Neon Metathesis Evangelion

by Octo8

Summary

Starting after Shamshel/Episode 4, angels arrive in a different chronological order than in canon, as do certain other events. In the midst of all this, Shinji, Asuka and Rei form bonds to each other, that will eventually result in romance. Promised ;) But of course, even so angels screw things up, SEELE keeps plotting and Gendo advances his scenario.
NERV Headquarters was huge. No, it was actually positively megalomaniac.

Shinji had no idea how anyone could have use for so much space. It was not enough that NERV had created an entire geofront beneath Tokyo-3. The facilities inside and below that geofront seemed to stretch for several kilometres. And there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to how they were arranged. The surface of the geofront was a nice woodland areal that could have provided enough space for several buildings, each dedicated to a specific task. Instead, NERV HQ had ended up as a veritable maze of train lines, rooms and corridors. And escalators. Lots and lots of giant escalators.

Shinji did feel a bit intimitated by the surroundings: A room that seemed to be large enough to house the entire apartment complex he and Misato was using, and a ludicrously large escalator running right through it, at its centre at least a hundred metre removed from any wall, ground or ceiling. But as usual, the vaguely suppressive feeling did not really reach him. He had to report in for synch and combat training, so that was what he would be doing.

His bored gaze got steady when he saw a person at the end of escalator. Misato seemed to be waiting for him.

“There you are, Shinji,” the Captain greeted him. “Sorry for letting you come here on your own. Ristuko wanted to brief me.”

“Brief you?” Shinji echoed.

“They finally got Unit 00 functional again,” Misato explained. “So I’ve scheduled joint combat training between you and Rei today.”

“Already?” Shinji asked. “She only got rid of her last bandages a few days ago.”

“You two need to be able to work together ASAP,” Misato answered. “There's no telling when the next angel will arrive.”

That made Shinji turn his gaze strictly forward again, and a scowl appeared on his face. The next angel. It was not something he was looking forward to.

Misato seemed to sense his mood. A mischievous grin appeared on her face when she asked in an all too innocent voice: “ Aren't you glad for the chance to be working with Rei?”

Shinji had only lived with his new guardian for a few weeks, but he could already guess what would come now. He sounded too petulant even for his own taste when he answered: “What do you mean?”

“You entered EVA-01 when you saw how injured she was,” Misato recalled. “The knight in shining armour getting up on his horse to save the fair maiden. You know, traditionally chivalry should be rewarded with a kiss.”

This was exactly what Shinji had expected, and yet he still got annoyed. Or flustered. Whatever. “It wasn't like that! You know that!” He paused, but before Misato could speak up again he continued
darkly: “It was much more serious than that.”

That seemed to make Misato reconsider. “Yes, it was,” she finally said in a serious tone. “But it still was a very noble thing for you to do.”

Shinji did not know how to respond to that. He knew full well of himself how much he longed for such words of praise and acknowledgement. Misato seemed to have made it a habit to casually mention now and then how his decision to pilot was the right and noble one, or how he had saved the city on two occasions. Even so, Shinji still never knew how to react to that. So as so often, he simply remained quiet.

He actually ran into Ayanami before the tests and training began, right outside the locker rooms. She was walking straight to the female one, without even so much as looking at him.

Before she could reach the door, Shinji spoke up: “So, uh... do you feel ready for the training?”

“I foresee no problems,” Ayanami simply answered.

“Say, didn't you get those injuries in a test with Unit 00?” Shinji asked. “Aren't you at least a bit afraid of entering that EVA again?”

“No,” Ayanami replied. Despite the shortness of the answer it did not sound curt. In fact, nearly everything she said sounded incredibly soft.

“Uh, if you say so....” Shinji commented. He was confused.

Ayanami finally came to a stop, right in front of the door to her locker room. Without turning around she asked: “Aren't you Commander Ikari's son?”

“Uh, yeah...” Shinji answered unsurely.

Not that I like that fact.

“Then you should have faith in your own father's work,” Rei stated.

Shinji just scoffed at that and entered his own locker room. He did not want to be rude towards Rei, but his father was a hot button topic with him.

The first two hours of activities consisted of nothing else but synch tests. The test room was occupied by EVA-00, so all Shinji could do was to sit in his entry plug and try to concentrate. Again and again and again. Synch tests were alright, actually, since they required basically no effort. But two hours of them could become very long, especially as nearly nobody spoke to him. Only Misato made a comment now and then.

He hoped the reactivation of EVA-00 would go smoothly. As much as he was confused by Ayanami, he did not wish harm on her. It seemed the girl had suffered enough due to the EVAs already, as proven by the bandages she had worn to school for several weeks. *Due to Father's EVA program... and yet she says I should have faith in him. Yeah, that'll be the day.*

There were no bad news coming his way, though, and finally he could leave the entry plug. Dr Akagi told him that the reactivation of EVA-00 had happened without a single glitch; in fact she seemed a little surprised by that herself. For now the unit would be left in the test room. Since it was too small to accommodate two EVAs, Shinji and his unit would be added by VR, just as the training simulation was. After two hours, Shinji and Ayanami would change places, with EVA-01
then in the test room.

The fights themselves, simulated retellings of the attacks by Sachiel and Shahamshel, were easy enough. Both Shinji and Ayanami simply followed Misato's commands. This was Virtual Reality, and Shinji knew so. There was no emotional investment here. There really only was rote and routine, and it seemed to be the same for Ayanami. Both EVAs, no matter which one was the virtual one and which the real one, showed little to none initiative.

That was expected. What was more surprising was Ayanami's general behaviour. Even during the simulations, her acknowledgement of orders and status reports did not waste one word too many, and outside the simulations, in pauses when the virtual environment was rearranged or when Dr Akagi would take her time to analyse the sensor and machine readings, Ayanami did not say anything at all. When pushed, she would finally answer with pure “Yes” and “No” answers, but Shinji really was not a person to push, so he gave it up after a single try.

*It's odd. Does she hold my earlier rudeness against me?* That would be one lengthy grudge over such a small thing.

After the training, Shinji ran into Ayanami again, after both had showered and dressed.

“Uh, I think we did well...”

Ayanami did not answer.

The two walked a few steps before Shinji tried anew: “I'm glad you didn't experience any problems in Unit 00.”

No response.

They had reached the long escalator when Shinji said: “I just hope we won't need to use this training any time soon. Hopefully the next angel will take some time before attacking.”

When Ayanami remained silent again, Shinji thought it best to give up. However, she eventually did speak, if with nearly a minute of delay: “You could have left. I could have piloted Unit 01.”

Shinji really did not know how to respond to that.

Misato waited for Shinji at the bottom of the escalator. Without acknowledging either of the two, Ayanami just turned around and walked away. Shinji watched her leaving.

His confusion must have been written plainly in his face. “Girl trouble?” Misato teased.

“Say, Misato, for how long have you known Ayanami?” Shinji asked.

“Since the first activation tests of EVA-00,” the Captain answered. “Which were about a year ago. Why?”

“She is... odd,” Shinji judged. “She hardly spoke a word during the training. And now she told me I could have left, as she could pilot my EVA.”

“That's just the way she is,” Misato explained. “I doubt you could fill much more than a A4 sheet of paper with all the words she has said to me, ever. I don't think she was hostile to you. Knowing
her, she probably even meant that in a friendly way – you're free to go, she'll cover for you. Though, knowing her, she could have meant it in all kinds of ways.” She looked in the direction into which Ayanami had gone and frowned. “Communicating with her is difficult.”

“I see,” Shinji muttered. That was not a very difficult concept for him to comprehend. Communicating with anyone was difficult for him.

By and large, Shinji’s life so far had been dominated by grey, dull monotony. He was living day to day, with little conception of or care for the future, and there was little that reached him emotionally. That did not mean he had entirely lost the ability to marvel, though. First seeing the Geofront, or seeing the buildings of Tokyo-3 literally rise into evening sky, those had been marvellous moments. And right now, he was able to enjoy his helicopter trip, no matter how suddenly he had been called to it. He had never seen urban areas, like Tokyo-3, or various fields and woodlands now, from such an angle.

He had assumed today would be just another school day, but he had been wrong. Instead of driving him to school, Misato had brought him to NERV Headquarters, where they had entered a helicopter belonging to the organization. The only drawback was how cramped it was. No less than four armed people, all of them dressed in light beige uniforms and red berets were besides him and the Captain. There was no doubt that this was not a joy ride; this was a military helicopter taking them to a military operation.

Shinji did a double take when he saw two giant statues in an otherwise empty woodland, one of them orange and one of them purple. Not statues, but Evangelion Units 00 and 01. EVA-00 was covered in scaffolds. And around them, a makeshift camp of containers and plane tents. It was there that the helicopters landed. Misato disembarked even before the copter had fully reached the ground. She did not even duck under the still roaring rotors. By contrast, Shinji waited until those had mostly died down.

He was surprised to see Dr Akagi and Ayanami waiting for them at the landing field, even though Unit 00's presence should have given him a hint.

“Ah, hello,” he greeted them, then looked at the blue-haired girl. “You're here, too, Ayanami?”

Instead of the girl, Misato answered: “She came in in another helicopter. Security rules. I had to push to be allowed into the same one as you, Shinji. NERV gets nervous when all its eggs are in the same basket.”

Shinji turned to her. “So I assume we are here to pilot our EVAs?”

Misato nodded. “I'm sorry about not having told you any details. Again, operational security. We can't afford any leaks. Come along.”

The group entered a nearby long, white tent. Inside, electronic devices had been installed in a very unorderly fashion, surrounded by mazes of cable. Dr Akagi led them to a monitor. Shinji could not quite recognize what it showed. The thing on the monitor looked like a weird caricature of a human foetus, but the picture was held entirely in black and brown colour tones, so it was difficult to discern details.

“I'm sure your departure was a bit too sudden to notice any landmarks, Shinji,” Dr Akagi began,
“This is Mount Asama. As an active volcano, it is under constant geological observation. Some day ago, the monitoring station found something remarkable. NERV teams were sent to investigate. And they found this.” She used a pencil to point at the monitor. “This is an angel. Importantly, an angel not yet in its adult state. We assume it is a sort of chrysalis. I hope you understand what this means for us in term of opportunities. A not fully grown, live but dormant angel would be a perfect study object, to find out about the capabilities of our enemies.”

“So you want us to capture it,” Shinji concluded. He felt... resigned. Not sad, because he had not really expected anything better. He would do NERV's bidding again, simply because there was no one else to pilot Unit 01.

“Correct,” Dr Akagi confirmed. “Work teams are currently re-fitting Unit 00. Its D-Type equipment will be able to withstand the extreme pressures and temperatures inside the volcano.”

Ayanami nodded slightly. Even though Dr Akagi hardly seemed to notice her, it was apparently her briefing as well.

“What about me then?” Shinji asked.

“We currently don't have D-Type Equipment for Unit 01,” Dr Akagi explained. “Unit 00 was our prototype... the unit we used to test all this equipment. It is still under development for the other units.”

“Unit 01 will take up position outside the volcano, standing guard,” Misato picked up the explanation. “If the capture attempt fails, the angel must be destroyed. And... if it should manage to break out of the volcano, it will be your job to fight it.”

Shinji's brows furrowed as he looked to the side. If the angel kills Ayanami, they mean. Why are we...

He looked up and decided to ask the question: “But so far it's been dormant?”

“That's correct,” Dr Akagi simply confirmed.

“Then why risk this?” Shinji asked. “Why fight more angels than we need to fight?” He knew he sounded petulant, but he did not care.

“Shinji...” Misato began, but Dr Akagi showed less caution: “More angels will come. If we haven't used all opportunities to study specimen until then we will be at a disadvantage. You will be at a disadvantage fighting them.”

That was not something Shinji liked to hear, but Misato added another argument: “Besides, it's time we take the fight to them. Right now, that angel is just a pup. What will happen once it's fully grown? Do you think it will simply stay dormant then?”

Shinji just looked down and did not reply. They always find oh so good reasons. They don't really care if I understand or agree. They only care that I get into the EVA. Misato is wrong. It isn't 'we' who'll take the fight to the angel, it will be Ayanami. Not her.

He looked up again, at Ayanami. He was very sure she would never protest. Which meant that if he refused to pilot, she would be all alone in this. It always comes down to this, doesn't it? Ever since I arrived here.
Misato gave him a soft smile. “We established changing areas in the neighbouring tents. Your plugsuits are there. Get dressed. The operation starts in...” She took a look at her watch. “One hour, twelve minutes.”

'Changing areas' simply meant a separation by a thin tent plane. Shinji could still see Ayanami’s silhouette on the other side, something he became acutely aware of when he saw her removing her bra and her... Shinji looked down, his face flushing red. Fortunately, he was already in his plugsuit. He heard a familiar faint noise of air hissing from Ayanami’s area and looked up. Her plugsuit had tightened, matching to her figure perfectly. He grinned lopsidedly. *Not that this is much better...*

He felt the need to say something. Ayanami had gotten the dangerous part of this mission. It was possible she could die out there; he was after all the back up in case she did. But he could not ask her if she was afraid. That would most likely be as pointless as last time he had asked her that. Instead, he said softly: “Good luck out there, Ayanami.”

The girl did not respond. Not that Shinji would have expected her to. But as she turned, and before she could go, he added quietly: “I'll protect you.” He did not know where that came from, but it was important to him. He understood why Ayanami had gotten the dangerous part of the mission, he could even agree with the logic behind it, but he felt awful and even somewhat guilty at the idea of leaving her alone with an angel in the middle of an active volcano.

He had not been sure whether she would even hear him. He had spoken so quietly that these words had been more for his own benefit than hers. However, she replied: “That is not your assigned task”, and left.

Shinji was still mulling that over when he left the tent. Then all thoughts of that sort were pushed away and he just laughed.

Both EVAs were standing a bit further down the slope leading up the volcano. Unit 01 looked like it always had, the only unusual element a single wall of scaffolds at its side that would allow him to reach the entry plug. But Unit 00... Unit 00 was wearing a white deep sea diving suit. There was no other way to describe it. Its cyclopean head was even stuck inside a helmet.

Misato smirked when she saw Shinji laughing. Ayanami and Dr Akagi were standing next to her.

“Well then,” she said. “It's time. Ayanami?”

The girl nodded and pushed a button on her wrist. Again, Shinji started laughing.

*She looks like a balloon!*

Her plugsuit had suddenly become inflated, so that her body indeed looked nearly completely spherical, not dissimilar to how EVA-00 currently looked... *Which is probably the reason*, Shinji realized. Even so, it was quite funny.

Ayanami did not laugh. Dr Akagi did not laugh. Misato merely smirked, and she had an over-active sense of humour anyway.
Shinji stopped. His face reddened and he looked down. He barely managed to look at the blue-haired girl when he whispered: “Sorry.”

Ayanami tilted her head. “What for?”

The right side of Dr Akagi's mouth curled up, but the grin did not extent further than that. “Get into your unit, Rei.”

“Yes, Dr Akagi,” the girl confirmed.

“You as well, Shinji,” Misato told him.

Shinji nodded and turned around.

After his EVA had reached the edge of the caldera, he still had to wait nearly an hour for Unit 00 to get into place, whose movements had become much clumsier. A giant crane was suspended over the caldera, and Unit 00 was being connected to it. While this happened, Shinji saw some objects glittering in the sky. They were far too high to be birds, but too numerous to be normal passenger planes.

“What are those?” he asked the open comm channels.

“Air force contingents from the UN and the JSSDF,” Misato told him. “They are our second back-up line, after you.” She breathed out. “If the angel escapes the volcano, and if you fail to defeat it, then they're our last hope. They will carpet bomb the area with N2 mines.”

“But that means...” Shinji started to protest.

“Yes,” Misato answered gravely, “it does.”

Shinji made his right hand a fist. His face had become a grimace of anger. Of course. They force us to pilot those things, and will kill us if we fail.

He calmed down again. He should not have expected better of NERV. Please, Ayanami. You have to succeed...

EVA-00 was slowly being lowered into the caldera, clad in its special equipment and holding a giant force cage. The unit was absolutely motionless. Shinji tensely listened to the comms.

“Current Depth: 170. Speed of descent: 20”
“Switching to CT Monitor.” A pause. “Visibility no more than 120.”
“Depth is 400... 450... 500... 550... 600... 650...”
Finally: “900... 950... 1000... 1020... we're over the maximum safety depth.”

Shinji tensed further up. Over the safety maximum? He made a deep frown when he listened again: “Depth is 1300. Unit 00 has reached estimated target level.” The target level is below the maximum safety depth? That's part of the plan?

“No reactions detected,” Ayanami reported. Even in a situation like this her voice sounded soft and monotone.

“Understood,” Misato confirmed. “We're resuming descent.”
What? What is Misato doing?

“Depth is 1350... 1400... A crack has occurred in the second coolant pipe.”

Coolant pipes? Shinji took a look at the cables again. They were pipes all right. And if they're needed...

“Depth is 1480... we're over the allowed maximum depth.”

I swear, Misato, if she gets hurt...

“Maximum allowed depth plus 120... Unit 00 has lost its progressive knife... Maximum allowed depth plus 200... Depth 1780. Unit 00 has reached the corrected target depth.”

“Target object sighted,” Ayanami reported. Her calmness began to unnerve Shinji.

“Prepare to capture,” Misato ordered.

“Rei, due to the extreme lava currents around you, you will only have one chance to capture the target,” Dr Akagi added.

“Understood,” Ayanami confirmed.

“Electromagnetic cage spread. No problems detected.”

“Target captured,” Ayanami reported.

Shinji breathed out. He was feeling pure relief. In fact, he was feeling a bit dizzy now.

“Nice job, Rei,” Misato lauded her. “We're initiating the ascent.”

The rumbling of the cables in the opposite direction as before had a calming effect on Shinji. It seemed like all his fears had been misplaced. Fortunately. Maybe for once things would go better than he had expected.

Then the alarm signal blared

“What's happening?” he demanded to know.

“Movement in the cage,” Ayanami reported at the same time.

Shortly afterwards, Misato ordered: “Abort the capture! Jettison the cage! New mission priority: Destroying the angel.”

“Understood,” Ayanami confirmed. Now she sounded strained. “Cage successfully jettisoned. Angel is growing rapidly... the Angel has freed itself from the cage.”

“Unit 00, withdraw and prepare for combat!” Misato ordered.

“Unit 00 is without progressive knife,” Ayanami reminded her, now surprisingly calm again.
Misato wasted no second: “Shinji, release your knife into the volcano!”

Shinji did not just “release” it. He threw it into the caldera with all of his EVA's might.

He desperately wished he could get a glimpse of how the combat was going. Even more so he wished he could help Ayanami. But all he could do was to stand at the edge of the caldera, wait, and hope for the best.

“Contact with knife, 40 seconds. Angel is approaching rapidly.”

Shinji could hear pained grunts by Ayanami over the comms. He did not notice how his EVA formed fists.

“Knife received,” Ayanami reported. However, a while later: “Progressive knife seems to ineffective.”

*Damnit!*

Suddenly, Dr Akagi spoke up: “Rei, cut open coolant pipe 5, and target the angel with it. We're rerouting all coolant pressure to there. The thermal shock should be able to damage the angel.”

“Understood,” Ayanami answered. She sounded tense. An eternity later, which probably was only about one or two minutes in absolute time, she reported: “Angel seems to be disint... oh.”

Shinji heard the explanation for the “oh” instantly from the command centre: “Coolant pipes 1 and 2 ruptured. Coolant pipes 3 and 4 damaged. Amount of coolant pipe received by Unit 00 insufficient.”

“Estimated time of arrival topside for Unit 00?” Misato asked.

“One minute, ten seconds,” came the answer.

“The angel?” Misato inquired further.

“Destroyed, as far as we can tell. Visual sensors show a disintegration of its physical form, and we aren't picking up any code blue AT fields.”

Half a minute later: “Coolant pipe 3 ruptured. She... she's hanging in there on a single, half-destroyed cable.”

That was a rather unprofessional report, but Shinji could appreciate that. Or maybe he could have if he were conscious enough about it. As it was, his mind was tasked out by swinging between desperate hope and just despair.

“EVA-00 at 150... further ruptures in remaining pipe... 120... 80.... the pipe, it...”

Shinji had heard enough. Given the depths Unit 00 had been in, 80 metres was basically at the edge of the volcano, but if the cable ruptured for good it would not mean a damn how close the EVA and Ayanami had come. So EVA-01 climbed into the volcano.

“Shinji! What are you doing?” Misato shouted.
He ignored her. He was not acting entirely unreasonably. 80 metres, or maybe 100 if Unit 00 has already sunken in a bit, was just about two EVA lengths. And he had not jumped into the caldera; rather he was now climbing down the pipes.

It hurt. It hurt like hell. Unit 01 had no heat-resistant gear. Shinji was not literally boiling. He willed his AT field to become as strong as possible, and the standard EVA armour was nothing to sneeze at. But it still felt like various parts of his body constantly coming into contact with glowing hot metal.

But that was nothing compared to what Ayanami would feel if he were to fail.

He could barely open his eyes for all the pain, but there it was, Unit 00. Unit 01 stretched out its hand.

“EVA-00 at 150... further ruptures in remaining pipe... 120... 80.... the pipe, it... pipe ruptured!”

A mild shock went through Unit 00 as it was now completely freed from any force pulling it up. It was now lost in the middle of enormous amounts of lava.

*I completed my mission*, Rei thought. *That is what matters.* She did not fear death. She would welcome it, even. But instead, soon there would be another her. She looked around. *Red. I hate red.*

Then she saw something piercing through the red. Something dark. And in the midst of that dark... two slits, glowing up white. Unit 01’s face.

*They managed to improvise a rescue operation.*

Unit 00 grabbed Unit 01’s hand. The latter was hanging from what remained of the pipes and was now slowly crawling them up, Unit 00 in tow. Over the comms, Rei could hear pained grunts from Ikari.

*He doesn't have special equipment. But he had to do this. Unit 00 is too valuable to lose.*

Finally, Unit 01 was topside, and it managed to drag Unit 00 out of the volcano with one final act of strength. Then it collapsed on the ground.

Rei’s synchronization was severed, her entry plug ejected. Soon after, people came, a rescue team, and helped her outside. It really was unnecessary. Her special equipment had gotten some debilitating cuts from the angel, so that her right leg had been subject to some sympathetic pain, but it was nothing severe, and in terms of physical health she was fine. She could have left Unit 00 all on her own, she could even have it manoeuvred it back to the airlift to the Nerv HQ.

Outside the EVA, there were more people. NERV technicians, workers... Dr Akagi, Captain Katsuragi, Ikari. The Operations Director seemed agitated. She kept on talking to Shinji. The boy did not seem to care or even pay attention. His stance shifted now and then, but not in reaction to what Captain Katsuragi was saying. He winced.

*He's in pain*, Rei realized.

She could now hear what Katsuragi was telling him: “Please, Shinji. Pay attention to me. Look, I
won't say the pain is your own fault... you do deserve sympathy... but you did act recklessly, and..."

Ikari looked up and spotted Rei. His face lightened up. Without further paying notice to Katsuragi, he impulsively ran over. Rei still had time enough to wonder about his intent, when she suddenly felt surrounded on all sides by him. For some reason he had grabbed her and… hugged. He has hugged me. Rei's eyes widened. She was startled and surprised.

Nearly as quickly as he had started the hug, Ikari ended it and awkwardly retreated. He looked down as he did so. “Ah, sorry, Ayanami. I'm just glad you survived!”

Katsuragi grumbled, but it sounded benign. “Don't think you can escape this by sheer cuteness.” She began to sound more serious. “If we had lost both Evangelions… and what about yourself? We would have had no way to rescue you!”

“I hardly could leave Ayanami to die, could I?” Ikari countered. He was grumbling for real, speaking in a subdued but defiant voice.

Rei did not understand what the conversation was about. She was confused.

“But you can risk your own death?” Katsuragi asked rhetorically. “Or impose burning pains on you?”

“I'm becoming used to pain,” Ikari mumbled.

This finally motivated Rei to speak up: “Did Pilot Ikari not succeed in your rescue operation, Captain Katsuragi?”

The Operations Director turned her head around to her sharply, then her facial features softened. “It never was my rescue operation, Rei. It was his. When he heard about the last pipe rupturing, he stepped into the volcano on his own initiative.”

Rei nodded. It was good that Ikari, despite being so new to NERV, could appreciate the value of Unit 00. Maybe he should have waited for orders, but she could appreciate the rapidness of events might have made that infeasible.

“He wanted to save you,” Katsuragi continued.

Rei's eyes widened again. He looked to Ikari, who now looked a bit abashed... and still in pain, as he seemed to bite down hard on his teeth.

She tilted her head. “I do not understand.”

“I thought you at least would,” Ikari suddenly shouted. “Everyone questions me. But...” His voice got quieter. “I did say I'd protect you, didn't I?”

Rei looked in the faces of the people around him. Captain Katsuragi was as easy to read as a book. She seemed to be mostly motivated by her concern for Ikari. That concern was not something Rei understood, but that was okay: All in all, she understood little of the world, and she had no reason to understand more. Her purpose did not require it. Meanwhile, Dr Akagi's expression was blank and neutral, but Rei knew her: She was constantly observing everything.

She felt a deep urge within her to ask Ikari why protecting her was so important. She was
replaceable, after all. She also wanted to ask if this had anything to do with what she was feeling currently. As so many things about the aftermath of this operation, that confused her as well. It was not a physical sensation, but something *inside* her. Something that was both unsettling and yet... positive, in a strange way she could not articulate even within her thoughts.

But it would not do to ask him this here. She would have to approach him later.
Replacability

“Hey, Shinji. You can wake up now. Class is over.”

Shinji looked over his shoulder. Kensuke had called him. He and his inevitable companion at the next table, Touji, were just opening their lunch boxes.

“Come over,” Touji called him. “There’s a table free here.” As Shinji did so, he commented: “Jeez, man, you look rough. Misato keeping you up at night?”

Shinji smiled tolerantly. It would probably be too much to ask for his two friends to keep their minds out of the gutter. Not that Misato herself was much better, so he was getting used to such banter, even if he never participated in it himself.

“I...” he began, but then shook his head. “I can't tell,” he realized sadly. “NERV stuff. Classified.” He sat down and got his own lunch box out of his bag.

“Always with the NERV stuff,” Touji complained. By contrast, Kensuke's face became more attentive, but he remained quiet. Surprisingly seriously, Touji added: “Don't let them work you to death.” Another smile, faint and sad, appeared on Shinji's face. Touji was a real foot-in-mouth kind of guy. At least he rarely noticed his mistakes; that spared Shinji having to listen to his attempts at apologizing.

So he just nodded and looked away. After all, he could not tell his friends what was going on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ayanami. She had unpacked a small, thin book and was reading from it. She seemed to do that a lot in her free time. In fact, there was absolutely nothing different from normal about her. It was as if yesterday had never happened, as if she had never come so close to death. Shinji was baffled; he thought there had to be hints, that at least now she would have to show some signs of uneasiness or relief. But the whole day, there had been nothing. As always, Ayanami sat alone; she always seemed to create her own personal personal field of solitude around her.

She never seemed to care about that, either, though. Shinji could understand: Solitude could be relaxing, a protection from the stresses of having to deal with others. For years, he had been sufficiently content that way.

Touji grinned and leaned over to him. Quietly yet provocatively he asked: “What's up with you? Doesn't care a bit about Misato's... attributes, but as soon as he sees some exotic hair...”

Shinji sighed. “I'm just wondering...” He stopped. “Would you believe if I told you that's something under NERV classification as well?”

“It's a convenient excuse, I give you that,” Kensuke answered. “Is the reason Ayanami keeps looking over to you classified as well?”

“Wh-what?” Shinji asked. He managed to not quite blurt it out.

“How can anyone be so inattentive!” Touji declared loudly. Some people looked; Ayanami did not. He shook his head and, now in a more subdued volume, almost hissed: “It's rare enough she pays attention to anything inside the classroom.”
Shinji nearly rolled his eyes at the usual theatricals of his friends. They were not as bad as some. Some of his classmates, mostly the girls but some boys as well, seemed to positively sustain themselves on gossip, and relationship gossip was the most sought after kind. So people would deduce relationships, whether they really existed or not, from the smallest hints. Shinji himself kept entirely out of this game. For that matter, so did Touji and Kensuke, usually, but they were always on the lookout for stuff to tease each other with, or Shinji.

And indeed Kensuke commented drily, without looking up from his food: “The same's true for you.”

“That's not true,” Touji almost snorted. “I look at uh....” Kensuke just grinned. “Well, at least I don't spend the whole class looking at online pics of battleships!”

“Warships,” Kensuke corrected. “Of the U.N. Pacific Fleet. It's big news on the forums I go to; the U.N. had sent them half way around the world, to Europe, and they're only returning now. Nobody knows what they did there.” He looked around and almost whispered. “I bet it has to do with the Evangelions. They were in the North Sea. And NERV has a big facility at Hamburg, a major port there.”

“You always think it has to do with Evangelions,” Touji dismissed that idea.

“What else could it be?” Kensuke argued, now that his favourite topic had come up rather heatedly. “They didn't do any manoeuvres with the Germans or Brits. And that even though the Brits will soon launch a new compact carrier, their first new semi-capital ship since Second Impact, and the Germans have a new submarine class that...”

“Jeez, jeez, we get it!” Touji complained.

“Huh. I didn't even know NERV has facilities in Europe,” Shinji spoke up. Kensuke gave him his best 'You gotta be kidding me' look. He seemed too stunned by his friend's ignorance to try to lecture him.

Touji cleared his throat. Shinji looked at him. Touji had lowered his head, but he was clearly gazing at something. Shinji followed that view and saw Rei looking at them... or, more exactly, probably at him. And even now she held her gaze, which made him uneasy. It was not so much that he was looked at. Over the years, he had gotten pretty good at not caring about the outside world. Let them look at him, let them talk about him, let them laugh at him. But Rei's intense stare was something else altogether. He might have called it creepy, except... he did not really feel so. He felt a slight blush building up on his face.

Still keeping her gaze, Rei stored her book in her bag. Then she got up and walked away.

“That was... odd,” Shinji whispered.

“I'll say,” Touji added more forcefully. “You EVA pilots... Talk about weird!”

For Rei, the world was never quite fully there. Or maybe she was not. Except for some extraordinary events such as the first activation of EVA-00 or the recent battle, life just went on and on. She only kept enough attention to function sufficiently, never more than that. The world
was just not real to her. It had nothing to do with her purpose, and she also could not quite... get it. She felt out of place in it, as if there was a fundamental disconnect between her inside world and the outside world. So that world had just become a grey blur to her. It often felt like her surroundings were a flowing river, and she was trying to grip single pieces of water. Or not even trying anymore, in fact.

She was alienated from her surroundings... and considering her nature, a topic her thoughts avoided as much as possible, that was probably little wonder. It did not matter, though. She only existed for her purpose, her place in Commander Ikari's plan, and if she died before its fulfilment, she could be replaced. Her self-image had always rested on those two truths.

But why then had Pilot Ikari risked his life to save her?

This had upset the absolute certainties that framed her life. She knew she had a bond to him, of course. As much as she did not like to think about it, she had a bond to all people, to all humans. But this was not the same. This bond was not supposed to also work in the opposite direction. And for some reason, her thoughts had dwelt on that topic. It had not simply faded into the grey background noise of everyday life, like everything else did. She hoped it could be once a conversation with Ikari would clear up matters. With the proper explanation, his behaviour could finally be integrated into that background noise.

But this very perception of reality was what made her hesitate all day long. Ikari seemed always busy – occupied with class, with his friends, with eating. He was part of the flowing river, and Rei just could not push through all of this water. She could watch him, but she felt like she just was not part of what was going on around him, in an almost physical way not part of it.

It was during the last class of the day that she decided to act. She had barely ended the customary bow at the end of class before grabbing her bag, and she was the first student out of the classroom door. She did not run; she nearly never did. It was just that she did not waste any time with superfluous activities. She did not look around, did not greet people, did not mentally go through her belongings to make sure she had not forgotten anything. She simply left the school premises as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This was actually nothing uncommon. She was maybe a bit more determined to be quick today, but whenever she did not have cleaning duty, she would usually be the first to leave the school – there simply was not anything to hold her there. What was different was where she walked afterwards. It was in the direct opposite direction of her usual route.

Eventually, she stopped and waited. And a bit later, she saw Ikari walking towards her.

He had his head cast down and was listening to his SDAT player, so he only noticed her relatively late. He was surprised when he did and quickly pulled the plug out of his right ear. “Ayanami.”

She closed the remaining distance between them. “Ikari. I have a question for you.”

“A… isn't your apartment the other way?” Ikari wondered. Rei did not answer. That was not the point. After some hesitation, which he used to stop the SDAT player and pack the ear plugs away, Ikari finally continued: “Uh… well, okay. What is it?”

“Why did you enter the volcano?” Rei asked.

“You know that, Ayanami,” Ikari answered. “To save you.”
“Why?” Rei inquired further.

“I couldn’t simply let you die,” Ikari claimed.

“Why?” Rei pressed on.

Now Ikari started to sound irritated. “What do you mean, why? I don’t understand!”

Rei had thought the question to be perfectly straightforward. She paused, long enough for the conversation to nearly die down. Finally, she continued: “Why was it important for you that I did not die?”

Ikari became even more agitated. “I still don’t understand. Do you wish to die?”

“It is irrelevant,” Rei replied matter-of-factly.

This took Ikari completely aback. In fact, he literally walked a step backwards. “Irrelevant?”

“Yes,” Rei confirmed. “I am replaceable.”

She saw how Shinji’s right hand moved, alternately forming a fist and relaxing again. For a moment he seemed too overwhelmed to answer. Finally, he did. “…Replaceable. Why would you say that?” His voice got louder. “You shouldn’t say such things.”

“…I see,” Rei merely answered.

Then I won’t say it anymore.

Ikari was breathing heavily now. “Ayanami… he managed to press forth. He spoke carefully now, measuring every word. “If I had been in that volcano, and you standing guard, would you have saved me?”

“If I had been ordered to,” Rei confirmed.

“And if you hadn’t?” Ikari inquired. “Or if Misato had ordered you to stay away?”

Then I would not have. That was the truth, but… somehow Rei did not like this truth. She appreciated what Ikari had done, even though it had made little difference. With or without that action, there would still have been a Rei Ayanami. What was important was not that Ikari had allowed her to live, something that was ensured anyway, but that he had in fact protected her. The thought of her not doing the same for him filled her with a strange sort of disdain.

“At Mt Asama, I would have stayed away then,” she finally admitted.

“At Mt Asama…?” Shinji echoed.

“You said you would protect me,” Rei answered. “From now on, I will protect you.”

She did not know for sure what she meant by that, did not know what this would entail. The thought of not obeying orders was strange and uncomfortable to her. After all, the Scenario had to come first, always. Maybe there was nothing she could do to protect him. Yet, she had found it necessary to reassure him of this. And she did truly want to protect him, the way he had protected her.
Without a further comment she turned around, and walked back towards school. It was time to return to her apartment.

After the combat at the volcano, Shinji had wished a return to normalcy. More angels would come, of course, but maybe they would take their time. And in the meanwhile, he would be able to return to his usual state of not caring about most anything around him, not his surroundings, not his circumstances, not the people around him... even though he had to admit he had already come to care about more people here than at any other point in his young life as far as he could remember back. However, that peace of mind, that comforting daily routine, did not come. Right now, Shinji felt nearly as agitated as he had the day before, at Mt Asama.

*Replaceable? What does she mean by that?*

Shinji had accepted that he could die in EVA combat. Even now, despite all of Misato's protest, he did not consider that to be such a big deal after all. He was slowly beginning to consider that maybe it was, that maybe if he died others would after all mourn for him. But even in his worst state he would never have considered himself replaceable. Expendable, maybe, but even then his loss would have meant something, would leave behind a world changed at least microscopically by his death.

But replaceable? To think one's own death would have no impact at all? *Is that what they do to EVA pilots? Is that how an ideal EVA pilot looks to them?* He was coming around to the thought that maybe Misato did care about him as more than just a pilot for her war, as more than just a tool, but sometimes he still doubted, and he was pretty certain that was how his father saw him. *And Ayanami fulfils these expectations perfectly.*

A tinge of despair had come up inside him during the conversation. He hoped his final question had reached Ayanami. He had thought that presenting her with a reversal of roles would finally bring his point across to her. And maybe it had; she had promised to protect him, so maybe she could see why he would want to protect her. Oddly, even though it was just a promise, and despite the circumstances of it, that promise made him feel... comfortable. Ayanami spoke rarely, so when she did her words had weight.

But he had also promised to protect her. And he thought about that as he watched Ayanami leaving.

*I did promise that. Or told her, at least. I... I need to try, at least.*

He began running, after her.

“*Ayanami!*” he shouted.

The girl came to a halt, but did not turn around. Shinji used the time to slow down and catch his breath.

“*Ayanami… does that mean I also have to protect you from yourself?*” he asked.

Cicadas form a nearby park were chirping in the background.
“I don't understand,” Ayanami finally replied.

“I can't protect you if you don't even care to be protected,” Shinji told her.

Again, Ayanami was quiet for a long time. When she answered, it was a whisper, but Shinji could still hear it: “But I do.”

She walked on, leaving him behind.

Things still felt tense to Shinji the next day. He knew he should not make himself a target for his friends’ jokes, but he caught himself glancing over to Ayanami several times during classes. What she had told him simply unsettled him. It was not right that anyone should think of themselves in such a way. He wished he could do something to make her change her perception... but he knew fully well he certainly was not the person to do such a thing. Walking up to Ayanami and talking about serious topics with her? Him speaking about self-value? The thought alone was absurd.

As for the fellow EVA pilot herself, she seemed to be, once again, back to her normal self. He did not once catch her paying attention to him. That's probably the best way to deal with this all. Pretending it never happened. It was easy enough for Shinji to blend out his surroundings; over the years he had gotten quite skilled at it. He would easily be able to blend out a single conversation; to blend out Ayanami. He certainly managed to entirely ignore Touji's and Kensuke's teasing; at the end of the school day he could honestly not even recall what exactly they had said.

However, that strategy proved to be unworkable. For one thing, a blue-haired girl he had rescued once already and who was his initial reason for piloting EVA was a bit harder to ignore than his friends. And more importantly in practical terms, he and Ayanami would see each other even outside school at least weekly in synch tests. And as it turned out, it was really difficult to ignore Ayanami when she was two steps below oneself on the insanely long escalator and one had nowhere to escape to.

Even now, she did not regard him. Shinji was unsure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. At least she isn't showing any sign of displeasure. It meant that, at the very least, he had not screwed things up completely two days before. That was actually somewhat reassuring.

Still, the unresolved ambiguity nagged at him.

“Uh, Ayanami...” It had come out of his mouth before he could even think.

“Yes?” the blue-haired girl answered without turning around.

Ah, damn. What do I say now? This was awkward and it became intensely awkward as time passed by without Shinji saying anything. He felt hot.

“I...” he finally managed to say. “I'm sorry. It's nothing.”

She simply nodded and kept looking ahead.

Huh. She really doesn't seem to mind...

The synch tests were nothing extraordinary. Dr Akagi was too busy analyzing the data to
communicate much more than a grunt of approval now and then, but according to Misato, both Rei's and Shinji's synch rates were stable. Both had even improved, but by less than one percent point. It was not a stellar result, but it did mean both were deployable once the next angel would come around, and as far as NERV was concerned that was all that mattered. Shinji as well did not have any big aspirations concerning his synch-rate; after all he was merely doing his job – and then that job only because nobody else could.

He even told Misato so at one point. The Captain was visibly upset about that attitude, as Shinji could see in his entry plug's comm screen. However, all she replied was: “I know, Shinji. And I'm sorry about that. But as for synchronization... we don't ask you to make an effort for our sake, but for yours. You know how important a proper synchronization can be in combat.”

Last time she had screamed at him that such an attitude would get him killed. It was after that that he had run away. In the days afterwards she had treated Shinji very carefully, as if she were walking on eggshells. Over time she had settled into her usual casual self again, but notably, she had not screamed at him once since then. Or even only so much as made a true demand, instead of 'requests'. The end result was still the same, of course, but Shinji appreciated that behaviour. Misato seemed to mean well.

“I know you're on cooking duty this evening,” Misato continued, “But you know what, I think I can take over for you.”

Shinji nearly jumped up from his plug seat. “There... there really is no need, Misato! It isn't a bother!”

“You shouldn't do that, Misato” Shinji heard Dr Akagi mutter in voice-only, “He needs to concentrate. His synch-rate just dropped by two point six. Not that I can blame him, what with your threat.”

“Hey!” Misato shouted.

“Rate rising again,” Dr Akagi reported as if she had not heard the Captain.

Shinji smiled and began to concentrate again.

There was not much talk apart from this, and certainly no more private talk. Rei spoke only rarely anyway, and the only time Dr Akagi was not fully professional was when she could make barbs aimed at Misato.

At least this professionalism and efficiency allowed for the tests to end in a timely manner. Once home, Shinji would have more than enough time for his homework and some free time. And maybe Misato would actually not speed on the way home... yeah, right. The Captain was an excellent driver, as her car-based rescue of Shinji from Sachiel's attacks had shown, but her attitude towards regulations and speed limits was rather cavalier.

The next day at school, it seemed things were finally returning to the sort of peaceful, eventless normalcy Shinji craved. The teachers were droning on about their lectures, or in at least one case veered wildly offtopic to talk about their youth, Kensuke and Touji talked about irrelevancies, and Ayanami simply kept looking out of the window.

So it came as a sort of surprise that on his way back home, he again spotted the blue-haired girl standing on the pavement, obviously waiting for him.
“Deja vu,” Shinji muttered.

“Ikari,” she greeted him as he came closer. “I have a question.”

“Again?” Shinki asked back, but it was in a good-natured tone. “Is this going to become a routine?” Rei just tilted her head. Shinji smiled in response. “Nevermind. What's on your mind?”

“Why do you pilot EVA?” Ayanami inquired.

Shinji let out a small sigh before smiling tolerantly. “You don't do light questions, do you, Ayanami? Well, I...” He hesitated. That question had after all been rather contentious not all too long ago. “I pilot Unit 01 because nobody else can. Well, I heard you can, maybe, but you're needed in Unit 00.”

“Is that all there is to it?” Ayanami asked further.

“Pretty much,” Shinji confirmed. “If I don't pilot, NERV will have one EVA less operational. That... that is something that can get people killed.”

As he was saying that, Shinji wondered if that really was all there was to it. After all, he had not chosen to stay in Tokyo-3 during a battle, but afterwards. When he could have gone away while nothing was on the line. And yet he had decided to stay.

“So you feel the bond as well,” Ayanami commented and nodded slightly.

“The... bond?” Shinji asked.

“The bond to people,” Ayanami explained. “To all of humanity. It is why I pilot EVA. Why I trust your father.” She paused. “You should as well.”


But Rei just looked down. She did not seem to have an answer for it. Finally she asked back: “Why do you distrust your father?”

“He never gave me reason to do otherwise,” Shinji answered. He hoped to sound defiant but feared he sounded whiny. “When my mother died, he abandoned me. I didn't hear from him for ten years. When I do, it's a letter telling me to come here, no details. And when I do, I find out I am supposed to go into war for him!”

“Your presence became necessary, when...” Rei tried to explain.

“I know!” Shinji interrupted her forcefully. “And I don't care. When I saw EVA-01 for the first time... I didn't want to pilot it. He must have foreseen that. He let you be carted in in order to blackmail me.”

“I was brought in in order to pilot EVA-01, if you had refused,” Rei stated.

“Nonsense,” Shinji objected. His father - that was a topic that really could break through his normally so calm nature. “You were in no condition to pilot anything. And Father certainly knew that. The only reason you were brought to the EVA cages is so that I would see you.”
Ayanami's reaction was nearly invisible. She blinked, and that was all. But that alone was a notable
difference from her usually completely blank expression. And it took a while before she said:
“What your Father does, he does for a reason. But this is hard to see. I understand.”

Shinji scoffed. “I am here all day if he wants to explain his reasons to me. But he never talks to me.
Except to give me orders.”

“I see,” Ayanami just replied. “I hope I have not given offense.”

She was about to turn around, but Shinji intervened: “Wait, Ayanami. Why would you think so?”

“My questions caused you distress,” she explained.

“No!” Shinji protested, but then had to relativize this: “...well, okay. Maybe a bit. But... I can't talk
with others about that. Misato, maybe, but even she... it's good to have someone to talk to. Maybe
it's good that someone asks such question, so that one can get a clearer picture of things.”

Ayanami nodded agreement.

An awkward silence ensued, until Shinji spoke again: “Uh, I suppose... I'll see you in school again
tomorrow, Ayanami?”

The girl nodded again and turned around to go.

_Having someone to talk to... to ask those questions_... that was a new concept to Shinji. He could not
talk about NERV stuff with Kensuke and Touji, and besides he questioned how seriously they
would take certain topics. As for Misato... she _meant_ well, but Shinji was still somewhat unsure
about her reactions. Besides, she also was his Operational Director. She was in a completely
different spot than him.

But Ayanami... he could be sure with her. She did not seem to take offence and she genuinely did
not seem to judge. He might not always like her answers, but they would be the same with or
without him. He felt he could not screw this up, and that was an immensely relieving thought for
someone like him.

The next day, Friday, Ayanami had cleaning duty after class. She would not appear once again on
Shinji’s way back home. Shinji considered that as he left the school yard... and then took the way
opposite to where he would normally go. It was his turn to wait.
Asuka Strikes!

The bell rang for the final time of the day. Shinji's lip curled up slightly as he saw from the corner of his eye that, contrary to all good manners, Ayanami was already grabbing the book on her table as she was still bowing. He himself took some more time to pack in his belongings. After all, Ayanami would need some head start.

A fact that, unfortunately, was not lost on others.

“So, NERV stuff again, huh?” Kensuke asked ironically.

“You already made that joke yesterday,” Shinji, slightly irritated, reminded him.

“I'm telling you, Kensuke, you're not thinking this through,” Touji spoke up. “Ain't you supposed to be the all scientific guy and stuff? The more interest Shinji shows in other girls, the less interest he'll have in Misato. That's just logic, man.”

Kensuke seemed to seriously ponder this. “I suppose you have a point there.”

“Seriously, man,” Touji addressed Shinji again. “You think we can hang out again after school again at some point? You seem seriously busy these days.”

“Yeah. 'Busy',” Kensuke repeated drily.

Shinji thought about that. It would be a bit weird to walk towards Misato's apartment, only to then turn back and head for the city centre, but it would certainly be doable. “Sorry about that. Uh... I'm pretty far ahead with homework, actually, so... we could meet at the mall in an hour or so?”

“In an hour?” Kensuke echoed. “Why do you need...”

“Sounds like a plan,” Touji cut in. “Don't you still have some arcade records to break, Kensuke?”

Kensuke looked slightly surprised, but then shrugged with a smile. “See you in an hour then.”

Shinji was surprised as well, but decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Till then,” he merely replied, and walked off.

Two weeks had passed since the operation at Mt Asama. And for the past week, the only day when Ayanami had not appeared on Shinji's walk back home was when both had synch tests. It was not like they talked much. Their conversations did not grow longer than the previous ones. Ayanami would ask him about his contacts with Touji and Kensuke, or he would ask her what she meant about her 'bond with the people' – that one had turned out to become a rather strange conversation that he still did not understand. And as soon as the initial question was answered, Ayanami would turn around and leave.

Shinji did not mind. Short as these moments were, they were the only opportunity for him to talk about some of those things which he could not discuss with others. His fear at sorties (Ayanami claimed to have none). Him so suddenly being caught up in a war (Ayanami advised him to simply keep to his orders and disregard the bigger picture). The absurd contrast between fighting such a war and then going to school again (for Ayanami, it was all the same). Sometimes Shinji felt he
could not get his point across, but that did not matter. Whatever he did, it seemed impossible to upset or offend Ayanami. That was something important to him.

That she went through life seeing little difference between combat training, school and free time was a little bit disconcerting. Ayanami was _odd_, that much was certain. But Shinji did not mind that, either. As long as he could talk with her, she could grow wings with eyes on them as far as he was concerned. He grinned slightly. She had answered that question, about his contrasts in daily life, the day before. He probably should let her ask something again, and he was somewhat curious what she would come up with.

Then he stopped. Every day, Ayanami had stood at the same position, practically exact to the metre. The first two times he had been surprised to see her standing there. Now he was surprised to _not_ see her there.

Something vibrated in his pocket. He took out his phone and found a message from NERV. He sighed. He would have to cancel Touji and Kensuke. And he was not sure how they would take him citing NERV as reason.

Shinji had never been inside this particular room of the NERV headquarters: A small conference room that had been placed seemingly randomly inside a bloc of barely used laboratories. He would not be surprised if the headquarters had rooms, blocs and entire wings entirely forgotten and abandoned. Choosing such a room at random seemed like just the thing NERV would do.

Ayanami had already been inside the room when he arrived. Finally, he asked: “Do you know what this is about?”

The bluenette shook her head.

The mystery was solved when Misato entered the room... and at her side, a girl Shinji did not know. She was of similar height to him, and looked mostly European – definitely a foreigner. Both her facial structures and especially her long, red hair made this abundantly clear. And what a face it was! The, frankly too bright, illumination of the room shined on a lively, determined expression. Meanwhile, her body was quite positively accentuated by a light yellow summer dress.

It took a while until Shinji’s brain kicked into gear. _Wait. Why did they let a foreign girl of my age enter the Geofront?_

By that time, Misato and the girl had reached Shinji and Ayanami. “Sorry for calling you here so abruptly, Shinji, Rei,” Misato addressed them in a bright voice. “There was a… communication failure.” Her tone, which her forced cheerfulness could not quite suppress, made it clear she was going to have _words_ with whoever was responsible for that. “I would have liked to tell you earlier, but we’re getting reinforcements. Meet Asuka Langley Soryu... the Second Child.” _Second... Child?_ Sure, Shinji knew there had to be one, seeing as he was the Third Child. But he had never really considered that. “She is from Germany, where she grew up and trained most her life as EVA pilot. Asuka, this is Rei Ayanami, officially designated as First Child, pilot of EVA-00, the prototype. And this is Shinji Ikari, officially designated as Third Child, pilot of EVA-01.”

“Ikari?” Asuka echoed. “Isn't that the name of the top honcho around here?”

“Gendo Ikari is the supreme commander of NERV,” Misato answered, adding quietly and drily:
“Even if your branch tends to forget that at times. Anyway, Shinji is his son.”


“Uh…” Shinji almost felt like raising his hand in order to get to speak at all, but he managed to suppress that reflex. “Explain what, exactly?”

“How you could defeat two angels despite supposedly having no training at all!” Asuka exclaimed. “So your father did let you train with your EVA, didn't he?”

“You... heard of that?” was all Shinji could muster as response. Then he realized the verbal context. “Uh – about the angels, I mean!”

“Yes, I'm sure you want to brag about that,” Asuka stated dismissively, waving her right hand. “But I already read the reports. They did not quite seem believable to me.”

“Now, now, Asuka,” Misato chimed in. “You three will soon start training together, and fight together as well. So we should all be a bit more cooperative.”

Looks to me we are already fighting together... Shinji was surprised himself how annoyed he was about that. It was not like he normally cared what people said about him.

“Hmmm,” Asuka muttered. “I suppose you're right. We are EVA pilots after all. The elite of the elite.” She shot a glare to Shinji. “Even if some here may not deserve that honour, but I will give them a gracious chance to prove themselves.”

“Prove ourselves?” Shinji exclaimed. “What about you, Soryu?”

“Sor... oh, right. Japan. So bothersome.” Asuka stated, rolling her eyes. Shinji had no idea what she was talking about. “Well, to answer your question, that's why I'm here, dummy. Why don't you show it to them, Misato?”

Misato sighed. “Well, that is indeed why we chose that room.” She pointed to a large screen behind Shinji and Ayanami. “If you'll direct your attention to there...” She held up a remote and pressed a button. The screen lighted up and showed a giant robot. An EVA, but not one Shinji had ever seen. It had four eyes and was painted red all over. It also seemed to stand on a ship and, strangely enough, to wear a sort of grey cape. What?

“That is Evangelion Unit 02, Asuka's EVA,” Misato explained. “The U.N. Pacific Fleet was sent to transport it to here from Europe. They were... not very happy about that.” Oh gods, I can't tell this to Kensuke. He'll burst from so much 'I told you so'. “Shortly outside the territorial waters of Japan, the fleet was attacked by a fish-shaped Angel, now designated 'Gaghiel'. Asuka chose to fight it, despite a lack of orders to do so,” The redhead defiantly raised her head and harumphed. “and... well, see for yourself.”

And so they did. It was a recording of the fight. EVA-02 jumped from ship to ship, and got in position on the largest one, a carrier. Planes were tumbling into the water on all sides as it moved. A giant fish, larger even than the EVA, came jumping out of the water several times, lunging at it. And every time, the EVA managed to evade the angel, seemingly with ease. While Soryu apparently did not care for collateral damage, she was never hectic or panicky. The movements of her EVA were always smooth and well coordinated. Finally, at the fourth jump, she grabbed the angel and slashed her prog-knife all over its underside. Then cannons started firing. After the
smoke had cleared, EVA-02 rammed its knife into the angel one last time... and it was over.

“Amazing,” Shinji muttered. It was true he had defeated Shamshel (he did not really count Sachiel as a victory for himself), but that had been a panicked, desperate fight that could very well have ended in his death. It was no comparison to what he was seeing on the screen. “Simply amazing.”

Ayanami looked numbly ahead, at the screen, and did neither move nor comment.

This was the Third Child everyone back at home was talking about? The guy who, supposedly, got into an EVA with no prior training, got a better synchro-rate than the First Child on the spot, and then defeated that angel despite neither having seen an EVA before nor having heard about angels before?

That just could not be right. Shinji Ikari seemed to stammer more than he actually talked. Asuka had prepared herself for a tough challenge in Japan – not so much defeating the angels, as rather besting that Third Child. She had foreseen a difficult task, but that had never deterred her before. She had never held any doubt she would win that challenge. There only was one best EVA pilot in the world, and that was the great Asuka Langley-Soryu. It was just logical that the world would not hand her that title on a silver platter, but that she would have to earn it, to show the world.

Now, she did not know what to think. Sure, her challenge had just become that much easier: The Third Child was nothing more than a dullard who had gotten the job due to family connections. But at the same time, that such a person could ever have threatened her position at all was slightly insulting. She had always imagined the Japanese pilots to be much similar to her. She did not mind if others competed with her, if others coveted the same spot as her. In her conception of the world, that was only natural, after all. Everybody wanted to be number one. She would always succeed, but others were welcome to try. However, it appeared the reality was rather starkly different, with one of the Japanese pilots being a dullard and the other one... well, the other one as well. The girl had not spoken a single syllable since Asuka had entered the room.

And what is it with that blue hair? I thought such things wasn't allowed at Japanese schools? Which is ridiculous as hell. And thinking of which, why is she wearing a school uniform? Ugh, so is he, isn't he? Just great. School uniforms, what nonsense!

At least the Third Child, Shinji, looked duly impressed with her combat footage.

As that footage ended, Misato announced: “When the next angel hits, we intend to employ you together. All three EVAs. No sense in holding back, is there?”

“I shall endeavour to make up for any potential shortcomings of my colleagues,” Asuka declared haughtily.

“Same here,” the First Child, Rei, stated.

Everyone, including Asuka, whirled their heads around to her. In Asuka's case it was due to outrage. How dare she? I don't fall short! In the case of Shinji and Misato, it seemed to be utter surprise.

“Ah, very well then,” Misato said somewhat awkwardly. “I think we should grab a bite. There's a cafeteria nearby, why don't we go there?”
“It can only be better than what they call 'food' on those American ships,” Asuka muttered. She had a certain feeling she was going to miss that kind of food after some weeks in Japan, but it still had been an insult to her sensibilities. So, without awaiting a further word from Misato or her fellow pilots, she turned around and decisively walked off. Misato followed her with a sigh.

Out in the corridor, Asuka looked behind to see Shinji and Rei were walking behind Misato. Rei looked completely expressionless, while Shinji looked sullen. What's up with him? Yet again she wondered how such a person could ever have become EVA pilot. If she had the same attitude as him, she would never come above a 30% synchrorate. And yet, according to the reports, he had managed 40% without prior training!

_Bullshit. All bullshit._

The cafeteria rammed home the point that yes, she had definitely arrived in Japan. Everything they had there seemed to come with rice. Not that Asuka necessarily minded, but she did wonder how any people could eat so much rice throughout the whole day. Fries every day aboard the American fleet had been bad enough, but at least that had been only once per day. She hoped she would not tire too quickly of this, but realistically, she gave herself about one or two months at most.

She sat down on a table next to Misato, opposite to Shinji and Rei. Her facial expression darkened when she saw what Misato had on her dining tray.

“_Jesus, Misato, es is nich ma... _” she began. It was Misato, after all. She was used to speaking German when addressing her.

“Japanese, please, Asuka,” Misato chirped. “Poor Shinji here probably just understood warblargl or something like that.”

“Very funny,” Asuka replied, now in Japanese. She had grown up with both, after all, and English as well. She turned to Shinji and spoke deceptively sweetly. “So for your sake then. I was about to tell our dear Captain here,” she turned back to Misato and raised her voice volume considerably, “that it isn't even 3 PM! I know from painstaking experience that 'you're on duty' doesn't help with you, but jeez!” She turned to her fellow pilots. “Why haven't _you_ said anything?”

“I've kinda given up on that,” Shinji answered quietly. Rei simply ate, slowly lifting and lowering her spoon with an almost mechanical precision.

“Relax, Asuka,” Misato told her. “There's nothing planned for today anymore. Besides, you do know me. Do you think a single beer will have any effect on me?”

“Yes,” Asuka replied darkly. “It'll make you get another one.”

Shinji snickered. _Oh, so he does have some humour in him._ The same could not be said for Rei, though, who simply continued eating like she was a damn robot. _What's wrong with her?_

Misato gave her best impression of a -_- smilie. “Two beers still won't...” she began, but she stopped when two arms snaked themselves around her upper body.

“She's right, you...” a male voice began – which soon turned into a grunt.

Misato gripped the seat of a chair and bent forwards, ramming the hind legs of the chair against the
legs of the person suddenly behind her. Then she grabbed one of his arms and yanked it downwards, eliciting yet another painful grunt. Finally she whirled around to face her attacker.

Asuka recognized him first, though. “Kaji!” she exclaimed. “There you are!”

*Finally a sane person besides me here.* And one of her favourite people in general, if not currently *the* favourite. Truth be told, after hearing of the exploits of the Third Child, she had imagined the pilot to be somewhat of a miniature version of Kaji. Someone *strong*. Kaji was not muscular or large, though; at least Asuka, having grown up in Germany, did not think so. He was not a knight in shining armour, nothing as boring and bland. Rather, he was wiry and cunning and charming like a rogue, something subtly stressed by his beard stubbles.

Misato narrowed her eyes; clearly she had recognized him as well... and then she still punched him right in the face. Kaji took a step back and held his nose. “Touch me again and I'll break your nose, Ryoji Kaji!” she hissed. “What the hell are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to still be in Germany?”

Kaji now rubbed his nose with his right hand. Beneath that hand, he grinned. “And leave Asuka to the tender mercy of American and Russian sailors? What sort of guardian do you think I am, Misato?”

As if to underline his words, Asuka walked over to him, took his arm and shot glares at Misato. Not that she really condoned Kaji's flirty behaviour with other women herself, but she had to make clear on whose side she was. His stress on just being her *guardian* was not entirely to her liking, but it was nothing big – it just meant she had to invest more work into him. Meanwhile, Shinji looked at the scene with eyes large as soup plates. Rei just calmly continued eating, not even looking up.

Misato scoffed. “So you're a good guardian. Congratulations. Must be the first thing in your life you've ever been good at.”

Kaji just grinned again, now openly. His nose still glowed red, but that did not seem to bother him “Would you seriously deny that I'm a good connoisseur of women?”

“You little...” Misato shouted, her head red like a tomato, and her mind obviously bluescreenining due to her anger.

Kaji walked to the head of the table, Asuka in tow, and looked at Shinji. “You're living with Misato, aren't you, Shinji?”

“You... you know my name?” Shinji asked back. *How lame!*

“There are only three EVA pilots worldwide,” Kaji pointed out. “I know Rei here as well.” He patted the bluenette slightly on the head; that did not deter her at all from continuing to use her spoon as if it were a robot arm. “Reports about your exploits have been making the rounds in NERV Germany. Soloing two angels with no prior training and saving a fellow pilot from death – that's nothing to sneeze at.”

Asuka's face darkened. *Kaji as well now? Could those fools finally stop for once with 'Shinji this, Third Child that'? It's seriously pissing me off!*

“Everyone would have helped Ayanami out,” Shinji mumbled. He almost sounded like he was
apologizing for his successes, which only served to further annoy Asuka. *First he completely outdoes me, and then he doesn't even want that success? Just you wait, Third, I'll show you! Kaji will be praising me soon enough!* “And I didn't even do anything in my first fight except stumbling out of the EVA elevator. Dr Akagi said the EVA moved on its own when it defeated the angel.”

“Ah yes, I've been meaning to check on good old Rits,'” Kaji answered. “But you did defeat the second angel, didn't you?”

“He already had some training at that point,” Asuka pointed out. It seemed to her people were blowing Shinji's exploits out of all proportions.

“And it was just luck,” Shinji added. “Some seconds more, and my EVA would have run out of energy.”


Kaji shrugged. “Whatever your battle plan was, it evidently worked.” He put his hands on the table and leaned forwards. “Here's a tip, kid: Never sell yourself short.” He looked over to Misato and grinned. “The ladies are always ready to hear heroic tales of high deeds done.” The Captain scoffed at that, crossed her arms and pointedly looked away from him. Kaji turned back to the Third Child “So tell me, Shinji... Does Misato still sleep sprawled all over the bed?”

Asuka jumped from his side and looked at him mouth agape. Misato's face looked the same. Rei, of course, continued eating.

And Shinji, that idiot, did not even seem to realize what was going on. “Whenever I have to wake her she does,” he simply replied, an apologetic smile on his face. “And I have to do that often, come to think of it, she never listens to her...”

Finally, Misato had found her voice again. She jumped up from her chair and shouted “What the hell are you thinking? And in front of the children no less!”

Shinji looked confused. “What do you mean, in front of us no less?” Misato looked at him dismayed. Asuka's palm went to her face. *How can anyone be so naïve and clueless? Is he really fourteen?*

“Indeed, Misato, whatever do you mean?” Kaji asked all too innocently. “Your health is important to me. You should sleep well. And I do have one or two tricks for you that could help you there.”

*I'm betting D-Mark to Yen Shinji still has no idea what's going on.*

Misato ground her teeth and managed to press out: “If all you're going to do is make unfunny jokes, then I'd suggest...”

“Actually, I *am* here as Asuka's guardian,” Kaji interrupted her, suddenly sounding surprisingly serious. “We booked a hotel room for her for the night, but that's no permanent solution, of course. She needs accommodation.”

Misato sat down again “That's... surprisingly sensible of you, Kaji. Yes, she does. I assume you will soon return to Germany?”

“No... *exactly,*” Kaji replied. “If you wish, I can take her in as soon as I've found an apartment, no
problem. I just wanted to ask you before, since I'm not accredited with the local NERV branch and all.”

Misato's face darkened. “If you are a security risk, we already screwed up back in Germany, anyway. And why would you stay here?”

Kaji grinned his rogueish grin. “Haven't you ever heard of operational security? I need to leave some surprises I can spring at you. Very well then, Asuka, seems like you'll be staying at that hotel for a while. I'll inform you as soon as I've found something.”

Asuka watched the piece of clothing in her hands with a certain disgust. A school uniform...

She was still at best half-convinced to actually go to school at all. Kaji had offered to not enrol her at all; since she already had a college degree this probably would not run afoul of the law and besides, nobody would dare touch NERV, anyway. However, he had strongly advised she should go anyway. For one thing, she really needed to learn kanji, now that she lived in Japan. And second, there was the issue of social contacts.

Asuka had scoffed at that idea. She had gone through college, actually, so what could kids her own age offer her? Kaji had pointed out that even in college she had had some contacts, and besides, she had been heavily involved with NERV in Germany, having been the only EVA pilot there. Here, she would have no such contacts and probably only do combat and synch training at NERV. Without school, what would she even do all day long? Plus, her experiences and status would give her a certain social edge at school.

She had to admit Kaji had a point there. She knew how far ahead she was of her age peers, but that meant she could at least get some proper admiration out of them. It was of course silly to go to school again just to learn kanji; a private tutor specialized in just that would be the more practical solution. And the idea that fighting angels would basically be an after-school part-time job was absurd. Instead, school would be a game, nothing more. The funny thing was that, after all, she had nothing to lose. She did not need to fear bad grades or, in fact, even suspension. She already had a degree; there was literally nothing they could do to her. So she might as well go there, play the grand social game, and not give a damn about anything else.

But apparently part of that game was that damnable school uniform.

She had considered alternatives. She could simply refuse to wear it altogether. That certainly would give her a very unique style, mark her as someone special, someone with convictions. But it was too blunt. They would maybe, as a transfer student, let her get away with that for two, three days. Then reprimands would come and eventually they would suspend her. So she could simply stay away from school altogether rather than choosing this strategy. And besides, she would already stand out anyway, what with being an attractive, red-haired foreigner and EVA pilot, so this would be completely unnecessary.

A second idea had been to technically keep to clothing regulations, but to subvert them whenever she could, by using non-standard hair-dos and accessories and lots of make-up. Going for the whole ‘delinquent’ look. That could in fact work, but she was in Japan here, not in Germany. Rebels were only looked up to so much, especially if they were girls. In this annoyingly conformist and sexist society, going for the ‘delinquent’ look would probably completely sabotage her efforts at the social game.
She sighed. So plain school uniform it was then. *What utter nonsense.* One would be very hard pressed to find any school in Germany, including private schools, that used uniforms. Maybe there was not a single one. So this issue was even something that went beyond just the 'normal' 'Western'/Japanese divide. To Asuka, school uniforms did not represent a status as schoolgirl, or cuteness or anything along those lines, but just mindless drone behaviour. Uniformity, like in the military. And she saw herself as a *warrior*, not as a *soldier*. She was not just a lowly grunt.

At least the local school uniform was *okay*. It was not very stylish, but Asuka had seen how certain “stylish” or “cute” school uniforms looked like. Personally, she had no problems with light and revealing clothing – when she *chose* to wear it. That was always good for a laugh, in fact; back at university, the boys, the young adults, would do their damndest not to look at her, a minor so much younger than them, during the hottest days. She had been an early bloomer, after all. However, baring half her legs due to *regulations*, that would be just demeaning.

She sighed again and put on the uniform. It was time to go to battle.

Even though she had never really practised them, at least she *knew* Japanese customs and etiquettes. Things like bowing to each other or to the teacher were *not* completely alien to her. Her mother had taught her about such things, even though she had grown up in Germany herself. The memories of those lessons were very faint and far away, but the lessons themselves had stuck. She still found most of the stuff silly, but she could go through the motions.

Asuka's hotel was reasonably close to the school, certainly close enough that she could walk. Already outside, the red-haired foreigner in a school uniform drew curious looks; inside the school premises basically every head was turning. Asuka felt a certain annoyance at that, that people basically treated her like an animal in a zoo or a circus show. She fought down that anger, though. She had to give a good first impression to everyone, and besides, she counted on her exotic nature helping her to make contacts. Enduring the numerous stares was the price to pay for that.

She went to the room she had been told was her classroom. So far, there were only a few people there, and they all looked up when she entered. A girl immediately went over to Asuka. She was of a small stature, with brown hair and twin tails. Asuka slightly furrowed her forehead over such an unstylish hairdo. “You must be the new transfer student,” the girl said, then paused. “I'm Hikari Horaki, the class representative. I'm pleased to meet you.”

*The class rep... another one of those silly Japanese ideas.* Before she had gone to university, Asuka had been in that role herself. Of course she had been, she had always been popular. But that role had meant something totally different in Germany. In Germany, class reps were elected by the class to represent them *against* the teachers. In Japan, they were appointed by the teachers to *handle* the class. They were the teachers' pets. Or, even less charitable, in keeping with the uniforms, the teacher's NCO in the field, as if the school were an army and the students its soldiers. *How disdainful.*

Still, in Japan, for some unfathomable reason, it seemed to be a respected position even among the students. So it was probably a good idea to get on that girl's good side. “I'm Asuka.” She remembered where she was. “Asuka Langley Soryu. I just arrived from Germany.”

“You'll be introduced to the class as soon as the first lesson starts,” Hikari told her. “I hope you'll find your way around. I can only try to imagine how difficult it must be for a transfer student from abroad. If you have any questions or need any help, feel free to ask me!”
That was an almost professional speech. At least the girl seemed to be competent in her role, regardless of how senseless that role was. “Don't worry about me, I'll get by.” Asuka wondered what more she could say. She certainly was not about to ask for help. She could ask how lessons were like here, but then again, she did not really care, after all, seeing as she was only here for kanji and social affairs. Then she noticed the other girl fidgeting. “But you seem to have something on your mind. Out with it, then.”

Hikari seemed to be slightly taken aback by Asuka's blunt word choice, but replied: “I apologise if this causes offence, but when I first heard that you were coming from Germany, I feared there could be communication problems. I'm not sure anyone here speaks German...”

Asuka waved her hand dismissively. “My mother was a native speaker. I grew up bilingual. Trilingual, actually. I also speak English, and know enough French to get by.”

Hikari looked suitably impressed, which of course made Asuka slightly more favourably inclined towards her. “So your mother is Japanese?”

Her mother really was not a topic Asuka wanted to get into any depth about, so she swiftly tried changing it. “Her father was. Don't worry, I know how to speak Japanese, and for that matter also to behave Japanese well enough, if that is what you’re concerned about.”

Hikari had the decency to at least blush slightly. “I'm sorry. I was. You understand, there are many situations when...”

“Yes, yes, I understand well enough,” Asuka interrupted her. “Ah, is that the teacher?”

“It is!” Hikari confirmed and rushed over to her place, ready to perform her function.

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*Isn't that*...

Shinji had spent way too much time on preparing food for the day, and had made it to the classroom only some mere steps before the teacher. Still, he stopped short when he walked through the door. Among all his classmates, one person stood out by the fiery colour of her hair.

Shinji entered dumbfounded when the teacher was right behind him. He wandered over to his desk, his eyes still on Soryu. *So she's here as well.* It made sense: She appeared to be of similar age to him, and the other two pilots, Ayanami and him, were already in the class, too.

He spent large parts of class glancing over to Soryu, but then, so did basically all his classmates. The boys were more or less openly admiring her; the girls were gossiping. Touji and Kensuke as well seemed to have an intense curiosity about the new girl.

Awkwardly, a few times Soryu looked back at him. And whenever their eyes met he had the feeling *hers* were shooting daggers at him. Over time, this made Shinji almost afraid to look at her. *I must have screwed up. Somewhere.* It was the only logical explanation: Somehow he must have pissed off Soryu when they had first met three days ago, and she was still carrying a grudge. He would have dearly liked to know what he did wrong so he could apologize, but then, he would probably screw that up anyway.

Fortunately for him, she ignored him completely during lunch break. Or maybe she simply had no
time to spend on him: Surrounded by nearly the whole class, she was far too busy telling them all about herself, something she did with great enthusiasm. Shinji stood a good deal away from that cluster of people, so he only heard bits and pieces. Asuka confirmed nonchalantly that she was an EVA pilot, she effortlessly switched between languages to impress people and even claimed to already just have finished a college degree before departing from Germany. Shinji made a mental note to ask Misato about that.

In any case, there was little doubt now who was suddenly atop the social ladder.

It was only after class that Soryu showed some interest in him, when she overheard a conversation between him and Horaki. The class rep wanted him to take class notes and homework to Ayanami, who had been absent that day.

“Rei Ayanami?” Soryu chimed in. “The First Child? She's in this class as well?”

Shinji nodded. “She's often absent. Doesn't seem to affect her grades, though.”

“In exams she's always among the best three or four,” Horaki agreed.

Soryu's grin seemed... off. Forced. “Well, then we can't let her illnesses affect her education, right? I think I'll accompany you, Shinji. Rei and I didn't really get a chance to talk when we met at NERV.”

Shinji? Rei? He felt kind of awkward due to her overly familiar way of addressing him, and he could plainly see so did Horaki, but neither of them commented. She is a foreigner, after all. A very attractive foreigner who had just asked him to walk with him after school. He gulped.

Horaki had her own take on the suggestion: “That's nice of you to offer, Soryu. I know Ikari is much more... serious than others here” Shinji could hear Soryu mutter That wimp? “but I would feel more comfortable if a girl was to accompany him to another girl's place.”

“Splendid,” Soryu beamed. She turned to Shinji: “You know the way?”

“Uh, I know her address,” he answered. “I've never been in that part of town, but I know where we must go. Theoretically.”

“Theoretically?” Soryu echoed. She sighed. “Well, I trust you'll have a better sense of direction than Misato does. Not that this is particularly difficult.” Shinji just shrugged and got into motion. “Hey, you can't just run away when a lady has offered to accompany you! Wait up!” Shinji sighed and came to a halt again. It took several minutes before Soryu had finally packed all her things and caught up to him.

They walked in silence for several minutes. Given just how wordy the German girl had been before, this surprised Shinji, but she made no attempts to speak up. Finally, it was him who did: “So, uh... you have a college degree?”

“Yup,” Soryu replied with obvious pride in her voice. “Finished it just in time, in fact. Made me miss the first few angels, but hey, I'm sure there are plenty more to come.”

What's wrong with her, she's saying that like it's a good thing! But that was not what Shinji asked about: “How... how did that even work? I mean, you're only 14 like me, aren't you?”
Asuka shrugged. “Like that matters. I may be of the same age as you, but I am a genius.” She glanced at him sideways. “I brought the papers along to Japan. I can show them to you at my hotel room if you don't believe me.”

Shinji raised his hands. “I... I don't think that'll be necessary. I was just surprised, you know. It's not often that one sees 14 year olds with college degrees.”

“It's not often that the world sees me,” Soryu stated haughtily. They both fell silent for a while, until she spoke up again: “That's why I want to meet with the First. You two may not yet have college degrees, but you are EVA pilots.”

“You think that makes us special?” Shinji asked.

Soryu actually stopped to take a look at him, a look of surprise and contempt. “Are you stupid? Of course we are! Three people, among three billion people on Earth! And only we can pilot the Evangelions. It's an ability only we have. Of course that makes us special. If you can't see that... pah!”

She stormed ahead. Shinji had the nagging feeling he had screwed up yet again.

However, she seemed to calm down surprisingly fast. By the time he had caught up to her again, she was asking him about his previous engagements with angels. There was really not much he could tell her about Sachiel, and while he had saved Rei at Mt Asama it was her who had defeated Sandalphon, so he mostly concentrated on Shamshel.

“You let those idiots into your entry plug?” she asked, appalled.

“I had to!” Shinji defended himself. “It was the only way for me not to worry about crushing them.”

Soryu wrinkled her nose. “It was their fault for leaving the shelters. They brought you into unnecessary risk.”

Shinji shrugged. “I don't mind.”

“You should!” Soryu insisted and shook her head. “You really are kinda weak, aren't you?”

Shinji shrugged again. “I suppose so. Sorry.” I knew this wouldn't end well.

Soryu rolled her eyes. “Apparently you are. So, how did you defeat the angel with three idiots inside the entry plug then?”

Shinji ignored the stab at him and told her. How he had ignored Shamshel’s lashes, how he had simply driven his knife deeper and deeper into his core, how he had managed to break it just before the power had run out on his EVA. Soryu's demeanour did not change; she did not suddenly laud him or anything like it. But at least she did not scold him again, either. Instead, she just kept on asking questions.

When they had finally reached Ayanami’s apartment bloc, he found he did not mind simply being called ‘Shinji’, no matter how inappropriate the address was.
It had taken only a single day for Asuka to reverse her position on the role of class reps in Japan. She had enjoyed all the attention she had been getting, but, Grundgütiger!, were those schoolboys and -girls ever mindless and infantile. And the boys were all perverts; she could still feel their lustful gazes all over her body. Somebody like Hikari, apparently a very resolute girl, was needed to keep them all in line.

And the only one who maybe was not quite like that, who had kept away from that silly gaggle of his classmates, whom even Hikari had called 'more serious' than the rest... was a spineless wimp who apologized for winning a battle against an angel. It really figured. And worst of all, such a person would be fighting alongside her! I should just ask to be deployed solo. This will probably be more productive.

For the moment, she still had some hopes invested into the First Child. Sure, this 'Rei Ayanami' had been nothing short of impertinent at their first meeting at NERV, but Asuka figured she could work with 'impertinent'. Maybe that just showed Rei had the right temperament to be an EVA pilot, someone who took the job seriously and had the proper competitive streak.

Those hopes kind of crumbled when she saw where Rei lived. The endless line of enormous, grey and dull apartment looked like a ghetto to her. The line that still stood, at least. On the other side of the street only the remnants of some walls showed that once there had been buildings there as well.

“What is that god-awful noise?” she complained.

“Construction works,” Shinji guessed. “I think they're dismantling the place.”

“No shit,” Asuka exclaimed. “What gave it away, the ruins? But why are people still living here then? Why is she?”

She gestured at the building in front of them. The wall mantling had been torn up in several places, windows had burst, balcony doors unhinged. In fact, the building seemed entirely abandoned and as if it might be torn down soon as well.

Shinji just shrugged and entered it.

The inside did not look much better. There was litter everywhere and dust. So much dust. Asuka could practically feel the creepy-crawlies skittering everywhere. And yet, this apparently was where Rei lived. Her name was above the door to apartment 402... or at least Asuka assumed so, extrapolating from the kanji she knew. On the other hand, maybe she had not been here for a while: The mail box at the door was flowing over with letters, newspapers, advertisements. Asuka saw two letters with the NERV logo and one with the insignia of the Tokyo-3 municipal government, but even those were unopened.

“So much for just leaving the papers here,” she muttered. She had wanted to meet Rei anyway, but now she was not so sure about this prospect anymore. Apparently, Rei had not just behaved like a weirdo at NERV – if she lived here, she was one.

Shinji pressed the door bell. Nothing happened, no sound could be heard. It seemed to be broken. The two pilots looked at each other. Shinji knocked at the door, politely. When that yielded no result, Asuka knocked at the door, violently. Still nothing happened.

“What do we do now?” Shinji muttered.
“Something!” Asuka exclaimed. “I have not come so far out to this post-apocalyptic wasteland just to return without any results. If need be we'll just kick in the door!”

“We can't just do that!” Shinji shouted hastily. “She's probably not here. Maybe she needed to go to a hospital?”

“Don't be so dramatic!” Asuka chided him. She intended to rattle at the door handle... only to discover the door was unlocked. “Let me guess,” she muttered quietly. “The lock is broken as well.”

She could not help but indulge her curiosity and carefully leaned her upper body through the half-opened door... only to jump back in revulsion. The trail of litter, dust and dirt seamlessly continued inside the apartment.

Shinji used this to take a look himself. He grimaced, but then shouted: “Excuse me. Ayanami, are you home? It's me, Shinji Ikari. And Asuka Soryu.” There was no response. After some seconds of hesitation, he stepped in.

“You can't just...” Asuka began, but by then the heavy door was closing already behind Shinji. Asuka pulled it open again and entered behind him.

“Ayanami?” Shinji tried again. When there was no response, he announced: “We're coming in, Ayanami. Sorry if we're disturbing.”

He uncomfortably stepped out of his shoes and tried to move through all the dirt on tip-toes. Several marks showed Rei apparently rarely bothered, so Asuka did not remove her shoes, either. She had no intention of getting her socks ruined.

The apartment was a mess. It would already hardly be a pleasant home under better circumstances. The walls were cold stone and metal frames, the lighting seemed to fit better to a storage hall and half of it was broken besides, and it was very cramped: The entrance corridor apparently also served as the kitchen. But worse than that all was the dirt and the sheer mess of things. Even Misato's apartment in Berlin, back when Asuka had lived with her, had never been quite so bad as this. The kitchen sink was full of unwashed dishes, and Ayanami's sleeping room was even worse: The only furniture there was a bed, a single chair, a small refrigerator and some drawers. The heavy curtains were closed, leaving the room dark and even more unappealing. There were blood stains on the bed pillow and a box of used, bloody bandages near the refrigerator. And clothes, clothes everywhere: A school uniform on the bed, socks on a drying ring above it, more socks on the chair, and one opened drawer apparently was full of unsorted underwear.

A bit belated Asuka realized there was an order to things: There was no piece of clothing simply on the floor, the bandages were unhygienic but still all gathered in one places, and even the empty cans were all gathered in a small plastic bag hanging from the refrigerator. How... odd.

“I know those glasses,” Asuka heard Shinji muttering. He walked up to the drawers and picked something up from them. Asuka followed to take a look. “Those glasses... just like my father's. Are those hers?”

He tried to put them on. *Herr im Himmel, is weirdness a requirement for becoming a Japanese pilot?* Asuka tried to grab the glasses. “You can't just pick up other people's things!”
“But...” Shinji tried to defend himself.

“No but!” Asuka insisted and jerked the glasses away from him, yanking them high into the air.

In just that moment there was a rustling sound coming from behind them. Both Asuka and Shinji took a look... and saw Rei standing there. Clothed in nothing more than a short, brown towel around her neck. The other two pilots just froze in mid-movement.

“Wa... was?” Asuka stuttered.

Rei stood in the door frame to her sleeping room for a second, entirely calm and not even trying to hide anything. Then she stepped forwards resolutely and quickly. Shinji jumped backwards, instinctively getting out of the way, but Asuka felt cornered. She had been a six year old piloting a 50m tall warmachine by thought alone, but even so this situation had definitely surpassed her weirdness quotient.

Rei grabbed Asuka's hand... or rather, the glasses inside. Asuka tried to stumble backwards, to get away from this weirdness, but only managed to bounce against the drawers behind her. She lost her footing, tried to regain balance by lunging forwards... and fell into Rei. The nude girl had no way to stop her momentum and fell down, with Asuka on top of her.

Waswaswaswaswaswas.... Asuka's thoughts somersaulted in her head while Rei just lay below her, arms stretched wide on the floor, not moving. Asuka felt hot as blood rushed into her face. This was.... What the fuck was this? What the fuck is this? Why is she just lying there? What do I do now?

“Will you get off?”

What? Rei had said that entirely calmly. It did not even sound like a request, more like a factual question. Only now did Asuka notice where she had fallen, specifically her left hand. Rei's breasts were... well developed.

Asuka jumped off the other girl. She was breaking out in sweat. She felt fooled and trapped. She knew of course there had been no conscious conspiracy between Shinji and Rei, but the result had been much the same. She had only gotten into this stupid situation because Rei could not keep her mail box tidy, because Shinji was too stupid to leave other people's belongings alone and because Rei was a damn exhibitionist. She felt awkward and embarrassed and confused all because those people were so weird and stupid.

With anger welling up inside her, she turned around to face Shinji: “Enjoyed that show, didn't you? Girl on naked girl action, just like in your fantasies, yes? And you just stood there and let this happen! You stupid perverted...”

Soryu raised her hand behind her back. Shinji was expecting the slap to come in any second now. He had of course not intended for any of this to happen, but he did somewhat feel like he would deserve it. It was not proper that he had seen Ayanami like this, and it was understandable that Soryu would feel embarrassed.

He himself felt awkward and confused himself, and to his shame also intensely aroused. Ayanami's body, the way she presented it, and yes, also the way Soryu had ended atop on it... He did not like
how it made him feel, but it did make him aroused. One more reason why he thought he deserved punishment. Maybe that would clear some things up; but he feared this incident would make things forever more too awkward between the three pilots.

He flinched and closed his eyes... and the slap did not come. When he looked again, a slender hand had caught Soryu's arm in a surprisingly strong grip from behind.

Apparently still not caring about her state of undress, Ayanami stated calmly: “Do not hurt Ikari.”

Soryu freed herself from that grip and whirled around. “What? And get dressed, you shameless....”

“As soon as I have ensured Ikari remains unharmed,” Ayanami told her.

Wait what? Shinji could hardly believe that someone would intervene for his sake. That it was Ayanami was pleasant. That she did so in the nude was... not helping any.

“So that's how it is,” Asuka muttered darkly. “You're all indecent! That's it! You... you... argh!” And with that she stormed right out of the apartment.

Shinji looked after her, unsure what to do. Ayanami in turn now looked directly at him. Shinji felt trapped, like a deer in the headlights – too shocked to move, definitely too shocked to think. He hated himself for it, but he could not help to keep looking at Ayanami, her shoulders, her breasts, her thighs... You're the worst, Shinji Ikari. Absolutely the worst.

“Why are you here?” Rei finally asked, entirely unperturbed.

That finally got through to Shinji. “I... ah... I was asked... the class rep...”

Calmly, Rei moved around him, to the other side of the bed where she had laid out her clothes, and began to put them on. Shinji forced himself to look away. That... did not go completely successfully.

“I'm here...” He gulped, closed his eyes and sputtered: “Class rep asked me to give the class notes and homework to you. I'm sorry about this all. Just wanted you to have...”

He hastily opened his school bag and began to rummage inside it. He did not care that a pencil flew out of it when he took out the papers. He simply laid them on Ayanami's bed, half throwing them, and managed despite his best intentions to get a further good look of her unclad back. Then he turned around to run to his shoes. He had not even fully tied them yet when he was already out of the door again.

He shouted Soryu's name several times, hoping to catch up to the German girl, but she seemed far ahead already. He would have liked to at least try to clear up things with her, but apparently he had hesitated too long. Too busy staring at Ayanami's breasts. I am absolutely the worst.

With shaky hands he got his SDAT player out of his school bag, and began to slouch back home.
Watching Kensuke play certain arcade games was almost frightening. He already had considerable high scores on all the normal machines, the ones that were played with buttons and joysticks. Those did not even catch his fancy anymore. Instead, these days he always went to those machines that used a gun mock-up with which to aim at the screen. Shinji had seen some people going completely wild mowing down virtual enemies on the screen, but not so Kensuke. He simply stood in front of that screen and remained entirely calm, only slightly moving his upper body to adjust his aim when necessary. His facial expression always stayed the same as well. Stone-cold.

It reminded Shinji uncomfortably of NERV’s simulated training for the pallet rifle. *Target in the centre, pull the switch...*

History was repeating itself: Just like after those very first combat training lessons, he was running away again. Not from Misato or NERV this time, but from Ayanami. This was why he was content to watch his friends play the arcade. The entire time after school he had remained silent, his gaze downcast, simply following Touji and Kensuke. He was glad they were having fun, but he was just a hanger-on to them. When they spoke or joked, he was never fully part of it. It was if he were just an outside observer to their activities. And in any case, he was just here because it gave him an excuse to be anywhere else but on his direct way home.

*I am absolutely the worst.*

He had not even told Ayanami that she would not be seeing him on his usual way home anymore. For three school days now, he had simply gone to the city centre with Touji and Kensuke after school instead. He had no doubt Ayanami had waited every day; she did not seem like a person to quickly change habits. But he simply could not face her right now, not in any capacity. He could not even tell her not to meet him anymore. All he could do was avoid her as much as possible. He just wanted to be away from this source of embarrassment and distress. So even though it had been his fault that things had become so awkward between them, he had added even more harm to Ayanami. And even though he realized that, he could not stop it. In fact, that guilt only made his desire to avoid Ayanami and everything to do with her all that much stronger.

*And like a wimp I'm giving in to that desire without a second thought. Without even trying. Selfish. Pathetic and selfish.* That was part of the reason he was content to just watch Touji and Kensuke: At least they showed him not every human on Earth was as pathetic as himself. It was like trying to catch some of their glory, such as it was... some of their normalcy, their being fit to normal human standards, by being around them. *Let's see how long they will put up with me.*

“Another high score...?” Touji exclaimed dumbfounded from next to Kensuke. “Man, if you invested half as much work into school...”

Kensuke shrugged. “School isn't as satisfying. Besides, I get to improve my aim here. That'll help me more than all lectures on Japanese literature.”

Now Touji shrugged as well. “Can't argue with you there, buddy.” He turned around. “Hey, Shinji, wanna give it a try now?”

His eyes still cast down, Shinji just shook his head wordlessly. He really did not feel like playing arcade games, and especially not one that reminded him of NERV training.
“Yeah, actually, you're right,” Touji conceded. That surprised Shinji, but he still did not look up. The world consisted of the floor in front of him. “Hey, I guess we'll see each other in school tomorrow, right?”

Shinji just nodded weakly.


“This way, Kensuke,” Touji urged him.

“Wait, isn't that...”

“Shut up, Kensuke.”

Shinji still heard the words, but he did not even try to figure out what they meant. That happened fast. Now they've gotten sick of me as well. He was not sad, not really. In order to be sad he would have had to expect better.

Someone was in front of him now. A soft voice called: “Ikari.”

Now Shinji did look up. Surprised... or rather, shocked. He felt trapped. “Aya...” he began, but he could not even finish the name.

Several seconds passed, with both of them just looking at each other. Neither of them moved. Shinji felt his heart racing. Ayanami seemed as calm and collected as always. Finally she asked: “Why did Pilot Soryu wish to harm you?”

Wait, what?

…

“Wait, what?” Shinji exclaimed. “Why are you asking that now?”

“I wanted to ask you on Friday,” Ayanami explained matter-of-factly. “I did not meet you at your way home.”

In as much as those 'meetings' had become a habit, it had been her unspoken 'turn' to ask something.

“I'm sorry,” Shinji whispered, again looking at the floor. Then it hit him and he looked straight ahead again, at Ayanami. “...that is what you wanted to talk with me about on Friday?” Not about what I...

The girl just nodded slightly.

Now thoughts and questions jumped into Shinji's mind without any sense or order to them. “How did you even know I'd be here?”

“Suzuhara told me,” Ayanami answered.

“Touji?” Shinji wondered. “You asked Touji?”
Ayanami shook her head. “He approached me. It was unexpected. But his information was correct.”

*Touji did? ... That's why he left now. But why...* Shinji did not pursue that thought further. He had wished to avoid Ayanami, but now he had been put on the spot. There was only one thing to do. With rigid upper body, he bowed down deep in front of her. “I am sorry, Ayanami. I should not have entered your apartment. And I should have left as soon as I saw you had been showering. It was foolish and stupid of me and it put you in an uncomfortable position.”

He remained bowed. No answer came. When he looked up slightly from that position, he could see her head was tilted. “Is that an apology?” she asked.

“Yes!” Shinji exclaimed, a little too loud and trying his best not to jump up from his bowed position.

“Why?” Ayanami asked.

“Ah... because...” Shinji began. That was unexpected. Unexpected enough that he now did straighten up again. “What I did was wrong.”

“Why?” Ayanami inquired further.

“It's rude to simply enter the homes of other people!” Shinji exclaimed. *What I did is wrong, wrong, wrong!*

“Why?”

“Well... that incident showed why!” Shinji insisted. “Because I just entered your apartment, I caught you showering. I embarrassed you!”

“No,” Ayanami simply stated without any inflection whatsoever.

“What do you mean, 'No'?” Shinji asked.

“You did not embarrass me,” Ayanami clarified.

*What? What?* Shinji could not believe what he was hearing. *Does absolutely nothing offend her?* Part of him, a *very small* part, realized that he maybe should be weirded out by this, maybe even find this creepy... but that part never had a chance against the sheer relief Shinji was feeling right now. *No, I suppose nothing does. I can't offend her. Whatever I do, I can't screw this up. Not even with... that.*

“I am glad,” Shinji told her. “It was still a foolish thing to do for me.”

Ayanami acknowledged that with a nod. “Is that why Soryu attempted to strike you? She took part in that foolishness as well.”

A small grin formed at the sides of Shinji’s mouth, the first time in days his lips had even only begun to curl up. Ayanami was a determined person. It seemed that when she wanted to ask a question, nothing would stop her: Not being caught in the nude, not five days of utter silence, not being abandoned after school and not even an in her eyes senseless apology.
“I think she was just embarrassed herself,” Shinji explained. “After she... fell on you.” And here we go again with the visual memories... Memories that were at once pleasant and intensely awkward. “She blamed me for that. Us both, really.”

“I see,” Ayanami answered. “Would she also have attempted to harm me?”

“I don't think...” Shinji began, but stopped when two identical noises started, one from his phone and one from Ayanami’s. That sound was keyed specifically to one event... an Angel attack.

Without speaking a further word, both started to run straight for the nearest Geofront entrance.

Asuka lay face-down on her hotel bed and wanted the outside world to go away. There was a school book and a writing bloc on the desk that stood right next to that bed, but Asuka had quite enough of both.

Why the fuck are they still using kanji?

For Germany, the Latin alphabet with its 26 letters was quite sufficient. Okay, plus 4 letters German used but insisted were somehow not part of the alphabet. And some combinations like sch, ch, eu that were pronounced differently than what their single letters would imply. But even so – that was 30 letters and maybe 10 combinations. Instead of the around, oh, 20,000 kanji needed for high-level Japanese literacy, most of them with multiple meanings and multiple pronunciations. Even English and French, where one had to basically guess how spelling and pronunciation went together, were better, because they at least used an alphabet instead of damn pictograms.

Asuka could read and write katakana and hiragana without problems. Those were after all syllabaries, nearly as good as alphabets as far as writing systems went. But their use in Japanese was limited. It occurred to Asuka that the Koreans had done it right: They had kicked out their Chinese-derived script decades ago and had only kept their own syllabary. Not that the country was in an enviable condition right now: Reunited since shortly after Second Impact, it was now a completely neutralized buffer state between Japan and China under military rule. World events and conditions like that were something Asuka, as a college graduate and pilot of the most powerful class of battle machines currently out there (a political factor in itself), kept up with. But at least the people there did not need to learn thousands upon thousands of characters just to not be illiterate.

