after everything he had once told Mayumi in that same spot, he found himself
beginning to wonder whether the school building was high enough to guarantee a short, painless
death.

They were all dead.

Why?

Why did he need to know, and be barred from living out his last days in peace and ignorance just
like everyone else?

What significance could Misato’s talk of the future have anymore, what was the purpose of that
career orientation event...? After the conversation with his guardian he had seriously tried to find
something, now he wished he could physically grab those handful of new browser bookmarks and
throw them out of the window in a high arc - that screaming void inside him pulled at everything
he was and he couldn't endure it.

Yesterday he thought that things were on the right track, that he had at the very least changed a
little bit, that he had become stronger and that his biggest problem was that Asuka didn't like him -
Ridiculous!

She was dead (and he couldn't get rid of the distant suspicion that he was especially responsible for her death in particular), they were all dead!

There was this frustration, this pain, this anger, this emptiness, but none of it could escape in any way, nothing even reached as far as his face, he was stunned by the sheer hopelessness, and that was ultimately what he had left, not a bang, but a whimper.

For so long he had dismissed these visions as mazy dreams, but now he knew better, even if he didn't carry Yui's name plate in his pocket...

All the skyscrapers and trains and solar panels, all the bicycles and cars, a blood red, post-apocalyptic desert!

"The real world... isn't real at all…"

At that moment he heard footsteps behind him; A good meter to his right, they came to a standstill.

He didn't even turn around. A sardonic, bitter, dried out smile took possession of his lips.

“I knew you’d show up.”

(1) The hour of explanations is finally at hand! Look forward to chapter 2.23: [Collapse Of The Wave Function], in which we (and Shinji) finally find out WTF is going on. As he already suspects, he is not going to like it one bit.

(2) I guarantee that no innocent fruit has been harmed in the production of this Chapter. I had Gendo flatten a fig because they are used quite often for some symbolism in the Bible and the Koran, so the fruit of knowledge in the original is said to have been not an apple, but a fig, but the apple presented a puntastic opportunity to the later artists inspired by ancient Rome, because "malus" (apple) in Lat. is a homonym to "malus" (evil).

(3) I am not quite sure myself whether I have interpreted this correctly in the original, but in any case this chapter was meant to cement out the gentlemen of SEELE as analogous to religious fanatics, while Gendo should seem more like a kind of twisted transhumanist or “alchemist”… I think his VA described him once as a ‘heretic’. In any case, there’s supposedly a vague difference between their plans, Fuyutsuki thought Gendo’s was the lesser evil, and I always thought this Gendo vs. Keel dynamic was interesting, even if it's one of those parts of the series where you can
only understand the broad strokes. It seems interesting to explore precisely because, while being meaningfully different enough for them to fight over it, it doesn’t necessarily appear that way for most people – How exactly shall we be turned into soup? Might as well pick between plague and cholera.

Perhaps Seele actually believes in predestination whereas Gendo is crafting a string of events that ‘counts’ as the prophecy coming true
I believe I can see the future
‘Cause I repeat the same routine
I think I used to have a purpose
But then again, that might have been a dream

I really don’t want them to come around, oh no
Every day is exactly the same
Every day is exactly the same
There is no love here and there is no pain
Every day is exactly the same

I can feel their eyes are watching
In case I lose myself again
Sometimes I think I’m happy here
(Sometimes)
Sometimes, yet I still pretend

I can't remember how this got started
Oh, but I can tell you exactly how it will end

I'm hoping, someday, you might find
Well I'll hide it behind something
They won't look behind

I am still inside her
A little bit comes bleeding through
I wish this could've been any other way
But I just don't know, I don't know what else I can do
Every day is exactly the same
Every day is exactly the same
There is no love here and there is no pain
Every day is exactly the same
(Every day is the same!)

-From Nine Inch Nails' 'Every Day Is Exactly the Same'

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At that moment he heard footsteps behind him; A good meter to his right, they came to a standstill.

He didn't even turn around. A sardonic, bitter, dried out smile took possession of his lips.

“I knew you’d show up.”

"Yes..." began a bright female voice in this typical ‘we-need-to-talk’ kind of tone, as if she herself found it difficult to bring up the manner. "This is usually a point... when you expect me to be present."

"The prediction you gave me was wrong." He began on his part, too frustrated to hide the accusation in his words. He had to start somewhere, and he lacked the courage to go for the confirmation of all his fears straight out of the gate. Once he had heard it from somebody else’s mouth, it would become an indisputable feature of reality. He suspected that she was not to blame for the situation, but the wrath in his words could not have constituted a significant increase to the mountain of his sins. Without doubt, there must already be a very special spot reserved for him in the ninth circle of hell, a place for him and just him, fashioned in such a way as to make the final resting places of the arch-traitors in the three mouths of Lucifer look like a Hilton hotel. "You said I could beat the next angel with gunfire, but it didn't work."

Yesterday he would have seen this as his lifeline, as a sign of hope that the rest of her gloomy prophecy would not come to pass either, but now he knew better: it was no longer just her prophecy, it was never just that, oh no, he had seen the final result with his own eyes.

"I know." Yui responded as objectively as possible, taking care to restrain any emotions that may have been bubbling up. "I miscalculated. It... it was my mistake. I wanted to warn you in time, but I... got held up..."

If he had turned to her, he would have seen that the dark-haired girl had turned her eyes away from him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I... I know that's no consolation..."

She swallowed. "I suppose... you’ve remembered?"

A simple question that had so much meaning, so many implications.

"I... I don't know... only kind of, it... it's all so messy, I..." The Third Child grasped his right temple with an expression of concentration, "I can't really...pull something out at will, even though it seems so clear in my dreams..."

"It's only natural..." Yui said in a businesslike fashion. "Expressed in bits, the subconscious has a much greater 'processing capacity' than your conscious mind... and our dreams ultimately come from the unconscious. It's a simple experiment, let the test subjects look at two pictures and ask them in half an hour which one they want - one group gets time to deliberately think about it, the
other is occupied so that the unconscious, *the intuition* gets time to run its calculations, and were asked to decide spontaneously afterwards... the probability that the test subjects would still prefer their chosen picture in a week was much higher with the second group. It's probably just way too much information for your consciousness to be able to sort it out sensibly or to contain it all at once...

But it's true.

That constant feeling of déjà-vû that you must have been experiencing... those weren't déjà-vûs. They're memories."

What had been heard could no longer be un-heard.

And that narrowed the endless possibilities that Misato had recently proposed to him to a single possible future.

That's life, isn't it? The course of time could be defined above all as the loss of possibilities: From the moment of birth, the place, the time and the social class in which one was born already staked out a narrow path for a person to follow, then at some point they would start school and there would a certain limit to how much one could achieve, this then decided what professions one could choose from, of which only one or two would actually be chosen and practiced by the individual, and with every unused possibility, every throw of the dice and every past year there were fewer and fewer paths left for them, and finally, there would only be one.

And at some point, everyone who ever lived had been met with that path -

*And now, a ll mankind* had reached the end of the road.

Oh, the tear ducts! These waterworks, which were ever all too easily roused.

One might think that the groundwater of his soul should have finally dried up at some point.

He howled and giggled at the same time, the ancient glitter of madness in his eyes, laughing because it was all too grotesque, laughing because you could laugh at just about anything as long as it didn't happen to you yourself, because laughing was a way to pretend that it had all just happened to someone else, as if it had never become part of his personal reality, just a simple story that almost got into his brain.

Yui's reaction was much quieter, an expression of deepest, understanding sadness that Shinji did not see.