Asuka simply did not have the motivation to continue working on her writing lessons. She had done those for a week already. For several days now, she had come 'home' to a lonely hotel room and practised kanji. It seemed that was the only thing she was still doing outside school. It was disheartening to return to this hotel room day after day and stay there most of the time. At first she had immediately changed out of the school uniform; now she could not even be bothered to do that anymore. Even Kaji had only visited her once since she had started going to school. She had no idea what he was doing. Hopefully he'll hurry up about finding an apartment.

That had been part of the reason for accompanying the Third to the First's place. It had given her something else to do, and the chance to properly meet the First. Unfortunately, that had ended in disaster. Asuka still felt flustered and embarrassed when she thought about that incident. It had been foolish of Shinji to just enter the apartment like that, but worse, what had that blue-haired harlot been thinking? Showing up in the nude, not even hiding anything, just letting Asuka lie on top of her without moving, letting her lie on her... Gah! Even only recalling that memory made
Asuka feel uncomfortable all over.

Fortunately, it had been easy enough to avoid both her fellow pilots at school. Both were essentially loners, always staying in their own private, little corners. Sticking to the crowds automatically meant avoiding them, and sticking to the crowds was after all one reason Asuka went to school: The social stimulation. *Just too bad how abruptly this ends once I've come 'home'*. She sighed. She was not looking forward to PE on Wednesday. *No way to avoid the harlot then. Urgh. According to schedule it'll be swimming. Well, at least the school will have regulations against skinny-dipping.*

With another sigh she slowly got up from her bed. *It's no use. The only alternative to learning those vermaledeiten Chinese thought excrements is to brood on my bed. So back to a needlessly complicated writing system it is.*

However, she had not even sat down when her phone emitted the quite clearly distinguishable angel alert sound.

She formed a fist and grinned. *Yes! That's better than brooding or kanji. My first fight on Japanese soil. That angel has impeccable timing. I'll beat the crap out of it.*

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The corridor around Misato flashed red, so that it appeared like she was walking through red hexagons. *I swear, sometimes NERV is overdoing things. I get that an angel is approaching. There's no need to turn the whole headquarters into an emergency sign-themed amusement park.*

Fortunately, her sense of direction always became considerably better under stress, and it took her only five minutes to reach the bridge.

“Report!” she bellowed.

“Battlecruiser Haruna reports huge flying object at these coordinates,” Hyuga stated.

Misato looked over his shoulder, on his screen. “At current speeds it'll be here in less than half an hour!” She looked at the image of the object: A blue octahedron floating in the air. *I wonder how they'll name it.* Suddenly, something flashed up on the screen. “What the...”

Hyuga confirmed what she was seeing: “Wavelength is pattern Blue. Angel confirmed!”

“No way we can still hope to intercept it in the open,” Misato muttered. “This'll be a fight in the city.”

Vice Commander Fuyutsuki seemed to agree. From the elevated position he and Commander Ikari held on the bridge he issued orders, carried through loudspeakers: “Issue evacuation orders. Tokyo-3 is to enter fortress mode.”

“What's the status of the pilots?” Misato shouted.

“All three have confirmed the emergency alert,” Aoba reported from his terminal. “GPS tracking shows all three are in close proximity to Geofront entrances. Expected arrival of all three within fifteen minutes.”
Misato nodded grimly. “Status of the Evangelions?”

“Ah... uh...” Ibuki muttered from her seat. *What the hell?* “U-Unit 01 and Unit... uh, Unit 02...”

Misato looked over to her. That was unlike the Lieutenant. Among the bridge personnel, Ibuki had always been the one most concerned for Shinji and Rei, but nonetheless she had always acted professionally and disciplined.

The annoying emergency lighting had dimmed the light to a diffuse red, so it was only now that Misato noticed a figure next to Ibuki. A figure very close to Ibuki. Misato stormed over to there. *What's going on?*

What she found was the Lieutenant almost cowering in her seat, trying to get away from the uncomfortable proximity to the man standing next to her. *What the fuck is he doing here?*

“Ryoji Kaji, get the hell away from there!” she shouted. “Do you want to get us into a sexual harassment lawsuit? Let my people do their job, damnit!”

With a grin, Kaji turned around to her and took one step forwards, finally bringing a more comfortable distance between him and Ibuki. “Your people? Doesn't Maya here” *Maya? “belong to Ritsuko? Ritsuko's Section 3?"

Finally Ibuki had it in her to finish her report: “No... no problems detected in Units 01 and 02. Unit 00's neural link capacity 0.2% below norm, but that is within parameters.”

*Both pilots and EVAs accounted for. Good. We'll be able to fight.* With that cleared, Misato could concentrate on Kaji. “What the hell are you doing here, Kaji? You don't have the security clearance....”

“I do, actually,” Kaji interrupted her. He got something out of his shirt pocket and let it dangle in front of her: A laminated identity card. “I've officially been appointed by the U.N. as an inspector inside NERV.” His ever-present grin broadened. ‘I'm here to watch you, Misato.”

“What the hell is this about?” Misato demanded to know. “You've changed sides?”

“You wound me, Misato,” Kaji declared theatrically. “We're all on the same side. NERV is a U.N. special purpose organisation, after all.” He suddenly got more serious and his voice more subdued. “But not everyone in the U.N. is happy about NERV. The amounts of money you get from the U.N. budget are staggering. The special privileges NERV enjoys, including your near-total authority over Tokyo-3, make some people very jumpy. And now you have three EVAs concentrated here. People fear that. Sure, for now the EVAs are tied down in fighting angels, but once they aren't anymore... you understand how much political power three EVAs could represent, right?”

Misato nodded. All in all, those were understandable concerns. But having a U.N. inspector watch her every step would be inconvenient. And that this inspector was Kaji... Misato's serious face broke down into an expression of helplessness. *This will be a nightmare!*

She was spared the need to answer when she heard Aoba reporting: “First and Third Children have arrived.” And with only some seconds delay: “Second Child has arrived.”

Ibuki took this as the cue to report on the Evangelions: “Power connection to all EVAs stable. All
units awaiting their pilot.”

Two minutes later Aoba reported: “First Child in Unit 00.” About ten seconds later: “Third Child in Unit 01.” Then nothing for a while.

“Angel has reached Tokyo-3 city perimeter,” Hyuga now spoke up.

“Engage city defences!” Misato ordered. She was glad that for now she had a perfect justification to take her mind off Kaji. Damnit, Asuka! How difficult can it be to get into that plugsuit? Though Misato had to grant that she never had been inside one, something she was rather glad about. So maybe she should not judge the pilots about this. But there's an angel out there, and it's nearly directly above us already!

It took almost another minute until Aoba reported: “Second Child in Unit 02.”

Figures. First time I'm getting into my plugsuit here is at an angel battle. Which would not be a problem if it were not for the fact Asuka had to share the locker room with that blue-haired freak. It made her suddenly very conscious about changing. Who wouldn't be with her around?

She only needed to look at her changing to recall the incident in that dirty, run-down apartment. It was an infuriating memory, and having the harlot in close proximity, again in a state of undress, only made it that much more infuriating. In the end, she left the locker room nearly a minute after the other girl, who of course was again all creepily calm and unperturbed. Well, too bad, real humans do sometimes have emotions like anger. Asuka would not apologize if that anger caused a minute delay.

She ran through the corridors towards the EVA cages. On the way, she caught up to Shinji. Not a very fast runner it seems. Jeez…

“That fight's gonna be easy!” she exclaimed to him. “With me here, the angels are toast.”

“You sound way too… enthusiastic… about that prospect,” Shinji muttered between heavy breaths.

“I am!” Asuka agreed. “I'm an EVA pilot. A warrior. And I'm gonna kick that angel into orbit, like England just shot a penalty.”

Unsurprisingly, that reference flew just as high over Shinji's head. Japan. I am not going to watch baseball matches, that's for sure! If she was staying any longer in that hotel room, she might have to unpack all the Turbine Potsdam and Schalke merchandise already.

“You… actually… like fighting?” Shinji asked. He sounded nonplussed. Or, as nonplussed as running allowed him to sound.

“Hell, yeah,” Asuka confirmed. “And I'm good at it, as you'll see. Angels? No problems. I showed that against that overgrown trout, didn't I?”

“Well, yeah,” Shinji had to admit. “Still… it's weird.”

Says that guy? Hah! They had reached the EVA cages. “Less talking, more climbing into giant thought-controlled robots!”
Before Misato could even say something, she could hear Asuka on the comms. “What’s the situation?”

Part of Misato, the Captain, was annoyed at the lack of communication discipline. But the other part, the guardian of Shinji and former guardian of Asuka, suppressed this annoyance. It was bad enough she had to send those kids out to fight; there was no need to also subject them to military discipline.

“I’m transmitting a visual feed to you. The Angel is that blue octahedron above the city. It’s on course to its direct centre,” Misato replied. To the point above the upper-most point of the Geofront. That surely was no coincidence. “You will probably have to fight as soon as you hit the surface. That’s why we’re sending you and Shinji in first. You two have better synch rates than Rei; your EVAs will hence have better reaction times. But we will fight with all three EVAs deployed.”

“Aww, really?” Asuka complained. “I bet you I could take on that Angel alone.”

“Asuka...” Misato warned her. Now both the Captain and the guardian were annoyed.

“It’s what I’ve trained for in Germany for years, isn't it?” Asuka argued. “That wasn't just research; it was combat training. And it was for use against those things, wasn't it? And it paid off when I defeated that one angel, alone. Shinji has nearly no training at all.” Shinji? I'll have to have... no, I'll have to tell Kaji to have a talk about Japanese etiquette with her. Which probably would be useless, since Asuka knew Japanese etiquette. She just cared very little about offending the sensitivities of people around her. “I want to fight!”

“You'll get to,” Misato told her. “If you think you're such a hot shot, by all means attack the angel. But Shinji will have a fair stab at it, too.”

“Uh, actually...” Shinji began.

Misato was relatively sure what he was about to say. And if she could make him avoid combat, she would do so. She would dearly like to do so, in fact. But sending out EVA-02 without backup was just not an option.

“Launch in ten seconds,” she ordered to cut him off. “Unit 00 will join you a minute later.”

All three pilots acknowledged the order.

The EVAs had not even fully reached the top when Ibuki announced loudly: “Energy build up inside the angel!”

“Specifics!” Misato bellowed.

“It's concentrating at its core and... it's focused outwards!” Ibuki yelled back.

Damn. No! “Shinji, Asuka, hold! Don't step out...”

But it was too late. Shinji's screams were already filling the loudspeakers; long, continuous, haunting screams. Asuka, of course, tried not to do the same, but to little avail. She screamed in short, throaty fits. Both their Evangelions had been hit right in the chest by concentrated energy
beams. In Shinji's case, that beam even managed to fully vaporize an entire building standing in the way. In the midst of this agony, Misato hastily ordered the elevators to be lowered again.

“Hyuga, take over for me,” she ordered and then set out to walk to the EVA cages. Kaji joined her. That surprised and annoyed Misato for a moment. But then, Asuka is his ward.

“And you worry about a sexual harassment suit,” Kaji muttered.

“What do you mean?” Misato asked angrily. She was too worried for Shinji to put up with Kaji’s antics.

“That’s exactly the stuff they’re sending in inspectors for,” Kaji told her. “So we can watch NERV sending out children to fight. Children to suffer. Child soldiers. You just know how this will look on a report.”

The two entered the elevator to the cages.

“We need these children to...” Misato began to defend herself.

“I know,” Kaji interrupted her. “That’s why so far nobody has said a word. Asuka is right: Officially, she was at Berlin to help in researching EVA technology, rather than to get combat training as a six year old child. Officially, using the research objects as weapons is an emergency solution. Officially, the children have no military rank, are not part of any armed forces, and could walk away at any time. Hell, that's really why we're making them go to school, isn't? We're upholding an illusion of normalcy that just isn't there. No, those aren't child soldiers, why, they're just normal students who help out at NERV after school.” He shook his head with an ironic grin on his face. “We've presented the world with a lie that's easy to swallow. And because the world is so dependent on those children to defeat the angels, nobody looks too closely and everyone just upholds the lie.”

Now Misato understood. Her anger at Kaji became entirely subdued when she thought through what he had said. “But if they hear the screams of a child who thinks and feels his ribcage has just been torn open…. Who certainly has all the same pain as if it had in fact been...”

“Yeah,” Kaji answered. “Of course, it's just three pilots. Just three children. In Africa there are several warlords with entire companies and battalions of child soldiers. But nobody cares about Africa. Half its territory is recognized as being stateless. But the U.N. … they have become a pillar of stability since Second Impact. Maybe the pillar of global stability. The paragon of virtue that keeps the squabbling nation-states at bay. If people become aware, really aware, how a U.N. organization is using child soldiers...”

The elevator came to a halt, its door opened. They stepped out.

“Do they really care about that?” Misato asked.

“Haven't you been listening?” Kaji almost hissed back. “No national government is going to care because the lives of just three children have been destroyed. But some are out to target NERV anyway. And NERV using child soldiers will be a very welcome justification for them to try to shut the whole thing down.”

“So… will this be in your report?” Misato asked. “You know why NERV is necessary. It absolutely is. I'm surprised they picked you to be an inspector, to be honest. You've been with
NERV. You aren't impartial. You could just omit certain things.”

“Yeah, I could,” Kaji agreed. He gripped the railing of the gangway and looked over the coolant liquid filling up the room. Both Asuka and Shinji had been pulled from their entry plugs. Cranes were transporting their seats to a waiting medical team. Both were unconscious. “But would it really be fair to Asuka and to Shinji to hush up how they're suffering here? And I don't like hush-ups. You know that, Misato.”

Misato formed fists and cast her view down.
Ramiel II

The world suddenly... stopped.

Whereas just a second before everything had been wild, frenzy and chaos, now there was calm and peace.

Shinji realized he was awake. And outside of his EVA, even outside of his plugsuit, wearing instead a hospital gown. He was lying in a bed looking up. Something was missing.

_The pain_, he realized. After intense or long lasting pain, its absence could become quite notable. _The pain..._ Suddenly his breath became haggard as he started to remember. That intense, all-consuming pain that had come out of the middle of his body. The lava inside Mt Asama, Shamshel piercing through his arms, Sachiel stabbing his head... nothing had been as painful as that. He was shaking.

_and the angel isn't dead. They're going to make me go out again and fight it_. That thought felt downright apocalyptic to him. He knew physical damage to his Evangelion was not actually transferred to his body, that he could not die from it, and that the pain would go as soon as he had desynchronized, or at least after the next sleep (or blackout...) afterwards. But the thought of having to endure such pain again... the pain had been so all-encompassing that any potential repeat of it did seem like the end of the world. Something he had to avoid under all circumstances. Something that nearly made him panic by just thinking about it.

He closed his eyes and willed his breath to go slower. It was no use thinking about this. What would come, would come. So it had always been in his life: There was no point worrying about the future, because it was entirely outside of his hands.

He opened his eyes again and let his head fall to the side. To his surprise, he saw another bed there, next to his. It had obviously been recently occupied, its blanket had been pulled to the side, the way people do when they get up.

For a while, Shinji just lay there. After that disastrous fight, simply staying in bed and doing nothing was appealing. But he just could not clear his head of the fear that he would have to get out again and resume fighting. That he would feel that pain again. That made him restless. He was ashamed at how much he feared pain. He maybe was not a man yet, but he was growing up to be one. Certainly he was no small child anymore. _I shouldn't fear pain_. And yet... _Just me being weak again_. And yet... _I never want to feel that pain again_.

His thoughts made him jittery. He would _like_ to just lie there and think of nothing, but apparently that was not possible. So he got up nervously. After looking around and seeing nothing of any interest in the room, he slowly and carefully opened its door to step outside.

Opposite to the room, the corridor had a window front with a view of the hospital park. Soryu was looking out of those windows.

“So... Soryu...” Shinji began.

She turned her head around. Her look was grim and annoyed. “Oh. You. So the angel got you as well?”
Shinji nodded, walked up to his side and looked out of the window. He was afraid of what she might say. Ever since the incident at Ayanami’s apartment, the two had avoided each other.

Soryu turned around to the windows again as well. “I'm gonna get that damn angel. It's still out there somewhere.”

“You still want to fight?” Shinji could not believe it.

“Do you think what I said before the fight was just empty talk? That I was just in it for a quick victory?” Soryu accused him. “No. I am an Evangelion pilot. A warrior. I know some battles will be painful. They always try to couch it in the nicest terms, but I know. I've accepted it.”

“So what you've said is true?” Shinji asked. “That you've trained to fight for years already?”

“Since I was six,” Soryu told him.

Shinji looked down. That felt… wrong, somehow. But apparently Soryu was not seeing it the same way, so instead he politely commented: “You have more experience than me.” A pause. “And probably more strength. When that angel hit me... the pain…” He shook his head and whispered: “Worse than everything I've ever felt.”

It took some time for Soryu to answer. “….yeah. Yeah it was.”

Shinji felt surprised by her admission. But then, she sounded exhausted, and who would not be after that battle? Maybe she was for once too exhausted to shout.

“And yet... they're still going to send us out to fight again,” he stated.

“Of course they are,” Soryu confirmed grimly. “We have to.”

“That's what they'll be saying,” Shinji stated. “That it's necessary for us to fight.”

“I say so,” Soryu corrected him. “I know so.”

That made Shinji look at her. He realized that he was seeing her for the first time without her A10 clips, which she was even wearing in school. Her face was hard and determined, as if cast in stone, with her red hair, now free of any constraints, surrounding it like a halo of fire. The modern Lady Tomoe...

“What... what makes you think so?” he asked.

“We have to prevent Third Impact, after all,” she claimed. Her voice was back to normal – that is, clearly saying 'Are you an idiot?'.

“Third... Impact?” Shinji echoed.

Now Soryu turned around to look at him. “Yes. Third Impact. The reason we're fighting against the angels?” When Shinji just continued to look at her in confusion, she laughed. It was a small and somewhat bitter laugh. “They haven't told you...”

“Told me what?” Shinji demanded to know, now somewhat more lively.
“The true reason for Second Impact,” Soryu answered. It sounded like she enjoyed her advantage in knowledge. “It wasn't a comet that hit Antarctica. Rather, an expedition found something there... a giant, humanoid object. That was the First Angel. During the probe, there was an explosion. That was the Second Impact. It took just one angel for that, Shinji. That's why we have to fight them. So they can't start Third Impact. And that's why they're attacking here. They want to eliminate NERV, their only credible enemy.”

Shinji took a shocked step back. “So whenever we fight them....”

“Third Impact could happen,” Soryu confirmed. “But also if we don't. That's why we have to kill them. That is the job of the Evangelion pilots. Three people with the weight of the world on their shoulders.”

Shinji turned to look outside again. He certainly was feeling that weight now.

Soryu just chuckled, though. “You really didn't know. Bought the 'comet' line hook, line and sinker, didn't you?”

Despite his surroundings, despite the angel still being alive, despite his fears, Shinji felt he had to defend himself. “Most people do!” he exclaimed petulantly. “It's not like anyone ever told me before you.”

Soryu still snickered, but it soon sounded somewhat bitter. After a while she asked: “So if you didn't know, why have you been fighting?”

Shinji continued looking out of the window. “Because I was the only one who could do the job. I didn't know the world was at stake, but... there are almost a million people in Tokyo-3. It's not the world, but...”

“Still something worth fighting for,” Soryu continued grimly. Shinji was not sure if he would have worded it that way. *Did I fight for a worthwhile reason?* She paused. “And if you didn't know... then I suppose you really didn't train in an EVA before your first fight?”

“It was the first time I had even seen an Evangelion,” Shinji insisted.

Soryu scoffed. “So you just stumbled into this whole thing blindly and just did as you were told. Well, I know the truth. Know why we have to destroy that thing. And I will. I *will* fight it. I'm an Evangelion pilot. That's my job.”

*She sounds so determined...* Shinji was amazed. He breathed out. He did not have her courage, her determination, her strength. But maybe he could at least try. *If really the whole world depends on it...* The thought of the pain he had endured still made his stomach turn. He whispered, because he did not have the strength to say it out loud, but he did manage to say: “I'm an Evangelion pilot, too. I'll be in that battle as well.”

They both looked outside the windows now, looking far away into the distance where the enemy was still waiting. Neither of them spoke a word.

This tense but still comfortable silence was interrupted by a rattling sound from the end of the corridor. To his surprise, Shinji saw Ayanami coming from there, in her plugsuit. She was pushing a cart, loaded with food, in front of her and stopped right in front of her two fellow pilots.
Without further ado she began: “I am here to brief you on the timetable of Operation Yashima. The operation will begin at 00:00. Pilots Ikari, Soryu and Ayanami will arrive at the cage by 17:30. At 18:00, Units 00, 01 and 02 will activate. At 18:05...”

“Just wait a minute there,” Soryu cut in aggressively. “What is Operation Yashima?”

“Captain Katsuragi’s plan to defeat the angel,” Ayanami reported.

“Which is...?” Soryu demanded to know.

“Captain Katsuragi will brief you on the details,” Ayanami told her. “It is imperative that you are at the EVA cages by 17:30. I have brought you food and replacement plugsuits.”

Soryu laughed bitterly. “So Misato has deployed us yet again. While we weren't even conscious again yet.”

“Do you have objections to the plan?” Ayanami asked her.

“To a plan I don't even know yet?” Soryu asked sarcastically. She scoffed again. “But don't worry. Since you seem to be playing courier servant for our superiors, you can tell them I'm ready. I know my duty.”

Ayanami nodded. Then she looked at Shinji.

It took some time until he could interpret the gesture. When he had, he took a step back. “Of course I'll be there as well!” And more bitter and subdued: “It's not like I have a choice.”

“You do,” Ayanami simply said.

For a long time, no one said a word. They had come to a communication impasse... which was finally broken by Soryu when she sighed exasperated. “What do you mean by that?”

“Operation Yashima only requires two Evangelion units,” Ayanami explained. “I can pilot Unit 01. Dr Akagi is already prepared to rewrite the personal data files.”

“Dr Akagi...” Shinji echoed. He had not seen much of the head scientist yet. He knew she was Misato's friend, but he had only seen her in a professional capacity at NERV so far. Misato redeployed us without so much as asking us. While Dr Akagi prepared... allowed for the possibility I might leave. What did that say about those two people? What did it say about Shinji’s guardian?

“I'm leaving,” Ayanami announced. “Captain Katsuragi and Dr Akagi are waiting for me.” She turned around, leaving the cart behind. She stopped for a moment to say, without turning around: “Goodbye, Ikari.”

When she started walking again, Shinji shouted: “Wait, Ayanami!” Again, the bluehaired girl stopped without turning around. Shinji ran up to her. “You think I'm leaving?”

“With Pilot Soryu and EVA-02 present, we'll have two units available again even if you leave,” Ayanami answered. “You dislike piloting. It makes sense for you to leave.”

Except for what Soryu just told me. And... “Except for my promise,” Shinji said quietly. Ayanami's
head turned around. It was a slow, deliberate move, and yet Shinji was sure he had caught her by
surprise. Shinji did not know where he had gained the sudden strength to speak so frankly, but he
took it. “It still counts. And it seems in order to protect you, I'll have to pilot the Evangelion.”

Asuka was annoyed.

*That damn idiot!*

What the hell had gotten into him to talk to her like they had known each other forever? Sure, they
had both been injured by the enemy. That was why Asuka had failed to shoo him away in time.
That was why she had told him what she did. And yet... *I shouldn't have. That only sends the
wrong signals.*

It was kind of cute that he had piloted EVA even though he had not known what it was all about,
had piloted it just for the sake of this overgrown annex to old Hakone... cute in a 'helpless puppy'
sort of way. In a weak way, a pathetic way. He really was more serious than his classmates who
were always mindlessly chatting about their newest obsessions or the newest gossip. But that did
not save him from being a pathetic pawn, someone who had just blindly stumbled into the whole
EVA business. Someone for whom piloting EVA meant nothing.

And yet, he had defeated two angels already. It was unfair.

*Probably thinks himself oh so noble for having defended Tokyo-3.* She had sensed it when they had
been talking. He had lit up like an American Christmas tree when she had called that something
worthwhile. *Pfah. Yes, he did fight even though he did not know what was at stake. That does not
make him something better. And what does it matter to him anyway? The harlot even assumed he'd
leave! He whines about having to pilot EVA. For me...*

For her, it was more than just her job. It was her *calling.* A weak idiot like Shinji would never
understand what that meant, would never understand putting so much work and emotion and
ambition into something. That was why she had to do something now. If Shinji really wanted to
leave piloting EVA he soon would be able to. That was okay, actually. Not everyone was cut out to
be a pilot. He was the outdated model; now the replacement had arrived. She had already killed one
angel on the way to Japan. Now she would defeat the next one. Sure, its energy beam had hurt. But
she was a soldier. Hurt was part of the job. As was victory.

Currently, she was walking EVA-02 to the temporary NERV encampments at Mt Futago. EVA-00
was behind her, and EVA-01 last in line. The towering, threatening expression of Unit 01 was
undermined by its slouching walk.

With some irritation, Asuka noticed the cables on the ground. Lots of cables. Lots and lots of *really
big* cables. There were power plants and relay stations with fewer power lines than there were
cables here. Most power plants and relay stations, probably. *What the hell is Misato up to?*

She was not pleased when she learned the answer.

The three pilots had left their machines, which now were a bit downhill so they would be relatively
easy to enter again. Misato and Dr Akagi had called them together on a stretch of road. There was
electrical gear all around them and even now people were still busy setting everything up.
“The energy output of all of Japan?” Asuka echoed with Misato had just said. “Is that even possible?”

“Energy transmission is problematic, but not impossible,” Dr Akagi answered. “All those cables have been laid for a reason, Asuka. Don't worry, the energy will reach the rifle.”

“And we need such an energy output,” Misato added. “It's the only thing that allows us to pierce the enemy's AT field. In theory, at least.

“In theory...” Asuka repeated. “Just great.”

“The MAGI assures us the power output should be sufficient, but it's not like we have any other way to test this than going ahead with this operation,” Misato pointed out. “We have to take the risk.”

No. You mean we pilots have to take the risk. But Asuka did not say so. That came with the job, and she was eager to do that job. Misato's 'we're all in this together' rhetoric still rankled her, though.

“Aiming the rifle at the enemy will be a delicate task,” Dr Akagi continued. “The position beam will be influenced by the Earth's gravity, magnetic field and rotation and will hence not fire in a straight line. The MAGI will calculate those factors and transmit a firing solution, but it still is imperative the rifle is fired at just the right moment.”

“That is why you will do the job, Asuka,” Misato took over. “You have the best synch rates, so your EVA has the best reaction times.”

“Yes!” Asuka celebrated. “Let's see how much that angel likes energy beams when they're aimed at it.”

“You need to pull the trigger exactly as soon as the target indicators converge in the centre, understood?” Misato told her.

Asuka simply glared at her. She had done EVA rifle training since she had been seven.

“Be aware that before you can fire the rifle a second time, you'll have to wait for the unit to cool, replace the fuses and reload,” Dr Akagi advised her.

Asuka quickly realized what that meant. “The angel shoots everything it perceives as a threat. If I don't destroy it with my first shot...”

“You will,” Misato reassured her. Hah. Easy for you to say. If I miss I'll be killed, and that's part of your operation plan. “Rei, Unit 00 will cover Unit 02. If it becomes necessary, use the shield we issued you at headquarters. It should hold up to the enemy's beam for at least seventeen seconds.”

“Understood,” Rei affirmed.

Surprisingly, Shinji spoke up, even if he was barely more than muttering. “If it becomes necessary? What does that mean? Is Ayanami supposed to jump in front of that ray?”

“With the shield protecting her,” Misato pointed out. “It's the only way to cover Unit 02, which will be prone in order to fire the rifle and hence otherwise completely unprotected and unable to
dodge."

Asuka saw how Shinji repeatedly formed his right hand into a fist and opened it again. He looked down. "And I? What will I be doing?"

"You are our reserve," Misato told him. "To be deployed as necessary. Should Unit 00 or 02 be disabled, you'll take over the job."

Asuka laughed. "So he'll do nothing."

Misato looked away for a second. "...I had planned for him to hold the shield. He has the second highest synch rate, after all. The Commander overruled me."

Asuka laughed again. More bitterly this time. "So Daddy is protecting his little boy. Figures. All nepotism here in Japan."

"You get to shoot the angel, don't you, Asuka?" Misato reminded her. Asuka knew that tone. Misato had gone beyond just being annoyed now, but she was holding her anger back. "So what does it matter to you?"

"It means I'll need to rely on this blue-haired freak to protect me," Asuka argued. Already back in Germany she had always cared little just how annoyed or angered Misato was "And I'm not sure if she's up to the job."

"Her synch rate is more than enough to simply hold a shield," Misato pointed out. She sighed. "Look. The operation starts in half an hour. I expect all of you to be in your EVAs and ready to start action by then. I'll be in the temporary command post." With that, she turned and left.

Asuka looked at her fellow to pilots with annoyance. It really did figure. Shinji had whined and complained so much about having to pilot EVA, about facing that angel again, and now all he had to do was stand around. Silly boy. She could understand that it could be a daunting job for someone who had not trained all his life, who had simply been swept off the street by all accounts. But then he should just leave. Leave the job to the professionals. Or alternatively, grow a spine and just do the damn job. But not this wavering back and forth; it's pathetic!

"I'm sorry," Shinji was now quietly telling Rei.

"What for?" the bluenette answered.

"You'll have the most dangerous task," Shinji explained. "It should have been my task. Misato even said so. And now I can't even protect you."

This raised Asuka's suspicion. She walked close up to the two. "Protect her? What's that all about?"

Shinji's demeanour changed from subdued and quiet to more lively... and somewhat panicked. He almost jumped away from her presence "Uh, you see, it's, ah..."

"He has promised to protect me," Rei told her.

Asuka's head whirled around to her. Since Rei, of course, had not moved a single milimetre, their two faces were now close up to each other. "What? What sorta sappy nonsense is that?"
She was surprised that Shinji could make such a promise. Apparently he could pilot his EVA well enough to protect people, but from what she had seen of him she would not have expected him to approach a girl and make such a promise. But then, maybe I shouldn't be surprised. God knows what the two did after I left that dump of an apartment...

Shinji was, again, looking down and this time blushing; he certainly was in no condition to answer. Instead, the eternally unperturbed Rei did. Good in exams, can pilot an EVA, nothing shocks her... a fucking Wondergirl. Bah! The bluenette was looking right at Asuka. “It is a promise. He has held it so far. And now, I will protect you.”

“How?” Asuka exclaimed. “We don't even like each other!”

“That is irrelevant,” the Wondergirl stated. “I will protect you.”

She was still looking right at Asuka. Right into her eyes, in fact. Only now did Asuka notice just how red Wondergirl's eyes were. It was a bit creepy, but also kind of interesting. And Wondergirl's look was determined and calm. She means what she's saying. That did not surprise Asuka, per se, but....

She scoffed. “Like I need protection!”

She turned to walk off to her Evangelion's entry plug.

Behind her, she could hear Wondergirl saying: “Good bye,” but she did not care.

Misato wasn't kidding about not being able to move.

EVA-02 lay prone, and both of its hands were holding a machine that even by EVA standards was a very large rifle indeed. I'm a sitting duck. Asuka did not like that feeling at all. She told herself over and over that it did not matter, that she would shoot first and that she would get the angel, but the uneasiness remained.

“Asuka,” That was Misato through the communication system. “We're entrusting you with all the energy of Japan.”

Can I have Korea as well? Asuka had a feeling she could use it. Damn it, in Germany we could've drawn from the entire European grid.

“We're counting on you!” Misato continued.

Yeah, yeah, no pressure... damnit, Misato! But in her fourteen years of life Asuka had learned that showing weakness was the surest way to summon problems, so outwardly she was the model picture of self-confidence. “You can. Don't be so dramatic, Misato, it's just a single shot!”

“If you say so...” she heard Misato mutter. And after a while, louder and more official: “Final safeties released. Load the gun, Asuka!”

Asuka did so, idly wondering why they even needed the most advanced combat system ever developed by humanity for this. For simply pulling a trigger. If it was the MAGI anyway who did the aiming, surely that was something that could be automated? Well, all the better for myself. The
“Beginning energy transmission to position rifle,” Asuka heard a male voice on the communication system. She focused on her targeting apparatus. Another male voice was counting down. “8... 7... 6... 5... 4...“ Asuka thought she faintly heard Ritsuko shouting over the countdown, but her mind was too focused on the rifle in front of her to notice. “2... 1...”

“Transfer complete!” Misato announced. Not a second later the target indicators converged. Immediately, Asuka fired.

...but so did the angel.

No! Asuka saw several things at once. The pulse of light from the angel, a veritable light show above the lake separating Mt Futago from Tokyo-3, and both beams impacting the ground... both missing their target. A huge explosion rocked Tokyo-3, levelling several building blocs. At the same time, EVA-02 was rocked by another explosion. Fortunately, it was only the shockwave Asuka was feeling; there was no actual damage done to her Evangelion.

Grimly, Asuka reloaded without awaiting orders to do so. But she knew this would be pointless. Dr Akagi had explained how long reloading would take. I'm dead. But maybe I can take you Hurensohn with me. At least people would remember her as the Heroine of Mt Futago.

“What the hell happened?” Asuka shouted into the communication system.

The first response she heard was a groan. Misato sounded like she was in pain. Apparently the temporary command post had been hit considerably harder by the nearby explosion than EVA-02. Finally the Captain managed to say: “Ritsuko... Rits' says it was mutual interference. The two beams came close enough to each other to divert each other.” Gravity, magnetic field, even other beams... this weapon is bullshit levels of sensitive! “Asuka...”

“Yeah I know,” Asuka cut her off. “I already reloaded, but...” She trailed off. There was nothing more to say. I'll die as EVA pilot. People will remember that about me. That... was not so bad, actually. The Martyr of...

There was a sudden flash of light and then it was all over...

...except that it was not.

There was a sudden shadow in the light. Asuka managed to open her eyes again and saw the strong back of an Evangelion in front of her... Evangelion Unit 00, holding the shield in front of it.

She did it. She actually jumped into the beam. For... me? Asuka knew of course that this was simply part of the mission, but that was not what she was thinking about right now. Only that someone would actually take the metaphorical bullet for her.

She was astounded about that long enough that she realized only with some delay that the mighty shape in front of her began to fizzle at the edges. The shield! It's melting!

She looked at her targeting screen again. The indicators were still far from close to each other. Hurry up! Macht hinne, ihr gottverdammten Wichser!

She could hear pained breathing from the First Child in the communication system.
Suddenly, there was even more shadow inside the light of the angel's beam, and a scream over the communication system, but Asuka did not regard that. The indicators had just converged. She fired.

When she looked up again, she saw the angel half in flames and slowly falling down from the sky in the distance, but she paid no attention to that, either. Instead she looked right in front of her. EVA-01 had pushed EVA-00 out of the way and then, apparently, fallen over. Its entire left shoulder was shredded up, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. Shinji was grunting in pain over the communication system.

...but there was no signal from EVA-00. Its entire armour looked melted, and the unit itself had fallen flat on its face.

“A... aya...” That was Shinji. He still sounded pained.

Asuka's face distorted in a grimace. *Whining and saying her name won’t help. Pathetic.* She set out to work and had her EVA remove the half-molten armour above Unit 00's entry plug. EVA-02 peeled it off bit by bit. Finally, the unit could eject said entry plug. LCL sprayed everywhere. EVA-02 carefully laid it on the ground. Then Asuka ejected her own entry-plug.

EVA-00's one looked just as bad as its unit, just as damaged and half-molten. And the First Child was still inside. Asuka was not even thinking, but rather running on autopilot. Her previous negative feelings towards 'the harlot' were forgotten for the moment. Here there was a person who had taken the shot for her... and besides, Asuka could not have anyone die for her sake. That would only lessen her; instead of a heroine she would be the cause for a fellow pilot's death. And deep down she knew she *already* was not worth of Rei's actions.

The entry plug's hatch was still hot, but the gloves of Asuka's plugsuit were up for the job. At first, no matter how hard she pulled, nothing happened. Finally, the hatch's opening mechanism moved a little bit. Presumably, the heat had deformed some parts. It was possible the hatch could not be opened in this condition, but Asuka would be damned if she let that stop her.

It cost all her strength and effort, but finally, the hatch opened, and Asuka could look inside.

There, Rei lay more in her pilot seat than she sat in it, surrounded by a puddle of remaining LCL. Her eyes were closed and she was not moving.

“First! Rei! Ayanami!” Asuka shouted, unsure what to really call her but not letting that stop her. “Are you all right?”

While Asuka breathed haggardly, it took some time for Rei to move. Slowly, the bluenette's head turned and her eyes opened. She looked up.

“*Grundgütiger, you scared me!*” Asuka exclaimed.

“Why?” Rei asked. *Even now* she did not seem perturbed. “You said we don't even...”

“It's not like I like you or anything!” Asuka interrupted her. “But as you've said... it's irrelevant.” Rei nodded weakly. “I'm still glad you survived the fight.”
“...am glad as well,” Rei answered. “That we won the fight.”

It did not sound very convinced, though it was of course hard to tell with the First Child. Before Asuka could wonder any further about this, she heard a half-shouted, half-grunted “Ayanami!” from outside. She got her head out of the entry-plug and saw Shinji running towards it. He still held his left shoulder, but he seemed to have no physical problems; was still a rather weak runner but he did run without problems.

“She's fine,” Asuka told him when he had approached. She could not help but to sound dismissive.

Of course, that did not stop him from sticking his head inside the entry plug. Asuka soon heard soft whimpers from inside. Shinji's shoulders were shaking.

*He's crying.* Asuka muttered, half to herself: “You care about her that much?”

He hastily withdrew from the entry-plug. He positioned himself in front of her, and then bowed rigidly. “Thank you for taking care of Ayanami while I was still in my EVA.”

Asuka made a confused grimace. She knew about bowing and its different variants and all that, of course, but seeing it in action was still weird. And that it was directed towards her made her uncomfortable. She could see that he was sincere. *One takes the shot for me, the other thanks me so profoundly...* It confused her. Even if she would never admit to it, she had little experience with people acting that way, doing things for her.

Asuka coughed to overplay her emotions. “Yeah well, we need to get the First out of there. Which we could already have done if you had only shown up a bit earlier, you know!”

“I'm sorry...” Shinji muttered.

*What?* She had not actually intended to accuse him. After all, he himself had been injured in the fight. If it were not for that he probably would have been so quickly at EVA-00s entry plug that NERV's sensors would have detected a Doppler shift. And that was something he could have brought up in his defence. Instead, he merely apologized. *How... weak.*

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Asuka said. “Think you're up for the job now, at least? I don't think the First is quite ready to walk to the Command Post alone, and she needs medical attention. We'll have to support her. Carry her, maybe.”

“It's just some phantom pain in my shoulder,” Shinji told her. “It's fading. I can...”

“I didn't ask for your medical history,” Asuka told him. “Let's go then.”

Getting the First Child out of the entry-plug was a bit awkward. She could move and walk on her own, but she was very weak. After she had gotten up from her seat, Asuka and Shinji basically had to pull her outside. Then they took her in the middle of them, her arms over their shoulders, so that she could be supported.

*Why am I doing this? I only wanted to check on the First. Oh well. Can't back out now. Besides, who knows what sort of perverted activities would ensue if I simply let Shinji carry her. Asuka looked over to her. At least she's wearing something now. Even if these plugsuits are flimsy. They were, mostly, very thin, so whenever Wondergirl leaned against Asuka it felt like there was nothing much in the way.*
“Ikari,” Rei spoke up. “Why were you crying?”

_What sorta stupid question is that?_ Shinji did not seem to mind, did not even seem surprised at such a question. He just answered: “I was happy. _I am_ happy.”

After a period of silence, the First Child spoke up again: “I am sorry. I do not know what to do or feel in a time like this.”

_You gotta be kidding me! What is she, an alien?_ Before Shinji could answer, Asuka barged in: “How about, oh I don’t know... _be damn happy yourself?_ How about trying to simply smile, idiot?”

Rei looked at her, then at Shinji. The Third Child had a faint smile himself on his face and confirmed softly: “Yeah. Try smiling, Ayanami.”

A second later, Shinji nearly missed a step. _Herr im Himmel, can he be any more obvious? What does he even see in her?_ Then Rei turned her head around and smiled at Asuka.

Asuka was surprised enough that she nearly lost her hold on the First Child. It was a facial expression she had never before seen on her. She had to admit it looked kind of cute. Helpless puppy kind of cute again, to be sure, but still very unexpected from Rei.

“And since we're handing out life advice here,” Asuka said haughtily. “Don't say 'good bye' before going on missions. That's way too damn final.”
Misato had made extra sure to come home timely today. She doubted Shinji had done anything amiss while she had been at work; he was not the sort of boy for that. Still, it was the day after the battle, and she needed to check up on him. He had not gone to school today, as she had told him to just rest. After all, once again he had been involved in saving the world.

“I'm home,” she announced cheerfully as she walked through the door.

There was no response. That was odd; even when he was in his room Shinji usually answered. *Except when he's listening to that damn music player, of course. Ah well.* She had told him to rest, after all, and if that was his way of doing it, then that was fine.

She had told him to rest, after all, and if that was his way of doing it, then that was fine.

She sat down at the kitchen table and unpacked what she had brought along from NERV. The price of going home early: Paperwork. Lots and lots of paperwork. But she could indeed do that at home. Most of it were just reports she had to acknowledge and sign, anyway. Most of those concerned the damage to the city: In the last seconds of the battle, the angel, now officially dubbed 'Ramiel', had broken through the Geofront armour. Even worse was the damage caused by the missed positron rifle shot and by Ramiel's impact onto the ground. Right in the centre of Tokyo-3, there now was a giant hole surrounded by several flattened blocs of buildings. NERV would have to close the hole, and the municipal government would have to be basically reconstruct the entire inner city.

Misato was vaguely glad that it was Asuka who had fired those shots. Shinji might have inquired about civilian casualties, 'collateral damage' as the military euphemism went. And while nearly all civilians had in fact been evacuated, the missed shot and Ramiel's crash had caused a few dozen deaths. *Asuka is better suited to bearing this, but I still won't tell her unless she asks.* Misato hoped she would not.

Shinji came out of his room just in time to begin preparing dinner. He just passed by her without greeting, without even acknowledging her. That was... more than just odd. In fact, such impoliteness was as un-Shinji as it could get. Misato looked up from her work to watch him. There clearly was something on his mind, and she waited for him to tell her. She did not intend to push him about it; that was not the right way with him. After all the boy had to go through, Shinji needed a safe space, not additional pressure. Hence she also would not complain about the rudeness. She did not really care about all that politeness stuff herself, and Shinji had better things to focus on.

Misato packed the papers away and prepared the table just in time for Shinji to put the meal on it. He did so without his usual care, almost ramming the pot onto the table. Misato noticed how stiff he was.

*He's angry. But of course he won't say anything.* “Thank you for the meal,” she said.

Shinji just nodded and began eating, his view focused entirely on his plate. Misato also took some spoonfuls, but after a while the tense silence began to grate on her. She began to worry about Shinji.

“Shinji, is something the matter?” she inquired.

Predictably, the boy just shook his head.
Misato laid down her spoon. “Shinji, if you really don't want to tell me, that's fine. But you're obviously angry. If you're angry at someone else, just vent at me, I promise I won't tell them. If you're angry at me... well, just vent regardless. Maybe I did do something wrong.” And I'd dearly like to know what.

“'Maybe?'” Shinji echoed, still looking down, a subdued anger now clearly in his voice.

“So it's me,” Misato stated flatly. “Well, I can't improve myself if you don't tell me what I did wrong.”

“It's nothing,” Shinji muttered. And after a while: “You are the Operations Director, after all”

Ahhh. “Yes, I am,” Misato agreed hesitantly. Then she had an idea. It helps that I'm not overly proud. “But I'm also your guardian. You can tell your guardian what that bitch at NERV did this time.”

That at least got Shinji to look up in surprise. Good. It still took about two minutes of him just stirring his soup until he answered, once again with his head lowered: “Misato, why did you just redeploy us?”

“Hm?” Misato prompted him to go on.

“Ahh. ‘‘After the first fight with the angel,’” Shinji explained.”Do you know how much it hurts to... and then you already redeployed us while we were still unconscious!” Finally his voice got louder. “You didn't even ask us. Didn't even tell us. You just sent Ayanami to present us with a done deal.”

Misato furrowed her brows. She looked down so that Shinji would not immediately catch that. He was right. She had devised her plan while he and Asuka still were unconscious, and when she had heard they were awake she had simply pushed on with it. She had known exactly what she was doing, even while Ritsuko had still raised doubts whether Shinji would pilot again at all.

“You came to the train station. I thought then you did care,” Shinji now almost whispered. “But now, you're just using me as a tool again. All of us. Dr Akagi was ready to reconfigure EVA-01, to let me go. While you...” He shook his head.

“Shinji... of course I planned for three Units,” Misato told him. “But if you had refused to pilot, I... I wouldn't have held it against you.”

“Really?” Shinji asked flatly and subdued. After a pause he went on: “If I had told you right then and there I'd go, you wouldn't have tried to convince me otherwise, wouldn't have tried to save your plan?”

Misato looked down again. She could not lie in this. In the end, Shinji had become merely the reserve pilot in the mission, but her initial plan had called for him to hold the shield. And if he had walked out of that... she would have tried to convince him otherwise. Probably would even have shamed him into staying. With victory or defeat over an angel at stake... with an angel in sights as her prey...

Right then and there, Shinji had just been a tool for her. She understood what he was complaining about: That she had simply expected him to continue to pilot. So she remained quiet.
He did not comment, did not gloat in his rhetorical victory. Instead, he just continued eating. He did not even seem particularly sad.

She still made one last, feeble attempt to defend herself: “My job at NERV comes with certain necessities....”

Uncharacteristically, Shinji interrupted her loudly: “Was it also necessary to nearly kill Ayanami?”

That took Misato aback. “What?”

Finally, Shinji seemed to have lost all prior restraint. “Your plan to catch that angel in Mt Asama. The angel was found below the maximum security line for EVAs, but you didn't care and went ahead with your plan. And when the angel wasn't there... you didn't order a retreat to reconsider, you didn't have the N2 charges dropped, you simply let Ayanami go down even further!”

“I... the angel...” Misato stammered.

“Was that the only thing that mattered to you?” Shinji accused her. “Killing the angel?”

Misato remembered the immense feeling of relief that had overcome her when Shinji had saved Unit 00. Not only because both it and Rei had been saved, but also because otherwise it would in fact have been her responsible for the girl's death. However, since then, she had not further thought about the topic. It was no use dwelling on things in the past.

Was that the only thing that mattered to me then? ....yes.

“So what will you do when the next angel comes?” Shinji asked her when she did not answer.

“Shinji...” Misato appealed to him.

“Don't worry,” Shink said cynically. “I know what my job is, Captain Katsuragi.”

Misato looked at him, utterly shocked and hurt. His accusations were true, but that in particular made them so painful.

Shinji himself now froze. He seemed to realize what he had said. “I'm sorry... I'm sorry!” He hastily stood up from the table and ran to his room.

There was always something surreal about returning to something as boringly normal as school after a fight against alien abominations in a 60m battle machine. Shinji would like to think there also was something calming about it, but… it was not really like that. It just drove the point home that it was only him and two other people who were expected to fight, that only they knew what it really meant. Everyone else got to have a normal, relatively carefree life. Not him.

And it felt like nobody cared about that, either. They all just expected him to fight, no matter how much he suffered. It seemed unfair to Shinji. He recognized that only certain people could pilot. Dr Akagi had once mumbled something about very specific neural structures that would have to match the structures of individual Evangelion units, or at least their mental programming. So Shinji realized that he had to fight, had to stay a pilot, or else so many people would die – billions of people, if Asuka was right. But in the end, after every successful battle, all of them were saved,
while only he suffered. How did that make any sense?

*Is that really something where everyone can just expect me to do my duty? Why should I do this for the sake of the world, when the world just puts me from one painful situation in the next?*

...I'm being selfish again.

He rubbed his eyes. He was tired. He had left the apartment deliberately early today, early enough that Misato was still sleeping and would hence not run into him. He felt bad about the harsh words he had told her. Not that they were not justified, but… *There was no reason to put it like that. No reason to put her on the spot.* And she was the Operations Director, after all. Maybe she did care a bit for him, but first and foremost he was one of her pilots.

He had to be of use to her, just like with any other people.

“Hey!” someone just catching up to him greeted. Shinji looked up; it was Touji. “Seems like the battle was rough.”

He sounded actually concerned. Touji would do this, from time to time, throw in a reference to the battles or NERV training and ask how Shinji was holding up, but that seemed to be just politeness – phrases that were somewhat expected and then forgotten about again once appropriately answered to.

Besides… “How do you figure?” Shinji asked. *How would you even know?*

“You look kind of… mopey again,” Touji explained.

“Yeah, despite the victory!” another voice catching up to the two spoke up. Kensuke, of course. “I only saw some of the officially released footage… all bullshit, of course… but – that was a position rifle, wasn't it?”

Shinji shrugged. Details like that were not really important to him. He wondered sometimes why Kensuke cared about that stuff. The group was just entering the schoolyard, which was slowly filling up with people.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I heard Misato requisitioned it from…”

“Hey!” a new voice cut in aggressively. Shinji turned towards it and saw Soryu running up to them, leaving a visibly confused Horaki behind in a corner. “That's classified information, you dolt! You can't just go around telling it to everyone!”

“Oh come on!” Touji and Kensuke replied in unison. Touji continued: “He was right there! You can't just tell him to…” and Kensuke: “How long do you think this secrecy will even hold, anyway?”

Soryu crossed her arms. “No arguments. Classification exists for a reason. And you're a pilot, Third Child. You're expected to behave like a professional.”

Shinji sighed. Soryu was probably right. He could say no reason why such details should be kept secret, but knowing NERV they probably were such rules. He did not particularly care about being professional, but it would probably do no good to go against the rules.
“She's such a stuck-up bitch,” Kensuke complained after the trio had walked on.

“Usually you'd be the first to point such things out,” Touji told him. “Unless it interferes with you getting information, of course.”

“Well, it does now!” Kensuke argued. “Also, she shouldn't boss Shinji around like that.”

“Yeah,” Touji just agreed. “That ain't right that you can't even say what has happened to you.”

Shinji shrugged. “It doesn't matter.” It did mean he would again have nobody to talk with about the battle except for Ayanami, but it seemed that was how these things went.

Touji grunted. “Well, it... it should.” That settled the discussion until the trio reached the classroom.

When they entered, Kensuke sighed. “Too bad about the mall. Why did that damn angel have to attack right at the centre point of the city?”

“Yeah,” Touji agreed. “Hell if I know what I'm supposed to do after school today.” He paused. “There is actually a fair amount of homework lying around back home...”

“Yeah, I don't think I'll hang out in the city today,” Kensuke agreed. He sighed. “Maybe I'll find some good places in other parts of the city.”

Shinji did not comment. He had hoped avoiding going home as long as possible by staying out late in the city, but with the city centre demolished that did seem unlikely. And apparently, his friends would just go home. But I can't so easily...

He barely paid any attention to class, but that was okay. School did not really matter to him. It did not help him survive battles with giant creatures out to kill him, particularly him as an EVA pilot, and as for his future... that was not something he thought about. And when he did, he rather assumed he would not see it. He wished he had a window seat, like Ayanami. As it was, he could only stare dully ahead.

He only slowly began to pay attention again when lunch break started. He noticed how people gathered around Soryu. Of course... But it seemed to be more than usual. He casually walked over until he could hear what the redhead was saying.

“They told me I only had one shot, but I was so proficient I managed to reload the gun just in time! Not even our head scientist had thought that...”

Shinji sighed.

School was boring, Soryu prevented him from talking about his experiences just so that she could, Touji and Kensuke returned home immediately after school and Shinji feared going home. There was only one moment of the day that promised to be at least a bit uplifting.

Shinji was anxious about Ayanami not being at her usual place. By now, he was relatively sure that if she could be, she would be there. With her, he did not have his usual fears that he might drive her off or that she might suddenly lose her interest in him. It would, after all, be difficult to top his idiocy at her apartment. But by the same token, also as part of her personality, she might not announce if she could not come.
As usual, Ayanami simply stood entirely still at her usual place on Shinji’s way home and looked in his direction. She was entirely expressionless. Her unusual, red eyes simply continued looking right at him, but he just smiled faintly.

As he came to a halt next to her, both of them were silent for a while. Finally, Shinji asked: “How are you?”

“I was reassured any remaining pains will fade within this day or tomorrow,” Ayanami reported.

“Oh,” Shinji breathed. And after a while: “So, are you feeling pain right now?”

“Yes,” Ayanami simply answered.

“...you're amazingly calm then,” Shinji told her. “Shouldn't you have stayed at home? Or... uh, do you have painkillers at home? I think Misato has some back at her apartment...” Which would mean going there, but...

“The pain is insufficient to justify either action,” Ayanami replied. “I have already consumed high quantities of painkillers over the last two days. I do not wish to build up a tolerance to them.”

“Oh. Of course,” Shinji answered. “Still... I'm sorry to hear that. It's just...” He sighed. He did not know how to express himself. He might have given up, usually. But with Ayanami, he could try. He could still fail to communicate what he meant, but he would not make an utter fool out of himself. “Why are you so calm then? If you're in pain... you don't even move, let alone make a sound...”

“Should I?” Ayanami asked.

“It makes me think you're suppressing those reactions for the sake of others,” Shinji explained what he meant. “And that... I don't like that thought.” It was weird to rationally know Ayanami had pain, but to not see it on her. That way, he could not even commiserate or, within his limitations, offer support to her. And he wanted to help her.

“Why?” Ayanami inquired.

“You're already suffering pain,” Shinji answered. “Enough to require painkillers the last two days. You shouldn't burden yourself further. Especially... especially not for the sake of the people for whose sake you already got those injuries.”

“You worry about me again,” Ayanami said. It was a purely factual statement, without emotion or judgement one way or the other.

“You were hurt pretty badly,” Shinji pointed out.

“As part of the mission,” Ayanami replied. “I had to protect EVA-02. It was necessary.”

That made Shinji involuntarily grunt in response. Necessity! It reminded him too much of Misato. “Doesn't it bother you?”

“What do you think should bother me?” Ayanami asked.
“That...” Again Shinji struggled to sort out his thoughts. “That you were put in this position. That Misato simply put you in a position where you got such injuries... where you might have died. Dr Akagi gave me the chance to leave. What about you? Can you just leave?”

It took some time for Ayanami to answer, and untypically for her, there was a change in her usual soft monotone: She was almost whispering. “No. Piloting EVA is my purpose.”

“Your... purpose?” Shinji repeated. “Is that the 'bond' thing you talked about?”

“Yes,” Ayanami answered.

“Doesn't that bother you?” Shinji asked further.

“It is part of my nature,” Ayanami explained. “Therefore, I do not resent that fact. It would be like resenting my leg or my arm. It is just as unchangeable. But it is different for you. You are not bound by any particular purpose.”

Having no purpose in life... But by now Shinji knew that Ayanami meant that in a positive, comforting way, similar to when she had told him she could have simply taken over EVA-01. He wanted to argue against her being 'bound', but he feared he would not find the right word. He felt selfish about doing so, but he hence changed the subject to himself: “Misato, my father... NERV... they don't seem to agree. They see my purpose in piloting EVA-01.”

Again it took some time for Ayanami to reply. “That is your job. You are not bound by it.”

“Do you... do you want me to go, Ayanami?” Shinji muttered.

“No,” she answered. “But it is an option for you.”

Shinji sighed. He truly appreciated what Ayanami was trying to tell him in her laconic style, but he was unsure if she was right. “I don't know. Not anymore, I think.”

“I see,” Ayanami answered.

An awkward silence ensued, something that had become a regular part of their talks. It signalled that the conversation had run its course. Eventually both Children began walking again, in opposite directions.

However, nearly immediately, Shinji came to a halt again. It bothered him that they had ended up only talking about him. He had to make at least an attempt. “Ayanami?”

Ayanami gave a sound of recognition. “Hm?”

“I... I don't know about your 'bond',” Shinji told her. “I don't understand it. But... it seems to me... even if you're bound to piloting EVA, that does not mean you just have to accept everything that comes with it.”

Ayanami turned around. “What difference...”

“Maybe... maybe it was necessary to protect Unit 02,” Shinji went on over her. “But that doesn't mean you have to hide the pain.”
“That is indeed not mission relevant,” Ayanami conceded. Then she continued walking.

Shinji did likewise, until he realized he was on his way home... on his way to Misato's apartment. There was absolutely no reason to already go there, though. After a while, he turned right at an intersection instead of walking straight on. He had no idea where he was going, but as long as it was not to that apartment it would be alright.

Tokyo-3 was not quite a metropolis, but still a large enough city. Even without a city centre, there were innumerable streets and neighbourhoods to go to. Shinji passed by shops, parks, and indeed even an old arcade centre that would probably see rising numbers of customers now. He passed through quiet alleys and busy streets. To him, it made no difference: Even at the busiest places, all the people were just part of the background noise. He did not really care what was around him: After all, he was not really there in order to be there, but just to be away from Misato's apartment.

Not that he had any intention of actually running away. He had done that once already. It was no solution... or rather, he already had a solution available to him. He could quit piloting EVA and leave Tokyo-3, after all. But he had already decided that once and then gone back on his decision. He could not waver back and forth on this forever. He had decided to stay.... with everything that would entail. It was just that right now he did not feel like facing Misato.

The light of the day shifted to the full orange typical of an ending day. In two hours or so the sun would set. Shinji's feet were sore, so at the next park he crossed he sat down on a bench.

He must have dozed off for a while, because he snapped his eyes open in surprise when he heard his name: “Ah, Shinji Ikari. What are you doing here?”

A man in his late twenties or early thirties with shoulder-long hair and a rolled up magazine in his right hand stood in front of the bench. He looked vaguely familiar

“Oh... I'm sorry,” Shinji answered. “You're from the NERV bridge staff, aren't you? But I don't know your name.”

“Yeah, I am,” the man answered. “Aoba. Shigeru Aoba.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Aoba,” Shinji muttered.

“Still out this late?” Aoba asked. “Won't Captain Katsuragi worry?”

Shinji looked down. Misato probably was worried, in fact. She worries about me, and then still sends me out to fight...

“Oh well,” Aoba continued when no answer came forth. “I suppose this is none of my business. Just don't go home all too late, you know?”

The bridge tech walked on. Following an impulse, Shinji jumped on his feet. “Uh... Mr Aoba...”

Aoba stopped and turned around. “Yes, Shinji?”

Shinji suddenly became very self-conscious and awkward again. But he managed to stammer out: “Ah... s-sorry, but... if I may ask, why did you join NERV?”

Surprise showed on Aoba's face. Then he shrugged. “It pays the bills. And hey, I do something for
the defence of the world. That's good, right?"

Shinji nodded unsurely. “It's... a purpose for you, then? Something to believe in?”

Aoba's brows furrowed. “I wouldn't call it that.”

“What do you mean by that?” Shinji inquired. “Uh, if I may ask.”

“There isn't a such a thing as a higher purpose for anything in the end,” Aoba told him. “Not us, not the world, certainly not NERV jobs. And pretending there is usually leads to bad things.”

“But you're in NERV...” Shinji began.

“As I've said, it pays the bills,” Aoba argued. “And it would rather suck for me if Tokyo-3 is destroyed or maybe even the whole world.”

Shinji was slightly confused by an attitude that was so openly.... He could not even quite place it. Callous? Dismissive?

“What's... what's so bad in believing in purposes?” he asked. “Don't people need...” He searched for the right terms and failed.

“Need something bigger than themselves to believe in?” Aoba asked back. Shinji nodded, glad to have been understood. Aoba sighed again. “I did not expect to discuss philosophy with a fourteen year old here. Look, the problem with 'higher purposes' is that if you have something that is bigger than any single human, then you have something that is big enough to sacrifice people for it. It's bigger than any one human, after all, right?”

“But… how do you go through life then?” Shinji muttered. “If you... if you truly think there is no purpose to anything, not even your life...” It was a familiar attitude to him. It was a thought that had dominated large swathes of his life so far. But that had not been a happy existence. He even had considered putting an end to it all, even.

Aoba smiled. “Well, I have rock music,” He held up the magazine and Shinji saw that it was about just that, “and air guitar playing. Isn't that enough?” He shrugged. “In the end, that's all we can hope for in life. To have fun.”

“I see,” Shinji stated. He was not sure if that philosophy made sense to him.

“Sorry if I have confused you, but hey, you asked,” Aoba told him. “And you should really head home now. See you around!”

When he did come home it was already dark outside and had been for some time. He ignored Misato jumping up from her place in the kitchen and went straight to his room. To her credit, she sounded simply worried and kept any anger she might be feeling out of her voice. Even so, Shinji would rather not face her. It was difficult to run away from one's room-mate, but he tried his best.

_The Seventh Angel has been defeated._

Things were happening in rapid succession now. Sure, for now Rei would still have to go through
her normal life, in a world she just could not connect to, experiencing the dull pain of existence. Forced into a shape that was not really hers, but at the same time not truly being what she was derived from, and now not even all there anymore. Rei recognized this all had been necessary for the mission, and to protect Lilith’s... her... Lilith's children. But it was painful and heavy to bear. However now it would soon be all over. Rei Ayanami would soon cease to exist, and her soul would return to the sleeping, unthinking stupor that befit its station.

She just hoped time until then would pass quickly. Day to day life still was a struggle, and there were few things that helped her get through this. Commander Ikari's unwavering faith in her, for example. Or his son's concern for her. She could understand the Commander. He dealt with her in clear, concrete terms, in terms of what was necessary and beneficial for his Scenario. Shinji Ikari, though, was more of a puzzle.

He did not think in terms of the Scenario, and yet he seemed to care for her well-being. Part of that was of course that he just did not know what she was. He could worry about her pain or her life or anything like that because he did not know she was in the end just a tool... a tool for the most important project on Earth, but ultimately not a full person. She had feelings and thoughts and a human shape, but that was almost incidental. She had a clear purpose, and would be replaced if broken or no longer suitable for that purpose.

However, many people did not know that fact. Only a handful people in Japan knew about it, plus the international conspiracy of SEELE. None of her classmates did, for example, and yet none of them interacted with Rei beyond what was strictly necessary. On the whole, only those people who knew what she was showed an interest in her. Shinji Ikari was the sole exception to that pattern.

The idea that a person might care about more than just her purpose was a confusing one. She had always defined herself via that purpose after all. It and her existence were inseparable. And yet... when the previous day Ikari had voiced concern for her again, she had... appreciated that. The talks with him did help to pass the time until her pain could finally be laid to rest. It was unfortunate that she could not talk with him about this pain, but it was still better than nothing.

She also liked when she could help Ikari in turn. She did not even try to fully understand him, as she knew from experience that most people were beyond her understanding. But it was clear that he appreciated those conversations as well, and that made Rei feel... She could not quite put it. Needed, but in a way that was beyond her purpose. That felt nice, too. And she genuinely wished to help Ikari if she could. Soothing him felt like a success to her.

If Commander Ikari said it was necessary or helpful for the Scenario that his son piloted EVA-01, then Rei believed this and would hence contribute to Shinji Ikari doing so. But at the same time... she felt he should be aware that he could in fact leave. It was... difficult to navigate around those two factors.

She would do her best, though. She greatly disliked the thought of disappointing either Ikari. That was why she was standing in her usual spot on Shinji Ikari's way back home, and watched motionlessly as he approached. It was a bit inefficient that she was staying in school for hours and only really got to interact with him afterwards, never more than a quarter or half an hour, but that as well was better than nothing.

“Ikari,” she greeted him. “How are you feeling?”

He had asked that the day before, and might do so again. It was often part of his greeting. But this time, she wanted to ask.
“Ah, I'm fine, Ayanami,” Ikari replied with false cheer. Then he sighed. “Actually, no, not really. There's no reason not to tell you. I... I dread going home. Going to Misato's apartment.”

“Why?” Rei asked.

“I... argued with Misato,” Shinji explained. “I probably shouldn't have.”

Rei's eyebrows moved by a few millimetres. “Captain Katsuragi is your direct superior.” It would be inconceivable for Rei to argue with superiors.

“Is she?” Shinji argued back. “I have a NERV ID card, but no rank or anything. I'm not part of her military hierarchy.”

Rei knew what he meant. Commander Ikari had once explained to her why NERV was set up that way, why the pilots could not be officially part of the military hierarchy. He had called it a 'necessary social construct'. She had not understood why it was necessary, but she had trusted him. Now this meant she lacked the understanding to argue against what Shinji Ikari was saying.

Ikari sighed. “But I still shouldn't have. I do take part in EVA operations, after all, and she... she is my guardian as well.”

Rei nodded slightly. She had never fully understood the role of 'guardians'. To her, a superior was a superior. She did not understand why several redundant relationships codifying that status were necessary. She made no difference between Gendo Ikari as Commander of NERV or as her guardian. But if that special role of Captain Katsuragi as Shinji Ikari's guardian made him listen to her, then that role was apparently doing its job. That was good.

“Why did you argue with her?” Rei asked.

“I was angry,” Ikari explained. “She wanted to know why. So I told her. I... I don't like how she's treating us, Ayanami. Her operations plan nearly got you killed at Mt Asama, and against the latest angel she redeployed Soryu and me while we were still unconscious. It's callous. It seems... it seems we're just tools to her.”

I am. But Rei could not tell him that. And he did not need to bear that burden. “You dislike being considered a tool?”

“Of course!” Ikari exclaimed. “I wished... I wished people cared about me. About me, not my use. That they were nice to me. But it seems I can only get their attention when I pilot my Evangelion.”

Rei thought this important. This was the first time Ikari had mentioned what he wanted for himself. She would have to keep that in mind.

“What will you do now?” she asked.

Ikari sighed again. “I don't know. I don't want to go back to Misato's place. Not until it's evening, at least. I suppose I'll just walk around in the city again. It's just too bad that Kensuke and Touji have gone home already.”

“Would you have liked them at your side?” Rei asked.
Ikari shrugged. “I did hang out with them in the city now and then. Doing that without friends... It's boring walking the streets on your own. Kinda... lonely.”

Rei considered that and mentally checked her schedule for the day. There were no assignments at NERV. It would be a very unusual change in her routine, but it would not at all infringe on her duties. “I can accompany you.”

Ikari almost jumped up. “Huh... what?”

“Would that not make walking through the city less boring and lonely?” Rei argued.

“Ah, well, I suppose,” Ikari stammered. “But, uh, but...”

His reaction was strange to her, but that did not bother her. Most people reacted at least occasionally in ways she considered strange, and she had learned to live with that. People acting strangely was normalcy for her. The only exception to that was Commander Ikari. She knew what motivated him, all his actions were dedicated to that and he was always straightforward. She liked that about him.

“It isn't the same as walking with friends,” she conceded, “but it might be preferable to the alternative.”

“Well, uh...” Ikari began to mumble. “I think... I think we might be considered friends as well, but...”

That makes sense, Rei reflected. Their regular talks would probably let them fall into that category. That was... good, even though it was strange to give a value to something not related to the Scenario. But then, it surely also would not hurt the Scenario, so that was probably okay. She waited for Ikari to finish what he was trying to say.

“...I mean, I don't want to be presumptuous... that is, if you don't mind to be considered a friend...”

“I don't,” Rei simply answered.

“Ah, good,” Ikari stated. “But even so... well, you see...” Rei just waited. “People might get the wrong impressions. It would kinda look like... like a date I suppose.” His voice trailed off awkwardly.

“If people think that, they're wrong,” Rei stated matter-of-factly. When Ikari just stared at her, she for once felt compelled to clarify: “There is no need to worry about their misconceptions.”

“Well, yeah,” Ikari admitted, “but...” For some reason he looked away, seemingly into the distance. He sighed. “I really don't want to spend another day like yesterday. So, if it's really no bother to you...”

Rei simply shook her head and waited. Looking hesitantly at her, Ikari got going.

They walked in silence. Rei had never done so before – just walking, not to get to anywhere but just as an activity in itself. It seemed futile and wasteful, but if that was what Ikari wanted, then there maybe was a purpose to it. He now and then glanced over to her, as if he were awkward with the arrangement or maybe the silence, but if he had complaints, he did not voice them. The two just walked on.
After a while, she felt her shoulders relax slightly. This was really unlike her daily routine. She did not need to worry about the next assignment on her schedule, as there were none for today, and yet she also was not at her apartment, just waiting for the next day. Instead she walked through the city simply because she wanted to do so. Because Ikari appreciated it.

She noticed another one of Ikari’s glances. He was smiling. Smiling at her. Only the Ikaris had ever done that. She felt blood creep up in her cheeks. That was not something that happened when she talked with the elder Ikari. She was unsure what to....

An image of red and orange popped into her mind. “How about, oh I don’t know... be damn happy yourself? How about trying to simply smile, idiot?”

Pilot Soryu's instructions. Delivered with a fire that was so very unlike Rei herself or Shinji Ikari. But Soryu had been right back then. She had given good advice. So the next time Ikari glanced over, Rei smiled herself. She tried to, at least, because it did feel right, it did feel fitting to what she was experiencing. Even so, it were only the corners of her mouth that slightly moved upwards.

It still surprised Ikari as much as her smile at Mt Futago had. Again he nearly missed a step, before managing to smile back even while his mouth was wide open. As the two walked on, he looked down, but kept his smile.

Pilot Soryu is proven right again. Maybe her overly forceful behaviour has some merit. It did drive home her point, and heeding her point seems useful.

After they had walked like that for some further minutes, Ikari commented: “I'm glad you accompanied me, Ayanami.”

“Hm,” Ayanami voiced in agreement.

“It's not quite the same as hanging out with Kensuke and Touji... they talk like they get paid by the word... but it's... nice,” Ikari added.

She was glad that... She decided to say it. “I am glad this turned out okay for you, Ikari.”

Now Ikari grunted agreement.

A silent half-hour later, Rei remarked: “I do not remember ever coming through this area of the city.”

“Uh, well, it's a pretty large city...” Ikari offered as explanation. “I...” He stopped. Rei did likewise, looking at him for an explanation. He looked at its watch. “Still at least four hours until sunset,” he muttered, and then looked at Rei. “Do you mind using the tram to a place outside the city?”

“No,” Rei answered truthfully.

She followed Ikari after he abruptly changed his direction. If he wanted to use the tram, that was fine by her as well. She had never used the line they were taking now, but she was familiar with the tram grid in Tokyo-3. The line would end just outside the city.

She sat down. So did Ikari, at least a metre away from her on the bench on her right side. Since there were only a handful other people on that tram that was alright. He looked down as the vehicle
got going, and for some reason formed a fist. After two stations he got something out of his pocket: his music player. He looked at it as if in contemplation, then suddenly looked up.

“Ayanami,” he asked her, “do you listen to music?”

Rei shook her head.

“I only have my usual tape with me, so it may not be to your liking, but... you could give it a try,” he suggested to her and held out his music player.

Carefully, she took it. She looked at it, its small body and the cables extending from it. She... she had no idea what to do with it. She remembered how Ikari usually wore it, the plugs in his ears. Was that... right? She hesitantly led one plug to her ear, but stopped mid-movement.

“Go on,” Ikari prompted her with a smile. When she did not, he got up and walked over the step in between them. He blushed slightly. “Uh... Ayanami... if I may?”

Rei just nodded, unsure what he meant.

He slowly reached out his hand, slow enough to stop it, carefully took her wrist and gently led her hand to her ear. His index finger lightly pushed against the backside of her hand, prompting her to enter the plug. His face, now directly in front of her, had become even redder, but he was still smiling faintly.

His hand had become warmer as well.

Rei knew the feelings of other hands on her body: as part of her regular medical tests, when people first showed her how to enter a plugsuit, when medics had taken her out of EVA-00's entry-plug. Few had been as warm as Ikari’s. And none as careful and gentle.

She also stuck the other earplug in. Nothing happened, until Shinji took her other hand, in order to make her hold up the player. He pressed a button.

As expected, there were sounds coming out of the earplugs. Music, Rei supposed. She could even discern a rhythm ordering those sounds. As far as she understood musical theory, it was that rhythm that made people appreciate music. However, to her, that had never happened. To her, pieces of music remained just sequences of sounds.

Another station was passed when Ikari asked: “So, what are you thinking, Ayanami?”

“I do not know if the music is adequate,” she answered truthfully. “I am incapable of judging it.”

“What do you mean?” Ikari asked. “You must have an opinion.” He chuckled. “You can tell me if it's bad, I don't mind.”

“It is not better or worse than any other music I have heard,” Rei told him. “I cannot tell what makes music good.”

“Oh,” Ikari voiced. He sounded disappointed. He sat down again. In fact, he let himself fall down onto the bench without much thinking, so that now he sat much closer to Rei. He looked down for a while, until he muttered: “That can't be.”
Rei looked at him to discern what he meant.

“Even if you’re not much into music,” Ikari now addressed her, “there is one piece... one segment.... let me show it to you...” He took the player and began pushing buttons. The music jumped to a different piece. “It’s kinda slow in the beginning, I know, but there is one part... hm.” He looked over sheepishly. “May I have one of the earplugs back? So I can see how much to fast-forward.”

Wordlessly, she handed him the right earplug. He had to lean towards her so that there would be enough cable length. She did likewise, leaning to her right side, supporting herself on her hand. She felt Ikari straighten up. His hand was nearly in the exact same location. Then he fast-forwarded the song up to a certain point.

Now more instruments carried the music, not that Rei could discern between them or name them. The music became more voluminous, more forceful. To Rei, it made no difference. It still evoked no emotional response in her, as she had read music should. She did not say anything, though. It was still nice. She did not enjoy the music, but it did not bother her, either.

She did like sitting close to Ikari while he enjoyed the music. The tape started the next song, and the next, and the two still just sat there.

Finally, though, the train arrived at its final destination. By then, the two were the only remaining passengers. They got up somewhat awkwardly, and Rei handed the player back. She was vaguely sad that the situation had ended, but she would never have protested.

The station consisted of a single platform. From there, Ikari led Rei up some stairs on a hill slope, leading to a street. They followed the street until it reached a car park.

Ikari smiled. “Isn’t that a sight?”

He made a gesture spanning the horizon. The car park was on a cliff overlooking Tokyo-3. There were tower viewers at the edges.

Rei looked at Ikari, to see where he was going with this.

“Tokyo-3,” he exclaimed. “The city we protect. The city you and Soryu protected against the last angel.”

He was right, of course. If an angel ever reached Terminal Dogma, and she was not there to enact the Emergency Solution, then Tokyo-3 would be at the centre of the devastation. Its physical form would be destroyed and its people, like all humans, gone.

Rei had never seen the city from this angle, but she knew the maps. The layout was familiar to her.

Ikari now stood right at the railing. He let his head hang low. “Misato took me here, after I had defeated the first angel. To show me what I’ve been fighting for. I wonder...” His hands griped the railing hard.

For minutes, the two just stood there, looking over the city, wind passing over them. Finally, Rei asked: “What do you wonder?”

“Misato...” Ikari answered. “Why she showed this to me. Did she genuinely wish to... I don't know.
Cheer me up? Praise me? Or did she calculate that this would make it more likely I'd pilot Evangelion? Did she want to help me, or manipulate me?"

"Your fears are unfounded," Rei told him. "I do not think Captain Katsuragi has the necessary skills."

That made Ikari look at her. "What do you mean?"

"Captain Katsuragi is an excellent tactician," Rei explained, "which is reflected in her role as Operations Director. Her skills at social manipulation are far less pronounced. Otherwise, she would be employed in a different manner, most likely administration." Commander Ikari certainly had prodigious skills in that field, which was to the benefit of the Scenario: For its sake, everybody had to be employed according to their abilities. And for Shinji Ikari and Rei this meant piloting Evangelion.

"I see..." Ikari answered. "Well, you have known her longer, so I trust your judgement. But then..."

He shook his head and looked over the city again. After a while, he spoke again: "Ayanami... what do you think about the city?"

"It is my home," she simply replied.

"Home..." Ikari echoed. "That makes sense. I... I don't think I have a home."

She looked over to him. "Is Tokyo-3 not also your home?"

"It's where I live," Ikari corrected her. "But home... isn't that supposed to be the place where you're happy to return to?"

*Oh.* That made Rei reconsider. "Then, maybe, I also do not have a home."

"That's... sad," Ikari judged. "And yet, you just go on, and never do something as stupid as lounging around in the city all day just because you don't want to return to your place of residence."

Rei did not comment on that. There was nothing to say about it.

More time passed by. "It doesn't seem you're enjoying yourself here, Ayanami," Ikari stated.

"Enjoying myself?" Rei repeated.

"That's why people come here, isn't it?" Ikari said. "To enjoy the view over the city. Apparently you don't."

Rei considered that. "No. I do not see where that enjoyment should come from."

Ikari sighed and smiled. It looked oddly sad. "It's all right. Let's head back."

They waited silently at the train station, the only people to do so, and entered a hence otherwise empty tram.

After its departure, Rei suggested: "Maybe we could listen to music together again?"

That seemed to surprise Ikari. "I thought you... uh, yeah. Sure."
He got his music player out. This time, the plugs were in the ears facing each other, so they did not sit as closely together, but it was still fine. Again, Rei leaned in closer to Ikari.

They sat like this all the way to the opposite end station. They took the same tram back, and, on Ikari's suggestion, boarded another one near the devastated city centre. The rest of the day was thus spent riding trams. Ayanami had never realized *that* could be enjoyable.
Misato currently felt very much like she was conducting a combat operation. She had an objective, she needed to stick to her strategy, and things could go horribly wrong. In fact, right now she would probably have preferred directing a combat operation. At least you could submit angels with enough overwhelming firepower. But this… this required her to be delicate, and Misato was unsure if she could do delicate.

For the first time in three days, both she and Shinji would have no other choice but to be in close proximity. It was Saturday, synch-tests had been scheduled at NERV, and she would drive him to there. She had not even commented when he had come home very late again the previous day. This was not an issue to be resolved by putting him on the spot in the apartment's corridor. The entire point was to make him comfortable again with the notion of talking with Misato again, and with living at her apartment. But in order to get there, he had to know that he could do so, that she was not offended, that there was no reason to avoid her.

To her relief, he had not run away and taken the train, as part of her had feared. Instead, he waited at the apartment door, and the two walked down to the street in silence. That silence continued when they entered the car and she started it. Shinji just looked outside the window, his face as far away from her as possible. If he was surprised at how slowly Misato was driving he did not show it. She wanted to gain as much time for this as possible. It was not easy for her, either.

Finally, without looking at the boy, she said: “I'm not angry, you know, Shinji.” That got no reaction, so after a while, Misato continued: “And you don't need to explain anything. I… I think I understand. In any case, it's your decision what you tell me.”

Tokyo-3 was a planned city, with a street grid intelligently designed to handle all foreseeable traffic and then some. In addition, the public transportation system was all-encompassing. As a result, there hardly ever were jams in the city. Misato could leisurely cruise through it without needing to pay much attention to the street; there hardly was any other car on it. The sun, now eternally a summer sun, shone from high up on the city.

“You can just come home normally,” Misato went on. “And talk to me normally. If that makes you more comfortable, we can simply forget about the past days.”

Shinji still looked out of the window, unmoving, as if she had not said anything. Misato felt a slight stirring of despair rise inside her. She had not expected her little appeal to solve everything, but it looked right now as if it was effecting absolutely nothing.

“Oh you can talk with me,” she nonetheless continued. “About... what you told me. You aren't really wrong, you know. But, well…” She stopped herself. “But that's only if you want to. It's up to you. We can talk about it or forget about it, just as you want. But there's no reason for you to avoid me.”

Shinji continued looking outside. Even as the car entered a garage in the Geofront, and all he had in front of his eyes was a simple grey wall, that did not change. Even without his SDAT player, it seemed like he was in his own small world.

It was only when the car had stopped and they were leaving it that he asked: “Would talking change anything? You'd still be the Operations Director, and I'd still be a pilot.”
But I don’t want to be just your Operations Director, you need someone that cares for you... Misato remained quiet. She had taken Shinji in because she had felt sorry for him, and she still did. She had genuine sympathy for him, and the more she had gotten to know him, the more she realized what a withdrawn person he was and how much a weight piloting EVA was on him, the more she had gotten to care. But maybe that was in fact the problem. He had nobody who just cared about him: Even his own guardian was the person who would send him into battle time after time again.

“Shinji, I...” she began, and then shook her head. This was too complex to talk about on the way from the garage to the testing area. And there was no use in a talk if she would be the only one speaking. She could only hope that her appeal had at least on some level gotten through to him.

This day is a complete waste.

Misato had always been one for unusual ideas. Sometimes those were in fact brilliant: Only someone like her could have the chutzpah to requisition the most advanced prototype weapon of the JSSDF and the power output of all of Japan... and in the end, that had saved the day. It was befitting that the Evangelion operations were led by such a tactical maverick.

But at other times, her ideas were simply plain crazy. Asuka still remembered that from her time with her in Germany. And this... this was definitely such a time.

She understood the concept behind the cross-synch tests, in theory. It was always possible that a pilot might get injured, and that a replacement was needed for their unit. And in general, it would allow for greater tactical flexibility if pilots could synchronize with units other than their own. Asuka suspected Misato was also preparing for Shinji finally deciding to run away, which was definitely a concern as far as she was concerned.

But in reality the chross-synch tests made no damn sense. EVA-02 was hers. It worked for her because she had trained in it for eight years already, more than half her life. It was the Standard Production Model, the final and ready form of the Evangelion series, the schema later Evangelion units would use, free of the instabilities the Prototype and the Test Type suffered from. It only made sense that it should be piloted, exclusively, by the best pilot. Maybe Shinji and Rei had a certain knack for compensating for the weaknesses of the inferior units, but that would not help them with EVA-02.

She could have told Misato and Dr Akagi as much, but nooo, they had to actually test that. The results so far were unsurprising: Neither Shinji nor Rei had managed to synchronize with EVA-02. To be precise, both had managed some points of synchronization. Apparently, it was near-impossible to enter the entry-plug of an Evangelion with an A10 headset and not get some connection. But in Rei’s case that connection amounted to 3%, and in Shinji’s to 6%, both way below the minimal 16% necessary to even get a unit moving at least very shakingly.

Next in line had been EVA-01. Asuka had been the first to try it. It had been... weird. In a way she could not fully describe, the unit had felt different to EVA-02. Colder, harder. She had achieved 6% connection as well, and she had felt the low rate. Synchronizing with EVA-02 was like easily slipping into a warm bathrobe, the attempt with 01 felt like rubbing against a cold steel wall. Inferior models using inferior technology. ‘Made in Germany’ still wins out.

Now, she was in the Pribnow Box watching Rei enter the entry-plug. Ritsuko and her technicians
had not been very enthused about a pilot still in plugsuit and smelling like LCL inviting herself into their domain, but Asuka did not care. It were exactly those eggheads who made her do those stupid tests, so she might as well watch them in turn. She stood in a corner and sulkily leaned against the wall.

“Alles Quatsch...” she muttered.

Misato spared a short, angry glare for her. She just scoffed defiantly in return. She looked at the other person leaning against a wall, at least two metres away from her: Shinji Ikari. The boy had his view cast down, and in particular he seemed to avoid eye contact with Misato. He had only come up into the Pribnow Box some minutes ago, after learning that was where Asuka had been during the EVA-02 tests. It was a curious decision: Asuka had come up here because staying in the locker rooms or the waiting areas would have been just plain boring. So she could understand if Shinji felt the same... only that he had not spoken a single word in since coming up, and mostly looked down on his feet. He could have done that elsewhere as well.

“Third stage connection complete,” Ibuki announced from her terminal. “Harmonics are stable. Synchrate at 38%”

“That's just three to four points lower than her synchrate with EVA-00,” Dr Akagi commented.

“Seems like we got ourselves the first successful cross-synchronization for today,” Ibuki announced so cheerfully that it caused Asuka to silently groan. The lieutenant was the very picture of the annoying genki girl stereotype.

Dr Akagi looked over Ibuki's shoulder at her screen and nodded. “That was to be expected. The personal data of Units 00 and 01 is nearly identical. Really, only Shinji and Rei ever had any realistic chance at cross-synching.”

Misato was standing behind the terminals. “So, Rei, how does it feel to finally pilot EVA-01 after all?”

“It smells like Ikari,” the pilot reported with barely any inflection.

Asuka blinked hard. That was not an answer she had expected. “What the fuck does she mean by that?” she hissed over to Shinji. “She knows your scent already?”

To her surprise, she saw that Shinji was now looking up. He even had gone some steps ahead, and seemed to be intensely staring at the scene before him.

“Shinji?” Asuka prompted. “Don't you dare dodge my questions!”

Instead of answering, he muttered: “I... I know that unit. EVA-01.”

“Are you stupid?” Asuka almost yelled back, voice barely subdued enough to not disturb the technicians. “It's yours!”

Shinji shook his head and stepped back to the wall again. “No, from... before that. Long before that.”

“So you have seen EVAs before after all?” Asuka questioned him. Typical. Just typical. Nobody tells the truth.
“I... don't know,” Shinji answered. “I can't remember. But now that I'm looking at EVA-01 from above... I know that view, I'm sure of it. Something....” He seemed to shudder. “Something happened here.”

Asuka merely raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, sure, whatever.”

_He kinda fits to Wondergirl. Both are just weird._ Shinji was a nice enough guy, but that was exactly the problem with him: EVA pilots were handling the most powerful war machines on the planet. They were not supposed to be _nice_. Angels would not be defeated by polite words. _Maybe it's a Japanese thing. Then again, it's not like Wondergirl is the height of courteous behaviour._

In the past few days, her thoughts had regularly gone back to the battle with the most recent angel, the one now dubbed Ramiel. That was to be expected, of course. Strangely enough, she had often not thought back to her glorious defeat of the blue octahedron, but rather of her rescue of Rei. Or her and Shinji supporting Rei while walking towards the command post. In a way, that was what Asuka would have wanted: Camaraderie between victorious pilots, the elite sticking together, the only ones that knew what fighting angels meant. That was why she had been so disappointed by the personalities of the Japanese pilots: She had envisioned people with whom she could boast and celebrate, not a subdued wimp wavering back and forth on piloting and an emotion-less freak. She supposed at least the latter one's blue hair gave her a certain aura of exoticness befitting her special status, but Asuka still wondered what the hell her deal was.

She watched as Shinji left the Pribnow Box. Unit 01 was loaded back into the cages; Unit 00 was now brought in.

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Dr Akagi had once told Shinji that entry-plugs were not unit-specific. Every entry-plug could be inserted into every unit. However, for some reason EVA-00's entry-plug, or maybe its _current_ one was different to the ones he was used to from EVA-01. The manual control handles were much less pronounced; instead of a control terminal in front of him, between his knees, he only had the handles at his sides. This was not just Ayanami's unit, it was her entry-plug as well.

And yet, it did not feel all that different to his. Despite all the horrors he had experienced as pilot of EVA-01, he felt calm inside it. Maybe it was just the reassurance of having a several hundreds ton heavy war machine under his control, but there was something in his mental connection to EVA-01 that calmed him. And even though he had only gone to the first stage connection with EVA-00, he felt the same here.

“Shinji, how are you feeling?” Dr Akagi asked over the comm system.

“It... it feels like Ayanami,” Shinji reported. “As if she were here, somehow.”

Maybe that was the difference. The First Child herself had become a major source of calm and reassurance for Shinji over the past three weeks or so. He could not pinpoint the source of his comfort in Unit 01, but now, in Unit 00, it felt like Ayanami, in a way Shinji could not quite explain. _But then, that's typical for the Evangelions. I understand nothing about them._

“Hm,” Dr Akagi answered vaguely. “If you aren't feeling any problems, we'll be initiating second contact now.”
“It’s fine,” Shinji replied lamely.

Playing guinea pig in machines I know nothing about... The image of EVA-01 from above struck his memory again. What is it with that? That exact angle... I have seen it from that exact angle before and then something... happened. Something bad, as a sense of foreboding told him.

Ibuki reported: “Harmonics are stable. Synchrate at 41%. Three points better than Rei in Unit 01.”

“Hey, that's fifteen below your usual standard!” Soryu shouted into the comm system. “Stop fantasizing about Wondergirl and show some effort, Third Child!”

“Asuka!” Misato cut her off.

When Shinji had come to Tokyo-3, his synchrate had been nearly ten points higher than Ayanami’s, and these days it usually was nearly fifteen points higher. Cross-synching seemed to totally evaporate that advantage. But Shinji did not care. To him, those were all just numbers. Math talk. Good for the scientists and engineers, irrelevant for him.

“I'm now increasing harmonics by twenty,” Ibuki reported. “Initiating third contact.”

Shinji breathed out and tried to relax, the way he had been told to act in synchro-tests. It seemed like it would become just that, just another...

...there was a pain behind his left eye.

What... Then a... hum in his thoughts. Something in his thoughts that he had not thought himself.

He instinctively tried to repel this intrusion. He closed his eyes... and a flood of images assaulted him.

Ayanami standing at the street leading to Misato's appartment. Ayanami on her stretcher, in the EVA cages. Ayanami trying to tell him and Soryu about Operation Yashima. Seeing Ayanami after her rescue from Mt Asama. Ayanami in the train, a plug in her ear. Ayanami atop of Soryu. Ayanami at Mt Futago, between him and Soryu, smiling.

A vision of Ayanami standing in the middle of the street, before he had even met her, disappeared again in an instant.

A nude young Ayanami with large eyes floating silently towards him.

There was a noise from outside, from outside the entry-plug, from outside the Evangelion. There was something wrong with the Evangelion. He could feel it.

An EVA malfunctioning... noises... people shouting...

And then he remembered.

A bright white room, full of cables, extending in front of him beyond a window. At its bottom, EVA-01.
He himself, in a room full of more cables and machines and computers. Behind him, behind a desk that is almost makeshift, a person he loves... Father? That was... Father.

“Ikari, this isn't a daycare centre. This is a very important day.”

*That voice sounds... familiar.*

“I'm sorry, Professor. I brought him here.”

Those words, those *sounds* came automatically into Shinji's mind. Tears welled up inside him. *That voice... that voice!*

“I want to show him how bright the future will be.”

*I... waved at those words...*

*...at Mother's words.*

And then, chaos broke out. He had not understood back then, of course, and he still did not. In fact, he had completely forgotten about this all. Even now, all he remembered were people shouting... his *Father* shouting, desperately, enraged, pleading... broken in the end. Not caring about him, only what was happening in front of him.

He remembered crying. Only one person paid attention to him. A person he had thought had an unkindly face, all frowns, surrounded by short, black, curly hair. He had cried at her legs. But even she had left him. She had set out to save his mother.

She had failed. They all had failed. That day was the last day Shinji had seen his mother.

*What the hell...?*

Unit 00 was holding his head like a person with a headache. As if it were alive. There were no signals from Shinji inside his entry-plug. The EVA seemed to move on its own. Asuka had read the reports of course: EVA-00 going berserk during its activation test, EVA-01 going berserk against in the battle against Sachiel... Those Japanese units were simply *unreliable.* Such things simply did not happen with EVA-02.

*I should...*

Asuka jumped back in shock. EVA-00 had just rammed its fist into the Pribnow Box. And again. And again. The glass began to splinter.

“Rei, get back!” Misato shouted. “Rei!”

The First Child stood right in front of the windows and did not move. She just watched calmly as EVA-00 delivered one punch after the other in her direction. As if it wanted to kill its own pilot. Yet, even as pieces of broken glass flew around her, Rei did not move.

Suddenly, EVA-00's huge Cyclopean face loomed large directly on the other side of the windows. The Pribnow Box was dented, but had mostly held against the punches. Now, the Unit seemingly
tried to headbutt its way in. And Rei still just stood there.

“Activation will be terminated in 25 seconds,” Ibuki reported. “21... 20...”

That was too long. Acting without thinking, Asuka ran to the front of the room. She grabbed Rei at the shoulder and pulled, but the bluenette still did not move. The Pribnow Box shook as EVA-00's head came down against it again. Asuka now grabbed Rei at the waist and dragged her backwards.

EVA-00's head came down again. The windows *burst*.

Shocked, Asuka froze, her arms still around Rei. She was only metres away from the alien face of an out of control Evangelion.

The Evangelion roared, another thing EVA-02 had never done.

This was not her unit, but it *was* an Evangelion. A machine to be controlled by pilots. Asuka looked at it angrily, defiantly. She would not cower in front of a *machine*.

She also did not let go of Rei.

A train station. A man leaving behind a crying child.

*Coldemptyalone...*

A park bench. People passing by, pointing at the boy on it, whispering. *His father killed his mother...*

*Coldemptyalonesocold...*

An SDAT player. Music in his ears, the world around him forgotten.

*Coldemptyalonenisolated...*

A new room, a new ceiling, empty but for a futon.

*Coldemptyalonenisolatedfaraway...*

Yet another ceiling. He was in a hospital bed. Nobody else was there.

*Coldemptyalonenisolatedfarawaycoldcoldcold...*

There was nothing there anymore. No feeling of comfort. No feeling of Ayanami. Just a leather seat and handles in his hands. He had formed them to tight fists around them, he noticed. LCL all around him. It did feel cold indeed. And something even colder in his head, in his brain, in his mind... something that was absolutely neutral and sterile.

With a sudden jolt, Shinji realized he had come to his senses again. He was still in EVA-00's entry plug. There still was at least a second stage connection, because he could see right in front of the Evangelion. Right into the Pribnow Box... which lay open and dented in front of him. He could see every single person inside. He realized EVA-00's head was right in front of that new hole in the
And inside that room, Ayanami. Held by Soryu.

“Ayanami!” he shouted. “Soryu!”

There was an immediate response from within the Pribnow Box. “Shinji!” Misato shouted over the comm system. She sounded worried. “Shinji, are you alright?”

While Misato spoke, Shinji saw Ayanami straightening up and getting free of Soryu's grip. She took a step forwards, towards the EVA, and said something, something not picked up by the comm system. Then she let her head hang low and left. Soryu looked after her.

“I... I am fine,” Shinji waved the question away. “Did... did I... did the EVA hurt anyone? Ayanami? Soryu?”

He saw Soryu running over to a terminal.

“She said sorry,” Soryu told him venomously. “Whatever for. You could have killed her! Killed me!”

“Sorry,” Shinji answered himself, looking down. “I... I didn't mean...”

“Big consolation that is to us!” Soryu shouted.

“Asuka!” Misato cut in once again, and grabbed her away from the terminal by the shoulder. “Shinji... are you hurt?”

Shinji could still hear Soryu scoffing. He shook his head. At least, he did not think he was hurt, but thinking was very difficult right now.

*I... I saw mother.*

...*I saw mother die. EVA-01... EVA-01 took her.*

“I'm fine,” he simply answered and sounded nearly as exhausted as he felt. “What happened?”

“It’s Unit 00 went berserk,” Dr Akagi reported. Her tone was neutral, matter-of-fact, without any worry, sympathy or any of the other emotions making Misato's voice a turmoil. “That was not you. The mental flow reversed. EVA-00 entered your thoughts, instead of the other way around. We disconnected its power supply, but somehow the incident ended even before power ran out, and you became conscious again. So far, we have no idea what caused all this.”

*Ayanami... that was Ayanami that I felt. Even right before... even right before the Evangelion went berserk. Even right before I... remembered.* That thought disturbed him. It seemed EVA-00 had nearly broken the Pribnow Box. Such violence, such fury... those were not things he would associate with Ayanami.

“It’s Unit 00 is still not fully responding to our signals,” Dr Akagi continued. “I'm sorry, but it might take a while until we can get your entry-plug out of there.”
Dr Akagi and Misato had insisted Shinji should stay in the NERV hospital for some hours for observation. He himself saw no reason for that. He felt fine, but he did not argue. So once again, he lay on a bed, hooked up to all kinds of instruments he did not understand, looking up to a ceiling he seriously began to resent, and listening to his SDAT player.

_Mother…_

His mother had worked on EVA-01. EVA-01 had killed his mother. His father had seen it. And yet, his father had still made him pilot EVA-01.

_I piloted the machine that killed Mother. That... absorbed her. While she was in it like I am in it. Because Father said so._

_He really doesn't care about me._

His mother... he could only vaguely recall her. Her warmth, mostly. He could not remember her face, and nearly nothing of her voice – only those two sentences that had come to him now.

_“I want to show him how bright the future will be.” … Unit 01 destroyed that future. For her. And for me._

The room's door opened. Shinji immediately turned to lay on his side, facing away from it. Misato was in the door frame.

She did not enter.

“She've cleared you, Shinji,” she told him. “We can go home.”

Shinji clenched a hand to a fist. It was miserable how he still avoided her. He should never have yelled at her in the first place, and now he only made it all worse. But he just did not know what to say.

After the silence had stretched for a while, Misato announced: “I'll wait in the car. Get dressed.” She closed the door again and left.

He curled up into a ball. He would go ‘home’, of course, to Misato's apartment, but the atmosphere there would be tense. He felt like he had no refuge in the world. At ‘home’, he had to face Misato, and at NERV they wanted him to pilot the very machine that had absorbed his mother when she had tried the same.

_That is my life…_

He got up unenthusiastically and slowly. His ‘civilian' clothes, his school uniform, had been taken to the room. He got dressed. Only afterwards he took his hospital gown, and, with a sigh, folded it.

He stepped into the hospital corridor. Frustratingly enough, he knew the hospital well enough already that he knew the way to the garage.

He stopped, startled, when he came around a corner and saw Soryu there, leaning against a wall. She had changed out of her plugsuit, into a simple jeans and shirt combination.
“Third Child,” she greeted him.

“Soryu,” he greeted back. “What... what are you doing here?”

She turned around to face him and shouted: “What the hell was that about?”

“What... what?” Shinji exclaimed.

“You're the guy who got a synch rate of over 40% in his first try,” Asuka accused him. “And yet, you can't control the Prototype? I was in there as well. I didn't cause it to berserk.”

“Ah... ah, well...” Shinji stuttered, too put on the spot to even consider the issue, to defend himself. “I'm sorry.”

“What were you even doing inside that thing when it tried to kill Rei... tried to kill me?” Asuka demanded to know.

“I want him to show how bright the future will be.”

That memory washing over him again drowned out all the shock of seeing Soryu. He cast his view down and again formed fists.

“I remembered,” he half-whispered.

The sudden seriousness of his voice made Soryu stop, then she scoffed. “A great time to think about the...”

Now it came all out of Shinji, even though he still spoke to the floor in a subdued, slow voice: “I remembered my mother. She had worked on EVA-01. There was an experiment. I never saw her again afterwards.”

“Your mother?” Soryu asked. “I should... I should have known...” She still sounded angry, but it was a crumbling, confused anger.

“I think it was when I was five... four maybe?” Shinji continued. “EVA-01 just... absorbed her.”

“Four...” Soryu now simply whispered. Her anger seemed to have gone. “And she was working on the EVA unit you now pilot?” Shinji nodded without looking up. There was an awkward pause, before Soryu asked: “That experiment... a... ah, Kontaktexperiment... a contact experiment?”

Shinji's face jerked up. “Someone... my father, I think... yes, they used that term.”

“You lost... your mother... in a contact experiment... with your EVA unit?” Soryu asked. She suddenly looked ghostly pale.

“What about it?” Shinji asked back petulantly.

Soryu closed the gap between them with a sudden step, grabbed him at the shoulders and shook. “What else do you remember?”

“N...nothing!” Shinji insisted. “I didn't even remember all that. It only came back to me... inside EVA-00. I know my father supervised the experiment, and there were a lot of other people, but I
Soryu let go of him. She kept looking at him, her face still displaying shock, then she suddenly turned and ran away.

Shinji was left behind, wondering. *What was that about?*

It took some moments until he resumed his walk to the garage.

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Misato sat in her car, and had both hands on the driving wheel, even though the motor was off. She had been so proud when the vehicle had been delivered to her. A genuine Renault Alpine from Europe. Now, this hardly seemed to matter. It seemed the Angel War did not leave room for frivolities like her interest in cars.

She felt frustrated. Frustrated at Shinji, frustrated at her general situation and now also frustrated at Ritsuko. The leader of NERV's science section had been unable to explain to her what had happened. Worse, she also seemed *uninterested* in telling her. This was not the first time Misato had seen Ritsuko unable to solve a challenge. Their memories from college days were full of happy moments, fun times, but also of desperate struggles to pass their exams. Granted, a bit more desperate for Misato than for Ritsuko, but even the faux-blonde had not been a perfect, always correct student. And back then, she had always confided her problems, also her problems with college classes, in Misato.

*What has happened since then?*

It was clear nobody could have foreseen EVA-00 going berserk. Nobody was *at fault* here. But after Shinji's accusations, it bothered her that yet again he had to bear the brunt of their failures.

*The whole situation would be a whole lot easier if he did not have a point.*

She waited nearly half an hour, agitated, but determined to not get irritated with Shinji. Finally, she saw him slouching into the garage and entering the car. Misato started it.

As they left the Geofront and entered the open street, she began to talk: “So, Shinji, what do you want to do now?” Again, he just looked out of the window. “How long do you want to keep this up, coming home late at night, ignoring me, not talking? It's possible for you to keep it up indefinitely, but is that what you want?”

Finally, there was a response, even if it was barely audible. “No. I don't think so.”

“I told you, we can just get back to where we were,” Misato told him softly.

“Going back to pretending?” Shinji murmured.

“What do you mean?” Misato asked.

Shinji leaned back and now looked straight ahead. He shook his head. “Eventually, the next angel will come. You'll deploy me again. We'd just be pretending everything is in order.”

There was a long silence in the car. Finally, Misato answered: “You can stop piloting EVA, if that
is what bothers you. I can understand that. We *are* asking too much of you.”

Again, Shinji shook his head. “I already tried to leave once. And then stayed. I can't waver back and forth forever.”

“Says who?” Misato challenged him. “Both the first and the second angel would have utterly destroyed Tokyo-3, and you defeated both on your own. You saved the city two times over.” *And the world, but he doesn't need to know that.* “You don't need to worry about what others think of you.”

“You say that now, but if the next angel were to attack right now you would say everything to get me into the entry-plug,” Shinji argued. Misato was about to answer, but he just continued, without rancour, without much emotion at all: “And I can understand that. Evangelions are needed to fight angels, and I'm needed to pilot Evangelion. Ayanami can take over for me, but that would still leave you with one fewer active Evangelion. With so much depending on the Evangelions, it would be selfish for me to run away.”

Misato furrowed her brows. *Is that his honest conviction, or is he again just going along with what he's being told?* In any case she had to admit that he, once again, had a point. During an angel attack, she would most likely do everything to have three Evangelion units ready and deployable.

“Why did you stay, at that train station?” Misato asked softly.

Shinji looked down, on the seat between his legs. As expected, he took his time in answering. “I thought I had finally found someone who cared about me. I know my tutor never did, he just did his job. I didn't want to go back to that. To being so alone. Even if it meant piloting EVA.”

“You stayed because of me?” Misato whispered. Shinji just vaguely grunted confirmation. Misato had thought something like this was the case, but him openly saying so now caused another pang of guilt inside her. “You...” She stopped herself, but then decided to go through with it. *The Commander wouldn't like this, but screw him.* “You don't need to leave if you stop piloting. I *am* your legal guardian. I *can* decide to stay that. And I would, if you want, even if you stop being a pilot.” *I owe him at least that much.*

Shinji looked at her, an undecipherable expression on his face. Then he leaned back into his seat again. “That would be nice, but... it wouldn't work. Maybe you wouldn't try to get me into EVA-01 immediately when the next angel attacks, but as soon as things get rough...” He shook his head again. “The only way for me to avoid piloting it is to leave Tokyo-3.”

“And you still don't want to?” Misato concluded.

“I don't want to return to being all alone,” Shinji answered.

The car passed a busy intersection, at least by Tokyo-3 standards. Again, Misato furrowed her brows, and then suddenly turned left to enter a supermarket parking lot. Shinji could only brace himself against the sudden forces of inertia. When the car stopped, he looked at her in surprise.

“You're right in one thing, Shinji,” she told him in a serious voice, looking straight back at him. “The next angel *will* come. And when that happens I *will* deploy you if you're still a pilot. I *have* to.”

“I understand that,” Shinji answered weakly. “You are the Operations Director...”
“Yes, I am,” Misato replied, then sighed and softened her tone. “Maybe... maybe it was a mistake that I took you in.” She saw how Shinji turned stiff at that. “Maybe you deserved someone better. Someone who can care only about you. I do care, Shinji. But I also have to care about fighting the angels, and that's... that's unfair on you. You deserve someone who only thinks of you, not also other considerations.”

There again was silence for a long time in the car. And when Shinji answered, he was back to being barely audible: “It's not like there was anyone else who would have taken me in.”

“You could have stayed at NERV headquarters,” Misato pointed out.

Again, silence. Until Shinji muttered: “Is that what you want?”

“No, Shinji,” Misato reassured him. “It is not what I want. I like to have you around. But I'm considering what would be best for you.” She smirked bitterly. “Outside of the Angels just randomly stopping to attack.”

And once again, silence. Misato was glad to have parked here. By now they would have long since reached the apartment, but this was a conversation that needed to happen.

“I don’t know what’s best for me,” Shinji stated weakly. “I don't know what I want. I don't want to pilot EVA, I don't want to return to my tutor, I don't think I can stay here without piloting EVA... it's pathetic.”

“No, it's not,” Misato disagreed. “Yes, you are indecisive. But normally, people don't have to take EVA and fighting giant alien abominations into account in their decisions. You do, and that's our fault.”

“Maybe...” Shinji began to muse, but as usual it took a while before he continued. “Maybe simply continuing as before is the best option. But, once the next angel arrives, I... I mean, I wouldn't like that you...” He stopped.

“You would resent me for deploying you again,” Misato summarized. Shinji looked away. She sighed. “Maybe... maybe that's okay. After all, I am forcing you, a boy of fourteen, into life and death battles.”

“But I can't live with you and then...” Shinji argued, still looking out of the window.

“Why not?” Misato interrupted him. “Maybe that is the best solution. You continue living with me... and if I deploy you, you hate me. It's alright if you do, Shinji. We're forcing you into such an impossible situation, asking so much of you... it's right if you resent people for that. I'm not offended by that.”

And maybe... probably... I deserve being hated.
Interests I

Rei’s daily appearance at that spot near the park, on Ikari's way home back to Captain Katsuragi’s apartment, had become a regular part of her schedule, only interrupted when there were synch-tests or memory storage updates. She liked that it had become part of her routine, part of her normalcy, something that she could understand and plan for, something for which she did not depend on the vagaries of the outside world, which often confused her. Or maybe 'confuse' was the wrong term; in intellectual terms she understood most of what was going on around her. It was just that in most cases she did not understand the sense behind it all. She could read up on the reasons people did this and that, but to her those explanations often fell short.

It did not matter, of course. Her purpose was not interaction with people. The Scenario did not call for it. But until her purpose would be fulfilled completely, she would have to live in this world, with all the people. On a primal, instinctive level, a level she never felt in any other context, she felt a connection to these people, a will to protect them. But in her everyday life she felt totally alienated from them. So it was nice to be able to rely on a frame of normalcy, like a regular schedule.

And it was nice that this schedule included Ikari. She could not quite say why, but that was in the end irrelevant as well. Her association with Ikari did not hinder the Scenario, and it helped her to endure the time until its completion. That was enough to know.

As for him... Before Mt Futago, Rei had never paid attention to when and why people smiled. It had always been simply something people did, a part of the outside world to which she had felt no connection, like so many parts of that world. But Pilot Soryu's forceful advice still stuck with her. If I should feel happy when something good comes my way, and smile to express that feeling... and that is what I did feel at Mt Futago... then that is true for other people as well. She had noted Soryu herself was smiling a lot, but usually in odd ways, in grins and smirks. Ikari smiled sometimes when he was with Suzuhara and Aida. It was... good that he did, though Rei could not say why, and thus she felt almost grateful to the two.

But Ikari always smiled when he approached her on his way back home.

They were small smiles, subdued smiles and faint smiles. They were one reason she usually just stood there, looking in the direction from where he would come. It was the most logical and efficient way to wait, but beyond that it also meant she would see him before he would see her – and that way she could see every time that smile appearing as soon as he noticed her.

So it also was now. Rei could see Shinji coming up that small hill, could see him looking up to meet her gaze, and could see the corners of his lip curling up.

And inside her, she felt warmth.

“Ikari,” she greeted him as he had reached her. “Will you spend the day in the city again?”

He shook his head. “Misato and I have... come to an understanding. I don't know if it'll work, but... I don't think I could have endured more days of tensions at the place where I sleep. I'm just glad we did find a way out of that.”
“Oh,” Rei merely replied. *That's good.* It was good Ikari did not have to endure that tension anymore. It was good that the Operations Director and one of her pilots were on agreeable terms again. That was good for the Scenario.

Why, then, did she feel sad?

“It is good that you can return to your usual schedule,” she commented.

Ikari looked at her strangely, a bit as if he had not understood what she had just said. “Yes... it's good.” He paused, and then eventually began: “Say, Ayanami... you know my father pretty well... do you know...”

He stopped. Eventually, Rei asked: “Do I know what?”

“Does he ever talk about my mother?” Ikari asked.

Rei knew his mother. The Commander spoke of her often enough. “You'll take me to Yui.” As such, Rei nodded.

“Does he... did he ever say how she died?” Ikari pushed on.

“It happened in an accident,” Rei answered.

“An accident with my EVA?” Ikari asked. Rei nodded. “Then why... then why hasn't Father ever told me anything about it? What happened back then?”

“Yui Ikari was lost in the initial contact experiment with EVA-01,” Rei answered. She felt like she was treading on unsteady ground. This fact was of great importance to Commander Ikari. She was... unsure how much she could tell.

“And now my father wants me to pilot that very same unit,” Ikari whispered. “The same unit that killed my mother.”

“There have been no such accidents with EVAs since 2005,” Rei tried to reassure him.

Ikari shook his head. “Even so, my father should have told me. But he probably feared I would not have piloted EVA-01 if I had known.”

“Would you have?” Rei asked.

“I don't think I *could* have said no after...” He looked down and blushed. “After feeling you shaking with pain.” Again that feeling of warmth. “But that isn't the point! I... I just want to decide on my own whether I pilot. And if I say no, others should respect that. Instead, they all try to manipulate me into getting into that entry-plug.”

“Only you and I can pilot EVA-01,” Rei pointed out.

“I know! And I will pilot it,” Ikari insisted. “If only to keep my promise. But it *hurts* when I do. People shouldn't just *expect* me to do it. It's easy for them to do so, they don't have the experiences that I...” He shook his head.
“You want to be praised for piloting EVA by people?” Rei asked.

“And why not?” Ikari defended himself. “After all, they're all saved because of me, aren't they?” Rei remained silent. That was correct, but it did not feel relevant to her. He eventually seemed to pick up on that: “You don't think so?”

“Only a limited number of people can pilot EVA,” Rei argued. “Therefore they should.”

“I never asked for that ability,” Ikari argued back.

Two completely different sets of ethics, Rei realized. She had a read a bit of philosophy. We are talking past each others.

After a while, Ikari looked down. “I'm sorry if you think I'm being selfish. But I just...”

“No,” Ayanami simply stated. Ikari looked up. “It is all right if you have a different opinion. You still pilot EVA. It would be presumptuous to also demand that you do it for a particular reason. It is alright for you to want praise.”

Shinji smiled, first faintly, then ever broader. “Thank you, Ayanami.”

She tilted her head. She did not understand his reaction. They had talked. She did not see how she had rendered any particular service to Ikari. Even so, she was glad he thought so.

He sighed. “I guess... I just don't want to be treated as a tool. Nobody should be.”

Not me, either?

“So, Asuka, what do you think?”

The real estate broker looked politely ahead. She had not understood a word of the question. Kaji was speaking German for just that reason. It allowed the two to speak frankly. Unlike with Misato, one could barely even hear an accent.

“It'll do,” Asuka answered in the same language. She sauntered over to Kaji. “It looks like we can make ourselves really comfortable here, don't you think? Our private little love nest.”

Kaji just smirked. “You mean like back in Germany?”

That caused Asuka to grimace and turn away from him. The hint about Germany, where all her advances had been rebuffed, did not sit well with her. She looked around the apartment again. “It's a bit small, isn't it? Just like all the others. And isn't there at least a single apartment somewhere with proper doors?”

“Unlikely,” Kaji told her. “Truth be told, I've come to rather enjoy European style doors in Germany. Perfect for keeping unwanted people out.”

“Exactly!” Asuka exclaimed. “It seems the Japanese are not all that great at building homes.” She winked at him. “Your qualities are... elsewhere, right?”
“But this apartment is very near to the inner city, and the price is reasonable,” Kaji stated without missing a beat. “I don't think we'll find anything better.”

Asuka raised her head defiantly. “Fine. If you say so.”

While Kaji went over to the broker to speak about conditions and terms, Asuka walked over to the nearest window and looked outside. The prospect of finally moving out of that hotel room was nice, but she was just getting nowhere with Kaji, and that was frustrating. She knew her current and her former guardian had a thing once. *Is he still fixated on her? That would be kinda lame. Bah, I'm sure Misato's tits will begin to sag soon. Especially with how much weight they have. I'll just have to wait. But for how long?*

Finally, after some more polite small talk with the broker, Kaji and Asuka could leave her behind in the apartment.

“Oh, only two more weeks in that hotel, Asuka,” Kaji told her in Japanese as they went to the car. “Then you'll have a real home again.”

Asuka suppressed a *Took you long enough.* By then she would have stayed in the hotel for over a month. And the housing market in Tokyo-3 did not seem to be all that tight, especially now that the first angels had attacked. Kaji had just been dragging his feet. But she could not say so to him. He had his problems, but he still was considerably better than any boy her age, after all.

“A home together with you again,” she instead commented.

Kaji sighed. “Yes. A home together with me.”

They got into his car. Finally there was the opportunity to ask the question that had been on her mind for two days already. Now she was with Kaji in an environment with no listeners. Even so, she switched back to German: “*Du, Kaji... what do you know about EVA-01?*”

Kaji glanced over to her. “What do you mean?”

“Were there any accidents in its creation or activation?” Asuka asked.

Kaji took a second to order his thoughts. “Not that I know of. The Unit is obviously still not completely stable; the sortie against the angel dubbed Sachiel showed that. But it seems they had come a long way from the Prototype. There were no berserk activities upon activation, nothing. At least, as far as the official records are concerned. Why?”

“Shinji told me there was an accident,” Asuka told him. “In the original contact experiment. He told me his mother died in it.”

“Yui Ikari? The Commander's wife?” Kaji asked back. “That's... interesting. I looked into the Commander's files upon departure to Japan. There is no cause of death listed for his wife. I understand that caused quite a flurry of rumours that he had killed her. That always seemed... highly unlikely to me.” He paused. “But she was an expert in the field of metaphysical biology, and a member of the Artificial Evolution Laboratory. The predecessor of GEHIRN and hence, ultimately, NERV.”

“So it could have happened?” Asuka asked.
Kaji seemed to ponder that. “You know what, Asuka? Let's go to that high-end supermarket on our way back. You know, the one conveniently located on the other side of the city. And in the meanwhile, you tell me what Shinji has told you.”

His facial expression did not change as Asuka did tell him. It nearly never did. He was too self-disciplined for that. Unlike Shinji, whom one could read like a book.

When Kaji spoke again, he sounded dead-serious. “Listen to me, Asuka. Don't tell this to anyone else, understood? Not even Misato. She's part of NERV, after all. And it seems very clear NERV does not want this to become common knowledge. For whatever reason. You were prudent to bring this up here. I regularly check this car for bugs. It would be unwise to talk about this in less safe areas.”

“So what should I do now?” Asuka asked. “What will you do?”

“This is important to you, isn't it?” Kaji asked back.

Asuka just glared at him. He knew why that was so. All her guardians and former guardians did. That had always been one of the worst aspects about how NERV had approached her legal status. Not only had she been forced to constantly get used to new people, people with authority over her, it was also that these same people would be told about her mother. It had felt like a constant invasion of her privacy.

“Well, then you should try to find out more,” Kaji continued. “Try if you can get more out of Shinji. But – don't use interrogation tactics. They won't work. Just talk normally to him.” He grinned. “That's an old maxim in the intelligence business: You can get more information out of a subject in a friendly talk than in a forceful interrogation.”

“What do you mean?” Asuka asked.

“If you try to beat the truth out of someone, they'll just tell you what they think you want to hear,” Kaji explained. “Not necessarily the truth.” His voice suddenly became graver and more quiet. “Not that there aren't still plenty of brutal idiots who don't understand that. People who justify their sadism to themselves by delusions of making the necessary 'hard decisions'.” He shook his head and caught himself again. “So, if you're confrontational with Shinji, he'll just think about what best to tell you so as to lose you again. Besides, those memories... they need to come to him again. Gradually, gently. That's best done by just talking about them.”

“So that's what I should do?” Asuka could not believe that should be the strategy. “Talk to that idiot like I were his friend or something?”

“Well, he is your colleague, isn't he?” Kaji reminded her. “So you'll just talk to him as a fellow pilot. No big deal. Meanwhile, I'll see what else I can find out about Yui Ikari and Unit 01.”

“He isn't exactly the easiest person to talk to,” Asuka complained. “All sulks and silence.”

Kaji smirked. “Then see that as your challenge. Think about how you can get such a person to talk to you in a friendly manner. Surely, even if you dislike the task, you should be up to it.”
Shinji was standing in front of Misato's door, his school bag already on his shoulders, and hesitated.

It was 07:40. He would have to leave the apartment soon to reach school in time. However, Misato was still not up. Once again, it seemed like he would have to wake her. There had always been something comical about a guardian who needed to rely on her ward to assure that she made it to work on time.

...it was not so comical anymore.

The previous evening, she had been all laughter and good spirits, but even by her standards, which involved using every opportunity to sound cheerful, it had sounded hollow. Still, Shinji was glad she had been that way. It made returning things to normal easier on him – something that was already difficult for him as it was. That was also the reason he had not yet told Misato what he had seen inside EVA-00. He did not want to make things even more complicated.

But so far, it had always been her doing that work, the work of going back to where things were. Waking her now would mean him doing likewise. He was unsure if it should. Uncertain if it was appropriate. He wanted to return to normal, but secretly he still doubted he deserved that.

Finally, he turned around and walked out of the apartment.

On his way to school he cursed himself for his cowardice. Once again, he was running away. Just as he had from Ayanami after the incident at her apartment, or indeed Misato after their argument. He stuck his plugs into his ears and started the SDAT player. On the whole way to school, he looked down. It helped him not to think about the world.

He hardly paid any attention to class until history came up. That was not such a bad class, after all. Sure, the teacher had a tendency to ramble, but in a weird way, it was a topic that Shinji could actually connect to. English with all its tenses and verb forms confused him, and maths was nearly as much a foreign language to him, with all the symbols and rules and the lack of applicability in real life. Not that history was much better in that regard. And yet, it did have a use for him. When the teacher droned on about the pre-Second Impact world, Shinji could almost imagine being there.

A distant world, far away from all the pains he suffered in this one. It did not matter if the topic was on the 20th century, the 19th century, or the pre-industrial age. None of those ages had angels and Evangelions, AT-Fields or prog-knives. And, although Shinji felt almost guilty for thinking that way, those were times when his father had not even been born yet.

Touji of course thought this all a big waste of time, but then he was bored by every class that was not physical education. He seemed to have a certain knack for English, probably because it gave him one more way to blather on and on, but he just put no effort into it. And as for maths, the natural sciences or Japanese... Shinji wondered how Touji had even been able to survive before he had shown up and had become his main source of homework. Kensuke, on the other hand, was actually a fairly good student, just lazy as well, and he also had a certain interest in history... just not in what the teacher had to tell. He was interested in wars and the politics behind them, not how people back then actually lived.

So it was not surprising that Touji celebrated the end of history class, and the beginning of lunch break with a loud and annoyed: “Fiiiiinally!”
Shinji sighed and got his lunch package out of his bag. A shadow fell on him. When he looked up, he was surprised to see Soryu standing at his desk. A fiery appearance full of life, just a metre away from him. He usually stayed away from her, as she seemed constantly displeased with him... something he could not really hold against her. But the strength of her presence, her aura, was undeniable.

Before he could start stuttering stupid stuff, she demanded to know: “Where do you always get those meals, anyway? I know the height of Misato's cooking abilities is sticking stuff in the microwave. And then letting it get burned there.”

Shinji had to grin at that. Soryu seemed to have a talent for very apt descriptions, especially when they involved his guardian. The grin died when he thought about how he had left Misato this morning. “I make them. It's the only way to avoid her... 'meals'.”

“You do?” Soryu exclaimed. Shinji felt a little bit disappointed in how shocked she sounded. “You must be the only boy in Japan who... nevermind. Is that actually edible?”

“You want a piece?” Shinji offered. With a suspicious look, Soryu took a piece of tempura. It was maybe slightly inappropriate to use fingers, but Shinji had no extra pair of chopsticks with him, so that was okay. For a moment, her eyes widened, before she was back to her normal frown. “Well, I've had better, but it isn't bad for a Japanese boy.” Shinji moved a hand to his face to cover a smile. Soryu was very obvious. “And it beats the cafeteria food here, but then that usually falls just short of poisoning the students.”

“You could make your own lunch food,” Shinji encouraged her. “I'm sure you'd be good at it.”

Soryu scoffed. “Little chance while I'm still stuck at that damn hotel. Oh well, NERV's paying the extra costs. Transition easement due to my redeployment, and that includes the daily meals at the cafeteria.”

“Ah... that's... good... I suppose...” Shinji stuttered. He felt unsure what to say around Soryu.

Her eyes fixed him in place. Then she grabbed his arm. “Let's go talk somewhere more private, Third.”

Shinji was positively shocked. He still manage to grab his lunch box before being dragged outside of the classroom. Touji hooted when he saw what was happening. Finally, Soryu stopped at a staircase.

“So, Shinji...” she began aggressively, but then looked away.

“Uh, yes?” he answered. It was still somewhat weird to be addressed by his personal name, but he did not really mind.

“It's just... what happened three days ago... uh... are you alright?” Soryu asked, suddenly changing her voice in the end.

“I'm fine,” Shinji answered. “There were no injuries, and no signs of lasting mental contamination.” He paused and looked down. “It's just....”

“Yeah?” Asuka asked, no, demanded to know again.
That made Shinji uncertain, but he could not just leave the topic dangling like that. So he eventually continued, barely above a whisper: “The memories. My mother. Her... not that you would understand...”

Soryu... growled in response. Shocked, Shinji looked up. Whereas ‘annoyed’ was the Second Child’s normal state, now she wore a mask of outright anger.

“You don't get it, do you?” she spat. “None of you do. None of you understand.”

And with that, she whirled around and left a confused Shinji behind.

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Two days history class in a row should find a mention in the Geneva Conventions. That rambling is more effective than sleeping gas, but would surely fall under ‘causing unnecessary harm’.

Asuka liked to stick with maths. Physics and chemistry, where she could use maths, were also all right, but there was something about pure maths... it was exactly its abstract nature that attracted her. It was pure in a way no other subject could be. The only subject where such things as pure platonic ideals truly existed. It was part of the world, but ordered and clear and abstract, unlike the everyday world.

Of course, it also helped that she already had a degree in that subject. And that it required only a minimum of kanji. She did not even need to study for math exams to routinely be at the class’ top three. And the only reason why she was not constantly the best was once again that she would still sometimes not fully understand certain questions, due to the kanji involved.

It was just like how the world should ideally be: Easy challenges that she and only she was the best at mastering.

The angels so far had been like that as well. The overgrown trout that had attacked the U.N. Pacific Fleet had been no match for her, and the floating d8 had been safely decommissioned from afar. The first two angels since her deployment to Japan, killed by her. With the next angel, she would have surpassed the Third Child.

Unfortunately, the Evangelion pilots were another matter entirely. There was Rei, who... Asuka shook her head. Thinking about her invariably summoned images of her lying naked below Asuka. Also of her smile at Mt Futago, sometimes, but most of the time those memories were... embarrassing. And unfortunately, reoccurring all too often.

And then there was Shinji. Rei at least had determination and exotic aura. Shinji had... Well, he has information I want, and that’s the problem. If he just weren’t so goddamn impossible to speak to. Who does he think he is, telling me I wouldn’t understand?

She glanced over to him. He actually seemed to pay attention to the teacher. Her eyes narrowed. That just isn't normal. She groaned inwardly. She would have to find another way to approach him today. A way that maybe did not make him talk like an idiot. Somehow.

She was still mulling on how to do that when the class ended. Lunch break. I should use that chance to... She looked up. To her utter surprise, Shinji stood at her table... and did not say
anything.

“What do you want?” she asked aggressively.

“I... uh... well,” Shinji stammered.

Asuka was well aware that half the class was looking at the scene. *Gottverdammte kleine Voyeure...* “Do you have a point to make, Third?”

He held up a box. “It's... well, I'm sorry.”

Asuka looked at the box. “Sorry?” *He's apologizing yet again?*

“For... for offending you yesterday,” Shinji explained hastily. “So, I... I thought I had to make it up to you.” He held the box out.

With a look of suspicion, Asuka took it and opened it. Her eyes widened when she found a whole array of food inside.

“*Verdammt noch einmal, Dritter...*” Asuka muttered. *What is he thinking, putting me on the spot like this? For all to see, too!* It was not like she had never gotten niceties. Both Misato and Kaji had given her presents on her birthday and on Christmas, despite all the cultural differences with Japan concerning such events. But that someone would just prepare lunch for her, in order to be nice to her, in order to make something up to her... that did affect Asuka. And that in turn annoyed her.

She suddenly raised her head defiantly. “Very well. I'll see if the food is good enough.” Shinji was about to turn around again when she added: “Next time, don't assume people won't understand. We...” Normally she would not have said so, but she still had a goal to pursue. “We need to talk about this again. Now that you've learned your lesson.” She looked at the lunch box. “...once I'm finished with this.”

She watched as Shinji retreated to his friends, who welcomed him with sounds of surprise and loud questions. Behind that scene, she could see Rei at her place... who seemed to watch those proceedings with an intense interest.
Interests II

Rei Ayanami found herself suddenly very concerned with Pilot Soryu.

She had witnessed the previous day how Shinji had given a lunch box to her. And that was something that had... worried her greatly. It was good for the Scenario if the two pilots could work together. But this was not just professional cooperation. This was personal bonding. And that... It was strange. Rei had read about the concept of jealousy. It was one of those things where she could intellectually absorb the information, but not associate it with anything happening in her life.

Until now. She realized what she was feeling was jealousy. It was a surprising feeling.

*If I feel jealousy towards Pilot Soryu, does that mean I feel a romantic attachment towards Ikari?*

...

*Is that the warmth I'm feeling?*

Romance was another topic that so far she had approached only intellectually, and even then only briefly. It had never held much interest to her. Of all the things happening in the world, that one seemed the most distant to her. But from what she had gleaned, it caused people to act irrationally. Romance was a threat to the Scenario.

...but surely, merely having those feelings would be all right.

*But if that's all that I can have, why then am I jealous of Soryu?*

She had never cared much for class gossip, but she knew that the Second Child was considered exceptionally attractive. And the way Ikari acted around her made it obvious he was thinking much the same. As for Rei herself, she disliked Soryu's loud and brash manner. It just seemed so unnecessary to her, disrupting silence and order and everything for no gain at all.

...and yet, at Mt Futago, seeing that liveliness had been invigorating. And Soryu had caused Rei to smile at Ikari.

Rei feared she might begin to think irrationally herself. That was not allowed to be. It was one thing if humans did that, but she was not a human being. She was a tool with human shape, with a fixed purpose.

She could have tried to approach that topic with Ikari after school, but for the first time in their conversations with each other, she had hesitated. They had ended up talking about irrelevancies from school. It was her fault that she was thinking irrationally; there was no need to burden Ikari with it.

Classes came and passed as she pondered those issues. It was not that she paid no attention to them. But she could generally understand enough of the subject matter by only half listening to the teacher. That usually proved sufficient. And even if not... it was not like it was actually important that she get a school education. Or any of the people in the class. One way or another, these were the final days of the current shape of Lilithian life.
Soon everything will return to its origin, and I will...

She looked up. It was lunch break. And Ikari was standing in front of her desk. He had put a box on it.

Without further prelude, he simply declared: “It... it just seemed fair I should give you a lunch box as well.” He smiled awkwardly. “I never see you with one of your own, either. And, after all, by all right you should have been angry at me a dozen times over.”

Hesitantly, unsure what to think, feel or say, Rei opened the box.

“I'm sorry,” she finally whispered.

“Huh?” Ikari asked.

“I do not eat meat,” she explained.

“Oh,” Ikari made. “I'm sorry, then.”

“What is that?” a voice from behind Ikari complained. “Have you become the class chef now?” Suzuhara looked demonstratively annoyed.

Ikari turned around to him. “I... ah, I just thought... it's just... I try to be nice...” Suzuhara made a sound that was half laugh, half scoff. “Yeah. Being nice. To the attractive red-haired foreign student, and to, well... Ayanami.” Rei did not understand why he grinned the way he did when he mentioned her name. “Sure that's just being nice.”

“Well, uh...” Ikari tried to articulate. Then he sighed. “I'm sorry. That looks pretty bad, doesn't it?” Suzuhara shrugged. “Hey, that's none of my business. I just think men shouldn't cook. We gotta have some principles, after all!”

“And in what century do you live?” a loud voice asked across several rows of desk. Soryu, of course. She has been listening. “Will you next demonstrate how the constellations move around the Earth?”

“The... huh?” Suzuhara asked back. “Speak Japanese, Red Devil!” That name drew some snickering from onlookers.

“It's not my problem if you can't even understand your own mother tongue, buffoon!” Soryu shot back.

“Can you also write that word?” Suzuhara asked provocatively.

“Can you write in a way that would even be understood outside Japan?”

“Why should I even need to? We have everything anyone could need! Even you came...”

While everyone was paying attention to the two squabblers, Ikari silently went back to his desk and got something out of his bag. A thermos flask, as Rei could soon see.
“I just remembered I also made some miso soup,” he told her. “Temperatures have been rather low the past days, after all. You could try that instead.”

He opened the flask, and poured some soup into its cup, then gave it to her. She took the cup to her mouth.

Her eyes widened slightly.

“That... tastes good,” she commented.

“I'm glad you like it,” Ikari stated. “Take the flask then. I have two lunch boxes now, after all.”

“Uh... thank you,” Rei said. The warmth she felt was not just the soup, as she felt it spreading to her cheeks.

She took another sip, and another. Most of the time she only ate in order to sustain herself. The only exceptions were when the Commander took her out to dinner now and then. The food on those occasions, usually European, Italian or French, tasted very different to her normal meals, but that had never made a difference to her. For her, it had always been another form of sustenance. And so was this soup, which also tasted different... but now, that did matter to her.

When she looked up again, she saw Soryu facing Ikari half the way back to his desk.

“You still promised me some answers, Third,” he told him.

“I know,” Ikari answered. It sounded slightly aggravated.

No interrogation methods, Kaji said. Hah. Easy for him to say. Damn that Third Child. A number of words were flying around in Asuka's head. Daumenschrauben... Eiserne Jungfrauen... Stasi-Methoden... oder einfach ein Tritt in die Eier.

It was not like she had learned nothing from him the previous days. Okay, so he's a damn good cook. And friendly. And he apparently hasn't told his friends anything about our talks... if they can be called 'talks'. And allowing for how weak and wispy he was, he also did not have a half-bad figure. He still was that, though. But in any case, he still had not been able to tell her more about what had happened to his mother. Damn him!

She was getting a bit desperate. She did not know how much longer she could pretend to be friendly towards Shinji. Sooner or later she would snap at him, again, and that would be the end of her efforts. That was how it always ended, her driving people away, people abandoning her. And that would almost be a pity with the Third Child. She had to solve this problem, somehow, and hence she defaulted to her usual style: Full speed ahead. She would meet and ask Shinji again, after school. On his way home.

That was why she was now walking towards Misato's apartment. She was a bit dumbfounded to see the First Child some distance in front of her, walking in the same direction. Rei stopped at top of a small slope and then looked back, in the direction of the school. Asuka furrowed her brows. That was where she had intended to wait.
“What are you doing here?” she hence asked Rei.

“What are doing here?” Rei answered.

That felt like a gut punch for Asuka. “But... waiting, that is... I wanted...” She began to shout. “Why do you to wait for that dork?” Rei remained silent. Asuka positioned herself right in front of her. “Answer me! What do you want with Shinji?”

“Talk,” Rei merely stated.

“Talking? To Shinji? Why?” Asuka demanded to know. *Goddamn little freak is sabotaging my plans...* It was difficult enough to do this, to wait for some boy like she were his friend, without such outside interference. Again, Rei remained silent. That further agitated Asuka. “You don't even seem capable of talking like a human being. Do you even understand what I just said?”

“I did,” Rei confirmed.

“So, why do you want to talk with Shinji?” Asuka asked again.

“We usually do,” Rei explained. “I wait here for that purpose every day we do not have sync-tests.”

Gut punch number two. *So he and Wondergirl... well, it was obvious.* And yet... she had expected that Shinji would at least look at her, maybe develop an interest. It could be awkward to deal with that, since she had none, but she had *expected* it. She was beautiful, a college graduate and an EVA pilot, after all. And in this country, a rare and exotic redhead. People *should* fall for her. Instead, Shinji had chosen this lifeless little...

...an image of Rei smiling at her flashed through her memory...

“Verdammtte Scheiße...” she muttered. She raised her head and declared: “Fine. Then *talk* with him.”

She was about to storm off when Rei called out: “Soryu.” Asuka balled her hands into fists, but she stopped, without looking back. “Why did you walk to here?”

“You're the genius topping most exams in school,” Asuka replied. “What do you *think*?”

“You have approached Ikari a lot this week,” Rei observed.

Asuka turned around. “And do you have a problem with that?” Rei's eyes widened slightly, then she looked down. It was a surprisingly emotional reaction from the girl, who was usually so stiff and cold. Asuka scoffed. “You can have him, then. I don't go for little boys.”

*At least that explains why he never showed interest. He probably was fixated on her as soon as he arrived. Men! All breast-fixated. Kaji over Misato's udders, and Rei... actually has kinda nice breasts...*

Asuka was staring at Rei, challenging her to defy her. Instead, the girl remained quiet and looking down. *Pitiable...*

...it was, actually. Asuka did feel a pang of pity, of empathy.
She harrumphed. “You don’t even know yourself, do you?”

“No,” Rei answered softly. That took Asuka aback. She had meant to belittle Rei, not to… she did not know what to say now. Instead, Rei eventually looked up. “It is maybe for the best if you form a stable relationship with Ikari. I shall not impede this.”

With that, she trotted away, entering the park.

_Huh, that was… weird. What did she mean by that? I did not mean to drive her off… okay, that's wrong. I did. _But now she was feeling weirdly guilty about that. Rei had looked like a beaten puppy.

Those thoughts left her head as she saw Shinji approaching her position. She had to prepare for what to tell him. This was a sort of intelligence gathering mission, after all.

Shinji looked increasingly confused as he went up the slope.

“Uh… hello, Soryu,” he greeted her. “What are you doing here?”

Asuka shrugged her shoulders. “I decided returning to my hotel room would be boring. I’m getting rather sick of it.”

“Huh. Makes sense,” Shinji judged. “Ah… have you seen Ayanami here?”

“She just left,” Asuka told him.

“That’s odd,” Shini opined. “Did she say anything?”

Asuka became annoyed. “Look. The great Asuka Langley Soryu is willing to talk to you, and all you do is think about other girls? Are you stupid? That's just impolite.”

“I… guess so,” Shinji sort of agreed. “I'm sorry.”

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Asuka prompted him: “Well then? Say something!”

“Ah… you wanted to talk to me!” Shinji protested. Asuka just crossed her arms. “Well, uh… there's a synch-test tomorrow. A regular one again.”

“Not quite,” Asuka disagreed. “Haven't you read the message? It will be an activation test. To see if we can still pilot our usual EVAs, after they messed it all up last Saturday. I swear, if they did something to my Unit…”

Shinji's lip curled up. “You'll… be displeased?”

“As will be demonstrated by a boot lodging itself firmly into Akagi’s ass!” Asuka threatened. “Well, let's go, Third...”

“Achoo!”
“Bless you,” Misato told Ritsuko. “Developing a cold?”

The faux-blonde shook her head. “No. No idea where that came from.”

“You seem awfully calm considering what happened last time we stood in this room,” Misato stated. “How the hell did they get the windows repaired so quickly, anyway?”

Ritsuko just shrugged. “After the first incident with EVA-00, we stockpiled security glass. We were going to retire it, you know. After all, it was merely the prototype. More proof-of-concept than anything else. Rei could have taken over EVA-01, and we would all have had a whole lot less trouble.”

Misato sighed. “Shinji would probably agree with you there. But imagine if that's what had happened during the last battle. EVA-00 is still not combat worthy again after that beam hit it. If we had decommissioned it, that would have been EVA-01 instead, and we'd only have EVA-02 deployable right now. We need to have three units, for just such cases. Even if that means relying on the Prototype.”

“Well, Commander Ikari agrees, so that's what we're doing,” Ritsuko agreed. “I suppose constantly repairing windows is a small price to pay for having three units ready.”

“For us, anyway,” Misato stated quietly, thinking back to the dread she had felt when EVA-00 had gone berserk with Shinji inside. “It isn't us in those entry-plugs after all.”

“Trouble with Shinji back at home?” Ritsuko asked. It sounded slightly teasing.

Misato shrugged. “It's solved now.”

Ritsuko hummed and grabbed a notepad. “If you say so. But you have to admit, him spending a whole day in the city with Rei was... extraordinary.”

Misato narrowed her eyes. “How do you know about that?”

“I do have access to Section 2 reports, you know,” Ritsuko told her. “Being third in command and all that.”

Misato sighed. “I'd rather not be reminded of that.” She rubbed her eyes. “Look, we... argued. But we're back to normal. More or less.”

“More or less?” Ritsuko prompted.

“Hey, he woke me up again today. That's normal!” Misato insisted. She grinned. “I even got him to take over laundry duty for today. I have the nagging feeling there'll be a whole lot of paperwork coming my way.”

Ritsuko raised her eyebrow without looking up from her notepad. “So you use him as a domestic?”

“Hey, I traded in two future laundry duties for that. I'm playing fair!” Misato protested.

“I suppose if he puts up with that, things are indeed back to normal,” Ritsuko judged, again with that teasing undertone. “So now he'll continue to be dragged down by his roommate.”
Misato glared at her. “I could say the same about certain cats.”

That got Ritsuko to actually grin, something that Misato counted as a success for her. The two did not fall often in their old game of verbal one-upmanship anymore, but when they did, Ritsuko always assumed the role of the cool, emotionless observer.

“So, what's the schedule for today, anyway?” Misato asked.

“Take a look out of the window and take a wild guess,” Ritsuko prompted.

Outside the Pribnow Box, in the test cube, Unit-01 was being put in place.

“So Shinji is first,” Misato concluded.

“Then Rei, then Asuka,” Ritsuko added. “Ordered by decreasing risk, so if something goes wrong we can fix it right at the beginning.” She made an annoyed grunt. “We should be doing such tests much more often, you know.”

“As I remember, it was you Section 3 guys who needed all the time to have the EVAs rewritten 'safely' again,” Misato pointed out.

Ritsuko sighed. “True. But the last synch-test before the cross-synch one was almost two weeks prior to that. We've become sloppy in our schedule.”

“Ramiel crashed into our schedule,” Misato argued. “A few days off from synch-tests after an angel attack shouldn't be too much to ask for.”

“I understand that you want rest for your pilots,” Ritsuko answered. “Taking care of such things is part of your job. But for my job, I need a constant stream of data to keep the EVAs properly calibrated. I don't think you have an inkling how difficult that can be. EVA technology is still far from mature. Really, if it weren't for the angels, they would never leave the lab and testing areas. Without constant maintenance, incidents like EVA-00 going berserk would happen far more often.”

“Yes, yes, you've made your point,” Misato conceded. “So I take it you'll ram up the synch-test schedule?”

“Considerably,” Ritsuko confirmed. “The next test will be on Monday, and starting from there every second day.”

Misato groaned. “Really, Ritsu? Asuka will be livid. And Shinji will be even more annoyed, he just won't show it...”

“Tough luck. That comes with being an EVA pilot,” Ritsuko dismissed the complaint.

At her terminal, Lt Ibuki coughed politely. “Third Child is in the entry-plug. Inserting entry-plug now.”

Misato walked up to her side to use the comm system. “Glad to be back in your own EVA, Shinji?”

His answer was curt and vague even by his own standards, barely more than an acknowledging grunt. Misato wondered what was going through his mind. She nodded towards Ibuki.
The Lieutenant started the process. “Initiating first level connection.”

Ritsuko was now looking over her shoulder as well, with a deep frown on her face. “Those values are abysmal. He's doing worse than he did in EVA-00!” She sighed. “Let's hope it's just the unreliability of first connection readings. Increase the harmonics, Maya.”

Ibuki nodded. “Ready for second level connection. All values are stable. Starting second level connection... now.”

“That's... bad,” Ritsuko whispered.

“What's the matter?” Misato asked.

Ritsuko waved towards Ibuki's screen. “Look at those values!” She could as well have told Misato to take a look at the Iliad in original Greek. “They aren't increasing.” She looked at Ibuki. “Is he even...”

The Lieutenant shook her head. “Initiation of second stage connection has failed.”

“Already at the second stage? Damn it!” Ritsuko cursed. She spoke into the comm system: “Shinji, how are you doing?”

“I, uh... well. I don't feel anything,” Shinji reported. “Normally, around this time...”

“You'd get a mental feedback, yes,” Ritsuko confirmed. “We can't get you connected to your EVA. Does anything feel off for you?”

“Off?” Shinji echoed. “Ah well, not as such... it's just... are those EVAs really safe?”

Misato and Ritsuko instinctively looked at each other. That was an odd question coming from the Third Child.

Silently, Ibuki pointed out something to Ritsuko: “Look at his psychograph, senpai. His ego-barrier...”

Ritsuko's eyes widened. Hastily she told Shinji: “Don't worry. EVA-01 is a very stable unit. It even saved you when you first saw it, didn't it?” She did not manage to make it sound very convincing. Misato knew her friend had some grave doubts about the Evangelions herself.

“What is going on?” Misato asked through clenched teeth.

Ibuki looked at Ritsuko, who nodded, and then explained: “Shinji's ego-barrier has always been problematic, to be honest. It's the psychological factor that defines the self via not being others, the psychological factor that separates people. Shinji's is usually very high, but can fluctuate widely in battle. By comparison, Asuka's ego-barrier values are constantly high, Rei's constantly low.”

Misato raised an eyebrow. “I won't pretend to understand what this means, but go on.”

“Well, now his ego-barrier value is very high,” Ibuki continued. “My guess is he is separating himself from EVA-01. The A10 complex can't open up to the EVA.”
Misato blinked. Ritsuko took over the explanation: “The A10 clips use the section of the brain that helps us be empathetic and communicate with other people. A kind of extrovert's section.”

“One wouldn't think Shinji should be pilot material, then,” Misato pointed out.

Ritsuko shook her head. “It isn't about connections to people in general, but connections to Evangelions. Or rather, the own unit; it is difficult enough for us to even only get that specific connection to build up. Whatever Shinji is with people, he usually easily opened up to EVA-01. Was in tune with it...which, really, is what the synch-rate signifies.”

“And now he isn't,” Misato concluded.

“What worries me is that this is already happening at the second connection,” Ritsuko went on. “If the third connection had failed, we would have known it to be subconscious influences. But second connection... that's conscious thoughts.”

“So Shinji is deliberately not synching?” Misato asked.

Ritsuko shook her head again. “No, then we already wouldn't have been able to initiate the first stage connection. But whatever it is that prevents him from synching, it is not something pushed to the darkest corners of his subconsciousness. It's something on his conscious mind. Face it, Misato, something is still bothering him.”

Damn it. It was bad enough that this meant the connection to his EVA had failed. But what worried Misato on a deeper level was the implication of that. Maybe the rift between us still isn't closed. She sighed. One thing at a time. She had not become Operations Director of NERV by an inability to schedule tasks.

“I'll talk to him,” she promised. “In the meantime... how quickly can you rewrite EVA-01?”

“So that Rei can pilot it? Matter of two hours, max,” Ritsuko explained. “The real problem was rewriting EVA-02. The differences between EVA-01 programmed for Shinji and it programmed for Rei are minimal, anyway.” She grinned and whispered, as if to herself: “Unsurprisingly...”

And what does she mean by that? Misato doubted she would come far with asking, though. Ever since Ritusko had become the head of Project E, her tendency to be all enigmatic and more-knowledgeable-than-thou had become insufferable at times.

“In that case... have its mental data written for Shinji during synch-tests,” she asked her friend. “We'll just have to try again and again. But during standby, it should be written for Rei. As long as EVA-00 isn't repaired yet, we need to have EVA-01 deployable, regardless of who the pilot is.”

Ritsuko sighed. “Misato, you have a knack for adding to the workload of others with completely reasonable arguments. I'm not looking forwards going through EVA-01’s mental data every second day.”

Misato grinned. “Tough luck. That comes with being head of Project E.”

Shinji had failed again. Of this, he was sure.
However, for a change, he did not actually feel *bad* about it. Yes, he should have been able to synch with EVA-01. But maybe it was for the better if he could not. Maybe it would not be right, anyway, to use the machine that had killed his mother. Maybe *this* failure was all right.

He could pretty much guess what had caused this failure: Exactly those thoughts. He had been unable to clear his mind of his regained memories and of the persistant thought that his mother had died inside EVA-01. He had felt the usual warmth and comfort inside the entry-plug, and yet it had become a foreboding place.

After his failure, the schedule had been changed: Soryu had reactivated her EVA-02 without a problem, while Rei now came up last, and again in EVA-01. If an angel were to attack now, she would pilot the machine. That made him a little uneasy, as it meant Rei would be in harm's way only due to his failure, but then again, she was probably safer in EVA-01 than in the notoriously unreliable EVA-00.

That changed schedule meant that Shinji had had nothing to do for hours now. Misato was too busy observing the tests, Soryu was in EVA-02 and Ayanami was somehow also involved in the whole process, even before her tests had come up. So for hours, Shinji had sat at a small table in a waiting room, a can from a vending machine in his hand. Having become useless inside an entry-plug, he had changed back into his school uniform. Now he brooded.

What will I do now?

He had not told Misato about his resurfaced memories the whole week. He did not want to make things even more complicated, and besides... he had told her he would pilot EVA. He could not step back from that mere weeks afterwards, no matter what was on his mind. However, now it seemed he *could* not even pilot EVA anymore. Was that a dilemma? Or a liberation?

...I don't want to think about this anymore.

He already had all week. And it did not help how much of an interest Soryu had shown in that topic during that time. It was not that he disliked talking to her. She had a delightfully irreverent and sarcastic streak. Maybe it was because she was a foreigner, but Shinji liked the blunt words she directed to those around her. Even when those were aimed at him. He did not mind that; he frequently did things deserving of scorn, after all. And she was so lively. And she was putting up with him even after he had, as always, screwed things up with her on Tuesday. Not without complaints, not without getting loud at him, but he did not mind that, either. Seeing Soryu in action, so full of energy... it was energizing him as well.

However, her increasingly single-minded obsession with his memories had become slightly annoying. And then what she had told him about NERV apparently keeping this all a secret, advising him to not say anything to Misato...

*Why does she think about this to much? What's that topic to her, anyway?*

It was not that he was holding anything back. He had told her what he knew; he just did not know more. It was not like...

...Soryu entered the waiting room. Still wearing her plugsuit, she positioned herself next to the table, directly next to him, looking at him.

“*Jesses*, Third, what is with you and always looking glum?” she asked as a greeting.
Shinji just shrugged. He had no real intention to tell her everything that was going through his mind right now. Instead he asked: “How was the test?”

“What do you think?” Soryu shot back. “Completely smooth sailing. EVA-02 is much more stable and advanced than the Japanese machines.” She seemed to consider. “Though I suppose the scientists and engineers here did their best. For whatever that's worth. Like your mother...”

Shinji sighed. And here we go again. “I don't know for sure if she was among the development team.”

“It makes sense, though, doesn't it?” Soryu pushed on.

Shinji shrugged again. “Yeah, of course.”

Soryu looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Yes of course it makes sense! Otherwise I wouldn't say so, now would it?” She breathed out hard, as if in frustration.

“I really can't remember anything about my mother,” Shinji told her. “Not even her face... and her voice only dimly, only that one sentence that has come back to me... I surely don't remember what job she might have had.”

And why am I even telling her that much? He knew the answer, though: Because Soryu demanded it. Shinji could slide away into secure passivity with Misato, and he liked the safety of being around Ayanami. But around Soryu, he felt like he had to keep pace with her.

“Great, just great,” Soryu muttered. “You're sure it isn't that you just haven't thought enough about it? Or are you just running away from the memories, because they're painful.”

Shinji made a grimace, but remained quiet. Of course the memory was painful. And was that not what people, all people, did, running away from pain?

“I'm sorry, maybe it's different in Germany, but I can't just summon up memories on the spot,” he told Soryu defiantly.

“I'm not asking you to, idiot!” Soryu shouted. “I'm just telling you to put up a little effort into it!”

At this point, Shinji hammered a fist against the table. Soryu stopped in surprise.”Why?” he shouted back, without looking at her.

“What do you mean, why?” Soryu countered, making it once again sound like he was an idiot for asking that question.


Soryu harrumphed. “So that's what I'm getting for showing a bit of interest in what has happened to you? No wonder nobody's willing to put up with you.” Shinji formed both hands into fists. She doesn't have to put it that way... “If you do remember something, you know where to find me.”

That seemed like it would end the conversation, but instead Soryu remained standing at her place. Shinji shook his head. “It took an Evangelion going berserk to uncover those memories. I doubt I'll remember more.”
“Not with that attitude, idiot!” Soryu yelled at him. “Gottverdammt noch einmal, don't be so defeatist!”

Abruptly, Shinji stood up, nearly toppling over his chair. Even so, he could not look directly at Soryu. Instead, his view was cast down, his body rigid, his hands fists. “Why do you care?”

Immediately, Soryu shouted back: “Because the same has happened to Mama!”

There was an awkward silence. Both teenagers just stood there, not changing positions, not speaking. Shinji’s eyes were wide, while Asuka’s face looked... She looks almost fearful.

“To... to your mother...” Shinji whispered.

“Yes,” Soryu growled back. “After the initial contact experiment with EVA-02 she...” She emitted a furious, inarticulate sound. “I promise you, Third. If you tell this to anyone, you're dead. I mean that. I don't care what your EVA did against Sachiel, I can take you on with or without EVA. Say a word, and you're dead.” She paused. “Don't tell anyone anything about the contact experiments, no matter which one.”

The threat did not even register with Shinji. “...you also lost your mother...”

Still just looking ahead, he could not see if Soryu's expression changed. Calmly, but darkly she answered: “What is that to you?”

Now Shinji turned around to face Soryu. “I... I just thought...” He stopped. “Maybe it's presumptuous. After all, whatever happened to your mother, you became a college graduate at age fourteen, and the best EVA pilot in the world, while I... and besides, you still had your father...”

At that, Soryu just scoffed. “My father. Right. Let me tell you about my father. He shacked up with the doctor that was treating my mother, and married her before my mother was even buried. Then he just dumped me with NERV.”

Shinji blinked. He blinked again. And yet again. The story sounded very familiar to him. Uncomfortably familiar.

“My father left me behind at a train station,” he answered quietly. “That I still remember. I was... four. So it must have been only weeks or months after my mother died.”

Again there was silence. It was ended when Soryu abruptly turned around on the spot. As she went she muttered: “Remember what I said about telling others.”
Rei figured that she should go to bed as soon as she arrived home. She was tired, so even if she went to bed earlier today, she would probably wake up at the same time tomorrow.

Dr Akagi had sent her through her usual battery of medical tests, as always only ever looking at the results, never sparing a glance, let alone small-talk, for Rei. Not that Rei minded or would even know it any other way. She had been there so that her fitness could be tested; as it was, she was functional for all her purposes, and that was everything that mattered. Given her origins, her biology was delicate; and her metaphysical biology was even worse. Her soul was just not made for her body; that body had hence to be constantly recalibrated.

If her body maintenance were to be left to her AT Field alone, the results could be potentially quite bad. By now, Rei did not even consciously consider that fact anymore. It was a normal part of her life, such as it was.

She walked up the litter-filled stairs of her apartment bloc. In the background, the demolition work was going on even at this late hour, but its noises did not even register with Rei anymore, nor did all the trash around her.

She did stop mid-movement in surprise when she saw a man leaning casually against the wall next to her door, though. He was wearing casual clothing, and looked into the setting sun with a grin on his unshaven face. Rei recognized him as the man who had come with Pilot Soryu. Her guardian.

She did not know why he was here, and what she could say to him, so she said nothing. She simply walked around him and opened her door.

“You really should get a lock, you know,” the man commented.

Rei stopped for a moment, but then continued walking in. So far, having no lock had not caused her any problems, and Soryu's guardian was not in a position of authority over her.

“May I come in, Rei?” he asked her back before she could turn around and close the door.

She would have no inherent problem with that. If he had a reason to come in, she would not have minded. But he had asked her and she saw no reason for that. So she simply began to wordlessly close the door.

He pushed against it from the other side. She looked through the opened gap and saw him holding up a laminated ID card.

He sighed. “I did not want to go this route, but alright. Ryoji Kaji, UN Inspector to NERV. I am to supervise your actions regarding the angels. So I want to talk with the pilots.”

Wordlessly, Rei stepped aside and opened the door. It apeared that man, Inspector Kaji, did have authority. It did not even occur to her to check the card.

“Thank you,” Kaji told her as he stepped in. He looked around, but did not say anything. The smirk was back on his face.

He furrowed his brows as he walked into her sleeping room. “Has this apartment been assigned to
you by NERV?"

Rei nodded.

Kaji’s smile... shifted, but Rei could not say how. “You really should at least get a lock, you know. Not that many people still come out here, but I bet police reaction times for the area are terrible.”

Rei was not terribly concerned about this. She had not seen a single neighbour in months; the apartment bloc was nearly entirely empty. There simply were no people here who could commit crimes against her. If something were to be stolen, NERV could replace it. And if people attempted violence against her... Rei had means to prevent lasting damage. And minor injuries were inconsequential.

“So, Rei, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself?” Kaji prompted her. “Where you're from, for example?”

“I am Commander Ikari's ward,” Rei answered truthfully.

“Do you know when he became your guardian?” Kaji asked.

Rei nodded. She did know that.

Kaji sighed. “When did he become your guardian?”

“As soon as I left the hospital,” Rei answered. Also technically true.

“So you've never known any other caretaker than him?” Kaji inquired further.

Rei nodded. Then she considered. “Dr Akagi has also been very involved in my upbringing.”

Kaji raised an eyebrow. “Ritsuko, is that so? Hmm. Very well. When did you enter the Evangelion program”

“Two years ago,” Rei answered. Of course she had always known that she was slated for it, and she had done simulator training for years before that. “I was called in to do reactivation tests with EVA-00, to clear up questions regarding EVA deployment.”

Kaji nodded. “That's the scientific aspect. But it was also planned to have you be part of the military aspect from the beginning, wasn't it?”

“I was supposed to be EVA-01's designated pilot,” Rei reported. “The plan was modified by the introduction of Shinji Ikari as Third Child. EVA-00 has been re-equipped as a battle-worthy Evangelion, and I am now its designated pilot.”

Kaji hesitated. “Have you ever considered leaving the program?” Rei shook her head. The question was very alien to her – considering such things was in itself a thing she could never have considered. “Not even after the injuries you received during that one reactivation test?” Again she shook her head. “Why did you agree to pilot EVA, to go into life and death battles?”

“I am able to,” Rei simply replied. “Therefore I should do it.” She decided not to tell him how piloting EVA connected her to people. It was one thing to tell Ikari. But this man was a stranger.
“That's noble of you,” Kaji lauded her. “If you could get out of the program... because there are more pilots than units, or because we find an alternative for fighting angels... would you?”

That was another strange question. What use were such hypotheticals? The real world was what mattered, and in the real world she was obliged to pilot EVA.

“I would follow Commander Ikari's order in such a case,” she answered.

“I see,” Kaji muttered. “Do you mind the Commander giving orders to you?” Rei shook her head. Kaji sighed. “Very well then. Thanks for your time, Rei.” He hesitated. “I assume you will report this talk to Commander Ikari?”

“Should I not?” Rei asked.

“Eh, it's alright,” Kaji told her. “After all, I don't think I've done anything bad.” He grinned again and winked at her. “Or do you think I have?”

Rei just continued looking at him and did not reply. She knew that this was not a genuine question, and in any case, it was a question only he could answer.

Kaji sighed again. “Well, I hope to see you around, Rei. Bye!” And finally, he left her apartment again.

That's a fine mess I've gotten my genius ass into. What the fuck use is a maths bachelor if I'm still acting that stupid?

Maybe the mistake had been showing interest in Shinji's memories in the first place. The obvious parallels to her own history had awakened her curiosity, but maybe she should simply have let sleeping dogs lie. Asuka had enough problems shutting out her own memories anyway, at night when it was dark and she was just lying in bed, or worse, when she would finally fall asleep only to see her mother again in her dreams... her nightmares. There was no reason to also involve other people in it.

And then, worst of all, Shinji! She already had compromised her situation enough by trying to be all friendly with him for a week. He would get all the wrong ideas if she let that stand unchallenged. It was bad enough how little interest that little whelp had in her, even though the great Asuka Langley Soryu had spent so much time with him. The boy seemed to have no drive of his own, which was intolerable in an EVA pilot. Hence Asuka thought she should be a challenge to him, to get him to act and not... not present her company as a free gift like that!

That was why she had to clarify things with him. Even if it meant appearing at the Katsuragi residence at not even half past eight on a Sunday morning. Knowing how her former guardian acted on weekends, Asuka was reasonably sure Misato had only gone to bed four, five hours ago, and that not even a ringing doorbell would disturb her likely beer-fuelled slumber. She is such a sloth... Misato had also been the first NERV guardian who had truly shown affection for Asuka, but that did not mean the Second Child would go easy on her – she needed to get a grip, and that as soon as possible. She also needed to stay the hell away from Kaji.

The door opened relatively quickly after she had rung. However, there was no one behind it. Asuka's jaw dropped when something appeared behind it. A... a... penguin? In Japan? Has Second
Impact fucked over the climate here that badly? And why is a penguin wearing a backpack?

“What?!” the penguin greeted her.

“What are you...?” Asuka whispered, mouth still wide open.

“What?!” the penguin told her.

Asuka closed her mouth, stood straight again and muttered: “Well, that explains it.” Great. Now I'm talking to even more animals besides just the stooges.

It was then that, fortunately, Shinji appeared behind the penguin. He was wearing an apron.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Forgot I still had something on the stove. Uh... Soryu. What are you... ah, I mean, nice to see you here.”

Asuka raised her eyebrow. “Yes, I'm sure.” He sounds like the epitome of happy excitement...

“Listen... uh... I assume Misato is still sleeping?”

“You know her well,” Shinji commented.

“Yeah, well, she used to be my guardian, back in Germany,” Asuka explained. You get that morsel for free. She stopped, unsure what to say or do next, but completely unwilling to show it.

“Huh. She never told me,” Shinji answered.

Before an awkward silence could ensue, the penguin again spoke up: “Wark!”

Shinji smiled. “That's Pen-Pen, Misato's hot spring penguin. No, I don't know what a hot spring penguin is. But if Pen-Pen is anything to go by, they're a nice bunch.” He patted the penguin on the head. It looked pleased.

“Misato sure takes in strange life forms,” Asuka muttered, then looked pointedly at Shinji.

Shinji nodded. “That's your former guardian for you.”

... Did he just...

Asuka could almost feel the steam rising inside her. She fought it down; she was here on a purpose.

“Listen, Third. I'm here to talk to you about what happened on Friday. I let you off the hook too quickly.”

“I... I won't tell anything, I promise!” Shinji hastily assured her. He hesitated. “Ah... you see... it's just...”

“What 'it's just'?” Asuka shouted. “There is no 'it's just'! You'll shut up, and that's the end of it!”

“But don't you think it's strange?” Shinji insisted. “Both our mothers, lost in contact experiments with the EVAs we would late pilot?”

Asuka narrowed her eyes. He's right... no. Rather, I haven't driven my point home enough yet. “So,
how's your stuff on the stove? Can you leave it alone for a while?"

“Uh... I think so... why?” Shinji answered.

“If I shout at you here, it'll just wake people up,” Asuka told him. “We need to talk somewhere more private.”

“Uh... yeah... sure, that makes sense,” Shinji agreed. “Let me just clean up the kitchen... I suppose we can get something to eat on the way...”

“Hrrrnnnggg...” Asuka voiced, but she did not say something. She supposed his request was reasonable enough; but she did not like standing in front of a door waiting for people. It was annoying, and people might get the wrong impression.

She had started contemplating using her head to ram the door in when Shinji finally emerged. Enough people had told her how thick it was, after all. She felt like she had waited an eternity. Her phone said it had been less than ten minutes, but standing around with nothing to do and waiting for an ungrateful whelp, that was an eternity.

The two got going wordlessly. When they had left the apartment bloc, Asuka realized she did not actually know where there could be a private place to talk to here in Tokyo-3. She was still too new to the city, and she was no fool: She knew the pilots were probably being watched every time they were in the open. They somehow needed to get rid of NERV's security apparatus. She just did not know how. That did not stop her from simply confidently walking in an arbitrary direction, though

After they had walked for ten minutes, Shinji finally dared to say something: “So, uh... you wanted to talk?”

Asuka looked around while she continued walking. They had entered a surprisingly upscale residential area; there were some high quality apartment blocs here as well, but also single residence houses, something rare enough in Japan. *It would be difficult for spooks to catch us here... but I also don't want to stand around on the street the entire time.*

“I just don't want you to get any wrong ideas!” Asuka told him. “So our... uhm, our... argh!” *This is definitely the wrong place for such a talk. Isn't there somewhere in this damn city we can go that's a bit more private?”*

“I thought...” Shinji began, then stopped himself. “Well, I don't know... hm. How about a bit outside the city?”

“What? Do you think I want to go on a hiking trip?” Asuka argued.

“No, we can take the train!” Shinji defended himself. “Come on, let's go.”

*Huh. That's unusually active for him.* She could not say she disliked 'active Shinji'.

The two remained entirely quiet on the train. Sometimes, Asuka glanced over nervously to Shinji, afraid he would do something stupid like starting to babble in the middle of the ride. But he seemed oddly relaxed and content with the silence. Asuka rarely was; she always had to occupy her mind with something. She had to always walk forwards; it was the only way to leave the past behind.

The silence grated on her, but she would not break it. She would not make a fool out of herself in
front of all these people. So for half an hour, Shinji and Asuka sat reasonably close together and kept silent. When the train finally arrived at its final stop, Asuka realized that it was quite a bit outside the city indeed, already a way up the mountains that surrounded Tokyo-3. She and Shinji were the last two remaining passengers.

“How do you know that place?” she asked as the two left the train.

“Misato once took me to here,” Shinji explained. “There is a platform with a great view over the city up those stairs. “

“Misato used the train?” Asuka asked. That seemed unlikely; she knew what a car fanatic the Captain was.

“No, I also was here with, uh... well, with Ayanami,” Shinji continued.

*The two have been on a date already?? Was zur Hölle...*

“Yes, I'm sure you two could put a private place outside the city, with basically no people around, to good use,” Asuka insinuated angrily. “Though I'm surprised she even cares for privacy.”

“Ah, uh... I thought about going downhill,” Shinji tried to change the subject. “Nobody will be there. And it hasn't rained in ages; we can sit down on the grass.”

Asuka looked down on her clothing. She had decided there was absolutely no need to dress fancy just for Shinji, so she conveniently was wearing jeans. Nonetheless, there was something about the idea that bothered her. “So that's how you treat a lady? Invite her to a patch of grass? Did you do the same for Rei as well?”

“I took Ayanami to see the city,” Shinji defended himself. There finally was some rigour in his voice. “We can do the same, but I thought you didn't want people around.”

Asuka harrumphed, raised her head defiantly and turned around, to walk down the hill. She could hear Shinji sigh behind her before he also got going.

After a good distance downhill, she simply let herself sink unceremoniously onto the ground. Even from here, the view on the city was not bad. For all its charms, Berlin was ugly. Tokyo-3 was much cleaner and more glittering, even with the decaying ruins of Ramiel still visible right at its centre. Not that she had really seen much of Berlin, of course. Basically just the Technical University and the NERV facility. She dimly remembered where her grandparents lived, a small South German town with a medieval centre, where she had lived for the first two years of her life, and where her mother had... but such memories best remained buried.

Shinji sat down besides her.

Asuka began talking seriously and calmly; she wanted to get somewhere, after all. “This is important to me, okay? I just... I don't want to be seen as something I'm not. I don't need pity or worse, people going easy on me because I've had it oh so rough. I managed to make my way through it. I managed to graduate from university aged 14, and I'm the best EVA pilot in the world. I'm owed respect, not pity.”

For a long time there was no answer. Asuka was already sure Shinji would chicken out of an answer, but she did not look. She did not want to see that pathetic spectacle. However, finally, he
did reply. It was quiet and soft, but entirely without his usual stuttering: “I know what you mean. Not that I have achieved much in my life, but I know how it is when others talk. When they look at you with pity... with eyes reserved for victims. When I... when my mother died, my father sent me away, to a tutor. He was good at teaching, but very cold. And the people around me, they looked at me and whispered.”

“There were... rumours, weren't there?” Asuka asked carefully and looked over to him. Only now she noticed how close he sat.

He nodded. “They said my father had killed my mother. I... I know he was there. At that experiment. So maybe...” He shook his head. “No. Even he would not do such a thing. But the people around me, they didn't know that. Or maybe they didn't care. They just wanted something to gossip about, I think. I was just convenient for them.”

Asuka nodded. That could have been the conversation. It seemed her point had come across to Shinji just fine. It had been a risk to open up so much to make that point, but it seemed to have paid off. But what he said now... it sounded so familiar to her. It sounds like... like someone who might understand. “Sometimes that's all people see,” she answered, and was surprised herself how bitter she sounded. “Only your use to them. Before Misato, I had half a dozen guardians. None of them cared. They just tried to keep me fit for my task. Piloting EVA.”

“Yes,” Shinji agreed. “My tutor... he did his job. But he never cared.”

“They only measured me by what I had achieved,” Asuka went on. “By my synch-rates and my grades.”

“He never looked at me,” Shinji continued. “Just a professional doing his job, nothing more.”

A slight shiver went through Asuka. That was it exactly.

Maybe it was that what prompted her to go on: “My mother didn't die in the contact experiment. But she... she lost her mind. Afterwards, she didn't even recognize me. I tried so hard to gain her attention again... and after she... after she... I hoped at least my father would pay attention to me.”

“Mine never did,” Shinji told her. “He dumped me at some train station, for that tutor, for a person I'd never seen before, to pick me up. I... I...” He tightened a hand to a fist and ripped out a bunch of grass. “I still remember it. Standing there at the platform, crying, while my father simply walked away. I think I was four or so.”

“...why do you even speak with him then?” Asuka asked. “I mean, my father...” She scoffed. “I tried so hard to gain his attention, but he was too busy with his new wife. They simply wrote me off, gave me to NERV. We talk maybe once every year, at my birthday. He always sends me gifts. To still appear as a caring father, I'd wager. Screw him.” She became quiet. “But accepting that... that was....”

“I still don't think I have,” Shinji whispered. “I thought that, maybe, if I was really good... did really well in my work... was well-behaved... my father would return to me. Maybe... maybe I still think that.”

“I understand,” Asuka breathed. “It's wrong, but... I understand.”
“Nobody has so far,” Shinji muttered darkly.

“Nobody understands,” Asuka pointed out. “How could they?”

Shinji nodded again. “That's true. I mean, some people have the best intentions, like Touji and Kensuke... or Misato... but...”

“They don't know what it's like,” Asuka finished for him. “To long for something... someone... you can't even properly remember the face of.”

“I still don't know what my mother looked like,” Shinji stated. “Father threw away all pictures, all videos. I have no idea. Only the feeling that something is missing.”

“Yeah,” Asuka agreed.

Gottverdammt. How... how can that be? She decided to not further analyse the improbability of some random Japanese boy knowing exactly how she felt because he felt the same. Rather, she simply enjoyed that emotion of understanding.

“And ever since then, I... I think I had nobody,” Shinji continued. “I think Touji, Kensuke... Ayanami... maybe you... you're the first real friends I had in... a decade.”

“I never had longlasting classmates,” Asuka answered. “I rushed through school, through college. There was no time for friendships. And at college, I was practically just the little mascot of the other students. They were friendly, yes, but they didn't take me seriously.”

“They're always so polite,” Shinji agreed. “But in the end, nobody wanted to have anything to do with me, so I just... accepted it, eventually.”

Asuka nodded. “Knowing that one will be alone. Accepting it.” There was a long silence now. There was still one thing on Asuka's mind. She did not know where it had come from, but... after that talk she felt safe bringing it up. Maybe Shinji would understand that as well: “Is that why you've been talking to Rei? Has she also lost her mother?”

Shinji looked thoughtful. “I... I have never heard her mention her mother. She is... yeah, she's strange. But... she listens. She may not always agree, but she also doesn't judge. With her... I think with her, she doesn't need to understand. It's enough that she listens. I think she genuinely just wants the best for people but can't express it.”

Asuka scoffed. “Yeah, if that's her true nature, then she's very good at hiding it.”

“Maybe... I'm not saying you have to tell her this,” Shinji answered. “But maybe you could talk to her. I think she would listen to you as well.”

“After what happened at her apartment? Fat chance,” Asuka dismissed the idea.

Shinji smiled faintly. “She doesn't seem to mind. As I've said, she doesn't seem to judge.”

“And you don't find that weird?” Asuka asked.

Shinji shrugged. “There is worse than 'weird'.”
Annoyance began to rise in Asuka. “Why are we even talking about her right now?” Before Shinji could protest, she continued: “We find out how much we have in common, and you go on about Ms Bluehair.”

To her surprise, Shinji smiled, as if amused. “You're right, of course. I... I'm not good at this, Soryu. But this talk... it went well. I suppose talking between us works as well.”

“Asuka,” she replied flatly.

“Huh?” Shinji made.

“I have not told you my entire damn life story so that you can still go on calling me 'Soryu'!” Asuka argued. “This Japanese custom is weird, anyway.”

“Ah... okay,” Shinji said uncertainly. “Asuka.”

She worked her mouth. After that talk, seeing how Shinji did understand, she felt almost bad bringing it up, but it needed to be said. “And none of this...”

“Will ever be spoken of to anyone else,” Shinji finished the sentence – surprisingly fast and surprisingly confidently.

Asuka nodded. Then she smiled. “It's odd. I wouldn't have thought....”

She was interrupted by two identical signals: The angel alarm from their phones.

Rei was in her seat inside her entry-plug. She looked entirely calm as she watched the flooded ruins of Shizuoka in front of her. She had a job to do, and she would do it. There was no question to it.

However, she was aware that this would be her first actual combat engagement, the first engagement where she was expected to actually fight the enemy instead of just holding a shield, and on top of that her first engagement in EVA-01. It was only the second time she had been inside that unit, and yet already the first time she would have to take it to battle.

_Ikari had not even seen it before his first fight._

She did not know what exactly had happened to him inside EVA-00, but it seemed to have incapacitated him in regards to piloting his unit. Apparently, neither the Commander nor Dr Akagi knew how this could have come about, but then EVA technology was far from mature. Accidents like this were to be expected.

And yet, she felt concerned about the incident. It had not been a simple accident. There had been no mechanical or electronic failure. The EVA had gone berserk. _The me inside the Evangelion has acted. Am this version of me at fault for what has happened?_

Maybe that explained the feeling of gratitude she was experiencing right now. It was an irrational feeling: She would be deployed as necessity dictated, regardless of other concerns. But she was glad that she could make up for whatever had happened to Ikari by now taking over his role. Besides, it felt nice synching with Unit 01. There was no struggle involved, nothing resisting her
control over the machine. Nothing that just wanted to end it all.

“EVA-01, EVA-02, are you reading this?” Captain Katsuragi's voice sounded over the communication system.

“Yes,” Rei merely responded.

“Yes, yes,” Soryu said. “I think the comm system is the one thing that has never failed.”

“Right,” Katsuragi stated. “Fortunately we got sufficient warning from the Maritime Forces, allowing us to make a stand right here, at the coast. Maybe this time, we can even avoid damage to Tokyo-3.”

“What good is a fortress city if we don't even use it in a fight?” Soryu complained.

“The last angel shot down anything it perceived as a threat,” Katsuragi explained. “Only a fraction of our defensive guns are still operational. The fortress wouldn't really help you anyway at the moment.” Soryu scoffed at this, while Katsuragi continued: “We have no information about the capabilities of the enemy object, so be careful. Go in one at a time, while the other covers her. Take turns.”

“That's what you call a fair fight?” Soryu questioned her. “Two against one?”

“I have no interest in giving a fair fight to angels,” Katsuragi replied. She sounded unusually cold.

Rei saw Soryu shrugging on the comm screen. “Whatever. I'm sure I can demolish it by myself.”

Rei really saw no point to all this unnecessary communication. Captain Katsuragi had little choice but to reply to Soryu's complaints, but Soryu seemed to be talking for the sake of talking. It was... inefficient. Superfluous. Loud. She concentrated on just looking straight ahead, scanning the sea for disturbances.

There was one.

Not too far off the coast, a huge mountain of water was forming, with the sea there being tossed into the air. Something was emerging, something big.

As the air cleared of the water again, Rei could see that the angel did not look very impressive compared to some of its predecessors. It had a very vaguely humanoid form, with two short legs, a torso that widened considerably up to the shoulders and two long arms that seemed to be perpetually outstretched. There was no head, just a visible core at the centre of the upper torso.

“Commence the attack!” Katsuragi ordered.

Immediately, Soryu set her unit in motion, grabbing the EVA-sized naginata that was among the weapons prepared at the beach. “I'll handle the angel!” she told Rei. “You cover me.”

It did not make a difference to Rei. “Roger,” she acknowledged.

She started firing at the angel. The pallet rifle had no effect on it, but then, that wasn't the point. The idea was to restrict its movement... at least, in theory. It was of course still possible that angels would simply move under fire without caring about it. However, the pallet rifle was the only EVA-
scale method for cover fire NERV had.

Suddenly, Soryu declared: “Charge!” and began jumping from rooftop to rooftop. It was actually a clever idea. Rei realized that at once, even as she was still aiming at the angel, though she doubted it would have come to her as easily: By jumping, EVA-02 avoided losing any speed or momentum due to being stuck in water.

In less than ten seconds Soryu was at the angel... no, above the angel. EVA-02 soared high into the air, the naginata raised far above its head...and then it struck. That one single strike cleanly cut the entire angel in half, top to bottom.

Rei would not have judged that possible, but showed no signs of surprise. What happened, happened.

“What do you think of that, First Child?” Soryu taunted her. “A fight should be clean, elegant and without waste.”

“I agree,” Rei merely replied. It was true.

Soryu did not get a chance to further the conversation. Suddenly, the flesh of the cloven angel quivered, and then burst – revealing what looked like two smaller versions of its original form, one orange, one white. Since EVA-02’s momentum had carried it behind the angel, its two successors now stood between the two Evangelion units.

Without further comment, Rei began firing again. What happened, happened.

Soryu, of course, showed her displeasure more openly. “Hey, that's cheating!”

As she was saying that, the two angels came charging, both right at Rei. The First Child dropped the pallet rifle, opened her Evangelion's shoulder pylons and drew her prog-knife. She had trained for EVA-scale close combat extensively, but only in simulations. She knew she had to do her job, but there was this sliver of uncertainty she just could not fight down.

The first demi-angel, the white one, reached her, slamming its rigid arm against the suddenly flaring up AT-Field of EVA-01. Trusting in those magical octagons to handle the defence, Rei had her unit hold the prog-knife blade down, and began stabbing. However, the enemy's AT-Field held as well. And then its partner appeared, leaping over it. The orange enemy's AT-Field crushed right into EVA-01's, through it, and the angel struck right at the Unit's face. Pain vibrated through Rei and she could taste blood.

EVA-01 took some steps backwards, its left arm raised to block any further attacks. Angel swings hit empty air, until finally the two got moving again. Rei blocked the strike of the orange one, but the white one...

...was pushed aside as EVA-02 rammed directly into it, Soryu screaming as her unit did so. Then she swung her naginata to hit the other demi-angel.

Rei could have used her chance when the orange demi-angel now turned to now face Soryu, but she was too surprised to do so. As EVA-02 and Orange began facing each other, White quickly whirled around that skirmish to face EVA-01. Rei and her enemy both chopped at each other, both blocked by each other's AT-Field. Behind White's unshapely stature she could see Soryu struggling with her own enemy.
EVA-01 was more agile, more active, more aggressive all on its own, despite Rei's slightly lower synch-rate in it. On the other hand, she had the gut feeling the AT-Field was slightly weaker than EVA-00's. She strained herself trying to keep it as strong as possible. The air between her and the angel was filled with orange glowing geometric shapes.

There was a scream by Soryu in the comm system, and then Rei could hear a loud bang behind White. A moment later, White stumbled. Rei realized someone had struck against its leg. *Soryu's naginata.* With a reaction time she realized was too slow, she renewed her attacks. With two AT fields now eroding White's own, the demi-angel soon found itself the victim of several cuts and strikes. Finally, Rei managed to sink her prog-knife into its core. Silently, but with an angry grimace, she slid it down the core further and further. Finally, the demi-angel stopped moving.

By this time, Soryu had already turned around to face Orange again, who now was backing off again. Rei had EVA-01 run to that fight, into the shallow water, but it was unnecessary: Two short slashes by Soryu's naginata, and the core was shattered.

Rei stopped mid-way and silently breathed out in relief.

“How sporting of them to have given us a surprise challenge,” Soryu joked smugly. “EVA-02 to Command: Mission co... Scheiße! Rei, behind you!”

Rei turned her Evangelion around to see the flesh of White quivering... its wounds closing and its core lighting up again. It leaped at EVA-01.

She heard a hissing sound coming from behind... and then saw a spear hitting White right in the core. *Not a spear. Soryu has thrown her naginata. How... she must have used her unit's AT field to stabilize its trajectory.* Rei was genuinely impressed. She did not think she would have dared doing this. *Loud and brash... but maybe 'brash' is not a bad thing..."

“Grab it!” Soryu roared.

Rei did not understand. With an annoyed grunt, Soryu had her EVA run forwards, pushing Rei’s unit out of the way, and rammed the naginata deep into White's core. When Rei had stabilized EVA-01 again, she could see Orange now running to them. She tried to counter-charge... but so did Soryu. The two Evangelions ran into each other. EVA-01 fell down into the shallow water, while EVA-02 stumbled. Soryu could barely parry Orange with her EVA's bare hands. By the time EVA-01 was up again, White was moving again.

From here on, the fight descended into utter chaos.

“Cover my flank, Rei!”

“I need your assistance, Soryu.”

“Out of the way!”

“Careful, Soryu.”

“We should...”

“This is inadvisable.”
The bickering even went on once both Evangelions had been immobilized.

Kaji smirked.

That was expected of him, just as much as the beard stubble or the unkempt hair. He was the always smirking rogue. That could charm some people on the spot, while others, usually the sort of stiffy, serious people in important positions, would constantly underestimate him. After all, he was just the slightly bedraggled guardian of the Second Child, right? Certainly not someone who would steal Adam from under SEELE's collective nose.

So he smirked even in the most serious or uncomfortable situations. Like right now. The First and Second Children had been ordered to this small room, to see the results of their catastrophic failure in the fight, carefully watched by Vice Commander Fuyutsuki. Commander Ikari could not be bothered to care about such petty nonsense. As always, Rei showed no emotional reactions, but Asuka looked uncomfortable.

And truth be told, Kaji felt the same way. Not that he would shun Ikari and Fuyutsuki, quite the contrary: The only way to gain that information that he sought so desperately was through contact with such people. But whenever he was near them, he was cautious. He had spent the past week scanning NERV networks for information regarding EVA-01 and Yui Ikari. What Asuka had told him was interesting.

It was possible Shinji had made the stuff up; that boys with low self-esteem would tell lies to make themselves more important was not entirely infeasible. However, Yui Ikari's official date of death was only two days after the official date for the first activation of EVA-01. And most people who had been part of that test had been reassigned all over the globe. A disproportionate amount of them had died, most prominently Naoko Akagi, the mother of his old friend Ritsuko.

He had always known that there was a deep and dark secret in NERV, but he would never have guessed that it would be something so personal. Both Ikari and Fuyutsuki had been at that test as well, and yet both were still here, alive and at the very top. Kaji would have to be damn careful in dealing with them.

His smirk widened miniscullly. He would need to make friends among NERV's officers, and he already knew just how to start. Business and pleasure, all at once. Just what a charming rogue would do. But for now he would have to listen to the pilots getting scolded for their failure. Just what NERV would do. First recruit children as soldiers, and then getting all upset when they act like children on the battlefield. Just keep smiling, Kaji...

A movie was running on a screen in front of them all, showing images of EVA-02 half drilled into the ground and EVA-01 half-drowned in the sea. A narrator commented: “Today, at 11:04:18, EVA-01 lost its final engagement with Target Alpha after an especially powerful flare of the target's AT field. EVA-01 was displaced 2.2km from Target Alpha, in Suruga Bay. At the same time plus 20 seconds, a similar powerful AT field spike from Target Beta overcame EVA-02. EVA-02 ended up 1.7km inland. We have a comment from the head of Project E: 'This is pathetic.'”

Kaji suppressed a sigh and kept smirking. Ritsu, when did you become so harsh?
Asuka stood up from her seat and looked to Rei. “This is all your fault! You totally screwed up the fight!”

Rei did not react.

While Asuka was still standing and glaring at Rei, the movie went on: “At 11:20, NERV abandoned the operation and yielded command to the UN Secondary Force.”

“We have been humiliated,” Fuyutsuki growled.

“At 11:23, UN forces attacked with an N2 mine,” the movie narration continued, while showing a map of the region – a large semi-circle of what was formerly land would now be part of the sea. “They succeeded in burning off 28% of the target's structural substance.”

“We were both unsuccessful,” Rei calmly remarked to Asuka.

“How can you just sit there and say that?” Asuka angrily demanded to know. “No wonder that went poorly! I have to fight besides a so-called pilot with such an attitude.”

“You charged blindly ahead,” Rei continued just as calmly.

“And you just stood there and did nothing!” Asuka shot back. “With the reaction times of a post-communist Russian government office!”

“Enough of that!” Fuyutsuki cut in. “We can't allow this childish bickering! Look at what sort of joke you made out of NERV.” The screen showed pictures of the salvage operations for EVA-01 and EVA-02. “The conventional forces have just been waiting for this opportunity. Their N2 mine gives us a reprieve – Dr Akagi estimates about seven to eight days. But...”

Misato coughed to gain attention. “Sir, if I may.” She walked over to him and began to speak quietly to the Vice Commander.

Truth be told, Kaji was a bit surprised to see her here. This did not concern Shinji, and gods knew she would have enough paperwork to fill out after a disaster like this. But for some reason she had taken the time for this. It would make things easier for him.

Fuyutsuki still looked unhappy, but said nothing. Finally he nodded and stood up. “Very well then, Captain. I leave this in your hands. Do not screw up again.” With that he left the room... practically stomped out of it.

Misato stood there with closed eyes and rubbed her nasal bridge. “Very well,” she finally said and turned around to face the pilots. “You heard the Vice Commander. We have seven days to come up with a tactic. The problem seems to be that as long as one of the two sub-units is active, the other can start regenerating. The two cores must be destroyed at exactly the same time... if Ritsuko is to be believed, with a failure tolerance of only 0.18 to 1.12 seconds. If you have any ideas on how you will achieve this, I'm listening.”

“I could do it!” Asuka claimed. “It's her that's the problem! You have seen how slow she's always been to react! Can't Shinji pilot EVA-01?”

Misato sighed. “It's possible that by next week he can pilot again; we still don't know what the matter with him is. But we can't exactly build on that possibility. And as good as you are, Asuka, I
doubt you can kill two targets at once. It seems you two will have to cooperate.”

“Cooperate?” Asuka echoed angrily. “That's not an option! I would have to lower my standards so much that...”

Now Kaji coughed to gain everyone's attention. “I think I have an idea, but I'd like to talk about it with Misato first.” He smiled his best 'cunning rogue' smile. “Who knows, maybe it's completely idiotic. So, would you two go outside and wait for us? And please, without killing or seriously hurting each other.”

For a moment Kaji considered if such a remark to the First Child had been wise. By all accounts, Rei could be very literal-minded. She might take it as permission to cause minor injuries. He dismissed that thought.

When the two were outside, Misato looked at Kaji with a raised eyebrow. “So, what is this all about?”


“And this incident will just contribute to it,” she commented, annoyed. “So how do you want to help in that?”

Kaji smiled in response. “What did you tell the Vice-Commander?”

Misato made a dismissive hand gesture. “I told him his attitude towards the pilots is unhelpful. And it is. We exist to defeat the angels. Whether we make a joke out of ourselves in the process... who cares. Defeating the angels is the only thing that can justify getting those kids into the giant, pain-transmitting robots. Interservice rivalry should not be their concern.”

Kaji nodded appreciatively. “And you confronted a direct superior over that? I'm honestly impressed, Misato.”

She glared at him. “That's all your fault you know. If you hadn't pointed this out to me...” She sighed. “But it's probably for the better.”

“Fuyutsuki is an old man, you know,” Kaji pointed out. “Our generation... we experienced Second Impact when we were young. It shaped us. Made us pragmatic. We never had the luxury to care about 'saving face'. And Commander Ikari only cares about whether an operation is ultimately successful or not. But Fuyutsuki is of an earlier generation. He grew up with the notion of always saving face, especially to outsiders. It's not NERV policy, just his personality.”

Misato sighed again. “Let's hope so. So, your plan?”

“Under current conditions, Rei and Asuka will not be able to cooperate within a week,” Kaji stated bluntly. “We need to change the conditions.”

Misato placed her arms on her sides. “I'm listening.”

“There are several apartments in your bloc that are empty, aren't there?” Kaji asked, as if he were changing the topic.

“What does that... yes,” Misato confirmed.
“And NERV could requisition one on short notice,” Kaji continued. “So, for the week, that is where Asuka and Rei will move. Under your supervision.”

“What?” Misato exclaimed “Asuka...”

Kaji shrugged. “...is currently still living in a hotel. And Rei... have you ever been to her residence?” Misato shook her head. “I have no idea why the Commander lets one of his pilots live in such a dump. Getting her out of there even temporarily will be an improvement.”