"Then it's just like you said..." he said, sounding so calm and peaceful after his outburst that it could have swept him into the deepest gorges of the Uncanny Valley, as if he had become a living oxymoron in a process that presumably involved hollowing his eyes out of them until no shred of soul remained in them.

("Help me, Asuka, help me...")

"No matter what I do, the Third Impact takes place." And that laugh again, and that damned semblance of geniality. In a way, it was almost liberating to finally know for sure what the future would bring.

(And everything seemed to be finally going well... friends, family, love, even a chance with his father! Why now, why now of all times...)
"How did you put it? It's already happened for you. The Third Impact took place... So I couldn't stop the angels. So it's all over with humanity. Finito. Bust. Over with. But were here somehow, in this world, full of people, animals and plants... What does that mean... that I have found a way to turn the clock back. That I... went back to fix my mistakes, didn't I? Is that right...?"

"Well..."

"But no. You talked about that too, didn't you? You... you always say 'this time', don't you?"

Yui cursed the perceptive power that this young man could demonstrate if he properly wanted to. She had to say something. Anything he could imagine would certainly be more terrible than the truth. But...

"So... this isn't the first time I've gone back, is it? Those dreams... Third Impact, right? That must always have been Third Impact... So many different scenarios of Third Impact... I didn't just fail once or twice, did I?"

Yui found herself cursing the fact that her counterpart was, despite everything, the son of two brilliant scientists. His theory had only one critical error, but to recognize it would have been outside the limitations of his knowledge.

"I... I... I..." Now he was really starting to get worked up.

"I've failed over and over again, haven't I? I... I always fail. I... I fail. That's how it is. A... a fact of the time-space continuum, isn't it?"

The laughter again. Oh, thrice-cursed be this stupid warped brain of his and his ability to comprehend with incredible precision what the physical absence of a future meant for a world.

"Humanity is at the end of its evolutionary potential, isn't it?"

Knowledge he shouldn't have yet – For an instant, all those many many years which Yui had only visited in passing seemed to be shining through.

"And that's why... that's why this... this senseless, circular existence, this ignorant dreaming, is the only life left for us? Is that what you're telling me? That there is nothing out there, nothing in all of creation, absolutely nothing except this great fat time loop that goes round and round in circles for all eternity, without a past or a future?"!

"Shinji... Shinji, calm down-"

Out of an old reflex, Yui stretched out her arm towards him, but he pushed her away with a force that managed to strike fear into her.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

She wanted to be soft with him, but she knew him well enough to know that only the hard way would be of any help: "Easy now! Are you really arrogant enough to think that the whole world would stop spinning just because you ask it to?"

Hollow, expectant but surprised, he looked into her face.

"Just listen for a moment!"

She actually hated to put it like that. It went against her nature.
"So much is true: We have entered an endless recursion of time. Every time, sometimes on the day of the Third Impact, sometimes an indefinite period afterwards, sometimes months, in a few cases even years, a process starts and takes us all back to the year 2015, just at the moment when the first angel invades Tokyo 3. Any time thereafter seems to have physically disappeared from this world, at least as far as the timeline of humanity is concerned. It is not as if the whole time of the universe is turned back, nothing on this earth has such power. All other lines probably continue, even if no one is there to observe them anymore…At least, no one of us."

"Then… time goes on in the rest of the universe, while we alone stand still?"

"No. It's just that we humans, the angels, and all the other life in this world are being returned to an earlier point of the time-space continuum. Try to think of time as one direction… If I make two marks in the middle of a wooden block, for example, and put a piece of wood from the second mark to the first, then the rest of the block is still there."

"But… the piece of wood you take out… how do you put it in? Isn't there solid wood already in that place? Or… did I go too far with the analogy?"

"No, not at all. You're absolutely right… whenever the latest versions of us go back… the ones that were 'inserted' there before us will be replaced and the last iteration of the time loop will be erased. It's like overwriting a CD. In short, at the beginning of each loop, it's as if the last one never happened."

"But what about those previous versions of us? Does that mean they’re all… you can’t even call that ‘dead’. They never… never even existed… All those people… whole world… all three billion… just… gone…"

(And suddenly the idea that ‘everybody dies’ almost sounded harmless again. Under these circumstances, ‘just dying’ would be an achievement. )

Oh, the tears. Always the tears. And now snot too. Leave it to Shinji to shed tears for beings who had never existed, completely potential hypothetical people, the answer to the question ‘What if?’

"Well, I wouldn’t say that – those memories, those déjà-vūs, that's their legacy. The proof that they existed after all. The footprints of the neverwereas. If it were all completely erased, we would have no means of knowing that it’s happening. If you can remember even a little, it’s proof that time is still progressing in manner of fashion, at least within the loop. Knowledge and experience accumulate with each iteration… because of these memories we are now able to determine that we are in this loop at all. All the past versions of us did not disappear in vain – They bought us a chance. A chance to break out of the time loop."

"So you’re saying… I found out over and over again, and in the end… I was still completely helpless…” The sobbing. Oh, that hideous sobbing. Was he even listening to her anymore?

"What I’m saying is, first and foremost, that a very, very long time has passed since you found that letter from your father in your mailbox, Shinji-kun."

"...how long has it been? And how much time is left? Third Impact, when is it?"

"2016. The night of January 1, 2016."

"This… this isn't even a year from now… I… I don't even have a year left… how… how can I ever… how can I… And what about the first question? The first one? What about the first question?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. Not even our world’s Dr. Akagi could say how many cycles
have come before our own, there was simply no way to determine that. The tracks have been erased."

"And... from "your" loop until now...?"

"I don't know either. I... I lost count... It could have been... about ten thousand, yeah, ten thousand sounds right. Of course I have not been present for each of them all the time I... I have traveled..."

Ten thousand... Ten thousand times from his arrival until 2016. Shinji didn't know how that compared to the age of the universe, but he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to type that into a calculator.

Ten thousand. Damn it, 10,000...

"Does that mean...that you serious mean to tell me... that I and... and Misato-san and Shikinami and Ayanami and the others have been..." he faltered briefly, but when he managed to speak it came out all the louder and all the more desperate. "Doing exactly the same things for thousands of years, over and over again?"

"Not at all. The events are not always exactly the same – Not all events always take place in the same way, even if the timelines tend towards fixed points towards the end – Certain things happen more or less often with consistent probability. The number of angels, for example, varies, even though the numbers 17, 12 and 13 are the most common... In my own loop there were 28. The appearance of the insubstantial angel you fought against last time, coupled with the appearance of a certain Mayumi Yamagishi-san, for instance, is a rare event which only took place in 0.2% of all iterations. In about 20% of these you left the singing to Asuka, in 33% you were stationed at headquarters with the First Child. I have observed a total of 3 times that EVA 01 went berserk in the fight against the angel and defeated it in such a manner. Yamagishi-san survived in about 80% of the cases in which she even came to this city to begin with.

There were also variations concerning other events, even though many of them haven't happened to you yet. For example the presence of the Mitsurugis is also a rare event, which I observe now only for the 3rd time. Only in 50% of the cases did you try to leave Tokyo-3 after running away from Captain Katsuragi's residence. In about 54% of the cases you were picked up in Aida Kensuke's tent, either because you were found before you could sneak out, or because you hadn't even tried to do so – I didn't get enough information out of you often enough to get solid statistics about that. In 22% of the cases, you did not meet Aida-kun at all.

Even things that happened before the beginning of the time loop weren't always constant - that's because a particle can have all kinds of stories, and only defines itself when it's observed, that is, when it is interacted with... by you, in this case. This is ultimately what it really means to be the epicenter...

In 45% of cases, Captain Katsuragi already held the rank of colonel when you met her.

And she already showed you what's down there in the terminal dogma, didn't she?"

"Ye-Yes..."

"That's how it was 40% of the time. In the other 60%, she did not even know it herself, and you both learned about it much later from Inspector Kaji, though the information he had available at the time would be partly incorrect – you would only receive the correct version shortly before third impact, if at all. So you're lucky in that way. There were also differences in the people around you and their circumstances, especially in Asuka there was a lot of variation, so her father was
American in about 30% of the cases it was the same man, but in these cases his ancestors had managed to flee the war in time. Ever he name was subject to a lot of variation. Only 38% of her incarnations were called ‘Asuka Shikinami-Langley’. Actually, ‘Asuka Langley-Soryu’ was by far the most frequent option, at about 60%. Once, I even saw a version of her who called herself ‘Kate Rose Wainwright’. There were also two or three scenarios in which her parents never divorced, so that her name was simply "Asuka (or Rose) Langley". In contrast, in 5% of the scenarios she was not Langley-san's biological daughter, but only ended up his name because her mother kept it after the divorce. In these cases, I believe the other half of their genome came from an elite sperm bank. Even rarer was that Langley-san and his new wife had a daughter who, in cases where he was Asuka's father, was of course her half-sister. The chances of you... developing feelings for her are fifty-fifty. There's even a 0.05% chance for her to be blonde.

There are also variations in yourself... the Ikari Shinji I know, for example, had slightly longer hair. Maybe you should consider growing it out, it looked rather good on you...

In 15% of the cases you did not grow up with your teacher, but with a distant relative, in one or two cases even together with a cousin. I saw one or two cases where you were raised in an institution and taken in by that world’s inspector Kaji. In 3% of possible outcomes, you celebrated your 14th birthday sometime between your second and third fight.

The Jet-Alone incident didn't occur in about 18% of iterations, in another 20% you never had anything to do with it, because the manufacturers never got their robot running in the first place. Your first meeting with the Fifth Child ranged from taking place early in your childhood to just before the Third Impact. Also, the individual EVA units 05 and 06 were ultimately scrapped in favor of the mass production series in 33% percent of the possible worlds, and what was already finished was delivered here as spare parts - in this case Mari Illustrious Makinami stayed stationed at a base in Russia and your paths never cross. Once I even met a Mari-san who called herself 'Mariko' by her first name, who was quite serious and grown up and moved in with Horaki-san because she didn't like to live alone... If you haven't met Mari-san yet, it's almost the opposite of what she is usually like... Possible pilots for EVA 03 Suzuhara Touji, Asuka, Horaki Hikari and Aida Kensuke, respectively, with probabilities of 42%, 27%, 21% and 9%. In the remaining cases -

By that point, Shinji had hardly been listening any more, the many numbers had gone way over his head, the last few sentences had hardly penetrated his skull, clogged as it was with the struggle to process the previous ones – Most of all, he couldn't grasp how Yui could calmly rattle on about all this without the slightest flinch in her face - It almost made him doubt whether she was a human being at all, or at some point had stopped being one, in order to become the eerie, ghostly appearance that had haunted him in all this time. She was a banshee whose prophetic screams warned ignorant, happy people about the coming of death, but only the soon-to-be-deceased could not hear them.

"Enough..." he announced almost imploringly, but also with an undertone of anger. "Enough with that!" Now, he underlined it with a horizontal motion of his arm.

He lowered it again and grabbed back onto the railing, which now served as support rather than anything else – he hadn't yet looked Yui in the face, but that was no longer necessary. You didn't have to look her in the face to stop avoiding her truth; that was no longer possible for him. "I... I understand what you mean, so that's enough! Enough! Enough! I... understand..."

The third child took a moment to take a breath and attempted to calm himself...at least to the extent that he was able to have a meaningful conversation.

"But if... if it's not me, then what... what's the reason? What's the problem? Why did this happen?"
"I'll discuss that later. If I told you now, it would just be empty words for you..."

"Try me." He demanded.

"Alright. It's essentially to do with Lillith."

"Lillith? That... thing in the basement at NERV which the angels are after?"

Yui shook her head.

"I knew you wouldn't understand it... The words just don't have the right meaning for you yet... But I can tell you what you can do to work on breaking out of the loop, you don't have to understand it."

"If that’s sp, Yui... How come you understand? How come you're here and you know all this?"

"I had a device. A device with which I could travel between the loops. You must have seen how I used it, right?"

Immediately, Shinji put two and two together - "That light! And this thing you were wearing, the one that looked like a plugsuit with the big yellow buttons! You always disappeared so quickly... so it’s not only a time machine, but also a teleport?"

"A time machine is always a teleport." Explained Yui. "This planet isn't really always in the same place..."

"But if... if you had a time machine, why didn't you stop the angels from attacking at all? Why didn't you... I don't know, send back an Evangelion at the time of the Second Impact to get rid of the First Angel before it exploded to begin with?"

Yui shook her head. "I'm afraid that’s out of the question. Some physicist, I don't know his exact name anymore, apparently proved a while ago that time travel is something you would always need negative energy for... That's something that's theoretically possible according to our understanding of physics, but beyond our current technology to create... That I can travel around at all is due to the particular geometry of a time loop - some factor gets canceled out in the equation, or that’s what Dr. Akagi said. I wish I could give you a better answer, but I'm not a physicist... I can only tell you what Dr. Akagi told me. As far as I understand it, I am limited to the time loop itself, and I can only ever travel forward, except when I jump from one loop to the next – if I were to go back right now, this iteration would be overwritten.

For you it may have been days between our conversations, but for me they happened each happened one soon after the other. Or at least... that’s how it was for our first couple of conversations. The machine no longer exists. It was destroyed. This is my last chance, so to speak..."

Shinji swallowed.

Crap, wrong choice of words, Yui concluded, quick to change the subject:

"In our iteration... there was a rare element that probably only appeared in a very small number of iterations. I haven't seen it anywhere except in my own world, and it's very unlikely that it exists here. But in my world... we found something that was left to us by the creators of both angels and humans, created by beings who could be called gods from the point of view of us and the angels... You've surely heard the legends in any of their infinite variations, scattered in the hearts of people... many told stories of a legendary magical land in the far north, somewhere in the Atlantic
Ocean, others suspected the lost El Dorado of bygone times in the Indian Ocean or Pacific and called it "Lemuria", or "Mu" and again others told of a utopian city sunk in the sea, along with its power and lost technology that has disappeared in the sands of time... Perhaps the most familiar to you might be the stories about the legendary paradise of Shamballa, or the Garden of Eden, from which we have since been banished... In the legends of the West it was known as the lost continent, under names like Sannikov-Land, Weltaba, Ys or Thule, Vineta or Atlantis...

"Atlantis?!"

Everything else might have been complicated words, half of which he couldn't place, and even this word he knew only from wild conspiracy theories and antique-styled mystery films, but the naming of the old legend did not fail to have its effect – the sheer weight of the archetype, the omnipresence of the name in art and cultural works would probably not have left anyone with access to contemporary international culture unimpressed, or free of emotion, or a sense of being in the presence of something bigger than themselves, because even though Shinji had never really believed in such stories, he was a product of his environment, and his teacher had done his part to equip his ward with the basics of culture and general knowledge - it wasn't so much the story itself and its knitted fabric of easily refutable or otherwise explainable facts as it was the basic archetype: A radiant civilization whose spires towered far over the lands of the surrounding hunter-gatherers, for whom everything that surmounted a tree might as well reach up to the skies, proud of their own outstanding progress, diseased with more than enough hubris to spit in the face of the gods, and the terrible forces of nature which would ultimately return them to insignificance, to be forgotten by future generations.