Kaji’s eternal grin was now matched in his thoughts. Oh sure, he was just pushing his slightly crazy idea. He would not interfere in Ikari’s plan for Rei, oh no, Commander, sir. It’s just for the mission, you see?

He had actually been pretty shocked by Rei’s living conditions. Oh sure, he had had worse, but that had been right after Second Impact, when Japanese society had basically completely collapsed outside the armed forces and the Tokyo-2 construction project. And there were more than enough vacant apartments in Tokyo-3 that Rei’s place of residence probably served another reason. \textit{But what reason? Why does Ikari stick her inside there?}

His talk with Rei had been just a masquerade, basically. Just the sort of superficial questions an UN inspector was supposed to ask. He had really been primarily there to check on how that most enigmatic of pilots lived, and secondarily to stir up the hornet’s nest – to see how NERV would react.

“I suppose...” Misato answered uncertainly, “but what does that have to do with the double-bodied angel just some dozen kilometres away?”

Kaji got a data disk out of his shirt pocket and smiled again. “I have a training program for them.”
“You're too slow!”

Asuka was fuming. This had been at least the thirtieth attempt at this goddamn rhythm sequence, and Rei still could not do it right.

“I am as quick as the rhythm demands,” Rei defended herself. There was no emotion in her voice, and that riled Asuka up even more. It made it sound like Rei was stating the obvious and that she considered Asuka just too dumb to see it.

“You don't react quickly enough!” Asuka accused her. “That's why we never manage that sequence.”

“Most failures have been due to the imprecision of your movements,” Rei claimed calmly.

“Imprecision???” Asuka exploded. “You…”

A loud, annoyed grunt by Misato cut the argument short. While Asuka and Rei had tried their best on the dance mat, the Captain had sat at a nearby table and watched. “We already had that same argument ten attempts ago. Look, girls, that's the entire point of this training: You need to take each other into account. If Rei is 'slow', you'll have to adapt to that, Asuka. And Rei, if Asuka is 'imprecise', you will have to adapt to that.”

“Oh come on, you don't believe that yourself!” Asuka complained. “That whole plan is ridiculous. Getting into harmony through dancing? Kaji must have been out of his mind! What was he thinking? You don't seriously believe that will help. You just don't want to lose your job.”

“If that angel comes through, I'll lose more than just my job,” Misato reminded her. “We all will.”

“Which is exactly why we shouldn't rely on such... such... petty frivolities!” Asuka shouted, grabbing her right sleeve, holding it up to show it to Misato. “What – the hell – were you thinking?”

“No need not to have a little bit of fun,” Misato pouted.

“At our expense,” Asuka pointed out. She really hated the clothes Misato had prepared for them, which looked like a cross between yoga clothing and ballet dancer outfits. If I had wanted to become an artsy hippie I could have moved to Kreuzberg...

“Sometimes you can be just as much a buzzkill as Shinji is,” Misato muttered.

Asuka glared at her. This was the first day of Misato's plan, which she claimed to have gotten from Kaji, and it already was plenty obvious just how stupid that plan was. The first part of it that for an entire week, Asuka and Rei should never leave one another's side. “Sleep, breath and eat together”, as Misato had called it. Yeeah, no perverted associations there...

That already was bad enough. It was not that Asuka was not happy whenever Rei came out of her 'creepy statue' role, like when she had smiled or the fact that she was now in a more appropriate apartment. She just preferred it when Rei did most of that nicely far away from her. Overall, Asuka
still thought the blue-haired girl was at best a dullard, at worst a freak.

The second part of the plan was to get the two to synchronize their movements. And in order to do so, they were supposed to play silly games on dancing mats. It was frankly childish, so it was no wonder Misato was so amused by it all – something that only added to Asuka's frustration.

“Leave Shinji out of this!” she told Misato. Her former guardian raised her eyebrow at that. Urgh. I wonder where her perverted mind has wandered again. So, she added: “Even second-rate pilots like him deserve better than to be living with you.”

Misato sighed. “This... isn't getting us anywhere. And I need a beer.” She ignored Asuka muttering about how she always does. “Let's have a break. Don't you have about half a million boxes to unpack anyway, Asuka?”

“Well excuse me for actually being civilized and cultured!” Asuka shot back. “That comes with some... necessities. And since I will be here for one week, I need to have those here.”

“The amount of boxes seems excessive for containing just necessities,” Rei commented calmly.

Asuka was about to yell out that yes, of course Rei would think so, given what a dump the bluehead's apartment was. But she swallowed it down when she did in fact think of that apartment. EVA pilots should not live in such filth. Maybe Rei just did not know better.

Instead Asuka just groaned. “Whatever. I do need to unpack some things. Come and help me, Rei.”

“No,” the First Child simply replied.

Asuka did a double take. “What?”

“Unpacking boxes is not part of my mission parameters,” Rei told her.

Asuka laughed. It was a short, surprised laugh. Okay, that one was good. Who knew she could be defiant? Then she immediately turned that laugh into a further annoyed groan and stepped out into the corridor, which was made nearly impassable by literally dozens of boxes stacked there.

“You don't need to help her, Rei,” Asuka heard Misato behind her. “But you do need to be in the same room as her, so off you go.”

Asuka groaned again, genuinely this time.

Finally. Home.

That thought came automatically to Shinji as he walked up to 'his' apartment bloc. He wondered about it briefly; it probably showed how things between him and Misato had turned around for the better again. At least until I'm deployable against the next angel...

In any case, it was difficult not to feel relieved about coming home. School had been same old, same old, but it had actually, really bothered him that, of course, Ayanami had not been in her usual place, waiting for him to come. The thought of a whole week without that usual daily highlight made him feel vaguely sad. And then he had needed to go straight to NERV, for yet
another attempt to get him synched with EVA-01. Having a synch-test all by himself had been uncomfortably reminiscent of his earliest days as a pilot. When the thought of having to pilot had driven him to such despair that he had even considered if this was a life worth living. And of course the test had been another failure; he still could not synch with his Evangelion. Or more properly now, Ayanami's Evangelion... Worse, Dr Akagi had told him they would repeat the test again in two days.

“Home” was definitely preferable to all of that. He wondered how things would go from here. It was... liberating to de facto not be an active pilot anymore, but how long would they still put up with him if he continued to fail to synch? And besides, it was somewhat irresponsible to feel relieved over his failures. There were after all good reasons why he had to pilot EVA. It was just that those good reasons did not at all change how he felt. He still hated piloting. In a way, the knowledge that it was necessary only made it worse, as this meant there really was no escape from it.

Except for failure. But what then about the need to stop the angels?

There was a difference now, though, to his earliest days at NERV. He still hated piloting, but he now also had things besides piloting. Misato was changing, now seemingly caring about more than just teasing him and about his piloting capabilities. He had Touji and Kensuke as friends. He had Ayanami, who would always listen to him and reply in that soft, soothing voice of hers to which he could, frankly, listen for hours. He really meant to keep his promise to keep her safe; she was too unique and precious to be lost. And then there was Soryu... Asuka... He had not had the opportunity to speak with her since the angel attack. But to have found someone who could easily and immediately understand what had happened to him... because something so similar had happened to her... The prospect made Shinji's head whirl.

Maybe that was why he passed the door to Misato's apartment. Instead, he walked three apartments further. Of course, the official reason was to deliver homework and class notes to Asuka and Ayanami. But it would be good to see the two girls...

...Shinji stopped when he realized that. He immediately got going again, but when he stood in front of Asuka's and Ayanami's temporary apartment, he felt... concerned. That all those good things were happening to him in a time when he failed to synched, failed to be a pilot, that felt wrong.

Now feeling a bit down again he rang the doorbell and waited. And waited. And waited a bit more. He was about to turn around to lurch towards Misato's apartment, when the door finally opened. Rei stood at the other side, clothed in what looked like an almost cliched aerobics attire. What? Shinji did not think he had ever seen her in something else than plugsuit, school uniform or swimming attire. Or a towel... Aaanyway, this is new. And odd. And he had to admit, also damn cute. She looked at him and then... breathed out? Shinji was confused.

The bluehead turned her head around and spoke: “It is as I have said. There is someone at the door. It is Ikari.”

In an instant, Asuka came rushing to the door. She was wearing mostly a much too large shirt. “Finally somebody sane!” she exclaimed.

“Uhm... hello?” Shinji tried.

“Yes, yes, hello to you, too,” Asuka answered. “Come in.”
“Well, I just wanted to...” Shinji began.

“Come in. Now.” Asuka ordered. “My own sanity may depend on it.”

“Please,” Ayanami added softly, in almost a whisper.

Slightly confused about the situation, he entered. Not that he could say no to Ayanami, and he probably also could not say no to Asuka, either.

“It's terrible!” Asuka exclaimed. “Do you know what your guardian makes us do?”

“She, uh, told me, yesterday,” Shinji answered. In fact, in his opinion she had sounded all too gleeful about the prospect. *She really doesn't know how to separate professional work from personal amusement...*

“It’s crazy!” Asuka almost shouted, and continued ranting as they walked towards the living room... or at least as much as the giant amount of carton boxes everywhere allowed. “Musical games as pilots training? That's so demeaning! I'm an elite pilot! I have fought and defeated angels! I deserve *professional* training! Not that this the worst thing, mind! Worse is that I have to live together with... with... *her!*” She gestured towards Ayanami. “And not just living together. In theory, we're supposed to be in the same damn room at all times! Yes, of course, as if that will somehow make us move in concert! Damn, neural surgeons must make a killing here in Japan, what with the copious amounts of brain removals NERV employees apparently undergo!”

The living room was only sparsely furnished. There was a small table with four chairs around it and a couch with a fabric that already looked a bit unhygienic. Between the two there was a mat on the floor, surrounded by loudspeakers and what appeared to be some sort of electronic displays.

Asuka sighed when she noticed Shinji's very much non-impressed look. “And yes, that is where they make us live. I mean, I get it's a temporary residence, and that they simply scrounged furniture together as they could find it, but I also understand we are to be in top condition to fight that angel in one week, and these surroundings are *not* helping.”

“The surroundings are adequate,” Ayanami opined.

Asuka growled, but to Shinji's surprise did not use that chance to take a jab at the bluehead. Instead Shinji said: “You can live here, yes, but... It's not very pretty.”

“I doubt aesthetic concerns will affect our mission against the enemy,” Ayanami stated.

“Well, no,” Shinji admitted. “But don't you want to live somewhere nice for... your own... sake...” His voice trailed off, remembering her own apartment. He had not thought about it before, mostly because he had tried as much as possible not to think of his visit there, but now he suddenly felt very concerned with how she was normally living.

“We do not live just to defeat the angels!” Asuka exclaimed. She breathed out heavily. “You really should keep that in mind, you know. We're pretty much fighting for the fate of humanity here, are we not?”

“Yes,” Ayanami confirmed.

“Good. Then let's live like humans!” Asuka concluded. “Might as well not fight, otherwise!”
Ayanami did not respond. That seemed to be her usual habit: When she had nothing to say, she simply remained silent. She had no affectations and no use for senseless blabbering. It was one factor that often made her presence so comforting to Shinji: She was enigmatic, yes, but also straightforward. She did not play games with people. In that regard, as in many others, Asuka was her direct opposite, and yet... Shinji could not say he disliked Asuka's habit to talk at length. He had never met someone who spoke so bluntly and irreverently and energetically. He liked how lively it was.

“Right,” the redhead hence declared after several moments of silence. “Back to being hungry then, I guess.” She grabbed a chair from the table and let herself fall onto it.

“Uh...” Shinji voiced.

“Wondergirl here thinks cooking isn't necessary,” Asuka explained. “After all, we have the cold NERV military rations. Or, I should say, the military rations NERV acquired from the JSDF. Yes, one S. From before Second Impact.”

“They are sufficient,” Ayanami stated. “If you disagree, you are free to prepare your own meals.”

Asuka groaned. “I thought there would be some sort of household plan for that stuff. If I want to start preparing a meal now, I'd have to go out, buy stuff, get back here, prepare it... urrrgh.”

“Uh... actually...” Shinji spoke up hesitantly. He had an idea, but he was not the type to simply state it. That's one thing where Asuka and Ayanami are alike. Neither of them would have a problem with that.

“Yes?” Asuka prompted him. “Do people have to beat every single word out of you?”

“That would be unwise,” Ayanami warned her.

Asuka looked at her dumbfounded. “I... shouldn't be surprised anymore. I definitely still have too much faith in humanity. So, Shinji, what were you stuttering?”

“Well, we have more than enough ingredients stocked,” Shinji told her.

“Misato has?” Asuka exclaimed in surprise

“More like I have,” Shinji admitted, muttering. “I'd rather not rely on her household logistics.”

“That's probably a good idea,” Asuka agreed. “So, you could lend me some stuff?”

“Ah... actually... I mean, if you really only have military rations here...” Shinji stammered. “And I'm cooking for Misato today, anyway... I could, uh, include you two.”

Asuka tried her hardest to keep her face even, but her eyes slit up. Shinji was oddly pleased with himself that he could cause such a reaction, as much as Asuka tried to hide it.

“I suppose...” she mused, trying to appear as if to consider the offer. “It can only be better than those rations.”

“What about you, Ayanami?” Shinji asked the bluehead.
He half expected her to refuse. Sad as it was, but keeping with what was “adequate” seemed to be in her nature. And she did remain quiet for a while. But then she surprised him. “Your soup was nice. You seem to be a good cook.”

Shinji was fairly certain he was blushing now. Asuka shot dark glares over to Rei. He ignored it; he was used to not quite comprehending her behaviour. “So you'll come?” he asked Rei. The bluehead nodded quietly.

Asuka's mouth worked. She seemed to be unhappy again. But then she just sighed. “I suppose that's for the better. Maybe you will yet learn to live like a human being.”

Shinji felt happy. Probably nobody was more surprised at that than him.

He had just wanted to offer his help to Asuka and Ayanami so he could be at least a little bit useful. If he could not synch with his EVA, thus forcing Ayanami to take over his job, then he could at least help them with their household problems. At least cook for them. He did not have a high opinion on his cooking skills, but it would at least be something he could do.

The whole thing had turned out better than he had expected.

Misato, Asuka, even Ayanami had all been positively enthusiastic in eating his food (Ayanami in her own, quiet way, of course). In fact, Asuka even had found some compliments for it... if probably only to needle Misato, saying that things sure had improved in her apartment since Germany.

This was the first time he had actually had people over in Misato's apartment, and the first time he had cooked for guests in Tokyo-3... or really, in general. He found he liked listening to Asuka's usually agitated talk. It even made him respond in kind now and then. Around her, he could imagine himself being more active and forthright than he actually was. He admired how she had experienced the same as him in life, and yet had gotten away so much better, so much brighter. Sure, she could get carried away with her verbal energy now and then, but that was okay. She still was one of the very few people in the world who could maybe understand him, understand what had happened to him, because the same had happened to her. That was worth a lot.

But he also liked sitting next to Ayanami, watching her quietly enjoy her meal. Whenever he got the chance to ask her something, in the short pauses Asuka used to catch her breath, her answers were short, precise and quiet. She was maybe not the most sociable person, but he found her calm nature to be soothing and relaxing. Besides, it was not like he was an outgoing person, either. They were both of a nature that could enjoy the quiet.

Both girls really were special in their own ways. It was not difficult to see why they would draw people's attention, between Asuka's fiery mane and Ayanami's even more exotic looks. They were both easy on the eye. Shinji liked Asuka's lively face and Ayanami's serene one, and they both also had... curves. He really hoped nobody would take too much note of where his eyes had just gone.

Misato now laid down her chopsticks, grabbed the beer can next to her finished meal and took a huge chug. “Ah... perfect,” she declared. “So, Shin-chan, how does it feel cooking for three
attractive girls?"

Shinji looked at her aghast. Asuka groaned. Only Ayanami did not react.

Before Shinji could stutter something, Asuka spoke up firmly: “I don't think you fall into that category anymore, Misato.”

“Now...” Misato began cheerily. All heads suddenly turned when Ayanami, of all people, talked over her: “Do you mean the 'attractive' or the 'girls' part, Soryu?”

Asuka grinned triumphantly. “Yes.”

“Hey now!” Misato complained. “I do understand the difference between OR and XOR, thank you very much. In fact, you made sure of that.”

“Sure did,” Asuka confirmed. “My genius level knowledge needed some practical applications, after all, like teaching you.”

Misato snorted. “Genius like your inability to sort out a schedule for your first semester?”

“I was twelve!” Asuka protested.

Misato sighed. “So you were...” Suddenly setting up a bright and cheery face, she asked: “So, what do you all think? Did Shin-chan here do good?”

“You should not call him that, Captain Katsuragi,” Ayanami spoke up. “It may be considered inappropriate, and he seems embarrassed by it.”

Thank you... However, her intercession did not have the desired effect: “Well, that's the point, Rei!” Misato exclaimed. “A world without teasing would be dour and boring.”

Ayanami tilted her head. “I will keep that in mind.” Oh gods, please no... “And I... liked his food. It...” She stopped. Searching for words? “It tasted good.”

Asuka had been looking at Ayanami while she spoke, and then nodded abruptly. “Better than military rations, that's for damn sure! Seriously, Misato, what the hell is NERV thinking?”

“We didn't think!” Misato protested. Shinji and Asuka snickered. “Ah, I mean, we didn't plan for Rei to sustain herself on those. That was her own decision. I thought you would just make your own food.”

“You could have told us that, so that we could have prepared!” Asuka accused her.

“Well... hm... maybe...” Misato muttered, unwilling to fully concede a point. “Well, now you know!”

“You would think that if I'm already required to dance around in a ridiculous outfit all day long by a frankly insane mission plan, then at least my basic necessities would be taken care of!” Asuka complained.

“That's what the rations are there for,” Misato pointed out.
“Besides, it isn't so bad,” Shinji spoke up. “It isn't all that much work if you two share it. I think you can both be trusted with access to the stove and oven.”

“Unlike Misato here?” Asuka asked mischievously.

“I... I didn't say that!” Shinji protested.

“Don't mind me, I've only become a running gag,” Misato muttered, waving her beer can.

“But, uh, if I remember the plan correctly... you'll still be living together for six more days, right?” Shinji asked. “So, you could, uh, make a household plan. About who takes up what chores when.”

“That could be efficient,” Ayanami agreed.

“Hrmm. Better than the alternative,” Asuka judged.

“I'll go get pens and paper,” Misato said and stood up.

It was a... long-drawn process. And truth be told, Misato took over most actual mediation. Shinji tried, but he just could not get himself to speak against Asuka's energetic demands. And Ayanami's quiet, unspoken pleas were a devastating weapon when used against him. So he spent half an hour sweating and stuttering, before Misato finally took up a more commanding role. Shinji did successfully prevent her from suggesting rock-scissor-papers as a way to assign chores, though.

“I still think NERV should just send, like, cooks and cleaning personnel and stuff,” Asuka finally muttered. “I mean, we are saving their arses out there, don't we? So that's really the least they could do.”

“Maybe it could have worked that way in Germany,” Misato allowed. “Here in Japan, well, NERV simply expects you to do your duty. And really, cooking and cleaning is not that big of a deal, is it?”

Asuka scoffed. “Have the Japanese heard of the concept of professional division of labour? And Misato, you really don't exactly make your organization look very bright and shining there.”

A glum silence followed that statement. Misato opened another can of beer and slowly drank from it.

Finally, Asuka grabbed the paper they had just worked on, stood up and declared: “Very well then. Since Misato wants us to dance around tomorrow as well, I better get some rest.” She was about to turn around, but before she did she muttered. “And thanks for everything, Shinji...” Then she walked off.

“Soryu's reasoning is surprisingly on point,” Ayanami declared. “I should not go to bed too late, either. Thank you for the meal and for your efforts, Ikari. And thank you for allowing us to come to your residence, Captain Katsuragi.”

Misato sighed. “If you don't want to call me Misato, fine, but at least drop the rank. You make me feel like I'm at work.”

Ayanami stood up and tilted her head. “I will consider that. Goodbye, Ikari, Captain.” She thus left the apartment as well.
“That went well,” Misato judged.

Shinji nodded. Then he narrowed his eyes and stared at his guardian. “Let me guess. You spent the whole dinner thinking about how you can tease me about having two female coworkers over.”

Misato had a sudden difficulty keeping the beer she had just drunk down. Her suppressed laugh turned into coughs. “That’s...” She coughed again. “That’s surprisingly bold coming from you, Shinji.”

“Even I can learn from experience,” he muttered.

“Awww. Don't worry. I wouldn't want to sour this event for you,” Misato reassured him. Her mischievous grin made Shinji mentally prepare. “After all, what boy can say that his first date at home was with two girls.”

Shinji groaned. “So, do you have that out of your system then?”

Misato held a finger under her chin and seemed to ponder that. “Hmm... yes, I think so.” She suddenly became serious. “I hope this will help with whatever it is that is bothering you.”

“Bothering me?” Shinji asked back.

“There's something on your mind,” Misato said and took another sip from the can. “I know of it because it makes you unable to synch with your Evangelion, but that isn't what I'm concerned about. I'm more concerned with the reason for it. Something is bothering you, and I want to know if I can help.”

Shit. Shinji looked down. He was of course fully aware of what prevented him from synching with EVA-01. But he still was reluctant to tell Misato. Asuka's prompt not to made sense: NERV was keeping the way his mother died a secret, so telling a NERV employee about knowing about that secret might be a bad idea. Even if it was Misato.

“You don't need to tell me,” Misato reassured him after he had stayed quiet for a while. “It's just... I figure if it keeps you from synching it must be something major. Something where you might want a bit of help or support, maybe.”

“Don't worry,” Shinji answered. “I... I'll find a way to synch again.”

“I’m not worried about that!” Misato exclaimed, suddenly sounding angry. “I don't care if it's Rei or you in EVA-01! I told you, if you want to quit, I'd support you. But it isn't your decision to quit. You simply have a problem. And I care about that, Shinji. Because I want to help you.”

Shinji looked at her. Even now, her outbursts still managed to catch him by surprise. “Even so...” he finally answered, very quietly. “Even so it's something I need to deal with myself.” This was about his family after all. He was not sure how proper it would be to tell Misato. “Thank you for your offer, but...” He shook his head.

“You already pilot EVA,” Misato told him softly. “You've already saved the world twice. You don't also need to deal with... whatever it is. At least, not alone.”

Again, Shinji shook his head. Then he stood up and went to his room.
As Asuka realized now, belatedly, there was one thing that had been quite nice about her hotel room. Sure, it had been somewhat on the small side (but then, what was not in Japan?), and it had been very impersonal and sterile. But at least it had a bed. Here, in the provisional apartment she had to share with Rei of all people, she was supposed to sleep on a futon. Maybe the Japanese considered that normal, but Asuka had slept in proper beds all her life. She felt half the bones in her body ache, at least by her maybe slightly biased count, and she felt generally unrested.

This is going to be such a great day...

She looked in the nearly un-furnished room she was forced to share with Rei. There still would have been another room available for sleeping, two even if one counted the small room where she had ended up storing most her belongings in, but no, Misato insisted on them always being in the same room, even while asleep. It seemed the bluehead had already gotten up. Right. It's her turn to make breakfast...

Last evening, Asuka had only barely heard her coming in, too tired to care greatly. It would be easy to just dislike her, and she often infuriated her, but then there were those moments like how she provided the lead-up to Asuka's joke about Misato, or how she tilted her head in that peculiar way... Hrrrm. Who would have thought I could be so weak willed? Gotta work on that.

Against all odds, Shinji had proven to be a lifesaver, both with his dinner invitations and his idea to establish a household plan. And it had become quite difficult to see just the wimp who had gotten his job due to nepotism in him. For one thing, nepotism or any care for Shinji seemed to be the furthest thing from Commander Ikari's mind. And then... she still fundamentally thought that Shinji was wrong, that he should embrace his position as EVA pilot more and be more forthright and bold. That had worked for her, after all. Still, it had become difficult blaming Shinji for this.

And besides... he may waver back and forth too much, apologize too much, go along with what others tell him too much... but at least he isn't an aggressive bitch, even though he has experienced the same as me in life.

Well, this aggressive bitch is hungry. Let's see what's for... ah damn. She realized that Rei was preparing the meal. And after that one look at her apartment, Asuka doubted she was very experienced in the kitchen. Well, better that than JSDF rations.

She slowly got up from her futon, and stumbled through the corridor. She still felt barely awake. So the first thing that Asuka realized when she entered the kitchen was that Rei was standing at the stove... and only the second thing that the bluehead was only wearing an apron.

Asuka blinked.

“Was zur Hölle?” she shouted.

Rei merely turned her head towards her. “Good morning, Soryu.”

“Yeah, right, good morning... why aren't you wearing clothes?” Asuka asked.
“I am,” Rei merely stated and returned her attention to the stove.

Arrrgh! Asuka found herself unable to look anywhere else than Rei’s unclad backside. It was....

“Something else than that apron!” she insisted.

“I saw no need for it,” Rei explained. “I did not get dressed after waking up, and this way no clothing will be stained.”

“And have you ever heard of common decency?” Asuka demanded to know.

“The concept is known to me,” Rei confirmed without even looking up from her work.

That left Asuka baffled. Rei’s calm and sure manner would normally infuriate her. It still did. But right now it also was more than just that. She was pretty sure she was blushing.

She shouted: “Well then apply it! I have to live with you for this week, so, try to be a bit civilized you blue-haired freak! At least wear... underwear! Don't you care about hygiene!?"

Rei stopped mid-movement in her work. “I had not considered that.”

Willst du mich verarschen...? “Well, damn good thing you have me around to remind you!” Asuka told her. “ I'll come back when you're finished here and I hope by that time you're dressed!”

With that, Asuka stormed out of the kitchen.

Keeping up with Soryu was... a challenge. Rei honestly believed the reason for their frequent mistakes lay with her training partner. However, Captain Katsuragi had ordered her to take Soryu’s imperfections into account and adapt to them, so she would. It was not an easy task. The German girl was fast, with decisively above average reflexes, but her movements often appeared too uncoordinated – all too eager, all too active. In order for the dancing game to work, Rei would have to move likewise. That posed a considerable challenge to her.

She had been annoyed the first day. That had been somewhat of a new experience. The Second Child often left a negative impression, but so far it had been easy to ignore her. Now it was not anymore. Now, Rei became acutely aware just how nonsensical and just grossly inefficient Soryu’s antics were. And that led to a maybe not strong, but strangely persistent negative emotion inside her. Annoyance. I'm feeling annoyance. That was new indeed.

She still did now, on the second day. She also felt slightly disoriented. Normally, she would simply keep to her schedule, do whatever was required, and then return to her apartment, where she was isolated from any trouble, any concerns, any loudness. She had her routine, and she did not need to bother about many things. Dr Akagi’s examinations were often uncomfortable, and EVA simulations could hurt, but she could simply let those things wash over her.

But Captain Katsuragi's training program... that was different. Here, she needed to be engaged in what she was actually doing, needed to constantly check herself to keep up, needed to actually engage with Pilot Soryu. That annoyed her as well, and yet... she had realized, during one break from the training, that she somehow felt more alive during it. There were two sides to it: In one
way, it was a break from her usual routine that was annoying and exhausting. On the other side, it was a break from monotony.

A large part of that facet was in fact Pilot Soryu. It would maybe have been possible for Rei to simply treat this all as just another training program, just another point on her schedule, just another task. That was impossible with Soryu as her training partner. For that, the Second Child was far too loud, too brash... too lively.

Still, she had been glad when Captain Katsuragi had declared the training over for the day. Success had been negligible. Soryu and Rei still did not harmonize any better than during the first day, and it did not even seem like there had been any progress made during this second day. In a way, that was understandable; the grave differences in the two pilots' personalities and approaches to tactics would not be undone in a matter of mere days. On the other hand, the angel designated 'Israfel' would reawaken in a mere five days, so 'losing' only a single day like this could be devastating.

As soon as the training was over, Soryu stomped off into their shared sleeping room, yelled at her to not come in, and changed into her usual free time clothes. Rei did not see the point. The training clothes seemed a little inefficient in design, but they would do, even outside training. So currently, Rei sat at the kitchen table and did nothing.

That was quite usual for her, actually. That was her default in between points on her schedule. If she was not at NERV, or at school, or engaged in sustaining herself, then she would simply wait until the next assignment came up. If there was nothing to be done, then she would do nothing. The only real deviation from that norm had been when Ikari had taken her to the city and the observation platform. She had found that enjoyable, but even then it had not occurred to her to regularly spend her time between assignments differently.

Yet Soryu... she seemed to never stand still. When she had no duty to perform, she would complain about there being no television set here, would message back and forth with Class Rep Horaki, would hum melodies... It was a completely alien way to spend one's time to Rei. And after all the emotional investment into the training program, and if it were only in the form of constant annoyance, now just sitting still and doing nothing felt surprisingly difficult to her. After a life of doing nothing else she did not know what she could do, but now she felt unsatisfied with doing nothing.

Her head immediately bounced up when she heard the door bell. Given the time, it was obvious who this would be. She slowly rose from her chair. She indeed was not a person of quick reactions or fast movements; rather she moved in a very subdued manner. Unfortunately, the same was very much not true of Soryu. The Second Child ran up to the door, easily beating Rei to it.

She hardly bothered with words and basically just dragged Ikari inside.

His face showed his amused confusion. Even so, the half-smile on it became slightly brighter when he saw Rei approaching him and Soryu.

“Ah, and hello, Ayanami,” he greeted her. “So, uh... did the household plan work out?”

“The household plan? I guess,” Soryu answered. “But it seems we need a friggen clothing plan!”

“Huh?” Ikari voiced.

“Rei,” Soryu tried to explain. “She... when she tried to make breakfast, she... Arrgh! Why do I
even need to explain that? Why do I even need to bother with that? Misato's insane plan will never work!"

“She is upset because I was wearing an apron when preparing breakfast,” Rei explained.

“That seems reasonable,” Ikari answered. He sounded confused about where the problem was. “After all...” His eyes widened as realization dawned on him. “Uh... you don't mean...” He looked at Soryu for confirmation.

“See what indecency I have to live with here?” Soryu complained. Ikari's head was suddenly the reddest Rei had ever seen human skin. Soryu looked at her. “And now that pervert idiot will have enough material to keep him awake at night for several weeks, thanks to you!”

“You did not need to tell him,” Rei pointed out.

Soryu's face now became nearly as red as Ikari's, though probably for different reasons. “If I don't tell anyone I'll go crazy in here! I need a break from this! I need a break from you!” She looked at Ikari. “How about a trip to the city? To get away from this madness.”

“Well, uh... I think you've earned it,” Ikari answered. “After all, you are both training here all day, while I... I...” He shrugged. “I can only go to do school and do my household chores. And I have homework and laundry to do.”

“Jeez, Misato has completely housebroken you, hasn't she?” Soryu complained. Ikari just shrugged again. That seemed to further infuriate Soryu. “Look. I say we will go to the city now. No counter-arguments! You aren't even an active pilot right now, so you don't get to argue against me!”

“Yeah, I suppose that's true,” Ikari muttered.

“Right. Let me just change into something more appropriate,” Asuka told him and rushed off to the sleeping room.

Ikari now turned his attention to Rei. There was again a faint smile on his face. “You deserve a break as well, Ayanami. You should come along.”

Rei felt her heart beating slightly faster. She felt glad about Ikari thinking about her, and about him wishing to spend time with her. However, his proposal seemed unworkable to her. She shook her head. “Soryu wishes to spend time apart from me.”

She was unsure if that was even compliant with Captain Katsuragi's program parameters, but she would not press that point. She had not been tasked with enforcing compliance.

“Uhm, well, I suppose that's true,” Ikari answered. “But it seems unfair to me to simply leave you behind here. Besides, I'm sure you two would get along much better in a more relaxed environment!”

That was a good argument, and something in Rei wanted to leap at it, to use it as justification to tag along. But she realized why that was so: Because she harboured romantic feelings towards Ikari. And while having those feelings was okay, her purpose meant she could not act on them. It would be unfair to pretend any differently to Ikari. It was better for him if he could build a good relationship with Soryu.
“It is necessary,” she hence simply replied. She let her head hang low and returned to the kitchen. Behind her, she heard how Soryu returned from the sleeping room and dragged a weakly protesting Ikari outside.

Shinji tried very hard to ignore the fact that he was walking with a lively, pretty, exotic girl through the city. He just could not allow himself to think about the fact that he was here on her (quite insistent) invitation, about the looks of other people, or about how she looked, or about what she might think... because otherwise, he was quite sure, he would just make a mess of himself and the whole situation again. He had a knack for that.

There were cranes rising into the sky everywhere. Reconstruction of the inner city seemed to happen at a breathtaking pace. He briefly wondered what had happened to Ramiel's 'corpse'. Dr Akagi had made a big deal about how intact Shamshel's remains had been. Then he shrugged mentally. It was not like those issues were important to him.

“And she just always stands there, not moving, no facial expression, just listening to Misato...” Asuka complained. She had been for some time. “I mean, does she have any self-initiative at all? Anything?”

“When we visited that observation platform, it had been her suggestion to accompany me,” Shinji told her.

That was probably a mistake. Asuka shot a dagger glare at him. “So, when it's about you, she shows some spine? Hmpf. Typical.”

“I'm sometimes wondering...” Shinji began unsurely, but then stopped himself.

“Wondering what?” Asuka asked.

“How Ayanami turned out the way she did,” Shinji said quietly. “And considering it apparently was my father who has raised her...”

“I... I hadn't even considered that,” Asuka admitted. “And you told me how much of a bastard your father is, so...” Her voice trailed off.

“Ayanami is a good person,” Shinji insisted. “I know you two are practically polar opposites in attitude, but you should give her a chance.”

In fact, Shinji still felt a bit guilty about how they had left her behind. It had been on her own insistence, true, and Shinji had not felt at all comfortable with further pressing the matter, but she had not looked happy. He was glad Asuka was enjoying this walk, or maybe her chance to vent, but he felt uncomfortable about enjoying himself while Ayanami had been left alone in her and Asuka’s temporary apartment.

*I think she would also need a chance to vent. Living together with a person so different to her as Asuka must be stressful for her as well.*

Asuka scoffed, but it sounded half-hearted. Then a mischievous grin appeared on her face.”So if you think she’s a good person and I'm her polar opposite, what does that say about me, hm?”
“Ah... I... uh...” Shinji began to stutter, while at the same time feeling how his cheeks heated up.

Asuka sighed. “You're just too easy to toy with, Third.” She sounded downright disappointed.

It did not take long until she had found new topics to vent about: The training gear Misato made them wear, the 'always stay in the same room' rule that she was currently violating, the in her view completely childish dance exercises. Shinji could understand her frustration. He probably would have just gone along with Misato's plans, but he could see how to someone like Asuka, the world's top EVA pilot and a college graduate, this all had to seem very demeaning. Besides, Asuka and Ayanami really were quite different in personality; that just had to cause friction.

So he tried to nod understandingly and agree with her as much as possible. However, that seemed to backfire. Asuka stopped in her walk, looked at him, narrowed her eyes and shouted: “You won't get out of this by just saying 'yes, yes', you know?” Shinji winced. That was what Misato had told him after Shamshel. “If the presence of the great Asuka Langley Soryu annoys or bores you so, then that's your loss. Then you should leave!”

“What... no!” Shinji protested. And there it is again. Me having ruined everything.

“You're always going along with everything,” Asuka accused him. “So yes, why shouldn't I think that you just went along with my plan to see the city, and now just nod and appear all understanding to avoid trouble?”

Shinji opened his mouth, then closed it again. Asuka was not wrong about his general behaviour. It was a thing he would do. So it was his fault for her thinking that.

“Sorry,” he hence muttered. Asuka scoffed and turned to walk on. Desperately trying to fix his mistake, Shinji hastily added: “But... you're wrong in this.” Asuka stopped. “I... I wouldn't just pretend to be nice to you. I know how that feels. You... you know about that.”

Asuka's shoulders slumped down. “We talked about it, yes.” It still sounded standoffish, and she was still facing away from him. “People always being polite and showing you friendly faces but in the end just being interested in your usefulness to them.”

“So... let's not do that,” Shinji proposed. Then he suddenly lost his bravery and could not go on.

Asuka turned around to face him again, arms crossed. “What do you mean?”

“Well... maybe I am like you've said,” Shinji conceded. “Yeah, I am. Always going along with things, always just politely nodding to avoid trouble. Well, let's... not do this among each other. I don't know how this could work, but...”

A somewhat bitter grin appeared on Asuka's face. “Well, I'm already telling it to you straight. And you think you have the backbone to do the same with me?”

Shinji shrugged and only barely avoided looking down. “I can try. After all... I know why it's important to you.”

Asuka's facial expression completely changed. She now seemed... surprised? Confused?... Shinji could not quite tell. “Yeah. Yeah, you do.” It was the softest he had ever heard her speaking.
It made his heart run just a tick faster.

“Well, it isn't quite evening yet,” Asuka abruptly declared, her voice back to its usual, haughty tone. “But I need to head back. My turn in making dinner today. In fact, I should probably hurry back. Right. For dinner. Uh... you're coming along?”

Shinji chuckled slightly. After all, his way home was literally the same as for Asuka now. But then his eyes caught a small store on the opposite street side.

“I'll see you later,” he told Asuka. “There's something I still need to do.”

Rei felt lonely.

It was not a feeling she was used to. Being alone always had been her default state. When she was not needed elsewhere, she would be at her apartment and wait. Ultimately, she only existed in order to wait for that one final moment that would be the fulfilment of her purpose. And when a tool was not needed, it was stored away.

But now she acutely felt the loneliness. It would be difficult not to feel the stark contrast after having spent the entire day with Soryu. Instead of her loud presence, now there was nothing. If Rei were able to appreciate irony, now would have been the moment: She had been constantly annoyed by this very facet of Soryu's nature, but now without it, and without anything for her to do, her surroundings appeared drab and too quiet.

Soryu also had successfully claimed Ikari's attention. That in particular saddened Rei. Ikari seemed to care about her. She was happy to have him as her friend. But there was no doubt she would always stand back behind Soryu. And that even was for the better: Regardless of whether Ikari saw Soryu as a friend or potentially more, she probably was the better choice than Rei. A human, not a tool. And even though their shapes were doomed, their souls could go on. Unlike Rei's, which was not even hers.

That all was true and logical. It was just too bad how sad it all felt for Rei.

She stared at the wall in front of her, sitting cross-legged on her futon. Soryu and Ikari were gone, and she did not know what she could do right now. So she just continued staring.

She heard the apartment door being opened. Soryu was speaking: “You're behaving weirdly, Third. But sure, that fits to Rei. Hm... I suppose she must be in the sleeping room.”

A moment later there was a knock at the room door. “Are you in there, Ayanami? Can I come in?” It was Ikari's voice.

Rei did not respond. He could come in if he felt it necessary; that was not her concern. She rarely held an opinion, and if there was nothing to say, she would indeed say nothing. Instead, she continued looking at the wall, facing away from the door.

After some pause, it was slid open. She heard footsteps walking up to her. She still did not turn around.

There was a long moment of awkward silence. She could feel Ikari standing behind her. Finally, he
said: “I, uh, wanted to apologize.”

“There is no need,” Rei answered. “I could have come along. I did not.”

“Still, I spent almost three hours outside with Asuka, and you sat here alone,” Shinji stated. “That... I think that wasn't nice of us.”

His words hurt. They were the essence of her current feelings of loneliness, thrown right at her. She said nothing, though. She could not say that it did not bother her, because that was incorrect, but she could also not make any complaints or accusations, as it was for the best if Ikari bonded with Soryu.

After a while, Ikari realized there would be no answer. So he continued: “I know this training is stressful for you as well. You... you aren't a person given to venting. Neither am I. Still, I think you need something to calm your nerves, maybe.”

A hand reached over Rei's shoulder. It held a small carton package. Hesitantly, Rei took it. Tea...

She looked over her shoulder. Ikari was squatting behind her, looking down. She still could make out a faint smile on his face.

“Thank you,” Rei whispered. A gift. That was very unexpected. It was not like Commander Ikari had really been miserly with her; their regular common meals were very high class. But those things had never been out of the blue. Just like her usual monetary support and the tools she got for fulfilling her purpose, they had always been part of a schedule or a plan.

This was evidently not. Still, she wondered what this was all about. She looked at Ikari expectantly to get an answer.

His face got red. “Should... I don't know, but I can imagine even you get annoyed here. You can then make a nice, hot cup of tea. It helps to calm down, it really does.”

So in a way this was just supportive of her mission again. Then again, she doubted anyone else at NERV had ever cared if she was 'annoyed'. And Ikari... Ikari had thought of her, even when he had been out with Soryu. That made her glad – irrationally glad, given that she had explicitly refused to go with the two. She realized she really had no idea how to respond to this.

Then it occurred to her. Slowly, the corners of her mouth began to rise.

The blush that had slowly receded from Ikari’s cheeks flared up again. Very awkwardly, he was about to get up again. Instinctively, Rei darted forwards and grabbed his wrist. She did not even know herself why; she had no clear aim with that, she just did not want this moment to end. Ikari’s eyes widened as he looked from his wrist up to her face. She did not know what to do or say now, but held on to him.

“Ayanami?” he finally asked.

Rei realized she had to let go. This moment would end, as all moments did. Abruptly, she let go of Ikari. She still kept her gaze on him, and he looked somewhat worried. He only got up hesitantly, still looking at her, and then turned around.

“Will you come visit tomorrow as well?” Rei asked. She managed to make the question sound entirely factual and even.
“Ah... of course, why wouldn't I?” Shinji answered, looking back. “I'll still bring the homework and all that.”

Rei nodded. That was good.

Asuka breathed hard, almost gasping. She noticed her hands were shaking. She was back in reality, back in the night-dark sleeping room she shared with Rei. But the images her mind had just displayed for her were still fresh in her memory.

A historical building in South Germany. The corridor walls are all oblique, and the corridor itself is gigantic... for a small girl. Her field of vision bops up and down as she enthusiastically runs up to Mama’s room.

And then she finds her.

Asuka shuddered while she hastily tried to get up. She ran on pure instinct, wanting nothing more than to get away from here, nevermind where, nevermind how. She did not even close the door behind her anymore as she left the sleeping room, stumbling towards the kitchen.

She tried to catch her breath there. She looked around, unsure what to do. Awkwardly, she grabbed a chair and sat down, but she was still too full of nervous energy. Nearly immediately, she got up again, and began pacing around the table.

It was not like she was unused to this sort of thing. She had been having this dream since she was six. She knew that soon enough she would have calmed down. But until then, she would still be a shaking emotional wreck, and in all likelihood sleep would not return this night. Back in Germany Misato had allowed her to roam the apartment those nights without complaining. Kaji even had often gotten up to talk with her. Not that he had really known what to say, but he had often sat himself besides her on the couch, and they had watched TV.

Other guardians... had not been as understanding.

Finally, she took out a glass from the dishwasher and filled it with tapwater. She was not really thirsty, but she figured it might help her calm down, and in any case it was something to do. With shaking hands she led the glass to her mouth...

...there was a loud bang, and a dozen shards of glass were now swimming in a puddle of water on the ground.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck...

It was a minor thing, really, but it made Asuka feel irrevocably overtaxed with the situation. She did not know what to do now. If her eyes had not remained dry for eight years, the whole stress might have wetted them.

She breathed in and out heavily. When she looked around again, she saw Rei standing in the kitchen’s door frame. Thankfully, she was wearing a nightgown. Asuka had strongly insisted on her wearing something in bed, and since she had no intention of wearing that unfashionable piece of clothing again had lent it to the bluehead.
A small, bitter laugh escaped Asuka. Rei looked ridiculously cute in that outfit, still half sleep drunk, but at the same time that really was all Asuka had needed to turn the situation into a complete disaster. She really did not need witnesses to her current emotional state.

Rei walked by Asuka. In all the emotional and material chaos around Asuka, the bluehead's movements appeared avian and graceful to her. Without giving more consideration to the shards on the ground than necessary not to step into them, she began to fill up the water cooker, and then started heating the water.

“What... what are you doing?” Asuka demanded to know.

“You should sit down,” Rei told her calmly, then left the room again.

Asuka was still standing, and still non-plussed, when Rei came back with a broom, and calmly swept aside the mess the Second Child had made. The Japanese pilot had also brought something else with her, which she had placed on the kitchen counter, though Asuka could not quite see what it was.

“What are you doing?” Asuka hissed at her. “I don't need your help!”

Rei only answered once she had finished sweeping the shards into a corner. She looked at her and replied: “No. You do not.” A pause. “But I will help regardless.” She walked over to the kitchen counter again, and began pouring hot water into two cups. “Sit,” she repeated herself.

This time, Asuka was too confused to offer resistance, and sat down. Rei was getting something out of the box she had brought to the kitchen. Teabags! Asuka realized. After she had inserted one each into the two cups, Rei sat down at the table as well.

“The tea should be ready soon,” she declared. “It should help you. I heard it being described as calming.”

“Why are you doing this?” Asuka demanded to know.

Rei... fidgeted. That was a new one, at least for Asuka. When she answered, her voice was as perfectly even and calm as always, though. “It is preferable to doing nothing. It is no bother to me, and it will help you.”

“I don't need help!” Asuka insisted again.

Rei did not answer, but simply remained sitting ever so calmly. Asuka narrowed her eyes in frustration, but ultimately did not move, either. The silence dragged out into awkwardness. Asuka sat on her chair, slouched down, eyeing Rei from a downcast view. Rei's quiet serenity made a striking counterpoint to her own posture, and to her still brewing emotional turmoil. But why does she need to be so weird? Asuka felt too tired to complain, though.

Finally, without even looking at a clock, Rei got up, and got the cups, putting one in front of Asuka.

Asuka put her cup into both her hands. It was warm. Of course it is, it's freshly made tea... Asuka took a sip. It was only a minimal one, but it made that warmth spread all over her body.
For nearly half an hour, both girls just sat in the kitchen, quietly sipping from their cups. Asuka now and then glanced over to Rei. She felt an absolutely irrational sense of gratitude, and that in turn annoyed her. She was Asuka Langley Soryu, EVA pilot, and she did not need help or comfort or care. She had, after all, survived eight years without it. And yet, the warmth of the tea was soothing, and the quiet in fact comforting.

Finally, Asuka breathed out, annoyed. Her cup was nearly emptied. “This means nothing, First. This... this never happened. Don't tell anyone. In fact, if you bring ever bring this up even only between us...”

“You do not wish that?” Rei asked.

“Absolutely not!” Asuka confirmed. “I don't want...” To be reminded of my weakness... exposed as worthless... “I don't want to ever talk about it.”

Rei nodded. “Then I shall keep quiet.”

Asuka eyed her suspiciously. She would very much like to trust her. For one thing because she had to, and also because... if it were not for this fear, then this scene would have been kind of... nice. But she feared that Rei doing this for her and then not even mentioning it again would probably be too much to ask for.

She sighed and drank out her last bit of tea. Either way, she was strangely calm now again.
“What is it with you Japanese and your love of cans?” Asuka asked. “You know you can also bottle juice and lemonades, right?”

“Let me guess, you're about to tell me how much better you do things in Germany?” Misato countered. “All hail reverse vending machines!”

Asuka scoffed. “Just because you were always too lazy to return the bottles doesn't mean it's a bad idea. Besides, I was talking about just having bottles. Container deposits would be the next step up. You gotta take it slowly. I wouldn't want to overburden Japanese society.” She sighed exaggeratedly and looked at the can in her hand. “But at least bottles can be closed again.”

Misato rolled her eyes. “Fine, no more coke cans for you anymore.”

Asuka growled. “You know that's not what I meant!”

Misato just sighed, too, and took a sip from her own can. Surprisingly, it was coke as well, not beer. The Captain looked like she was strongly considering switching to her usual liquid sustenance, though.

Asuka took another sip as well and looked over to Rei. The bluehead had so far not said a single thing during their break, but that was normal for her, of course. In particular, she had not even hinted at the nocturnal incident. So far she seemed to be keeping her word, but Asuka would still be watching her.

Progress had actually been okay so far today. It kind of figured that Asuka had to do all the work in making that happen, but she supposed that was how things worked. She did not like to be in any kind of debt to people; she was supposed to be superior to them! So today she had tried to make things up to Rei... not that she would ever admit so. As far as everyone else was concerned, they were supposed to think Asuka did not care one way or the other. But covertly, she was working on restoring her worth. So now she was honestly trying to adapt to Rei. Which was really awkward; it irked Asuka to not move or react as fast as she could, just so her sluggish fellow pilot would have a chance to catch up. But through her great effort, some progress had been made.

And yet, Asuka was still anxious. Not about the angel out there in the now N2-mine enlarged Suruga Bay. Sure, that bastard had defeated her and Rei in the first go, but Asuka had no doubt they would win the second round. She was confident in her abilities. She had to; those abilities were all she had, all that made her her. If they failed against the angels it would eventually be the end of the world, but that would not even matter at that point anymore. So they would win because they had to.

Instead, she was anxious about Rei. She still felt the nocturnal incident would come back to bite her. So she had to keep a watch on the bluehead. And Asuka had done so quite literally throughout the day: She had watched her like a hawk when the two had gotten up, had been ready to jump at her if she only as much as spoke a word during breakfast, and had continuously glanced over to her during training. In fact, she had to admit she was looking at Rei a lot. And it was not only the nocturnal episode that came into her mind, but also the morning before that, when Rei had... made breakfast.
So Asuka did not only see that Rei did in fact keep quiet – as always the First Child was nearly completely silent – she also noticed how Rei's lithe body bent and twisted on the dancing mat, or how gracefully she sat at the table. And as much as Asuka hated having to wear the frilly training gear, she thought it look kind of cute on Rei. The Japanese pilot was nearly her complete counterpart; for example, Asuka could never sit so quietly and orderly. She saw no reason why. But Rei radiated an aura of calmness and stability doing so; the same calmness and stability she had shown during the night. It was... an interesting effect.

“Very well,” Misato spoke up. “Back to work!”

“Right. 'Work’,” Asuka muttered, but she stood up and returned to the dancing mats. Of course, she did so hesitantly and with a slouch, whereas Rei had simply gone straight there as soon as the Captain had finished.

Misato now had them try a more complex sequence. Some part of Asuka was glad about having a new challenge, but overall she was annoyed about having to contort her body even more now. It was all just so childish! She again glanced over to Rei on her right. The bluehead was in the starting position, upper body bowed down. Asuka quickly focused on her own mat again.

The first attempt did not go well. The first few steps came naturally to both girls, but then things got more complicated. Asuka really tried to keep herself in check, to stay in rhythm with Rei. But suddenly, the lights called for a complete swerve to the left. Losing all thoughts about coordination, Asuka hastily attempted it... and nearly landed flat on her face.

“Damnit!” she shouted. “Are you trying to kill us, Misato?”

Misato just looked at her glumly and took a sip from a can. It was her cherished Yebisu beer now. That name had burned itself in Asuka's memory from the many times Misato had complained about its unavailability in Germany. She had accepted that back then. Now though, she wondered how any woman could complain about the absence of beer in Germany.

The sequence started again. This time Asuka wanted to be prepared at all costs for the steep left swerve. She threw all her momentum leftwards... only to lose balance. She helplessly tried to balance with her legs... which hit something. Rei as well had thrown herself too far left.

Hastily Asuka came to her knees and turned around, to see if she had hurt Rei. Normally she would not care at all, and she certainly would not show she cared. And maybe she did not care about Rei per se, but she had to get a hold of the situation. It could not appear like it had been her fault.

She saw Rei simply coming to her feet again. The girl had emitted no sound, and her face showed her normal lack of any expression.

What the hell? Asuka was pretty sure she had accidentally hit Rei pretty hard. She remembered Mount Futago. Even there, Rei had hardly shown any pain. Her gait had been understandably weak, but there had been no groans or pained facial expressions, either. What is it with her? She remembered Shinji's question about her. What has the Commander done to that girl?

Asuka kept looking at Rei as they both got into their starting positions again, this time openly. Whatever it was... it can't have been pleasant. It made Asuka feel vaguely guilty about how she had treated the First Child. The thought occupied her enough that she screwed up already during the first steps, the easy part.
“What was that, Asuka?” Misato demanded to know.

Asuka stood straight and pointed at Rei. “Why don't you ever ask her that?” Shit. And here I go again. But she did not know how not to do this.

Rei on her part showed no emotion. She simply got into the starting position again. It... frustrated Asuka. On consideration, Rei was not so bad. Surely she deserved better than this.

“You're doing the dishes as well, Shinji?” Misato asked.

“It's my turn,” Shinji stated.

“It wasn't your turn to cook, and yet you also invited Rei and Asuka over,” Misato countered. She grinned. “Once again.” She trilled: “Myyyy, I wonder whyyyyy…”

Shinji looked down on the sink. Misato's teasing did manage to embarrass him, but he still felt warm and content inside. The evening had gone well. Once again. He was not used to such streaks.

“I don't mind the cooking,” Shinji answered. “It... it gives me something to do.”

Behind him, Misato sat down at the table, a beer can in hand. “Sometimes it's quite nice to do nothing.” She sighed and muttered: “Preciously few times recently when I've been able to do that.”

Shinji tensed. This touched some deep-seated fears he had. At first he just muttered some vague agreement. After some time, Misato still had not replied, but also had not left. Slowly, Shinji began to explain: “I feel like that's what I'm already doing anyway. I go to school and do housework, but…” He paused uncomfortably. “I can't pilot EVA currently. And because of my failure, Ayanami needs to deploy. It's all up to her and Asuka. They will feel pain, and they will fight in life or death battles. What if...” He tightened his hand hard around the sponge it was holding. “What if the angel had not just thrown their EVAs away in the first fight? They would have...” He fell silent.

“You...” Misato began loudly, but then forced her voice to become softer: “You blame yourself?”

Shinji shrugged. “It just is how it is. If I could synch with EVA-01 again, I would. I would be out there, fighting. Better... better me than Ayanami. But I can't. So all I can do is support the pilots... the real pilots best I can. Cooking for them is at least something I can do.”

Misato did not respond for a while. As Shinji was facing the sink, he could not see what she was doing. He began focusing on the dishes again, not expecting a further answer. However, eventually Misato did respond: “You know, that really isn't what I expected when I took you in. I know you said you'd pilot if you could right now, and I believe you, but let's be honest... you never liked it. This, though... you were positively glowing at the meal. So... a boy who would rather cook than pilot. Yeah, I really wasn't expecting that.”

Shinji let his head sink down. Misato was right. The way he behaved was pretty pathetic. Not that he intended to stop cooking; it still was at least something he could do. But it was indeed pathetically little for a boy to do, while leaving the girls to fight. He snapped out of those thoughts when a beer can was rammed hard onto the counter next to him. Misato had stood up and walked over to him.
She now spoke firmly: “But screw that.” Shinji winced. It was one thing for Asuka to ignore Japanese sensibilities and etiquette, but Misato was Japanese herself and yet... it was little wonder she apparently had gotten along reasonably well with Asuka in Germany. “You want to cook? You're right, it's something you can do. Honestly, without your influence I think the two girls would have clawed each other's eyes out by now. So don't think it's nothing.” Her voice got softer again. “So, if you'd rather do that than piloting, you'd still be contributing.”

Almost instinctively, Shinji shook his head. He knew this would not work. “And for how long?” he muttered. “How long... what if the next angel breaks through? Would you still accept it then if I can't pilot, even though I used to be able to? I... I have to still try.”

Misato nodded. “I kinda figured you'd say that.” She took a sip from the can.

“Why did you bring it up then?” Shinji asked.

Again there was an uncomfortably long silence, until Misato simply shrugged her shoulders. “NERV... we... I already have asked so much of you. It is only fair now if I point out alternatives to you. Even if you don't think them viable. But Shinji... could that be why you can't synch?”

Shinji looked up to her in what was almost a fearful shock. “What do you mean?”

“Your fear to be useless,” Misato explained bluntly. “Is that what's holding you back?”

What do I say now? Shinji kept staring at Misato, nevermind how impolite that was. Finally he managed to answer: “I... I just don't feel comfortable in that entry plug anymore.” And that even was the truth.

Misato sighed. “If you insist we will further try the synchronization attempts. Repairs to EVA-00 have been given a low priority, what with the current angel attack, but they will be finished within two weeks. It would be helpful to have three deployable units. But maybe we'll eventually have to admit defeat.” That caused Shinji to look down again, in defeat. Misato trilled: “Hey, cheer up! It isn't like you need the EVA anymore to attract the ladies. I bet you haven't noticed, but...”

“Hm?” Shinji voiced unenthusiastically. Misato's overt cheerfulness was all too artificial for his tastes.

“Asuka,” Misato told him, talking as if they were gossiping. “She was watching you all the time. I would say you're making quite an impression on our Red Baron.”

“Red...” Shinji muttered. “Uh, are you sure, Misato?”

His guardian chuckled. “You really didn't notice. I suppose I really shouldn't worry. You are a boy after all – oblivious like a brick wall.”

“Well then!” Misato exclaimed cheerfully from her usual place at the table. “That went well. Let's try...”
“Don’t you dare say ‘Let’s try the next sequence!’” Asuka cut her off. She jumped straight up and whirled around towards Misato. She was sick of her former guardian comfortably sitting there and watching how the two pilots were making asses out of themselves with the silly dances. “We have successfully completed every sequence you have presented us with today, and what do we get as reward? Another one! Quite frankly, you suck at morale building, Captain Katsuragi.”

“Please don’t say such things to your teachers,” Misato muttered.

Asuka admitted she had a point there; at least she was used to the redhead's outbursts and made no fuss about them. The rest of the society here, though... “Japanese!” Asuka scoffed.

“Besides, you also complained when I did make some efforts towards a better morale!” Misato argued.

“Apparently, the training gear does not count as morale building,” Rei spoke up quietly. “At least judging by Pilot Soryu's reaction.”

“There you have it!” Asuka declared smugly, a little bit surprised by the bluehead's reaction, but not showing it.

“May I remind you there is still an angel out in Suruga Bay that needs defeating?” Misato argued. “And that it will reawaken in three days?”

Asuka shrugged. “Just drop another load of N2 mines onto it if we aren't ready yet. That has worked before, hasn't it?”

“Well, yes, but... but... you're supposed to defeat the angels!” Misato stuttered.

Asuka waved her hand dismissively. “And we will. But in case you have forgotten, our job is actually piloting Evangelion, not jumping around on mats in silly outfits.”

The training this day, Thursday, had actually gone amazingly well. Asuka still mostly credited herself with that; after all it had been her who had first started adapting to the other pilot. But today, Rei had caught up quite nicely to her. She still felt she had to do most of the work, but at least the bluehead was progressing.

This did show even away from the dancing mat. This morning, both of them had prepared a cold breakfast for themselves, and it had been quite easy to work around each other. It was like Asuka instinctively knew where Rei would go or reach next... which she suspected was the entire point of the training program. Of course, this had not stopped her from muttering about how certain other people were standing in the way.

“Those 'silly outfits' were still necessary,” Misato defended herself. “The aim was to get you in synchronization, and Japanese start at appearances.”

Asuka crossed her arms. “It seems you have ignored a certain problem in your logic there.”

“Getting you to synchronize with Japanese society is even more of a challenge than getting you to synchronize with Rei,” Misato muttered.

“I don't plan to stay here my entire life,” Asuka told her bluntly. “I've been redeployed on account of the angel attacks. Those will one day be over, or so everyone says. Hopefully not too soon, but...
really, the only good thing about this place here are the fights, and the food.”

Misato laid her chin on the backside of her hand and grinned. “Iiiiis that so? Just the food? Not also a certain cook?”

“Grrr...” Asuka fumed. She had it to here with Misato's teasing. “It's... It's not like that.” She defiantly swung her head around. “He's just someone actually sane. Unlike you or...” She looked at Rei. And remembered her calming presence two nights ago. “Grrr...”

“Suuuure,” Misato answered. “Well, enough fooling around. Yes, this day has been very successful. You're doing well, Asuka, Rei. But that just means we should use it for all it's worth.”

“I disagree,” Asuka stated. When Misato raised an eyebrow, she specified: “Come on, Misato! We have done well. Surely, we have earned a break. I can tell you, if we don't get one, our results will just get worse.”

“What do you have in mind?” Misato asked. “Shinji is busy with yet another attempt to get him to synchronize again with EVA-01. He won't come home for a couple of hours.”

“Scheißdreck,” Asuka whispered. She looked around in the room, as if hoping to find something she could use. Her eyes fell on Rei. She remembered the slight tinglings of guilt she had felt over how she had treated the girl. Maybe here was a chance to make up for them. She declared: “Rei and me can go to the city. Being together in a relaxed environment might even help this 'synchronization' Quark.”

“It... might,” Misato conceded, who seemed clearly surprised at the idea.

“What would you plan to do in the city?” Rei asked. She in turn sounded as sceptical as her still monotone voice allowed.

“Have fun!” Asuka exclaimed. “Don't worry. I'm sure I'll find ways to show you how.”

Misato chuckled now. “Okay. That's something I have to... well, see the results of, at least. Okay, for your good progress, I'm giving you two the rest of the day off, provided you spend it together. Off you go then!”

“You... what?” Soryu blurted out. She had gotten rid of the training gear in a hurry and was currently changing into tight jeans trousers.

Rei was changing as well, but she was putting on her normal student uniform. She simply repeated what she had said before: “I do not possess what you term 'free time clothing'. I only ever wear my school uniforms, the school bathing suit or the plugsuit... or the training gear now.”

Soryu blinked. Blinked again. Rei simply continued putting on the school uniform. “Well... I had planned to go shopping,” she heard Soryu say behind her.

Rei did not quite know what to make of that. She simply followed Soryu outside once both had finished dressing, and then towards the nearest train station. She had no particular opinion on
Soryu’s plan. Going to the city or continuing on the dancing mats really made no difference to her. Since Captain Katsuragi had ordered that she and Soryu stay together, she would follow the redhead pilot, but she herself had no intrinsic wish to see the inner city – but also no complaints about it, either.

The two entered the next train that appeared at the station. Soryu leaned back, arms extended on the bench's back to both sides, legs wide. Rei sat down some distance away. After a while, Soryu's face showed a predatory grin and she commented: “I hope you have taken enough money with you. This will be a larger project.”

Rei just nodded.

Soryu looked over to her with suspicion in her eyes. “I mean it. What... how do you even support yourself, normally?”

“NERV pays for all my expenses,” Rei explained. “They provided me with a credit card.”

“You have a credit card from NERV itself?” Soryu echoed. She sounded non-plussed. Then for no reason Rei could discern, she began to cackle.

Clothing had so far been something simple for Rei. She herself had no inhibitions about nudity, no bodily shame, and with Japan’s year-round summer since Second Impact there was also little climatic reason for clothes. But social norms demanded them, so Rei complied with those. Personally, she did not care either way.

Clearly, Soryu had other ideas. With her, clothing was apparently something very complex.

As soon as the two girls arrived in the inner city, Soryu dragged Rei into the nearest clothing store, a small but not too exclusive boutique. The German girl clearly had done this before, many times. She did not pick the next best clothes, but searched them out with what Rei recognized were the eyes of an expert. And then she had Rei try them out. Seeing no reason to resist, the bluehead complied.

She tried out three different set of clothes. In the meanwhile, Soryu got ever more agitated.

“But what do you think?” she finally demanded to know. “Yes, I know those clothes will all be sufficient! But... you also should like them! Isn't there something you like?”

Rei considered that. What did she like? She liked when she could fulfil her purpose, use EVA to bond with people... but she doubted she could tell Soryu this. She liked swimming, but that had little to do with their current situation. She liked being close to Ikari, but she would certainly not bring this up in front of Soryu. So she remained quiet.

“I mean... okay, let's start at basics,” Soryu tried again. “What colours do you like? Blue would of course fit to you, but we could also try purple... even red...”

“Please, not red,” Rei spoke up quietly. “Blue will do.”


“I have never seen the point of flowers,” Rei answered. It was true: So many flowers, and yet they
all looked like each other. All copies of each other...

“Hah. Finally something we agree on!” Soryu exclaimed.

“But it makes no difference to me if I appear in striped or unicolour clothing,” Rei continued. “The reactions of other peoples are inessential.”

Soryu nodded empathetically. “They are. To hell with other people. What matters is how you want to look like. If you like what you see in a mirror. What... what sort of style or personality do you want to project?”

“I... I never considered that,” Rei admitted. “I do not know.”

“Then we have to find out by trial and error,” Asuka insisted.

And for the next hours, so they did.

Rei was not used being the subject of so much attention. Dr Akagi regularly subjected her to veritable batteries of medical tests, but Rei had quickly learned the Doctor did not care at all about her. Dr Akagi cared about her body, the medical data, the results from those examinations. Those were different things. Rei was convinced Commander Ikari cared about her, but he rarely had time for her. He could not pay much attention to her. His son... Rei by now was fairly certain what she felt for him. He had always treated her with a kindness she had known from nobody else. But he was a quiet, reserved person, much like herself.

Asuka was not. Not by a long shot. And she definitely wanted a result to her experiment. So for several hours she sent Rei into changing rooms, asked her excruciating questions, let the bluehead view herself in the mirror. Strangely, this all felt more exhausting to Rei than most of Dr Akagi's examinations. However, slowly but surely, a pattern emerged, of long and flowing, simple dresses, of plaid shirts and unassuming jeans. Rei began to worry how they would even be able to carry all that material, but it seemed Asuka had experience in this matter as well.

Including ideas for alternative transportation methods. “We should have brought Shinji along,” she mumbled at one point. Secretly, Rei had to agree. Ikari would probably have been able to explain many of the things that confused her. Soryu meant well, she assumed, but the redhead's pure energy threatened to overwhelm her. Also, for all Rei genuinely did not care what others thought about her or how she looked to them... the impact she had on Ikari was something she considered. Would he appreciate seeing her in that blue dress?

Clothes were not the only thing Rei and Soryu acquired. There also was an entire array of cleaning and hygiene products. Hair conditioners, deodorants, perfumes... Rei wondered for what she would need all this, but she complied with Soryu. Her NERV credit card was accepted everywhere, and she supposed she could maybe, eventually, find uses for all that.

And in truth, while all this 'shopping', this going through town from store to store, trying out everything, evaluating purchases on qualities she had never considered before, was exhausting, she felt slightly... elevated by the sheer amount of attention Soryu paid to her. Rei realized that this action was in large parts self-serving for the German girl; she was her project. And yet... it felt good to not be ignored. To not be taken for granted.

Still, after they left the perfumery, Rei had run out of energy, in a way she had never considered possible before. After all, purely physically, she was still fit. She could have run to dozens of
further stores. But to judge the merits of even more clothes or perfumes or whatever... that was a sort of stress Rei had not even known existed before.

Soryu led her to a bench, and the two sat down. She looked content and even smug. “Well, that was a success. Next up...” She looked over to Rei. “Hm. I suppose... your hair? But apparently you are already doing something with it.”

“I cut it regularly,” Rei informed her.

“You do that yourself? The cut's not half-bad, then,” Soryu allowed. “But still, you could have something fancier, you know. Strange then that you would also colour your hair.”

“I don't,” Rei answered.

“What do you mean, you don't?” Soryu asked. “That... do you mean that's your natural hair colour? Blue?” Rei just nodded. “How can that be?”

Even though my genetic pattern is a copy of the genotype of a specific human, my phenotype does not follow human genetic expression... But there was no way Rei could tell that to Soryu. So instead, she just remained quiet.

Soryu put a finger to her lips. “Hmmm... if that's really true... I wonder what a hairdresser could do with that. What they'd even say to that! Yes, clearly, we must do that next! Up then, Rei, we still have work to do!”

Unenthusiastically, Rei got up from the bench. Hairdressing... At least that would require no more decisions from her, but even so she did not look forward to it. It still sounded like even more stress.

Soryu eventually noticed how Rei was falling behind. She stopped, turned around and asked: “What's the matter?”

Rei did not reply, and simply used the chance to catch up to Soryu. After all, it seemed there was another task they still had to do. Soryu watched her with some suspicion and then followed her.

“So, this was your first shopping trip ever, wasn't it?” she asked. Rei just nodded. “Was it fun?” Rei did not react at all. “Oh come on! At least give me an honest answer.”

“It was... exhausting,” Rei thus answered truthfully. She did not know how to put the other feelings she had about the venture into words, ambiguous as they were. “But it seems it will soon be over. Only one task left.”

“It's not supposed to be a task!” Soryu exploded and stopped again. So did Rei. “It's supposed to be fun! So, shopping isn't fun for you? Going to the hairdresser isn't? Then what is?”

Rei did not answer. She did not know. 'Fun' had never really factored into her life and decisions at all. She was on this world for a purpose. Why would 'fun' be required then?

Soryu sighed in extreme annoyance. “It's that very thing again, isn't it? You don't know what you want. You don't even know what you like!” She grumbled. “Might as well go home then.”

“Is that what you want?” Rei asked.
“I want... hrrrm...” Soryu continued to grumble. “Look, you really have no idea what you’d do for fun?” Rei shook her head. “Then we will try something out. Not the hairdresser, mind you. I... hm. I know. I’ll invite you to the cinema.”

“Cinema?” Rei echoed.

“Yes. I’m sure you have heard of the concept,” Soryu replied aggressively. “Nothing required of you there except leaning back to enjoy the show. Let's see... oh, I know just the movie for you. Something to escape this world for a bit.”

The nearest cinema was in walking distance to where they currently were. Soryu paid for the tickets, and the two took their seats. Rei did not know what to expect, but that did not bother her. As Soryu had said, all she had to do was lean back and watch.

The cinema screen was gigantic. The only times Rei had ever experienced such a large visual input had been during EVA simulation training. And the sound and music came from all directions, immersing the audience in its rhythm.

“I already watched the series,” Soryu told Rei, who had no idea what she meant by that. “The third season was meh, but they made up for that in the fourth one, the final. The movie is supposed to be a better retelling of that third season. Shouldn’t be too difficult...”

The outline of Earth appeared on the screen... no, not Earth, the continents were different. An Earth-like planet then. Strikingly earth-like, the chances of finding such a world were... Rei’s mind stalled the thought process when a... ship appeared in front of the planet. A spaceship, looking vaguely avian with a sort of neck and two short wings. The perspective changed to inside the ship, to a man in a brown coat.

And from then on, Rei’s mind just stopped analysing the film. She just let it have its impact on her. The different worlds, the people, the institutions... the Alliance, the Reavers, the ship... none of that made any sense in regards to physics or metaphysical biology, but that did not matter. It really was a completely different world, and the movie sucked Rei into it.

“I'm a leaf on the wind, watch how I soar.”

Rei gaped.

When the movie was over, she was still internally shaken. She had known about fiction before, of course. She even had read some novels. But this... this had been something else altogether. The visuals, the sound, seeing the world and characters upfront instead of having to imagine them... and then such a different world. A real alternative to reality.

Rei walked out of the cinema slowly and quietly. Just as slowly and quietly as she had walked into it. She realized that could give off the wrong impression.

“That was a surprisingly enjoyable activity, Soryu,” she announced, breaking the silence between the two girls.

Soryu looked at her surprised, then grinned.
There was one thing to be said for Misato's main task this week: At least travel times to her place of work were excellent. She just needed to walk two apartments over. For a moment she considered ringing the bell. Who knew what Asuka and Rei were doing inside? She imagined Asuka trying to do Rei's hair. Asuka would fume at being caught in such a typical girl bonding moment. With a grin Misato opened the door with her key.

As usual, she found the two girls in the kitchen. Rei was already wearing her training gear; Asuka was still in a wide shirt and short trousers. Both were sitting at the table.

“Oh hey, thanks for announcing yourself, Misato, instead of trying to sneak up on us,” Asuka greeted her.

Misato made a glum face. It was not like Asuka did not have a point, but the girl could be such a spoilsport. “I hope you two are well rested, there's still a lot of work in front of us.”

“'Us'?” Asuka questioned. “Your work is sitting at the table, running a silly commentary and drinking beer.”

Misato groaned. “You two have made some progress, but admit it, Asuka: If you hadn't been supervised on Monday or Tuesday, you'd just have walked off to the city or something like that.”

Asuka shrugged. “Maybe. But don't say 'we' have work to do if it's just us two. At least be honest.”

Misato ground her teeth. “Alright. You two have a lot of work in front of you. I hope your little free time activity yesterday went well, because I don't think we can make time for one today.” She paused and sat down at the table. “Seriously, how did it go?”

“Rei finally has a more or less complete wardrobe,” Asuka announced with a certain smugness in her voice.

Misato grinned. “You dragged the poor girl through half the shops in the city, didn't you?” She turned to Rei: “Could you at least enjoy some parts of it?” Rei nodded. Unsatisfied with that non-answer, Misato asked: “Like what?”

“Soryu's genuine interest in my preferences,” Rei stated calmly.

Asuka coughed and turned her head from the scene, looking everywhere but the other two people at the table. Misato was surprised. “Are we talking about the same girl?” she muttered.

“I am quite certain we are,” Rei told her.

“Well, colour me surprised,” Misato stated. “Good on you, Asuka.”

“Somebody had to do it,” Asuka proclaimed defiantly and crossed her arms. “You know Rei how long and didn't even notice she had no free time clothing?”

That actually was an uncomfortable question. Sure, she was only the Operations Director, but for nearly two years, Rei had been her only pilot. And yet, she had never even bothered to get to know...
the girl better. Rei's constant silence had made her back off from any such attempts.

So of course, Misato tried to overplay that and chuckled. “Well, I'm sure she has more than enough now. Literally 'more than enough'. Just too bad you had to spend all of your free time on it.”

“We also went to the cinema,” Rei said.

“Really now?” Misato inquired.

Rei nodded. “Soryu invited me to it and paid for the tickets.”

Misato grinned mischievously. “She did? That sounds more like something Shinji might like to do.” When Rei just tilted her head, she felt compelled to explain: “Going to the cinema with you.” And leaning forwards, almost whispering, to put more emphasis on it: “Taking you to a date.”

“A date?” Rei asked. “Does that mean Asuka has taken me to a date?”

Misato laughed. “Well, normally...” She looked over to Asuka. Her eyes slightly widened. The German girl had resumed her 'looking awkwardly around in the room' routine, her cheeks were slightly coloured, and below the table her hands were fidgeting.

Well, I'll be damned. Who would have thought Asuka would turn out to be into... hah. Yet, Misato was also quite certain that Asuka had a certain affection for Shinji. She felt a little bit sorry for her, for the storm of pubertal confusion that seemed sure to be oncoming for her. Nonetheless, she would milk it for all it was worth. Besides, 'pubertal confusion' beat her own mental state when she had been fourteen by lengths.

She turned to Asuka, rested her chin on her hand and grinned again. “Actually, I don't know. Have you taken a cute girl to a date?”

“Was denkst du eigentlich über mich?” Asuka exclaimed, thumping her hands on the table.

“Nur das Beste, liebe Asuka, nur das Bestes.” Misato shot back [1], still grinning. She changed into Japanese and a more serious voice. “Well, you better go to your room and get dressed.” She could not suppress her nature. “I'll make sure Rei stays here and doesn't get a peek.”

Asuka's eyes shot murderous daggers at her. “I am dressed.”

Oh for fuck's sake... “Are you seriously going to do that?” Misato asked.

Asuka crossed her arms again. “And why not? You had your fun at our expense. Enough with that.”

“The purpose of these exercises is to get you two into synchronization,” Misato managed, barely, to explain calmly. “To have you act alike. Think alike. Be alike.”

Asuka scoffed. “So are you gonna repaint the Evangelions as well?” When Misato merely raised an eyebrow at that, Asuka continued: “That would be the equivalent. We'll fight in different looking Evangelions, we can just as well stay different looking in training.”

Misato sighed. “Is the training gear that offensive to you?”
“I just don't see any point to it anymore,” Asuka explained. “If I ever have.”

“So you decide, on your own, to do away with it,” Misato concluded.

“Yes, on my own,” Asuka confirmed. “After all, it is also I who has to wear it.”

Near desperation, Misato turned to Rei. “Rei, you're wearing the gear. Can't you say something to Asuka?”

“I do not think I would be able to convince Soryu, no,” Rei told her.

“This is a movement coordination program,” Asuka spoke up. “And that's what we're doing. Getting our movements coordinated. Pretty successfully so far. Which is what is needed against the enemy. Appearances... don't matter at all in this.”

Misato looked at her glumly. “And what about my orders?”

Asuka grinned viciously. “What, are you gonna ground me? I thought we had so much work to do today?”

Misato sighed and rubbed her forehead.

“I wonder why we even bothered to make plans about making dinner at all,” Asuka commented as she lay down on her futon. “Shinji is doing a stellar job at that.”

“He is skilled,” Rei confirmed, who was just changing into her nightgown.

“Yeah,” Asuka agreed. She lay facing the wall and did her best not to turn around and watch Rei. “Well, at least he has some use then.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Asuka could hear Rei's tiny steps to the light switch. The room went dark, and Rei laid down.

It took a while until the bluehaired girl replied: “You do not have faith in Ikari that he will be able to pilot again?”

“Not in time for the battle, that's for damn sure!” Asuka declared. That was a safe bet. It was Friday now – the battle would be in two days.

“I can pilot EVA-01 in battle,” Rei declared. “My own unit is damaged anyway. At this time, Ikari does not need to pilot.”

“A fact I'm sure he enjoys,” Asuka commented. It sounded more dismissive than she had intended.

Rei made an agreeing sound. “He only pilots because he has to. He agreed to it when he witnessed my medical state before the attack of the Third Angel.”

“Your medical state?” Asuka questioned.

“I was incapacitated from an earlier failed activation test with EVA-00,” Rei explained. “I was
hardly able to move at all. Ikari had at first refused to pilot EVA-01, so they brought me in on my stretcher to pilot despite my condition. Only then did he agree.”

“I... see,” Asuka merely replied. It was not difficult for her to imagine the situation. *On a stretcher? It would have been impossible for her to pilot at all then. There can only have been one reason*... Despite the secrecy shrouding it, she had never experienced NERV Germany, with its overall rather relaxed manners, as something sinister. NERV HQ seemed to be a very different beast.

“I think...” Asuka noticed how Rei hesitated. That was very unusual indeed. “I think it would be better for Ikari if he could stop piloting. He was never prepared for such a life. And every engagement he has been in has been painful for him.”

Asuka furrowed her brows, not that Rei could see it. “But he *is* an Evangelion pilot. Those things... come with the job.” Rei did not reply. The room was silent for a long time. Finally, Asuka asked: “What about you? Have you been prepared for that job?”

“All my life,” Rei answered. “It is something I can do. Something that allows me to be part of humanity.”

“Yeah, that doesn't sound strange at all,” Asuka declared ironically. “Still, I think I know what you mean. It... it gives one a purpose. A chance to make a difference... as cliché as that may sound.”

When Rei again remained silent, Asuka assumed this would be it for the evening conversation. In fact, they already had talked more than on any other evening before. It seemed they were after all getting more used to each other. Today, they had managed to master most routines. Rei seemed almost completely changed – more lively on the mat, more proactive, more... more like Asuka. The German girl, meanwhile, still tried, and mostly managed, to reach Rei's level of precision in everything. As much as Asuka hated to admit it, even only mentally, maybe Kaji's crazy 'synchronization' plan had some sense to it.

The only little trouble had been Asuka's insistence to not wear the training gear. Ultimately there was nothing Misato had been able to do about it. She needed Asuka as pilot, and she needed her to train. And the subsequent successes on the dancing mats had vindicated the German girl.

Grinning about her victory, Asuka closed her eyes and tried to drift off, but was surprised when Rei spoke up: “Was there a time before you were an Evangelion pilot?”

“Yes,” Asuka answered flatly. “I was chosen at age six. I hardly remember anything before it.” 

That was of course not completely true, but saying so was the best way to avoid talking about that subject.

“Did you have... a normal life?” Rei inquired further.

That question surprised Asuka even more. “Normal, what's that supposed to mean?” Then she considered. “I suppose... at one time... before... before everything...” She sat up straight and looked over to Rei. “Look, don't go snooping around in my past. Yes, I had a normal life once. It doesn't matter anymore now. I'm an EVA pilot now.” She let herself fall onto the futon again. She was still annoyed at Rei's question. Maybe that was what prompted her to ask: “What about you? Did you ever have a 'normal life'?"

“No,” Rei answered. “I was never given the chance.”
“What's that supposed to mean?” Asuka asked.

There was a silence. Finally: “Good night, Soryu.”

“Big day tomorrow,” Soryu stated. She was already on her futon, watching the wall. It was a peculiarly regular behaviour with her.

Rei put on her night gown. “We will succeed.”

Soryu scoffed. “You make it sound like I'm a little child who needs to be comforted.”

Rei walked over to the light switch and turned it off. “I was merely stating facts,” she said as she walked back to her futon. “We are forewarned now, and our training program has proceeded far better than I had expected.”

“That's true,” Soryu agreed. “Who would have thought after the first two days or so... we really rocked the exercises, didn't we?”

Rei would not have quite put it like that, but... “...Yes.” Normally, she would have left it at that. She did not know where the urge to speak came from. Maybe she wanted to keep pace with Soryu; maybe that was an effect of the synchronization program. “Maybe your new training clothing was productive.”

Soryu laughed. It sounded surprised. “Just goes to show what 'appearances' are worth. I noticed you still wear the training gear Misato has given us.”

“She ordered us to wear it,” Rei explained. “I saw no reason to defy that order.”

Soryu scoffed again, but this time tinted it with a note of humour. “You should aim to misbehave. Good night, Rei.”

_Aim to misbehave... _That was not something Rei could do, unfortunately. It was not even just a question of personality and character. That, as well – Rei did not have the attitude to rebel. But what was more, the whole concept just... was not part of her. She was a tool, with a fixed purpose. Without that, _she would not even exist at all._ It was just coincidental that she happened to have feelings and personality. In truth, she existed as a tool to preserve Lilithian life in some way and form. And seeing how important that plan was, she did not resent the fact.

She fell asleep. That was actually more difficult than at her regular apartment. There, she went to bed at 22:00, and woke up at 6:00. Always, with exact precision. Here, times had shifted from 24:00 to 7:00, but they were not as exact anymore. Soryu sometimes went to bed earlier, sometimes later, and today and yesterday she had even talked when the lights were already off. And without that mechanic precision, Rei had to actually wait for a while these days until sleep came.

That sleep was interrupted when she heard the room door being opened. As she oriented herself, she heard noises from the bathroom. Soryu had apparently used it. Rei had already closed her eyes again, when she heard a loud _thump_ sound right next to her. She opened her eyes again to see that
Soryu apparently had stumbled onto the wrong futon. The redhead lay right in front of her, faces only centimetres apart. For a moment, Rei considered what to do now.

Soryu was not taking up much space sleeping. Rei had noticed that before: For a girl so boisterous when awake, it was curious how Soryu nearly always stuck to one end of her futon and barely moved at all during sleep. Given that habit, the futon was large enough for two, and Soryu's presence did not bother Rei. Both would need to be well rested for the battle tomorrow.

Rei had just closed her eyes again, when she heard a whimper. She opened them again, to look at Soryu's full lips trembling.

“Mama...”

Rei did not know how to react to that. She had no idea about Soryu's mother or why her daughter would whimper for her.

“Mama...”

It sounded more desperate. There were tears in Soryu's eyes.

Rei hesitated. Finally, she was about to grab Soryu at the arm, in order to wake her up now. It seemed the redhead's sensory experiences were not very pleasant. She stopped mid-movement, though, her hand hovering above Soryu's arm. She let it come down gently. Letting it rest on Soryu's arm, she hesitated again, again not knowing what to do. In her uncertainty, she slowly moved the hand up and down.

Soryu whimpered again, but this time the sound ended in a nuzzled breathing. *Is she calming down?* Whatever it is was the pilot was experiencing, it did not all seem pleasant. Rei realized that Soryu would *never* let herself be seen like that awake. So if it were dreams the German girl was having, as Rei suspected, then they had to be serious.

She decided not just yet to return to sleep, but to keep a watch on Soryu. Leaving her hand on the arm, moving it gently now and then, looking at the fellow pilot for any sign of trouble. Soryu sniffled, but seemed to calm down.

Then she rearranged her posture. Inching a bit forward, she nestled her face against Rei's neck.

Rei's hand was now at Soryu's back, so that she enclosed the German girl to all sides. After some more minutes it seemed Soryu had passed through whatever had troubled her. Content with the result, Rei allowed sleep to claim her again, in the position she was in.

Soryu was... warm.

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Asuka felt... safe. Snug, comfortable, soft. Rested as well. She was half-awake, eyes closed, still shedding the last remnants of a dream she already had mostly forgotten, safe for images of yellow flower fields. She desperately tried to cling to this state of semi-consciousness. No thoughts, only feelings and faint images.
She murmured dismissively as the prongs of awakening tugged at her. It had been some time since she had slept so well. She felt surrounded by warmth and softness, as if she were in a proper bed... better, in fact. She felt...

...skin.

Abruptly, Asuka's eyes jerked open. She was looking right into the intense, red eyes of Rei. For a moment, neither of them said a word. Asuka was too frozen in shock to move.

“Have you slept well?” Rei asked. Asuka still did not move. She noticed Rei's arm around her body. She felt how warm Rei's body was. And how soft. When she gave no answer, Rei continued: “You seemed to have had nightmares.”

As good at self-deception as Asuka usually was... this felt nice. It should not, but it did. And Rei sounded like she genuinely cared for her well-being. So that creeper crawled over to my... Asuka looked over her shoulder. No, she was on Rei’s futon. Shit.

She jumped up and looked down on Rei, but was still unsure what to say. “You... you...”

“This incident never happened,” Rei said firmly. Then, after a pause: “Unless you want it to.”

What... That could work. Rei seemed very apt at making incidents not having happened. But that she... that anyone should show so much consideration for Asuka as to offer that... and the memory of being held by Rei...

...unable to cope with that, Asuka just scoffed roughly and stormed off to the kitchen.

When Rei arrived there, there was a cup of tea ready for her on the table.

Wordlessly, the bluenette sat down at that place and put the warm cup between her hands. Asuka sat opposite her, with a cup of her own. For a long time, both just sat there, occasionally sipping from their cups, not saying anything.

Asuka felt... awkward. She knew Rei did not deserve her just walking out on her. But there was no way she could apologize or even only tell her as much. And she was also very uncertain about the night itself. A sound sleep like she had not had in a long time, a soft awakening... in Rei's arms. That was...

...that was unimportant for now. After all, in some hours they would be in battle. That was all that mattered right now.

“We...”

Asuka and Rei looked at each other. Both had spoken up at the same moment. Asuka grinned ironically; Rei's lips curled up insignificantly.

Asuka did not even need to think to know it was her turn to speak now: “We will win today.”

Rei nodded. Both knew she had wanted to say the same thing. And maybe that was all the understanding the two needed.
The elevator was set to maximum. The Evangelion jolted twice its length into the air. The pilot did a salto. During the salto, she drew the prog-spear. She threw it. The spears landed right next to each other, immobilizing the Israfelim for a while.

She took the pallet gun from a supply store. She fired the grenade launcher. The Israfelim's advance was stopped for good, but now they began to fire. The pilot hopped backwards... she made a salto backwards, and another one, and another one. A retractable wall extended in front of the Evangelion, blocking the Israfelim's shots. She shot back on its left side. She shot back on its right side.

The Israfelim entered close combat... and Misato had them where she wanted them to be. Fire came raining down on them from all sides. It did not hurt them, but it allowed the pilot to go on the offensive. She kicked the Israfelim in front of her, she punched, she kicked again... and finally, the Israfelim were staggering back, and uniting again. Out of white and orange, there was green again.

The pilot jumped again... to pile right into the reformed Israfel. The angel staggered back... and back... and back... the pilot drove it all the way up a nearby mountain. Then she started hitting its core, again and again.

Then there was an explosion.

Evangelions were marvels of technology. An explosion that tore apart the entire top of a mountain merely shook them. Asuka felt like she had fallen down a staircase, but no worse than that. When the ash from the explosion had settled down again, she could even clearly see the surroundings... with the sky on the left side. Clearly, EVA-02 was not standing upright.

Right in front of her she saw purple. Lots of purple. Evangelion Unit 01... and as she paid more attention to her own unit, she could feel that something was on EVA-02's shoulders and back.

She had ended up in Rei's arms once again.

She opened a visual link to her. Rei looked at her blankly. Asuka stared at her, her face the very image of intimidation. She could not say anything, this would be picked up by Command, but she hoped that visual threat was enough.

Speaking of Command... somebody wanted to speak with her. Urgently. She opened up the comm channel.

“Asuka! Finally! Are you two alright?” Misato demanded to know.

Asuka thought the Operations Director sounded too hysterical. Of course she was alright, why would she not be? She had just achieved a major victory, after all!

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Asuka answered. “The bastard cheated with its explosion trick at the end, but we defeated him. That was quite a show, wasn't it?”
“Well, the end does not have many fans here,” Misato said unsurely.

“What do you mean?” Asuka aggressively demanded to know.

Another voice cut in. Vice Commander Fuyutsuki. “The sight of the two Evangelions yet again in disarray will be welcome ammunition for our opponents.” He sounded displeased.

That annoyed Asuka. Very much so. Who was that guy to question her success? According to him, she had just failed. That sort of thinking was unacceptable and hence had to be corrected – Vice Commander or not.

“Would you rather have had an aesthetically pleasing defeat, Sir?” she shouted.

The background chattering on the comm channels got quiet at once. Nobody replied. That only served to further fire up Asuka's anger.

“Whose stupid idea was it, anyway, to have us fight an active angel? A further N2 mine drop would have it enter its passive, regenerative mode again, but nooo, some people were too embarrassed to request that from the conventional forces. Nevermind how tactically sensible that would have been, but hey, can't 'lose face'? Rather send out the kids to fight! After all, you decision makers will all be safe and cushy in your command centre several dozens of metres beneath the Earth. And the risks to the pilots, well, that's worth not 'losing face', right? Better they be at life and death risk than you being maybe a tad embarrassed. Hah, Japanese nonsense. So interservice rivalry is more important than the safety of the city? Yes, surely it is better to let the angel come to a city with nearly a million inhabitants, rather than to make a tactically sound request to another agency. Who do you even think you are? If you think you can do piloting better, why don't you do it, gottverdammt noch einmal?”

There was further silence, while Asuka was angrily catching breath. After a while, Misato announced: “After the recovery of the Evangelions, you are ordered to report to Vice Commander Fuyutsuki’s office, Asuka.” Then the comm channel was shut down.

Asuka leaned back in her cockpit seat. Whatever. As far as she was concerned, they could all be angry at her. After all, what could they do? It was not like they could fire her. Even sending her to the brig for insubordination was a dicey prospect – after all, purely officially she was not part of a military hierarchy. Normally that irritated her; what with not even having an official rank. But right now she intended to play that card for all it was worth.

It was a bit weird to have a victory celebration without one of the two victors. Directly after the battle, Misato had sent Shinji home from NERV, and instructed him to organize a party – cooking a meal, inviting people, the whole deal. She had even specifically ordered him to invite Touji and Kensuke over, even though he felt uncomfortable inviting his own friends – after all, that was supposed to be Ayanami's and Asuka's party, while he had done nothing of note contributing to that victory. But he had complied with that order. And he supposed it made some sense: The only classmate Asuka had formed a friendship of some sort with was the Class Rep, Horaki, while Ayanami, well... So that way, there were at least four people present besides the pilots.

Misato also had informed him that she and Asuka would come later. She had not stated a reason,
and since he had spent the whole battle in the entry-plug of a thankfully powered down EVA-00, just in case, he could not even guess at one: For hours, he had experienced nothing but LCL.

Shinji was in the midst of preparing the food when, about three and a half hours after the guests had come together in Ayanami's and Asuka's temporary apartment, Misato and Asuka arrived. Both looked grumpy.

“Finally!” Misato declared and glared angrily at Asuka.

“Sure, blame me for that Fuyu guy making trouble, why don't you!” Asuka complained. “I'm not the Vice Commander, I'm the easier target after all!”

“That is Vice Commander Fuyutsuki to you, Fräulein!” Misato told her. Shinji blinked at her use of what he assumed was German. “I did not enjoy standing at attention while he lectured you for an hour, something you did provoke.”

“Oh, you had to stand for an hour, boo-hoo,” Asuka shot back as the two entered the kitchen. Neither of them paid much attention to the onlookers of their little squabble... a squabble Shinji suspected had gone on for a while. “I have to write a fucking essay on military discipline! And you suggested that!”

“Believe me, Asuka, what the Vice Commander had planned for you was worse,” Misato pointed out drily. “I did you a favour!”

Asuka scoffed. “Such bullshit. I never had to do anything like that at NERV Germany. Should I be grateful to you because your superiors are even worse?”

Shinji, Horaki, Touji and Kensuke all watched the discussion awkwardly, all of them embarrassed by being witnesses. Ayanami also watched.

“You're right,” Misato finally answered. It sounded surprisingly dark. “NERV Germany was different. Well, now you're deployed here. The angels are attacking Tokyo-3, not Berlin. And that is what the Evangelions have been designed for. That is what you are a pilot for.”

“The best pilot!” Asuka reminded her defiantly. “Given how much depends on me, NERV sure ought to treat me better.”

“I hope you'll write that essay,” Misato stated. “Otherwise, Vice Commander Fuyutsuki will think of something.”

“I am tempted to provoke that,” Asuka told her. “We'll see. Maybe I'll do it.”

Misato let that go, finally. Both of them took a seat at the table, Asuka with a defiant pose, Misato somewhat awkwardly.

By the time he had finished cooking, Asuka was regaling the guests with tales about the fight. It had only lasted about five minutes, as both Evangelions had run on internal battery power, but Asuka apparently could talk about it for hours.