Humanity most likely had a fixation on burning cities for as long as there had been cities; Shining Isles in the hostile mesh of forest, moor, desert and swamp in which the children of Man had scratched out something like her own halfway safe habitat, where their deeds and words would hold weight for long, where the lines had learned to be straight, and the angles had been forced to get used to adding up to 180 degrees or even form sharp-edged ninety degree corners.

That hadn't changed even today – there was a deeply felt, tense continuity, running through the collective unconscious, to the disaster films which Shinji could not stop quite stop watching even when he could well imagine what he might find himself pondering after observing one and a half hours of death and destruction in an epic format.

Tokyo-3 met all the criteria to quickly become such a lost city itself; nothing guaranteed that this whole chain of islands could not fall back into the sea from which they had emerged at any given moment; after all he had seen so far, it would not take much to make that happen, and Yui's impossible words did not make it much less likely:

"Not quite. We were afforded the privilege to get to the bottom of the origin of these stories, and we found it, immersed in the floods, but still very well preserved... The ruins of Arka.

There the creators left us knowledge, much more far-reaching knowledge than anything you could ever have gathered from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and thus an above-average understanding of our... cosmology."

"Dead Sea Scrolls?"

"All in good time... In any case, we found technology there. Technology that allowed us to build a device that allowed us to move between different time planes... for technical reasons, however, users of the travel device had to fit similar requirements as EVA pilots. So you couldn't send an adult like Captain Kasturagi, just me. “
"Then you were...

"Yes. An EVA pilot. But I doubt that any of the Evangelions in this world would synchronize with me - I myself am also a very, very rare element. That's probably why I was able to travel through so many alternative dimensions without messing up the causal nexus too much by meeting myself. I'm the First Child in my world. Instead of Rei Ayanami who, in turn, did not exist in my world – Or perhaps, it would be more correct to say that I am an alternative version of her, a... another possibility for her life. But as you can see, the similarities are limited..."

"But then... then... then this ‘father’ you were always talking about..."

He would later curse himself for not asking this question again and again if it was not one of those days when he thought it was better that he didn’t and hoped that he would never find out, or when he thought that he already knew the answer to the question, the question that was actually only a variation of something he had known before he knew about the time loop, yes, before the time loop itself, strange as it sounded now:

In all those infinite possibilities and variations, had there ever been any world, any parallel universe out there somewhere where Shinji and Gendo Ikari had been a family?

What finally came out of his mouth was something else:

"...is that... your, so... Ayanami’s father, who didn't die in your world, or... or otherwise got around to raising her - raising you, or are you talking about... your... or Rei’s... adopted... F-... guardian...?"

"Ikari Gendo."

The mathematician's answer.

And now Yuis burst into eerie silence, and it became apparent that the conversation had also affected her emotionally.

"I miss him so much..."

"Y-Yui-san..."

She smiled bitterly. "Yes... there exists a version of him in this world, another Ikari Gendo, who lives his days in this city... Actually nothing prevents me from going to him, but in this world... in this world I don't exist, he... he wouldn't know who I am at all, and he probably differs in many ways from the man I know in my world by that name ... He has another girl who is in my place, a girl who did not exist in my world, and it would really not be fair with her if ... if I claimed her place for myself...

The really crazy thing was: even though there were such adventurous things in her story as jumps between dimensions, he could only imagine too well how she must be feeling... He understood it so clearly that it hurt.

He didn’t know about other worlds, but regarding this world, its version of Ikari Gendo, and the place at his side – well, there was no such place left for Shinji, either.

"But..." And now, for the first time during the conversation, he turned around and looked Yui in the eyes, casually noting that she was dressed in a school uniform - and something in the depths of his skull, that idea rang true, even though the picture that presented itself to him showed her in a long dark skirt and a long-sleeved white blouse with a red ribbon on her collar – one would suppose that the design of the school uniform was probably also subject to fluctuations.
"But if... if every time loop erases the one before it, then... then you can... then you can never go back.

Not even... not even if you still had your time machine..."

Now it was Yui’s turn to hold back sobs, but still, she shook her head.

Again he realized how much Yui’s eyes resembled his own, not only in color, but in the half-mad glimmer that glittered in them sometimes.

"No... I haven't given up... It's... actually very possible that I can go back if the time loop is broken at all, even if it doesn't happen this time and I perish with this world... Maybe I'm lucky, and I’ll see them again – father, all the people I know, and my Shinji Ikari... Because the three goddesses of destiny at the foot of this particular world tree mouth work their endless possibilities with a very special kind of magic..."

"What... what are you saying...? I... I don't understand, I don't understand a bit of what you're saying!"

"The root cause of this time loop is a transcendent being that overcomes time. She can be at all times at the same time – that’s how she called home all the souls of this world... You yourself should have noticed by now that there must at least be one, if not two other beings who can remember, besides you... It seems as if they violate the laws of our world, but how much do we even know about these laws? Haven’t just we recently re-educated about its workings?

Quantum phenomena, Shinji."

"Quantum... phenomena...?"

(That called up another a picture, a bare, spartan room with colorful letters on the walls... -

ARTIFICIAL EVOLUTION LABORATORY, THIRD CROP -

STRANGENESS

TOP

BOTTOM

TiD²)

"You have surely heard of the uncertainty relation, of the fact that one cannot exactly determine the place and the impulse, thus mass and speed of subatomic particles, and therefore no fixed places can be assigned to them... further such pairs are frequency and duration of an oscillation, as well as time and energy...

(All these ghostly apparitions of silent blue-haired girls...)

That we cannot determine them, however, is not due to the imperfections of our measuring instruments, but to the fundamental randomness inherent to the nature of the world... One could therefore say that the particles have no specific location - if one had a completely specific location, the indeterminacy of the impulse would be infinite... This could also be seen as meaning that every particle in the universe can be at every location in this universe with a certain small probability, even if there are locations where it is much more likely to be encountered in the case of a measurement than at others. Surely you've heard of the double-slit experiment before?"
"This thing where you, uh, send light through two cracks... they kind of act like waves, and when you look at which crack they go through, they don't and you don't get that interference... pattern... thing? I'm... I'm pretty bad at physics, I just saw that in a documentary about space..."

The increasing helplessness apparent in the Third Child’s demeanor forced Yui to pull herself together again and refrain from clarifying details.

"Exactly...If you send macroscopic objects through two gaps, the impact pattern on the wall behind it is the sum of what you get if you close one of the gaps, but for objects that are small enough to be affected by quantum phenomena, there are places where fewer particles hit the interference pattern...

While this was more or less obvious in previous theories and understandings of reality, it is not quite obvious in this case which mathematical components are to be assigned to which real objects, whether such real counterparts exist at all, and what knowledge, if any, may be inferred from them - A particular sticking point is the wave function, which describes the state of a particle or an entire system - On the one hand, it can often have several, different states with different probabilities, on the other hand, in the end only one of these states is observed, for example, a radioactive atomic nucleus could have decayed... or not.

What is really happening is still hotly debated and there are numerous interpretations that ultimately have little bearings on the theory’s applications in science and technology and the like – They are by definition concerned with things that we will never observe, and in the end it probably boils down to mere semantics, a purely philosophical discussion... unless, of course, you happen to get yourself into a situation like ours... It is of course much more complicated in practice, though the fundamental question remains basically the same. There are two certain observations, point A, your arrival in Tokyo-3, and point B, Third Impact, but on the path from one to the other, there is almost infinite variation... The one you know is just one of them.