To his surprise, unasked, Ayanami stood up and helped Shinji carry the food over to the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted some movement at the table. Touji had put a hand on Kensuke's shoulder, so the smaller boy could not get up.
With that work done, both sat down again, next to each other. With some ironic self-awareness, Shinji realized that was the quiet corner of the table. On the other side, Asuka had come to the point where she had, apparently, told Vice Commander Fuyutsuki off. Now she ranted how much, in her eyes, a buffoon the man was, while Misato loudly disagreed, Touji snickered and Kensuke tried to insert some pieces of trivia about military command structures.

“You seem stressed,” Ayanami remarked at his side.

Shinji noticed he had winced. “Just... loud, that's all. I don't enjoy so much talking and shouting at once.”

“You can't shut it out?” Ayanami asked.

“You can?” Shinji asked back. “That's enviable. I don't think I can. Turning attention away from loud voices...”

“You are doing just that right now,” Ayanami pointed out.

“...huh. You're right,” Shinji admitted. “Thanks to your help, it seems.”

“My help?” Ayanami inquired.

“Well...” Shinji felt some warmth rising in his cheeks as he fixated his look at the table in front of him. “I can... focus on a... calmer voice. A more pleasant voice.”

“Pleasant?” Ayanami asked.

“Idsayso,” Shinji managed to get out.

Both of them remained quiet for a while after that. At the other side of the table, the argument about Asuka's... communication with Vice Commander Fuyutsuki had changed to her arguing why she should be given extra leeway: Because she was a pilot, one of just three on Earth, she was essential, and she was the best... and now she used all the details of the last fight in order to prove that claim.

Shinji realized Ayanami was not just looking over to that scene. In particular, she was watching Asuka intensely.

“She makes it sound like it was just her work,” he remarked. “You did just as much. You should get as much praise.”

Ayanami shook her head, but still kept looking at Asuka. Apparently quite interested in her antics. “No. It's alright.”

[1] “What are you thinking of me?” - “Only the best, dear Asuka, only the best”
This time, Asuka awoke on her own futon. She and Rei had slept in the same room for one last time; theoretically they had been free to sleep wherever, but the victory party had dragged on quite a bit, and afterwards both had been too tired to drag futons around in the apartment. Asuka in particular had been too tired to feel awkward.

She felt stiff. Maybe there was something to having a live pillow... No! I won't give Misato any more ammunition! Groggily she looked over to Rei's futon. It was gone. Asuka sat up straight and looked around the room. No, there it was... in a corner, rolled up. What?

She quickly got to her feet and went into the kitchen. Nobody was there. She also looked in the bathroom and the two unused rooms, and did not find any blue-haired, red-eyed girls there. Where has she gone?

A glum unease was spreading within Asuka. It was clear this apartment had only been their temporary residence, for the duration of the training. But Rei's own apartment was a filthy concrete box in a slum. Is she so quick to return there?

She searched for her mobile phone, the only source for the time. Just before 7:00... She hastily sprang into action and put on her clothes. She managed to catch up to Misato just as the Operations Director was walking down the stairs of the apartment bloc.

After hearing her yelling, Misato waited up for her. “Asuka, why the hurry?”

“Rei hasn't gone over to your apartment, has she?” Asuka asked.

Misato furrowed her brows and got going again. “No. She isn't in your apartment anymore? Well, not that it really is your apartment anymore...”

Asuka scoffed. “Which is exactly the problem. Verflucht. I bet she's back to that hovel of a... hrrrng.”

Misato chuckled. “Why, Asuka, dear, are you...”

“Oh can it!” Asuka interrupted her. “You really do have a one track mind.”

“That's because you and Shinji make it too easy for me,” Misato told her, amused. “I could never have the same fun with Rei.”

“It's your definition of fun that's the problem!” Asuka insisted.

“Oh, I'm sure you'll discover soon enough where the fun in that is,” Misato promised.

That had the intended effect on Asuka. The German girl even knew Misato had intended the effect, and yet... “You're the most indecent person I've ever met!” she declared and stormed off. Behind her, she could hear Misato chuckle.

Asuka still felt pissed off when she entered the train that would take her to the city outskirts where Rei lived. She was not quite sure herself where she stood in regards to the blue-haired girl. But that
did not matter right now. *Either* way, she had to get her out of that dump of an apartment. She wondered why Rei had even returned there. Sure, the apartment they had used for the training program was meant to be temporary, but if Asuka's only alternative was a concrete box in the slums, she would cling to that temporary measure as long as possible.

The neighbourhood was indeed still as dirty and miserable as in Asuka's memory. The demolition work for the day had already started, so a loud, repetitive noise filled the air. Asuka wondered how *anyone* could live here, let alone an EVA pilot. Let alone a fourteen year old girl on her own. That... that was just not right.

Asuka's face was a constant mask of disgust as she went up the stairs of Rei's high-rise bloc. The elevators were still not working and Asuka doubted they ever would again. All that dirt, dust and grime on the ground, the stairs, even the walls... she felt unclean just moving through it. For a split second, she hesitated in front of Rei's door. The bell would still not work, and she was unsure if knocking would have any effect. However, she dearly wanted to avoid the embarrassment of the last time she had been here.

She pounded loudly on the door and yelled: “Rei? Rei, are you there? It's me, Asuka. Rei! Open the door, Rei!” When there was no reaction, Asuka repeated the action. Finally she shouted: “Rei? Rei, I'm coming in! If you're unclothed... please yell!”

Asuka swung the door open forcefully. There would be no half-measures with her. With hands balled into fists she stomped through the corridor/kitchen towards the bedroom. She found Rei there. The blue-haired girl was lying on the bed, belly down, her chin resting on the still dirty pillow. She was wearing a plaid shirt and short jeans, as Asuka noted with some triumph. Her legs were long and... *Jaja, is gut.* [1]

Foregoing any greeting, Asuka shouted: “What are you doing here?”

Rei had so far not even reacted to her appearance. Now she turned her head towards her. “On account of last day's battle, we have been given the day off. I have nothing to do.”

“*Jaja, I know,*” Asuka dismissed that. *I could have slept in, not having school, but nooo...* “But why are you *here*?”

“This is my designated apartment,” Rei answered.

“It's a dump!” Asuka exclaimed. “Why haven't you stayed in the apartment we've used?” Before Rei could answer, Asuka pushed on: “I know it was only temporary, but why were you in such a hurry to return here?”

Slowly, Rei got up into a sitting position. “The training program was over. This is my designated apartment.”

“Hrrnnng.” Asuka got frustrated. “To hell with your training program and your designations. Is that what you want? To be back here?”

“I do not know,” Rei admitted.

“How can you not know?” Asuka exclaimed. *Gott im Himmel, what has that Ikari guy done to her?*

“Because it is an irrelevant issue,” Rei explained. “I am here because this is my designated
apartment, the place where I live outside the training program, which is now over.”

Asuka threw her arms into the air in further frustration. “Well, that can be changed. At the moment, that apartment is still reserved for NERV use, so you might as well be there. It's closer to school and... gah! Just look around! Just listen to the noise outside! This here is no appropriate place for a pig, let alone an EVA pilot!”

“NERV disagreed,” Rei pointed out.

“NERV kann mich mal,”[2] Asuka muttered. “Look. Do you really think you'll run into trouble if you stay in that other apartment for a while?”

“No,” Rei answered.

“Then why not use that apartment?” Asuka demanded to know.

“Because this is my designated...”

“ARGH!” Asuka shouted. “Is that designation that important? Why?”

Asuka crossed her arms and waited for Rei to answer, tapping her foot. Finally, the blue-haired girl answered: “I do not know. It could be for NERV.”

“Unsinn,” Asuka scoffed. “Look, everything you do here you can do there as well – better, even!”

For a long time, neither girl said something. Asuka was just about to launch another verbal offensive, when Rei stood up. “Why do you care so much which apartment I use?”

“Why shouldn't I?” Asuka exclaimed. “Is it somehow offensive to you if I do?”

“No,” Rei answered calmly. And after a pause: “Not at all.”

“Uh, right,” Asuka hastily replied, trying not to think about what that could mean. “The thing is, I'm still looking for a permanent residence in Tokyo-3. The plan was that I stay with Kaji. We've already picked an apartment, in fact. Or maybe they would have sent me to live with Misato again. Ugh. But if we two stayed together in that apartment, near Misato, maybe we could get away with having it to ourselves!”

“Is that the reason you are so insistent?” Rei asked.

Asuka shrugged and showed her smuggest face, dismissing all seriousness to the situation with a hand wave. “I might finally get to live without direct adult supervision. Bad enough I went to college and didn't have that.”

“I see,” Rei just stated. Her view lost focus. Her facial expression was always monotone, but after one week of living with her day and night, hour for hour, Asuka could see some subtleties. And right now, Rei looked... hurt. Alone.

It was like hurting a frightened kitten. Even Asuka could not go that far.

“Andwellitsalso...” Asuka mumbled. She growled. “Look, alright. I also don't want you to live here. Happy?”
Rei focused on her again. “Why?”

“Because you deserve something better!” Asuka exclaimed. “It's as easy as that. Nobody should live in this dirthole, and... well... you especially not. I mean... you did help to save the entire world two times already now, didn't you? So, see? You deserve something better!”

Again, there was a long lasting silence. Finally, Rei answered: “It is irrelevant where I live. But that means...”

It sounded like Rei would concede, but that was not enough for Asuka. Forcefully, she interrupted her: “No! No, no, no! It's not irrelevant! It's your life! You need to give more meaning to it!”

Silence, again. But not as long this time. “You think I can do that by moving out of here?”

“It would be a start, at least!” Asuka insisted.

And once again, exactly as Asuka had expected, silence. Finally, Rei answered: “Then I will try this. We will return to the apartment we used for the training.” And she got going, leaving Asuka behind in the room.

Well, that was quick in the end. “Uh... don't you need to pack?” Asuka called after her.

Rei stopped for a moment to answer: “Nearly all my belongings are still over there. I had planned to get them here over the course of the day, but that is now unnecessary.” Then she started walking again.

“Fortunately so,” Asuka grumbled and then followed her.

On the train, by chance, the two ended up on opposite benches. When there were not people standing between them, Asuka kept looking over to Rei. What was she doing? Misato's teasing was immature and unreasonable, but it still made her uncomfortable. Did she like Rei? Well, despite her weirdness, the blue-haired girl had many likeable qualities, so yes. Did she like-like Rei? Or more to the point... girls? That was a strange thought. After all, Asuka was changing regularly together with her female classmates, and had never noticed anything. Besides, there was Kaji. Asuka was pretty sure she found him attractive, and he was a guy.

Maybe she just... liked Rei. She also liked Shinji. Both were weird, but all in all, good. Comrades in battle. Considerate. And Shinji understood. That was worth a lot. So maybe it was just that: Sympathy. Maybe. Then again, why did she find... okay, yes, she admitted it to herself: She did find Rei attractive. It was understandable with Shinji: He fell short in comparison to Kaji, but maybe in ten years or so he would have caught up. He was male, at least. So... Hrrrm.

Asuka glanced again over to Rei. Even surrounded by people to all sides she appeared serene, as if standing above such earthly matters. It was... yes, she was easy on the eyes that way. But did that mean anything? It was obviously nonsense to go crazy over Rei when Asuka did not even know where she stood in regards to... girls in general. I may need to test this.

Silently, she left the train and accompanied Rei back to the apartment. She realized she was glad Rei had agreed to come back.
Tokyo-3 had been built on a small plain north of Lake Ashi, surrounded on all other sides by mountains. To the east was a massif that separated it from old Hakone, consisting of Mt Daiga directly between the two towns, and further south, bordering Lake Ashi, its three larger brothers, Mt Hakone, Mt Kami and Mt Komega. The valley between Mt Daiga, Mt Hakone and Mt Kami was known as Owakudani, the 'Great Boiling Valley', famed for its volcanic hot springs. The springs were still open and an important tourist spot accessible via the Hakone Ropeway, which these days, with Tokyo-3 at the other side from Hakone, was much more frequently used than before Third Impact.

However, the hot springs covered only a small part of that dip between the mountains. The entire northern part, the slope leading up to Mt Daiga, was a military area. Before Second Impact, the Pola Museum of Arts had been located here on a cliff on that slope. Now, the U.N. had built a military base there on several levels, still named Pola and housing the 22nd Armoured Division of its Standing Forces. Most infantry bases of UNSF and JSSDF lay outside the mountain ring surrounding Tokyo-3, but mountains were not exactly favourable terrain for tanks, and so the UN's 22nd Armoured Division and the JSSDF's 4th Armoured Division were kept close to the city.

Since 2005, the U.N. had been headquartered in Tokyo-2 [3]. Officially, the reason was the devastation of New York City in general and Manhattan in particular in the Second Impact Floods. Misato had long suspected that to be a pretext, though. Even if NYC could not serve as headquarters anymore, chances were the U.N. would have moved to Geneva then, like its old predecessor, the League of Nations, or maybe Vienna. Both cities already housed many U.N. agencies. Instead it chose Tokyo-2. Misato suspected the reason was to have a pretext to have a large part of its standing forces stationed in Japan. NERV was a U.N. agency, so the organization had to know about the coming angel attacks.

As a result, Tokyo-3 was now surrounded by military bases on all sides, as befitting to a fortress city. The UNSF's 4th Army and the JSSDF's 7th Army kept no less than five divisions and five independent brigades in the region between themselves. The 7th Army had its headquarters at Gotenba Military base; further bases were at Okanayamo, Shimizukan, Mizunodeguchi and Odawarajo. Meanwhile, the 4th Army was in fact headquartered at the sprawling Pola military base. Misato suspected that was why the meeting had been scheduled there: Not only was it the nearest military base to Tokyo-3, it also was neutral ground between JSSDF and NERV. And it was mainly the JSSDF who wanted to see her – who wanted to have a piece of her for NERV's so-called 'failures' during Israfel's attack.

During the entire drive to Pola Base, Hyuga looked less than thrilled with the prospect. Misato could understand him. He had come along as her second in command, but officially he just was a simple Lieutenant. But even a glum Hyuga was still a better companion than the third NERV officer in the car: Major Yosuke Matsuno, leader of Section 2. NERV's intelligence and security section was the next best to something military NERV had besides Misato's own Section 1, Operation, so he had had been sent along. There was nothing special about his appearance. He was a little more hard of face than most, but apart from that he was the very model of an average middle-aged Japanese man, and that was unnerving in some way, as was his insistence on not moving a single millimetre during the entire drive.

There was a single blue and silver flag of the U.N. flying high over the base. The UNSF were not big on flags, for fairly obvious reasons: They were not a national army and hence could not rely on any national identity. Among the JSSDF the U.N. forces had a reputation of being subdued and eccentric – though by far not as weird as NERV and its people, of course.
Pola was a busy military base. Cramping an entire armoured division, plus Army HQ, into such a relatively small area, spread out over several height levels, was no mean feat. Surrounded on all sides by UNSF personnel, Misato almost felt like an intruder in the clearly marked NERV car. Said car took a while until it reached the centre of the base: The reconfigured and repurposed former museum. Leaving the car, Misato frowned slightly when she noticed other cars nearby, cars marked as belonging to the JSSDF. She looked down: Her red uniform jacket was straight, and so was her red beret. Normally she did not give a damn about that, but here, on 'foreign' ground, she had to be a proper representative of NERV.

Even though Major Matsuno outranked her, it was she who led the trio into the building, with him and Hyuga slightly behind her. She was the Operations Director. It was she who had been called here to answer to the accusations, it was her responsibility and her show. Matsuno, like Hyuga, was only along for the ride so as to present a proper NERV 'delegation', and he certainly kept to that script.

A UNSF adjutant led the trio through the building. A lieutenant – so even the adjutant attending to them had the same rank as the lowest-ranking member in the delegation. *This is ridiculous.* It became even more ridiculous when the NERV officers entered the conference room where they were expected. Generals' stars could be seen on every shoulder. Two Generals, three Lieutenant Generals, four Major Generals. Five generals from the JSSDF, four from the UNSF, and four of them female. And reporting to them, Misato Katsuragi, officially designated only 'Captain' by NERV, nevermind that she coordinated three machines that were virtual weapons of mass destruction.

The conference room had a sort of arena feeling: Three rows, separated by a corridor, in a semi-circle around an open area. Inside that area was a table with three chairs, behind that a large screen. The NERV officers walked through the corridor, JSSDF generals to their right, UNSF generals to their left, and took the seats at the table.

A wiry man of greying hair from the JSSDF side of the seating rows stood up. Misato had read his dossier: General Ichiro Yoshida, commander of the 7th Army. Among his subordinates, the 3rd Infantry Division, the 4th Armoured Division and the 32nd Brigade were represented. The 16th Infantry Division was at best *attached* to the 7th Army, too busy with its task to guard the flooded Kanto plain to really support Tokyo-3, while 13th and 29th Brigades were maybe too unimportant. As for the 41st Brigade with their off-limits military base in the Ashikagara District, Misato did not even know what they were doing; most of that was classified.

“Captain Katsuragi, we have invited you here to... *explain* NERV’s role in the recent incident,” Yoshida started. Misato just nodded. Yoshida pointed at the screen behind her. She turned around to see footage from the first fight against Israfel. “Why did your vaunted Evangelions fail to stop the enemy?”

Misato turned back to her audience. In a calm and measured voice she answered: “The enemy was successfully defeated by Evangelion Units 01 and 02 in the second sortie.”

“At the cost of a mountain,” a man sitting next to Yoshida, a relatively young Lieutenant General, muttered.

“Given the enormous amounts of financial resources the NERV budget eats up, we're wondering why it even took a second sortie,” Yoshida pushed the issue. “Not to mention the enormous damages to infrastructure the two battles caused.” He operated a remote.
Misato did not turn around again. She could guess what the screen showed. “General, as you're surely well aware, angel attacks do not follow a recognizable pattern. Every angel so far observed had a different set of powers. We had no way of knowing that the angel designated Israfel would react to the engagement in the manner it did. There is literally nobody on Earth who could have foreseen that. Neither in NERV... nor in the military.”

This caused angry murmuring on both sides of the corridor.

A female JSSDF Major General stood up. “The difference is that the military, even at the... heightened levels of activity since Second Impact, does not enjoy the same sort of budget NERV does.” She sat down again.

Yoshida nodded. “For such a premium price, we should be able to expect premium services.”

“You get them, General,” Misato insisted. “The fact remains that only Evangelions can successfully erode enemy AT Fields. Without that, the angels are virtually invincible.”

A black man from the UNSF stood up now. General Alex Winston, commander of the 4th Army, UNSF. He smiled and his voice was in stark contrast to the conversation so far: Soft, polite, without any of the military sharpness that so far had dominated. Heavily accented, too. “A technology NERV has so far declined to share with anyone else, including other branches of the U.N.. It does seem strange to me that you want to justify your special status based on a condition you yourself actively maintain.”

Misato hoped and prayed her short briefing by Ritsuko was enough to deal with that kind of questions. Outwards, she showed no emotion, though now she did stand up to address the general. “There is no AT Field technology. The ability to build up AT Fields is an integral part of Evangelion technology. NERV and its predecessor organizations have worked on Evangelion technology for over a decade already, and even for us building and maintaining Evangelions is difficult. That task is what NERV was founded for, so that all resources for Evangelions can be focused there. That is the most efficient approach. Besides, even if we tried to spread the technology now, we could hardly expect results within the timeframe of continued angel attacks.”

The same JSSDF Lieutenant General who had heckled her before spoke up again now, without standing up: “But then, of course the NERV representative would say that.”

Misato stared at him with narrowed eyes. “With all due respect, what is that supposed to mean?”

General Winston took over explaining in his soft and friendly voice: “Please, Captain. It is no secret – and no shame! – that you would represent your organization's interests here. The matter of the fact is... please, don't take this the wrong way, Captain. But your organization has been under a lot of scrutiny for obvious reasons. And the pattern we have detected is concerning. In every angel fight since the first one, NERV has demanded absolute authority. And it has justified enormous budgets with these angel fights. Frankly, the impression many of us are getting is that NERV simply does not want to allow other institutions access to its honey pot.”

Misato paused to find a good formulation for her answer. “So, General, are you implying NERV deliberately bars other agencies from the fights? To hog all the glory and gain all the money? You think that is a deliberate NERV policy?”

A lazy smile appeared on Winston's face. “Isn't it?”
Misato turned her gaze to Yoshida. “Is that the JSSDF’s fear as well, General?”

“There have been concerns,” Yoshida replied stiffly.

Misato nodded, and reached into her jacket’s pocket. There she had deposited her secret weapon. She held it tightly in her hand as she answered: “What I say may appear as mere NERV propaganda to you. But believe me, we take over fighting the angels out of pure necessity. If we could, we would leave that entirely to the military. If I could, I most certainly would.” She put her ‘secret weapon’ on the table. It was an audio recording device. “This is an audio record from the fight against the angel dubbed Ramiel. Pilots Ikari and Soryu had just been hit with high energy beams, a beam which set the LCL, the liquid they were in, to near boiling temperatures.”

A grim expression of determination appeared on her face as she hit play. Shinji’s haunting, desperate, long screams filled the room, as did Asuka’s shorter bouts. Misato heard movement behind her; either Hyuga or Matsuno seemed to have sprung up from their chair.

Misato did not regard that incident. Instead, she spoke firmly to her audience. “These are fourteen year old children screaming. Keep in mind they feel everything their Evangelions feel. They just felt their ribcage being ripped open by a burning hot beam. Fourteen year old children that we sent out into life and death battles.” Now she began to raise her voice: “Do you think we like to do this? Do you think we would do this if there were any alternative to it? I would jump at the chance to spare our kids that fate! Only they can pilot Evangelions, and only Evangelions can generate AT Fields... but that isn't something we celebrate. Why should we celebrate this?”

She played the recording again.

General Winston looked... contrite. He had sat down again, and hung his head low. The rest of the UNSF delegation looked vaguely depressed, one female Major General even outright shocked. Meanwhile, the JSSDF delegation, being Japanese, was much harder to read.

“Enough already with the theatricals,” Yoshida, who had remained standing the entire time, bellowed. The recording ended on its own before Misato could accommodate the request. From behind her she heard Matsuno hiss: “That's a NERV internal matter!”

It was, but right now Misato did not give a damn. Fuyutsuki might disapprove, dragging the shameful... well, not secrets exactly, but the shameful internal details of NERV into the open, but Misato was pretty sure it would have an effect. And Commander Ikari only cared for results, so Misato felt relatively safe.

“You have demonstrated your personal stance quite well, Captain Katsuragi,” Yoshida told her sharply. “But I remain unconvinced that it is representative of NERV as a whole. You might want to avoid your pilots suffering, but your Vice Commander Fuyutsuki seems to think otherwise.” He looked over to the UN delegation. “I understand he only approached the conventional forces last minute with his request for a N2 mine drop, and sounded very... reluctant about it.”

Winston nodded. He sounded more subdued than earlier. “That's true. It seemed like he really disliked giving us any role in the battle at all.”

Misato suppressed a growl. She had always held great respect for the Vice Commander, who was meticulous, always polite, and unfailingly fair in his judgements. But right now he seemed like a living fossil to her. Still, she could not publicly complain about a superior officer.
“Isn’t what matters that Vice Commander Fuyutsuki did in fact request the mine drop?” Misato argued. “His personal feelings will not affect his professionalism or that of NERV as a whole. And you have my word... my personal word... that we and I in particular will do everything to spare my pilots unnecessary pain. You want the glory? As long as you find a way to keep fourteen year old kids out of the firing line, I will give you all the glory you want. I don't need it.”

“Does that mean NERV will in the future be more open to cooperation with the conventional forces?” a Lieutenant General from the UNSF side inquired.

Misato nodded towards him. “I will make sure of it. And I have authority over NERV's military operations.”

“I know many people in Tokyo-2 who will be glad to hear that,” Yoshida commented. “I think that was all, Captain Katsuragi.” And without taking further note of her, he left the room, followed by his delegation.

“I hope for a better cooperation in the future,” Winston said, and then left as well, followed by his people.

The NERV officers were the last ones to leave the room. On the way back to their car, Matsuno hissed: “Was that really necessary?”

“It worked, didn't it?” Misato argued. Of course, to her that had been more than just strategy. It had been conviction. But Matsuno did not need to know that.

“You made a lot of promises I'm not sure you'll be able to keep,” Matsuno accused her.

Misato stopped and turned to him. “You may outrank me, Major, but you don't have any authority over me. Worry about your own section. Maybe then it won't take three days to find a kid who has never left Tokyo-3. Meanwhile, I'll take care of my section.”

It took some time until Matsuno resumed following her outside.

Misato was greeted by a surprise outside; the JSSDF Lieutenant General who had heckled her was waiting at the NERV car.

“Captain Katsuragi? Lieutenant General Nobuteru Kokuta, 3rd Infantry Division, JSSDF,” he introduced himself. “I just... I wanted to tell you if there is anything the 3rd can do to help you, please don't hesitate to ask.”

“That's... a kind offer,” Misato told him as she approached him and the car. “But, please forgive me, but it is a bit surprising.”

“It does appear I had a misleading attitude when I entered that conference,” Kokuta admitted, carefully skirting the line that would have made an outright apology necessary.

“And now?” Misato asked. “What changed your mind?”

Kokuta hesitated. Then he told her: “I have three children. The two eldest, a daughter and a son, are 15 and 12, respectively. I hope you understand.”

“Yes,” Misato answered. It was just a whisper. “Half a year ago I wouldn't have, but now... I do.”
He held out a sheet of paper to Misato. “A list of telephone numbers. Private numbers of some other high-ranking officers in the 7th Army. With some, I could only make educated guesses whether they would be sympathetic to you, but it's worth a try.”

Misato took the paper. That was Kokuta's turn to abruptly turn around and walk off.

There were two reasons why Gendo Ikari resided in an absolutely giant office: It was a reminder to him, and it helped him to impress and intimidate people.

Personally, he saw no allure in having such an office. It was not a coveted status symbol or a source of pride for him. Indeed, given the rapidly nearing end of humanity in its current form, one could almost find any attachment to status symbols laughable. Gendo did not. Rather, to him, the desire for status symbols was just a facet of reality, a factor to be used in others, against others. Something he treated with the same solemn seriousness as everything else.

He himself had no such desire, though. When he was still in GEHIRN, he had often done his work on ramshackle desks in offices that were located in only half-excavated areas of the Geofront. It made no difference to him. He had only one desire and he would use every tool available to reach it. But he had learned very early on that representation and intimidation were in fact very capable tools.

And secondly, the vast office with its giant surfaces was a reminder to Gendo of what was still to be done. Kabbalistic structures were drawn on them everywhere. They showed his plans in a covert way, shrouded in enigmatic glory. They also added to the intimidation effect.

Gendo sat at his desk, his view directed into nothingness. Fuyutsuki had pulled a chair to the side of that desk. There was a shogi board on it.

“This could have ended considerably worse,” Fuyutsuki stated.

Gendo grunted in agreement. “There was little information on that angel. But we managed.”

“Captain Katsuragi is not handling the fallout as well as she could,” Fuyutsuki pushed on. “The U.N. and national governments could use this as an opportunity to redirect funds to the conventional forces.”

“Only to a degree at worst,” Gendo disagreed. “The old men will make sure of that. The world needs Evangelions, and only we have them.”

“We, and the old men,” Fuyutsuki reminded him.

Again, Gendo grunted in agreement. “That's why the project at Matsushiro is so important. More important than what Captain Katsuragi is doing.”

Fuyutsuki grinned humourously. “Man trying to wrestle free from the gods. The classical sin of hubris, the favoured subject of Greek tragedy.” He moved a stone on the shogi board.
“They aren't gods yet,” Gendo insisted, and immediately countered.

“We do our best to prevent that,” Fuyutsuki agreed. “Man turned from God, and with the Fruit of Knowledge he stole from him, built his own.” Again he moved a stone.

“With the tools that he found,” Gendo disagreed philosophically and countered his elder on the board. “The tools we have found.”

“We need to do something about that,” Fuyutsuki spoke up in a completely serious voice now. “Matsushiro is not safe. We'll need it as a quarantine.”

“Hm,” Gendo agreed. “The Scrolls would indicate so.”

“Which is why we may need to move the project away from Matsushiro,” Fuyutsuki argued.

“We'll move it here,” Gendo said flatly.

“We'd have to keep it in the lower sectors,” Fuyutsuki answered, alarmed, “very close to...”

“The risks are smaller than the risk of remaining dependent on the old men,” Gendo argued.

Fuyutsuki moved a stone and remained silent.

[1]Right, enough of that. (more or less)

[2]Lit. “Nerv can me one time”, without specifying what it 'can'. A less vulgar form of “can kiss my ass”, I suppose.

[3] That is canonical, as per a newspaper snippet in Episode 21.
Tuesday

So, this is a thing.

Shinji still couldn't quite wrap his head around how, but it apparently was a thing: Walking to school together with Asuka and Ayanami. The fiery redhead, full of life, who maybe could understand him, and the serene bluenette, full of grace, who would listen. Shinji was a bit worried at times what he was thinking about the girls, but there was no denying that their company, of one of them or of both, simply elevated him.

He knew they'd now follow the same route to school, of course. That was why he had planned to leave Misato's apartment ten minutes early; he didn't want to impose himself on them. Misato would have nothing of that, though, and when he had encountered Ayanami and Asuka, both seemed to be content enough to walk with him – to his continuing amazement. After all, what was he? Not even a pilot anymore right now. Just a boring school boy.

Still, as long as he was with them, he could manage not to look the gift horse in the mouth. The doubts would return later.

“I'm sure glad to have my own room again,” Asuka exclaimed, who was walking in the middle between the other two. “Now all that's missing is an actual, proper bed for it. Humans aren't made for sleeping on the ground.”

Shinji didn't mind sleeping on futons. In fact, he barely knew anything else. He stayed quiet on the topic, though. Instead he asked, “So Ayanami has moved to the other room?”

“Yes,” the blue-haired girl replied. “It seemed important to Soryu indeed.”

“She's basically in the equivalent of your room in Misato's apartment now,” Asuka explained.

“So... uh...” Shinji hardly dared to say it out loud, to openly hope for it. “You two will be staying permanently over there then?”

“We talked with Misato about that yesterday,” Asuka told him. “She's trying to arrange matters now. According to her, it shouldn't be difficult; it's not like there's currently a great demand for the apartments here, so the house owner will probably even be glad if NERV rents one from him. So you are blessed to stay in my awe-inspiring presence.”

Shinji certainly did not argue against that, neither the fact nor Asuka's formulation. A small, awkward smile appeared on his face. Maybe he could talk to Asuka about what had happened in their lives, and he certainly could talk to Ayanami now without her always having to wait in that spot near the park. And even if not, just being in their presence, just looking at them... They both were... Uh... yeah.

Secretly, the images from his visit to Ayanami's apartment – Ayanami's old apartment – were still a pleasurable if awkward memory to him.

“You've nothing to say about that, idiot?” Asuka chided him.

“Ah... uh... sorry,” Shinji mumbled.
“Stop apologizing and tell me what you think!” Asuka demanded.

“Well, I'm glad, of course!” Shinji insisted. “I... uh... I...”

“You uh you what?” Asuka asked.

Shinji gulped. “Well, it's just... I'm kinda...” He closed his eyes. “Glad that you're around.”

“Oh,” Asuka answered. “Well, you should be. We are great to have around, aren't we, Rei?”

“Hm,” Ayanami agreed. “It will be good to be closer to you and Ikari.”

Shinji and Asuka both mumbled indistinctly in response, looking down on the pavement. All three walked in a silence that was somewhat awkward but, or so Shinji thought, also somewhat content.

After a while, Asuka spoke up again, “Misato also mentioned something about assuming guardianship over me again. Since I'll be living next to her, and so she'll be the one who will de facto be looking after me anyway.” She shrugged. “Kaji is great as a guardian, but Misato wasn't bad, either. The only problem was having to live with her.” She grinned. “Besides, it'll make matters between me and Kaji... less complicated now.”

“Oh,” Shinji voiced. He was vaguely sad about Asuka talking about Mr Kaji like that. Trying to overplay that, he asked, “What about Ayanami?”

“Commander Ikari is my guardian,” the blue-haired girl answered. “That is not up for discussion.”

Asuka scoffed at that. “Not that he really takes care of you.”

“Commander Ikari's guardianship has so far always been sufficient,” Ayanami insisted. “He and NERV have provided for me. I know he is doing the right thing.”

“The right thing?” Asuka echoed in disbelief.

“Yes,” Ayanami confirmed. “Commander Ikari's work is all-important. I have the utmost faith in him.”

That killed the mood for a while. Ayanami's comment bugged Shinji. His father never had time for him, never had done anything good for him. Yet now he was supposed to swallow that Gendo was a good person doing the right thing? Worse yet, swallow that coming from Ayanami. He had made his peace with how his father had treated him, but having seen Ayanami’s old apartment... That comment really didn't sit well with him.

This though festered enough in him that he finally asked, “...why?”

Asuka and Ayanami turned their heads towards him. “What do you mean?” Asuka asked.

“Why do you have faith in my father, Ayanami?” Shinji specified.

Ayanami remained silent for a while. Shinji had already accepted that he would get no answer and was brooding when she replied, “His work is important.”
Shinji had regularly talked with Ayanami for months now. Most of the time, the girl was pretty monotone. Nonetheless, there were certain subtleties. She had sounded even quieter than usual now. Shinji was sure she was holding something back. Asuka seemed to notice it too, looking at Ayanami with a furrowed brow. Still, the blue-haired girl might be right. After all, if the angels truly threatened all of humanity, then being the Commander of the organization whose purpose it was to fight them was pretty damn important indeed. But even so...

“Maybe so,” Shinji admitted glumly. “But he still should take better care of you.”

“How?” Ayanami asked.

“What do you mean ‘why’?” Asuka interjected. “You deserve better treatment, simple as that.”

Shinji nodded, secretly glad Asuka had taken the initiative. “You really do, Ayanami.”

“How?” Ayanami asked again.

Again, the answers of both Asuka and Shinji amounted to little more than unintelligible muttering. Now that it had happened the second time, Shinji became aware of it. Him shying away from clear answers was one thing, but what was it with Asuka?

“Well,” Asuka spoke up, maybe a bit too hastily. “Now she's in a new apartment. We can... I mean, things can go better, right? I mean, the food alone...”

“Oh, right. With you two staying over there, I can continue cooking for you,” Shinji realized. That was good. It was something he could do. Some way for him to contribute.

He noticed how Asuka's eyes widened for a short moment, before she replied, “Hm. You're one of the few boys who could be entrusted with that task. It could be acceptable.”

Shinji didn't think his cooking was all that special. That it could have such an effect – the real, hidden effect, not what she was saying – on Asuka regularly bewildered him. It also made him feel both a little proud and very awkward. He wasn't used to positive feedback.

“It would put a disproportionate workload on Ikari,” Ayanami protested.

Asuka scoffed. “He offered in case you haven't noticed.”

“It's really no big deal,” Shinji assured them. “I like to be able to do something.”

“And think of the food we'll be getting!” Asuka hissed at Ayanami.

Now Shinji could smile at that. Ayanami remained silent, so he continued, “It's not like I can do much else at the moment. Not until I can get to synchronize with EVA-01 again, anyway. And hey, it's not like you won't still have other household chores to do.”

“Oh, don't remind me,” Asuka complained. “That is such bullshit. We're EVA pilots. The elite of the elite. The world depends on our sorties. You would think NERV would at least take care of our apartments. But nooo... damn Japanese cheapskates.”

“Was it different in Germany?” Shinji asked.
“Well... not really,” Asuka grumbled. “But I wasn't fighting angels yet in Germany! Here, I am supposed to do that, do synch-tests, go to school, and clean the apartment as well. That's bullshit!”

Shinji shrugged. He had never thought of that. It didn't really seem that outrageous to him. Of course he was supposed to take care of his (well, his and Misato's) apartment. How else should things be?

“I am sure you eventually will again, Ikari,” Ayanami spoke up.

Shinji looked over to her. “What do you mean, Ayanami?”

“Synchronize with EVA-01,” she explained.

Shinji sighed. “I'm not so sure. It's... I mean, how do you manage it, Ayanami? You know what happened there, and yet you... simply get into the entry-plug like it's nothing. Like nothing could happen.”

Asuka's eyes widened in surprise at that, but she remained silent.

“It would be useless for me to worry about something I cannot affect,” Ayanami answered. “Especially something with such a small risk.”

Shinji considered that. “I guess... I mean, yeah, purely rationally, I can see that. But... I don't think I could ever stay as calm as you do. How do you manage that?”

“I just am,” Ayanami replied. “I cannot tell you why or how.” Both of them trotted on silently, while Asuka watched them with some suspicion. After a while, Ayanami continued, “I wish I could somehow show you. But I cannot tell you.”

“Well, that would be a neat trick,” Shinji commented with a humourless smile.

A while later, the three entered the school grounds. Shinji became uncomfortably aware of how many heads the group turned. The students had gotten used to Ayanami, despite her unusualness, and he himself didn't stand out in any way, but Asuka always was the centre of attention. And now she had arrived together with Ayanami and him. Maybe Shinji imagined it, but he felt like people began whispering.

On their way to the building, they came across Touji and Kensuke, who stood leaned against its wall. They both grinned as the trio approached.

Touji jumped up straight and walked over to Shinji. “Shinji, you dog! How do you do it?”

“How do I do... what?” Shinji asked, feeling a bit intimidated by his friend's behaviour.

“First you get to live with Misato, and now you're dragging two fine pieces of ass with you to school!” Touji explained. Or 'explained'.

“You'll get a kick in a piece of your ass if you keep this up,” Asuka hissed. “What the fuck are you thinking?”

Touji looked at her glumly, then turned his head back to Shinji. “Well, I suppose you can't aim for both good looks and good character. That'd be too much to hope foooo... ah!”
Asuka had gripped the collar of Touji's sport jacket and dragged him down to her level. Her grip was surprisingly strong. “Next time, my leg will go... higher.”

Shinji was still wondering what Asuka had meant by that when Touji was suddenly on the ground. A clean leg sweep courtesy of Asuka had brought him down. The German girl grinned viciously. “You should not hurt classmates,” Ayanami chided her. Delivered in her usual monotone voice, it did not sound very convincing.

“He had it coming!” Asuka defended herself as Touji got to his feet again. “Talking about me like I'm just a slab of meat.”

“That's what you get for trying to make compliments to girls,” Touji muttered petulantly. “Just saying you're kinda hot...”

“You are correct, Suzuhara,” Ayanami observed in her usual neutral voice. Four stunned pairs of eyes turned towards her. She merely kept looking ahead.

“Uh, right,” Asuka said. She caught herself quickly and added smugly, “Of course I'm attractive. I know that already. But he said that with all the social graces of a,” she turned her head towards Touji and hissed aggressively, “Rampaging elephant!”

Touji grinned dismissively and then turned to Ayanami. “Aww c'mon, Ayanami, you're making poor Shin-man all jealous here!”

“What do you mean?” Ayanami asked.

“Wellll...” His grin turned provocative. “What do you think about Shinji's looks?”

“Ikari's looks are also pleasing,” Ayanami stated with her usual absolute certainty.

Shinji’s eyes widened, while blood shot into his head. For a second he considered saying something. Instead he stormed into the building.

Normally, by now, Rei would be standing at her spot near the park and waiting. But now there was not even a need for that anymore. She was walking by Ikari's side, and would be for the entire way back to her new apartment. That was... pleasant.

There had been some hesitation after class. Both Soryu and Ikari had walked up to her, so that they could go to the apartment bloc they shared, but had acted weirdly. Awkwardly, as Rei now realized. But this had settled down after the first few metres. Rei did not know what this meant, but that was the norm for her. Most of the time she did not understand people. There were many things she did not understand or knew little of. So far, this had never been a problem. She knew what she had to know, and the rest was irrelevant. There had never been a reason to worry about other things. Now she did though. She knew almost nothing about living with other people. She did not know how she would have to act in her new surroundings. She had lived in the new apartment for a week already, but that had been part of a mission, considered a temporary measure. Now that 'temporary measure' would turn over her entire life.
It was not that this was all bad. She was hopeful for her cohabitation with Soryu. Rei did not see her as merely 'loud' anymore; 'lively' would probably be a better description, with all the advantages and disadvantages that came with that. Hanging on to that liveliness, maybe Rei could feel like she were part of it, part of humanity... but still, she also was anxious. Her whole life had so far been full of certainties. Now, near the very end, things began to become more ambiguous.

“So, Ayanami...” Ikari spoke up. “How do you like our classes? I mean, you seem to look outside the window the whole day, and yet you always do so well on tests...”

“Seriously,” Soryu grumbled “How do you do that? You're cheating, aren't you?”

“Class attendance and tests are required of me,” Rei simply answered.

“Well... yeah,” Ikari admitted. “I just thought you'd have an opinion on that.”

Normally, Rei would not deem that worthy of an answer. Her opinions simply did not figure into anything. She would do as she was told. However, it was Ikari who had asked, so she honestly considered the question.

Finally she answered, “Those tasks are required, but I do not comprehend why.”

Soryu snorted. “You and me both,” she told her. Ikari chuckled. It was a warm, sympathetic chuckle. Rei supposed things would be alright. She would have Ikari nearby, who did not understand her nature and yet was always supportive of her even so. And she would have Soryu, full of relentless energy but curiously enough also caring about what Rei wanted.

Two people who showed some care towards her. That was... completely unprecedented.

Given that, the outlook for the future did not look so bad, despite all of the changes in Rei's life. Those could be mastered. Besides, it would soon all be over. Ikari's and Soryu's friendship could maybe aid her, carry her until it was her time. It would only be a few months until everything was over. Maybe they would be good months. Rei had never thought in terms of good time or bad time; she had always simply done what was needed, until her purpose would be fulfilled. But as long as she did fulfil her purpose, maybe she could enjoy some good months.

As she entered her new apartment again, she considered what she had told Ikari some weeks ago. If home is the place where one is glad to return to, then she had had no home. Did she now? She was unsure. She did like come to here, to be near Ikari and to have Soryu around. But she knew where she would ultimately end up. Somewhere she belonged. Maybe that was her home.

But she began to entertain the thought that this, the new apartment, could at least be a genuine improvement... at least for the final few months.

Once Soryu and she had stored away their school bags and settled down a bit, there was a certain awkward uncertainty about what to do now. Even Rei, who had always had her days meticulously ordered so far was a bit unsure. Normally she would have simply done her homework and then, seeing as she had no appointments at NERV, would have idled the rest of the day. But she understood that simply lying on the bed for hours would be no option here.
For now, she simply sat down at the kitchen table, still the only form of table or desk in the apartment, and began doing her homework.

Not having to live and sleep in a tiny hotel room was nice. But beyond the lack of a bed in the new apartment, there was also another problem as Asuka now realized: The lack of everything else as well. In Germany, upon coming home, she would've plugged one of her consoles into the TV and played games for at least an hour before looking at homework. That was a routine she had continued all through college as well. Reading material could wait until she had played her games. And it had worked, too: She was, after all, a genius. Once immersed in the work, she could stay concentrated for hours on end. It was just that she always prioritized her own needs and amusement.

But here, her consoles were still in some boxes stored... somewhere, and there was no TV anywhere in sight. No computer of any kind, either. Not even a radio, for that matter. What use was it to be in the homeland of Nintendo, Sega and Sony and have no access to consoles? Such bullshit. Okay, step 1: I brought Rei home. Now step 2: I'll bring my consoles home. Except that she had no idea where NERV had stored her belongings. She'd have to ask Misato about it. Great. I doubt this'll still happen today. So what do I do now?

While she had paced up and down the apartment several times already – quite unnecessarily so, as it was after all nearly completely empty – she noticed that Rei had already sat down and began homework. Of course. Fucking Wondergirl. She walked over to the table stiffly and let herself fall down on one of the chairs.

Rei didn't even look at her, and simply continued reading and writing. Asuka angrily glanced over to her. Still Rei didn't pay attention. Finally, Asuka decided it would be beneath her to beg for it, so instead she walked into her room, opened her school bag, got her materials out and returned to the kitchen to start her own homework.

It didn't go well. She began with maths, and had predictably few problems there. But everything else was the usual battle with kanji. She saw how Rei slowly, but steadily and surely wrote on her sheets of paper, while she herself couldn't even properly decipher what was asked of her. It was... infuriating. At least Rei was probably someone who would keep her mouth shut about it and not make it a public spectacle, but still, losing in an academic contest like that, even to just one person... and not really due it being her own fault, but simply because the Japanese stupidly insisted on their scrowy signs...

And even while Asuka began grumbling loudly, Rei didn't look up. Finally, the German girl had it to here. “How can you stand that?”

Now Rei looked at her, but still didn't say anything.

Asuka gestured at the books and papers sprawled out between the two girls. “How can you write this arcane nonsense as if it's the most natural thing in the world? Why haven't you people changed this crap already?”

“I do not know,” Rei replied calmly. “It was not up to me to decide.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Asuka exploded. “It's still stupid.”
Rei just turned her attention to her own work again.

“Stupid kanji...” Asuka muttered, feeling rejected.

Quietly, Rei stood up from her chair and walked over behind Asuka's, looking at the redhead's work. “Do you require assistance?”

“Certainly not!” Asuka insisted forcefully. And when Rei was about to simply return to her place, she added, “What makes you so sure you could help me, anyway? Why do you think you could explain this entire nonsense to me while our teachers can't.”

Rei stopped on her way and tilted her head. She seemed to consider it. She turned around and answered, “Ich könnte es Ihnen auf Deutsch erklären.” [1]

Asuka blinked. The accent was terrible and the formal address inappropriate, so it took a while until she had processed what the blue-haired girl had just said. “Du... du kannst Deutsch?” Rei simply nodded. When she didn't say more, Asuka muttered, “Schön für dich...” [2]

Finally, Rei, who had just stood there the entire time, spoke up again, “Würden Sie meine Hilfe annehmen?” [3]

“'Du'!” Asuka exploded “'Du'! Wir sind doch hier nich aufm Amt!” [4]

“...Würden du meine Hilfe annehmen?” Rei tried again. [5]

It sounded so sincere in all of its complete grammatical wrongness, that Asuka just had to laugh. It was a short, aggressive, somewhat bitter laugh, but at least it was a laugh. Then she grinned somewhat viciously. “That's... not how you say it.”

Rei remained quiet for a while, until she answered, “You can teach me then. And I can help you.”

That proposal caught Asuka by surprise. It sounded like it could be a fair exchange. So what if Rei would help her; apparently she required help with German. There was still something Asuka was superior in. It... was worth a try.

The attempt ended poorly.

It wasn't that Asuka didn't honestly try her best. She did. But there was only so much she could tell Rei about German grammar without having any materials at hand. At the same time, the blue-haired girl could tell her the meaning of every single kanji, and in some cases even where those meanings came from. There was no fair giving and taking; rather Asuka could do nothing and Rei was carrying her all the way.

Finally, Asuka angrily swiped several sheets of paper away. “I don't need your help. This all is just stupid.” She jumped up from her chair. Rei, who had stood directly behind it, gracefully evaded her. “I mean, what are they gonna do? Fail me? I already have a college degree!”

“I understand,” Rei simply commented. “What will you do now?”

“Something a bit more fun!” Asuka declared. “Not that you'd know anything about that.”
Asuka immediately regretted her words. But she could not back down from them. She just couldn't. She was Asuka Langley Soryu. She never backed down. Instead, she looked right at Rei, daring her to challenge her statement. Of course, the blue-haired girl did not, and instead simply sat down on her chair again.

“Shouldn’t you have, like, finished your homework two times over by now?” Asuka asked, annoyed.

“I was interrupted during it,” Rei simply stated.

“Nobody asked you to help me!” Asuka reminded her. “And it’s not like much good came out of it.”

Rei just nodded and tried to concentrate on the book in front of her.

Well, fuck. There had to be a way to not talk like that to Rei. “Look, I’m sure you can go through that all easily enough!” she told her. “We should go over to Misato’s apartment.”

Rei looked up. “Why?”

“Because at least they have a TV there!” Asuka exclaimed. “And maybe we can hang out with Shinji. He wants to prepare dinner for us anyway. Might as well go over to him until then.”

“That seems acceptable,” Rei answered. Rather quickly, for her.

It was plain to see there was... something between Rei and Shinji. Asuka didn't know what to make of it. She kinda disliked the thought that she would lose out to Shinji... or would lose out to Rei... but should she be jealous of both of them? Besides, it wasn't that she really was interested in either of them or anything. For her the ideal partner would be... well, more somebody like Kaji.

Shinji was surprised to see them both at his apartment door, but let them in quickly. The two apartments were identical in structure, but at least this one wasn't completely empty. And it was kinda nice to have Shinji... well, fawning over her. There really was no better word for it. And that was of course the only correct attitude to be displayed towards her.

As for Misato, not only was she not there, she had informed Shinji she'd be working late and not come home for dinner. So Asuka still wouldn't get a chance to ask her about her belongings. To add insult to injury, there was only crap on television. Cheap soap opera series running into their 2000th episodes. And neither Rei nor Shinji really reacted to what Asuka considered biting avant-garde sarcasm aimed at the cliches displayed there, except for some awkward chuckles from the boy.

“My best friend! How could you do that to me? How could she do that to me!”

“But... but I love you!”

“And what about her?”

“I... you have to understand... I love her as well!”

SLAP!
“I do not understand.” Asuka looked around to find, to her surprise, that Rei had spoken up. As the only one of the trio, she knelt upright on her pillow. Next to her, between the two girls Shinji sat on the ground, leaning half backwards. Asuka was on his other side, lying on her belly, her arms on a pillow, supporting her head.

“What don't you understand?” Shinji asked amicably.

“He seemed to have answered truthfully,” Rei explained her confusion. “Why did she slap him then?”

“Are you stupid?” Asuka complained. “He cheated on her. With her best friend. It's a betrayal of trust.”

Rei nodded, apparently trying to process this. “He should not have kept this a secret to her.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Asuka looked over to Shinji, confused. The boy however, didn't pay attention at her, but furrowed his brows at Rei. “He shouldn't have slept with her friend.”

“They are her lover and her best friend,” Rei argued. “People she cares about.”

“That's exactly the problem!” Asuka insisted.

“Should she not be happy for them?” Rei asked. “If he had told the truth from the beginning.”

Asuka just scoffed, to dismiss Rei's opinion that way. In truth she just didn't know what to reply to that. The way Rei framed it, it did appear a bit silly…but that was just the way things were done. Rei's opinion on it was just... weird.

Asuka continued watching TV even as Shinji began preparing the dinner. Rei kept glancing at the kitchen, at one point even getting up and watching from the entrance to it, but she didn't offer to help, either.

Doesn't know how to, Asuka suspected. As for her... yeah, she supposed she could help. But Shinji had offered to do it, hadn't he? And she liked people doing things for her. And she also.... if she was honest with herself, she didn't quite know how to ask if she could help, either. It would just feel too demeaning to do that.

In fact, part of Asuka thought this work was kinda demeaning for Shinji as well. He was a boy, an EVA pilot, somebody who had literally wrestled with monsters. Shouldn't those mundane tasks be beneath him? It was slightly grating to Asuka how easily he accepted them. Even after all these weeks, it still didn't fit her image of how an EVA pilot should act like. It was weak. And yet, she kinda found that weakness endearing. That annoyed her.

When the first delicious smells came out from the kitchen, she had a bit of a guilty conscience, which she tried to silence by indulging in those smells. When Shinji finally called them over, not only was the dinner ready, the table had already been set as well. Even more, as soon as the two girls had sat down, he began to serve them the food.

When it was Rei's turn, Asuka noted, “Again separate dishes for us both. You've done that the entire last week as well.”

“Well, yeah,” Shinji answered. “Ayanami doesn't like meat. And it would be impolite if I left her to fish the meat pieces out of her meals.” He sat down and began serving himself.
“But what about all that work?” Asuka demanded to know. “You're already cooking every day. Isn't that quite an effort? Even without special wishes?”

“It... it's no bother,” Shinji murmured.

“You are making quite an effort for us,” Rei stated.

“Well, I suppose, but...” Shinji fumbled. “It's... I kinda like to see you both happy, you know?” His face had become quite red.

Oh.

The three began eating in what Asuka deemed to be content awkwardness. Once again. Those moments seemed to be occurring quite frequently recently. As she ate, Asuka looked over to Shinji. He was a nice guy... but that was half the problem. He was nice and caring and non-threatening... rarely taking offence but without the goofiness of some of their classmates, quite serious actually... Asuka realized that she liked that in him, that this made it fun to be around him, but at the same time, didn't it also mean he was a bit of a bore? Compared to a charming rogue like Kaji...

Just the way he smiled awkwardly at Rei right now, for example. There just was no confidence in it! And yet... it was kinda cute. She wished he'd turn it on her. Which was odd, because she also kinda would like the same from Rei.

Shinji stood up and got something from the kitchen counter. He was built nicely, Asuka had to admit. Just the right proportions, neither fat nor excessively muscled. She became uncomfortably aware how just the last days she had been thinking the same about Rei. And she had no idea how to make any sense out of that.

So, if I find them both kinda attractive... does that even mean anything?

It probably didn't. It just showed there really was nothing behind it. Okay, so both were easy on the eyes, but that was about it. None of them caught her eye the same way Kaji did. Now that was a proper man. It really just went to show that, yes, there were some nice and nicely built people out there... but there could only be one person for Asuka, and that was Kaji.

“I can't believe Misato is still at NERV!” Soryu fumed as she opened the door to her and Rei's apartment. “Does she sleep there?”

“She has before on occasions,” Rei informed her, following her in.

“Figures,” Soryu grumbled. “It wasn't enough for her to be just one type of -oholic.”

Rei did not reply to that. There would have been no point. Instead she entered the kitchen. Her school materials were still on the table, and she simply sat down to continue her homework. It had been nice over at the Katsuragi residence, and now it was time to finish her tasks.

“Always so meticulous, eh?” Soryu muttered when she saw that.

Rei did not react, but the comment did perturb her thoughts. Soryu was puzzling. She was not as friendly as Ikari, but she had never seen a person with such determination and drive to help her–
except, of course, for the Commander, who had even burned his hands to save her that one time. But he was a special case. Yet at the same time, Soryu could also be brusque and demeaning to her. She was used to cold and brusque from the Commander, so she should have been used to that dichotomy, but it seemed starker in Soryu.

It was easier with Ikari. Less complicated. Ikari was quiet, passive... he could muster determination to help her, he had shown that amply at Mt Asama, but normally, 'determination' seemed to be the furthest thing from his mind. Yet, he would always listen, would always show he cared, would... smile. Rei did not think she had ever seen Soryu smile. Grin and smirk, sure. But never an honest smile. She wondered what that would look like. Combining Soryu's usual fire with a smile...

She doubted Soryu would ever smile at her, though. The German girl had maybe taken some pity on her, but the two pilots were just too different. And in the short time still left for the world, there was no way their so divergent personalities could become closer. Not that Rei had any intentions of changing. She could not; she had to remain as she was: A tool.

So maybe she was being unfair to Soryu. If her presence annoyed the German girl so much, without any real possibility of her changing, then maybe she should not be around Soryu anymore.

“You're still busy with that?”

Soryu had just strolled into the kitchen again, wearing one of those overly large shirts that served as her bed clothing.

“I've just finished,” Rei reported.

“Good,” Soryu grumbled and began to fill up a glass of water. “Go to bed. You'll need the rest.”

Rei stood up from the table and faced Soryu. “Maybe I should leave the apartment again.”

The redhead whirled around so quickly, glass in hands, that some drops of waters splashed on the floor. “What? Why are you saying that?”

“My presence seems to cause you distress,” Rei stated.

“Well... you can be... hrm... but...” It seemed Soryu was unable to find the right words. “We just agreed you should stay here yesterday. You're sure quick to change your mind! We haven't even begun to bring your furniture over!”

“Which is why I could return to my old apartment,” Rei argued.

“But why?” Asuka exclaimed. “Do you want to leave? Am I so...” she muttered darkly before catching herself. “Surely you can't want to return to that slum!”

“I do not,” Rei agreed. “But the whole day you have sounded displeased in my presence.”

“So?” Soryu simply asked.

“I do not wish to cause you displeasure,” Rei stated.

Soryu scoffed. “Displeasure?” She shook her head. “You're worrying too much. Too much fretting over small things.”
“So my presence here is alright?” Rei asked.

Soryu shrugged. “Yeah, of course, I said so, didn’t I?”

“Your earlier comments...” Rei began.

Soryu waved her free hand dismissively. “As said, you fret too much, Rei.”

Seeing that attitude from Soryu was good. Rei was satisfied with the answer. Still, Soryu's behaviour did not make sense to her. She could almost guess what the answer would be, but...

“Does that mean I should not take what you say very seriously?” she asked in her normal, monotone voice.

“I didn't say that!” Soryu protested loudly.

“You did imply I should not take your comments today seriously,” Rei pointed out.

“Well, yeah, but... I mean...” Soryu failed to defend herself. “Grrrr!”

That was about the reaction Rei had anticipated. It was somewhat nice, in a strange way, that she could provoke it. That she had that influence over Soryu.

She walked past the redhead. “Good night, Soryu.” Then she went to her room.

_Urrgh..._

Even though there was light, Asuka felt her way to the bathroom more than that she saw it. She was still half asleep when she reached it. Even when she left it, she was still more in the fading remains of her dream than reality. Somehow, her entire hand had been full of band-aids. It didn't make much sense to her, but she didn't question it. She just wanted to get back to her warm futon.

She held her eyes tightly shut as she passed the light again...

...why was there light?

Groggily, Asuka raised her head. The light was coming out of the kitchen. Asuka stood there for a full five seconds, her mind still too bedraggled by sleep to properly process the incoming information. Then she walked over.

Rei sat calmly at the table and stared into nothingess.

“Byuh?” Asuka just voiced.

Slowly, Rei turned her head to her. It looked as sluggish as Asuka felt. Both looked at each other for a few seconds.

Finally, Asuka's brain managed to form complete words. “Trouble sleeping?”
Rei nodded. She just sat there. Asuka just stood there.

It took another half minute until Rei spoke. “There are loud noises from the neighbouring apartment.”

“Oh,” Asuka answered dumbly. Then she shook her head. “So... the neighbours are loud? And prevent you from sleeping?” Rei nodded again. Grr... Adrenaline was kicking Asuka's mind into gear hard. “Stupid-ass Japanese cardboard apartment walls... “Shouldn't you... go complain or something?”

Rei shook her head. “It's okay.”

“No, it isn't!” Asuka insisted. She walked out of the kitchen and turned right, towards Rei's room. And indeed, as she approached it, she could hear thumping noises which got increasingly louder. They came from directly behind the wall separating their apartment from the neighbouring one.

“Also so was...” Asuka fumed. “What kind of jerk is this loud at this time of the night!” She kicked against the wall hard a few times. “Hey!” she shouted. “Quiet over there!”

There was quiet for some seconds. Then the thumping resumed. Asuka once again began kicking against the wall, but this time there was no response. Her face turned red as she imagined smashing that apartment with a well placed fist strike of EVA-02. To simply ignore her like that and continue being so inconsiderate...

She turned around to do... something, when she spotted Rei just outside the kitchen door, from where she had watched the scene.

“Let's go over and tell'em what's what!” Asuka demanded.

“It is alright,” Rei disagreed. “They will not be that loud every evening.”

“One evening is bad enough!” Asuka insisted. “Can't be that those Hornochsen get to have their fun at the expense of your sleep!”

She stormed into her room, passing by Rei, who looked somewhat lost. There, she quickly put on jeans and a jacket and grabbed her wallet. Then she stormed out of the apartment just as energetically. Rei followed her, more slowly but also without hesitation. Asuka was about to protest when she stepped out of the door, as she was wearing nothing more than her night gown... but then reconsidered. Remembering what she had been ‘wearing’ in her old apartment, the night gown seemed perfectly fine now. Certainly, Rei wouldn't get embarrassed by it.

Rei, wearing a night gown in the moonlight, unfazed by the night wind...

...ehem.

Asuka rang the door bell to the neighbouring apartment. Not one time, but at least three times. There was no response.

“How come that noise can disturb you, anyway?” she asked Rei. “What these folks do here is outrageous, but not half as loud as the constant noise at your old apartment.”

“Those are demolition works,” Rei reminded her. “They do not last into the night.”
Ah… Asuka was unsure how to react to that, so she returned her attention to the door. There still was no reaction. Grr… So she began a minute long concerted action of constantly ringing the bell and pounding at the door. Finally, a slender young man in his twenties opened. Another man his age stood behind him. Both grinned when they saw her.

But before they could even so much as say 'Yes?', Asuka already began ranting, “You may not have noticed, but it is the middle of the goddamn night. How dare you make so much noise? This is completely out of bounds! People need to sleep! Some of us have to go to school tomorrow, or to work! Pay a bit of attention to that, will you! You two may want to have your fun, but it's totally inappropriate to do it at the expense of others!”

The man in front furrowed his eyes. The outburst had obviously surprised him. Finally he answered, “Quite impertinent for some young girl like you to make be making a spectacle of yourself like this, don't you think?”

“Impert…” But before Asuka could even finish, the man had closed the door again. Releasing a shout of frustration, the German girl began pounding against it again.

The door opened again. “Haven't your parents ever told you to not bother adults? If you don't leave I'll call the police.”

Asuka got something out of her purse. That was the reason she had taken it along, besides also carrying her key inside it: Her NERV ID card.

She scoffed. “You think the police will risk a confrontation with NERV?” The man looked at the card and took a step forward. “Touch me and Section 2 will process you into ground meat! See this? I'm Asuka Langley Soryu. I pilot one of those big-ass robots you see every time before cowering in your filthy bunkers because the big bad angel has arrived. I'm here to protect your asses, you cowards! And I'm telling you... if you aren't quiet now, I'll find out where you and your friends work. And next time there's a sortie, I'll personally make sure that place is utterly destroyed. Is that understood?”

The man ground his teeth. “Who do you think you are that you can make such…”

“She is in fact Asuka Langley Soryu,” a voice behind Asuka spoke up now. Rei. “We are EVA pilots. Her threat is credible.”

“Why should I believe…” the man started, but stopped when another person appeared on the scene: Misato. The Captain was in full uniform, but looked slightly bedraggled. She moved slowly, and the uniform looked crinkly.

“What is this all about?” she asked. “Asuka? Rei?”

The man managed to speak first. “Just two teenage girls who think they're mecha pilots or something making trouble.”

Misato furrowed her brows and looked at Asuka. Her status as a pilot wasn't classified, but NERV frowned on spreading the word. That wouldn't stop Asuka from using this leverage, though.

“You saw my ID card,” Asuka insisted. “Tell him, Misato. Or I'll stay here and make trouble until Section 2 arrives.”
Now it was Misato's turn to grind her teeth. But she did admit, “She is a designated EVA pilot. She is NERV. And this whole apartment bloc is watched by our security service.”

“You're kidding me!” the man hissed.

“And we need our sleep to further protect your sorry asses!” Asuka added. “Since apparently you can't do that yourself.”

The other man, who so far had just stayed in the background, laughed. The man with whom they had talked jerked his head around and glared angrily at him. Then he growled. “We'll... tone it down, okay? No need to make a scene here. Geez...”

“Not like you have a choice,” Asuka rubbed it in.

The man scowled and closed the door.

For a moment, Asuka, Rei and Misato just stood there. Then the Captain spoke, “There would've been better ways to solve this.”

Asuka shrugged. “None as effective and quick. The fucker kept Rei awake. We had to remedy that.”

Misato smirked. “Rei, hm? I see. But this is a security leak.”

“Our status isn't classified,” Asuka insisted. “Hell, you were the one who said I should go to school. Operational security is only on your mind when it suits you, it seems.”

Misato sighed. “I see you're still in combat mode. I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

As the two girls entered their apartment again, Rei remarked, “Captain Katsuragi is correct. This could have been solved differently.”

Asuka growled. “You, too? At least you can get back to sleep now.”

“So you did that for me?” Rei asked.

Asuka shrugged. *Play it cool.* “Of course. Can't have such louts screwing up things for everyone.”

“...thank you.”

Asuka jerked her head around. Then grinned. It felt good being thanked.

Rei did not return to her room, but again sat down at the kitchen table.

“What are you doing?” Asuka asked.

“It will probably take a while until I can go to sleep again,” Rei informed her. “I am used to fixed sleeping rhythms. I have trouble adjusting to deviances from them.”

“Oh,” Asuka voiced, feeling slightly helpless.
Rei resumed staring into nothingness. “But it is okay. I am grateful for your action. You can resume sleeping.”

_Gottverdammt noch einmal..._ Apparently this burst of activity and confrontation hadn't been enough. Asuka wanted to do something. She couldn't simply leave Rei here alone in the night with nothing to do. She stomped into her room.

She returned with her trusty set of cards. She and Kaji had often played, up until and including their trip on the U.N. Pacific Fleet. Afterwards, she had taken it to her hotel room and from there to here. It was pretty much the standard German set: French-suited cards, one time 7 to ace in every suit. She sat down at the table opposite of Rei. The girl continued her fixed view ahead.

Asuka knew she would be tired as hell tomorrow, but it didn't matter. Better to be tired together with Rei than leaving Rei to be tired on her own. “Wanna play?”

Rei looked at the cards. Blinked. Looked at Asuka. Looked at the cards again.

Asuka smiled tiredly. _Officer's Skat it is then. For now._

[1]”I could explain it to you [formal address, incorrect for use between classmates and minors in general] in German.”

[2]”You... you can [speak] German? Good on you.” --- Note: Most likely Rei can canonically at least read German; the text she reads when she first meets Asuka is in German.

[3]”Would you [formal address] accept my help?”

[4]”'You!' 'You!' [informal address] We aren't in an office/government department here.”

[5] “Would you [informal address] accept my help?” [grammatically incorrect as the verb now doesn't match the pronoun anymore]
If there was one thing Asuka couldn't stand, it was people being cheerful in the morning. Especially this morning. She was tired and grumpy, and in front of the class was that cheerful girl with the brown, and vaguely red shimmering short hair who seemed to smile constantly. At least when she didn't outright giggle. *Urrrgh... how typically 'kawaii schoolgirl' do you want to get?*

“Hello, all,” she introduced herself. “My name is Kirishima. Mana Kirishima. I've just moved to here from Kyushu with my uncle, who has gotten a new job here. Uh... I hope my appearance so late in the school year isn't an intrusion.” She giggled again. “But I'm very excited to get to know new people! I hope we'll all get along very well!”

“As you can see, Ms Kirishima, there are enough seats vacant,” the teacher told her. “You may choose one.”

*Well. At least there are still some people moving to Tokyo-3.* The general trend was the reverse, which also was the reason for the many vacant seats. *Of course* people were getting the hell out of a war zone, and Tokyo-3 had become de facto just that. Asuka was indeed rather wondering why people even *stayed*. There was an angel attack every other week, and most people seemed to simply ignore that. Even so, over the last months, four classmates had left town. And already a third or so of all apartments in Asuka's apartment bloc were empty. *Why oh why not all of them...*

“Oh, I think I'll sit down over there,” Mana trilled. Asuka didn't pay further attention to her until the new kid turned towards Shinji. She had placed herself right next to him. “I hope you don't mind. But I wanted to sit next to a cute boy!”

…

*Sach ma gehts noch! Noch alle Tassen im Schrank oder was? So was Unverschämtes... [1]*

It didn't help Asuka's attitude how Shinji reacted, turning red and looking down at his desk. *I swear, if you dare smile now, I...* His lip corners were up. A bit. Maybe. At least Asuka thought so. *How can she simply burst in like this and.... grrr.*

Asuka watched the two carefully throughout the class. At least that Mana girl seemed to be a good student; that meant she looked ahead, listened to the teacher and did not confuse poor Shinji even more. And confused he did look; Asuka noticed that even from behind. *But I bet he liked that compliment. Hrrmpf.* It was kinda unfair. It wasn't that Asuka didn't think the same about Shinji. But here that... *person* just entered and said it. She made it far too easy on Shinji, and that was unfair!

Asuka's mood was still sour when their midday break began. Especially when Mana asked Shinji whether she could stick with him, what with being new and she not knowing any people here yet and... *Yes, yes, play the damsel in distress. Because that isn't old and cliché or something. Herr im Himmel, is that girl desperate or what...* Her mood improved slightly when Shinji at least delayed Mana, if of course with a stuttering apology and an awkward smile. Before he could deal with the new girl, he first brought a lunch box to Ayanami, and then the two came over to Asuka's desk.

He had done their lunch boxes every day for over a week now, of course, but right now Asuka was *especially* glad about that fact. She quickly opened the box as the two were still standing at her
“What you got there?” A giggle.

Asuka groaned. Mana had positioned herself right behind Shinji and was now looking over his shoulder.

Then she asked, "Sieht lecker aus. Kann ich mich zu euch setzen?”[2]

There was nearly zero accent. Asuka's jaw dropped. “Ja, kann denn hier jeder deutch?”[3]

Mana giggled again. “Der arme Ikari hier nicht, so konfus wie er aussieht.”[4] Asuka snorted against her will. Shinji did look mightily confused right now. “What about you, uh... what's your name if I may ask?” Mana turned to Rei.

“Rei Ayanami,” the blue-haired girl simply answered. Mana smiled radiantly at that, which rammed a further pang of... something into Asuka. Uncertainty? No no, not her as well!

As Rei was grabbing a chair to sit at Asuka's table, Mana looked back and forth between Asuka and Shinji. “So... may I? I even got my own lunch box, no worry!”

“Oh yeah, sure,” Shinji hastily answered. “That shouldn't be a problem, right, Asuka?”

“Natürlich nicht.”[5] Asuka muttered under her breath.

Mana grabbed a chair as well and addressed the redhead: “So, what do you think, was my pronunciation alright? I haven't spoken German in years!”

It had been pretty much spot-on, so of course Asuka couldn't say so. “Where did you learn that, anyway?”

Mana shrugged. “Before coming here, my uncle often had business partners from Germany over. I think he was his company's expert for all Germany issues, and they did a lot of trade with that country. I sorta picked it up at home.”

“Ah,” Asuka voiced. Then something hit her. “And how did you know I can speak it?”

Mana giggled again. “An attractive redhead piloting giant mechas? Your face isn't exactly unknown, Soryu.”

Right. Asuka didn't know whether to be flattered or annoyed. So instead, she just began eating. The others followed her lead.

“That's very nice of you, to cook for your friends,” Mana commented to Shinji.

“Uh, it's no great bother,” Shinji muttered.

“He's very good at it,” Asuka spoke up. “And he's doing it just for us. Even making separate vegetarian dishes for Rei.” Where did this come from? Asuka knew she would eat her words later on; showing open gratitude like that was just not her style. But right now she had to make a point vis a vis Mana. The brunette had to see how close their bonds were. Wait, are they?
“Not many boys would do that,” Mana stated and giggled again. “I think it's cute.”

Of course you do, you goddamn paperboard cutout. What don't you find cute? But Asuka couldn't bring it herself to protest. After all, it was pretty cute...

“Ikari is an excellent cook,” Rei spoke up quietly. That she did so surprised Asuka. The redhead was glad she spoke up now and then these days, but she was also kinda annoyed that it was Mana who had prompted that.

“Is that so? Maybe I should forget my lunchbox one of these days,” Mana 'suggested'.

“He's already working hard enough!” Asuka protested sternly. “Don't you burden him as well!”

Shinji looked at her in surprise. Asuka realized just how serious she had just sounded. Pfah, so what?

“Oh, I wouldn't want to!” Mana insisted. “After all you... uh... you three are the mecha pilots, aren't you? I've heard stories about you, but...”


“Well, we've heard about the angel attacks in the news,” Mana told her. “There's never much on NERV, or the E... the mechas. Or about their pilots. But there are rumours. About how you three are just ordinary students. About a blue-haired pilot and a foreign red-haired pilot. So it really wasn't difficult to identify you.” She giggled. “So, if those stories are true... you have saved this city half a dozen times over already. That's... that's quite impressive to be honest!” Giggling again. “And yet Ikari still finds the time to cook for his friends!”

“Well, someone has to do it,” Shinji muttered.

Asuka scoffed. She feared she'd never be able to drive that attitude out of the boy. “And we're the best at it. Saved the world half a dozen times over indeed!”

“The world?” Mana asked.

Ach. Scheiße. “Well, uh... I don't think those monsters would stop at just Tokyo-3!” Asuka improvised a cover story.

“Huh, that sounds true,” Mana conceded. She flashed a bright smile. “So that means I should be really, really grateful to you three.”

“You should!” Asuka agreed, and she was dead serious. Surprised, too. Normally people simply took this all for granted – the constant training, the pain feedback, the fights. She knew the worth of all that, and that it made her special. That was why she piloted. But not getting the recognition she deserved from others was really annoying at times.

To her surprise, Mana stood up, bowed and said: “Thank you very much for your efforts against the angels.” There was excited whispering in the class. She sat down again, casually, as if nothing had happened, with a smile on her face. Asuka was honestly impressed with how she carried herself... not that she would show it.
Only Rei was of course entirely unaffected. “Ikari has an aversion to public attention.”

And indeed, as could have been expected, Shinji looked awkward as hell. He was even sweating, and he tried very hard not to look into the faces of any of the classmates around them.

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” Mana exclaimed. “I really didn't mean to embarrass you.” Her voice got small. “I'll try to be careful from now on. I'm so sorry!”

Asuka grinned triumphantly. Okay, so maybe Shinji was lamentably pathetic on that issue, but at least this was something where she hadn't fucked up while Mana had. “You see how they treat us heroes here. All whispering and rumours. Hmpf. Pathetic. No wonder Shinji isn't used to what you've done. Which really came a bit out of the blue.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mana conceded timidly. “So, uh... you feel you don't get enough gratitude? For what you're doing?

“I just said so, didn't I?” Asuka replied.

“Well, it's understandable,” Mana assured her. “I mean, you apparently go into life and death battles, and yet...”

“Exactly!” Asuka agreed.

“What's it like, piloting an EVA?” Mana wanted to know. “And being... uh, being in battle against... against such a thing?”

“Painful,” Rei spoke up.

“Huh?” Mana voiced.

“The Evangelions... we're in direct neural contact with them,” Shinji explained quietly. “We move them by thought and we feel... what they feel. Like... like being...”

“Like being stabbed,” Asuka intervened curtly. “Or punched or burned.” Though she wondered about Rei of all people had bringing it up. So far the girl had seemed to be entirely unaffected by physical pain...

Mana gaped. “But... that's terrible! And in those battles... you could die any minute, no? How have they been so far?”

“Death is possible,” Rei agreed. “But that is irrelevant.”

Both Asuka and Shinji jerked their heads around to her. “Don't say such things!” Asuka protested. Shinji looked sad.

“It is the truth,” Rei insisted. “I am...” She looked at Mana and then stopped. “It is irrelevant.”

The mood thus thoroughly killed, the four students ate in silence. Asuka was annoyed. Now there was one day when Shinji's idiotic friends would leave them alone during the break, and what happened? The new transfer student clung to them. Just great. Okay, yes, the praise had been nice, but Mana's presence still felt like an intrusion. _Oh well. There's still dinner tonight._
After a while, Mana spoke up again, hesitantly: “It's a bit silly of course that I've started attending this class now. I'll be here three days, and then you guys will be away for a week.”

“Huh?” Asuka asked. “What do you mean?”

“Uh... your class' trip to Okinawa?” Mana explained.

“Okinawa?” Asuka exclaimed. “That's... that's next week? I thought it would be in two m... gah! Shinji! Is that true?”

“Uh, yeah,” Shinji just answered. “You didn't know? Not that it matters. I don't think we can go, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Asuka demanded to know.

“I doubt we can leave Tokyo-3,” Shinji explained. “What if an angel attacks?”

“You mean, I fight those giant monsters, and as reward I can't even go on the class trip?” Asuka shouted. “We'll see about that, verdammte Scheiße! That would be outrageous. You'd think piloting Evangelion would come with rewards not punishments like that!”

Shinji made an awkward face. “It isn't really a punishment. Just... a necessity.”

“We have no immediate replacements,” Rei spoke up. “Since we are the elite, as you often point out.”

Asuka glared glumly at her. Rei speaking up was a good thing, but why did she have to speak up by throwing Asuka's words back at her? That was just not fair!

“I mean, we still won't have school, so that's good...” Shinji tried to calm Asuka down.

The redhead would have none of that. “Not good enough! I'll call Misato right now and...” She looked at the clock at the wall. “Oh for fuck's sake. Fine, after school then. But I'm telling you, if she makes us stay at home, then... then I'll... grrr....”

“You can tell her face to face,” Rei stated. “I just got a message. There will be a synch-test directly after school.”

“This keeps getting better and better,” Asuka muttered. “Yes. She's going to get such a mouthful!”

Misato was getting a mouthful. Unfortunately, or maybe rather fortunately, Shinji didn't understand a word of it. Asuka had chosen to hold her rant in German, and she had started as soon as they had met Misato inside the Geofront.

Misato made only token attempts at defence, in German, until finally she came to a stop in a break room. It was a small, drab room, like most areas down here. Some soda machines, three tables with chairs, a single poster at the wall. Clean, but still depressing. The typical decoration-less style of the Geofront.

“Look, Asuka,” she said in Japanese. “I understand your outrage, but there really is nothing we can
do. What happens if an angel appears?"

“Drop a N2 mine onto it,” Asuka replied immediately and firmly.

“That works if we can intercept it at the coast,” Misato agreed. “But what if it comes down from
the sky again? Or appears directly next to the city? We still haven't figured out where exactly the
angels hide and what their approach vectors are. Maybe they spontaneously materialize, for all we
know.”

“Even then N2 mines work”, Asuka argued.

“Yes, but would you have half of Tokyo-3 levelled just for the sake of your vacation?” Misato
asked back.

“Tokyo-3 wouldn't even be standing anymore, period, if it weren't for me!” Asuka pointed out.

Misato's mouth formed a thin line and her posture became rigid. “That's true. It's because you're an
EVA pilot. And as long as you are while the angels are attacking, you'll be on stand-by. We have
no other choice.”

Asuka scoffed. “Easy for you to say. Making the hard choices... for others.”

“You have a choice as well, you know?” Misato shot back. Asuka just crossed her arms and glared
at her, challenging her to explain herself. “Nobody's forcing you to stay an EVA pilot.”

“WHAT?” Asuka shouted. “But you need me!”

“Even so, I'm sure you could drop out of the pilot roster in time to take the trip on Monday,”
Misato answered. It sounded slightly terse. “We wouldn't force you to do otherwise.”

“But... you need me!” Asuka repeated. Shinji was surprised by her vehemence. This was beyond
just the usual forceful protestations of the girl.

“We'd be pretty screwed up with one less Evangelion, but we'd make do,” Misato answered. Asuka
suddenly turned stiff. Misato's voice suddenly became very serious. “We won't... we aren't forcing
you.”

Asuka face's darkened. “Make do. I see.” It sounded surprisingly calm, if tense. Then she simply
turned on the spot and walked out. She didn't run or anything, she just walked without looking
back.

“A... Asuka!” Shinji called after her. She didn't react.

Misato groaned. “Damnit. I fucked that up. I wanted to talk about that with her in... ah, nevermind.
It's probably best if she can vent some steam. We can schedule her test last.”

Shinji looked towards where Asuka had gone. “But...”

“Ritsuko will have my head if you two are late as well!” Misato insisted. “We'll schedule your test
first.”

Shinji looked down. That somehow didn't feel right, leaving Asuka alone like that. She had been so
quiet before leaving. She hadn't shouted or run or anything, but that somehow made it even worse. It seemed all of her usual liveliness had just been drained from her.

Just like... *Just like when we talked. When she told me about her... her upbringing.* And that had been some serious stuff...

“Well, how's that for an absolutely useless question?”

“Just damn annoyed by Misato,” Asuka told him without turning her head. “No need to come running for me!”

*Oh. Of course not.* Now that he was here, Shinji realized there indeed was little he could actually do. He felt foolish.

It was then that Ayanami came running in. She looked as expressionless as always, but it was rare for her to go faster than just walking.

This caused Asuka to jump up and turn around, looking up angrily to the both. “You as well? What's this about?”

“Captain Katsuragi told me that now I might 'as well go after you, too,'” Ayanami explained.

“What for?” Asuka shouted. “There's nothing you can help me with. Nothing I need help with! I don't *need* your attention.”

Ayanami nodded. She looked as if she was about to turn, but then hesitated. Meanwhile, Shinji tried to gather something that might resemble an answer: “Well, no, I... I didn't say so...”

“Then why are you here?” Asuka pushed on.

“I... I don't know,” Shinji admitted weakly. “I didn't really think it through. I just... I didn't want to leave you alone.” Asuka drew in breath, as if she were about to shout, but Shinji just continued monotonously. “Since we both know what's that like.”

Asuka exhaled. “We do.” There was no inflection in her voice. It was impossible to tell how she meant that.
Uncomfortable with the ensuing silence, Shinji continued, “I suppose you're right. You don't... you don't need us. But I...” He looked at Ayanami. “...we still wanted to make sure you're okay.”

Unexpectedly, Asuka smirked. “You're a fool then.” She looked at Ayanami. “Two fools. But I can't exactly fault you for that kind of foolishness, now can I?”

“We should return to Captain Katsuragi,” Ayanami spoke up. “…if you are feeling better.”

Asuka scoffed. “I suppose there's a reason she has called us here to NERV, so we might as well get it behind us.”

The three walked side by side, Asuka surrounded by Shinji and Ayanami. Both of the flanks made sure to stay exactly at her sides.

“This Okinawa thing is really pissing me off,” Asuka said. “And that talk with that Mana girl today... it's true. We really aren't getting enough recognition.”

Praise was nice, but Shinji didn't want to appear needy or annoying. He liked the praise he was getting for piloting, but he would never demand it. So he stayed q...

“Ikari has said the same thing,” Ayanami answered.

Two heads turned towards her. “What do you mean?” Asuka demanded to know.

“That he likes the praise he is getting for piloting,” Ayanami explained.

Asuka chuckled and gave him a predator's grin. “Do you now, Third? And has Rei here... praised you?”

Shinji began stammering, but was saved by Ayanami simply commenting quietly, “If two pilots value praise and recognition, then maybe there should be more praise and recognition. I would wish that for you two.”

**Ah, Huh.** Ayanami saying that was all the more remarkable because she herself did not seem to value praise, and besides, it was somewhat a criticism of NERV, if ever so slightly... and that from her. Those two things made Ayanami saying that valuable. Yet neither he nor Asuka found an answer to her.

When the three returned to the break room, Misato looked exasperated but refrained from making a comment, instead simply leading them on further to the EVA testing rooms. There, they found Dr Akagi in her usual labcoat, outside the room they were supposed to meet her in, leaning against the wall outside the door to it, smoking a cigarette.

“That's bad for the ventilation system,” Misato greeted her. “Not to mention the extra work for the cleaning crews.”

“It's bad for my lungs as well,” Dr Akagi admitted and puffed out. “But some people kept me waiting.”

Misato sighed. Shinji looked abashed. Asuka struck a defiant pose. Ayanami showed no reaction.
“I'm sure you'll get the Section 2 reports on it tomorrow,” Misato told her with a certain annoyance in her voice.

Asuka scoffed at that, while Shinji felt slightly awkward. He didn't like being reminded that he was being watched. And not just here. Even when he was out in the city, or even only at school... he could never be sure, but it was safe to assume Section 2 agents were nearby.

Dr Akagi shrugged. “That may well be. So, if whatever has been keeping you has finally been settled...” Misato just glared at her. “Right. To the point then. I wanted to give you a lengthy presentation on what we're going to do, but we don't have the time for that anymore. We've prepared Units 01 and 02 for the test. Asuka, for you this will just be a normal activation and synch-test. Rei, Shinji, for you I have something special planned. You will be in EVA-01's entry plug together and try to synchronize at the same time.”


“It should be possible, in theory,” Dr Akagi defended herself. “Both can synchronize with EVA-01. There's no reason to assume they shouldn't be able to do it at the same time. In fact, we maybe should have looked into double-synching before already... hm...”

“May I remind you that the last time you tried putting pilots into other people's Evangelions, Unit 00 went straight for Rei and me?” Asuka exclaimed forcefully.

“I doubt that was the case,” Dr Akagi muttered. “Anyway, the only times EVA-01 has ever acted autonomously were to protect its pilot. In theory, there should be no danger to Shinji or Rei.” She smirked. “Nice to see you care, though.”

Asuka harrumphed and threw her head back in a defiant pose.

“In theory,” Misato echoed. “Yes, that'll put our minds to rest.

Dr Akagi smirked again. “That's the plan, yes.” When she was met with looks of confusion, she explained, “I probably should credit this idea to Rei. She spoke to me last time she came to get her medication. About how she's comfortable in EVA-01, but Shinji isn't, and about how she just can't communicate to him why she is. She mentioned something along the lines of wishing she could just make him feel it.” That smirk again. “I was honestly kinda surprised that she could even hold a conversation for so long.” Shinji furrowed his brows. What does she mean by that? That isn't very nice to say. “But well, that's what we're going to try.”

Asuka was the first to understand, sort of. “...telepathy?”

Dr Akagi chuckled. “Nothing as fancy as that, I'm afraid. We're dealing with science here and keep to the laws of physics, instead of dabbling with the supernatural. There won't be a connection between Shinji's and Rei's mind. They will both be connected to the EVA, after all, not each other. But they should be able to feel those connections. Shinji should be able to feel how secure Rei's link to EVA-01 is... in theory. It's worth a shot, at least.”

Shinji glanced towards Rei, who was of course standing perfectly still and looking straight ahead. Feeling her connection to the EVA? He wondered what that would be like.

“Well, get dressed, you three,” Dr Akagi ordered. “No sense in wasting even more time.”
Dr Akagi had told him they would be in the same entry-plug, but Shinji hadn't really realized what this would mean. Until now.

They were using one of EVA-00's entry-plugs, the model that did not have a large control unit in front of the pilot's seat. That was necessary because that space was now taken up... by Ayanami, who was essentially sitting in Shinji's lap.

It was... awkward. Shinji didn't know what to do. He leaned back as much as possible and left his arms dangling uselessly at his sides, all so that Ayanami would still have as much space as possible. Their legs inevitably touched, were almost intertwined and that... his heart thumped, but it felt good. It felt close. And somehow, while that closeness with Rei was awkward, he didn't feel threatened by it. Just unsure what to do and how to act.

Nonetheless, Shinji had protested at first. Ayanami could have the pilot's seat, he'd just... stand around behind it or something. Like Kensuke and Touji had during the fight against Shamshel. Dr Akagi had insisted on the two pilots sharing the seat, though. Apparently, the location inside the entry-plug could influence synch-rates.

So now, Shinji tried his best to breathe evenly and not to think of the body in front of him. A body in ridiculously thin plugsuit, its posterior directly pressed against his thighs. Oh wow... He felt really, really warm right now.

Ayanami wiggled slightly. Oh gods. She was wiggling again. Maybe she was sitting uncomfortably, which would be... ehem... EHEM... understandable. Though the wiggling did the exact opposite of helping with that problem. Damn it, are those suits thin! And Shinji imagined it had to be kinda bad for Rei as well. Which was why he also felt bad about also enjoying the situation on some level; he kinda felt like he was exploiting Ayanami.

“We're going to second-stage connection now,” Dr Akagi announced.

Right. The EVA. Concentrate on the EVA, Shinji. Not on the girl currently rubbing her butt against you, she's probably not interested in any of that, anyway. The EVA.

At least right now his mind was far too distracted to think about what could go wrong, about what had happened to his mother, about what this unit had done. He was far too concentrated on Ayanami. That still left very little mental space for trying to synchronize with the EVA, though.

“But... there was something. Some sort of feeling that spread inside him. It was difficult to describe. It was something solid, something rock hard, something unshakeable. He stopped in his awkward movements trying to stay clear of Ayanami for a while to look at her. She was sitting perfectly still now and had her eyes closed.

It's her. It's her connection to the EVA.

Shinji sensed no doubt in there. No thought of failure. A bit of tension maybe, preparation for if things got worse, but also a total willingness to face that prospect, to face any prospect necessary to doing what had to be done.
He was in awe.

He also was slightly jealous of such security, of such absolute determination. It was something he wanted to have as well. And if Ayanami could have it, then why not he as well? At least, as far as the EVA was concerned. Maybe she had been right; it would have been impossible to try to explain this feeling of security, but now that he felt it as well... if Ayanami could have this trust, then so could he.

“We'll just have to try,” he heard Dr Akagi on the comm system. “Initiate the third stage.”

There was a new feeling, something undefined. But at least it was there. During the last half dozen attempts in EVA-01 he hadn't felt a single thing. There had been no mental feedback at all. But now, he felt an opening. However, he was still doubtful, his mind still reeling away from it, spurned by images of a disaster that happened ten years ago. And he felt...

...he felt Ayanami.

Not just her body in his lap. He felt... maybe not her mind, but a sense of Ayanami-ness. A spirit of her, maybe. And it was a glorious feeling. Firm in resolution, but soft in other ways. Caring... for him? Surprisingly warm. And beyond all measures, comforting.

Shinji felt like he was being carried by a wave of intrinsic goodwill, like swimming in an ocean of safety, surrounded on all sides by this magnificent presence. The earlier awkwardness, his fear of EVA-01, his feeling of inadequacy, that all was forgotten now, washed away by that powerful wave. How could he fear EVA now? How could he fear anything when he was basking in that warm, glowing comfort?

He breathed in, feeling absolutely content. He didn't even fully realize it, but his arms closed around Ayanami. Her body now felt as warm as what he could feel of her mind. And she reacted as well, arching her back, and nestling herself closer to him. He didn't mind, he didn't feel uncomfortable, quite the opposite. This was right. This was good. He trusted her implicitly. And she... she trusted him. For whatever reason. He could scarcely believe it, but it was true; he could feel that trust as plainly as her determination.

And there it was again, that earlier form of safety and comfort he had always felt inside the EVA, ever since his first battle with Sachiel. A feeling he had lost in that time when he had been unable to synch, but now there it was again, as if it had never gone away. The EVA was no threat. How could it be if Ayanami would open her soul to it like that? He trusted Ayanami without hesitation. If Ayanami's presence declared the EVA good, then the EVA was good.

It was... It was like...

“T'm home,” he whispered.

Welcome home.

Rei liked EVA-01. Piloting it wasn't as straining as it was with EVA-00. There was no resistance to it, no other her that demanded satisfaction, revenge, freedom. Instead, EVA-01 was... protective. It was not another her, and yet... Rei didn't actually know what it was. She was well-read on metaphysical biology, but she didn't know why she could synch with EVA-01. It wasn't necessary
for her to know. What mattered was that she could.

She could understand Ikari’s concerns. Safety was important. What she could only barely understand was why those concerns would stop him from synching. Yes, the Evangelions were dangerous, even for their own pilots. Nobody knew that better than Rei. But if the angels won, then they would be all just as dead. Or if the Commander’s mysterious human enemies won. The mission had to come first, always.

Granted, Ikari was not replaceable, while she was. Maybe that made a difference.

She could feel him now. The Pribnow Room had just initialized the second stage connection. Just as Dr Akagi had predicted, she couldn't read his mind, but it felt like his mind, not just his body, were somehow physically present. It was a sense of *Ikari-ness*.

It felt... vulnerable. Like a hunted animal. And careful, oh so careful. Careful not to hurt her, not to bother her, not to fail in her eyes. She reached out instinctively; not bodily, but in her mind. Set her resolution against Ikari’s doubts. She wanted to help him, almost as an automatic reaction.

“We'll just have to try,” Dr Akagi spoke on the comm system. “Initiate the third stage.”

Rei breathed in hard.

She could feel the core of the EVA resonating in her mind, as always, but this time there was more. There was *Ikari*. A sense of fragility, of vulnerability... of goodwill, of concern for her... So much concern. Rei was used to people treating her as a tool, as a means to an end. That was alright because she was just that, in fact. But Ikari... it seemed the utmost thing in the world for him right now was to not hurt her. Was to never hurt her.

Ayanami latched onto that concern. It was a new experience for her. She had known of course that Ikari cared for her, but... this was so much in contrast to how she normally felt, to how people treated her. She realized she wanted more of that. And she also wanted to calm Ikari, to soothe him, to make him less afraid. It was almost a need.

She felt his arms around her waist and leaned back against him. This was not what had been planned, but...

...it was maybe the nicest experience Rei Ayanami, either of them, had ever had.

Asuka ground her teeth.

Shinji, that idiot, was still positively glowing. He had been ever since he and Rei had come out of EVA-01. Rei, that other idiot, was not quite as obvious – unless you knew her. She was actually attentively looking at Shinji. And that was highly unusual for her. *What have the two been doing inside that Evangelion?*

Asuka had heard some of the comm chatter between the Pribnow Box and the Evangelion. And she could almost imagine it, Shinji and Rei sitting very close together in those skin-tight plugsuits they all wore... *Grr*...

The redhead felt a certain annoyance about it, and a certain fear. If she were honest with herself,
she felt excluded. But what should she do now? Feel now? She could be jealous of Rei in regards to Shinji. But maybe she could also be jealous of Shinji in regards to Rei. And being both would just be silly. And yet, she felt... she felt like she was losing out to both of them. Or losing them. That neither of them might need her.

It had always been clear that there was something between the two, ever since Asuka had arrived in Japan. Of course, the two were too blind and passive for anything to ever come out of it. Surely, it couldn't be that they'd beat Asuka to the punch?

*...what punch even, Gott im Himmel!*

That was the crux of the issue. Asuka was unsure what she herself even wanted. She just generally feared losing out, being *left* out. She had to be at the top. People had to pay attention to her. Otherwise, everything would come undone.

“So it seems I can synch again,” Shinji told Asuka.