As I said, there are many theories about how to interpret such different possibilities - And most of them are just beginning to take decoherence effects into account, which can be explained without further assumptions from the basic equations of quantum mechanics - Essentially, decoherence means that for systems in which such interference phenomena occur, the larger they are, the easier it is to "disturb" them, so that they assume a certain state and behave macroscopically - it is still a big problem when working on quantum computers today... An "observation" does not always imply a man with a pen, it can be any kind of information exchange, interaction with the environment suffices. As things stand today, Schrödinger’s cat, for example, would not have to suffer for long - one could not isolate the box in which it sits to such an extent that the superposition state would last for a long time. It would still happen, but it wouldn’t last until someone took pity on the cat and opened the box."

"Yes, yes, yes, he's all complicated, I know that. Of course it's complicated... honestly, I don’t really care that much about understanding it, I just want to know what... but what’s happening. Please just tell me what's happening..."

The EVA pilot didn't even have to add the addendum 'without confusing me any more' - Yui knew him well enough to know that each of the thousands of horror scenarios he was probably imagining right now would surpass the truth in his cruelty and creativity – She knew ‘him’ though not necessarily the version of him that she was currently facing.

"Please..."

"Well, obviously, if we break out of the time loop... Time goes on. But that’s all we can know for certain..." Okay, she might need to aim for brevity here, judging by his facial expression (and also
by the way he had clung to the railing behind him with both hands) he had pretty much reached the edge of what he could stand.

She could see it all too well in his eyes, they seemed to scream: Please no more uncertainty! Okay then. The simplified version. In any case that would probably reduce the likelihood of her saying anything incorrect, it had been a good while since she’d listened to Dr. Akagi’s explications.

"As I said, the basic calculations and predictions are the same, so once you've broken out of the loop, you won't even be able to know what exactly happened, and you can live your future without care - from your perspective, all the possible outcomes would be be indistinguishable..."

"Yes, all well and good, but what happens now?"

"First there's the Bohm-De-Broglie theory. According to that, the particles are not only described by the wave function, but also by their individual lines of motion, so-called trajectories, which are only ‘guided’ by the wave function, hence the term ‘leading wave theory’. Essentially, some arithmetic can explain how the particles can follow certain paths and still form an interference pattern. This theory retains the determinism that a certain initial state can only produce a certain final state, which we can calculate. If this is true, the result is quite unspectacular: the iteration of the events during which the escape from the loop occurs becomes the unambiguous past of the point at which the escape occurs, and the future continues from there, essentially as we know it from the normal course of time. But..."

"But...?!

"This theory introduces, as already mentioned, hidden parameters, these trajectories. Information which we can never obtain and which has only been added arbitrarily so that the calculation makes sense... But every model which does not contain such a thing forces us to give up our understanding of reality... According to the Many-Worlds Interpretation, for example, all possible solutions become physical reality – But with every ‘measurement’, every decision new parallel universes bud off from each other...

"Parallel...Universes?"

"So if we observe, for example, that an atomic nucleus has decayed, there is another universe in which the corresponding observer could see an intact nucleus. So if this interpretation is right, it would be the best imaginable outcome for us... For you it will be as if time had gone on normally, and I will probably wake up in my own universe at the time when the time looping process would otherwise have begun, and the first things I see will be Dad and the other you... Of course, I sincerely hope for it, even if it is probably due to my wishful thinking to some extent - this interpretation with its countless universes is of course... ontologically extravagant...".

"There's another alternative.” It was not a question, but a statement, perhaps fished out of the structure of her explanation - his desire for more information, too, was no longer a question.

"The... Copenhagen interpretation. According to this, randomness is a fundamental part of nature, and which of the countless possible outcomes may be observed is decided only when an observation is made... When this happens, the wave function collapses, that is, the calculation is reduced to a single solution after interaction with whatever is used for measurement, and is undecided before that.

But this could also be taken in a different manner – instead of saying that there is no exact state between observations, we might also say that the superposition is all possible states at once, that rather than no path, all possible paths would be taken - that any end has not none, but all possible
histories before it. A certain Mr. Feynman once thought about it like this: If, for example, you have an interference pattern with minima and maxima in the double-slit experiment, some particles that would have landed in the minima if the other slit had been open land somewhere else - from this he concluded that the particles must have received information somewhere between the source they were sent and the detector – They must have interacted with the second slit, and been influenced by whether it was open or not... Hence the theory states that particles actually take all possible paths - if you finally make an observation, you get the "sum of the possibilities", even if in practice you actually calculate it with an integral and not with a sum. It is in itself comparable to a vector sum, since you can treat differentiable functions as vector spaces... whatever that means. It's what Doctor Akagi said. In any case, you can assign a wave phase to each path - similar ones amplify each other, different ones erase each other, so that the more exotic options usually don't have any effect when it comes to macroscopic objects...

So it may be that the past that the potential past led to the breaking of the time loop won’t be decided until the loop is actually broken, and when we look back, what we will remember will be such sum of possibilities."

Shinji's reaction was not a sudden shock, more a gradual widening of his eyes and a continuous dwindling of the color in his face - all the implications took a while to gradually reveal themselves to his overstrained mind.

"But then... that means even... even if I... even if I... if I manage to prevent Third Impact, that is still no guarantee that... that the world as I know it will go on...? That all the people I care about will be there...? You might not be there, Yui!"

"Yes..." she admitted with a strange smile. "That's true, I might not be there. But you won't remember anything, so you won't suffer or feel guilty... and if I can help to end it all, my world and I will still be a part of the causal nexus... not a single world will be wasted, if only those memories help you escape, any version of you... because you are the epicentre.

No matter what happens to me, you'll be there. And as long as you're there, as long as some Ikari Shinji comes to live a happy future... I don't care what happens to me."

The Third Child was overwhelmed, but this time in a completely different sense.

"Yui... who are you?"

"I already told you that. Ichijou Yui, First Child from an alternative timeline."

"No. I don't mean that... Who are you... to me...? Who were you that other me you keep talking about... the one with the longer hair? Were you... friends...?"

Yui just smiled - genuinely, an honest, almost tender smile that wasn't at all ironic or delusional - That wasn't the only process that took place on her lips, for a moment he was sure she was tempted to say anything, but what it was, would at last keep to herself.

Instead, she changed the subject.

"Remember that first thing you said? About how the fight wasn't as I described it to you... I assumed from the evidence so far that this iteration follows the most frequent 17-angel sequence, but I was mistaken - The insubstantial angel which you fought last time was, as I said, a rare event - so we are in an ‘irregular’ iteration, so there are quite a lot of things that could happen from now on...".
"Thank you, but... can't you... tell me... exactly how the remaining fights are going to go, so I... I don't know, plan how I... how I'll stop it from going wrong?"

"I've tried that before... I've tried it many times, a few times I even involved Captain Katsuragi and the adults and..."

For example, I wasn't able to tell you about the Angel in time because I was caught - for the police officers of this city I was no different from some runaway child, but because there is of course no data about someone who doesn't exist and no parents to whom they could take me back, I was sent to a foster family, and they do their best everytime, but... for me the two of them are hardly real anymore.... It's possible that I'm even older than them by now, I don't know how old I am anymore, with every reset of the time loop my... appearance and so on is reset and... yes, everything is just... distant. That is why you are the one who can save this world, not me. If you knew from the beginning about the relationships you were going to form and how they were going to turn out, you would run the risk of taking them for granted, and sometimes painful experiences are necessary to learn... if you knew back then at Futagoyama that you would find Ayanami alive, would you have cried?

If you hadn’t, would she have responded to you as she did?"

"But... if I do everything right this time and... wipe out the angels, then... there will be no Third Impact and... everything will be fine?"

She couldn't do it.

Not when he looked at her with such helplessness and exhaustion, not when he clung to the possibility of a pleasant answer like a lifeline - Yui could not bring herself to tell him that the angels would be the least of his problems... not yet.

"Exactly." she lied. "The angels shouldn’t be so difficult to deal with as long as you manage to—... limit the damage..."

"The damage to what?"

To your pretty little head, she wanted to say, to that last little bit of light left in those midnight blue eyes, on that friendly smile... But instead she changed the subject again: "A wrong word in the wrong place can have big consequences... That's why I told the police my name was Yamaki Ryoko. I'm a grade below you... if I want to contact you... I'll do it at school... and one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"We were talking about the way Ayanami and what transpired between the two of you on the mountain, right?

Even if she ends up smiling and talking a whole lot more...don’t fall in love.

It will only end in tears."

---

It should be self-evident that he waited until Yui had gone - he didn't know her, he had no attachment to her, and until now, knew her only as the herald of misfortune, but even from the very few short conversations that had passed between them so far, he had gathered the impression that
he, or rather, his counterpart in her own time-loop, must have meant something to her...

So he didn't make her watch what happened next. He didn't wish for her to struggle with the guilt - after all, he knew only all too well how that felt.

However, as soon as he was certain that she must have descended down the stairs, his self-control was finally at an end: He did not so much fall to his knees as that he melted down to the ground like soft Frčh cheese after being left outside the fridge for a while, his legs laid out in an untidy heap like discarded clothes, his hands on the bars of the roof’s railing, bringing to mind a monkey in a cage.

Though he looked through the bars, he didn't see anything, too overloaded to record a single bit of information, clinging to the cool metal in the sweltering summer heat, though it didn't provide him with any sense of security either - he simply didn't have the time for the outside world at the moment, his entire 'processing capacity' was turned inwards, occupied with the feverish struggle to digest this latest revelation.

There weren't even tears or anger or panic; after that conversation he was just… well, 'burned out' came close to it, but he would have had to sleep and dream for a year and a day before the words inside him would have matured enough for him to describe that state and that knowledge in a way that truly did it justice.

If you was to be believed, it had been a very long time since he had first read that letter from his father. But if he looked back to that moment and thought it over, if he followed the string of his memories right up to his arrival in Tokyo-3, he was unable to make out a point of transition anywhere...

If he had truly traveled back in time, shouldn’t he have noticed somehow? Wouldn’t there at least have been at least some kind of distant hunch?

Now he knew, clear as day, that it wasn't just his imagination; That the worst nightmare he had dismissed as a distorted perception of his frayed nerves was in fact really, actually true...

( The world is wrong )

Or maybe he had imagined it after all, and this girl who had come out of nowhere only to confirm his crazy fantasies was also part of the delusion. Maybe it was just the pressure and his persistent fears of failure, or maybe, it wasn’t anything at all, and he was right about to wake up from his latest crazy dream any moment now.

Anything but this!!

He was willing to take anything for an explanation, as long as it would reverse the course of this black day.

If his brain were a computer and his soul its operating system, the screen would have turned blue just about now, displaying little but a message asking the user to restart the system.

The sheer magnitude of this revelation...

It would all be so, so much easier if only he could act as if none of this had ever happened, as if he never stumbled into it and had nothing to do with it, not one bit.

He didn't know in how far it was a result of simple old sleep deprivation, or how much of it was down to the shock, but he felt so tempted to just close his eyes and hope that when he finally woke
up, he would no longer know the faintest thing about what just transpired – The only reaction he was still capable of was a mixture of denial and lightheadedness.

He didn't want to know about this, didn't want to see it, didn't want to hear about it, didn't want to say anything about it, nothing at all! He didn't even want to think about it, he didn't even want to understand what it all meant, he didn't want to feel anything else than the cool metal rods in his hands and perhaps the sunlight on his skin... if only it weren’t for that one cloud blocking the path of the light, leading to a noticeable cooling of the spot he was standing on.

Oh, go somewhere else for a change, oh you dark clouds, come back some other day!

"Shinji?"

The boy had not heard anyone approaching nor had he been expecting anyone, and yet the first thing he consciously perceived once he finally looked up after god knows how long was Kensuke’s freckled face - The short military enthusiast was leaning against the same railing in front of which Shinji was sitting, facing him, with his usual relaxed smile on his lips, though it was clearly tinged with half-hidden concern.

"Are you okay? What are you doing up here? ...have you been here this whole time?"

This prompted the reactivation of various mental faculties, and in the presence of someone else who could have formed an opinion about it, Shinji once again became aware of more immediate surroundings in time and space, including his own less than presentable state and the fact that he had completely lost track of time... How late was it?

He hoped that there was still something left of the lunch break… and what did that matter anymore? His friend was not half a meter away, and yet, they now existed in separate worlds; The things they worried about no longer took place on the same scale...

Shinji couldn't find his words, didn't know where he had put them or what to do except maybe to claw his fingers into his uniform pants.

"What's the matter? Got some quarrel with Shikinami? She's been staring at you all day, as if she's about to get laser eyes and melt a hole in you!"

It wasn't that the Third Child had the need to be alone in this moment, or that he was unwilling to share what was on his mind – oh no, quite the contrary, being alone was just about the last thing he wanted now, as long as someone was there, someone real, he might still trust himself to know what’s real and what’s not... he wanted all those thoughts gone from his soul, and he was certain that if he ever voiced them, he would be reassured that none of it could be, but the problem was ‘how’. It all wanted out, it strained the seams of his mind but found no exit, it found no words, no language that his classmate would have understood.

"Oh... was she..." he began, deciding that answering the question was better than nothing - the question was a prompt, something he could hold on to. "I didn't... notice..." This answer only increased the evident concern in the freckled boys’s bespectacled eyes, especially since Asuka's murderous looks had been very obvious. Under normal circumstances, the downtrodden young EVA pilot in front of him had a tendency to be overly concerned with what others thought about him, even if it was the highly negligible opinion of his deranged flatmate.

Kensuke squatted down to be more or less at eye level with the Third Child.

"Now, let’s be honest for a sec... what’s going on? You've been pretty much... absent lately and
especially today, it’s worse than when you first moved here...

The freckled student realized that if he wanted to have something like a conversation, he would have to take care of it himself - nevertheless he remained relaxed in his tone of voice, hoping that it might rub off on the Third Child.

"Nagato’s been pretty much fearing the worst, even Touji noticed... The two of them democratically appointed me to see if I can get anything out of you..."

So far, however, he had not been very successful - the only thing he had achieved so far was a few short, cautious glances that would only confirm that the Third Child was at least actually listening to him, no matter how much his empty eyes seemed to be busy with something beyond the railing that only he could see...

The way he looked, Kensuke could almost believe that he could turn to him at any moment and announce that he saw dead people or something – and it took most of his restraint to keep his inner nerd back from saying that out loud... But a change of strategy couldn’t hurt anyway, so he tried a different approach:

"I saw this girl on the way here... we told you about her, the one we found injured on the street when we visited you because of the double angel thing... Apparently she's now attending our school... Hm... I guess that’s not as surprising as it would have been a week ago - I’ve heard that the city council is considering to move all remaining students in this city here - Apparently all the other schools are even emptier than ours, I guess we’ve been somewhat spared because many of our parents work at NERV... Though I guess there’s not that much to rejoice about, especially since I've also heard that all the people from our year are going to be divided up into class B and D...".