His voice was so upbeat, his eyes bright, and there was a shy but brilliant smile on his face... *...hrm. Maybe something good has come out of this, after all.* But not due to Asuka. Due to Rei. It wasn't that Asuka begrudged Shinji his success. She was even glad for him. If she were quite honest with herself, she *liked* Shinji smiling like that. But she was acutely aware how she had no part in it.

“How nice for you,” she hence replied in a very ambiguous tone. A tone that made it sound like she didn't actually think so at all.

Shinji's smile dimmed at that.

*Scheiße. Now I've done it again.*

“Scheiße. Now I've done it again,” Dr Akagi agreed. She, the pilots and Misato were in the Pribnow Box, going over the result of the tests. “We measured synch connections from both you and Rei. In fact, we measured notably *high* synch-rates. Despite your recent troubles with synching, you were around five points over your usual value, Shinji, and you even ten over yours, Rei. We really should look more into this double synching. There seems to be some potential there.”

Misato tapped a finger against her chin. “Hm. You think we could utilize that in combat? And would that also work with Asuka?”

“So it seems I can synch again,” Shinji told Asuka.

“Combat is your area, Captain,” Dr Akagi answered. “As for Asuka... she can't cross-synch with Rei and Shinji. I doubt we could get her to synch in EVA-01, or Shinji or Rei to synch in EVA-02.”

Misato grinned at Asuka. “You're just too damn special, Asuka.”

“Hmpf. Of course I am!” Asuka agreed. But inwardly, she felt dread. So she would continue to be excluded...

“Any reason for the heightened synch-rate, Rits?” Misato wanted to know.

“We've only just measured it!” Dr Akagi reminded her. “I haven't had time yet to formulate hypotheses. Could be that two minds, if working sufficiently in harmony, can just bear more of a synchronization strain, for lack of a better word, than a single one. Could simply be positive
reinforcement from one another. Could be anything else. Take your pick.”

Akagi's words went through Asuka's mind. Two minds in harmony... positive reinforcement from one another... It was just not fair. It seemed Asuka had never had a chance to begin with. And worst of all was that Shinji and Rei weren't even seeing this! Hell, they still called each other by family names! That was actually somewhat infuriating. On their own, their relationship would never lead anywhere.

...that's it! That's the solution!

It dawned on Asuka. If she could set the two up, then she wouldn't have lost. In fact, then this would be her success. She would not be defeated, because she would have stepped out of the competition. It would even solve her state of confusion regarding the two. She could bow out of the whole mess completely, and concentrate on Kaji. Zwei Fliegen mit einer Klappe! [6]

It was such a neat solution to the whole conundrum! Rei and Shinji had to get together through her efforts. They would be happy, she would be in control of the situation and she would be rid of her confusion. Without anyone paying attention to her, she grinned.

“My chance,” she muttered quietly.

It was time to devise a battle plan.

[1] German ranting questioning Mana's mental state.
[3] “What, can everyone speak German here?”
[6] “Two flies with one swatter”, i.e. “Two birds with one stone”
To say that it was rare to see Rei smile would be an understatement. That faint, soft smile always was a singular instance. There nearly never was a day where it was seen twice, and many a day without a single one. In fact, Asuka and Shinji had needed to tell her to smile even when she had escaped death. It was only since then that she had begun smiling at all. It was for that reason that every time that did happen, it still managed to stun Asuka.

Goddamn her. By now, Asuka could admit at least to herself that she found her damn cute. Her lithe figure, her graceful way of moving, those honest looks, the tiny smiles... Stupid cute Rei.

Rei showed her emotions in other ways. And a week of intensive synchronization training had made Asuka tune to those little signals. So she noticed that while Rei didn't smile when she saw Shinji waiting for them just outside the door to Misato's apartment, she did look slightly more upwards, with a more steady gaze, and her steps quickened. She was obviously looking forward to walking to school with Shinji, just as much...

...well, just as much as Asuka was.

There was not much which could make Rei show even that little emotion. She blatantly just endured synch tests and school classes and talks with NERV personnel. In a way, she went through life as if it weren't her own. That anything could make her react at all was rare and therefore precious.

And therefore Shinji was.

The three began walking their route in silence. Shinji is kinda special as well. Okay, he was maybe a bit... finicky, and much too shy in social situations, but he was by no means a coward. She had watched his berserk attack against Shamshel. That had not been his Evangelion, that had been he himself attacking the angel with suicidal recklessness. Worrisome, yes, but by no means cowardly. There were lots of brave boys around, though. What made Shinji special was that he was brave, but also not a brute macho guy. He cooked. He listened. He... he put up with her.

And yes, his own shy and awkward smiles, and his scrawny, wiry figure were kinda cute as well.

Who'd have thought that I have a thing for clumsy puppies? Asuka scoffed mentally. It kinda figures, doesn't it? I find people who I find... uh... yeah... and then it's two of them at once. All in all, her plan to end this confusion was the only way forward. Shinji and Rei clearly had a thing for each other, and while yes, both were kinda-sorta cute, neither of them could come close to Kaji.

She had thought about her 'battle plan' the whole day yesterday. The most crucial problem was a lack of intelligence. She didn't know exactly what Rei and Shinji thought about each other, so as of yet she had no hook she could use. So her plan for today was to change that. She could ask Rei in the evening, in their apartment, so for now she would concentrate on Shinji. She would have to separate him from Rei during school and ask him about her.

“I wonder what we'll be doing next week,” Shinji spoke up.

“Grr, don't remind me,” Asuka fumed. “The last school day before the Okinawa trip. And we aren't going! I swear, if someone makes a stupid comment about that, I'll bash their head against the
“That would be inadvisable,” Rei commented.

Asuka scoffed. “It'd feel good, though. I'd even be willing to write another essay, on why it's a bad idea.”

Shinji chuckled, which caused Asuka to grin triumphantly.

She had heard about his first meeting with Touji. Apparently the guy really was even more of a jerk than he let on. They were all good buddies now, and Touji even had let Shinji beat him back, which was only sensible in Asuka's opinion, but it was clear Shinji shied away from physical violence. *Oh well...* it was maybe not very... masculine, but so what? It wasn't like Asuka needed protection. In fact, if the next bully appeared, it could well be her solving the issue physically. She was trained, after all.

Still, there was a certain attraction to competence and confidence, which was why men like Kaji would always win out over boys like Shinji.

The trio was greeted at the entrance to the school yard by Hikari, a clear sign that they all could have slept in a few more minutes. Taking her role as class rep way too seriously, Hikari was usually the first of the class to arrive. Especially now that Rei didn't appear super-early anymore.

Hikari obviously noted that fact as well. “Hello, Asuka. Ikari and Ayanami seem to be a good influence on you.”

Asuka scoffed. “Aren't you afraid I'll corrupt them or something?”

Hikari took a good look at Shinji, then at Rei. “...unlikely.”

Asuka supposed she had a point there. She sighed. “You know I'm only here for shit and giggles, right? That I don't really need the school grades and all that stuff?”

“Well, yeah, you've told me...” Hikari answered unsurely. *Probably fretting if she has overstepped a line. Good.*

“That means I come when I want, and if I want,” Asuka drove the point home.

“Well, ah, anyway, I wanted to ask you if you're okay,” Hikari changed the topic.

Asuka turned her head and glanced at Hikari sideways. “Why wouldn't I be?”

“Well, you seemed kinda... out of it yesterday afternoon,” Hikari explained. “In PE.”

*Hoo, boy...* There was a reason for that. PE had consisted of swimming again, and Asuka had decided to use that chance to check where she stood in regard to girls. As it turned out, nothing happened... or nearly nothing. She could glance at Hikari undressing, even continuing her talk with her as they both did, and nothing would happen. Looking at most girls did nothing for her. But there was Sanae Ishimoto, the star of the volleyball club, her athletic body, her abs and her... yeah. Even the new girl, Mana Kirishima, had looked kinda nice from behind. *Ehem...* And then of course there was Rei. Lithe figure, but, ah, otherwise well developed. What a combination. After looking a bit too long in the direction of those girls in a state of undress, was it any wonder she
spent most of the PE lesson somewhat bedazzled?

So it appeared some girls did do something for her. Hmm.

“Are you spying on me or what?” Asuka asked. Hah. Projection much, Asuka?

“It... was pretty obvious,” Hikari answered. “You looked kinda... flustered. I already worried you had a fever.”

“You're weird,” Asuka said dismissively.

Hikari didn’t reply, and neither Shinji nor Rei said a word. Oh great. Another conversation killed by the great Asuka Langley-Soryu...

Finally, they all kinda trotted inside and waited for the teacher to arrive. Maths was easy as always, Japanese a chore as always. History was just plain boring, but at least not as exhausting as Japanese. Asuka idly looked around in the room. Rei was looking out of the window, as always. Kensuke looked like he might die from boredom any minute now. Touji did something below his desk, probably using his phone. Mana had arrived late to class and now kept glancing over at Shinji. Grrr... And Shinji... Shinji appeared to be actually attentive. Huh.

He sat upright, his eyes on the teacher, obviously listening. That was odd. Most people thought the droning, rambling history teacher to be the worst bore in all of Tokyo-3. And Shinji himself rarely paid attention to anything, or rather, rarely showed interest in anything. He could pilot the EVA well, but only because he had been forced to. Even cooking was the same: He was excellent at it, but had only really started with it out of self-defence from Misato's attempts at it.

And while Asuka could only see him from behind, she kinda liked seeing a Shinji who took an interest in something. To see his usually so mopy figure straightened up. He was kinda cute that way...

...I'm so fucked up. Time to get my plan going.

That was why she immediately jumped up from her seat when the break started. Unfortunately, Mana had an advantage over her, sitting as she was right next to Shinji.

“I'm really wondering what I can even do next week,” Asuka heard the brunette complain. “I hope it won't get too boring.”

“Well, uh, you could...” Shinji stuttered.

Oh no you don't! The boy was too good-hearted for his own good; of course he would offer help. Or maybe he has already taken a liking to Ms Schoolgirl Stereotype? That notion kinda frightened Asuka. It... would threaten her plans in regards to him and Rei. Yeah. That would be bad.

“Hey, Shinji,” she interrupted in a deliberately loud voice.

He turned towards her.

“There's...” Asuka began, and then was unsure how to continue. She shrugged. Why not be blunt? “There's something we need to talk about. Come with me.”
“Uh, what?” Shinji responded.

Asuka grabbed his arm. “I said, come with me.” And with that she basically dragged Shinji along behind her.

*Right. I got him away from the Dark Seductress, and I can him ask about Rei. Efficient.* In fact, getting away from Mana was no small extra bonus. The brunette had constantly orbited around Shinji the previous day. It was kinda unsettling how quickly and how *much* she was latching onto the boy.

Asuka stopped her march once they had reached the building’s central staircase.

“Uh... Asuka...” Shinji spoke up after some seconds of silence, looking pointedly at her hand still holding his arm.

“Oh,” Asuka voiced. Even then it took some more seconds until she let go.

“So... what's this about?” Shinji asked.

“What do you think about Rei?” Asuka asked bluntly.

“In... in what way?” Shinji posed a counter-question.

“Well... in general!” Asuka exclaimed.

Shinji looked somewhat suspicious now. “She's a nice girl. Uh... dedicated pilot. Quiet, of course, but uh, you know that. Fun to walk to school with. Yeah...”

Asuka furrowed her brows. “Is that all?”

“Well, what more do you want?” Shinji asked. It sounded like he tried his best not to sound too complaining, not to give offence.

Which of course only served to further annoy Asuka. “Well... you think she looks attractive?”

*That* got Shinji nervous. “Ah... sorta? I mean... she's, uh... exotic. The blue hair and all.”

*Exotic.* That was not much to work with. “And do you think she's... you know... a good person?”

“Uh... sure,” Shinji answered. “She... she always listened. And she jumped into that beam for you. Ahhh... I mean... before *you* defeated that angel, of course.”

Asuka dismissed Shinji's obvious concerns with a handwave. It had been in fact her who had eliminated Ramiel, so she didn't see Rei's action as competition. Rather she was still astounded that anyone would take a lethal beam shot for her, even if with protective shield and as part of a mission.

“Yes, yes, but *beyond* that,” Asuka demanded to know. “I mean... you've hung out with her an awful lot. Well, 'a lot' for you. And certainly for her. So, you know...”

“I know... what?” Shinji asked suspiciously.
An idea for a formulation hit Asuka. “If you had to choose a girlfriend, would you choose her?”

Shinji's eye widened. His face reddened. “You... you can't put me on the spot like this!”

“Oh come on, just answer the damned question!” Asuka demanded.

“Oh well... I mean... maybe... not that you... I mean... I won't... uh...” Shinji stuttered.

Asuka rolled her eyes. “Right.” Why had she ever thought she could get Shinji talking about girls and relationships? The guy still turned into a tomato every time Touji told one of his dirty jokes. She would have to be more subtle...

...only that she couldn't do 'subtle', of course.

She sighed in annoyance. “Let's just get back into the classroom.”

---

This sucks. Boooring!

Asuka was all alone in her apartment and had nothing at all to do. Well, that wasn't quite correct. Theoretically, she still had an essay to write. *Eh, screw that.* Her entire class would be preparing for the big day tomorrow, Monday, the flight to Okinawa, but she of course wasn't part of that. It was just unfair! Her piloting was never even *brought up* in her daily life, never recognized... and the one time it did interact with her daily life was to deprive her of something. It really felt like she had to get out there and fight monsters, at the risk of her life, and then be punished for it. It wasn't fair that the sacrifices she had already made anyway should have to come with yet more sacrifice, instead of being rewarded.

After all, she had spent hour after hour training since she was six. Between that and school/college, she had barely had any free time at all. And was that ever recognized? No, rather, to add insult to injury, now she was even deprived of a single school trip. A small issue maybe, all things considered, but for the first time in a long while she had a feeling that EVA was screwing her life over.

Unfortunately, she had nothing else.

And to make matters worse, the previous day, Saturday, Rei had disappeared. She hadn't even told her anything; Asuka had just found out she was gone in the morning. Some calls Misato had made on her insistence had revealed she was at the Geofront for a lengthy medical check-up; Dr Akagi estimated she would stay there for several days. *What can they prod her about for several days?* Was there something wrong with Rei? It would fit to her to not mention such things, even if they were maybe a life-threatening condition. *Oh Gott...*

More immediately it meant that Asuka was bored. Misato had promised her that her belongings would be moved to the new apartments on Monday, and a new TV should arrive within the week. *Finally, finally* she would be able to play video games again. But for now all she could do was to sit in the kitchen and stare at the wall. *Fuck.* She was left fuming at her situation, worrying about Rei and getting bored out of her mind.

With a loud groan that probably could be heard two blocs over, Asuka got up, grabbed her wallet and got out of the apartment. Walking two doors over, she rang the bell of the Katsuragi residence.
Misato opened.

“Hello, Asuka,” she greeted her.

“Yes, yes, hello,” Asuka greeted back... in a way. “Is Shinji here and no, you don't even need to bother, I can already guess what you'll say. Just answer my question.”

“Charming as ever,” Misato muttered. “Shinji's inside, yeah.” She turned around and called: “Hey, Shin-chan! Asuka is here to take you on a daaate.”

“Oh for fuck's sake...” Asuka grumbled.

Shinji appeared at the door. He seemed hesitant. “Uh... yeah, Asuka?”

“Rei's still away and I'm bored,” she told him bluntly. “Let's go to the city.”

“See,” Misato addressed Shinji. “Told you!”

Shinji ignored her. “Uh... Sure. Let me get my things.”

Asuka wondered what those “things” could even be. It wasn't like Shinji had ever been seen in anything else than black trousers with too long belts and white shirts, outside of PE and NERV activities.

Come to think of it, I should take him shopping as well. Together with Rei... well, together with Rei and her NERV credit card.

“Have fuu-uun,” Misato trilled as the two turned to leave. Shinji sighed. Asuka rolled her eyes.

“How do you stand living with that person on a daily basis?” an exasperated Asuka asked.

Shinji remained uncomfortably silent. Huh. Apparently that issue was more serious than just Misato's teasing. Or Shinji is overdramatizing things again. Would fit to him.

“So,” she spoke up again. “Any idea what to do now?”

“You're the one who wanted to go to the city!” Shinji protested.

Asuka hand-waved that protest away. “You've lived in this city longer than me.”

“Only by about two months!” Shinji protested again. “And you've been to the city plenty of times by now.”

“True,” Asuka admitted in an aggressive voice. “So, do you want to go to the hairdresser first? Or the boutiques? Or maybe the beauty salon?”

“...I see your point,” Shinji mumbled. He glanced over sideways to her. “That's all you've ever done there?”

Asuka raised an eyebrow. “As opposed to you... doing what exactly in the city?”

“Ah... well... uh...” Shinji stuttered. Then he stopped walking. “Oh. That's right. Say, Asuka, you
like playing video games, don't you?"

“Or I would if NERV finally handed my consoles back over to me. Or got me a TV,” Asuka complained.

“Well, I just remembered, the inner city mall recently reopened,” Shinji told her. “They had an arcade hall there. Maybe that one is open again as well.”

Asuka scoffed. “You still have arcade halls here?”

“Uh... yeah?” Shinji answered.

*Arcade halls. Seriously. Have I stepped into the 80s?* She shrugged. “Well, it's an idea, at least.”

She got moving again.

There was one advantage to Tokyo-3 that even Asuka had to admit: Its excellent public transportation system. Granted, Berlin had two subway networks, the S-Bahn network, the trams in the east of the city... but some of the trains on the S-Bahn network weren't merely pre-Second Impact or even only pre-Reunification, but *pre-World War 2*. Mothballed in 1997 and slated to be scrapped, they had to be reactivated after the grave damages of Second Impact. Meanwhile, Tokyo-3 employed ultramodern, state of the art trains on a coherently planned grid network.

...which meant they *really* could have used normal seats to fill up the train wagons instead of benches at the side to leave the centre free for standing passengers. Due to the excellent condition of the system, it wasn't like how things had been in old Tokyo, with every cm³ of the wagons used to cram passengers in. No, due to the lack of benches or seats it merely meant there would be too few sitting places during rush hour.

*Silly Japanese.*

“So,” Asuka spoke up from her position on the bench, “Do you have any idea what could have happened to Rei?”

“Ah well,” Shinji, sitting next to her, answered. “Could be anything. She has often been absent from school before. Never for several days at once, though."

“Hrm. I don't like this!” Asuka complained. “We should get more information. Rei is one of us, after all. An EVA pilot. And they treat us like children who don't get to know anything!”

“Well, we are...” Shinji began.

“What normal children have to take several megaton into life and death battles?” Asuka argued forcefully. “We're doing adults' work. More than normal adults' work, in fact. So they should treat us accordingly. Hell, I have a college degree!”

Shinji didn't answer to that. Asuka pointedly sighed in exasperation. She really *hated* it when he did things like that. Hated it when he appeared sullen or weak. It was pathetic.

...and yet, at the same time it also made her feel genuinely sympathetic. She would *like* to see Shinji more cheerful, or just... smiling. Which of course was one more reason to hate his dark moods, when he wasn't and which made Asuka feel conflicted.
Asuka hadn't had a chance to visit the mall before Ramiel destroyed it, so she couldn't say how well they had built it up again. But whatever it was before, now it looked quite magnificent, full of lights and potted plants and squeaky clean ground tiles. And the amount of small stores inside was truly staggering. *Why couldn't they have finished this sooner? Having everything in one building would have made that shopping trip with Rei so much easier!*

The arcade hall had in fact reopened as well. There were some clunky machines in a corner that looked like they had come straight out of the 80s, but those were definitely the minority. The whole place looked sleek and modern, and most of its attractions were things standard PCs and consoles didn't offer: 3d and even VR goggles, laser pistols, dancing mats. To say that this all looked very interesting to Asuka would have been an understatement; starved of video games for months now she felt like she had entered the promised land.

*Shinji has been good for something. Who would've thought?*

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an unfair thought, but Asuka was too busy too care, already basically jumping to the nearest free shooter game. Then to a piloting simulator... okay, *that* one felt a bit familiar. Though, really, even the shooting games were familiar enough. *Target in the centre, pull the switch...* Asuka didn't mind, though. Quite the opposite: She enjoyed the skill boost her NERV training gave her in those games. She was *better* than anyone else playing them.

“Hey, it's Shinji! And... Soryu? Man, I'm sorry, Shinji!”

Asuka groaned in her “pilot's seat”. Touji. Which meant...

“Hey there, Shinji, Soryu.”

*Yeah. The two stooges.* She ended her game and stood up. And indeed there they were, approaching her and Shinji: Touji in his usual training apparel and Kensuke in his usual white shirt.

“Uh.. shouldn't you two be packing?” Shinji asked.

Kensuke shrugged as they came to a halt. “Already did. Now we have nothing better to do.”

“Yeah, it'll be so much fun t...” Touji tried to tease them.

“Not another word!” Asuka cut in and aggressively pointed her finger at him. “Remember my promise about aiming higher the next time? Yeah.”

“Spoilsport,” Touji muttered. “I'm sure Shinji...”

“If I hear you say anything to me, him or Rei, there'll be... scrambled eggs,” Asuka threatened. Before he could reply, she threw her arms into the air and began to vent, “I mean, for fuck's sake!” The use of the expletive had everyone stunned. “We're protecting your sorry asses, and what do we get in return? We can't even go on school trips! And instead of sympathy from *those we fucking protect*, we get mockery! Maybe I should simply let the next angel destroy the city!”

“Well, it's your job...” Touji muttered.

“Yes, the job I *chose* to take on,” Asuka reminded him forcefully. *Mana was right. We don't get enough respect. It's time to demand it from people.* “In order to keep you pathetic little clowns
protected. Without us, you'd all have been killed half a dozen times over. For that we risk our lives. For that we suffer the pain of the neural feedback. *So show some fucking respect.*

“I was just trying to make a joke!” Touji complained loudly.

“At our expense,” Asuka pointed out coldly.

An icy, uncomfortable silence followed. The four stood in a sort of rectangle next to the piloting simulator, all looking at each other tensely. Shinji in particular looked awkward. He was the one who stood furthest away from the other three, doing his best to appear invisible.

“Ah, well,” Kensuke spoke up nervously. “Maybe we should...”

“No. She is right,” Touji spoke up again. He sounded unwilling to admit this, but surprisingly serious for him. “If they don't want jokes about it...” He shrugged. Asuka was stunned.

“Uh... right...” Kensuke voiced.

“We saw what it's like,” Touji pointed out to him.

That got Kensuke serious as well. “Yeah. We did.”

Touji turned to Asuka again. “You're right, I suppose. It's shitty that you can't go.”

As far as apologies went, this one was a bit lame. Though at least it didn't involve the usual Japanese bowing nonsense. Touji was probably too Osakan for that.

“She didn't need to put it like that,” Kensuke complained in a small voice.

“Only way to get it through your thick skulls!” Asuka claimed.

“What are you two doing here, anyway?” Touji asked dismissively.

“What does it look like, genius?” Asuka shot back.

Touji narrowed his eyes. “What about Ayanami? Hey, Shinji, you should take her along...” He looked at Asuka. “Uh... take her along as well, I mean.”

“Ah, she's getting some sort of medical treatment,” Shinji explained. “Seems like she couldn't have gone to Okinawa anyway...”

Another silence followed, which was broken by Kensuke. “You any good at those games?”

Asuka scoffed. “I only discovered them today, but I bet I could beat your sorry ass in them.”

Kensuke smirked. “It's on.”

Touji sighed. “And here we go...”
Asuka was... frantic. That was the only way to describe her playing style. Neither her character, nor
the target cross, nor she herself were ever still. It was a markable contrast to Kensuke, who was
cold, unmoving, outwardly professional. And whereas Asuka routinely muttered German
swearwords, Kensuke remained entirely quiet.

Normally one would think this would ensure Kensuke's victory, but it was always a close affair. He
did win time after time, but then he was the group's master gamer who had visited this
establishment dozens of time whereas Asuka was a green rookie who had come here for the first
time. She had experience with console games and, Shinji suspected, NERV's VR training, but the
games she played here she had never touched before. Clearly, her wild and exhausting playing
style worked for her.

What was more, seeing Asuka bent forwards, backwards and sideways in her tight jeans, see her
jumping around, sweating, growling...

...it invoked some very peculiar feelings inside Shinji. Like he could grab her right now and...

"Ehem. Why the hell was he having such abysmal thoughts? That was terrible of him!"

Touji sighed. "Poor Soryu."

Reluctantly, Shinji turned his attention away from the game to his friend. "Huh?"

"She'll never get rid of Kensuke now," Touji explained. "This is the first time in forever he has
found a more or less equal opponent. He should be very happy right now."

"Sure doesn't look like it," Shinji muttered.

Touji shrugged. "You know how he is during games. Ice cold."

Before Shinji could reply, Asuka burst out in loud curses. "This is bullshit!" She had lost again.

"Absolute bullshit! Who designed these games? Let's have another round!"

"Ah, I'm running out of mon..." Kensuke tried.

"I'm paying. Now shut up and play!" Asuka demanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Kensuke confirmed.

A wall separated the two players, so that neither could look on the other's screen. Both had a pistol
at hand with which to shoot at the screen... and ideally kill the other's character or its AI allies. As
soon as Asuka had paid the two went hunting each other again.

Kensuke found Asuka first.

Her nervous playing style saved her. While some shots grazed her persona, she got away. Kensuke
didn't comment at all; Asuka emitted a vicious growl as she was finally around a corner.

"Yes! Now go get him!" Shinji suddenly cheered Asuka on. She would be unbearable if she didn't
win a single game, but that wasn't the main reason why Shinji did so. Mostly it was... seeing Asuka
play, she was so alive. So fiery. So... uh... yeah, he had to admit it: So goddamn attractive.
Touji shot an angry glare at him and then turned his attention back to the game. “Don't give up, Kensu! You nearly had her! Victory is yours!”

Some other people in the arcade hall turned their heads to them, but nobody really cared. The rules were a bit more relaxed here, and people cheering on their friends happened.

In the end, Asuka lost that game again, again under loud curses.

“Another one!” she demanded.

...and lost that one as well. Kensuke was down to barely any life points at all, but he remained victorious.

“Gottverdamnte Scheiße!” she cursed. “You can't be serious! How can you... after all that... and you still survive! That's bullshit!”

“Well, I have played this game for...” Kensuke tried, but he didn't come far.

“Well, you'll play it another time!” Asuka demanded.

“Uh, are you sure that's...” Kensuke began, but he was interrupted again.

“I'm damn sure and I'm paying, so shut up!” Asuka ordered him.

Kensuke shrugged, turned towards his screen and started. His character cautiously looked around corners, crawled through ventilation shafts, directed his AI minions. He was a cold-blooded professional...

...who was suddenly under fire.

Running through a city square, Kensuke's character managed to reach the safety of a half-bombed out house... a safety that proved to be treacherous. AI minions of Asuka's had occupied it, and while Kensuke cleaned them out easily, that took time. Shortly after the last of the AI characters had been dispatched, Kensuke's avatar came under fire from the building level above him. It retreated into a corner and waited...

...click click click...

Something metal rolled over the virtual ground. A grenade. It exploded.

“Flawless victory!”

“Yes!” Asuka exclaimed. Her avatar had not been touched once. “Yes! Yes yes yes! Take that, Four-Eyes! You may win, but I win in style!”

She was positively glowing. Like a sparkling fire... and right now Shinji felt like a moth. Damnit, but he wanted to see Asuka like that more often. Maybe cause her to be like that.

“That... was honestly impressive,” Kensuke admitted, peering around the wall separating the two. “You really have never played this game?”

“Pff. No need to,” Asuka claimed arrogantly.
“Apparently not,” Kensuke conceded. “So, are you content now?”

“Quite,” Asuka agreed haughtily. “You want to give up already?”

Kensuke shrugged. “Well, I already got three free games out of it. I doubt you'll dole out more now that you've won.”

“Hah, you're right,” Asuka confirmed. “Actually, I'm kinda hungry. We should go eat something, Shinji.”

“Uh... well... I haven't eaten anything yet, either,” Shinji admitted.

“Come on, Shin-Man, you want to let yourself be bullied around by Soryu?” Touji protested. “Stay with us and we'll do something fun.”

Kensuke shrugged and smirked. “While he's hungry? I don't think that works. Come on, Touji, we've played enough for today. Have a good day, Shinji, Soryu.”

“Wait, what?” Touji protested as Kensuke got going.

“Come on, Touji,” Kensuke repeated without turning around. “Let them eat something.”

“Oh, that's bullshit,” Touji grumbled as he followed his friend.

What was that about? Shinji wondered as he watched the two leave.

“So, you're coming?” Asuka asked.

“Ah, sure,” Shinji agreed.

The place they decided to go to... okay, the place Asuka decided they would go to was a fast food restaurant serving burgers and fries. Asuka claimed she was getting sick of having rice with everything and 'weird' sauces as part of almost every meal.

“Well, that was satisfying,” Asuka declared before she put about five fries at once in her mouth.

“The game, or venting at Touji?” Shinji muttered.

Asuka scoffed and chewed on her fries. After she had gulped them down she declared, “Both, of course.” She looked at Shinji across the table and narrowed her eyes. “Don't tell me you disapprove.”

“It's just... it could make things kinda awkward,” Shinji explained. “I mean, they are my friends.”

“Well, that was satisfying,” Asuka agreed. “Don't tell me you disapprove.”

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“It's just... it could make things kinda awkward,” Shinji explained. “I mean, they are my friends.”

“All the more reason for them to be more considerate of you!” Asuka argued.

“What do you mean?” Shinji asked, honestly confused.
“What do you mean ‘what do you mean?’?” Asuka shot back. “If they are your friends, then they should be considerate and friendly towards you. Seems obvious to me!”

“But... they are my friends,” Shinji just repeated. “That means, we don't need to be all polite and thoughtful and all that around each other. It means we can be relaxed with each other.”

Asuka's arm stopped mid-movement of grabbing more fries. “...right. That's this Japanese ingroup-outgroup bullshit, isn't it?”

Shinji had no idea what she meant by that specifically, but he got the gist of it. “Things are... different in Germany?”

Asuka shrugged. “I'm just saying. If I have friends, I'd expect them to be mindful of me.”

“More so than with strangers?” Shinji asked.

“Of course!” Asuka exclaimed. “What else is the point of friends then? They're the people you go that extra mile for.”

Shinji considered that. “Well... you aren't wrong, but... they're also the people around which you can be yourself.”

“Maybe,” Asuka allowed. “But not at the friend's expense.”

Shinji used the ensuing silence to take a bite of his burger. He had no problems with fast food per se, but after the last few months of having spent quite some effort on preparing his meals himself he found it somewhat lacking. Asuka obviously seemed to enjoy it, though. Maybe it was just was because it was in fact something else for once. Or maybe she just liked eating in general; she certainly seemed to enjoy his cooking as well. Or maybe she actually doesn't and would like more 'western' food...

“Though yes, winning against Kensuke was also fun,” Asuka stated. “And how I did! Flawless victory! He never achieved that against me!”

Shinji barely managed to suppress a ‘Took you long enough’. Instead, he formulated it slightly more politely. “Achieving that seemed important to you.”

“I always win in the end,” Asuka claimed, sounding slightly icy.

“It seems so,” Shinji muttered.

“You doubt that?” Asuka asked. She sounded enraged now.

“No, no, no, not doubt...” Shinji defended himself. “It just seems to me... you went to some awful lengths to get that victory. I'm just wondering if it was worth it.”

“I always win in the end,” Asuka repeated her position.

Shinji hesitated. Asuka looked proud now, but it seemed a very fragile pride. A pride Shinji wouldn't want to shatter. He even kinda liked that attitude about her. That drive that he himself utterly lacked. And yet...
“That's important to you?” he asked.

“What does that matter to you?” Asuka shouted angrily.

“Sorry,” Shinji whispered. “It's just... I never felt the same.”

Asuka scoffed. “That's obvious.”

Shinji looked around before answering. There was a group of three people present, older teenagers, but they were several tables away. Apart from that, the restaurant was empty. “And yet... we both lost our mothers to EVA. At the same time. And yet then... developed so differently.”

Asuka stared at him angrily for a moment. Then the tension left her body. “I did wonder about that, actually. You told me how... how your mother left you, how your father abandoned you. Just like with me.” Shinji nodded. Asuka shifted in her seat uncomfortably and finally shrugged. “I can't make people stop abandoning me. It's what people do. I had half a dozen guardians during my time in NERV, for example. But I can... I can make them respect me. Being on top... means being safe.” She breathed out. “So how can you be so calm about all that?”

Oh.

Half a dozen emotions ran through Shinji's head. Foremost surprise, of course, that Asuka would tell him that. Awkwardness, about what to say now. Even a certain fear about having to explain himself in turn now. A slowly dawning realization about Asuka. And, strangely, the instinctive desire to wrap her in his arms and be the one person to not leave her.

...not that she would ever let him.

Finally, he managed to speak up. “What would be the point of trying? My mother left me, my father abandoned me, and my tutor never really cared about me. No matter what I did. I just... I just want the world to go away, sometimes. The SDAT player helps in that.”

“You've given up,” Asuka summarized flatly. “You don't even try.”

Shinji didn't answer, just held his head rigidly downwards, looking at his tray with the fries and the remaining burger.

He heard Asuka whisper, “Verdammt noch einmal, Ikari... Drecks...”

Shinji felt a sudden strong grip around his left lower arm. He looked up to see a determined expression on Asuka's face, looking right him. “So you've given up. And I've become a goddamn tryhard.” She laughed bitterly. “The elite EVA pilot corps, everyone.”

Her eyes widened when, by a sheer impulse he couldn't explain himself, he laid his hand on hers. “We've gone through the same things. But I think you've dealt better with them than me.

Asuka hastily withdrew her hand. “I'm not so sure about that,” she muttered, nearly to the point of unintelligibility.

“I mean, I think I know what you mean,” Shinji continued. “If I thought it could change anything... could maybe bring Father back...” He shook his head. “Maybe winning would be just as important
to me. Instead, I've given up.”

“And I can understand that,” Asuka assured him. “I've long since given up on...” She fought with the right words. “...on things getting better, I guess. I just desperately hope they don't get worse.”

“Oh,” Shinji voiced. Then he shrugged. “I guess I kinda assume it'll come to that. Life at my tutor's was bad, but then... but then I had to pilot Evangelion.”

“It's... weird to me to hear you talk about Evangelion in that way,” Asuka admitted quietly. “But I guess there really is no reason why it should mean as much to you as it does to me. You kinda really were grabbed off the street.”

Now, for once, it was Shinji who scoffed. “That's one way of putting it. Another one is that my father...” He stopped, overwhelmed by emotions. His hands balled into fists. “He hadn't spoken with me in ten years, or even only written to me. And then I get a note, and the only thing it says is to come to Tokyo-3. And then I find out the only reason he called for me is to have me pilot that... that thing.” He hissed that word, and added in a whisper, “To have me suffer.”

“...and I thought my father was an asshole,” Asuka commented. “At least he always did write to me at Christmas and my birthdays. And he never used another girl to blackmail me.”

“Damn it,” Shinji cursed. “He never showed his face in ten years. Why is he still having such an effect on me?”

“...because you have nothing else,” Asuka attempted an explanation. “I know how that is. And... maybe that's for the best. Look at how I threw myself at the Evangelion program.”

“Always staying safe,” Shinji muttered.

Asuka nodded in confirmation. And at that moment, Shinji felt so incredibly close to her, like... the only other time he had felt so close to a person had been the double-synch with Ayanami, and that had involved weird EVA neurotech. Here and now he seemed to have achieved that entirely without such enigmatic technology. For a moment he truly did wish to never leave her alone again, and not just for her sake – for his as well.

A fast food restaurant was a weird place to have such an intensely emotional moment.

“Maybe...” Asuka began. “Maybe we have nothing at the moment. Or only have the Evangelion program. But that'll pass, surely? Surely, eventually... we'll just have to survive until then.”

A shiver went down Shinji's spine as Asuka so bluntly put the risks of their 'job'. They make us fight life and death battles... And for once, Asuka seemed to notice how someone in her vicinity felt.

“Hey,” she spoke up forcefully. “We will survive. So that we'll find... I dunno... stuff to live for. Bah, that sounds awfully high-minded. But you know what I mean.” She worked her mouth. “You will survive. I'll protect you. I promise you.”

Half a smile appeared on Shinji's face. The same promise he had made to Ayanami. And Ayanami, in the end, had protected Asuka against Ramiel's beam.

“I'll take you up on that,” he said softly. Asuka nodded again, as if to reaffirm the point.
In that moment it occurred to Shinji that maybe they all had something worth living for within reach. But it was a quick and fleeting thought.

The rest of the meal was spent in silence. After what they had just said, what more was there to add? So it was a comfortable silence. They had stated what needed to be stated. In fact, Shinji had never planned to go that far in the conversation, but... strangely and against all expectations it had paid off. Even if it had meant holding that conversation in a fast food restaurant of all places.

Weird... weird... weird...

That thought kept circulating in Asuka's mind. That conversation... she hadn't meant to open up like that, but it had felt good, but it was being held in a friggen fast food restaurant.

It figured that she had been forced to make the first step. To tell Shinji about... her. Her development. Her... fears. That was weird as well. There was no other person with whom Asuka would have talked about this. Certainly none of the half dozen guardians she had, or her stepmother, or even her father. But Shinji... he had gone through the same anyway, hadn't he? She had been sure he'd understand. Still nervous, of course. But then he had in fact shown to understand.

And Asuka had almost shivered.

It seemed Shinji had been hit harder than herself. She at least still struggled. Maybe it had made her an obsessive, aggressive bitch, but by God, she still struggled. She wasn't dead yet. But Shinji... he had just given up. And while normally Asuka would sneer at that... It wasn't like this made Shinji useless. Quite the contrary. He cooked for her, he listened to her, he had defeated two angels solo. So at that moment, what Asuka had felt was an intense anger at Gendo Ikari, genuine sympathy for Shinji, something she hadn't felt in a while... except maybe for Rei, but that was Ikari's fault as well...and a need to somehow shelter him. Protect him.

And amazingly, she had even managed to express that as well. Normally conversations just didn't go that way for her!

And when she now looked at Shinji eating up the last of his fries... that honest face, the typically slumped shoulders, the sad attempts at smiles that adorned that face now and then... something inside her wanted to 'protect and shelter' him in much more direct ways. Which was a bit scary. Sudden thoughts and images about holding Shinji...

It was little wonder that the two of them were both a bit awkward when they got up and left the restaurant.

...only to discover a familiar hairdo in the crowd outside, short-clipped, red-tinged brown hair. Mana Kirishima. Asuka's mood soured slightly. What's she doing here?

By chance she and Shinji approached Mana's position. The girl was talking with a man in his fifties, who looked bullish and muscular, but as if to compensate for that image wore an excellent business suit. Hands as broad as a child's head attached to arms covered in what was probably
designer clothing. The man hesitated when he saw the two approaching. Mana turned around as well.

“Ah, Ikari, Soryu,” she greeted them. “Ah... that's my uncle. Yohei Kaneko. He's taking care of me.” Kaneko nodded curtly at the two. “Those are Shinji Ikari and Asuka Soryu, classmates of mine. What are you doing here?”

Before Shinji could answer, Asuka let herself be led by her annoyance at the girl. “I could just as well ask the same of you.”

“True enough,” Mana admitted. “I've been shopping with my uncle. Still finding things for our new apartment.” She giggled. Of course...

“We've been to the arcade hall,” Shinji offered with a half-smile. Asuka rolled her eyes.

“They have an arcade hall here?” Mana asked.

“Uh... if you're here... you should have passed it,” Asuka pointed out.

There was a bit of silence. “Oh. Well. I'm not very observant it seems,” Mana admitted. And giggled. “Well, maybe I should accompany you two to there one of these days. It's not like we have anything to do next week after all.”

“Don't you start as well,” Asuka muttered.

“Oh, I wouldn't...” Mana began but then stopped herself. “I mean, I just want some ways to alleviate the sure to come boredom.”

“Right,” Asuka muttered. “Well, we should be going.” She turned around and left the scene.

“Ah... have a nice day still, Kirishima, Mr Kaneko,” Shinji still said before following her.
Asuka felt and looked tired. A combination of having had the whole previous day free, finally getting back her consoles and a TV after several weeks without and not having a room mate present to rein her in meant she had gotten very little sleep. She had played the entire Street Fighter series forwards and backwards, Tekken, Mortal Kombat, the FIFA games, racing simulators... She hadn't even noticed how the hours had flown by, and the only time she had left her apartment had been to go over to Misato's for dinner. Which was also the only time she had eaten that day.

“You look grumpy,” Misato observed as she led her and Shinji through the Geofront's corridors.

“They could have scheduled the test in the afternoon,” Asuka complained wearily. “At least that goddamn school trip should have meant no school and getting to sleep in for us.”

Misato just sighed. You're lucky I've come at all. Though Asuka did have a great motivation to do so. She hadn't left the house the day before, but she had made some calls.

This time, Misato and her pilots arrived at Akagi's lab in time. The woman was standing behind Ibuki, who was sitting at a terminal, a hand on her shoulder and looking at her screen.

Misato coughed to gain her friend's attention.

“I wouldn't have expected you for another quarter-hour,” Akagi said drily as she turned around.

Misato sighed. “Let's forego the usual needling, shall we?”

Before she could continue, though, Asuka interrupted her: “Doctor Akagi, what happened to Rei?”

“She's undergoing a lengthy medical check-up, just as I've told Misato,” Akagi told her, sounding slightly irritated.

“She isn't in the NERV medical ward,” Asuka countered. She raised her chin. “I checked the records.”

She had not, actually. She had notified Kaji about the whole thing, knowing that her former guardian was interested in anything odd going on inside NERV. And Kaji had called her back the previous day. But Akagi didn't need to know that detail. Asuka kinda liked presenting herself as some sorta master hacker or data expert.

“How would you have access to...” Akagi began, but then caught herself. Speaking calmly, she continued, “Rei is not in the regular medical ward. She requires special medical attention.”

“Special? How so?” Asuka demanded to know.

Misato looked at her with furrowed brows, but didn't comment, instead focusing her attention on Akagi now.

“Are you a trained medical specialist, Asuka? No?” Akagi argued. “Then I doubt you'd understand the specifics. Suffice to say, Rei exhibits some deviations from standard human biology. Or how many other girls with naturally blue hair have you met so far, Asuka?”
Asuka scoffed. “You could at least give us a summary.”

“Don’t worry,” Akagi told her. “Rei will be back in a few days. There’s no need to make a big issue out of that.”

Now, Asuka was fuming. That her concerns were simply pushed aside like that annoyed her to no end. *Even here at NERV, where they should really know better, people don’t treat us with respect!*

Misato sighed. “Let’s just do the test. Something nice and easy which we’ve already done a hundred times.”

“Actually, this won’t be a standard test,” Akagi disagreed.

Asuka groaned. “Another mad science experiment from you, Doctor?”

“It’s not like we have anything better to do,” Akagi defended herself. “Especially you and Shinji, who...”

“Don’t you start,” Asuka growled. Everyone in the room looked at her. She defiantly raised her head. Okay, so this had been a flagrant violation of Japanese expectations of respect for superiors, but what did she care?

Akagi just shrugged, unimpressed. “Be that as it may. There’s no telling when we’ll have time for experiments again. And surely you want your Evangelion optimized for the battles against the angels.” Asuka just scoffed. “Besides, it isn’t even possible for us to do normal synch-tests today. EVA-01 isn’t available.”

“Why not?” Misato asked.

“It’s undergoing intensive maintenance works,” Akagi explained. “Which will probably last for some more days as well. Same for EVA-00. Therefore, we only have EVA-02 available.”

“Then what will I be doing?” Shinji asked.

Akagi smirked slightly. “You’ll be inside EVA-02. Together with Asuka.”

“A double-synch experiment?” Asuka exclaimed. “But you said this wouldn’t be possible with Shinji and me!”

“I don’t really expect to get any results,” Akagi admitted. “But EVA-01 is unavailable, and we have time. So might as well experimentally test my theories.”

Asuka groaned. “Great. That’s what I’ve been chased out of bed for. Playing guinea pig for your theories.” Inwardly, though, there was a weird feeling of hope. If this worked... if she could share the same with Shinji as he had shared with Rei...

“You would have had a synch-test either way,” Akagi argued calmly. “EVA-02 is available, after all. And if against all expectation this experiment works... think about what possibilities this opens up to us in the future! We still don’t know what caused the spike in Shinji’s and Rei’s synch-rates, but if this could be utilized on the battlefield... well, I don’t think I need to explain to you the value of that.”
“So, what? You want me to climb into that entry-plug together with Shinji?” Asuka asked provocatively. “So that he can feel me up or what?”

Shinji didn't even protest; he just looked down on the floor. *Great, so he would actually feel me up?* Part of Asuka had no problems with that, but all in all, the great Asuka Langley-Soryu did not just allow boys to do that to her. Still, she was slightly sorry about having pushed Shinji into the defensive like that *yet again*.

“Rei had no problems with that,” Misato trilled. *Rei also had no problem appearing in the nude in front of us.* But even Asuka couldn't just blurt this out. Rei had nothing to do with this, and she didn't want to denigrate her in front of Misato and Akagi.

“That's *her* choice,” Asuka stated and crossed her arms. She kinda *wanted* to see if she could get the same results with Shinji as Rei did, but she couldn't very well admit to that. Besides, she was still annoyed at Akagi, and saw no reason why the doctor shouldn't feel that.

“You're a pilot, Asuka,” Misato reminded her, now sounding forceful. “Act professionally.”

*Oh. So that's how it is. I am to show respect, but they...* Asuka narrowed her eyes. “Is that what you think as well, Dr Akagi? That I should act 'professionally’?”

“Yes it is, Asuka,” Akagi answered gravely.

“Don't you see the contradiction in what you've just said?” Asuka asked.

Again, people were looking at her. Confused. “What do you mean?” Akagi asked.

“You want me, as an EVA pilot, to treat you professionally,” Asuka argued. “So why am I not treated professionally, as an EVA pilot?”

“And what do you mean by *that*?” Misato intervened.

Asuka didn't turn to her, but let her gaze rest on Akagi. “When exactly have she and I herded pigs together?”

Everyone in the conversation, and the onlookers of that conversation, looked confused. Except Misato, but then, she had lived in Germany. She just groaned. “Really, Asuka?”

'Have we herded pigs together?' or variants thereof was a slightly passive-aggressive German phrase, said when taking offence at others using the informal address or assuming a first name basis (the two usually went together). Now, it wasn't that Asuka really *minded* being addressed by her first name. That was how it was done in Germany as well, after all: Children were addressed by their first name. But there was a difference: In Germany, *everybody* did so, including other children. Children were just addressed by first name, period. That was just a general rule and hence not a marker of status or anything.

But here in Japan, she was expected to address her classmates by family name (not that she really did), while at the same time adults could freely address them with their first name. That did make it a hierarchical status thing, with who gets to address whom in what way a matter of relative social
standing. And it was time for Asuka to demand her appropriate social standing. Besides, why shouldn't she be addressed as an adult? The same people, at the same time, expected her to do adult's work, to go out into life and death battles and fight for their protection, and then still reserved the right to treat her as a child. Cherry-picking the best of both worlds for them.

No longer. After all, demanding respect had worked with the stooges, so why not here as well?

“What does she mean by that?” Akagi asked Misato.

“If you want professionalism, a professional working relationship between us, then you should act and speak accordingly,” Asuka told her. “Then we are colleagues. Then, I am Pilot Soryu to you. And then, yes, then maybe you can order me into that entry-plug, as a matter of professionalism.”

“Really now?” Akagi asked.

“Misato gets a free pass as my guardian,” Asuka told her. After all, she could also call her by first name. There was equal standing. “You don't. Be glad I don't expect you to say 'Pilot Langley-Soryu.'” Her Japanese documents listed 'Langley' as her middle name instead of as part of her double family name, but as far as Asuka was concerned, that was nonsense. Her German passport and the documents from NERV Germany got it right.

“Are you going to demand that of Commander Ikari and Vice Commander Fuyutsuki as well?” Misato muttered.

“Just watch me,” Asuka snarled.

Akagi sighed. “Very well, Soryu. You are expected to enter the entry plug together with Shinji.”

Asuka nodded forcefully, as if to make her victory official that way. Maybe I owe Mana a word of thanks. Not that she'd ever utter such... “Then I'll go change.” And with that, she turned and left the others behind in the room.

Asuka had made it very clear who would get the pilot's seat: She. After all, it was EVA-02, her Evangelion, they were in. Shinji would sit in her lap, not the other way round.

Even so, it was kinda awkward. The plugsuits were so thin that it felt like the two were sitting skin to skin. Awkward, but not exactly uncomfortable. After all, it wasn't like Asuka hadn't thought a lot recently about holding Shinji. And now that she was in such close physical contact with him... It felt as good as she had imagined it.

Not that she had any designs on him. She was still convinced the best way to go forward was to hook up Shinji and Rei; it was just Rei's sudden absence which had sabotaged the plan for the moment. But now that they were here anyway, playing guinea pigs for Akagi's mad science project, she could as well enjoy the situation, as far as she was concerned.

Akagi wanted to replicate the same conditions as in Shinji's and Rei's double-synch experiment as closely as possible; as part of that Shinji and Asuka were now expected to sit as close to each other as possible. And well, if that was demanded... Asuka laid her arms around the surprised Shinji. With how much her mind had dwelt on that recently, she could just as well try it. It was covered by scientific necessity now, after all.
She began feeling kinda hot. Shinji was... soft. In a good way. She idly wondered if Kaji, wiry as he was, would feel the same. Probably not. It was a bit like holding a live, and warm, teddy bear. She laid her head on his back.

“Uh... Aaa... Asuka...” Shinji protested weakly.

“Shut up and concentrate on synching!” Asuka told him. “We're here for a reason.”

“R...right,” Shinji confirmed.

“I want to get that top-end synchrate as well!” Asuka exclaimed. “That's why I'm doing it. Be professional about it.”

“Ah... right,” Shinji repeated.

After all, the end goal still was to hook him up with Rei.

It still felt good resting against him. And it made her imagine all sorts of other things she could do with him. Mentally, she angrily swiped those images away, but they persisted.

There was a giggle over the communication system. “Initiating First Contact,” announced Lieutenant Ibuki.

_The comm channels. Fuck!_ Asuka was about to frantically get away from Shinji, but then stopped. They just... didn't want to do so. _Screw them. And maybe I'll have a talk with Ibuki about 'professionalism' as well._ As she was currently going all out against NERV personnel anyway, she might as well go all out. And in the end, she was just following Akagi's orders, after all.

“Initiating Second Contact,” Ibuki announced, now more serious.

Asuka smiled as she felt EVA-02's familiar neural feedback. It had always felt like home to her, much more than whatever place she was currently living at. Apartments came and went, guardians came and went. And friends had been non-existent until recently. Only EVA-02 was always there for her.

...but there was something else. A presence, though she couldn't discern much more.

“Initiating Third Contact,” Ibuki announced.

Now Asuka was truly home. But it was as if there were another person in her home. She felt a sense of vulnerability, of loneliness, of fragility. A sense of... Shinji-ness. She raised her head from his back and looked at him. She couldn't discern any thoughts, and the sense was faint, as if far away, but... _That is what he feels? That is his world?_ 

It was not unlike her own.

“Asuka...” she heard Shinji mumble.

In response, she hugged him tighter and leaned her head against his back again. She would have few objections against going into battles like this.
Going into the experiment, there had only been two options: Either nothing at all would happen, with only Asuka synching and Shinji just being a bystander, like back then Touji and Kensuke in his own entry-plug... or he would feel Asuka-ness the same way he had felt Ayanami-ness. He had both dreaded and hoped for the latter.

He dreaded it because, well, it was Asuka. He liked her – really, really liked her, but it wasn't the same as with Ayanami. He felt similarly strongly for Ayanami, but the blue-haired girl was... safe. Soothing. Comforting. Asuka was fiery, challenging, always with the possibility of failure. And shying away from pain and the possibility of pain had always been his survival strategy. Still, he also hoped for success, because...

Just imagining the intense moment of closeness he had shared with Ayanami applied to Asuka made him shiver. Feeling Ayanami not just physically, but her very presence, her essence, that had been the best moment he had had since coming to Tokyo-3. And while he liked her serenity, he liked Asuka's passion just as much.

...he probably shouldn't feel that way. Not about two different girls. But he did. Despite how different they were. Which made him suspect he only liked them because they were the only two girls willing to put up with him.

He had not at all expected Asuka to hold him in an embrace from the beginning. It did make sense, though: The best chance to reproduce the synch-rate successes from the experiment with Ayanami were to replicate the conditions as accurately as possibly.

...that didn't mean Asuka had to lean her head against him, though. He protested of course, but Asuka dismissed the protest. And most notably didn't let go.

Shinji felt hot. And yet... he liked being held like that. The last time he had... the last time he had been was by his mother, more than ten years ago. Having Asuka all around him, her arms around his waist, her head on his back, her voice directly in his ear... it was terrifying and reassuring at the same time. And more than just that. It was too easy to imagine other sorts of physical contact now. Very easy.

“Initiating First Contact,” Ibuki announced with a giggle. Just like she had last time. Shinji felt embarrassed. Surely this reflected badly on him? Not so much that he had such reactions to Asuka, maybe, but that he had them to both Asuka and Ayanami. That seemed... somewhat perverted.

“Initiating Second Contact,” Ibuki announced a bit later. Now Shinji felt something but was vague and low level. He got a distinct sense of being in an EVA, but not only was that sense very much weaker than in “his” Evangelion, it also felt different. Friendly, but less... homely, if that made any sense. But what mattered was that he did feel something. Which meant, shortly he would feel...

“Initiating Third Contact.”

...there it was. Asuka. Her essence. Asuka-ness. Shinji sharply breathed in LCL. She was... burning and fragile like a flame. Vulnerable, but still struggling. Forever struggling against her demons, where he had long since given up. Burning brilliantly and hot, leaving behind nothing but ashes, but at the same time even the slightest wind gust could threaten it. And he didn't want this amazing flame to extinguish. He wanted to protect and nurture it and delight himself by watching it.
“Asuka,” he mumbled.

He felt Asuka's arms around him tighten, and her head returning to his back. Felt engulfed by that flame now. Felt protected by that flame. Nothing would dare pass it. Asuka had promised to protect him, and now he felt that promise. As long as he was under the cover of that flame, nothing would be able to touch him. Nothing. Not angels, not his father, not the world. He owed it to that flame... to Asuka to repay her.

When the test was over, both pilots left the entry-plug in a dazed state. Even after they had walked a few steps in silence, Asuka still had a hand on Shinji's right shoulder. She only hesitantly withdrew it. But at the same time, both pointedly avoided looking at each other, unsure how to process this intense emotional moment they had just experienced.

For a long moment, Shinji just stood under the shower, unmoving, letting the hot water wash over him. It wasn't like he hadn't expected this to happen, and yet... There was just nothing that could prepare one for such a moment. Ironically, it probably was weaker than the shared experience he had had with Ayanami; maybe the fact that he shouldn't be able to synch with EVA-02 at all did play a role. But that didn't even matter. He had felt Asuka, Asuka's inner essence, and that was what mattered. That was what shook him.

Asuka's fire... Asuka's body... Asuka's embrace... ...Ayanami's soothing coolness, Ayanami's body, embracing Ayanami. ...Ayanami holding Asuka? Asuka kissing Ayanami?...

More hot water washed over Shinji.

*I'm so fucked up.*

He was rather subdued when he got to the debriefing in Akagi's lab room.

“You two surprised me,” the scientist opened up the debriefing. “Something did happen. As I'm sure you perceived.” Both Asuka and Shinji just nodded, not looking at each other. “The effect was notably smaller than with Rei and Shinji in EVA-01, but it was there. Shinji at one point broke the thirty points barrier. That's enough to move an Evangelion, even fight in it. And A...” She grinned ironically. “Soryu,” She trilled the name, making quite sure how she felt about this whole issue, “even was nearly ten percentage points over her usual level. That's remarkable.” She sighed. “Back to the theory drawing board for me then.”

“Oh, some guys can achieve anything when pressed against a girl they like,” Misato declared with a smirk. Shinji blushed. Even Asuka didn't protest.

“In any case,” Akagi spoke up again. “Well done, Soryu...” She smirked. “Shinji.”

That... wasn't right. And if Asuka was looking out for him, he should look out for her. Shinji breathed in. “I...Ikari.”

“Hm?” Akagi voiced.

“A...Asuka is right,” Shinji managed to get out, balling his hands into fists. “We... we're colleagues, Dr Akagi. So...”

Akagi moved her hand to her face and groaned. “You as well?”
Asuka laughed triumphantly. That made it all worthwhile.

“I... I am a pilot as well,” Shinji stated. “Otherwise... otherwise I wouldn't even be here... wouldn't even be talking to you.”

Akagi sighed. “Very well. Dismissed then, Soryu, Ikari... Hah. This'll cause some confusion.”

Misato looked at them both and furrowed her brows, but said nothing. She and the two pilots left the lab.

Asuka bent over the sheets of paper on the kitchen table and smirked. You want an essay, alter Sack? You'll get an essay. But probably not the one he would have expected. Military discipline, okay. But Asuka was focusing on the limits of it. On cases where it was allowed to refuse a order, and where it was mandatory to refuse an order. Ironically, she could use the Bundeswehr, the German military, as guideline.

Let's see how you Japanese dinosaurs deal with Innerer Führung and the Staatsbürger in Uniform. Or citizen in plugsuit in my case, I guess.

According to those principles, in a democratic society (something which Japan still styled itself as, despite all evidence to the contrary), military discipline had to exist within a certain framework. There had to be an ethical legitimation to the military organization, it had to be integrated into society (given NERV's nature, Asuka of course gave this part quite some space), its organization had to allow for the personal rights of the soldiers as far as military necessities allowed, and the single soldiers had to have a personal conviction to do their job and follow orders, but also to refuse illegal orders.

And just as soldiers had to refuse illegal orders, they were also free to dismiss orders that were not following an official purpose relevant to the military organization or orders that were unreasonable, though the conditions for the latter were usually so extremely narrow as to make that case non-existent. Now, none of this had anything to do with Asuka's case as such, but focusing on those aspects allowed her to fulfil her task while at the same time making it very sure what she thought of the whole thing.

It was a bad idea to challenge a 14 year old college graduate Wunderkind by letting her write an essay. Fuyutsuki would soon see that.

Of course, the Bundeswehr had developed those ideals as a reaction to the atrocities of the Wehrmacht, the Nazi military. Asuka wondered if she should instead look up some more locally appropriate examples of atrocities instead, like Unit 731. Fuyutsuki seemed like the conservative Japanese type who would not appreciate that.

As she considered looking up sources about that topic, her mind drifted back to the previous day. Hoo, boy... She had to admit, she had liked the physical closeness. Looking back, it had been enjoyable. What was more, she had gotten a glimpse into Shinji's nature that mere words would never have allowed her. And after having seen how vulnerable Shinji was... how burdened down by the world, and yet always remaining so friendly, so helpful, so understanding... she felt the inner urge to help him, to protect him. Frankly, she wanted to pull him into a hug and never let go.
...well, fuck. What then of her plan to set Rei and Shinji up? What then of her plan to pursue Kaji? Stupid Shinji had gone and ruined that all!

Sighing deeply she returned to her writing when someone opened the door. Immediately, Asuka jumped to her feet... and saw Rei entering the apartment. Or more precisely, an exhausted looking Rei with dishevelled hair and dark rings beneath her eyes came *careening* into the kitchen.

“Rei!” Asuka exclaimed. “Are you alright?”

*Fuck, what has happened to her?*

Rei looked at her, at first as if not comprehending. “Ahh... Asuka,” she merely stated. She looked like she might fall over any minute now. Asuka rushed to her side and grabbed both her upper arms, so as to lead her gently to the kitchen table.

Finally, Rei seemed to recognize her surroundings. “I am... fine.”

“You sure don’t look like it!” Asuka snapped. “What happened to you?”

“I was...” Rei began, but then stopped and simply stared into nothingness. It took almost ten seconds until she continued, but then she did as if she had never stopped. “...undergoing a medical check-up.”

Now Asuka was really worried. Which meant that she became frantic and loud. “What did they do to you there?”

Rei didn't answer this at all. And Asuka was fast running out of ideas what to do now. Seeing Rei so hurt, so vulnerable... She suddenly felt the *exact same* thing she had felt for Shinji: Just wanting to hold Rei, to shelter her from all the bad things in her own arms, and to never let go. But whereas with Shinji that strong emotion had gradually built up in shared events over the past days, with Rei it came all at once in a strong burst that felt like a punch to the gut.

Asuka almost jumped over the table when it seemed like Rei would fall out her seat. The blue-haired girl ultimately didn't, but Asuka still grabbed her by the shoulders. And then, not knowing what else she could do, feeling desperate and just overwhelmed by the sudden surge of emotions for Rei, she pulled the bluenette into a tight hug, gently pressing her head against her chest.

Rei didn't even react, which made Asuka all the more worried. And Asuka refused to feel embarrassed. She was the great Asuka Langley-Soryu, and the great Asuka Langley-Soryu didn't feel embarrassed. She could hug her roommate whenever she wanted.

“Come,” she finally said. “You need to lie down before you hurt yourself.”

Asuka gently led Rei to the latter's room, and helped her lie down on the futon there, then knelt beside it. She still didn't have a single clue what to do. She was about to stand up, when Rei wordlessly grabbed her leg.

Asuka knelt down again. “Rei?”

The blue-haired girl remained quiet, simply not letting go of Asuka's leg. Finally, she said: “My head... my heard hurts. Please... don't go.”
“I'm not sure what I can do!” Asuka whispered desperately.

“Please don't go,” Rei repeated.

“...of course, Rei,” Asuka assured her. She skittered closer to the futon.

Rei groaned. Asuka reached out, hesitated... and then remembered her calmest night in recent memory, when she had awoken in Rei's arms. Carefully, she laid Rei's head on her lap and began stroking her hair.

She would have to find out what had happened to Rei. How irresponsible was it of NERV to send her home like that? When she wasn't even fully healed again yet? Or... Checkup. Akagi called it a check-up, not a treatment. What had they checked? What sort of check-up lasted days and was so intensive or invasive to leave the patient behind like... like that?

But for now the most important thing was taking care of Rei. However, Asuka felt overtaxed with that. Okay, so, she had taken the initiative to provide physical comfort to her, but... she feared she was bad at that. She just wasn't made for all that emotional-sentimental stuff. She needed support. She needed...

...Shinji. Shinji might know what to do. He knows her, and he understands me.

“Hey, Rei,” Asuka whispered softly. “I'll be back soon.”

As she tried to get up, Rei groaned in protest.

“I'll bring Shinji,” Asuka explained to her. “Maybe he knows what to do.”

“Shinji...” Rei echoed. There were no further protests, though she did wince slightly as she repositioned her head from Asuka's lap to the futon.

Soon afterwards, the Katsuragi apartment was hit by a barrage of endless door bell ringing and hammering at the door.

Misato opened. “Asuka.” She sounded worried. “What's the...”

Asuka didn't even look at her, but stepped inside past her, and shouted into the apartment: “Shinji! Come quickly! Rei's back! She... she isn't well at all! Please, come!”

“Rei?” Misato asked. “What's with her? Is there something...”

She didn't get to finish. Shinji, in shorts and a long purple shirt, came running to the entrance. He didn't even bother to tie his shoelaces, he just stormed out together with Asuka. He did manage to say a hasty “I'll be back later Misato”, though.

The two found Rei in her room, lying on her futon, not emitting a single sound, but twitching.

“She's come back staggering from that 'medical check-up',” Asuka explained, sorrow and a rising anger struggling in her voice. “What sort of 'medical check-up' was that?”

Shinji's brows furrowed. He went down on one knee next to the futon. “Ayanami... Ayanami, are you... what happened to you? Can I do something for you?”
“Stay,” Rei just said monotonously.

“Uh... of course, Ayanami,” Shinji reassured her.

But that apparently wasn't enough for the blue-haired girl. Slowly, she lifted her upper body up from the futon, an act that seemed to almost exhaust her. Then she let it fall against Shinji.

“Buh...wah... uh...” Shinji stammered.

“Aren't you stupid?” Asuka scolded him. “That way she'll fall down again. Hold her properly!”

“Uh... bah... uh...” Shinji continued, but he did put his arms around Rei.

Both closed their eyes soon after.

Asuka had... mixed feelings seeing this. On the one hand, by accident (she wouldn't call it 'dumb luck' – the way Rei currently was was certainly no 'luck') the plan to get Rei and Shinji together had just gotten a boost again. But by now she didn't even know anymore if she wanted that plan. Seeing Shinji hold Rei, she felt excluded once again. But... indeed only excluded. She wasn't jealous of Rei for getting Shinji's attention; rather she was glad that someone cared for Rei. Or maybe that wasn't quite correct, either. Maybe she would have been jealous of the person holding her... if it had been anyone other than Shinji. But as it was, she was glad to see them both content. Just... a little left out.

She was disrupted in her conflicted thoughts when Rei leaned sideways, almost falling out of Shinji's arms, who thus got rudely awoken from his closed-eyes bliss, and again tugged at Asuka's trousers.

“R...Rei?” Asuka asked.

She looked up at her with wide eyes. “...please?”

*Jesus, she can melt hearts to LCL with that look.*

Asuka got on her knees. She gave Shinji a sorta awkward look... and then enclosed Rei from behind. Rei rested her head on Shinji's shoulders, and Asuka hers on Rei's back.

Having such close physical contact was very unfamiliar to Asuka. She probably would not have initiated it if not for the emotional turmoil of the past few days. But it did feel good to rest her head on Rei's back... or, a day earlier, on Shinji's. And she would not let go now. Rei was in a terrible state, and she wanted to shield and shelter her with her body, to tell the whole world to go away and leave the girl alone.

Well. The whole world except for Shinji maybe. It was kinda weird to be so close to him now as well, his face just a head's width, Rei's head's width, away from hers. But it didn't feel like an intrusion by him. She had felt his goodwill, his personality that would never deliberately hurt others, that was always looking out to please and help others. Not that this sensation should really have been necessary anymore; she had also seen this in his day to day interactions with her and Rei. What it came down to was that she trusted Shinji. Trusted him enough to have his head so close to hers... his eyes... his mouth...
The weird thing of course was that Asuka was having similar thoughts about Rei. But right now, none of this mattered. Maybe she would worry about it later, but right now she wasn't concerned. Right now all that mattered was that intense swelling of emotions inside her that was all aimed at helping and nurturing and holding Rei.

Carried by that intense feeling, she grabbed Shinji's arms, which were also around Rei. She sighed. She was worried about Rei and pitied her and also was deeply suspicious of NERV, but she also was... content.

Suddenly, Rei began to mutter. “I am not her. I am not her. I am not her.”

“Uh... Rei?” Shinji asked carefully.

“I am Rei Ayanami...” Rei continued to mutter. “Not her.”

Shinji and Asuka looked at each other. Both were worried.

“You... you are Rei,” Asuka confirmed.

“And we really wouldn't want you to be anyone else,” Shinji added softly.

Asuka looked at him in surprise. That had been unusually smooth for him. It was also true, of course.

Rei remained quiet for a while, but finally muttered, “I'm sorry.”

“Ayanami?” Shinji asked.

She got some distance from him again, which meant pushing Asuka backwards. “I am sorry. I should not have been a burden on you two.”

“What about food? Are you hungry? I could make some okayu; that's easy to keep down.”
Asuka smirked. Okayu was a sort of rice porridge that was seen as comfort food in times of a cold; similar to chicken soup in Europe and America. It did seem appropriate.

Hesitantly, Shinji loosened his grip around Rei. He looked at her with obvious worry in his face, then looked Asuka straight in the eye. “You'll take care of her, won't you?”

“That's exactly what I had planned,” she told him.

Shinji nodded and got up. Asuka repositioned Rei so that the blue-haired girl's head was now lying on her shoulder. It was imperative not to stop comforting Rei. Asuka just would not.

Shinji looked at them, nodded again, as if satisfied, and then turned and left to return to his apartment. Since Asuka and Rei never cooked here, there were no supplies in their own.

Asuka sighed and closed her eyes. For now, there was nothing to do but to take care of Rei. Be there for her. And, by God, she would be. After all, it wasn't exactly unpleasant to hold her like this.

Shinji felt... tense. And confused. But also, for maybe the first time in years, at least outside the EVA, determined. It had been weird to see Ayanami physically needy like that. And even weirder to be the object of that need. However, after sharing such an intense emotional and intimate physical moment with Ayanami, there was no way he could let her down now. Strong feelings were bubbling beneath the of his mind, kept in line only by his commitment to further help Ayanami by getting food ready for her.

By the gods, he wanted to help her! It was terrible see her in a state like that. He had held her and now he just wanted to make everything right for her again. Right now, that meant little more than preparing okayu, but that meant doing something at least. And doing things meant that he didn't need to think about what he felt for Ayanami... or what he felt for Asuka... or how Asuka stood in regards to Ayanami. For now, all that mattered was helping Ayanami. The girl for whose sake he had first entered the Evangelion.

Even while he was worried about her, though, it had felt... good to hold her. To both hold and be so close to Asuka. Both, once again, that he could do something to help, but also the physical proximity itself. It was maybe weird and pathetic that he reacted like a Pavlovian dog to both girls, but he could not deny the facts. He really cared about both of them, and he really wanted to be close to both of them. It probably didn't speak well of him. If Kirishima continued to be so nice to him, would he begin to feel this way about her as well? What worth did his feelings have then?

Misato entered the kitchen from the living room. “Okayu? Rei must really be under the weather.”

Shinji coughed and fought down a blush. He was not about to tell Misato just how much comfort Ayanami had required. “She really could use some easily digestible food.”

“Whereas I would have preferred something less bland,” Misato remarked.

“Ah, well, I'm sorry, I know it's my turn to make dinner, but...” Shinji stammered.
“Don’t worry,” Misato reassured him. “I’ll make do. It's your turn, but you have taken over at least a dozen of my turns, so... I'll just order something for myself. Just see to it that Rei gets into shape again.”

“That's what I had in mind,” Shinji muttered.

Misato raised an eyebrow at that. “What's with her, anyway?"

“She... she doesn't seem to be all there,” Shinji explained. “Ever since she's come back from that 'medical check-up', or so Asuka says.” He paused. “Can you... can you ask Dr Akagi...”

“Yeah, I probably should,” Misato interrupted him. “Rei is one of my pilots, after all.”

When the meal was ready, Shinji called Asuka to inform her. Then he considered how awful Rei had looked. It was likely Asuka would need a hand. He quickly put on his shoes again and went to wait outside of the door to the Soryu/Ayanami apartment. Asuka looked kinda surprised to see him. She had Ayanami’s arm draped over her shoulder so as to half support, half carry her. Without much thinking, Shinji took the other half.

It was only a short walk to the Katsuragi apartment, of course, but Rei really didn't look like she could make it on her own, or at least not without running the risk of falling down. Shinji wondered how she had even made it back to the apartment bloc. He realized the three of them made quite a scene. Asuka was of course notoriously uncaring about those things, but he normally wasn't. Now, though... Ayanami's well-being was surely more important than the whispered gossip of neighbours.

Misato merely raised an eyebrow when she saw the three enter like that, but didn't comment. In fact, she even readied a chair for Ayanami.

When Shinji brought her a plate of okayu, Rei whispered, “Thank you”. It sounded like more than the usual polite formula. It was of course always difficult to tell with her, as she never had the most expressive voice, but right now she just sounded exhausted.

Silently, Shinji watched her eat. He did want to just tuck her away somewhere nice and comfy and lay himself besides her, but if he were honest with himself, he also wanted to do more – or at least, once she was healthy again. But he just needed to glance over to Asuka, who was looking at Rei herself, to notice that he had similar thoughts about her. About extending that close physical contact they had had in the entry-plug maybe.

What did this mean? Did he... did he love them? Both of them? Or was he simply latching on to girls who had shown him kindness? And if those were true emotions... what in all heavens’ name should he do now? On one hand, that was an easy question. He most definitely would not simply stop helping Rei now. And he also liked to make Asuka happy, whatever the circumstances. But of course, on the other hand...

What should I do now?
Unsurprisingly, Rei quickly tired after her simple dinner. Her condition seemed to actually improve; she now sat much straighter and wasn't liable to fall out of her chair any minute now. But it was clear she could hardly keep her eyes open anymore. Maybe she could have walked back on her own now, but Asuka and Shinji didn't want to take any chances. Or maybe it was the reverse: They did want to use the chance to walk Rei back to her and Asuka's apartment. With Rei's arms draped over their shoulders, the three walked very close to each other, almost cheek to cheek.

Asuka and Shinji almost carried their exhausted friend all the way back to her room, where she was gently let down on her futon. By that point, Rei seemed to already be half asleep, something which Asuka secretly found to be the cutest thing ever. Mostly, she was glad that the blue-haired girl was apparently feeling better, good enough at least to sleep soundly. She and Shinji looked at each other kinda awkwardly.

“Well, ah, I... I should...” Shinji began.

“Yeah. I understand,” Asuka replied.

Shinji didn't move, though. It was plain that what he really would have liked to do was stay. Not leave Rei alone, even if she would soon be safe in the land of dreams. And wouldn't that be something? To have both Rei and Shinji here... maybe even close together, so that Asuka and him could take care of Rei... that was a nice thought indeed.

Asuka had already once slept in Rei's arms, if purely by accident. For a brief moment she wondered how it would feel to sleep in the arms of two people. No, of those two people.

But of course, this was an impossible thought. Shinji couldn't simply stay. Even Misato, disorganized as she usually was at home, would notice, and chances were she would protest that arrangement. Not that Shinji would ever have the chutzpah to not ask for permission from his guardian in the first place... technically now also Asuka's guardian again, but she herself wouldn't care about such details. Or at least, not as much as him.

“Thank you for your help,” Asuka whispered, very softly.

“Ah... but... thank you for taking care of Ayanami!” Shinji insisted.

Asuka half-grinned. “Nah, that's something I do gladly.” And so do you.

“Uh... right,” Shinji answered. “Well, uh...”

“Go before Misato storms in here and wakes Rei up again,” Asuka told him.

That got Shinji to faintly grin as well. The two went to the apartment entrance, where Shinji put on his shoes again. As he stood up again, Asuka laid a hand on his shoulder. There was much she could say, but...

...instead she left it at, “I'm sure Rei will feel better tomorrow.”

Shinji nodded, then hesitated. He put a hand on hers, stroked it with his thumb... and then seemed
to realize what he was doing and quickly left the apartment.

Asuka grinned. That was so him. Though, to be fair, not that she'd tell him that, but she felt pretty much the same confusion as he apparently did. She could have shown more initiative as well, after all.

*Verflucht. What will I do now?*

Well, for now, she returned to Rei's room, to take one last glance to see if the blue-haired girl was alright. She found Rei moving unrestfully, and apparently awake

“...Asuka,” Rei whispered.

Slowly, Asuka walked over to her futon. “I'm here.”

“I'm... I'm not...” Rei mumbled.

“You're what?” Asuka asked.

Rei remained silent for a long time. Asuka just waited. “...tired,” she finally replied.

“Then sleep,” Asuka told her softly. Rei nodded, and she turned to leave the room.

When she had reached the door, Rei stated: “You could stay here.”

Asuka froze and tensed. Staying here would probably mean sharing a futon with Rei, and while she had done so before... and while, truth be told, she wouldn't exactly mind... openly stating that wish would be another thing altogether. It would be admitting everything to Rei, and worse, to herself. Asuka wasn't sure if she was ready to do so yet. *And what about Shinji?*...no, she was definitely not ready.

“I know,” she answered softly, closed the door behind her and walked to her own room.

Misato and Shinji had just finished breakfast when the telephone rang. Shinji felt a bit tired and lethargic. He hadn't gotten much sleep this night; he had been far too worried about Ayanami. It had felt really bad to lie in his bed alone, unable to do anything. If he had been over at the Soryu/Ayanami apartment, he maybe could have provided some comfort to Ayanami. But then, of course he would have liked to hold Ayanami. Or be close to Asuka. Instead, he had been all alone in his room, worried and confused. Of course this didn't exactly make for a restful night.

“It's for you,” Misato announced. “Some 'Mana Kirishima'.”

*Kirishima? Huh.* “A classmate of mine,” Shinji explained and took the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mana Kirishima here. Is that you, Ikari?”

“Ah, yes,” Shinji confirmed.

“I'm really sorry to bother you,” Kirishima apologized. “I hope I'm not disturbing you. Just end the
call if that's the case."

"Nono, it's fine," Shinji reassured her. Mostly he was curious as to why Kirishima was calling him.

"This may sound strange, but... I have spent the entire week so far doing nothing," Kirishima explained. "I'm bored out of my mind. And since there are only three other classmates left behind here in the city, I thought I could call you about it. So that maybe we can do something together."

"Ah... Ayanami isn't feeling so well," Shinji answered. "And Asuka is taking care of her, sort of. And I should as well..."

"Ohhh, I understand," Kirishima reassured him. "Still, it's a bit of a pity. I thought I could use the free time to get myself acquainted with the city, but turns out I have no idea about it. I wanted to ask you if you could give me a little tour of it."

"A tour..." Shinji echoed.

"I mean, you don't have to, but I'd reeeaaally appreciate it," Kirishima trilled.

"Ah well," Shinji muttered unsurely. "I could... maybe..."

"Really?" Kirishima asked. "That would be really cute of you." She giggled.

Shinji sighed. After having spent so much time with Asuka and Ayanami, the 'cute schoolgirl giggle' really didn't do much for him anymore. Neither of his fellow pilots were the type to do it, and that made them appear more... real, in a way. More authentic and honest. Besides, he had nothing against stereotypically cute girls, but they just couldn't compare to Ayanami's silent determination or Asuka's fiery strength.

Still... he wasn't the type who could just say no. And he could kinda understand her. He had felt lost upon getting to the city as well. Granted, he had had to deal with more at that time than Kirishima now, but still, there was no reason for her go through the same problems if he could help.

"Alright," he relented. "Let's, uh, do this."

"Wonderful!" Kirishima exclaimed. "You're a really nice boy, Ikari. Have people told you that?"

Even if she was no Asuka or Ayanami, that still made Shinji stutter. "Ah... ah well... you know... oh."

Kirishima giggled. "When and where shall we meet then?"

"Uh... at the city mall?" Shinji suggested. That was an easy place to find, even for someone new in town. "Say, at two?"

"I'll be there!" Kirishima promised. "And thank you again, Ikari. You're really cute!" She giggled again and ended the call.

Shinji sighed. Well, that's a thing. He was kinda uncomfortable with it. He really should be there for Ayanami. He still intended to go over and see how she was doing, but it appeared he would have to spend the rest of the day away from her.
When he rang at the door of the Soryu/Ayanami appartment, it was Asuka who opened for him. Her shoulders were slumped and she looked grumpy.

“Hello,” she just said,... grabbed his collar and dragged him inside.

“Uh... hello,” Shinji answered, once inside. He peered from the entrance into the kitchen and saw Ayanami sitting completely motionlessly at the kitchen table, gazing into nothingness, her hands around a mug of tea.

“Ah, hello, Ayanami,” he continued as he removed his shoes.

She turned her head towards him very slowly...and then simply nodded. This didn't look good.

“Are you feeling better?” Shinji asked as he entered the kitchen.

“Yes,” Rei simply answered monotonously.

Slightly despairing, Shinji looked at Asuka.

“She doesn't seem to suffer pain anymore, at least,” the redhead explained. She sounded anguished. “That's something at least, I guess.” She rubbed her eyes and Shinji now understood why she looked so dishevelled. She probably hadn't gotten much sleep for the same reasons as him.

He sat down at the table and smiled nervously at Ayanami. That got at least a reaction insofar that she was now looking straight at him, though her facial expression still didn't change. So he ended up speaking exclusively with Asuka, or rather, only she responded. Both of them now and then also said something to Rei, or only smiled at her, but there was no real reaction. Though Shinji had to admit, seeing Asuka smile at Rei was something precious. Sure, he wished she would smile at him like that as well, but... he just wanted her to smile, and he wanted Rei to be taken care of. It was really nice to see Asuka caring for Rei. Though it really didn't help with his problem of feeling close to both girls.

“Normally I'd say it's time for another angel attack again,” Asuka commented, “but right now...” She looked at Rei. “Yeah, let's hope for a few more days.”

“As if we had any influence on that,” Shinji muttered. “If we had, I'd make them never come again.

“That's what we're there for,” Asuka reminded him. “We can't just stop the angels by wishing for it. We have to fight them. We specifically have to fight them.”

Shinji winced. It was true, but he didn't like to be reminded of that fact.

“Ikari doesn't,” Ayanami said flatly. She still didn't look at either of them directly.

“Huh?” Asuka voiced in surprise.

“I can pilot EVA-01,” Ayanami explained. “That was the original plan. Rei Ayanami in EVA-01, and Asuka Soryu in EVA-02. Having three EVAs operational goes beyond the original plan.” She rattled it off like just a list of facts.

“Hm?” he answered.

“If you don't want to fight, I can cover for you,” she told him.

Shinji shook his head. “We need three active Evangelions. If NERV had had one fewer unit against Israfel, the angel would've won. Besides...” He looked at Ayanami. “I... promised I would protect her. I can't let you two go into battle with less backup than possible.”

Asuka scoffed. She remained quiet for a while. Then she said, surprisingly softly, “That's a really sucky situation for you.”

Shinji just nodded.

There was a long-drawn silence. Finally, Shinji looked at his phone and said, “Ah... I'm sorry, but I must go now. That new girl, Mana Kirishima, has talked me into giving her a tour of the city.”

“Mana?” Asuka echoed. “That... hmm. So she just calls you, tells you to show her the city, and you just say yes?”

“Uh... kinda?” Shinji admitted.

Asuka's head began to slightly tremble. Shinji could guess what would come now. “Seriously? You simply let that walking stereotype trample all over you? You can't be serious! What's wrong with you?”

“I mean... she isn't wrong,” Shinji defended herself lamely. “She's stuck here in Tokyo-3 just as we are. So I imagine she's indeed pretty bored. And she's new, so she needs to learn where's what in the city.”

“Well... maybe,” Asuka conceded. “But not by you. At... at least not when Rei is not feeling well! Right, that's it! You need to stay here and help take care of Rei, not go out with that harlot!”

“Uh...hm,” Shinji voiced. Asuka did have a point there, but... “But I already told her I'd show up.”

“Well, then cancel!” Asuka demanded.

“That wouldn't be very polite,” Shinji mumbled.

“Who cares?” Asuka argued. “I'm not allowing you to let that Flittchen sink her claws into you!”

“Allow?” Shinji echoed. At first it was just a mutter again. “Allow?” Now it was more forceful. “You're not the Operations Director. You can't allow or disallow me anything.”

“I'm not trying to... geez!” Asuka exclaimed. “I'm trying to do you a favour, idiot! It's for your own good! And besides, this isn't about me! It's about Rei! Just look at her!”

Shinji did. The blue-haired girl still sat there motionlessly and without focus on anything. That did worry Shinji.
“I’ll be back in time for dinner!” he defended himself.

“Not good enough!” Asuka decided.

Shinji stood up. “It’s not really your place to tell me, now is it?”

“Apparently, someone has to!” Asuka retorted.

This whole conversation really annoyed Shinji. He admired Asuka for her fire and her strength. Maybe even more than that. But it was undeniable that sometimes she could be intolerable. And he had just about had it. So he did what he usually did in such situations – walk away. Wordlessly, he turned around.

“Don’t you dare leave on me... on us now!” Asuka shouted.

Shinji put on his shoes.

“Shinji Ikari!” Asuka shouted. “You will stop doing this right now! You'll stay here!”

Shinji walked out of the door.

Shinji had never been to Tokyo-3’s largest public library, or any other. It just never had occurred to him. Though now that he thought of it, maybe he should go there. He liked history, even in the droning, boring form presented by their teacher, just because it helped him escape reality. How much better suited would history books be? Or fiction books? It was almost strange even that he wasn't reading, that he was only relying on his SDAT player. Even so, he knew where the library was, so it was one point of interest he was showing to Kirishima. They even took a quick look inside.

“They have CDs and LPs inside,” Kirishima giggled as they went outside again. “How old-fashioned.”

“That’s how I’ve listened to music most of my life,” Shinji defended the old-fashioned sound carriers. “Some people need some time to adapt to digital music.”

“But it makes things sooo much easier,” Kirishima claimed. “Even my uncle uses it now. Say, what kinda music do you listen to?”

Shinji shrugged. Then he realized he kinda had to answer something. “Classical, mostly,” he muttered, and was preparing for the inevitable mockery.

“Ah,” Kirishima replied. “I listen to that now and then. Mostly because that’s all my uncle has in his collection. It’s... different. Artful. Harmonious.” Shinji turned his head at her with widened eyes. He hadn’t expected that. “So, who’s your favourite composer?”

“Ah...” Once again Shinji had been caught off-guard. And even though Kirishima had admitted to liking classical music, he feared sounding too pretentious if he answered. Still, he had to reply somehow. “Well... there's a great variety...”
“But surely you could name some names!” Kirishima insisted and giggled.

“Well... there are some who are just more... artful, as you say, than others,” Shinji replied, and suddenly sounded very serious. This was a topic he could speak about with some expertise. “Bach, for example. He was a technical master composer.”

Kirishima nodded. “He was. But he's a bit too bombastic for my tastes. I like Mozart... he's so light and unburdened.” She began humming. Shinji recognized it: The first movement of Mozart's symphony no. 40.

Shinji smiled. Now that was a new experience. Someone with whom he could actually talk about his taste in music. He thought Mozart a bit too light at times, too playful. It just didn't really mesh with him. But as he watched Kirishima humming and walking a step so light she was almost jumping, he supposed it fit to her. Even if she didn't exactly hit every note...

“That was the last point on my list,” he told her. “The library. So I guess...”

“Thank you!” Kirishima interrupted him. “That was a very informative tour. I feel kinda bad about having taken up so much of your time.”

“Ah... it's no big deal,” Shinji answered unsurely.

“There's an ice cream parlour over there,” Kirishima pointed out. “Let's have some ice cream!” She giggled. “I'll even invite you to it. I know it isn't exactly the right way around, but you've been sooo helpful to me...”

Shinji shrugged helplessly. There was no way he could win against the whirlwind liveliness of the brunette, and besides, he still had time.

The two teenagers took their ice cones and retreated to a nearby small park, where they sat on the only bench there.

“Well, I sure feel more secure in Tokyo-3 now,” Kirishima stated. “Not as lost, now that I know where everything is.” Shinji just nodded, unsure what to say. “I guess it was difficult for you as well when you c... ah, stupid me. But for you it was even more difficult, wasn't it? You came to pilot those mechas.”

Shinji stopped licking his ice cream. That was not really... “That isn't really how it was,” he found himself saying. “I came because my father told me. In as many words. I only learned here that he only called me to send me out into life and death battles.”

“Oh,” Kirishima voiced quietly. And after a while: “You didn't know what your father was doing?”

“Only that it was important work,” Shinji explained. “And that it was in some important, high ranking agency of some sort. Never any of the details. I hadn't seen him in ten years. Never even gotten a letter from him in that time.”

“Oh,” Kirishima voiced again. “Then... seeing that mecha... and hearing what you were supposed to do... it must have been a shock.”

“You can say that,” Shinji muttered... angrily, as he noticed. Anger was building up inside him as he retold the story.
“Then it's quite laudable of you that you still did it,” Kirishima commented. “Doing what your father told you. Going out and fighting.”

Shinji whirled his head around to her. Was that laudable? Following his father's wishes... demands, really. Most people would say so, but... Asuka never would, for example. And even Ayanami – she clearly believed in whatever his father was doing, but she would never expect that Shinji should do likewise only because Gendo Ikari was his father. She would like him to also believe in him and hence follow him, but that was something different. Both pilots were quiet different from society that way... or really, in most ways.

And Shinji realized he appreciated that about them. Kirishima, though...

“I guess,” he muttered unenthusiastically as he turned his head back again.

Kirishima seemed to sense she had committed a faux-pas. More hesitantly than before she continued, “And you won in the end! Apparently despite grave inexperience.” Shinji remembered Sachiel mauling his head. Well, EVA-01’s head, technically, but he had felt it – strike after strike after strike. Some victory that had been. When he remained silent, Kirishima added even more unsurely, “You... you saved the city. Everyone should be grateful to you!”

*People should, yeah.* It was maybe a selfish thought, but also a logical one. He had saved them after all, hadn't he? But mostly Shinji wished that this could all just be over soon.

“It sure doesn't look like they are, though,” he answered.

“I... I can be grateful,” Kirishima offered. “I am!”

Shinji smiled weakly. “Thanks. You're... you're a good person as well, Kirishima.”

She giggled. “Call me Mana.”

Shinji was surprised and kinda embarrassed. “Uh... are you sure that's appropriate?”

“After you've spent so much time on me? Sure,” Kirishima... Mana opined.

“Ah... alright then... Mana,” Shinji confirmed.

“There you go!” Mana told him and giggled. “Hm. You know what I miss here?”

“What's that?” Shinji asked.

“Before we moved here, my Uncle and I were living at the outskirts of the city,” Mana explained to him. “There was a small forest nearby.” She giggled. “It was *perfect* to play hide and seek in. Or if you just wanted to be alone. Nobody could find you. But here... everything's so open. Even the parks are all open, well trimmed... tame. I haven't seen any underpasses or dark corners, either. No secluded places.”

“Huh... I guess... that's true,” Shinji agreed.

When he had run away from Misato, he just had stuck to hiding in plain sight. Moving with the masses. Sleeping in an all-night cinema, walking through the streets, and finally leaving the city
area altogether. But now that he thought of it, Tokyo-3 really didn't have many dark corners. At least, outside the slum where Ayanami used to live in. It sorta made sense: It wasn't a grown city, but a city planned from the ground up. With proper planning, such things could be avoided. Which made the existence of those slums kinda weird, actually.

Mana giggled again. “I know. Let's go into that library again.” She hopped up from the bench.

Both had finished their ice cream cones, so that was a possibility, but... “Why?” Shinji asked.

“Nobody's there,” Mana explained. “That's a sort of secluded place then, isn't it?” Again, giggling.

Shinji didn't quite see the logical connection, but if Mana wanted to go... “Sure, why not,” he relented and got up.

The library indeed appeared to be completely empty. Masses and masses of shelves, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, formed almost ominous corridors to walk through. There had to be thousands and tens of thousands of books here, but not a single Yen spent on decoration. And after the two had passed some of those corridors, far away from any window, it was almost easy to forget that there was a world outside of shelves and books.

Mana stopped and giggled. It sounded more... awkward this time?

“So...” she began. “I think... I think we're alone now.”

Shinji looked around. “Uh... yeah. I don't think there's anyone else at all on this level.”

Mana giggled. “Exactly. And uh... yeah, this is a secluded place. Just what I wanted!”

Shinji began to become slightly nervous. “Wanted for what exactly?”

Slowly, Mana moved closer to him, until her upper body nearly pressed against his. “To show you my gratitude.” Her face moved closer to his.

Shinji took an instinctive step back. “Ah... ah... Mana! You can't mean...”

Mana smiled. “And why not? You're a cute boy. A hero. And I want to show you how much I really appreciate you.” She closed up to him again.

“Well... well, it's just...” Shinji began to sweat. Mana was a nice girl, sure, and he did appreciate her and what she was telling him, but... He had been wrong. She was showing him kindness. The same kindness Ayanami and Asuka had shown him. No, more even. And yet, he didn't feel the same for her as he felt for them.

Mana giggled. “Are you afraid, Shinji Ikari? Afraid of a little kiss?”

“That's not it at all!” Shinji protested. He looked straight at her. She was attractive alright. And he was a fourteen year old boy. The prospect of kissing an attractive girl really wasn't so bad.

“Then let's kiss!” Mana prompted him with a short giggle.

“Uh... well... I suppose... I suppose we could,” Shinji finally agreed.
Both leaned their heads forwards. Shinji was nervous. Nervous and excited. This would be his first kiss. And yet, this felt all wrong. He wanted to kiss, sure. Wanted to kiss attractive girls, yes. But he hadn't really thought of Mana that way, even though she was attractive.

Their lips touched.

Shinji jolted backwards.

“I... I'm sorry,” he stammered.

Mana looked disappointed. No, almost fearful now. Regretful and... despairing? There was an awkward silence.

Shinji, overwhelmed with the situation, simply turned and ran outside.

Shinji felt horrible. After that disaster in the library, he hadn't returned straight home but instead wandered the streets aimlessly, trying to clear his head. That's what he was always doing, after all: walking away. He should have confronted Mana about what she had done. Or maybe he should have returned straight to Asuka and Ayanami, apologized to them and told Asuka she was right. But he had done none of those things.

He wasn't even properly running away. He was a failure at that as well, as his stint at the train station had shown. How many times had it been now, that he was just aimlessly wandering the streets? He was disgusted by his weak nature, but he couldn't do anything about it. He simply walked on.

Finally, he came back to the apartment bloc where they all lived. He looked at his phone. Not yet half past six. Still time to make dinner. He should probably inform Asuka and Ayanami about that.

It was Asuka who opened the door. She looked angry.

“What do you want?” she asked curtly.

“Uh... just tell you that I'll make dinner n...”

“Don't bother!” Asuka interrupted him. “Rei and I have ordered something.”

“Oh,” Shinji simply answered.

“Now go run back to your little harlot,” Asuka snarled at him. “It seems I can take care of Rei without you.”

“She isn't...” Shinji began to protest and then realized that this sounded like him defending Mana. Which wasn't his intention; he just wanted to deny any link to her.

Asuka just laughed bitterly.

“It really isn't your place to tell me whom I can hang out with anyway!” Shinji shot at her. He was getting kinda desperate. He knew Asuka had a point. And yet, she was so overbearing...
“Sure. If you want to leave your friends alone when they need help, that's entirely your call,” Asuka argued venomously. “Now leave us alone!”