"Oh.. are they...?" This finally broke through the surface somewhere, but not for the reasons Kensuke had suspected - for Shinji, this comment on the special status of his own class fit quite well with Nagato's reflections, and reminded him again of that many, many things that were happening above his head without him understanding them... But he noticed their signs, he saw the discrepancies, and even when he didn't notice them, some prophetic dream was sure to rub them in his face.

Why...?

Why couldn't he just overlook everything, why-

"This girl... Yamaki is her name, I think. Was she up here?"

A quiet, delayed nod.

"Did you talk?"

"Yah..."

"What about, if I may ask? New member in your fan club of secret admirers?"

Ouch. If he wouldn't even start stuttering panickedly at the word 'secret admirer', the Third Child must be really distraught - Kensuke hadn't even expected anything much like an answer and rather thinking about what to say next when he finally heard his classmate's voice, just barely audible: "Schrödinger's cat... I think..."

"Aha. And? Is it alive or dead?"
"I... I don't know it's not like... like I understand that sort of thing..."

"It's okay, none of us are physics professors." Kensuke joked. "Of course, we all hope that the poor kitty is alive."

It wasn't much, but it was something.

Though it didn't last long and came to a standstill as soon as the young EVA pilot realized what he was doing, there was a smile, if not a half-suppressed laugh, if only as an instinctive reaction to the joke.

There was something about it, like this feeling one had when, after a long, feverish illness, one left the warm bed for the first time in a long while, exhausted, not yet quite strong enough, sensitive to the cool air of the outside world, but still on the way to recovery.

And what did you do once you had a fish on the hook? Pull in the line.

So there followed a simple gesture of support, a friendly hand placed on top of a shoulder and a gentle smile - it was probably more effective than it should have been according to all the rules of reason. In the end, man was probably just a simple creature whose body released certain substances according to certain stimuli, completely decoupled from the systems responsible for processing great abstract problems.

"So, come on. Class is going to start without us if we dilly-dally around here for much longer. Touji agreed to give us an alibi if worst comes to worst, but I'm not so sure that the class rep is going to believe him." Kensuke said, straightening up and rising to his feet - the Third Child hesitated to do the same.

"You... you don't have to do that, you... you're gonna get in trouble and all..."

"Well, hello there, that's what friends are for!" the freckled boy assured. "We can't get much more trouble than we did after barging in on your battle with the monster... so then, are you ready to go?"

Shinji didn't answer, but after briefly propping himself up on the railing, he stood up straight again, thus announcing his intention to go with Kensuke.

"And just so you know, if you want to talk later, I'm all ears, yeah? Or go to Touji or Nagato if you prefer. We're there for you, yeah? And if it really is because of Shikinami, don't worry - dogs that bark don't bite and hot-headed people are rarely the sort to keep grudges. She'll be over it before you know it."

---

Back in the classroom, the two boys were immediately greeted by Touji waving to them from Nagato's table - the owner of said table was still in his chair, turning around, and taking note of their arrival as a positive event, even though his body language was somewhat more subtle than Toujis.

The two, as Shinji quickly realized, were busy talking about this upcoming career orientation event,

*(unaware that very soon, they would all be-)*

The Third Child felt reminded of that conversation he’d had with Misato, the one about the future.
(...and even before he had (accepted) his present knowledge, it had only reminded him of the uncertainty and purposelessness of his existence.)

Therefore, he did not follow the conversation as closely as he would have owed to his friends.

(A few benches down, Rei’s desk was still unoccupied. Or would it be more correct to say that it was unoccupied again? If she had eaten lunch at any time, then she must have done it while he was on the roof.)

"...Wasn't it, Shinji?"

"Huh?"

"I said this might be a nice opportunity to introduce you all to our parents." Repeated Kensuke. "Touji’s old man already knows me, because we've been hanging out since elementary school, but I haven’t really had a chance to introduce him to the rest of you..."

"They're all busy with their work, there's nothing you can do about it. Money doesn’t grow on trees..." Touji added. "And if you're honest, you're pretty glad to have your flat all to yourself all the time, aren't you, Kensuke?"

"That's true. But as soon as you mention the word ‘school’, suddenly there’s a free slot in his shedule."

"Well, that's different." Nagato argued. "It's about your future, after all..."

"For my part, I'm coming mostly to see what sort of divine outfit Misato-san will be wearing this time." commented the tall, tracksuit-wearing boy. Judging by his grin, he was mainly looking forward to the neckline of said outfit.

Having maneuvered all the little metal balls into the little depressions intended for them by skillfully tilting the plastic cube in his hand, he shook it vigorously so that he might start once again.

"Have you thought about career counseling yourself?"

"Actually, I’m only going because it's a mandatory event." Kensuke replied. "I already know what I want to be."

"Really...?" Shinji asked, in order to participate somehow - otherwise he had nothing to contribute to the conversation, no family he could introduce to anyone, no real dreams for the future.

"I want to join the military, of course! If the biomechanical combat machine doesn't work out, a fighter jet is the next best thing," he announced, giving his best impression of a machine gun: "Dakkadakkadakkadakka!

They really should have expected that - Typical Kensuke, head in the clouds!

"But my old man thinks I should find a boring ‘real’ job and go to college."

"He wants you to have a safe, financially secure life and not die in some war," Nagato commented. On the whole, he agreed with Kensuke’s father. "There are majors besides law or MBA. How about computer science? You're good with computers, aren't you?"

"What's the point of getting to grow old and wrinkly if you never experience anything on your life?
You almost sound like the class representative!"

"By the way, she’s thinking about becoming a kindergarten teacher from what I’ve heard..." Touji mentioned. "I already feel sorry for those poor toddlers."

"I don't know..." Nagato replied. "I could actually imagine how Horaki-san might be very suited for such a profession..."

"I guess she’d finally graduate from teacher’s pet to teacher” Touji replied, not entirely without sarcasm. "So how about you, Nagato?"

The black-haired boy was noticeably more hesitant with his own answer, at first taking the time to move ball number three in his puzzle to the designated place, as if he wanted to waste some time with it, even if he gave up when his attempts instead led to balls one and two rolling freely again the little Labhyrinth in the plastic cube again. ".My father would of course like it the most if I became a computer technician after his example, but..."

"But you have something else in mind?" Touji asked.

"Not... not really..." Nagato replied, not as if he didn’t have an answer, but like he very much had one, but also had a reason to be reluctant to disclose it – and neither Touji nor Kensuke missed this.

"Come on, tell us!"

"Yes, exactly!" Kensuke agreed.

"Come on, say something, Shinji!"

He had almost feared that Touji would say something like this - he meant it well, and under other circumstances he would probably have joined in in encouraging Nagato to share his thoughts, knowing well what it was like when some important realization was pushing its way to the outer world out of its own nature, but got stuck to your tongue because you doubted if anyone on this planet could possibly want to hear it -

But the truth was that this was just about the last conversation that Shinji wanted to be having right now.

Maybe he could have borne Kensuke’s idle daydreams, for they were easily swished aside like vague shapes of smoke, but then came Nagato with his much more reasonable suggestion, and suddenly there was a crystal clear, colorful picture of a bright future in his mind - Kensuke as a computer scientist or programmer? Now that was something he could imagine much more easily. Lsame with the class president as a teacher, surrounded by smiling little children who would never be born - And knowing Nagato, his dream was sure to be something very reasonable and realistic, and most reasonable, realistic things would surely open to a citizen of a modern industrial nation with grades like his, so that the image of it would be sure to emerge brightly and radiantly in his mind's eye – only to be swallowed up by the flames of the Third Impact.

A wasteland, blood-red, with huge EVA-shaped monoliths and a gigantic feminine corpse decomposing in the background-

He didn't know how to answer, and Touji didn't press him either, since it was Nagato whom he wanted to squeeze for answers at this moment.

Shinji had thought to find comfort in his pleasures, if only of the simplest kind, simple distraction, incentives to think of something else, but instead their carefree words of a future that would never
come drove the thorns deeper into the flesh; That Kensuke would likely never have become a decorated officer would not have been a surprise, but that wasn't the point, he wouldn't become a computer scientist either, and neither was the class president going to become a teacher either – that opportunity had been taken from them by none other than him, through his own personal failure... What Kensuke had said was true: They had been there for him, they did their part, insofar as far as they could, but he hadn't done his, wouldn't do his, and that left him with a loneliness as deep as if the reverse were true.

Touji and Kensuke alternately made increasingly absurd attempts to guess what Nagato's 'secret dream job' might be, which he denied in an increasingly flustered manner once their guesses began to contain pink tutus as an explanation as to why the elder Mitsurugi might be against them, until the two of them finally had mercy on him and let it go...

Shinji might just as well have been miles away from it all, and at the same time he couldn’t get far enough to escape the mirror of his guilt -

He didn't get to be so lucky, he didn't deserve it, and in the end the three of them turned towards him, still smiling ignorantly (like Valkyries about to descend from the clouds), coming at him with that accursed questions - He believed that it was Touji who asked it first: "But in earnest, what are your plans, Shinji?"

Then Kensuke joined in. "Yeah! Admittedly you already got us all beat in terms of dream jobs before you even finished school, but it would be cool to know which paths our celebrated Third Child will take after the Earth is finally safe - even if I could well imagine that everything else would just seem pretty boring to you afterwards… What could possibly match up to saving the earth?" Kensuke only laughed, although Nagato found the whole thing somewhat less exhilarating and instead spoke in a slightly accusatory tone. "But Shinji's work is also very, very dangerous, Kensuke... Once this is all over, we'll probably be very glad to have our peace again... If we should be so fortunate."

Touji mostly agreed with Nagato, but had given up on trying to convince Kensuke a long time ago – "Peace is no good if you can't enjoy it." He then ended this section of the discussion as diplomatically as possible. "It's quite possible that Shinji might not have to work at all... How about it?" he asked jokingly, now addressing Third Child directly. "You could sell the rights to your biography to Hollywood and retire to a tropical island with the proceeds and the money from NERV! Just don't forget to invite us every now and then so that we can keep you company!"

Images.

Of a future that would never be, and of a deceptively radiant present.

"I..."

Already, he could hardly believe that this conversation was even taking place (like how many times before?), it was all so far away, far away from the world whose falseness he had not been able to see through until this day.

(How many times had they had this conversation, and how long had it been since he first became aware of this irony...?)

"I..."

He didn't manage to look them further in the eye - it was quite possible that, from their perspective, it might have looked as if he was simply embarrassed.
"I... I guess I... I don't... I haven’t really thought about it yet..."

He probably would have said something like that yesterday, before this revelation: It was true, he had no idea – Besides, he was probably not the kind of person that one would expect to have a fully-formed idea of the future, so it was hardly surprising that his friends didn't find this answer suspicious in any way and didn't push him for answers.

"Don't worry about it..." Touji added, fairly chill about the lack of response. "To be honest, I haven't really got a clue either, but that's what this stupid event is all about. People always say that you should start thinking about your future as early as possible, but we're still young, and once we're old and grey, all the money we earn with our jobs isn’t going to make us young again...

The future is far from certain, isn't it, Shinji?"

Just yesterday that would have been enough to lift his spirits and lead him to thank the heavens for gifting him someone like Touji as his best friend - but today, these words could hardly make a difference.

Nothing any of the three could have said or known would have been able to change the situation for the better or even for the worse - the abyss, the difference between his knowledge and their perspectives simply could not be overcome.

(1) So yeah. The cat’s out of the bag, or the box, as it were. Note that Yui is downplaying both Ikaris’ involvements in the doomsday proceedings – that’s on purpose. He’s certainly recalling a vague sense of guilt but at this point he still thinks that he simply failed to stop an angel.

(2) Some of you guessed ‘Lillith’ pretty much from the beginning, and also speculated as to her motivations… good job! Though I have always believed that great reveals should not come out of nowhere. Of course at this point Shinji doesn’t think of “Lillith” as something (let alone someone) who would require a motivation… She and Rei tend to get very ‘plot-devicey’ roles in FF don’t they? How about an arc folks? Or at least the attempt at one.

(3) I decided from the beginning that Shinji was going to take the big reveal very badly and need a good-sized storyarc to deal with and come to grips with the news because it seems realistic – Of course it depends on what exactly you want to explore with your story there’s never a ‘one true way’ for anything (especially in art) and I have always believed that everything can be made to work by a good enough writer, but particularly in the ‘vision during the Leliel fiasco’ type of loop stories it seems like the transition often goes too smoothly. In the infamous re-take he acts on it immediately even when he still kinda believes that it’s just dreams – ppl don’t act that way and having a dream or anything else you typically read as ‘unreal’ suddenly come true would screw with anyone. I mean Shinji’s always going on about how he’s not cut out for the job and how he will certainly lose, nay, already lost.

Yeah, he sort of got a chance to make everything alright but it still all depends on him, more than before since he’s almost the only one who knows – that’s more pressure, not less. If he were great at taking chances he wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with, this is exactly the sort of situation where he would tend to panic and catastrophize.
The one time I’ve seen the designated time traveler actually react to the situation itself is this one fic where Asuka’s the one sent back and she nearly blows her cover several times, including right on arrival, both from the sheer unreal shock of being sent back and the scars left by the events of EoE and about a year of post-apocalyptic survival… (the one with the wolves, in case you read it, cant think of the title rn)

That said, I guess this ended up becoming a bit of a metaphor for my struggle with compulsive procrastination and general feelings of being stuck in life around age twenty. Sigh. I also probably mucked up the pacing which I have sought to correct since I got a review like twelve chapters from now but I can only correct this so much at this point. Still, thanks for your enduring patience and support!

(4) The ruins of Arka are a nebulously mentioned location from the ‘proposal’, probably a Nadia-esque ancient ruin – As most of you already know a lot of the ‘alternate’ scenarios described herein are inspired by other entries in the franchise such as the Manga and all manner of ‘unused scenes and concepts’ from all over the franchise.

(5) Looking at this now, I fear that the technobabble is no longer up to my standards and that for all of my token efforts to sufficiently imply motivations and a journey Yui comes off as an exposition fairy, not sure if I struck the right balance between making her a novel character, a counterpart that doesn’t need extra description because she’s essentially an offshoot of something familiar, and an alternate possibility (of what a fully human Rei might be like, or a version of Shinji that was raised as a pilot) – if I could do this all over again I would probably tweak her backstory somewhat in a way that I can no longer do without retcon. But I guess the price that we pay for improvement is to realize how much we used to suck. It’s surely better that crying for your glory days

(6) What I still really like, and turned out to be my favorite bit of this even after having spent much time looking forward to dropping the explanation, is the rooftop scene with Kensuke. Though he wasn’t always the most tactful, Kensuke is actually a pretty great and insightful friend at times. I remember thinking right after ep 4 that ‘This dude is probably going to be my favorite character’ (Perhaps since I am also an embarrassing nerd with no filter), but then of course the very next one was ep 5… XD But though he can’t quite match Rei, Kaworu and Mari, Kensuke will always have a special place in my heart.

(7) This fic will resume in chapter 2.24: [Maintenance of Heart and Soul], in which Shinji gazes upon a changed world in which everything still looks the same.

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