She began to close the door, but Shinji still managed to ask, “How's Ayanami?”

Asuka stopped mid-movement. For a while, she remained silent. Then she answered, “Better.” A pause. “No thanks to you.”

“Is that it, Asuka?” Shinji almost shouted now. “You want to lay all the blame on me?”

Asuka opened the door fully again. “I will blame you for simply running off with a bad author's idea of a Japanese schoolgirl.”

“I... I did return a bit late, but...” Shinji began to defend himself.

“That you went at all is the problem!” Asuka shouted at him.

“Why?” Shinji asked desperately. “Do you want to control my entire free time?”

“You don't get it, Shinji, do you?” Asuka asked with poison in her voice... and slammed the door.

Shinji balled his hands into fists. An expression of sheer anger distorted his face. But he didn't do anything. He could have demanded to see Ayanami. If Asuka wanted nothing to do with him anymore, fine. But she couldn't just separate him from Ayanami. But he didn't really feel... worthy to see her. Not after what had happened. He didn't think he would actually be able to help Ayanami right now. Probably, seeing her would just be another burden on her.

With slumped shoulders he returned to his own apartment. Misato was away; she would spend this and the next night in Tokyo-2. NERV had a secondary facility there, apparently, and some task or other made her stay there for the moment. So all that was left to do for Shinji was feeding Pen-Pen.

Rei wasn't good at picking up emotional cues at the best of times, and right now her thought processes were still slow and difficult. But even she, even now, could feel the tension inside the car. Ryoji Kaji, Asuka's former guardian and now UN Inspector to NERV, was driving the two girls and Ikari to the airport, so they could meet their class, which was returning from Okinawa. Normally, Captain Katsuragi would have done this, but she was occupied elsewhere. Due to Mr Kaji's personal relationship with the Captain, he had taken over the job.

Asuka and Rei sat in the back of the car, Ikari in the front. And it was clear that Asuka and Ikari did their best to never so much as look at each other. They certainly didn't talk. Rei felt a painful pang in her heart at that. She wanted them to talk to each other, laugh with each other, hug each other. Preferably with her inside that hug.

She had not expected what had happened two days ago, after she had returned home. Asuka caring for her. Asuka holding her. Asuka and Ikari holding her. Not everything had really registered with her, not in the state she had been in, but it had been so primal, so basic, so overwhelming that she hadn't needed to register details. She had been able to feel the care both had for her just fine.

Ikari had stood by her ever since he had arrived. He had entered the Evangelion, something he had never seen before, to face an angel, a deadly enemy he had never heard of before, all for her sake.
He had entered deadly hot lava, without protection and without orders, just to save her. He was the first to tell her she wasn't replaceable, the first who, for some reason, liked her for her. He had listened to her afterwards, talked to her, seemed to have enjoyed her company.

Asuka had come into her life like a fiery whirlwind, completely overthrowing all certainties she had. She had told her to smile, she had broken her out of her old life, her old apartment, she had embraced her in a protective hug when she had returned from NERV. Ikari was her stable support; Asuka was passion and hope for change. And she wanted both of that; needed both of that.

Needed both Ikari and Asuka?

But she couldn't have both of them if they were so much in disagreement as they were now. It hurt her to perceive that dissonance between the two. Ideally she wanted to talk to them, hear them laugh... be hugged by them... kiss them? Both of them? That was a strange thought she had never had before. Even after she had realized what she was feeling for Ikari, that thought had never appeared. But now...

Though she would be content if she could only spend time with the two until everything would be over...

Mr Kaji's car came to a halt at a parking spot in front of the airport. Rei noticed that nobody had commented on his driving style, which was very similar to Captain Katsuragi's. Asuka and Ikari both simply remained silent, and so Mr Kaji didn't say anything, either. The four moved through the airport in silence.

Finally, they joined a larger group of parents, siblings and other family members of their classmates. There were surprisingly few women among that crowd.

Finally, the class entered the area. Most kids started running when they saw the assembled crowd. There were hugs (though mostly of girls – most boys shied away from that), loud greetings, cheerful laughter. And finally, some of the class members also noticed Rei, Asuka and Ikari. At nearly the same time, Horaki and Aida turned towards them.

“Asuka!” Horaki exclaimed. “I'm so sorry you couldn't come along. I brought you some souvenirs! And I can show you so many photos.”

Asuka grinned lopsidedly. “Yeah, we can take a look at them later.”

“Hey there, Shinji, Ayanami, Soryu,” Aida greeted them.

Ikari looked around. “Say... do you two know where Touji is?”

Horaki and Aida looked at each other uncomfortably.

“His father already asked as well,” Horaki reported and nodded to a man in the crowd: A very bullish person, wearing a jacket with a very high collar and leather gloves. “I was surprised nobody had told him. That... NERV hadn't told them. They haven't told you, either?”

“NERV?” Mr Kaji intervened into the conversation.

“Yeah,” Aida answered. “Bunch of guys in NERV uniforms and with NERV IDs showed up and talked with Touji. That was... Wednesday, I think. Then, Thursday morning, Touji just leaves with
them. Didn’t seem like he was arrested or anything, though. But I have no idea what they talked about!”

“Hm,” Mr Kaji voiced. “And nobody told his father. That might become a problem.”

Asuka turned to him. “Why? Do you have any idea what happened to him?”

Touji escorted from Okinawa... new Evangelions built in America... the accident in Nevada... all classmates are...

Rei would maybe have gotten a good notion what this was about if thinking weren't still so difficult right now.

“I just think NERV is becoming too arrogant for its own good,” Mr Kaji stated. “As for what happened to your classmate, well, there could be...”

He stopped when a high-pitched, utterly loud wailing sound resonated through the airport hall.

The angel alarm.
Sitting inside EVA-02, being connected with the machine, felt good. No trouble with Shinji here. No confusion about him and Rei. Just Asuka and her machine. Asuka and the machine she excelled in. And an enemy who would soon feel the brunt of Asuka's anger. Life was so much simpler inside an Evangelion.

“So, what's the status?” she asked the Command Central. “Why are we deployed all the way out here in the boondocks?”

“An unidentified object has emerged from Tokyo-2,” Lt Ibuki explained. “There has been a major explosion in our test facility at Matsushiro, possibly caused by the unidentified object.”

“Matsushiro?” Shinji exclaimed. A view screen to his cockpit popped up in Asuka's. “But... that's where Misato is! Is she alright?”

“We... we haven't yet made contact with the staff at Matsushiro,” Ibuki admitted in a soft voice.

“But then...” Shinji began anew, but Asuka cut him off, “Is that object an angel?”

“So far we're detecting Pattern Orange,” Ibuki admitted. “But it's better to be safe.”

“Then why are we so far away from Tokyo-3?” Asuka demanded to know.

“NERV doesn't want us...” Ibuki began but then completely changed her answer, “We figured we can minimize collateral damage out here.”

“Also, we have tracked down the route of the unidentified object,” Lt Hyuga added. “It has to take the pass at Mt Nobe, which gives us a chance to have you all deployed, ready and awaiting it.”

Asuka scoffed at these answers. This would be the first time NERV had ever shown concern about minimizing collateral damage. And if NERV worried about not losing the object, then making a stand at Tokyo-3, where it seemed to be headed, would have made the most sense. But most of all she was annoyed about sitting around in her Evangelion, doing nothing, and that out here in the wilderness while the sun was already setting. She really had better things to do than to just wait.

“But... but if we have to fight,” Shinji protested. “How are we supposed to do that without Misato?”

Another viewscreen popped up in Asuka's cockpit: Rei. “Commander Ikari will assume direct control of the operation.”

“F...father?” Shinji muttered.

Oh for fuck's sake. “Yes, your father!” Asuka told him. “He is the supreme commander, remember? Now forget your daddy complex and just focus on what's ahead of you! We might have an angel to battle!”

There was silence on all comm channels afterwards. Damnit, Asuka. As much as Shinji has fucked up, we really don't need a sullen pilot right now. Focus your anger on the angel. And as much as
she tried to justify it to herself, she was kinda annoyed that she was back to lashing out at Shinji.

...his thumb stroking her hand...

Damnit!

Asuka looked around. Wide and far there were only mountains, forests and rice fields, with only some few quaint buildings and some streets interrupting that monotony. It was quite scenic. Asuka hated it. Being deployed to Tokyo-3 at least meant being in a proper *city*. Tokyo-2 or Osaka would have been better, but Tokyo-3 wasn't bad. It didn't have Berlin's rough and dirty charm, but it did have its own distinctive look, all sleek and modern aesthetics. Quite a bit better than the wilderness here.

Asuka didn't like the countryside. The town where she had last seen her mother was in a scenic countryside as well.

“Object within one kilometre of pass,” Lt Shigeru reported. “Estimated contact with Evangelion defence line in less than three minutes.”

“That's all the information you can give us?” Asuka muttered.

It took a while before someone answered. “...sorry, Asuka,” Ibuki apologized.

“You gotta be kidding me! “Ehem!” Asuka protested. She had spoken with... well, shouted at Ibuki for her lack of professionalism after the double-synch test.

“...I apologize, Pilot Soryu,” Ibuki told her. She suddenly did sound a lot more professional. None of that sentimentalism stuff anymore.

Better. If Asuka could do nothing else until that maybe-maybe-not-angel finally showed its face, she could at least demand the appropriate respect for her.

“Object has crossed the pass,” Shigeru announced.

Asuka now concentrated on the view in front of her. She should see the object any minute now...

...

*Are you fucking serious?*

Between the forests, along a road fortified by quaint stonewalls, a giant head appeared: All black, except for white eyes and creepily large, red teeth. Behind that head, impossibly large shoulder pylons. And then the rest of the body appeared: A black Evangelion. Its gait was slumped, and yet it emanated an aura of immediate danger.

“You knew!” Asuka shouted into the comm system. “You fucking knew! Why did nobody tell us is the object is an Evangelion!”

“Pattern Blue detected,” Ibuki announced in a subdued voice. She sounded awkward. “EVA-03 designated as the Ninth Angel.”

And then it hit Asuka.
“That's why you brought us to the wilderness!” she shouted. Without awaiting orders, she raised her missile launcher and aimed at the Evangelion. “You cowards were afraid of losing face again, if too many people should see one of your precious Evangelions going rogue. You bastards!”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the comm channels.

Asuka fired. The missile would have hit the Evangelion... angel... Evangelion... whatever right in the head. However, it exploded uselessly against its AT Field. The giant monster just walked casually through the smoke, the setting red sun in its back. It looked eerie; far too slender for an Evangelion.

Asuka prepared another shot...

...the angel jumped.

It was completely impossible. It bent backwards and leaped like a jumping spider, a movement EVAs were never supposed to do. And the jump was at least four times its height. Asuka was utterly dumbfounded as the angel landed not even 100m in front of her.

She tried to react; 100m should give her enough time..

....suddenly EVA-03's hands were around her unit's neck. It was completely impossible! The black Evangelion's arms had extended to a size of double its height! And now Asuka felt utterly paralyzed. EVA-02 couldn't do much but wiggle and kick, but it couldn't free itself from EVA-03's grip.

...breathe...breathe...breathe...

It hurt! Asuka's neck hurt!

“Gottverdammt... Gottverdammt... Gottverdammt...” she cursed.

“Asuka!” she heard Shinji's long-drawn shout over the comm system, and a much quieter and shorter repetition from Rei: “Asuka...”

There was an incredible pressure on Asuka's neck. She couldn't breathe and it hurt. Her chest began to burn. And she felt completely useless... a doll in the hands of another being. EVA-02's hands were on EVA-03's arms, but there was nothing Asuka could do. The grip was iron-hard.

...and the pain was taking over her senses.

A comm call made it through the pain. “...stay back. Use long range weaponry. Avoid contact with the enemy.” An utterly cold and unmoved voice.

“But Father!” Shinji screamed.

Shinji... Shinji will save me. Asuka felt utterly pathetic and weak for thinking so, but the pain had become unbearable. And she was really only a plaything for EVA-03 anymore, anyway.

...and then suddenly, a punch to her stomach. She spat out its contents into the LCL. EVA-03 had retracted its hands again and rapidly moved forwards along their path, ramming its knee right into...
EVA-02. Its hands let go of EVA-02, only to punch it. And again. And again.

...and again....

Asuka screamed, again and again. Her stomach, her head, merciless beatings were raining down on them, and she had no protection against them. Inside the entry-plug she raised her hand as if to protect her body, but that of course had no effect.

...and again...

Asuka barely noticed anything but the pain anymore.

...and again...

Then the world went black.

“Aaaaasuka!”

Shinji didn't care what his father told him. EVA-01 ran through the rice fields, its giant boots tearing them up and leaving behind desolate puddles. These fields were located on several plateaus, and EVA-03 lorded over the surrounding region from one of the highest ones. Finally, EVA-01 stepped onto it...

...and saw EVA-02 lying at its black counterpart's feet, entirely motionless. Shinji screamed in despair and rage. EVA-01 raised its pallet rifle... and Shinji hesitated. EVA-03 had now turned towards him, entirely calmly, with no haste. The two units were now standing opposite of one another, simply looking each other in the eye.

*It's an Evangelion unit...*

And there was something else. Before EVA-03 had turned, Shinji had seen something white sticking out of its back, something long and round. An entry-plug.

“Retreat and fire, Shinji,” his father told him, his voice calm, rigid, uncaring.

“No!” Shinji exclaimed. “It's an Evangelion! There's someone inside, isn't there? Someone like us! A child!”

“Irrelevant,” Gendo told him. “Right now, it's the enemy.”

Slowly, EVA-01 backed away from the black creature. Shinji felt trapped. He didn't know what to do. Retreating meant abandoning Asuka; attacking meant hurting someone just like him, someone who had been thrown into this crazy war, an innocent, a child like him. Maybe it would even mean ultimately killing them.

Shinji would rather die.

EVA-01 backed away step by step. EVA-03 slowly followed.

“Engage the enemy,” Gendo ordered Shinji calmly.
“That's not the enemy!” Shinji shouted. “That's...”

And then it hit him.

...NERV agents have taken Touji away....

...

No! No, it can't be!

“Nononono...” he muttered. EVA-01 now walked backwards at a brisk pace.

EVA-03 stopped.... and roared. An unearthly, long, piercing sound that echoed off the surrounding mountains. EVA-03's mouth wide open and skywards, its terrible red teeth clearly visible.

And then it jumped. Not a high jump like the one that brought it close to EVA-02. It was leaping almost parallel to the ground... right into EVA-01.

Shinji thought his chest would soon explode, and then felt EVA-01 crashing down onto the ground. After a second, he could orientate himself again, but he was still coughing from all the pain in his chest. He noticed that EVA-03 had now lifted his own unit into the air... one-armed.

Pain!

EVA-03's free hand began punching its purple counterpart. And again. And again. Shinji whimpered inside his entry-plug. Tears of pain ran down his cheeks.

“Shinji, use the gun!” Even now, his father's voice didn't sound concerned in the slightest.

EVA-01 still had the pallet rifle in its hands, and the hands free to use it. But even if Shinji could have focused on all that, despite the pain.... maybe he could have fired wildly. Maybe that would even have hit EVA-03. In that close a distance to EVA-01, its AT-Field surely was eroded. But Shinji could not condemn Touji to death just because NERV had again screwed up. It wasn't Touji's fault. And Shinji would never be able to live with himself if he became responsible for Touji's death.

Pain!

When Shini came to again, he noticed EVA-01 was lying at the foot of a mountain flank, several hundreds of metres away from the rice fields. EVA-03 had thrown the unit all the way to here. It wasn't technically disabled... the umbilical cord had been severed, but the battery was running just fine... but Shinji felt weak and wobbly. Enough so that he couldn't get EVA-01 to stand up again. He felt terrible.

Once again.

He was getting sick of it. Every angel fight he participated in was pain. He knew he had no other choice, that only he and Ayanami could pilot EVA-01, and Ayanami was needed in EVA-00, but that only made it worse. He could see that it wasn't malice on the part of anyone, that this just was how circumstances were, but it still meant his life was terrible. That was his life now in fact, ever since he had come to Tokyo-3: Getting mauled by angels. And there was nothing he could do
about it.

He came to full attention when there was a loud, pained gap in the comm system. *Ayanami!* Shinji frantically opened all comm channels to hear what was going on.

“*The angel is invading EVA-00’s left arm,*” Lt Ibuki reported. “*The nerve systems are being corrupted!*”

**No! Ayanami!** Shinji tried desperately to get EVA-01 up now, to scramble, to help her....

“*Cut off the left arm.*” That was his father. “*Immediately.*”

**While she's still synched?** It would be like cutting off her own arm!

Some seconds later there was another pained gasp.

“*EVA-00 is heavily damaged,*” Ibuki reported. “*The pilot is wounded.*”

*Of course she is!* Because the Commander had willed it. The way Ibuki listed that as if it were news was almost cynical. And “*the pilot*” - as if Ayanami were nothing more than that, just the pilot of EVA-00! But of course, Ibuki was not the one to blame.

**Father! You bastard!** There was now a white-hot rage burning inside Shinji. His father had hurt Ayanami. Just as his father had put her into that dump in the slums of Tokyo-3, had her rolled out from hospital when Shinji had at first refused to pilot EVA-01, even though she had barely been able to move, and probably it also was him who had drilled it into her that she was ‘replaceable’.

If he had to choose between his father and Ayanami... there would be no choice at all. And his father had just ruthlessly *hurt* Ayanami.

Like a drunkard, EVA-01 stumbled towards the nearest supply truck. Fortunately, it wasn't even 200m away. Had the Evangelion been thrown just a little bit farther, it might actually have crushed it. As it was, the truck was sitting prettily on a road leading up the mountain flank, which was fortified by an old-fashioned looking cobble stone wall. EVA-01 took the umbilical cord that lay next to it, and attached it to itself.

“*Shinji, the enemy is approaching your position,*” his father told him. “*ETA 40 seconds. Stay close to the supply lines and engage the enemy.*”

**No.**

That was simply clear for Shinji, a given. He *could not* attack Touji. Touji should never have been EVA pilot in the first place!

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, EVA-03 calmly approached Shinji’s position. He still didn't know what to do. He couldn't fight, so what else was there? He could run away, but that wouldn't work. He'd just end up out of reach of the umbilical cord and then the battery power would run out. He...

EVA-03 *jumped* again.

Shinji managed to make EVA-01 raise up the pallet rifle as an impromptu defence. EVA-03 still
kicked EVA-01 right in the chest, but EVA-01 managed to swipe it off it with the rifle. EVA-01 landed in the mud; EVA-03 managed to jump off its counterpart and land relatively gracefully some dozens metres away.

EVA-01 got up again. EVA-03 didn't bother; it swept its hand over the ground... and reached with it all the way to EVA-01. Then the other hand. Its arms were now extended to a length of double its height. And the hands were strangling EVA-01.

Inside his entry-plug, Shinji struggled against an invisible force choking his own neck. But no matter how he turned and shifted, it never went away. There was no protection as his neck got further and further abused.

EVA-03 roared and whirled its purple counterpart around, but this time it didn't let go. EVA-01 crashed against a mountain flank as the black unit continued choking it.

Shinji sat in his cockpit, in pain, and just hoped this all would end soon.

“Life support is breaking down.” Lt Hyuga at the Command Centre.

“The pilot's life is in danger.” Lt Ibuki.

“Lower the synchronization rate!” Vice-Commander Fuyutsuki.

“Belay that order.” Shinji's father, the Commander. He didn't even seem concerned at all. He had the least amount of emotion in his voice. “Shinji, why aren't you fighting?”

“My friend... is in that unit... isn't he?” Shinji managed to respond. Talking was hard, with his neck distorted and mangled.

“The unit has been taken over by an angel,” his father stated. “Our enemy! You must fight it!”

“I can't!” Shinji exclaimed, then breathed heavily. “I... can't kill...”

“If you don't, you will die,” his father told him. Forcefully, yes, but all matter-of-factly, with no concern for him at all.

“I know,” Shinji answered. He was beginning to sound weaker.

The communication channel died.

...suddenly the pressure on Shinji's neck just stopped. His upper body fell forward and for several seconds all he could do was catch his breath. It was finally over.... somehow. Though it would soon start again, at the earliest when the next angel would come and maybe...

...the light in the entry plug switched to red. It took some time for Shinji, still dazed and exhausted, to even notice it. Then he caught the writing on a screen, in English and Latin letters: “OPERATION DUMMY SYSTEM – REI”.

Rei... that was the only part he could decipher. Rei Ayanami?

There was a sound coming from the back of the entry-plug, like an engine starting up. What is that?
First connection synchronization seemed to still stand, as Shinji could look outside the EVA. He didn't feel anything anymore, thanks the gods, but he could deduce movement from what he was seeing. The scenery was shaking, as if EVA-01 was moving its entire body. Then Shinji could see purple arms coming into his field of vision... and they grabbed EVA-03's neck. As they choked the black unit, EVA-01 was slowly getting up from its mountain flank again. Now it was the purple unit who had the height advantage.

*What's happening?*

The two Evangelions were now trying to choke each other.

*Why is the Evangelion moving on its own? How can that happen?*

There was an unhealthy sound coming from EVA-03's neck. Its head was now bent nearly all the way backwards. Its arms fell down from EVA-01, and yet the purple unit was continuing its choke.

*Nononono...*

“Stop this!” Shinji shouted, desperately hoping the Command Centre would hear him. “Father! Stop this! It's over!”

EVA-01 grunted, and swung EVA-03 beneath it. The black unit landed hard on the street leading up the mountain flank, blood coming out of its mouth.

“Faaaather!”

EVA-01 punched its black counterpart right in the face. And again. And again. Then it raised its own head and *roared*, a powerful sound of dominance and victory. It raised its arms far above its head, and clasped them together for a hammer strike...

...and then it stopped.

*What happened now?*

---

Rei felt her left arm burning all over. She had difficulty breathing, difficulty moving, for all the pain she felt.

Once EVA-00 had been disabled, the angel had simply moved on. But for some reason, synchronization was still up, and Rei had *felt* her arm blown off. There was a gaping wound at EVA-00's shoulder now, and Rei was still feeling it. As far as her senses were concerned, her arm had just been hacked off, and she was left to lie here, near a street ramp.

She looked at a big, orange counter. EVA-00 had lost its umbilical cord in the fight, and the five minutes of battery time were ticking away. *Soon...* Synchronization would end automatically then. But until then, the pain remained. Rei held her shoulder and quietly whimpered.

And until then, there would be dark and repulsive thoughts entering her mind. The her inside the
Evangelion was in just as much pain as she herself, and furthermore she was *livid*, counting the use of the explosive charges as one more crime committed against her. Rei did not think in those terms. Though, actually, neither was her counterpart inside EVA-00, really. She simply *raged* and was just adding reasons for that rage. And that rage and disgust and feeling of impotence were leaking into Rei’s mind.

She heard a roar from outside.

It exhausted her to no end, but she managed to support EVA-00 on its remaining arm and raise its head. .. and she saw the angel swinging EVA-01 against a mountain flank and then choking it.

*Ikari!* For a moment, her pain was forgotten.

EVA-01 still looked functional, though. *Why isn't he fighting back?*

...*he has figured out who is inside the contaminated unit.*

Rei let EVA-00's upper body fall down again and reached out with its intact hand. Pain jolted through her whole body. Slowly, EVA-00 crawled over the street ramp in front of it. It was completely useless, of course. Soon, the battery would be spent.

Rei opened all communication channels.

Lt Ibuki was currently speaking: “The pilot's life is in danger.”

*I have to... I need to...* But there was nothing Rei *could* do. Even now, she couldn't ignore the pain. Even only listening to the comm channels was difficult.

“Shinji, why aren't you fighting?” the Commander asked. Uncompromising, straight to the point, as always. Rei had always found that comfortable about him. One didn't need to *guess* his intentions; it was always very clear. She was his tool, and he didn't cover that up in fancy illusions.

Now, though... *Ikari can't fight back.* Rei knew that for a certainty. If Ikari knew that it was Suzuhara in that unit, he would rather die than attack. The Commander's usually so pragmatic stance suddenly became something very unpractical.

“The unit has been taken over by an angel,” the Commander told his son. “Our enemy! You must fight it!”

“I can't!” Ikari exclaimed amidst heavy breaths. “I.. can't kill...”

“If you don't, you will die,” his father told him.

Worry added to the pain Rei was feeling. The Commander was certainly right. His son *had* to fight back. And yet, he surely wouldn't.

*Is that the end? Already?* There was a part of her rejoicing at that thought. The her inside the EVA certainly embraced it wholeheartedly. But... *The Scenario. This will end the Scenario.* That was unacceptable, but what could Rei do? Certainly, the her inside the EVA did not care for the Scenario at all.

And the battery timer inside her entry-plug fell below the one minute mark.
“Switch to Dummy Plug control complete,” an unknown voice from Command Central announced.

_They are bringing the Dummy Plug online._ That could maybe salvage the situation. But...

“Open the system. Begin the attack,” the Commander ordered.

Suddenly, EVA-01 began moving again. It arched its back to reach the angel with its hands. Finally, it broke through the angel's chokehold on it, and began strangling the angel in turn. EVA-01 rose from its position, nearly subduing the angel in doing so. The two were now strangling each other.

...until the angel just stopped. Black arms fell down from EVA-01’s neck. EVA-01 continued, though.

“Stop this. Father! Stop this! It's over!” Ikari. But Rei could only hear it on the EVA-to-EVA channel. The Command Centre probably couldn't.

It hurt to hear his despair. Ever since he had come to Tokyo-3 he had been there for her. And now, he would watch as his own Evangelion was killing his friend.

“Faaahther!”

EVA-00's battery died just as Ikari's scream ended.

...and then, Rei decided she could not allow that. She reached into the Evangelion, to feel the her inside it. The her inside the Evangelion resonated with her. Rei could feel her strong wish to just end it all. And now, she would get her wish. Two parts of a single soul... now united in purpose.

“You've always taken care of me...” Rei whispered.

Outside, EVA-00's giant red eye suddenly flared up with light, sending visible rays of it everywhere.

“My turn.”

---

Maya Ibuki had always been against implementing the dummy plugs. It was a nice enough _idea_ for sure: If dummy plugs could synchronize with the Evangelions, then nobody would need to send _children_ into life and death battles again. But at what price? Rei, poor quiet Rei who had already suffered so much, had been further exploited to make those things a reality. And it had been Ritsuko, her mentor, her superior, her... who had done this. It made Maya feel very conflicted.

She supposed that now that they had the dummy plugs anyway, they could as well be used, but... not like this. The Dummy Plugs were completely untested. Professional procedure would be to first hold strictly regulated tests with them, then field tests and only _then_ use them in battle. To immediately jump to “use a battle as field test” was just reckless! Doubly so as Ritsuko wasn't here to supervise it all.
However, orders were orders, and Commander Ikari was the legitimate supreme authority here.

On the giant viewscreen in front of the command decks of the NERV headquarter, she and all the others could now see how EVA-01 slowly rose from its subdued position... and then nearly immediately forced the infected unit down with a counter-choke.

Murmurs went through the command central.

“Is that the power of the Dummy Plug?” Maya whispered.

It was what they needed right now, but it made her even more worried. Such a powerful thing should not have been first tested in battle. Nobody knew what it would do now. And what if they couldn't shut it down anymore? Its use right now was just reckless.

...but Commander Ikari, calm as ever, probably knew what he was doing. After all, if the angel broke through...

The two units were now engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle. Maya looked at at the data output of her console: All systems were stable, and ever more of the system's emotional moments were cleared up and brought under observation. Everything seemed to go smoothly.

Another part of the terminal showed her the MAGI's estimations of the angel. And all activity values suddenly fell drastically. Maya looked up at the viewscreen: EVA-03's arms were limply falling from EVA-01's neck. It was over.

...however, EVA-01 continued its choke. It even swung the infested unit around and began punching it. Maya turned around to look at the upper deck, but there was no order from Commander Ikari to disengage the Dummy Plug. In fact... was he smiling?

Then suddenly something caught her attention on her terminal.

“EVA-00 reactivating!” she shouted.

“What?” Shigeru exclaimed. “But its battery is dead.”

Maya switched her terminal's screen to show EVA-00's data output... and paled. “Berserk...” she whispered.

“What's that?” somebody from the lower decks shouted. Maya looked up and saw that EVA-01 had stopped mid-movement, its two hands raised and clasped together, as if ready to strike any second now... but it didn't. It did nothing. It seemed frozen.

Frantically, Maya brought up the readouts from EVA-01 and the Dummy Plug. Huh? “Dummy Plug system still active,” she announced.

“Then why isn't the Evangelion moving?” Shigeru complained. “Wait. Look at the nerve functions! They're getting no feedback! As if... as if the body just isn't listening to its own nerves anymore.”

Maya knew that EVA-01 was a special unit, that its very material was different from the other units'. The very flesh that was now not responding to its nerves. But how could this be a problem? Ritsuko had never spoken about anything like that.
EVA-00 now walked up the other two units... and pushed EVA-01 away with a heavy blow from its elbow. And then, the purple unit just turned and walked away.

“It's as if the Dummy Plug has absolutely no control over the unit anymore!” Shigeru complained.

“Is the pilot of EVA-00 alive and conscious?” Commander Ikari asked.

“Ah... yes, sir,” Maya confirmed. At least he cares about...

“Raise LCL pressure to maximum,” he ordered.

“What?” Maya exclaimed. She knew that was unprofessional, but she couldn't help it. On the uppermost deck, the Commander had sat down again. Whereas before he had watched the scene standing and smiling, now he was back to his usual enigmatic and intimidating pose.

“Just do it!” Ikari ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Maya confirmed in a subdued voice. She felt terrible, but she entered the commands... to no avail. “EVA-00 is not responding”, she reported. She wasn't very surprised. If one could speak about a normal behaviour of berserking Evangelions, it was that.

“Pattern Orange detected!” Hyuga bellowed from his terminal.

Maya took a look at her own again. Indeed, there was a strong Pattern Orange AT Field.... and it came straight from EVA-00. How is that possible? A Pattern Orange shouldn't have that much strength.

“Is that unit infested as well?” Shigeru asked tersely.

Maya shook her head. “No indication. All readouts from EVA-00 normal and stable... well, except for the berserk state. But EVA-00's nerves and tissue are unaffected.”

“Pattern Orange rapidly contracting and expanding again,” Shigeru reported.

“So is EVA-00's AT Field,” Maya added. “The two fields can pass each other seamlessly. Strange...”

“What is it doing?” Hyuga asked.

It was a rhetorical question, but there was an answer. And for once, Commander Ikari sounded tense. “It's scraping off the angel from the Evangelion unit.”

Rei wasn't fighting with the her inside the Evangelion anymore. She wasn't trying to subdue her anymore, to control her, to keep her thoughts constrained. The two parts of one soul were now resonating with each other. They were both drawn to the end... to the final salvation. To nothingness. But not without helping the one person who had first shown kindness to Rei.

EVA-01 moved as they/she willed. It was part of their/her flesh. They/she was now all her, the part of their/her identity deep down and well covered. This let a feeling of uneasiness fester inside Rei...
I'm not her!... but it also let her/them transcend the pain and the physical needs and urges of existence.

Rei’s AT Field, the AT Field of both of her, of a soul now united, flared up. Then EVA-00's, and Rei’s contracted again. It flared up again, and EVA-00's retracted. And so on and so forth. And bit by bit, they were scraping off the angel... towards EVA-00. EVA-03 would be freed at the cost of the Prototype.

But it was all good. That was what Rei wished for.

Suzuhara will live. Ikari will not blame himself. And another one of me will return. Despite all the best efforts of him and Asuka, the simple fact remained that she was replaceable. Ikari was not; he was unique and precious and he had to be protected.

And besides, oblivion was what Rei wished for anyway. It was that desire for oblivion that made the her inside the Evangelion resonate with her. Only due to that were they of one will now.

Finally, there was no trace of the angel on EVA-03 anymore. Determining that was difficult. Adamite tissue was Adamite tissue, after all. But EVA-03 was now inert, bereft of both its pilot and its parasite. All active Pattern Blue had been removed from it.

EVA-00 maintained a strong AT Field... inverted it... and ran. The angel was now inside the light of its soul, a prisoner of it.

“What are you doing, Rei?”

The Commander's voice. Superficially, it sounded as calm as ever, but Rei could hear his tension in it. She didn't answer. She couldn't justify what she was doing to her Commander...

...not our Commander...

EVA-00 ran up the mountains, far away from any settlements or houses. They/she began to feel something... a feeling of searing flesh inside her. The angel, disrupted and partitioned by AT Field manipulation, was now regrouping and beginning to take over the Evangelion. They/she didn't have much time anymore. Almost worse, yet, Rei could feel the angel turning outwards, trying to escape. Only the inverted AT field held its back. She didn't know if the angel could even survive outside of an Evangelion, but then again, it had to have existed somewhere before infecting EVA-03.

Inside her entry plug, Rei turned in her seat to open up a switch behind it.

“Rei, the angel is infesting your unit,” the Commander told her. “You must eject.”

“I can't,” Rei told him softly.

“Rei! Evacuate EVA-00 immediately! That's an order!” Now the Commander had finally lost his famed composure.

“I must stay to keep the AT field in effect,” Rei answered. She could still feel the angel trying to escape. Then everything would start again, and there was no telling which Evangelion would be the next target. Maybe Ikari's. Maybe Asuka's.
She pulled the switch. Mode D was activated.

Rei turned around in her seat again. She saw a brilliant white light and a person approaching her.... the Commander?

No. Ikari... Shinji was smiling at her. And so was Asuka.

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*It all returns to nothing,*  
*it all comes tumbling down,*  
*tumbling down,*  
*tumbling doow...*

---

[1] Look up Mount Nobe (Nobeyama) in Google Maps. It's almost all the way up to Tokyo-2 (Matsumoto), and rather remote. NERV didn't need to intercept the angel so early, and so far away from the Fortress City they specifically built to fight angels...
The outside world was a hazy view of colours that did not fit together. And her head hurt. She tried to move, but just couldn't. She wasn't restrained or anything, just too weak.

“Katsuragi?” The voice was concerned.

Only with some delay did Misato recognize the voice. She still couldn't see clearly, her eyelids only half up.

“...Ka...Kaji?” she asked.

“Right here,” the man confirmed.

Misato groaned and fully opened her eyes. She flinched at the light falling onto them, but she could see she was in a hospital bed, surrounded by machines, with Kaji sitting on a chair pulled to one side of that bed.

“What... are you doing here?” she further asked.

He grinned. “You'd be surprised how many doors an U.N. Inspector ID card can open.”

Misato groaned again. That was just like him. Though, at least there was a person there now who could talk to her. “What... happened?”

“Evangelion 03 was infected by an angel,” Kaji told her matter-of-factly. “It awoke during the activation test and took over the unit. EVA-03 then mauled the facility and headed towards Tokyo-3.”

“There... there was a battle,” Misato stated. It wasn't a question.

Kaji nodded. “Commander Ikari mounted a defence line at Mount Nobe. The angel was defeated, Touji is doing fine, given the circumstances, and EVA-03 could even be salvaged.”

Misato noted a certain hesitation in his voice. He had been very careful about this, but he couldn't fool her. “Something happened.” Again, a statement of fact.

Kaji nodded gravely. “More than just one thing. Apparently, Ikari had an automation system for EVA-01 activated, after Shinji just... refused to fight. I'm still trying to figure out what happened there; it's not something he told the U.N. or the Committee. The system did very well in battle, until it just... stopped. Mid-movement” He hesitated. “That's when EVA-00 went berserk.”

He stopped. After a while, Misato understood. “Rei...”

“She somehow managed to transfer the angel from EVA-03 to her unit,” Kaji explained softly, his voice, usually so rough, now barely above a whisper. “And then she ran away and... she activated the self-destruct without ejecting.”
“Rei...” said again, but then fell silent. She closed her eyes.

“Yeah,” Kaji just confirmed.

A thought hit Misato and she immediately opened her eyes wide. “Shinji... Asuka! Are they...”

“They're fine,” Kaji reassured her. “Asuka was knocked unconscious, but there is no physical harm. The doctors expect they'll wake up again during the night. Shinji hardly got a scratch.”

“But... Rei!” Misato insisted. “Rei died. And... if Asuka is in the hospital, Shinji will have nobody around! You should have stayed with him!”

“I... Katsuragi, I had to come see you,” Kaji told her. “When I heard you had been caught in the blast...” He stopped, his face cast in stone.

“You can't leave Shinji alone!” Misato protested. She breathed heavily, the burst of anger having exhausted all her energy reserves.

Kaji held up his hands in defence. “Don't worry. I asked a friend to take care of him.”

Misato looked at him with narrowed eyes. “A friend? Have you been in Tokyo-3 long enough to make the sort of friends you could trust with that?”

Kaji smirked. “Ah, but you know my charms, Katsuragi. And she is very sweet, and cares about Shinji.”

Even more narrowed eyes. “She?”

A broader smirk. “Are you getting jealous of Shinji?” He leaned towards her. “After all, she's with him. I'm with you.”

Misato grimaced. “I didn't invite you.”

Kaji sat back and remained silent. Misato suppressed another groan. Okay, so Kaji was annoying most of the time, but he had come here to see her. Speaking of which...

“Where am I, anyway?” she asked.

“The NERV hospital in the Geofront,” Kaji answered. “NERV launched a large scale rescue and evacuation operation of Matsushiro.” He smirked ironically. “Can't have outsiders get involved, after all.”

“You're beginning to sound like Asuka,” Misato said accusingly.

Kaji shrugged. “Maybe it does take a teenager to show us adults when we take ourselves too seriously. The hospitals in Tokyo-2 would have been far closer.” His voice got more serious. “And if you had been found later, or been transported to a hospital later...” He stopped. “I'll have to go through the casualty list. Maybe some of them could have been saved if NERV hadn't been so stubborn.”

“You're taking a job seriously,” Misato stated and sounded genuinely amazed. “Will wonders never cease...”
Kaji went back to smirking. “It's a very convenient job. I wouldn't say being a U.N. inspector opens all databases to me, but... it's a good start.”

“Just... don't go overboard,” Misato cautioned him. “The world needs NERV. And I...” She remained silent. “Just be careful in what you do. Asuka would miss you.”

“Well, the doctors say they want to keep you for observation at least for tomorrow still,” Kaji blatantly changed the topic. “Once you're released, I do think you could use some free time.”

Misato weakly shook her head, as much as her pillow allowed it. “As soon as I get out of here, I need to see Shinji. And Asuka as well. With... with Rei gone...”

“Hm,” Kaji voiced ambiguously. “Yeah. You're right. But we haven't had any real chance to talk in private ever since I've come here. You've always been... busy.”

“I am busy most of the time,” Misato defended herself heatedly. Then she groaned. Maybe it was the anger, maybe that she had talked so much, but suddenly she had a headache. She closed her eyes and continued, “But thanks for coming.”

“Well, for now, just get better,” Kaji told her. “I'll come again tomorrow.” Again that smirk. “Count on it.”

He stood up and left. And Misato knew she could count on it. That had always been the scary part about Kaji...

Rei dead. She groaned again. Damn... Asuka had once called her out for having worked with Rei for a year and yet never really having cared for her. The girl had always been so quiet. And maybe she had not been treated properly by her guardian, Commander Ikari. And now she was dead. At least it wasn't Misato who had sent her out to fight this time, but... It could have been. Would have been me, if I hadn't been injured. And it could well be Shinji or Asuka next time.

Shinji...

[[[Trigger Warning for following section: Shinji's heavy emotional fallout from the battle]]]

Shinji was in a dream. People moved weirdly fast around them, almost without contours, and their speech was hollow and unintelligible. He didn't move, didn't talk. LCL, open air, plugsuit, clothing, it was all somehow the same to him. None of it was real. Sure, he did leave the entry-plug and changed into his normal clothes, but in a way that was just a brown-haired boy. Shinji felt like an outside observer to it all.

Shinji watched as that boy was guided around by adults in uniforms. He recognized none of them. They all looked the same to him. He didn't want to go – wanted to just sit in a corner and... and not
think. To just end there. But among their unintelligible voices he could understand their commands to go on, could feel their hands pushing him forwards... gently, maybe, but still ultimately against his will. He wanted none of this. It was better to do nothing, think nothing. Thinking meant remembering, remembering how...

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...Shinji thought it better to do nothing, think nothing. But he just did as he was told. In truth, it wasn't really him who moved, anyway. He was like a puppet on strings, being moved at the whims of others, because doing otherwise would just be too difficult, too exhausting.

It was difficult enough to discern anything around him. People running, shouting, blurring into each other, all being the same. A vision of chaos, in which Shinji was a timeless bubble. All the chaos whirled around him, never touching him. He couldn't even tell how he moved through it, would never be able to recall specifics of what happened, but somehow he found himself with a young woman in NERV uniform.

As the two moved away from the others, towards a car, Shinji, as an outside observer, recognized her. Lieutenant Maya Ibuki. But the brown-haired boy gave no sign of recognition and just walked at her side. She said something, but he gave no response. Her words were unreal, virtual, imaginary. How could anything be real after Ayanami...

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...the brown-haired boy walked at Ibuki's side. The two entered a well-maintained, silvery-whitish Toyota Prius. There was a small Hello Kitty head on the driver's window. There was a red Little Tree air freshener hanging from the ceiling, though Shinji couldn't tell the scent. In contrast to the car's exterior, its upholstery had seen better days. The seat still was comfortable enough. And Lieutenant Ibuki was saying something.

Shinji didn't even notice the car had started. Outside, there was simply another scenery every time he looked. And he had his view transfixed on the outside, just staring into nothingness.

Finally, some words reached his mind. “Asuka at least is okay. Don't worry. She'll return. It's just sympathetic shock from the neural feedback. There isn't any physiological reason for her unconsciousness. The doctors figure she'll wake up during the night, most likely.” She sighed. “It's dreadful that nobody will be by her side, but Mr Kaji really wanted to see Captain Katsuragi, and I... well, someone needs to look after you as well.”

Shinji heard the words now, but none of it really registered. He was in an endless virtual plane with changing sceneries. That was all.

The car stopped. Shinji's step were automatic. He didn't fully realize where he was, but he instinctively knew the way from the parking spot to Misato's apartment. Just as automatically and instinctively he opened the door. Only when he reached the kitchen did he realize he had let Ibuki in together with him.

“Sit down,” she told him. “I'll make something to eat. I hope you don't mind if I'll take from your supplies for my own meal as well. I'll replace it tomorrow, promise!”

Shinji didn't even understand what she meant. He simply sat down at the kitchen table as he was told and looked fixedly ahead...
...a moment later Ibuki put a plate of hot soup in front of him. He looked at it without comprehension. Gently, and without comment, Ibuki placed a spoon in his hand. He looked at the spoon, then began using it. Mechanically, he dipped the spoon into the soup, led it to his mouth, emptied it, dipped it into the soup again. Always with the same rhythm.

Wind whistled from Ibuki's direction... no, a whisper.

“It'll get better, Shinji. It'll get better.”

*Right.* Shinji just nodded. It *sounded* right at least, and it seemed like this was the expected reaction.

He only once looked up from his plate. Ibuki looked... worried? Yeah. That was the emotion. Worry.

He noticed his plate was empty. Worldlessly, he stood up and carried it to the kitchen counter.

“No worry about it,” Ibuki told him. “I'll wash up.”

Shinji nodded and left the kitchen. He went straight to his room. Without changing he sat down on his futon and... just... stopped... thinking.

EVA-01 just walking, no input from him. He knows Ayanami is somewhere behind him. And then the loud explosion. EVA-01 falls to its feet. A giant purple cross of light filling the sky...

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Shinji sat on his futon. And now it all came back to him. Ayanami... Ayanami... there was no Ayanami anymore. He would never again enjoy her reassuring presence. Would never hear her words, always understanding. Would now be all alone and bereft in this world.

*And it was his own fault!*

Ayanami had sacrificed herself because he hadn't fought. Because he had been too weak. Because he had refused to fight because of his emotions, his sentiments... his fears. *He had killed Ayanami!*

The realization of that was horrible. He had killed Rei Ayanami, a person of beauty, who had already suffered so much anyway, and now she had died so young, and it was all because of him, and he was guilty, and it should rather have been him who had died, because who would miss him anyway?

Asuka was gone as well. Injured in the fight. Who knew if she would ever come back. Maybe he'd also lose her fire, her passion... her understanding due to having lived through the same as him... And Touji. Maybe he would lose his friend as well. He would remain entirely alone.

The next angel would come. He would have to fight and suffer again. And then the next angel, and the one after that. He could leave at any moment, except that he *couldn't*, as the fate of the world rested on him. So he had to fight, again and again and again. The battles would go on, and he would lose others as well, and then he would remain all alone, and he would fight and he would suffer, and that was his life now.

*I have killed Ayanami!*
Maybe that was his punishment now. To go on fighting forever, with no end in sight. With no possibility of retreat, because people were counting on him. But it wasn't a punishment he thought he could bear.

...Ayanami...

Maybe... maybe... with her he could have stood that life. But now, without her? He couldn't quit. People were counting on him. If Asuka was right, the *entire world* depended on him. That wasn't something from which one could just walk away. So he would be burdened with suffering the angel fights his entire life.

...I killed Ayanami...

He stood up. Slowly, methodically. He walked towards the balcony door. Opened it. Walked up the railing. Looked at the city in front of him. Giant towers, glistening lights. That was the world he was supposed to protect, *had* to protect. Of course one couldn't just step down from that duty. But that meant that his life would continue to consist of suffering. But now without Ayanami to support him, possibly without Asuka as well. And if he didn't lose her now, he would in the future. And Ayanami's death was his fault. That was his life now, and there was no changing it.

His life...

He breathed out. And again. Then he raised a leg... and lowered it again. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. He opened them again to look at the city. Tokyo-3. The city that *expected* him to protect them, to protect them by suffering – and quite rightfully so, because only he could pilot. So there was no escape here, except...

His grip around the railing got harder. He again raised a leg, imagined himself raising it over the railing... but he couldn't. He became frustrated. If he remained a coward now, then there would indeed be no end to it all.

And besides, he had killed Ayanami. Caused her death, at least.

*Ayanami*...

He breathed out and *again* raised that leg. He would go through with this. But he hesitated. He had to go through, but he couldn't. He just never had been the type to go through with things. He again lowered the leg and just stood there, doing nothing, looking at the city. He didn't know how long this lasted. Finally all the thoughts in him united in a whirlwind.

*Ayanami, his life, the pain, Ayanami, Asuka, Touji, Ayanami, his guilt, his cowardice, Ayanami*...

He closed his eyes. This time, he actually did manage to raise his leg over the railing. But then he hesitated. He didn't know how long he hesitated, how long he just remained like that....

...he was abruptly pulled away from the railing. Arms enclosed him, a body. Ibuki didn't say anything. Didn't scold him and didn't even shout out any shock. She just stood on the balcony now and held him in a tight hug. She didn't let go of him. Even after quite a while, she still remained quiet. She just stroke his back and held his head against her shoulder. She was only minimally taller than Shinji.
Shinji didn't want this. Of course Ibuki would pull him away from the railing. That was part of her duty, both as a NERV officer and because she had said she would look after him today. And he didn't mind that; it wasn't like he had been truly determined to go through with this. But to hold him now? Why? He didn't deserve this. Didn't deserve any of this. Didn't deserve this... niceness. He had caused Ayanami's death! Ibuki had witnessed that from the command centre. Didn't she care about that?

But Shinji didn't resist. Was too weak to resist now. Just let himself be held. And in truth, he didn't want to fight this. He didn't deserve to be comforted, but at the same time he also didn't want to get away from that comfort. He felt instinctively that he needed it. He maybe should still fight it, because needed or not he didn't deserve it, but as usual he was just weak.

Weak...

His eyes became wet. A first tear dropped on Ibuki's shoulder. She didn't comment, didn't seem to care, only stroked his hair now. Shinji became simply overwhelmed by this niceness, this comfort. More tears came. He didn't deserve any of this, he had killed Ayanami, his life was in ruins now, and it would just go on and on like this, all without Ayanami, on and on and on and on and on and on and on...

He cried into Ibuki's shoulder now.

[[[End Trigger Warning]]]

Asuka's head hurt. That was when she realized she was awake. She felt nauseous as well. It probably was like the worst hangover ever, only that Asuka of course had never actually had any alcohol-fuelled hangovers to compare her current state to. She was 14; she didn't yet get to drink and nonetheless already got to have hangovers. Somewhere, there was a point in that, but right now Asuka couldn't quite catch it.

I'm alive.

That meant they had won. And yet, Asuka couldn't feel joyous about this. It certainly hadn't been thanks to her. She had simply been knocked out of the battle. The enemy's very first action, and she had been down. It was embarrassing.

Useless. Useless, useless, useless.

She had failed. She was of no use to anyone. Why would anyone bear with her? She was disgusting. Maybe they'd still tolerate her. Misato was the Operations Director after all, and she one of her assets, no matter how bad. And Rei was now her roommate, so the blue-haired girl would have little other choice than to put up with her.
Asuka breathed in and out, trying to calm herself. She knew she was overreacting. Nobody would leave her just because of one defeat... though could she really be so sure about that? As much as she was telling herself that, a feeling of fear remained. And in any case, she was just disgusted by herself. Losing like that had been just pathetic. And in the end, she had even held out for Shinji to rescue her. She! Had held out for some one else to rescue her! What had she even trained piloting EVA all the years for? Apparently, it had made her barely passable. Apparently, just by natural talent, she was a loser.

With shaking hands she grabbed the electronic clock on the bedside table. 4:13... And apparently nobody was coming to check up on her. It would be a long night.

Asuka lay in the bed and couldn't think of anything to distract her. Her mind went through the battle again and again and again, until she wasn't only disgusted at herself, but also bored by that disgust already. As the long hours slowly ticked away, she became ever more certain of her own unworthiness. By the time the first morning light hit the Geofront outside, she didn't even need to think about it anymore. It had become accepted normality.

Of course nobody would come see her, not even the nurses. Why should they? She didn't deserve company, and of course nobody would want to have anything to do with her. Asuka knew of course how silly those thoughts were, and that meant the fact that she was still thinking them... it was just self-pity. Even more pathetic. But, with nothing else to do, Asuka couldn't stop those thoughts. For hours, she was all alone with self-destructive thoughts of disgust at herself, and with nothing to do to distract herself from them.

Finally, there was a knock at the door. Asuka looked at the clock. 8:32 “Yeah?” she answered the knock.

The door slowly opened part-ways, and a brown-haired head looked in. Asuka recognized it: Lt Ibuki.

“Uh... hello... Pilot Soryu,” she greeted her. Hah. Learned her lesson. “May I come in?”

“What do you want?” Asuka asked instead of answering.

“Well, uh, I was about to tell you...” Ibuki replied with an awkward smile.

“Fine, fine, come in then,” Asuka relented.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, Ibuki did so. Finally, she declared. “Well, I'm here to get you home.”

Asuka raised an eyebrow. “You?”

“As... Soryu, Captain Katsuragi is injured,” Maya explained softly to her. “And Mr Kaji is with her.”

“Typical!” Asuka scoffed. “They only care for themselves.”

Ibuki went over that with a polite smile. “Well, Mr Kaji has sent me to pick you up.”

“Urrgh. Fiiine!” Asuka relented. “Go outside and let me change.” Ibuki turned around, and Asuka asked, “Oh, by the way, how did the battle go?”
Ibuki stopped mid-movement, frozen. Then her shoulders slumped down. Slowly she turned around again. “It was... complicated,” she answered quietly. Far too quietly for such a simple answer. “EVA-03 – it was piloted by your classmate, Touji Suzuhara.”

“Him?” Asuka exclaimed and sat up straight in her bed. Then she remembered. “Hikari told me NERV agents had... oh my god. He was chosen as... as Fourth Child?” Ibuki simply nodded. “Why that idiot?”

Ibuki looked at her oddly. “I do not know how the Children are chosen.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Asuka was still digesting this news. She had failed, and the new pilot was an idiot like Touji. Even stooges like him could climb to her level then. Hell, maybe he was her replacement. Then she remembered to ask another question. She tried to overplay any embarrassment about not having done so before. “Did he survive?”

Ibuki nodded. “He did. He is injured and will need to stay in hospital for a few days, but is expected to make a full recovery. Even EVA-03 could be salvaged. Sh... Pilot Ikari is... unharmed.” She didn't sound quite convinced as she said so. And now she hesitated.

And there was only one person left to be listed. “Rei!” Asuka shouted.

Ibuki lowered her head. “EVA-00... it went berserk. It freed EVA-03 from the angel, but...”

“Rei!” Asuka shouted again. “What happened to her?”

“Rei engaged the unit's self-destruct mode,” Ibuki whispered. “And stayed inside it to maintain the AT Field that kept the angel in its place.”

“Rei!” Asuka shouted once again. “Did she....”

Ibuki just shook her head.

“No, no, no, no!” Asuka protested. “That can't be! It isn't true! It can't be! Rei... Rei can't be dead! Not now! Not after... she can't be! Do you hear me, Lieutenant? She can't be!”

Ibuki just looked further down on the ground and said nothing.

“This is bullshit!” Asuka raged. Her fists hammered on her blanket. “Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit! What is this? To have her.... have her... NOW? Nonono, this just can't be! You must be mistaken! It can't be! She can't be... she just can't!”

There was no sadness in Asuka. Even at the funeral of her mother, she hadn't shed a single tear. Even now her voice was steady and her eyes were dry. But there was rage, so much rage at a universe which would dare do this to her now.

She had... yes, she had loved Rei. Loved and lost without ever telling her, because she had been a coward, a coward who hadn't been able to admit to herself that yes, she liked people her own age, even if they were still teenagers. And now it was all too late... No! It can't be!

Rei had been serenity. Calmness. Quiet in the midst of all the turmoil that constantly raged inside Asuka. This had been important. And now... now she was gone? Just like that? Of course Asuka wouldn't accept that! Such a serene being as Rei could not exist merely in the imagination and
memory!

She was only muttering now. “No, no, no, no…”

“Please do change, Soryu,” Ibuki whispered. “I’ll wait outside.”

The car ride was quiet at first. An awkward silence hung in the air of Ibuki’s small car, as both passengers tried their best not to look at the other. Inwardly, Asuka was fuming. This all just had to be bullshit. What were those NERV guys thinking, first sending an Evangelion against her, and then waking her to tell her Rei was dead? That Rei supposedly was dead!

Finally, Asuka drily demanded to know, “What happened?”

And so Ibuki told her. Softly, quietly, factually. That Shinji had figured out Touji was piloting EVA-03. That he had drawn the angel-infested unit away from EVA-02, but then had refused to fight. That the angel had then disabled EVA-00. Shinji had then refused to fight, and in reaction the Commander had ordered the activation of the “dummy plug” - apparently, an EVA automation systems. The “dummy plug” had fought well, but had finally just stopped. And that was when EVA-00 had gone berserk. The unit had somehow scraped the angel off EVA-03 and then detonated with Rei inside it in order to kill that angel.

It was too much for Asuka to take in. She didn't know what to make of it. Her thoughts were dominated by a single thought: Rei was dead. Rei was dead. Rei was dead. But even so... Why didn't Shinji fight? Why did the “dummy plug” stop? Why did EVA-00 go berserk? Might Rei have still lived if one of those things had gone differently?

After Ibuki had parked her car, she and Asuka went to Misato’s apartment. Shinji opened for them. At first Asuka was about to protest... but then, did she really want to return to her apartment? The apartment she shared with Rei.... had shared with Rei? No, that was a terrifying prospect.

As soon as he had opened the door for them, Shinji simply went into the kitchen and sat at the table, eyes straight ahead. After she had removed her shoes, Asuka hesitantly joined him there. It wasn't like she had anywhere better to go.

“Hopefully, Captain Katsuragi will be released from hospital today,” Ibuki told them quietly. “If not, I'll check up on you this evening again. But NERV really wants me to write that after action report, and my own apartment is a mess and...” She stopped herself. “I'm sorry. I'll see you again this evening. And hopefully Captain Katsuragi as well.”

Neither of the two pilots answered her. She simply left the apartment.

Subsequently, for a time that seemed like hours, Shinji and Asuka just sat at the table without doing anything. Not looking at each other, not speaking, not even moving. There was nothing to say and nothing to do. They both knew. And with Rei dead, what was there to actually do? What sense would there be in any activity? So they just sat there, together but alone, and did nothing. Midday passed into early afternoon.

Finally, finally, Asuka found the will to say something. It was small and quiet, exhausted and emotionless at first.

“Why didn't you fight?”
Shinji didn't answer. He didn't even seem to have caught her question. He just looked at the kitchen table as he had for at least the last hour.

“Rei sacrificed herself. She had to fight.”

Again, there was no response from Shinji.

“She had to fight because you didn't. She had to sacrifice herself because you didn't fight.”

Was there a flinch in Shinji's face? But apart from that, there still was no reaction.

“Didn't you promise to protect her?” Gradually, increasingly, Asuka's voice got louder, more lively, angrier. “Is that what protection looks like to you?”

Shinji balled his hands, one of them lying on the table, into fists. They trembled.


Shinji was now breathing heavily.

“Answer me!” Asuka demanded. “Why, why, why, why!”

Tears rolled down Shinji's face.

Asuka was breathing heavily as well. “Well?” She heard a small whisper, but she couldn't understand it. “What was that?”

“Rei is dead....” That stopped Asuka cold. Shinji's voice got louder now. “Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead.” His voice got slurry from all the crying.

...Rei is dead... It was like a renewed realization of that fact. Asuka just sat there, looking blankly at Shinji, who was by now crying his eyes out.

She abruptly stood up, so that her chair was on the verge of falling over, and leaned forwards over the table edge. “You could have... you could have...”

“Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead.”

Asuka stopped. There were now so many emotions inside her. Anger, so much anger. A sense of utter and total loss. A sense of betrayal, that Shinji hadn't fought for Rei. But also pity for Shinji, who was by now a miserable wreck.

Even with all that anger, she wasn't sure she could uphold her strong and stern pose for much longer. Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead.

She walked over to Shinji's chair. She wanted to accuse him. She wanted to finally get an answer out of him as to why he had failed her.

“Shinji...” she began sternly.

Unexpectedly, Shinji's head turned around to her and looked up at her. It was a mess of tears and swollen eyes. “You promised me, Asuka. That you would protect me. That you would cover for
me. I... I never wanted...” Then his upper body collapsed on the table again. He repeated his mantra. “Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead.”

It was weak. It was pathetic. Yes, Asuka had recognized that before and promised to... but how could he appeal to her promise now after he had broken his? It truly was pathetic.

...Rei is dead...

And Shinji was a crying mess right in front of her, entirely lost in his mourning and his guilt.

She couldn't help it. She couldn't not do it. Her arms grabbed around Shinji’s, and she laid her head on his shoulder. Her eyes remained dry, but they were united in mourning. Soon afterwards, Shinji sat upright, his arms around her waist, his head buried in beneath her chest, her head bowed down and on his back, her arms below his shoulders.

She still didn't cry. She never did. But...

Rei is dead. Rei is dead. Rei is dead.

She let herself be comforted by Shinji, just as she comforted him.

Shinji was spent. Entirely. There just was nothing left of him anymore. All energy, all of himself, had flat-out left him. He felt numb, unable to really process any emotions anymore, unable to have any desires or motivations. He merely existed.

But he was at peace.

He was sitting on a pillow in the living room, his back leaning against the wall to the kitchen... and his head leaning against Asuka's, who sat besides him. Where their hands touched, their fingers were intertwined. Both just sat there and rested. Shinji slowly but hungrily drew energy from that closeness to Asuka. She was still at his side, despite everything. She was still here, at least.

He felt like he never wanted to move again, that he just wanted to sit in this silent comfort, and let the world outside turn without him. It was enough for him to just sit here with Asuka. The world outside was just hurt and pain and loss. He had had enough of that. He was physically unable to take more of that. Any more, and he would shatter.

But he had Asuka, at least.

Outside, the sun slowly began to set. It didn't matter. Time was meaningless. Shinji would not do anything, anyway. He had no desire to even only move, not even the strength for it. It took a while, a long while, before he felt ready to even only speak again. It was like a case of a heavily injured person, whose body would only slowly regain its strength and capabilities. So it was with Shinji’s entire ego now.

Asuka's thumb stroked his hand.

He breathed out. “I... I think I loved her,” he admitted quietly. He wasn't even looking at Asuka. He just spoke into the air in front of him. It was just something that needed to be said, rather than true communication.
And so he was quite okay with there being no answer. But after a few minutes, Asuka did speak up. “Yeah... me as well, I think.”

That... did give Shinji pause. He looked down his own head at hers beneath it. She had loved Ayanami? Like... in that way? But in his current state, Shinji couldn't really think about it, couldn't even be really surprised about it. He just accepted it. It appeared they both had lost Ayanami.

“I'm sorry for you then,” Shinji said. It sounded totally emotionless, as he simply had no energy left for emotions.

“I'm sorry for you,” Asuka responded in the same way. After a while, she spoke up again, slowly, hesitantly. “It... it seems we're all we have left. Each other.”

Shinji considered that for a long time. “Yeah,” he said finally. “We only have each other now.” It was true. It had been Ayanami who had first talked to him, unwittingly supported him, helped him to get through the day. Then Asuka had arrived, a person who understood him because she had gone through the same. He... he had liked them both. And now, only Asuka was left.

“But...” he spoke up after a while. “But... what if I lose you as well? Everyone has always left me. Often they didn't mean to, but it still happened.”

Asuka’s head wiggled itself free from beneath his. They now looked each other in the eye, faces merely centimetres apart. Shinji didn't blush. He was still too exhausted for that, and the closeness to Asuka was good.

“You don't want that? To lose me as well?” Asuka asked.

“Of course not,” Shinji insisted with a quiet determination. “I... I would like to just continue like this. With you close by.”

“Yeah,” Asuka agreed. “Same for me.” It sounded like she had trouble admitting it.

“So... I don't think it's possible, I don't think the world will allow it...” Shinji continued. “But I would like to never lose you.”

Asuka's eyes widened slightly. Then her face darted forwards. Their lips met.

This time, Shinji did not jerk back. This time, it was good. It was right and proper. This was the person he was supposed to kiss. It was still an act of desperation, of course. A desperate clinging to each other so they wouldn't lose each other as well. It was hardly the ideal first kiss.

But it didn't matter. He was kissing Asuka. He was close to Asuka. He wouldn't lose Asuka.

He didn't know what he was doing, of course, what he should be doing. He very much doubted the cheap soap opera romances he sometimes had happened to catch or whatever it was that Touji was... “reading” were very accurate there. He just had to go by instinct. He didn't really trust his instinct, but what other chance did he have?

Asuka's face slowly retreated from his. And for all his doubts, he knew very much he didn't want that. His hand grabbed her shoulder, and then he laid his arm around it to pull her closer again. It was just a gentle push, and Asuka seemed to have no objections. The kiss began anew. And this
time, Shinji didn't think. He just let his lips and his tongue do their thing. He felt Asuka's hand stroking his back.

_Closeness. Acceptance. Trust. Closeness._

The kiss eventually ended, as all kisses do. But even then, Asuka and Shinji kept looking in each other's eyes. Shinji was okay with staying like that. Asuka was _fascinating_, a presence of fire and righteous anger and now so much softness. He could look at her like that forever.

“So... does this mean anything?” Asuka asked. It almost sounded like a challenge.

It was typical that _she_ had brought this up. Shinji would have been content to just go along with whatever happened now and _not_ think of this.

“I... I don't know,” he admitted.

“How can you not know?” Asuka asked forcefully.

Shinji smiled weakly. It was good to see that Asuka had retained some of her fierceness even in these circumstances. But it did mean he had to justify himself.

“I... I haven't ever done this before,” he told her. “So I don't know what I'm supposed to...”

“I want to know what you _want_ to do, not what you're supposed to do!” Asuka interrupted him.

Shinji remained silent. That he had to think about. What did he want? It was a question he rarely thought about in general. And now... did he want... what? A relationship? He didn't know if he was ready for that. He'd probably screw that up. The thought of being in a relationship, it just felt so _heavy_ to him, so heavy and adult and serious.

But he was still looking Asuka in the eye. In that halo of fire surrounding the most expressive face he had ever seen. Into brilliantly shining blue eyes. And a mouth with full lips.

“I... I can't say we're in a relationship now or anything,” he told her. “I just... that would be presumptuous. Like I already know I can pull this off, even though I don't. But... I would like to give it a try. I... I want to be together with you, Asuka.”

Asuka grabbed his shoulders with both hands. “You don't have permission to screw this up. I'm not willing to _try_ anything. Yes, or no?”

It just took a further look at Asuka's face for Shinji to find an answer. “...yes.”

Asuka pulled him in for another kiss.

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By the evening, Misato was still not back home. Instead, Ibuki had arrived again with fresh groceries, and had immediately begun cooking. She had looked mildly surprised at how close Asuka and Shinji were sitting and moving and at the touches they exchanged, but she hadn't commented. Asuka, on her part, felt like a moon that just had to stay in a constant orbit around its planet – Shinji, in this case. She would not leave his side.
Despite her earlier pressure on Shinji, she didn't know herself what they were now. Was he her boyfriend now? Was she his girlfriend now? They both had just sought closeness after Rei’s death. To actually make more out of it, to use that death for it, seemed almost cynical. Rei had after all only just died the previous day! But Asuka had needed that reassurance. Had needed to know that Shinji wouldn't leave her. Had hence needed to formalize it, in a way.

They had both loved Rei. Asuka was clear about that now. And it had been so obvious as well! The blue-haired girl had been hard to read, of course, so it had always been a bit of a mystery what she was thinking and feeling. Even so, it was clear she had been at least positively disposed towards Asuka and Shinji. So in a way, it was fitting the two would come together now. They could uphold Rei's memory together.

Or at least, that was what Asuka was telling herself. Despite her earlier push for it, she still didn't know if she truly considered herself to be in a relationship, did truly consider Shinji her boyfriend and herself his girlfriend. It had all happened so fast! Though she'd never admit so, not even to Shinji, she was... confused. But that was alright. Whatever they'd call it, she was close to Shinji now. That was what mattered.

And so, the two sat together at the kitchen table as well, their chairs almost impractically close to each other. But so what if their arms would occasionally bump into each other while eating? Asuka had no objections to touch right now.

“How are you two feeling?” Ibuki asked shortly after they had begun eating.

As if on command, Asuka and Shinji looked at each other, then, remaining in synchronisation, at their plates again. Finally, it was Shinji who spoke up. “Better, but..” He shrugged.

“I understand,” Ibuki reassured him. After they had continued eating for a while, she continued, “With Captain Katsuragi's permission I'll stay here the night. If there's anything you need... or want to talk about... don't hesitate to wake me up.”

Again Asuka and Shinji looked at each other. Ibuki was rather different from most NERV personnel, even from Misato. It was difficult to comprehend how someone like her had ended up in such an organization. She did her job on the bridge, whatever that entailed, but whenever she had talked to Asuka, which always only been brief and casual, she had sounded friendly and warm, as if she didn't see just another cog in the machine before her.

“Ah... thanks, Ms Ibuki,” Shinji spoke up. “But... I don't think anything can really 'help' us right now. We just...” He shrugged again.

“You need time and rest,” Ibuki completed the thought for him. “I understand that.”

Rest, yes. Asuka was tired. Not just mentally, physically as well. It was barely evening, but she had been up very early, and after all she had gone through this day... yes. She needed rest. And sleep.

That was why she and Shinji, after standing up from the kitchen table and saying thanks to Ibuki, went straight towards Shinji's room. Asuka didn't even think to ask him about that. It was, more or less, a natural destination for the two. She even grabbed Shinji's hand on the way there. But just as Shinji had opened the door, they heard Ibuki call from behind them, “Ah... Soryu.”

Asuka turned around and sighed. “Around here, you may call me Asuka.” She was way too exhausted to care for stuff like that at the moment.
Ibuki nodded. “I'm sure Captain Katsuragi would have nothing against you staying here. But I think she would prefer if you used her room, not Shinji's.”

Asuka groaned. “What? Do you think we'll hold an orgy inside there? After I've just learned today that... after today?”

A blush spread on Ibuki's cheek when Asuka spoke of an orgy. The redhead found that rather silly. “Well, not exactly, but... you are two teenagers and...”

“Ms Ibuki, I... ah... I think I understand...” Shinji stuttered. “But... we're exhausted. We couldn't even do... you know... even if we wanted to.” His head was now much redder than Ibuki's.

“That sounds believable, Shinji,” Ibuki told him. “And I trust you. But you two are Captain Katsuragi's wards, and I'm only her... stand-in. I can't...”

“I think...” Shinji spoke up. “I think Misato would also want, that I... I mean, I'll have someone watching over me this night, right?”

Asuka had no idea what he was talking about, but that seemed to convince Ibuki. “Yes. You will. Alright. I did say I trust you. So... good night, you two.”

“Good night,” the two replied and went inside.

The only thing the two did inside that was maybe a bit 'untoward' was change. Shinji lent Asuka a shirt and shorts, both of which fitted alright. There were certain sparks in the room as both were in their underwear, but neither of them could catch fire. Not right now. Not with how exhausted they were. Though Asuka did notice Shinji's figure. A bit scrawny, of course, but well-built and with a cute posterior. If she hadn't been so tired, well...

And if the sight hadn't made her remember when she had checked out Rei...

Without further comment, both of them crawled into the futon. Automatically, they began holding each other. Asuka smiled faintly and breathed in. The scent of another human, of someone she trusted, of someone she... loved. And now she was in his arms. Safe. Understood. Warm. A place of rest after all the chaos of the day.

She nestled her head against Shinji's chest and whispered, “What made Ibuki change her mind?” There was no response, though she could feel his body stiffen. “Shinji?”

“Asuka...” he responded uncertainly. She looked up at him. His face looked worried. “I... it's something stupid I have done.”

“Tell me,” Asuka said softly. “You know that... whatever it is, I've probably done something similar.”

Shinji shook his head, but he nonetheless talked. “Yesterday evening, I was on the balcony. I looked at the city, and remembered Rei's death and...” He stopped, but it was clear to Asuka what he meant.

She tightened his hug around him, desperately clung to him. “No. You're not allowed to leave me now, you hear? We'll get through this together!” The thought of losing Shinji as well nearly drove
her crazy, but the only thing she did was hold tight onto him, as if that could prevent him from drifting away.

“We will,” Shinji reassured her. “It's just, that directly afterwards… I couldn't bear it. And… maybe now I can.”

“We're all that we have left,” Asuka whispered.

“Each other,” Shinji added.

They kissed, then nestled themselves against each other again. Very soon afterwards, Asuka's tiredness overwhelmed her.
On the third day

Waking up felt weird. In theory, Shinji was very much a morning person, actually, someone who could be immediately fresh and awake. And when there was school, or when he had an early sync-test, he would get up and get there in time, that was just his nature. But when he didn't have anything on his schedule, he often remained lying on his futon. Even when he was fully awake, he often felt then that there was just no point in getting up. The world outside just seemed like something there was no point in dealing with, like a cold place.

This was different now. Shinji woke up, and immediately felt warmth. Softness. Arms around him. He nearly jerked away. Asuka mumbled something in her sleep, clearly disturbed in it, but not waking up. Shinji remained still, rigid even, and his heart began racing wildly. Right, the two had gone to bed together.

He didn't regret it. He had never felt particularly alone going to bed; it had never been anything that bothered him. But it seemed this was very much a case of not being able to miss a thing one had never had. Going to bed alone was alright. Going to bed with Asuka had been... he lacked the right words. Comfortable physically, of course, to be held and to hold her. But more than that it had been emotionally comfortable. To not depend on what he had done or achieved, to simply be held, no matter what, to the point that both had fallen asleep that way.

So that wasn't the problem. The problem now was that he had no idea what to do now or how to behave. What was appropriate now? He didn't want to hurt Asuka, and right now she was so vulnerable in front of him.

...so vulnerable. So soft. So adorable how she was sleeping peacefully.

Slowly, hesitantly, he closed his hold around her again. Maybe she wouldn't want that, wouldn't want him. That was okay. He was used to that, after all. If she said so, he'd be gone. But as long as she would have him, he'd be there for her. After all, Asuka and he, they only had each other anymore, now that Rei was gone.

Rei... Shinji hugged Asuka tighter. He nestled his head against her neck and closed his eyes. Not for sleep, just for comfort. To feel Asuka's physical closeness. To take in her scent. To soak in her warmth.

After a while, he heard a soft "Buuhh?" coming from Asuka. He smiled. It was kinda... adorable. Though he probably still wouldn't tell her that. He withdrew his head to look into her face. Her eyes opened... and got wide. Her body went rigid. *Deja vu...*

"Uh... good morning... Asuka," Shinji greeted her.

"Guten... morgen..." Asuka muttered. "You're... still here?"

"Uh... this is my room," Shinji told her.

"Oh. Right. Of course," Asuka answered. Her thoughts seemed to kick in gear. "It is your room. I'll... I'll just..."

She hastily got up, too quick for Shinji to even try to hold her back. "Uh... Asuka, where are you
“As you said: It is your room,” she told him. She sounded cold.

“Asuka!” Shinji protested. She was looking for her clothes. It really seemed like she would leave him now. Shinji’s heart began racing again. Fear was taking hold of him. “Don’t… don't leave me!”

Asuka turned around to face him, to look down at him. Even in the dimly lit room, Shinji could see her eyes were narrowed and her face cast in stone.

“Please,” Shinji continued. It almost sounded like begging. He was beyond pride now. And it wasn't like he had ever held himself in the highest regard to begin with. “You… we agreed. That we're all that we have now.”

“Yeah,” Asuka simply replied. It sounded cautious, but otherwise emotionless.

“So… don't just leave...” Shinji whispered.

Asuka scoffed. ‘I'd hate to return to that apartment. The one I shared with...’ She trailed off.

“Then stay!” Shinji encouraged her.

“For how long?” Asuka demanded to know.

“For as long as you like!” Shinji exclaimed.

“Do you actually mean that?” Asuka asked. She sounded… incredulous. Why would she sound incredulous?

“Of course!” Shinji answered. “I did say I'd… I mean, it's happening right now, isn't it?” He felt defeated. “That I'm losing you now. Because I screwed it up again, somewhere. Even though I said I don't want to ever lose you.”

Asuka let the shirt that she had already picked up fall to the ground again and walked up the futon. She got down on one knee and fixated Shinji with her gaze. “So you won't leave me?”

“What?” Shinji exclaimed in shock. “No!”

“Promise me,” Asuka demanded. Her voice was rigid.

“I…” Shinji began. What should he say now? He felt that whatever he could think of, it wouldn't be enough. So he simply went with the truth. “I promise I'll never leave you.”

Asuka blinked. Blinked again.

“If that's a lie, Third, then I'll...” Asuka spoke between gritted teeth. Third? She hadn't called him that in a while. “but... but if not...”

She lunged forward and grabbed Shinji in a big hug.

Shinji widened his eyes in surprise. Then a faint smile appeared on his face, and he patted Asuka's back. If that was what she was so concerned about, then she didn't need to worry. He had every
intention in the world to never leave her. He rather feared the world would find a way to somehow take her away from him.

There was another surprise when Asuka pushed forwards, and shoved his upper back onto the futon, with her on top. She grinned, so genuinely that he couldn't help but do so as well. “You are mine, you hear?” she whispered. It sounded aggressive, but there was also something else. Something Shinji had never heard before, at least not in real life. It sounded… sultry? He gulped. “And I'm marking you.” She aggressively pushed her head forwards and kissed him… not that he had any complaints about that.

He closed his arms around her. Clearly, having such a blanket was enjoyable, and the kiss was… electrifying. All throughout his body. His hands began wandering over her body. She giggled… Wait. Asuka… giggling? That wasn't a sound Shinji would have associated with her. Not that he had any intent of stopping her.

However, she did. With a broad grin on her face, she rolled off him, to his side. “Okay. I believe you. And I won't leave you, either.”

Shinji furrowed his brows. So had this all been a test? That would be… cold. But Asuka was still tightly holding onto his arm, and now was leaning her head against his shoulder. The very opposite of 'cold'.

The two just lay there for a while. Shinji because he now didn't know what else to do, and this was still better than nothing; he still had Asuka close, after all, and he genuinely enjoyed that fact. He just would maybe have wished for more, as frightening as that very thought was for him. And Asuka because… well, Shinji actually would have dearly loved to know what was going on inside her head.

There was a knock on the door. “Hey you two. I made breakfast!” Even Shinji, as a morning person, thought Ibuki sounded inappropriately cheerful. Nobody should get that cheerful just over breakfast.

Asuka openly groaned about it. That made Shinji snicker. “Let's see if her breakfast is as good as she makes it sound.”

“It better be,” Asuka grumbled.

This time, when the two changed, Shinji kept great care to keep his body turned away from Asuka. As nice it was looking at Asuka in underwear… yeah. The two left his room together, with her having taken his hand. Shinji found that a bit inappropriate; after all, Ibuki was in the house. Though he remembered having heard that foreigners were considerably more relaxed about public displays of affection. If he now was… in a relationship with a foreigner, strange as that sounded to himself, then he would have to take that into account.

Ibuki stood at the kitchen counter when the two entered the room. She cheerfully turned around. “Good morning, you two.” Then she saw their interlocked hands and stopped short. But only for a while, then she hid an obvious grin behind her hand.

Asuka sighed exaggeratedly and sat down at the table together with Shinji.

When Ibuki began placing food on the table, Shinji protested, “Ah… it should be me doing this. You two are guests here, after all!”
“That's really nice of you to offer, Shinji” Ibuki answered. “But until Katsuragi returns, I'm taking care of you. A bit of meal preparation won't hurt me. Besides...” She stopped. Her face got more serious. Then she shrugged. “You're already doing enough, aren't you? Piloting… fighting...”

Shinji winced at that. Yes, he did that. And he would have to continue to. Two things happened at once now: Ibuki laid a hand on his shoulder, and Asuka grabbed his hand again. _Huh_. That did give him reassurance. It was a powerful signal he wasn't alone, in any case.

With a smile that was only half forced, he began to eat.

Misato loved cars. She loved the technical details, she loved their history, she loved their speed. She was an avid reader of car magazines, and her most prized possession, her pride and joy, was her blue Renault Alpine. Already before Second Impact it had been a very rare car type; now it was practically irreplaceable. That was why she had invested so much money and energy to have the car repaired again after Sachiel's attack. And that was why she was annoyed now that somebody else was driving it – and _how_ he did it. She knew Kaji's usual style, but right now he played the tamest driver to have ever graced the Earth. This was just no way treat a Renault Alpine.

And it was doubly annoying because she wanted to be back home right now. To look after Shinji, to see if he was okay, and whether Asuka could cope with the situation. The three pilots had become so close... it had actually been a small miracle to watch. And now their little trio had been torn up.

_Gods damn it..._

It also drove home the point that this was _war_. People died in wars. Soldiers died in battles. Which was why children _shouldn't be_ soldiers, and yet she commanded her own little squad of child soldiers. Hell, only recently she had recruited Touji into it. She knew why this was necessary. _More_ than just necessary in fact; she wanted all of Adam's spawn wiped out. But while this was her desire, well, it wasn't her who actually fought for it. She made others do it. And worse, in any of the next battles Shinji could die as well, or Asuka.

The children she had taken on as wards, only to send them into war.

“Has Asuka domesticated you in Germany?” she snarled at Kaji. She had just been released from the hospital, and _of course_ he had been there to drive her home. It was convenient, it was annoying, it was endearing, it was frustrating. “You drive like a pensioner with hat.”

Kaji just smirked at that comment. “On a Sunday, no less. Don't worry, Katsuragi. Ibuki is a good girl. I'm sure she's taken good care of Asuka and Shinji.”

_Maybe even better than I’m able to._ Misato fell silent.

“What will you do now?” Kaji asked her.

“What do you mean?” Misato asked in return.

“I think you know what I mean,” Kaji told her all too softly.
Damn him and his style. Misato sighed. “What other choice do we have but to go on? The angels won’t just stop just on account of a casualty on our side.” Casualty. So cold, Misato.

“You’ve become more driven,” Kaji remarked. “More driven than I knew you.”

“Maybe you never really knew me,” Misato remarked.

“I think I never did,” Kaji agreed. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t enjoy your company.”

Misato scoffed. “Is that why you had yourself transferred to NERV Japan?”

Kaji just smirked, which made Misato silently furious. This annoyance culminated into an open groan of frustration when Kaji held at a traffic light that he could easily still have taken, had he sped up a bit at yellow. And then he had the chutzpah to sit in his seat, lean back, smirk and text on his phone. Misato could barely keep herself from grabbing said phone and throwing it out. The only thing that did prevent that was how weak she still felt, which also was the reason it was Kaji driving the car at all.

Kaji typed slowly. Irritatingly slowly. Misato would not have thought he’d lag behind so much in communication technology. He wasn’t done when the traffic light turned green again. So he just non-chalantly pushed the phone over to Misato. “Here, hold that for a while, please.”

Misato gripped the phone hard. Then the text on it caught her eye: “Is your car bug-free? Not safe to talk.” Misato stopped short. So that is what it was about. She still scoffed, of course. Otherwise Kaji’s effort would have gone wasted. Would they bug my car? That was a disconcerting thought.

“We should go out some time again,” Kaji noted. It sounded oddly neutral.

To somewhere guaranteed to be bug-free? “We should,” Misato agreed in the same voice.

“Maybe bring Ritsuko along,” Kaji suggested. “Just like the old times. To catch on to what we’ve been doing since then.”

Misato wasn’t sure if that would work on her old friend, but she supposed it was worth a try. “Sure.”

“I think it would do you some good to get away from your work,” Kaji continued.

Misato narrowed her eyes. Was that still part of the game? “I told you. I’m a busy woman.”

“Nobody should be too busy for human contact,” Kaji argued.

That was easy for him to say. It wasn’t like he ever had problems with ‘human contact’. So Misato scoffed again.

“Just see to it that I arrive home quickly,” she told him.

It wasn’t really quick, but eventually the car did reach the parking lot of Misato’s apartment bloc. The way from there to the apartment, through the open parking lot and the narrow staircases, was quiet. With a sigh, Misato opened the door.

“I’m home,” she announced.
“Welcome home, Captain Katsuragi,” a voice greeted her from the kitchen. Ibuki walked over to the entrance. “I hope you don’t mind my presence here.”

That surprised Misato. Mind? She removed her shoes, entered the kitchen… and bowed to Ibuki, maybe a tiny bit lower than a superior normally would to a subordinate. “Thank you for taking care of my wards while I was unable to.”

When she looked up again, she saw how reddened Ibuki’s face was. The woman was very professional at her job, but still came across as girlish, as younger than she was. “It was no problem at all! I gladly helped! Somebody needed to be here, after all. After all those two have done for us…”

“Where are they anyw…” Misato began, when she was already interrupted.

Shinji entered the kitchen from the living room. “Welcome home, Misato.” He sounded subdued, but not depressed or anything. That was good. “Mr Kaji.” He nodded towards the man. “Are you feeling alright, Misato?”

“I’m feeling sore all over and weak, but apparently I got off lightly,” Misato answered him. Asuka appeared in sight just behind Shinji now, staying in the entrance between the kitchen and living room. “No major lasting injuries.” Her voice got softer. “How about you? How are you feeling?”

“Well, I wasn’t injured,” Shinji began.


Asuka scowled, while Shinji finally managed to say, “We’re… better.”

“Well, if there’s anything we can do to help you…” Kaji spoke up.

“Thank you, but there is no need for this, Herr Kaji,” Asuka answered. She sounded icy.

Misato raised an eyebrow at that. In Germany, Asuka had always used the informal address with her and Kaji, even while still using his family name, because everyone did, just as she now also wasn’t using honorifics when addressing Misato. The Captain had been surprised that Asuka had begun referring more formally to Kaji in Japanese, but the deliberate use of German now was of course a clear sign. Misato just wondered what that sign meant.

But of course, Kaji was unflappable. He retained his good-willed smirk. “I’ll be around if you change your mind.” Asuka just scoffed.

Misato wondered what it was with Asuka now. The girl could certainly be difficult, but she and Kaji seemed to have always gotten along. Was it just one of Asuka’s usual moods?

Misato was itching to exchange more than some polite words with Shinji and Asuka, anyway. She turned towards Ibuki. “Thank you again, Ms Ibuki. And please, no need for military titles around here. If there is ever a chance for me to repay you, you can call me.”

“I understand,” Ibuki answered. “You’re too kind, Ms Katsuragi.” She turned towards Shinji and Asuka and smiled. “I’ll go now, but you can still come to me if you need anything.”
Shinji smiled awkwardly. Asuka’s face remained serious and neutral until she saw that and managed a faint grin.

Just as Ibuki began walking over to the apartment entrance, the phone rang. Misato picked it up…

…the phone slipped through her hands and fell down. She didn’t even care. Was frozen as if in shock.

Kaji grabbed her shoulder hard. “Katsuragi! What is it?”

“Ritsuko,” Misato managed to get out. “Rei… she said Rei… she said she’s still alive.”

The information filtered through Misato’s mind. She had not just lost her first pilot. It was still terrible what these kids had to do, but at least so far none had been sacrificed for the sake of the war. And Asuka and Shinji…

…a smile was appearing on her face. But Shinji now looked like a marble statue. No part of him moved even a single centimetre. He was entirely in the grip of a shock.

“How can that be possible?” Asuka shouted. “Why weren’t we informed? What the hell was she thinking?” She went on to emit various sounds of rage and frustration, to the point that Misato feared she might hyperventilate.

“Well, I suppose we’ll find out,” Kaji spoke up. He had picked up the phone. “Ritsuko has told me we can come immediately to visit Rei.”

That seemed to wake up Shinji. “Ayanami!” he simply exclaimed, and ran over to his shoes at the apartment entrance. There was a glistering in his eyes.

Asuka stopped her frantic movements when she saw that. Then she hastened after him.

Ritsuko frowned.

Sometimes she thought it wasn’t Rei’s fault. It wasn’t her fault that Gendo still couldn’t let go of a woman ten years dead… well, Ritsuko knew better. Ten years lost. But the result was still the same. However, it was just infuriating Rei could get Gendo’s attention despite being such a doll, despite being such an empty shell. Even when she was missing half of herself, Gendo always had more time for her than for Ritsuko.
True, it wasn’t exactly like he treated Rei in a stellar fashion. Ritsuko had been shocked at first when she had first seen the circumstances in which Rei had been living at the time, deep down in the bowels of the Geofront. Appalled in fact that Gendo could do something like that to a little girl. But over time, that had just become normalcy to her. Over time, Rei had become mainly a medical case, a challenge in keeping her AT Field intact and treating her artificial body. What Rei was and how she lived didn’t really figure into Ritsuko’s thoughts anymore.

But she was painfully aware of the source of Rei’s body. And very aware of the rare smiles Gendo showed the girl, smiles he never showed to his supposed lover.

She saw in the corner of the monitor screen that Misato, Asuka and Shinji had arrived… and Maya and Kaji were accompanying them. That would complicate matters. Gendo was already suspicious of Kaji. He would use the supposed ‘U.N. inspector’, of course. That was what he always did. So he would tolerate Kaji snooping around in NERV. But even if he didn’t show it, just as he generally never showed emotions, Ritsuko very much doubted he was happy about it. And Maya… Sometimes Ritsuko felt guilt about her. Maya was a good soul, cheerful and helpful and just so innocent. She had retained her youthful idealism. And yet here Ritsuko was, dragging her ever deeper into the swamp of guilt and sin that was NERV. She would have preferred to keep Maya as far away from this incident as possible.

But what was done was done. Ritsuko walked over to Rei, roughly grabbed her upper arm and pulled on it. “Come. They’re here.” Immediately, she felt guilty for that as well, but once again, what was done was done. Besides, it wasn’t like Rei was reacting to this, other than in fact standing up.

There was a slight knock, but the door burst open before Ritsuko could even respond. Asuka stormed in. Ritsuko grinned sourly. ‘Soryu’, right. She didn’t dislike Asuka, and would entertain her request, but she knew the girl was not half as adult as she wanted to present herself – as shown now. Then again, that was probably for the better. It showed Asuka was still a more or less normal girl, and that was a good thing. The world needed pilots, but it was good if they could maintain some normalcy for themselves.

“Rei!” Asuka exclaimed… and without further ado grabbed the girl into a big hug.

Rei didn’t respond to it. Didn’t react in the slightest.

Shinji came in next, awkwardly pushing by Misato and Kaji and sheepishly trotting up to Rei and Asuka. He looked a bit hesitantly at Ritsuko, and then, to her surprise, grabbed both Rei and Asuka in a hug. Seeing all three pilots in a group hug was a surreal experience.

Still Rei just stood there and seemingly endured the embraces. But it was like Asuka and Shinji didn’t even notice. Shinji especially seemed to be in a trance. He… yes, he was softly crying and whispering something. Ritsuko was, frankly, dumbfounded. Did Rei cause that? It was no wonder Rei could cause reactions in Gendo; he knew her origins. But Shinji didn’t, and Asuka had no association with her whatsoever.

While the adults all simply watched, it was Asuka who loosened the embrace first, taking half a step back from Rei. Still keeping her hands on the girl’s shoulders, and still with Shinji’s arm around her waist, she looked Rei in the eye and asked: “Rei! Are you okay?”

“I am unharmed,” Rei confirmed monotonously.
Asuka picked up on that. She looked clearly uncomfortable.

Ritsuko decided to step in. “She suffers from amnesia at the moment. I’m very sure it’ll be temporary. However, her emotional reactions will be impaired as well.”

Shinji looked up from Rei’s shoulder, a single tear still on his face. “What does that mean?”

“You’re seeing it right now, Shinji.” Ritsuko told him softly. “What I’m saying is that this won’t last.”

She had absolutely no problem with Shinji. While she was very much interested in him continuing to pilot, she would have allowed him to go, and to arrange for Rei to take up her original position in EVA-01. In fact, Shinji had already once shown trouble synching with EVA-01. Clearly, piloting was a heavy burden to him. There was no reason not to be nice to him, whatever Ritsuko might feel about Rei.

Asuka disentangled herself from her two fellow pilots and stared angrily at Ritsuko. “How could this even happen? Why didn’t you tell us she’s still alive?”

“I have to agree with her there, Ritsuko,” Misato added, her arms crossed. “How could Rei even have survived the blast at all? She doesn’t even look injured!”

Ritsuko sighed. “She was very lucky, that’s for sure. The reason she didn’t eject was so that she could maintain her EVA’s AT Field. And it appears that field held to the very last. Even when most of the EVA had already been torn apart by the self-destruct explosion.”

“And so Rei survived,” Misato concluded.

Ritsuko nodded, but Asuka wasn’t content. “Then why haven’t you told us,” the German girl complained. “Rei doesn’t seem to have a scratch on her!”

“Because quite frankly, we weren’t even sure she was still alive,” Ritsuko told her. “She has no visible injuries, but she was synchronized with a self-destructing EVA to the very end. We weren’t sure if her mind was even still there, or if she would be nothing more than a body without a soul.” Ritsuko suppressed a sad smirk at that formulation. For outsiders, ‘soul’ might just have been a metaphor, but for her… “Rei only regained full consciousness this morning. Only then could we confirm she was still there.”

“You could at least have informed them about the possibility of her survival!” Maya spoke up now. In fact, she was shouting, her hands balled into fists at her side. That seemed to surprise everyone in the room, except for the still motionless Rei and Shinji, who was far too occupied with Rei. Ritsuko wondered where that outburst had come from.

“And give them false hope?” she argued. “Truthfully, we didn’t think Rei would recover. We thought we had lost her.”

She could see Shinji visibly cringe at that comment. Asuka frowned. Have they become so close to her? To Rei? To the girl that never even smiles? Not only was that surprising, it also hurt. Who would react the same way if Ritsuko was injured or killed? And yet, Rei was merely a doll, was merely her project.

“You may have had their best interests at heart, Ritsu,” Kaji spoke up now. He at least sounded
“We have special facilities for her,” Ritsuko explained. “To add to the other complications, her physiology can be quite delicate. And before you start, yes, having dedicated facilities for her is justified. The Marduk Institute estimates there are maybe two or three dozens of potential pilot candidates all around the world. And half of them at minimum we’ll never find.”

Maya still didn’t look convinced. She was as easy to read as a book, as emotions struggled on her face. She clearly wanted to believe, but something seemed to really bother her about the situation.

Shinji had reluctantly let go of Rei by now, though he still kept a hand on her shoulder. Even when he followed what others were saying, he still now and then looked over to her, as if to make sure she really was there. His eyes were reddened. Both he and Asuka always kept close to Rei.

“So, what’s Rei’s status right now?” Misato asked.

“I checked her thoroughly before I called you,” Ritsuko told her. “Physically, she is in good shape. Given the circumstances, in excellent shape, even. The only thing that needs to be kept under watch is her mental situation, but we can’t do much more there than give it time to improve.”

“So Rei can return to her apartment?” Misato further inquired. She sounded oddly cold and professional.

That did hurt Ritsuko a bit. In a way, it was unfair. As far as these people were concerned, she had just saved Rei! Then again, if they knew the truth, who knew if they would even still talk to her? On some level, she did deserve their displeasure. But... over Rei? She was still surprised how everyone had seemingly grown so attached to her.

Look at her! Rei still didn’t seem to even notice what was going on around her. She did now and then look Asuka and Shinji in the face, but those were fleeting moments, and she didn’t seem to recognize them. And yet... And yet she has all those people honestly caring about her. And what have I, despite all of my merits? She had Gendo, and that was good. She loved Gendo. But it was such a fragile relationship...

“Yes,” Ritsuko simply answered.

“Then let’s go!” Asuka prompted. Both she and Shinji laid a hand on her waist and gently nudged her forward. Asuka looked grimly determined, and Shinji... Shinji looked like he was in a blissful trance.

The adults stepped aside for them, and then followed them outside. Ritsuko was left behind. She furrowed her brows. I’m losing Misato, and Rei, Rei!, has two people at once basically falling over themselves to help her home? There was just something fundamentally wrong with it. Where has everything gone wrong? She knew she had given up much for Gendo, but then, Gendo was a driven man. That’s what she admired so much about him. His drive, his powerful aura... she had to keep pace with him. Surely, that was worthwhile.

It was too bad he wasn’t even here at the moment. Away on some grand expedition together with Fuyutsuki to the end of the world. It hence would fall to Ritsuko to hold the fort. Misato... Misato simply didn’t know. And if she did, she wouldn’t understand. No, for Gendo’s sake, Ritsuko would have to do it. But still...
Ritsuko went to her computer and activated the programs monitoring the nearby corridors. She watched as the group walked through them. Asuka and Shinji were unsuccessfully trying to chat up Rei, and never let fully go of her. Again Ritsuko furrowed her brows. Why is it that Rei has won so much devotion to her? Not only from Gendo, but from other people as well. Ritsuko was a brilliant scientist, a woman of hard work and devotion, whereas Rei was a tool without emotions. So why did Rei have all these friends and she didn’t?

_I wonder what would happen if those people knew the truth about her..._

Shinji still wasn’t sure if this was all just a dream. Inappropriate as this was, he just could not let go of Ayanami; he had to convince himself that she was really there. Even now in the car, he had a hand around her lower arm. Then again, Asuka even had a hand on Ayanami’s leg. The two had the blue-haired girl in between them, all three sitting on the back seat of Misato’s car. And Shinji now was beyond shock, beyond sorrow, beyond any sense of reality.

Only one thing mattered. **Ayanami is alive. Ayanami is alive. Ayanami is alive.**

He was not guilty of her death. He would not have to go through the heavy burdens in front of him without her. He had not lost her serene grace and soothing presence. Ayanami, the girl for whose sake he had started piloting in the first place… she was here again. She was alive. It was impossible to describe Shinji’s feelings. To say he had never felt as relieved in his life would be incorrect; it just wouldn’t be true to compare that feeling to just mere relief. Even with Asuka… close now, back in his mind there had always been that darkness, that constant knowledge about his loss and his guilt. He had just been able to divert his thoughts from it. But now, he was ascending from that darkest pit back to the light.

**Ayanami is alive.**

He had already cried on the way to the Geofront. Not at all caring at that point what Misato would think in the driver’s seat, he had leaned his head on Asuka’s shoulder and let the tears come. One of her arms had been around his waist, while the other hand had gently caressed his face and his hair. Strangely, Misato hadn’t even commented, even though Shinji had noticed how often she had looked in the rearview mirror. She had been and still was in ‘Captain’ modus the whole time, all serious and professional, with none of her usual teasing. And indeed, this was the one time where Shinji might have reacted violently to it.

Further tears had come when he had seen Rei. Now, he was spent. All the acute surprise and relief had turned into an amazed but quiet contentedness. Things would still be bleak. He would still have to pilot. He would suffer and he would be unable to escape his fate. But he would have Asuka at his side and he would have Ayanami at his side.

So even when they were all walking up to Misato’s apartment from the parking lot he still moved in a sort of daze. At least he let go of Ayanami for now. The girl’s gait was even, slow, unexcited. She seemed to walk because it was expected of her, not because she had somewhere to go. But Shinji’s mind blanked out those details, like how Rei had hardly moved, had not reacted to his and Asuka’s emotional outburst and not to the touch, either. She also hadn’t spoken a word since leaving the Geofront. But those were indeed just details.

The group awkwardly came to a halt in front of Misato’s apartment. Before Ayanami and Asuka
could move on to theirs, Shinji hastily spoke up, “Uh, why don’t you two come in? I can make dinner again. Do you think something to eat would be good for you, Ayanami?”

“Yes,” the girl simply replied. And thus it was decided.

As soon as he had removed his shoes, Shinji went to the kitchen counter. “You two can watch television in the meantime, maybe,” he suggested.

“Right,” Asuka agreed. “Let’s go, Rei.”

Shinji didn’t watch as Asuka basically dragged Ayanami forwards to the living room. He was convinced something was coming through to the blue-haired girl. For now, he had a job to do. That always felt good. He was needed, and he could actively help to improve Ayanami’s situation. And he so dearly wished all the best in the world for that quiet, subdued girl. One of only two people in the world who seemed to listen to him, maybe understand him.

Asuka wasn’t sure if Rei really was watching TV. Oh sure, she looked in the direction of the device, but it was a rigid stare and her facial expression was blank. It rather appeared she was looking through the TV.

Asuka started another attempt at conversation. “Are you glad that you’ll be back home again tonight?”

“It’s alright,” Rei answered without even turning to her.

Asuka was getting increasingly uneasy. Temporary. Akagi has said this is only temporary. But what if it wasn’t?

The redhead wasn’t really paying attention to the cheap action series on the TV, either. Rather, she glanced over to Rei again and again and worried. Rei was here again. That was a miracle. She had thought she had lost her for good, had lost her serene presence that managed to calm her down, her avian grace, her putting up with her. The only person who had ever taken a bullet, or rather a death ray, for her. But all her relief and amazement over Rei’s survival was slowly turning into worry and despair. Rei was more expressionless and unemotional than she had been even when Asuka had first met her.

Temporary... let’s hope so.

It would be a cruel, sick joke if Asuka was still losing Rei now. She had admitted to Shinji that she loved Rei and, yeah, she did. Rei was a person she… she just didn’t want to miss. Wanted to be closer to. Wanted to help. Was glad when she put up with her. And yes, whom she found rather attractive. Another twisted irony: For Asuka to have come to terms with the fact that, yes, she found certain girls attractive, only to still lose the one girl who had caused that revelation.

Of course, Asuka had also accepted the fact now that she loved Shinji. The boy who had gone through the same as her, who even now was one of only two people to understand what piloting meant, who never seemed to be put off by her aggressive episodes, who had started to cook for her just like that… and with whom she had in fact started a relationship. So what now?

“Can I get you something?” Asuka asked Rei. “Do you need another pillow? Something to drink
“That is not necessary” Rei merely answered.

But I want to do something!

The idea that all that Asuka could do was wait, and that even that had no guarantee of success, was just terrible. There had to be something she could do to bring Rei back to how she used to be, or to at least make her more comfortable!

Asuka didn’t try anymore after that. She kept looking at Rei with worry, the TV entirely forgotten. Dinner was soon ready after that.

As always, Shinji had thought of making a separate, meatless version of their meal for Rei. He always was considerate like that. As for Rei, she simply sat down and began eating, not even looking at anyone else. The other people at the table, Asuka, Shinji, Misato, looked concerned.

“Do you like it?” Shinji asked Rei.

“It is alright,” Rei stated without looking up and immediately continued eating.

Asuka and Shinji looked at each other. A certain despair was on both their faces.

“Do you need something with it?” Shinji tried again. “Spices, maybe. Or something else to drink than water?”

“No, that is not necessary,” Rei answered flatly.

Well, damn.

It was little wonder the dinner was held in silence otherwise.

After they had all finished, Asuka stated, “Well, thank you, Shinji. I think Rei and I should go home now. I think you can use the rest, don’t you, Rei?”

The blue-haired girl nodded… and stood up to immediately go to the apartment entrance.

“Ah… don’t worry, Asuka,” Shinji told her. “I’ll clean up the table.”

Asuka nodded, and also went to get her shoes. By that time, Rei had already left the apartment. Shinji followed her to the apartment entrance.

“I don’t like this, Asuka,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Asuka merely agreed.

“What do we do now?” Shinji asked.

“I… don’t know,” Asuka admitted. “But… Rei has to come first. She’s one of us. She… we both… we said we…”

“We love her,” Shinji whispered.
“Yes,” Asuka confirmed.

“We… we came together because we thought we had lost her,” Shinji went on. “But we didn’t. So… what do we do now?”

“We… have to figure something out,” Asuka answered. “But that can wait. First we have to help Rei. Whatever is between us… it can wait.”

Shinji nodded. “Ayanami comes first.”
There was a reason why Shinji had become so good at cooking: It was a mistake to let Misato do the task. His guardian was of the sort to set the kitchen aflame when making soup. However, even she was capable of learning, and could be entrusted with minor tasks. Making a simple breakfast was within her capabilities.

...how did I end up here?

When they had both nearly finished, Misato spoke up. “So, Shinji...” Shinji heart contracted. He knew that kind of voice. “What is it between you and Asuka?”

Of course that question had to come. Shinji in particular had not been very secretive about their relationship the previous day.

Needless to say, he could only answer in a stammering manner. “Well... well... uh...” He managed to catch himself, and spoke quieter now. “It’s just... after Rei... we thought she was dead, Misato. Both of us did. We needed... well...” He shrugged.

“Closeness?” Misato asked. She sounded surprisingly serious. “Comfort?” Shinji just nodded. “I can... understand that. But I hope you haven’t done anything... well, not done anything I would have done.” Shinji just tilted his head. “You know... well, how undressed have you gotten?” She winked.

Immediately, Shinji’s head became red like a tomato. “We... we didn’t!” he exclaimed. “I mean, we changed into pajamas, but that’s all. There was nothing...” He stopped, too embarrassed to go on.

Misato’s lips trembled in amusement “Yeah, no way you could lie to me. I believe you.” She got more serious. “Still, I wished Ibuki hadn’t been so lenient. She said she just trusted you, and I can see why, but still, to let two teenagers sleep in the same room?”

Huh. Apparently, Ibuki hadn’t told Misato about Shinji’s argument. It stood to reason that she hadn’t told her about what had happened on the balcony either, then. Shinji was very glad and grateful about that. That was something he really didn’t want to explain to Misato – and who knew where she’d drag him if it became known how he... In any case, that was the past now. Not only was Ayanami in fact alive, he also had Asuka.

Then Shinji’s mind returned to Misato’s question. Oh damn. “No-nothing happened!”

“For now,” Misato pointed out. “What about the future? What do you two... plan?”

Shinji looked down on the table. “Well... we aren’t really sure ourselves. I mean, Ayanami is back now. We just... we have to care for her first before we can do something with our... with our... uh... relationship.” And he was red again.

“Hm,” Misato replied ambiguously. “You two are also... close to Rei, aren’t you?” Shinji could merely nod. Misato sighed and muttered, “Fine mess you’re in.”

Even while still looking down, Shinji smiled and shook his head. “It isn’t so bad. It's good,
actually, very good. I mean… Ayanami is alive.”

From the corner of his eye, Shinji could see Misato smiling. “You’re a good boy, Shinji. Just… be careful, you know. Gods know I won’t be able to keep you from doing what I tease you about, but… be careful.”

Shinji looked up and into Misato’s face. “Careful?”

Misato sighed. “Don’t rush too quickly into situations that might turn out to be uncomfortable for you. And by all gods, use protection!”

*Prot...* Heat shot into Shinji’s face again. He nodded dumbly. *This conversation is just terrible!* He hoped it would end soon.

Again, Misato looked amused. She picked up something lying on the table next to her and gave it to him: A letter. “In fact, you seem to be quite in demand with the ladies lately,” she told him with a wink. “It’s from that Mana Kirishima.”

*Kirishima?* Unsurely, Shinji took the letter. He had no idea why Kirishima would write him. It really didn’t help with Misato’s teasing, that was clear. He silently went to his room in order to read the letter.

*Dear Ikari,*

*if you do not want to read this letter, then I can understand it. But I implore you to at least give me this chance to explain myself and most importantly to apol...* 

*I would very much like to stay friends – ideally, to simply forget about what has happened, though I admit that is a selfish wish, seeing as it was me who has made the mistake. I promise you something like that will never come up again. But I honestly would find it a pity if now we could not even talk to each other anymore. Therefore, I ask of you to give me a second chance to behave well. I will this time, I promise!*

*I hope to hear an answer from you in school, or via letter.*

*Yours truly,*

*Mana Kirishima*

Even after he had finished reading, Shinji kept on staring at the letter. It seemed so absurd to him. Kirishima had formulated it so seriously, as if her attempt at kissing had been the most terrible thing in the world. And yes, it had kinda scared Shinji at the time. But now, after the angel, after Ayanami’s self-sacrifice, after having thought her dead and then seeing her again… it felt so trivial to Shinji. So *irrelevant*. So *silly*.

He still was confused *why* Kirishima had even tried to kiss him, but if she just wanted to forget about it all, then that was alright with him. It really didn’t matter greatly anymore. He had other,
more important things to worry about. Like Ayanami’s well-being.

It was time to go over to her and Asuka’s apartment.

“Are you out of your mind?”

Rei stood in front of Asuka, unmoving, expressionless. Also, unclothed. Asuka thought the two had gone through this topic already.

“I told you to wear clothes outside of your room and the bathroom! I even gave you a night gown!”

There was something creepy about the situation. It was Rei’s body uncovered in front of Asuka, something which she admired, but it didn’t seem to belong to Rei. The situation was more desperate than anywhere close to arousing.

“I do not remember that,” Rei answered.

“You… Scheiße...” Asuka cursed. “What do you even remember?”

“I do not remember why I am in this apartment,” Rei went on.

“We trained here together!” Asuka shouted at her in desperation. “For an entire week we did silly dancing routines! And then managed to beat an angel together.”

“I do not remember that,” Rei told her.

She doesn’t… That was bad. Very bad. Trying to cover up her growing fears, Asuka shouted, “Well, then once again: If you move outside your room or the bathroom, wear clothes!”

Rei just nodded and returned to her room.

It’s happening again.

The previous day, Asuka had been concerned but joyful about Rei’s fate. But now, she wondered if it even was the Rei she had known in that body. The blue-haired girl seemed to have forgotten everything. The rules the two had agreed on. The reason she was even here in this apartment. Their shared training week. And… the bond the two had created.

It seemed yet again EVA had taken a person she loved and spat out a caricature in their place. It seemed like history repeating all over again. Again somebody she loved was abandoning her. Again, they didn’t even really recognize her anymore.

Nonono, this can’t be happening again! Ritsuko said it would be temporary! And I... this time I can do something about it!

But deep down, Asuka realized that this was a conviction born out of desperation.

When Rei came back to the kitchen she was clothed. In her school uniform instead of any of the clothes she and Asuka had bought together, but at least she was clothed. Asuka had prepared tea for her in the meanwhile, from the bags Shinji had originally bought for the blue-haired girl.
Rei didn’t seem to recognize it, though. She just stood in the entrance between kitchen and living room and looked at… at Asuka, actually, as the redhead realized belatedly. Her gaze seemed to be mildly curious. But apart from that she was as expressionless and motionless as she had always been since returning from the Geofront.

Asuka nodded towards the mug of tea at the end of the table. “Sit down. The warm tea will do you good, I’m sure.”

Rei did so without further comment. She sipped from the mug… and stopped. Her face seemed to clear up just a bit as she looked straight ahead.

“This is…” she began.

“Yes?” Asuka asked eagerly, overjoyed to see any reaction at all in Rei.

“...familiar,” Rei ended. Yes! “But I do not know why.”

“That’ll come in time,” Asuka told her with more confidence than she was actually feeling. For now, she simply enjoyed her own mug. It was not quite the same as that one night where the two had sat there in soothing silence together, but Asuka hoped it would be a start.

She’ll come back. She has to. It can’t happen the same way as with… as with…

The downward spiral in her thoughts was halted when the door bell rung. Hastily, Asuka stood up and opened for Shinji.

“Gott sei Dank...” she muttered and hugged him.

Shinji hugged her back, but he did seem surprised. “Uh… Asuka...”

She loosened the embrace to look at him. “Yeah?”

“Well… I mean… Ayanami is here, right?” Shinji explained his position. “So, would it be appropriate…”

“Oh, right,” Asuka agreed and ended the hug. She didn’t have any problems with public displays of affection, but that wasn’t the point. The only reason the two were exchanging public displays of affection now was because both had thought Rei was dead. But she wasn’t. And they had both admitted to loving her. So it did make sense to have the whole mess sorted out first, before continuing that relationship.

Though as that had happened at the apartment door, and Rei hadn’t followed Asuka, at least she hadn’t seen the hug. Though Asuka wondered if the blue-haired girl would even care one way or the other right now.

Rei looked up when Shinji entered the kitchen. In fact she was staring intensely at him, her gaze following him as he took a seat at the table. He smiled awkwardly as he did so, which made her stop in mid-motion and widen her eyes, as if in surprise.

“Are you feeling better, Ayanami?” Shinji asked.
“Better?” Rei replied

Shinji looked at Asuka, but she couldn’t give him any guidance here. He turned back to Rei. “Well, you know… are you remembering stuff again?”

“Not everything,” Rei answered bluntly.

“Ah well, it’s only the first day since your release,” Shinji tried to downplay that concern. “Surely, things will get better.”

Rei didn’t respond, didn’t even react to that.

Trying to combat the ensuing silence, Asuka clung to something that seemed to have worked at least somewhat. “Do you like the tea, Rei?”

The blue-haired girl just nodded, and that was that.

The silence that now followed lasted well after both her and Asuka had finished their mugs of tea. The German girl didn’t quite know what to do now. Nothing seemed to really have an effect on Rei, and yet, they couldn’t well leave her alone.

“Ah… you have a TV here now, don’t you?” Shinji finally asked

“And thank God for that,” Asuka muttered.

“Then let’s go over and watch TV,” Shinji recommended.

Asuka nodded and got in motion. When both her and Shinji where moving to the living room, Rei simply followed them. Asuka thought watching TV was a good idea. They could all be together without the need for conversation. Even if everyone remained silent, they could still just sit or lie there and watch.

Shinji sat down on a pillow. Asuka took one as well. She went straight to Shinji’s place… but then, upon consideration, placed her pillow a bit away from his. Rei sat down next to Shinji on the other side.

They watched a nature documentary. They watched a courtroom show. They watched a police procedural. And during all this, attempts to communicate with Rei just… failed. She did seem to understand, on an intellectual level, what happened on TV, but it didn’t seem to interest her. Or maybe she couldn’t connect to it, just like she currently seemed unable to connect to anything around her. It was frustrating.

And in a way, so was Shinji’s presence. He was right next to Asuka. But she held back from leaning her head against his shoulder or taking his hand or laying an arm around his waist. She would have liked to, to feel a bit of reassurance, to get a bit of rest, but… Rei had to come first. And it would just be unfair to her if they excluded her now. The whole mess of who felt what for whom in their trio would have to be sorted out, but they would only be able to do so once Rei felt better again. Once she was herself again.

That was even more frustrating. But Asuka cared for Rei. She could even admit that herself now, had even admitted that to Shinji. She… she wanted to see her smile again.
In the afternoon, remembering the one time they went to the cinema, Asuka suggested something science fiction. Unfortunately, the only such item to appear on TV at that time was a rather low budget series. Whether it was due to that or Rei’s condition, it had no effect on the blue-haired girl. Asuka’s worries grew.

In the evening, Shinji decided to start cooking. Asuka followed him into the kitchen. Rei stayed in the living room, since nobody had told her otherwise.

“Ayanami will get better,” Shinji commented quietly, and added in a whisper, “She has to.”

Asuka nodded. “She did have a sort of reaction to the tea. Maybe it was the smell or the taste… or because it was associated with an emotional moment… not that I would’ve thought it was emotional for her…”

Shinji looked at her. “Emotional moment?”

“Well… uh…” Asuka stuttered. Then she rubbed her palm over her face. Of course Shinji didn’t actually know about that episode.

...then again, there is no reason to hide anything from him is there? She knew, by experience, she could trust Rei with that, and she knew Shinji was just as trustworthy as her. So she explained the incident to Shinji.

“Oh,” he voiced. “That….” Then he smiled. “Ayanami can be nice like that. In a quiet, unobtrusive way.”

“Yeah,” Asuka agreed, though she wondered if Rei currently would even still be capable of that. “It’s just… it amazed me how she indeed never has brought it up again. Just like I said.”

“And yet you now told me,” Shinji observed.

Asuka looked down and kicked her leg back and forth. “Well, I… kinda trust you. Don’t misplace that trust!”

“I won’t,” Shinji promised her softly. “But… but if that helped Ayanami, then maybe we can try something else? Some other tastes or smell that would trigger emotions with her? Memories of hers?”

“That was the idea, yeah,” Asuka agreed.

“Then… then I think I know what I’ll be making,” Shinji stated. “If you’re okay with rice porridge.”

“Oh!” Asuka realized what Shinji meant. “Yeah, of course I am. That’s a good idea.” She looked around and then gave him a peck on the cheek. He reacted most satisfactorily with a slight blush and a smile, while getting out the ingredients. Asuka returned to the living room to keep a watch on Rei. The blue-haired girl seemed to not have a moved a single millimetre since she had left.

Okayu was a simple dish, easily prepared, so the two could soon return to the kitchen, to a prepared table. They and Shinji sat down and began eating… or rather, Asuka and Shinji intensely watched as Rei was eating. It was purely mechanical at first – taking a spoonful, carrying the spoon to her mouth, eating from it, returning the spoon, taking the next spoonful, all in the same rhythm.
But then she stopped shortly, only to speed up the rhythm. It seemed like the taste agreed with her.

Hesitantly, still not entirely trusting this positive turn of events, Asuka and Shinji smiled at each other. But then Rei stopped again. Her entire body went rigid. The two other pilots looked at her with concern. For the first time in days an emotion crossed over her face. In fact, it was probably the strongest emotion they had ever seen on it.

And it was anger. Hate, maybe.

Rei took her plate and threw it away with force. It crashed against the kitchen counter and shattered. And now Rei was entirely calm and expressionless again, and simply looked straight ahead, as if nothing had happened. Both Asuka and Shinji were aghast. Shinji simply balled his hands to fists and looked down onto the table. Asuka grabbed the edge of the table hard and looked back and forth between the two.

It's happening again!

Again that person who had returned from the EVA was nothing like they had been before. Again, there would be nothing of her former self inside her anymore. Again…

She slammed a fist onto the table. Shinji looked up, but only briefly. I can do something. I can do something. I can DO something. She stood up fiercely, walked over to Rei and laid her hands on her shoulders, so that the blue-haired girl had to face her.

“Rei. Are you okay, Rei?” she asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Rei replied.

Asuka’s grip on her shoulder became a little bit tighter. “Is there… like… is there anything we can do to help you?”

“I don’t know,” Rei answered again.

Asuka was not willing to accept that. So she folded one arm around Rei’s shoulder, and with the other laid her head against her chest. That had worked once, already and besides… why not hug Rei? She certainly seemed to need it, and Asuka herself could use some comfort as well. Even if Rei still didn’t react. Asuka looked over to Shinji, and nodded him over. He looked surprised that she would do so, but finally, hesitantly stood up and approached the two. Then he gathered both in his arms.

We can do something. This is temporary.

Rei still didn’t react.

Walking to school was a lot more subdued than it had been before the Okinawa week. Than before everything had gone down. Even then, Ayanami had been mostly quiet, but it had been a different sort of quiet. She had listened, she even had spoken now and then, and whenever she had, Asuka and Shinji had listened, not wanting to waste such a precious moment. But now, it seemed Ayanami wasn’t even really there. She walked side by side with Asuka and Shinji, but that was mere physical presence. She didn’t even look at them, and all her answers to questions were purely
mechanical. Eventually, there were no more questions.

Shinji felt an acute sense of loss about this. Walking to and from school had always been highlights of the day ever since Ayanami and Asuka had gotten her new apartment. He liked Touji and Kensuke, but the times when it was just the three of them, who could talk with each other without worry and without anyone listening in, had been priceless. And now Shinji had to wonder if those times would ever come back.

To their surprise, when the three had nearly reached the school, they found Touji standing on the pavement, looking down and moving with a certain nervousness. Usually the boy was running late for school rather than being up so early. Even more unusual was his appearance: He was sporting a bandage around the head, a further one down his left cheek, and a cast around his neck.

Nobody said anything. Shinji really didn’t know what to say. It was clear what had caused those injuries. Touji only noticed the trio once they had nearly passed, and then suddenly sprung into action. “Oh! Shinji! Ayanami, Soryu! Hell… ouch!” He fumbled at his neck cast. It looked uncomfortable.


“Yeah, hello...” Touji answered absent-mindedly and then called, “Hey, Ayanami! Please stop! I need to tell you something.” Ayanami did so, but didn’t turn around. Quickly, Touji moved two steps towards her, but then flinched, as if something hurt. “Ayanami?” The blue-haired girl turned around and Touji bowed deeply. “Thank you. I’ve… I’ve been informed of what happened. Thank you for saving my life.”

“I don’t remember that,” Rei answered.

Abruptly, Touji straightened up again… only to hold his head. Shinji rushed to his side, but then didn’t do or say anything. “You… ah...” Touji began. “You don’t remember?”

Rei shook her head. Shinji took over explaining, “She’s suffering from serious amnesia. Dr Akagi said it will be temporary.”

Touji took another look at her. “Oh. And that… that due to saving my life...”

“Yes indeed!” Now Asuka caught up to the others again. “This all… it wouldn’t have been necessary if you had just kept control over your damn unit!”

“But I tried to!” Touji pleaded. “I… I ‘synched’, and I did feel something... but then there was something else in my thoughts, something foreign, and I blacked out. And then I was only now and then dimly aware of what was happening around me.”

“You blacked out,” Asuka echoed accusingly. “That’s just it. You slipped, you lost control, and Rei had to pay the price.”

Shinji was shocked at Asuka’s accusations. Surely the redhead knew that this was nonsense, that Touji as well was simply another victim of the angel. Meanwhile, Rei simply stood by and watched without showing any reaction whatsoever.

“I didn’t even know what to do!” Touji shouted back, but it didn’t sound as convinced as before. “I had no chance!”
“Yes, you indeed didn’t” Asuka shot back. “You never should have been made a pilot!”

“You think I wanted to be?” Touji shouted now. He was breathing heavily now. “But those NERV agents… they said they could help my sister. NERV has all sorts of advanced medical tech, right? And at the public hospital…” He shook his head. “They couldn’t help her. They just couldn’t help her there anymore.”

His sister… and it had been Shinji’s EVA which had injured his sister in the first place.

“So your sister is okay, and Rei…” Asuka began anew.

Shinji felt terrible about that. So he spoke up in a pleading voice, “Asuka… please….” He laid his hand on Touji’s shoulder. “So you’ll pilot now?”

Touji sighed and shook his head. “I have to. I’ll just have to. I’ve seen what it does to you, man. I never really paid attention… I’m so sorry. I should have. I should have!”

Asuka just scoffed but stayed silent. And Shinji… Shinji suddenly felt a depth of sympathy like he hadn’t ever before. Touji was now going through just the same as him; would continue to go through the same pain and suffering. And yet, just like he, he had no other choice. But what words of support could Shinji give him? It would in fact be just as terrible as Touji thought it would be. And besides, Shinji was arguably the reason Touji now had to pilot in the first place.

“We… we… we’ll go through this together,” Shinji tried. “All four of us.”

Touji laughed bitterly. “Yeah, indeed only four. And the rest – none of them have any clue. I know that because I used to be such an ignorant idiot myself, and yet I saw what piloting did to you. I saw you suffering through a fight and then just ignored it. Serves me right to be a pilot now, I guess…”

“Look, stooge,” Asuka spoke up now. Rough, but calm. “It can be painful, yes, but we’re doing good work. The world needs us. We…”

“Oh, I know,” Touji interrupted her. “They told me. Doesn’t make it any better. I’ll still… I mean, just look at us. One amnesiac, another one’s head in bandages… I…” He became quieter. “I don’t want to have to suffer constantly.”

This was greeted with silence. Asuka looked critical, dismissive, maybe even full of contempt, Shinji didn’t know what he could do to reassure his friend, and Rei showed no reaction at all. It was her who finally broke the silence.

“We should move on,” she simply stated quietly. “Or we’ll be late”

“Yeah,” Touji agreed. It sounded bitter. “After all, I know they’ll even make pilots do extra cleaning duties. But… thank you again, Ayanami. I may have whined your ears off here, but what I wanted to do was to thank you. I owe you something.” He turned his head around. “To you as well, Shinji.”

Touji’s bandages caught lots of looks in the school, and raised many questions – or rather, the same question over and over. He thus had little chance but to tell the truth, that yes, he was the newest EVA pilot. The news spread like wildfire through the school. Even when the teacher
entered the class, there still was a lot of excited whispering.

This deflected attention from Ayanami’s strange behaviour. Or maybe it wasn’t at all strange to the rest of the class. To them, Ayanami had to seem the same as always. The blue-haired girl sat down at her place as soon as she had entered the room, and began staring out of the window. That was what she was always doing. The greater change was in Shinji and Asuka, who were eying her with concern.

Kensuke and Horaki were in the crowd that formed around Touji, like most in the class. Shinji noticed Kirishima kept some distance. The girl seemed considerably more subdued than before. *Is she still feeling guilty because of that library incident?* That had been five days ago already… granted, five very eventful days for Shinji, so maybe his view was skewed. She didn’t even properly look at him when she sat down at her desk, next to his. And before Shinji had mentally gathered a possible reply to her letter, the teacher had already entered the class.

During class, Mana was leaning far forward, as if extra eager to pay attention. Or maybe she just wanted to intensely look *anywhere* else other than in Shinji’s direction. And while he also tried to ignore her, that was made difficult by her shifting around considerably on her seat, as if she were sitting uncomfortably. And indeed, at one point Shinji caught her wincing.

When the midday break began and everyone stood up from their places, there was no way anymore for the two to ignore each other. So in the general rush, when everyone was too busy with themselves, Shinji spoke up quietly, “Uh… Kirishima?” She turned to him. There was a certain anxiety on her face. “I got your letter. It’s okay. We can forget about that incident, if you want.”

“Really?” Kirishima replied. “Oh, thank you!” She sounded very relieved indeed, which Shinji found odd. *Has she fretted over this so long?* With some delay, she added, “I’d hug you, but I guess that would be counter-productive.” Shinji smiled lopsidedly. *Quite so.*

“The incident? What incident?”

Both Kirishima and Shinji whirled around, to see Asuka standing behind them, arms akimbo.

“Well… uh… welll…” Shinji stammered, but he saw no way that he could explain that all to her now. He looked over to Kirishima, but the girl was no great help either. She simply looked down and stayed quiet. “Ah, you see… it’s… it’s just… well, it’s something… Kirishima and I…. uh…”

He stopped his half-hearted attempts to get an explanation out. Some seconds of silence followed. Finally, Asuka remarked, “I see,” and stormed off.

And Shinji felt terrible again.

He glumly took the lunch boxes from his backpack. He brought one over to Ayanami, who barely reacted, and then returned to sit down at his table again. *What do I do with Asuka’s box now?* With a sigh he was about to open his own when somebody next to him remarked, “Won’t you bring that to Soryu?”

Shinji looked up to Kensuke standing next to the table. He sighed. “Gods know where she is now.”

Kensuke shrugged. “Somewhere in the corridors. Good place to talk to her in private.”

Shinji looked at him suspiciously. What business of Kensuke’s was this? Gumpily, he turned his
head away from his friend… to see how Ayanami was now staring at the open class door through
which Asuka had rushed. There still was no expression on her face, but…

*I really shouldn’t lie to Asuka.* They had after all talked about that, how nobody had ever been
honest with them, just false smiles and no concern. They had to be different to each other than that.
Shinji took the two remaining lunch boxes and went outside.

It took some time until he had found her. She was sitting on a windowsill at the end of a corridor,
her head turned around so that she could look outside. When she spotted him, she jumped up from
that position.

“Shouldn’t you be with Mana now?” she asked acidly.

Shinji looked down. Finally he mumbled, “I brought you your lunchbox.” He held out of the two
boxes.

Asuka furrowed her brows. Then she abruptly took the box, and laid it out on the windowsill.
Nobody said a word.

“Uh…” Shinji finally spoke up. “About… about Kirishima and me…” He saw Asuka tensing, but
she gave no audible reaction. “I suppose… I suppose you do deserve to know what happened.”
Asuka turned around and crossed her arms. Shinji looked up again, to face her. “That incident I
referred to… well, when I showed her the city we also went to the library and well… well… she…
she tried to kiss me there.”

Asuka’s face turned into an expression of horror. She even took a step back. Then all emotions
seemed to become replaced by horror. “I knew it. I knew it!”

“She didn’t get anywhere!” Shinji hastened to specify. “I… I ran away.”

“That… that whore still kissed you!” Asuka fumed. “And I thought I could trust you!”

“That… it happened before we… before we got together,” Shinji pleaded. “And even then it didn’t
feel right. That’s why I ran.”

“ ‘Didn’t feel right’,” Asuka echoed sarcastically with a scoff.

“It… it wasn’t with you,” Shinji explained. And, since he had decided that now was the time for
honesty, “...or with Ayanami.”

“Okay. So you ran away,” Asuka allowed, ignoring the last part of Shinji’s explanation
completely. “But you shouldn’t have been out with the Flittchen at all. I told you, didn’t I? You
should have looked after Rei!”

Shinji looked down again. “Yes. You were right.”

“Yes. Yes, I was,” Asuka confirmed. She gathered up the lunchbox again and left.

As she passed Shinji, he pleaded: “What will you do now? Will you leave me? You as well?”

Asuka stopped. “Don’t pressure me. I need to think about that.” Then she continued to walk.
Shinji felt just defeated. I screwed up. How do I fix that?

Asuka and Rei still came over to Misato’s apartment for dinner, but the atmosphere during it was tense. Misato obviously noticed, but didn’t comment. Hardly a word was spoken. Shinji looked hurt, and Asuka couldn’t blame him for that, but neither could she simply forgive him. It was complicated.

She knew she was being unfair. Shinji had run away after all… or had he? That exactly was the problem, the loss of trust. Asuka had thought that she had finally found someone whom she could trust completely, someone who was just like her, someone who understood. And that was why it hurt so much to imagine him being together with Mana. Asuka just didn’t want to set herself up for even more hurt.

The status of their relationship, such as it was, had been complicated due to Rei’s presence anyway, not that either of them would have it any other way. But if they were really to be… together, then Asuka had to make absolutely sure that Shinji wouldn’t hurt her or just leave her as so many other people in her life had. She had thought she could be sure of that, but that certainty had been shattered. Even if Shinji had acted right in the end, that certainty was simply gone. And while Asuka missed it as much as Shinji obviously did, she couldn’t show that. She had to guard herself against further disappointments.

Thus, dinner ended as it had started, in awkward silence. Afterwards, Asuka and Rei silently trotted back to their apartment. Asuka didn’t even try to start a conversation anymore. She just didn’t have the energy for a likely futile attempt. She was unsure about Shinji now and Rei was still behaving like a stranger. It gnawed at her.

That was why she retreated to her room basically as soon as she and Rei had come home. There really was nothing left to do but to sleep. Maybe she would have a solution to the whole mess once she had slept over it.

Asuka dimly remembered fields of sunflowers and corridors in an old South German building going up and down in her field of vision and a feeling of dread when she was awoken in the middle of the night. There were noises coming from outside her room. Something shattered, something fell onto the ground, something got dragged over the ground. What in God’s name…

When she stepped outside her room she saw light coming from the kitchen. She made her way to there…

…and saw a veritable battlefield. The kitchen table had been dragged through half the room, the chairs around had been thrown to the ground, and all around that lay the shattered remnants of dishes and glass cups. And amidst all that chaos stood Rei in her night gown, now completely calm and emotionless.


“Rei…” Asuka whispered, unsure what to do or what to say.

“I remember, but it doesn’t fit together,” Rei went on. Her voice was still soft, but the pain in it
could not be mistaken. “I remember you. Loud, brash, inefficient. Caring, warm, holding me. I remember me, but...”

“But?” Asuka prompted her. Inside her, her heart jumped. She’s beginning to remember.

“I don’t know which of them is me,” Rei answered. “The Rei Ayanami in the depths of the geofront. The Rei Ayanami inside the EVA. The Rei Ayanami piloting the EVA. The Rei Ayanami waking up at the hospital. I am...” All hints of emotion left her voice, so that she spoke a simple matter of fact. “Torn.”

Moving carefully so as to not step into shards, Asuka took some steps forwards. “I don’t know what you mean!”

Rei made a gesture to the ground around her. “Like shards. It does not fit together.”

It still didn’t make sense to Asuka. But Rei seemed so lost, so vulnerable. She wanted to help her. She feared she would be too clumsy, as always, that she would screw it up, but she couldn’t just leave Rei like this. “Come. You need rest. We can clean this up tomorrow.”

Carefully, she guided Rei out of the area of broken shards and into the living room, holding on to her waist. The girl tensed when she was led towards her room.

“Asuka...” she whispered softly.

“Yes?” the redhead answered.

“I do not wish to be alone,” Rei stated.

Oh. Well, that was kinda understandable. Rei seemed downright frightened. Apparently, coming back from amnesia was a terrifying experience. Asuka stopped. Then she turned around and nudged Rei into the opposite direction. Towards her own room.

Once there, Rei immediately crawled into Asuka’s futon. The redhead hesitated. The last time she could have chosen to share a futon with Rei, she had chickened out. And truth be told, she still didn’t feel quite ready, but… but Rei didn’t want to be alone. She was in the futon now, looking at Asuka. She needed Asuka’s support.

With a lopsided smirk, Asuka entered the futon as well, behind Rei, and then closed her arms around her.

“Thank you,” Rei whispered. “You are warm. I still remember that.”

Well, at the very latest Asuka was warm right now. She felt heat rising into her face. But she found holding Rei was just as pleasant as holding Shinji. Her mind steadfastly refused to think about what that meant, but right now she could just enjoy Rei’s presence.

However, Rei still found no rest. She soon started to shiver, and then began thrashing around with her arms for a minute.

“Rei!” Asuka exclaimed. “Rei!” But there was nothing she could do but hold her tightly.

“It still does not fit together,” Rei complained after her movements had died down again. “There
are more images in my head, but they still don’t fit together. I cannot have been in the EVA and in
a body at the same time.”

“In a body?” Asuka asked, confused. She had no idea what Rei meant.

Rei seemed to ignore this. “And Commander Ikari. I have no idea if I admired him or hated him.
He… he rescued me. He put me in the EVA. He didn’t let me reach oblivion.”

“Oblivion?” Asuka echoed, now very much worried again.

“I remember Shinji Ikari,” Rei continued. “Yes. I remember him.”

All the problems with Shinji this day were wiped from Asuka’s mind. If it was something that
could help Rei… “What do you remember?”

“He promised,” Rei answered. She whispered, but it sounded determined. “He promised to protect
me. He did.”

“He saved you from the caldera of Mt Asama,” Asuka told her. “And he promised to further protect
you.”

“I remember that,” Rei whispered. “I remember him. Why is there no confusion there?”

Asuka’s body went rigid for a moment, her grip on Rei slightly harder. That special connection
between the two again… If it could help Rei, Asuka was all for that, but she still felt slightly
excluded. It was those two who had first formed a connection, who had become each other’s
reasons for piloting, who could freely cross-synch, who had shared the first dual synch experience
because their minds were in harmony. It was nearly enough to make Asuka feel like an
unnecessary addition.

...still, if it could help Rei…

“Wait a moment,” Asuka told the blue-haired girl. She crawled most of the way out of her futon
and grabbed her jeans, which she had carelessly thrown on the ground. From its pocket, she got her
NERV mobile phone. Hastily, she chose one of the contacts on its list.

It took a while before an answer came. After all, Shinji was presumably sleeping.

“Urgh… Asuka?” he spoke up. “What’s the matter?”

“Rei,” Asuka simply answered. “She’s starting to remember and it’s messing her up. She
remembers you, though. All of it.” Asuka tried to sound as neutral as possible, to keep all jealousy
from her voice. “Maybe you can help?”

“Ah… help?” Shinji asked, apparently still not fully awake.

“Come over!” Asuka told him.

“Now?” Shinji asked. “But… I don’t think Misato would...” He stopped his stuttering. “How bad is
it?”

Asuka looked over to Rei, who had started shivering again. “Very. Please come.”
“...give me a minute to sneak out of here,” Shinji told her.

It took more than five minutes until the door bell rang. By that time, Asuka was already impatiently waiting in the apartment entrance. Before Shinji could say anything, she dragged him in, told him to be careful, and guided him through the mess that was the kitchen. Then she led him into her room.

Both took great effort not to fully look at each other.

Inside Asuka’s room, Shinji hurried over to the futon and knelt besides it. “Are you okay, Ayanami?”

“I remember you asking before,” Rei told him and sat upright. “I also remember I did this.”

And with that, she grabbed him into a hug. This time, Shinji didn’t need to be told to hold her. He closed his arms around her and laid her head against his shoulder. He closed his eyes and let both of them come to a rest.

Seeing the two so at peace… Asuka still felt a pang of exclusion, but it was also adorable. Both of them were.

“This time,” Rei whispered, “stay.”

Shinji looked unsurely to Asuka. “Well, if your clothes fit me, mine will most likely fit you. I can lend you some stuff for the night.”

Shinji nodded and gently disentangled himself from Rei. As Asuka handed clothes to him, part of her wondered what she was doing. Her heart was pounding heavily. Would he spend the night here? With both of them? Asuka went along with this because Rei needed help and support, but what did she think about this?

Shinji changed into his borrowed clothes with his back towards the girl. It still allowed Asuka to ogle him. He did have a cute butt. She sideglanced towards Rei and threw her head around when she noticed the blue-haired girl was also looking straight at said posterior.

After Shinji had changed and turned around, there was some awkward hesitation. Do we really all get into that futon? It was, admittedly, broad enough, but… Well, why not? Asuka liked Shinji. Asuka liked Rei. And Rei, right now, needed all the support she could get. Asuka stepped over Rei and got into the futon behind her. Then she waved Shinji over.

Still looking awkwardly, Shinji slowly got into the futon… until he was basically dragged in by Rei and Asuka. Get in here. In a way, this was a chance for Asuka. To lie here with both him and Rei. Despite her earlier uncertainty, now she didn’t want to miss that chance.

Shinji’s arms stretched out to cover Rei, to cover Asuka. He closed them behind the redhead, just as her arms now also extended around him. And between them, in their midst, Rei, who had her arms tightly closed around Shinji and her head nestled against his neck. Likewise, Asuka’s head leaned against the backside of Rei’s neck.

To feel Shinji’s arms around her while her head rested against Rei… to be so close to two people she cared for, had feelings for… and who both seemed to return those feelings… Asuka felt loved.
Accepted. Needed, too. And that this happened with two people, to her of all people… Asuka breathed in, feeling content and peaceful.

Shinji stroked her back, while nuzzling his head against Rei’s hair. There was a sound coming from him that sounded almost like a squee, while Rei just sighed contentedly. Asuka smiled instinctively. Rei and Shinji were feeling good, here, together with her. And Rei in particular didn’t shiver anymore, seemed happy now. As for herself, Asuka just basked in the warmth of her two bed companions.

There was nothing going further than hugs. No kisses, certainly nothing even bordering on the sexual. Which was just fine with Asuka. It wasn’t like she didn’t want to try that eventually… but not… just not now. So there was no risk here, no challenge. She trusted Rei and she noticed that on this instinctive level she also still trusted Shinji. This was just an expression of physical closeness, of feeling the others. Just as Asuka and Shinji had done when they had thought Rei was dead. To have three people do it was maybe a bit odd, but right now, Asuka didn’t care about that.

Rei mumbled something.

“What is it, Ayanami?” Shinji asked.

“I still… I’m still remembering,” Rei told him. “Things are coming back to me.”

“And that’s bad?” Shinji asked.

“It hurts when I… when I remember… me,” Rei answered. “But I want to remember.”

Asuka stroked Rei’s hair. Soon, the blue-haired girl breathed more evenly again. Asuka didn’t know if she had drifted off to sleep. But after she herself had done so, she didn’t dream anymore of old town building corridors in South Germany.

The first thing Shinji noted when waking up was blue. He was looking right at Ayanami’s head. Strains of red were interwoven with it, as Asuka’s wild hair spread out every which way on the futon. This time, Shinji didn’t react with fear. To see Ayanami sleeping so peacefully, after whatever had happened to her last night, made any trouble he might catch for this worthwhile. And to have been held by both her and Asuka... at that point, Shinji hadn’t cared about anything else in the world anymore. There had been just content comfort, a feeling that had been mirrored on Ayanami’s face. They all had been peaceful and content, and that in itself had been an incredible feeling. All three of them had found… home. A sort of emotional home.

Shinji raised his upper body to look at the two girls. He felt a pang in his heart. He just needed to look at them and he wanted to protect them, help them, hold them… kiss them? And that went for both of them. To see them lying together here like that, literally within arm’s reach… It made him happy, but it also made him confused as to what he actually wanted. He had gotten together with Asuka, but only because both had thought Ayanami was dead. So did he want Asuka? Or did he want Ayanami?

They were both so adorable lying there. And attractive. Shinji was very aware of their shapes.

The most confusing thing was how he had feelings both despite how different they were. Asuka was all urge to go forwards and to hell with the odds. There was a liveliness about her that just
dragged him with it. And yet, at the same time, the two could connect because they both had gone through such similar things. That was a connection that wasn’t there with Ayanami, but in a way it didn’t need to. With Ayanami, he felt like she understood *regardless*. She had listened even when nobody else had, and she always seemed to want to support him. Her presence was soothing and graceful.

And he kinda wanted both of that. Which was kinda screwed up.

He sighed and lay down again. Then he snuggled up to Ayanami again, while one hand reached out to Asuka, distantly caressing her face with one finger. He heard Ayanami give a content grunt at the height of his chest and smiled. He would have to sort this all out… eventually. For now, it seemed he could in fact enjoy the presence of both girls, and he would. He continued just looking at them, and smiled.

*School. We should go to school.* But it was so peaceful and comfortable and warm right now, and they could still comfortably make it. Five to ten minutes more in bed surely wouldn’t be a problem…

Ayanami’s eyes opened. She looked slightly confused, until she saw Shinji. Her gaze got clearer, and the corner of her lips curled ever so slightly upwards. It was *adorable*.

“Feeling better?” Shinji whispered, so as to not wake up Asuka.

Rei nodded. “I still don’t know… who I am. But it seems less important now.”

Shinji was still trying to figure out what that meant, when the door bell rang. Instinctively, he jumped up abruptly. *I shouldn’t be here!* Guilt began flowing through him.

Asuka made some half-awake, half-asleep noises. Shinji sprinted to his trousers to put them on again. Ayanami got up from the futon.

“Hrrrrm…” Asuka complained, without opening her eyes. “Cold!”

Shinji was barely in his trousers when he was already shaking her shoulders. “Come on, Asuka! Someone is ringing the door bell.”

“But I want Rei back here,” she protested half-asleep.

Shinji shook harder and repeated, almost shouted: “Someone is at the door!”

Finally, Asuka opened her eyes. “Hm? Oh, yeah.”

She and Ayanami now got hastily dressed as well. Shinji was too afraid of what could come to shoot any peeks towards them. The door bell rang again.

By the time all three kids came hastily running to the apartment entrance, there also was a banging at the door. With one nervous breathing out, Asuka opened the door.

“Asuka, Rei, finally!” Misato shouted. Then she spotted Shinji. “Shinji, what are you doing here?” She took a step forward and grabbed him by the collar. Immediately, two arms grabbed hers in turn. Ayanami was silent, though part of Shinji’s mind still could register that she was acting against a *NERV superior*, but Asuka definitely was not.
“Calm down, will you, Misato?” she exclaimed. “I called him over. Now let go of him!”

Misato looked in surprise at both her and Rei. Then she grudgingly did so. She folded her arms and tapped her foot. “I await an explanation. Now!”

“Rei… during the night, she started to remember,” Asuka explained. “It kinda screwed her up. She wasn’t doing well at all, Misato. I didn’t know what to do. But she did remember Shinji. So I called him over. And to hell with what you think of ‘decency’ or ‘properness’, Rei needed help!”

“And do you plan to do this every time Rei feels bad?” Misato demanded to know.

“If need be,” Asuka told her defiantly. “But I doubt it will get so bad that frequently. Rei… trashed the kitchen.” That did get the Captain to shoot another surprised looked at the blue-haired girl. “I doubt this will happen that often.”

Shinji’s heart went faster. Often, Asuka merely lashed out at people, fueled by a life of hurt expectations and abandonment. But if she could focus her inner flame, she was a passionate force to be reckoned with. And Ayanami… he had seen her face when she had caught Misato’s arm. All quiet determination. For his sake? With those girls around, he felt… safe.

“So, what did you three do?” Misato inquired further.

“What, you think we stayed up all night sinning?” Asuka countered. Though she obviously wasn’t quite as jaded as she presented herself here; a blush spread on her face. “Rei needed our help. So we laid her between ourselves and went to sleep. That’s all we did.”

Misato’s palm went to her face. “But the three of you did sleep on the same futon.”

“And it did help!” Asuka claimed. “Rei wasn’t shivering anymore, or trashing around, or complaining how her memories don’t fit to each other. And goddamnit, I won’t have her well-being sacrificed in the name of your phony moral outrage!”

“I’m your and Shinji’s guardian,” Misato told her quietly, almost softly. “That comes with certain responsibilities. I trust you only wanted to help Rei, that this was your intention, but with you all three lying together… I can’t trust it’ll stay at that!”

Heat shot into Shinji’s face, and Asuka was blushing again as well, though she didn’t let that stop her. “Really? And what do you think is the worst that could happen?”

“You know that!” Misato argued.

“I do,” Asuka answered. “And I don’t see why…”

She was interrupted by a signal coming from four different devices: The angel alarm.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Misato, now entirely the Captain announced immediately. “You’re all dressed? Good. Come. I’ll drive you all to NERV. And no funny business on the back seats; Shinji will be with me in the front!”

The four ran down to the parking lot. Another angel attack? So soon? So far, all angels had appeared with at least two weeks between them. This one came barely five days after the last one. I
don't want to fight yet again! Five days ago, Shinji’s EVA had nearly mauled Touji. Who knew what this angel would bring? Shinji felt an incredible anxiety. But there was nothing to be done: He had to fight.

The Renault Alpine got into motion. And shortly before it reached the nearest entrance to the Geofront, Shinji could see the angel floating in the air: A revolving white and black striped ball.
For the first time since becoming an EVA pilot, Shinji didn’t have the boy’s lockerroom for himself. Touji was now changing into his plugsuit alongside him. His plugsuit’s black and blue matched the black and white of his Evangelion unit.

The unit my Evangelion had nearly destroyed…

Shinji shook his head. He had to think about the fight in front of him, not what had happened in the past, even if it was a mere five days ago. And he supposed it would be nice to not be alone here in the future. He reminded himself to look at the positive aspects.

Or at least it would be a change for the better, if Touji weren’t so quiet and morose. He had finished getting dressed, and was now sitting on a bench in his plugsuit. He looked distressed. Shinji wondered why he would be deployed at all; his bandages were still there. Then again, they had no scruples to roll out Ayanami to blackmail me… But that had been his father’s doing, surely? Surely Misato would not stoop to such lows?

Shinji was about leave the locker room when Touji spoke up: “Man, this is so fucked up.”

Shinji turned to him and made an inquisitive noise.

“I mean, maybe it’s normalcy for you already,” Touji went on. “I was inside your EVA, after all, when you defeated that one purple angel. You… it pierced right through you. You screamed in pain. And this can happen to me now as well.”

Shinji didn’t know what to say to that. He couldn’t reassure Touji, because Touji was pretty much right. He couldn’t tell him to man up and fight, either; for that he could understand the fears of the newest pilot far too well.

“I really don’t want to go out there,” Touji continued.

“Then… don’t,” Shinji told him. “Misato… Misato once told me they need pilots who are convinced about what they’re doing.” She had shouted that at him, of course. “Otherwise, they’ll just be in the way. I… I tried to leave Tokyo-3 after that.”

“But you couldn’t,” Touji argued. “And neither can I. I need to pilot for my sister’s sake. If I don’t go out and pilot, they’ll probably cut their medical care for her.”

“Then… then think of your sister,” Shinji suggested. “Whatever you do, do it for her.”

“Well, I kinda have to, don’t I?” Touji answered. He stood up. “Time to begin the suffering.”

To Shinji’s surprise, Ayanami and Asuka were waiting outside, in the corridor that separated the male and the female lockerrooms. Asuka was leaning back against a wall, while Ayanami just stood there motionlessly, with a blank expression on her face. Both were in their plugsuits.

“Ikari,” Ayanami spoke up without preamble. “I will pilot.”

“What?” Shinji replied. “What do you mean?”
“Both of us can pilot EVA-01,” Ayanami explained. “I will do it.”

“But… but...” Shinji didn’t know what to say. He hated piloting, but this was his task, his burden to carry. Ayanami had to deal with so much already, had already nearly sacrificed herself for Touji. He could not expect her to take over his job.

“You hate piloting,” Ayanami argued. “I do not. So I should do it.”

“Who wouldn’t hate this?” Touji muttered.

Asuka got into an upright position again. “Hey, stooge. Run along to the cages. We need some privacy here.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Red, there’s an angel outside!” Touji argued.

“All the more reason for you to hurry,” Asuka stated haughtily.

Touji rolled his eyes and walked off.

Asuka now turned towards Shinji. “Look, Shinji. We know what piloting does to you. We… I don’t allow you to leave me now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shinji asked. He had no clue what she meant, but felt a little bit defensive. The way she had said it, it almost sounded like an accusation to him. Most of all he was confused, though.

Asuka worked her mouth. It was obviously difficult for her to explain herself. “That night after the last angel. When you thought Rei was dead. And when you were faced with the fear of having to go on and on fighting.” Oh. Shinji looked to Ayanami. The blue-haired girl gave no sign of understanding. “Look, I don’t like having Rei in the Evangelion. But I don’t like having you there, either. Ideally, I’d just like to smash that angel by myself, but I don’t think Misato would allow that.”

Shinji breathed in and out. That was happening way too fast. Ayanami had just returned from near-death; she could not be sent out to fight yet again. “But… my promise. I promised to you, Ayanami. That I would protect you. I can’t now just...”

“I remember that promise,” Ayanami spoke up monotonously. “I release you from it.”

“What?” Shinji exclaimed.

“I release you from your promise,” Ayanami repeated. “You want to protect me. But one of my previous selves also wanted to protect you. I still feel compelled by this. And piloting is less of a burden to me than it is to you.”

Shinji looked down. Previous selves? Not that it mattered. What was he still worth if he couldn’t keep a simple promise to a girl? If those girls now had to look out for him, instead of the other way round? It was pathetic. But apparently, he wasn’t needed anymore. Nobody needed him. Not his father, not Misato, not Ayanami. They were all okay with him just stopping piloting and disappearing.
He just had to try to convince Ayanami otherwise. Even if he didn’t really know what to say. “But… but I…”

“There is also something else I remember,” Ayanami spoke, still monotonously, over his incoherent objections. “A previous self wanted to do this.” And with that, she took a step forward, raised an arm to lay her hand on the back of Shinji’s head… and kissed him.

Shinji’s eyes widened, but he didn’t break the kiss. Surely didn’t want to break it at all. It was a surprise, a shock, but it would have been a shame to look this gift horse in the mouth. Just as Asuka’s kiss had been just like herself, passionate and fiery and pushing forwards, Ayanami’s kiss also was just like herself – cool, determined, yet soft.

It ended way too soon.

“I can see why my previous… why I wanted to do this,” Ayanami commented.

Shinji still felt his world spinning. It wasn’t just the kiss. It was that Ayanami had initiated it. Did she… did she want him? In that way? But Asuka already did, and he was still surprised about that! He wasn’t used to people… liking him.

And even more surprising, Asuka, who stood next to Ayanami and had watched this just… smirked. It was a rather unsure facial expression, as if she were tentatively approving. “Well, that seems to have worked,” she commented.

Worked? But surely this was even more of a reason to protect Ayanami. To make sure such a creature of beauty would not be hurt yet again. Whereas he…

Asuka laid an arm around Ayanami’s waist to nudge her forward. Before she turned to go, she told Shinji, “We’ll defeat this angel and come back. And then you better prepare the best meals you’ve ever done for us. Understood?”

Shinji just nodded dumbly and remained behind. He felt as if his whole world had been turned over. Ayanami had kissed him? Did this mean she liked him as much as he liked her? But why? After all, he didn’t even have the common decency to only feel for her like that. Surely he wasn’t worthy to get such feelings returned. Especially not now, that his protection apparently wasn’t even required.

And what was it with Asuka? He would have expected her to protest, to react like she had to the news about Kirishima’s kiss attempt. After all, had she not said she wanted him for herself? And had she not said she loved Ayanami? Just as he probably loved both of them. So how would I react if I saw them kissing? …okay, I don’t think I’d mind. Even beyond the pleasurable aesthetics of such a vision, he liked the thought it would maybe make them happy. Is it the same for Asuka?

Shinji’s heart beat wildly as he lost himself in daydreams about what this could all mean…

“…What do you mean, you still don’t know?”

Evangelion units 01, 02 and 03 had just been delivered to the surface by NERV’s launching pads. Asuka could see the enemy floating about two hundred metres above the ground, a bit less than a kilometre away from her: A giant black and white ball of… well, nobody was exactly sure what
that ball was. It very slowly levitated between the skyscrapers of Tokyo-3 seemingly without a care in the world.

“We’re still detecting no Pattern Blue,” Misato explained on the comm channel. “No AT Field at all, in fact. And believe me, we have all our sensors directed at that thing.”

“Don’t we have some big ass observatory on Mount Fuji?” Asuka asked.

“Yes, but there was no warning from it,” Misato answered. “The object just appeared at the edge of Tokyo-3’s mountain ring.”

“I don’t like this,” Asuka growled. As far as she was concerned, NERV existed to provide her with information and maintenance for her Evangelion, to provide her with the necessary support network so that she could fight. And right now, NERV was proving to be pretty useless at that.

“Just be careful,” Misato cautioned her. “All of you. Approach the object with extreme caution. Cover and security come first.”

“Yeah, thanks, I could’ve thought of that myself,” Asuka shot back. “I’ll take point.” There was little alternative. Her support consisted of a half-crippled rookie and someone who was just recovering from amnesia. Someone she wanted to keep safe, too. “EVA-03, stay back with your rifle. Provide fire support as necessary.”

“Uh… right,” Touji answered.

“EVA-01, back me up, but stay back,” Asuka ordered Rei.

“Understood,” the blue-haired girl confirmed.

Touji had zero experience with the rifle, of course. He had not even been able to go through simulated training courses with it. But it was the only thing he could really be trusted to do. His Evangelion was largely dead weight.

“Isn’t that my job?” Asuka heard Misato mutter quietly, but the Operations Director didn’t push the point.

*You're the one who saddled me with Touji.* And second, Asuka wanted to make damn sure Rei was safe. Her piloting EVA-01 was marginally better than Shinji being inside an entry-plug again, but it was hardly ideal. *Ideally* they would have been given some weeks’ time in which Rei could recover.

Rei’s suggestion to pilot had surprised Asuka in the locker room. She had objected at first, but then had remembered what Shinji had told her about the incident on the balcony. Rei hadn’t understood her change of opinion, but in her usual fashion had just accepted it. She was unaware of what had happened.

The truth was, Asuka worried about both Rei and Shinji. Maybe that was why she hadn’t felt jealousy at witnessing their kiss. It was something that would do good for both. Or maybe it was something as simple as the question of whom she would be jealous of anyway – of Shinji for kissing Rei, or of Rei for kissing Shinji. Also, while she hated the idea of becoming the person left behind, doing it this way felt… just. The entire idea behind putting her relationship with Shinji on hold had been to work out things with Rei, after all. And just because Rei was kissing Shinji didn’t
mean they would leave Asuka alone. That was what her father had done. Those two were different.

Of course, that still meant that the three of them were faced with a gigantic mess of romantic entanglements. And whatever couple would emerge from it, it would mean one of the three would remain excluded...

Asuka grunted, too silent for the comm channels to pick it up, and decided to focus on the matter at hand. A standoff with a possibly-angel-maybe-not object was really not the best time to think of relationship drama. Not that there had been much actual drama so far, fortunately.

EVA-02 moved from behind skyscraper to behind skyscraper, always trying to stay in cover. It had a pistol in its hand, and a short axe attached to its side. EVA-01 moved on the same path behind it, while EVA-03 had found a nice niche between the buildings for a sniper position. Meanwhile, the black and white ball simply continued to float at minimal speed over the streets of Tokyo-3, apparently oblivious to what was happening around it.

“I’m getting impatient here, Misato,” Asuka half whispered into the comm channels. There was of course no real reason for speaking quietly; it wasn’t like the angel… object… whatever could hear what was said inside the entry plug. It was just a natural consequence of so far having moved silently and stealthily.

“We’re still not detecting any AT Field,” Misato reported. “We can’t confirm Pattern Blue.”

“So what do you suggest?” Asuka asked, now getting somewhat louder. “Are we supposed to sneak around that damn thing all day?”

She could hear Misato grunting. “You’re right. We can’t have that thing floating around in our city all day. Try to engage it from cover.”

Asuka grinned. “Jawoll!”

EVA-02 had its back pressed against a building barely higher than itself. NERV sensor readings, transmitted to her cockpit, showed that the giant ball was floating over the broad avenue just at the other side of it. This was the perfect opportunity. The Unit darted forth around the building corner, raised its pistol and fired.

As soon as the bullet hit the sphere, it simply vanished. The bullet continued its journey into the sky.

“Was zur Hölle...” Asuka muttered.

“Pattern Blue detected!” Misato shouted. “Asuka, it’s directly below you!”

Asuka suddenly felt like she was sinking into a morass. She had EVA-02 look down and saw a sudden sea of pitch perfect black below her. And EVA-02, as well as some nearby cars, was sinking into it.

The pilot didn’t waste any time. She had not been trained eight hard years without developing quick reflexes. She soon noticed that she could not step out of the expanding blackness, which held her like quicksand. Even jettisoning her umbilical cord and holding on to the roof of a nearby lower building didn’t help. So she simply let her pistol fall, which sunk into the blackness, drew her axe and hammered it into a high-rise building.
Even then it seemed not to be enough. Despair rose in Asuka as she pulled at the axe, but nothing happened. By now, EVA-02 had sunk to its knees. Her shoulders began to ache… and finally EVA-02 rose from the strange blackness. Meter by arduous meter, the red unit crawled up the building, still adhering to the formless black beneath it like to glue. Asuka got almost dizzy from the strain of freeing EVA-02’s feet, the world around her spinning, but finally the unit hung at the side of the building like a frightened a spider.

She had the unit jump onto the roof of the lower building nearby – just in time to see EVA-01 walking backwards step by step to escape the black sea. The purple unit had in fact faithfully followed EVA-02, and thus was now the shadow's next victim.

“Rei!” Asuka shouted into the comm channels. “Get out of there! Now!”

The building on which EVA-02 stood shook. Asuka looked around to see all nearby buildings wobbling.

“They’re sinking,” Asuka muttered. “It’s swallowing the whole city…”

Then she narrowed her eyes. To hell with that, she had to help Rei. But by now, the enigmatic blackness had reached EVA-01 already, and the purple unit began to sink.

“Rei!” Asuka shouted again. EVA-02 jumped. It hopped from roof to roof, barely holding its balance amidst all the shaking of the sinking buildings, and only came to a stop at a building right next to EVA-01. Then it knelt down, and held out the axe towards the sister unit. “Hold on to that!”

EVA-01 grabbed the axe and Asuka pulled. She had to be careful, of course. There was nothing really on that building that EVA-02 could hold onto in turn, and that building was still sinking. But she would be damned if she were to just give Rei up.

Soon, however, EVA-01 had sunk into the black up to its waist. Asuka pulled again… and the axe slipped from EVA-02’s fingers.

“No!” Asuka shouted. She had her unit fall prone, its hands now trying to reach out to its purple sister unit. But Rei’s Evangelion had sunk in to nearly the shoulders already. They couldn’t make contact.

There was a scream of pain in the comm channels. Touji? EVA-02 briefly looked up, and Asuka saw how EVA-03 was saving itself from the swallowing darkness: Its arms had grabbed the nearest roof – by extending to double the height of the EVA. Just like the angel did… But apparently, this was supremely painful for Touji. No wonder. The feedback… He’s feeling his arms being extended to such absurd lengths.

It was painful to watch, but it did seem to help Touji. EVA-03 escaped the abnormal gaping pit and could pull itself up to a skyscraper roof. Touji never stopped screaming, though.

And EVA-01 was up to its neck into the black nothingness already.

“Gottverdammt, gottverdammt, gottverdammt,” Asuka cursed. She couldn’t reach Rei, she could only watch as she sunk ever deeper. I won’t lose her yet again! But what could she do?
A private communication channel screen popped up in EVA-02’s cockpit, showing Rei’s face. “Asuka, I remember. A previous self of me... enjoyed the tea.”

“Don’t you dare!” Asuka shouted at her.

The communication channel broke down. EVA-01 was lost in the dark sea…

...a sea that now disappeared. And the white and black ball was in the sky again.

There was a small ready room near the EVA cages. Two tables, six chairs, two vending machines. NERV Headquarters seemed to be full of those rooms, and none of them looked especially bright or cheery. Maybe this came with being underground, but then again, if NERV were to actually use the entire surface area of the Geofront instead of cramping everything into a giant pyramid, this probably wouldn’t be a problem. As it was, said pyramid was full of corridors and corners and little rooms nobody had used in years, with natural light reaching nowhere.

This small room was where Shinji had sat for the past hour in his plugsuit. Misato hadn’t objected to Rei piloting EVA-01, but she had called him to stay ready and near the cages. It was unlikely that a pilot, or more specifically Rei was knocked out while EVA-01 remained intact and that Shinji as reserve pilot could then turn the tide, but it was possible, so he did in fact remain in reserve. He was bored, but he considered boredom to be better than actually fighting. At the same time, that thought made him feel guilty. Yes, fighting was terrible, but he only didn’t need to do it now because Rei had taken his place.

It hadn’t helped that Misato, even while accepting Rei as EVA-01’s pilot, had sounded rather disapproving when she had called him. So right now, relief and guilt were his predominant emotions, but they were both dulled by the sheer boredom of simply sitting there alone and doing nothing. He didn’t even have his SDAT player with him. And he had no clue what was going on out there. He was as isolated from the fight as humanly possible – safe, but also ignorant. And that made him worry about Asuka and Ayanami.

Quite suddenly, the monotony was broken when Asuka stormed into the room, still in her plugsuit and dripping LCL. She seemed angry.

“Ah… Asuka,” Shinji greeted her. “Is the angel def...”

“You have no idea, do you, idiot?” Asuka snapped. Then she grunted and wiped her hand over her face. “Of course you can’t know. S… sorry. Well, the angel is still out there. And it has swallowed Rei.”

Shinji jumped up from his chair. “What?” His heart began to race.

“The weird ball simply disappeared, and then the ground turned into complete blackness and swallowed everything – buildings, cars… EVA-01,” Asuka explained and then shouted, “Verdammte Scheiße!”

“Ayanami….” Shinji began, but then didn’t know what to say.

“Is in there,” Asuka answered. “In that blackness. Which has disappeared again and now the ball is in the sky again and I have no idea what this means but goddamnit, I’ll go to Akagi now and if
need be *rip* some answers out of her. Why the fuck couldn’t she warn us? Some scientific expert she is.”

And with that, she simply got going again, to the other side of the room. Hastily, Shinji followed her. He just *had* to know what had happened to Ayanami as well.

He was surprised that the elevator to the top level of the command centre simply allowed them to go up. He knew that elevator was secured, and only allowed authorized personnel to reach that level. That was why he would never have tried it himself. But right now, he moved in Asuka’s shadow, and there was little that would stand in *her* way.

When the elevator had reached its destination, Asuka stormed out of it like a bolt. Without any further prelude she addressed Misato and Akagi, “What *happened* out there?” Shinji trotted behind her.

Misato looked at her disapprovingly, but Akagi remained cool and answered, “We’re unsure. Ten minutes isn’t exactly a long time to analyze data. But this very much looks like a Sea of Dirac. The same thing that has happened in Nevada.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” Misato spoke up. “But in Nevada, an area with a radius of 89km vanished. Could the same...”

“What happened in Nevada?” Asuka demanded to know.

Misato sighed. “There was an accident at the NERV base there. EVA-04... have you read the reports about the battle against Shamshel? Its corpse was nearly entirely intact. Most importantly, its S2 engine was still entirely intact, so it was first studied in Germany and then installed in EVA-04. But when the unit was first activated, a... well...” She looked to Akagi for help.

“A Sea of Dirac opened,” Akagi continued. “The same thing as you’ve seen here, but as a circle with a radius of 89km. It swallowed the whole area, including all of the NERV base. After that, the USA got nervous. That’s why we received EVA-03. America basically shoved it off to us after that incident.”

“I heard about an accident,” Asuka muttered. “I had no idea it was that bad. So this angel has been active for that long?”

“I doubt it,” Akagi answered. “So far, every angel ever detected has made straight for Tokyo-3. For an angel to linger for two weeks, and strike somewhere so far off, would be absolutely atypical. Also, the type of Dirac Seas are different. At Nevada, there was one abrupt appearance of such a sea. Here, the angel seems to be able to open and close itself at will.” She looked at Misato. “That’s also why I don’t think Tokyo-3 is in imminent danger of a Nevada type incident.”

“Open and close *itself*?” Misato asked.

“The Pattern Blue clearly emanated from the Sea of Dirac,” Akagi explained. “I think it *is* the angel. I’ll have to look closer at the gathered data, though.”

“But what about that big ball then?” Asuka demanded to know.

“Again, I can’t be sure, but if the angel is the Sea of Dirac, then the ball might be its shadow in the physical world,” Akagi told her.
“In the physical world?” Misato echoed. “Just what is this Sea of Dirac?”

“A mathematical abstraction,” Akagi answered. “Physical objects can exist in there, but concepts such as physical space have no meaning there. Not as we know it, at least.”

“Then… then… Rei is still alive in there!” Asuka concluded. “We have to save her!”

Akagi nodded. “Rei is inside the Sea of Dirac, and almost certainly alive. For now. We have some luck in that the Nevada incident has spooked the entire world. There is… you could call it an emergency convention of the foremost mathematicians and physicists with knowledge about Dirac mechanics that was called right afterwards in Beijing. And the assembled NERV delegation has promised to come here ASAP.”

“So they can save Ayanami?” Shinji spoke up now, joyful hope in his voice.

“Maybe. If they arrive in time,” Misato pointed out. “Rei has been trained for years, so she should know what to do: Turn on the power saving mode as soon as possible. But even so…”

“Sixteen hours,” Asuka muttered.

“Yes,” Misato confirmed. “Even so power will only hold for sixteen hours. And then the LCL filtering system will fail.”

Shinji balled his hands to fists. She’ll asphyxiate! That was a terrible way to go. And she had only just miraculously survived the last battle; Shinji doubted she would be that lucky again. They had to help her, save her, somehow… but that would be entirely out of his power now.
Nothingness. The whole world around Rei Ayanami was nothingness.

The EVA’s sensors couldn’t see or detect anything outside it. Sonar and radar waves didn’t return; the space around it seemed to be far too big. And visually, all Rei could see was a vague, nondescript grey, with no patterns or other objects visible.

There were not many emotions breaking through Rei’s mind – regardless of who this “Rei” really was. She couldn’t remember strong emotions from the First, from the Rei in the EVA, from the Second or now from herself. Only one strong memory burned through all the fog in her mind, the memory of warmth and care that she associated with Ikari and Asuka. As a result, even now, she did not panic, did not fear, did only rationally evaluate the situation. And for the first time ever, this appeared odd to her.

*Humans fear the dark. It is why they invented fire, the city, Evangelions. I am surrounded by darkness. Why do I not fear?*

Of course, she was not fully human. She was… but her mind strained against going that way. She was Rei Ayanami, nothing and nobody else.

*And I should feel fear.*

She knew her chances were bad. She had no idea how she even had gotten here; so she could not even guess how to get out of this place yet. She was truly and utterly lost.

*How will this affect the scenario?*

Without EVA-01, did the Commander’s plans even still make sense? The unit was not strictly needed as an Impact catalyst; NERV HQ had all the parts needed for Impact control. Rei was chief among them; in fact that was pretty much her definition. But without EVA-01, would there still be any motivation for the plan?

And what about herself? She was replaceable… or was she? If she were lost here, could she come back? Or was this a long awaited window of opportunity towards oblivion? But then, did she deserve oblivion, could she afford it, while the Scenario was still unfinished?

And did she even still want oblivion at all?

Rei felt a certain anger rising in her. A rebellion against looking at things this way. She had felt that anger a lot since awakening at the hospital. Something in her that was just *fed up* with being treated as a tool, something that desired to be respected as a person, something that desired… destruction. What did the Scenario matter still? What about herself? Shouldn’t she care about herself, about her own survival?

And those were not the ways of thinking Rei remembered. Then again, the anger felt familiar. Somehow. The Second never had them, and yet…

*My memories still don’t fit together. Who am I?*
That was the question that could drive her to despair. She was Rei Ayanami… but was she the same as the Rei Ayanami before her? That Rei Ayanami had died, so why was she still here? What exactly was she? She couldn’t just be a continuation of the previous Rei Ayanami, because there were more memories inside her. Memories that just didn’t fit together.

*I’m a tool remade.* But no… not only was there that part of her that was repulsed by that thought, there were also Asuka and Shinji. Their compassion. Their care. Their care for both her predecessor and for her. *Not for a tool.*

The world simply didn’t make any sense to Rei anymore. Or rather, *never* had made sense to this Rei. If there was a difference – which was exactly part of the problem.

Rei tried to breathe evenly and looked at the clock. She had been in this strange nothingness for nearly two hours now. In fourteen hours, everything would be over.

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Ritsuko looked at the sheets of paper unorderly strewn all across the portable table and sighed. This was absolutely no environment to process complicated mathematical formulas in. Sure, she still had MAGI access, but she’d rather be in her nice, secluded and decidedly non-windy office in the Geofront. Instead, Misato had ordered the establishment of an observation post on the roof of one of the broadest highrise buildings in the inner city.

It made sense, of course. They had to react fast if the angel appeared again. And right now, its shadow was still prowling the skies above Tokyo-3, having grown to a radius of an impressive 300m. One could put an EVA inside there. One could put four to five units stacked above each other inside there.

And EVA-01 was still inside the angel proper.

*You’re still too nice, Misato. Your job still hasn’t ruined you as mine has me. Maybe it’s time that a tainted woman takes over, and does what needs to be done. We can’t just sit here and wait.* With a groan, Ritsuko picked up two sheets of paper and walked over to the Captain.

Misato was looking through binoculars at something in the distance. Ritsuko furrowed her brows and could discern some khaki. Without greeting, she asked, “Was it really necessary to call in all those JSSDF units?”

Misato lowed her binoculars and looked at the faux-blonde. “I know they haven’t much chance against angels, but what other choice do we have? It’s not like the Evangelion sortie was very successful.”

“I doubt they will be, either,” Ritsuko remarked. “And it will undermine NERV’s public position. The Vice Commander would disagree with the decision.”

“The Commander and the Vice Commander aren’t here,” Misato pointed out. “They’re still on that expedition you don’t want to tell any details about. And *I* have promised the JSSDF to cooperate with them, without regards to… other considerations. At worst, their units will have no effect, no negative one, either. But maybe they can affect something.”

“Was that also your rationale for deploying EVA-03?” Ritsuko asked.
Misato’s grip around her binoculars became tighter, and her gaze somewhat lower. “Yes. I know Touji is injured and completely untrained. But at worst, he’d be unable to do anything. A net value of zero, as if he hadn’t been deployed. But there was always the chance he could do some good. A lucky shot, helping to erode an enemy AT Field… I just didn’t feel safe about the notion of sending merely two units against such an enigmatic enemy.”

“Hm,” Ritsuko answered ambiguously. “The ability EVA-03 has shown was remarkable, in any case. We should do tests regarding that.”

“It seemed to have been intensely painful for Touji,” Misato pointed out.

“Yes, but it saved him, didn’t it?” Ritsuko argued. “Having such an ability under complete control might come in really handy in future fights.” Misato remained quiet at that, until Ritsuko continued: “And no matter your sentimentalities, we need the pilots to fight those fights.”

“I know that,” Misato answered, almost growled. “Don’t you have anything new to tell to me?”

Ritsuko shrugged. “I have cross-referenced our observations with findings from the NERV labs in Germany. I’m completely sure now that the angel is the Dirac Sea. It operates as a sort of circuit. Whenever that circuit is closed, we see a three-dimensional reflection of it in the sky. Whenever it is open, the Sea of Dirac interacts with our physical world. And while we don’t fully understand S2 engines yet, the mechanism of the circuit is remarkably similar to some of its mechanics. I think the whole Sea of Dirac circuit is a large, diffused S2 mechanism. Which would confirm it as the angel.”

“Great,” Misato now definitely growled. “I can tell you I have no clue about Dirac Seas or circuits or S2 engines or whatever. So all we can for now is to wait until the experts arrive?”

Ritsuko shook her head. “They got ready as soon as possible, but it will still take them a further six hours until they arrive here. We don’t have the luxury to simply do nothing during those six hours.”

“That makes sense, but what do you propose we can do?” Misato asked.

“There might be a way to salvage EVA-01,” Ritsuko claimed. “It’s a dangerous one, but we can at least use the time to prepare for it already.”

“I’m all ears,” Misato told her.

“NERV has the authority to requisition all 992 N2 mines in existence in the world,” Ritsuko explained to her. “If we drop them all at the same time, and use EVA-02’s and EVA-03’s AT fields to concentrate the blast, we can force open the conduit. If we concentrate enough firepower at the same microsecond, we would even be able to kill the angel and its Dirac Sea. That would allow us to recover EVA-01.”

“I can see how, but such enormous destructive potential would surely destroy EVA-01 as well!” Misato pointed out. She sounded aghast.

“The damage sustained by the unit would most likely not be regenerated for months, but the unit itself could survive it,” Ritsuko argued.

“And what about Rei?” Misato shouted. “What kind of rescue operation would that be?”
“It would be a salvage operation, not a rescue operation,” Ritsuko pointed out. “The life of the pilot isn’t our concern.”

If the Dirac Sea was force-opened like that, it would be possible to recover Rei’s soul, after all. Most likely this time, Ritsuko wouldn’t get away with a “she survived after all” explanation, but that was still better than to lose her soul. Or even worse, lose EVA-01.

“Isn’t your concern?” Misato echoed through clenched teeth. Suddenly, she grabbed Ritsuko at the collar. “We’re talking about a fourteen year old girl who has helped to save the world half a dozen times over!”

A ten year old construct, Ritsuko mentally sneered. She remained silent.

“Why are you so concerned about EVA-01?” Misato shouted in her face. “Just what are those Evangelions?”

“That is not something you need to know, Misato,” Ritsuko said silently and looked sidewards, away from the Captain’s close-up face. “Just… trust me.”

“You want to sacrifice a fourteen year old girl and then tell me to trust you?” Misato shouted again.

Now Ritsuko had had enough. She grabbed Misato by the shoulders and faced her. “And who sent that fourteen year old girl into battle? If we lose her, it’s your fault. You ordered Asuka to engage the angel!”

Misato let go of her, but kept her angry face. “And what other choice do we have? Only those kids can pilot Evangelions. We have to send them into battle. And that is why we owe it to them to always prioritize them in rescue missions, you heartless bitch!”

Ritsuko wore her most relaxed and calm face, but that was a show. It hurt to be accused like that by her former closest friend. Misato was a woman who was in fact sending children into battle, but who still had maintained a certain form of innocence. That was why she was kept outside all of NERV’s secrets. She was too innocent, too naive, to get to know what was really going on.

Ritsuko had lost all of her innocence. She knew. Oh, by the gods, she knew. And it was a knowledge that burdened her down. She was a guilty, a condemned, a sullied woman. Still, that knowledge came with a responsibility. Only she knew the course to take now.

“And why do we have to send them into battle?” she argued. “Because of the angels. It is NERV’s job to stop the angels. And believe me, whatever I do, it serves that goal. We can’t always prioritize the survival of the soldiers fighting this war.”

“So you’ll kill Rei,” Misato accused her with the utmost scorn in her face and voice.

“I hope the expert team will have a different solution once they get here,” Ritsuko told her. “The mine drop will only happen shortly before EVA-01’s energy reserves are used up. So in… thirteen hours, by now. But I’ll see to it everything is in place.”

She set into motion, to pass by Misato and do what needed to be done, when Misato told her: “One more thing. It’s Soryu for you.”
Ritsuko stopped. “Really now? I’ll call her that when she’s around, but…”

“We send that girl out to fight for our survival,” Misato reminded her. “You’re even willing to sacrifice the pilots for some nebulous grand aim. The least we can do is give her the level of respect she wants, the level of respect she’s owed. And I will enforce that in my section… and in yours.”

“Very well,” Ritsuko said, venom now creeping into her voice as well. “You do that. Meanwhile, I’ll organize what needs to be done.”

And with that, she resumed walking, leaving a rigid and fuming Misato behind.

She also heard quick steps walking away from that place, but paid them no heed.

There was a small container brought in place at the impromptu observation outpost that Misato had reserved for the pilots. As Touji had sought medical attention immediately after leaving his EVA and hadn’t returned yet, that made the metal box Shinji’s and Asuka’s little refuge. It was so small that the table inside had to be shoved entirely against a wall, so that only three seats remained on the other side. There were two cups of tea on the table, but they had gone cold already. Shinji and Asuka did not sit at the table. Instead, they had retreated to the corner of the container, sitting on the ground, still in their plugsuits.

Not for the first time today, they sat huddled together, their hands connected to one another and their heads leaned against each other. Something that Asuka noted. “And again we’re like this.”

Shinji nodded slowly. “Again we’ve lost Ayanami.”

Asuka jerked her head upright and looked at him. “No. Rei is still alive in there. And we will save her!”

“But you told me what Akagi has said,” Shinji reminded her.

“To hell with Akagi,” Asuka said. “She only cares about her precious Evangelion unit. She can’t force us to go along with that plan.”

Shinji stiffened. “What are you saying?”

“I will not have Evangelion Unit 02, my unit, and myself, be complicit in Rei’s murder!” Asuka proclaimed. “And as for Touji… he owes his life to Rei.”

Shinji nodded. “And he seems to take that pretty seriously.”

“I’m just holding out for those experts Akagi spoke of,” Asuka continued. “They gotta have a plan. Something to do. And if not… well then we better tell Akagi that we won’t carry out her plan. That we’ll only go along with plans that prioritize Rei over EVA-01.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” Shinji asked quietly. “I mean… it seems like Akagi thinks that can salvage the Evangelion. And maybe… maybe Rei can survive the bombardment. But if we do nothing… she’ll just asphyxiate.”
Asuka jumped up angrily and growled. “No she won’t! I won’t allow this! Those experts will have to have something. And I’ll take even the most outrageous and unlikely plan over that abomination that Akagi is thinking of!”

Shinji slowly stood up as well. “I wish I could help you. But right now I’m a pilot… no, a reserve pilot even without a unit.”

Asuka looked at him and furrowed her brows. Then she spoke, “Come with me then.”

“Uh… what?” Shinji reacted.

“Get into the damn robot with me,” Asuka explained. “We can… what did Akagi call it… dual synch.”

“Oh,” Shinji voiced. “Yeah. We can do that. They said that did boost our synch-rates. So maybe that’ll help in rescuing Ayanami.”

Asuka nodded, fully displaying confidence. “It will.”

Trying to display confidence himself, Shinji tried, “That angel will give us Ayanami back.”

Surprisingly, Asuka looked down now. Finally, she said, “And then, we’ll finally clear up that… mess between us.”

“Mess? What do you mean?” Shinji asked.

Asuka looked up again and smirked. “I should be jealous of you. You got to kiss both of us.”

“Ah… well… you know…” Shinji tried to defend himself. “I mean, Ayanami, she…”

“I’m just jealous I didn’t have the chance,” Asuka told him. “It’s her and my turn now to kiss.”

“Ah… oh,” Shinji voiced. He tried his best not to visualize that… tried and failed. Horribly. He could just barely avoid tilting his head. “But… uh… surely… we must find a solution to that… mess, as you’ve called it.”

Asuka sighed. “Yeah, eventually. It’s just gonna suck that one of us will be excluded.”

“Yes,” Shinji agreed.

And saying that, he was already pretty sure that it would be him. Okay, so Asuka liked him. So did Ayanami. But clearly, either of them were so much better than him. There wouldn’t be much of a contest. And he would be glad if the two found happiness in each other. He hadn’t really thought about girls… liking each other that way. It was a bit immature, after all, and to him Asuka was the very antithesis of immature. But apparently, she would disagree with that notion, and that quite forcefully so.

“Of course, right now, there’s nothing we can do,” Asuka growled. “Damnit, but I hate all this useless waiting.”

Quietly, Shinji took the single step necessary to reach the table, got Asuka’s cup, and held it to her. “We can’t do anything now. But… I’m sure you’ll think of something when the time comes.”
Asuka looked at the cup now in her hands. “Four hours until those experts arrive. Eleven hours until Rei’s reserves run out.” Then she placed it back on the table, returned to Shinji, and put her hands on his shoulder. “I will do something. Together with you.”

Her face came closer. Shinji smirked, slightly nervous. He had kissed Asuka before, but… “You know I’m not Ayanami, right?”

“Eh, close enough,” Asuka stated and moved her face forwards.

Touji hated the black plugsuit he was wearing. It was just embarrassing. It was one thing to wear it in the isolation of the entry-plug, but to have to walk around as a boy in such a skin-tight body suit was just demeaning. But Misato had insisted that all pilots remain ready for immediate launch, so he had been wearing this flimsy mark of shame for hours now.

At least he was wearing a jacket over it now. He would have preferred something like a long coat, something that would go all the way down to his knees or maybe even feet, but it seemed he had to take what he could get. He had needed to beg for even that much for hours… not that he would publicly call it ‘begging’, of course. More like, insisting on a reasonable demand. But yeah, it had pretty much been begging until Misato and Akagi had relented.

It’s easy for them to not care about this. Akagi had even dismissed it as oversensitivity. They don’t need to walk around like this, after all.

It was more than just the humiliation, though. Walking around in a plugsuit marked Touji as a pilot. And he didn’t like that. Piloting was something he did, not something he was. In fact, he hated the thought of that. He would do the job for the sake of his sister, but he wasn’t truly a pilot. Or at least, that was what he was thinking about himself.

He sighed and looked further out over the city below him. There wasn’t much the medical section had been able to do about his pain. It was “just” feedback pain from the EVA, they had said. Apparently, that was considered normal and acceptable around here. Somebody had even remarked that maybe his EVA’s special ability, the trick to double and triple its arms’ lengths, should be properly trained. She had apparently not cared that this trick had pained Touji to the breaking point.

Touji now could surely understand why Shinji had always been that mopey. He kinda was himself now. Faced with the prospect that this would be his life now… In his first fight, his unit had been taken over by an angel, and he got punched so hard that the sympathetic reaction had required medical treatment of his skull. They had sent him into his second battle still in bandages, only for him to suffer even more pain just to save his own life. And he doubted his third battle would get any better. In fact, at that point they would maybe demand his pain in order to do his arms trick.

From here on, it would only be ever more pain. I need to find a way to end this. But he couldn’t just quit. Then his sister would lose her medical treatment by NERV. So what else could he do…

His father had been against the whole thing from the beginning, of course. Touji had been surprised when he had learned that his father hadn’t even been informed by NERV. That seemed like reckless arrogance to him. But maybe it was for the better. His father had to be presented with done deeds; otherwise he would never have agreed. He had to now; now that his son was involved
in the defence of Tokyo-3 trying to stop this would mean losing face. And face was particularly
important in his line of work.

There would be consequences, though. His father had friends. Like in most Japanese cities, those
‘friends’ had good contacts to the local administration and police, and in Tokyo-3 this meant
NERV, but that mutual understanding would only go so far. But things were as they were. It just
couldn’t be helped. Even if Touji’s father was too stubborn to admit it, his daughter needed help.
Better medical care than what the regular hospital could offer. And only NERV could provide that.

And hey, now I can also protect them both. Both my sister and my father… But Touji couldn’t
really convince himself of that. After all, so far he had had no problem with leaving the business of
protecting the city to NERV. Just as everyone else in Tokyo-3, really. For the citizens of Tokyo-3,
angel attacks were alerts, evacuations to the bunkers, and then coming out of them again and
repairing the damage. That was all. Life always went on. He had known that Shinji had been
fighting for them all, but he had never really appreciated that. And even now, he kinda wished he
could leave fighting to him.

Pathetic. Maybe that was why he deserved to have to pilot now. He had never regarded Shinji’s
plights as a pilot, so now he had to suffer them for himself. But if it weren’t for his sister, he would
run away from them.

He was interrupted in his thoughts when a helicopter approached a landing pad close to his
position. He turned around to watch it. So far, he had stayed far apart from everyone else in this
‘observation post’. Partly it had been on account of his state of clothing, and partly because he
really didn’t want company right now. Also, it was obvious that Soryu and Shinji preferred some
alone time right now.

And I thought Shinji and Ayanami would hit it off. Meh, who can claim to understand girl issues?
Though it was a bit of a pity. Shinji had been the first person able to get Ayanami out of her shell
at least a bit. And he had always seemed calmer and more collected in her presence. The two quiet
loners, Shinji and Ayanami, would have made a cute couple. Instead he goes for attractive and
exotic. Meh. Sure, Soryu had an amazing body, but she more than made up for that in personality…

The helicopter was coming down on the landing pad. Touji decided to take a look at the new
arrivals. He could watch from a distance, maybe, where he wouldn’t stand out. Bah, fat chance in
that ridiculous suit. But truth be told, he was bored. Even self-pity was only so entertaining after a
while. So he took the risk and came closer to the landing pad.

Akagi and Misato were already standing there to await the helicopter’s arrival, though the latter
stood several metres behind the former. She had her arms crossed in that peculiar way of hers,
holding her her elbows, and had a serious frown on her face. Shinji and Soryu were standing next to
her. Nobody regarded Touji; the landing pad had everybody’s full attention.

A middle-aged man in an immaculate black business suit, but with long and unkempt hair, was the
first to leave the helicopter. He walked over to Akagi and shook her hand.

“Good day,” he said. His Japanese was slow and deliberate and with a heavy accent. “You must be
Dr Akagi? I have heard so much about you.”

Akagi nodded and returned the handshake. “Dr Steven Heck, I presume?” The man nodded. “This
incident gave me an opportunity to read up on your work concerning Dirac mechanisms. No
wonder you are considered the world’s foremost mind on that topic.”
“You’re too kind, Dr Akagi,” Heck answered.

Akagi looked into the helicopter and furrowed her brows. “And if I may ask, who is that?”

“Ah, I can understand the surprise,” Heck replied. “Trust me, he is a kid genius. My apprentice, assistant, and if need be translator.”

A boy of the same age as Touji and the pilots stepped down the stairs from the helicopter. He wore black trousers and a white shirt, but while his clothing was unassuming, his face certainly wasn’t: It sported grey hair and red eyes. *Just… like Ayanami…* He seemed to sport a constant faint smile.

“Hello,” the boy spoke up. “My name is Nagisa. Kaworu Nagisa. I’m very glad to meet you, Dr Akagi.” Then he waved to Misato, Shinji and Soryu. And then he turned around and smiled at Touji.

*What the hell?*
Rei was used to waiting. To doing nothing. To being stored away like a tool currently not in use. That was something all her sets of memories agreed on.

*Is that a trait of “Rei Ayanami”? Is that a trait of me, hence?*

For hours now, she had sat inside her entry-plug and done nothing. Now and then she had still tried to send out radar and sonar signals, but nothing had ever come back. So she just remained motionless in her seat and concentrated on using up as few resources as possible. As was appropriate for an inactive tool.

*They made me a tool.*

There it was again, this… *resistance.* Resistance to things that had been entirely normal to… to the Second. Yes, that was it. First, Second and Third.

...but then, who was she?

She looked at her instruments. There were merely five and a half hours of energy left in the Evangelion. Most likely, soon all her confusion, all her troubles, all her questions about herself wouldn’t even matter anymore. Dead people didn’t have crises of identity.

*And this time, there won’t be a Rei Ayanami returning.*

...*at least this didn’t happen to Ikari.*

If Ikari had piloted EVA-01, then chances were *he* would be here now. *He* would die. That was an unacceptable thought. He already had been burdened down by the world so much; he deserved to live. He deserved to make Asuka happy. Whereas she herself… well, she had longed for oblivion before. Maybe she didn’t anymore, but it was still better she be lost than Ikari.

*But I want to have my chance as well…*

She had finally kissed Ikari. And he had reacted so eagerly to that kiss. She had finally found… someone. Someone who accepted her as she was, for what she was. Someone who wasn’t just part of the Scenario, but who was her own free choice. Hugging and cuddling were one thing; but a kiss meant acceptance of intimacy. Acceptance of each other. And *feeling* that… well, it was good that Rei had used the chance while she still had been able to.

It was just a pity she hadn’t had that same chance with Asuka. All she felt for Ikari, she felt for her as well. Why had her previous self ever thought she had time? She had known the world would soon end, after all. There never had been time. But the previous self had always still acted as a compliant tool.

*Is that me? Am I one as well? Am I her?*

Rei sighed. There really was no point to such thoughts anymore. Now it seemed it wouldn’t all be over in a few months, but in a few hours. She had no idea what would happen to her… to the children of *her* then, but then, there was nothing she could do about it anyway.
Instead she closed her eyes and thought about the kiss. And thought about how a kiss with Asuka might have felt. Thought about the two holding each other, her in between them. Them stroking her hair, rubbing her back, kissing her in turns. Tightening the hug, caressing her body, feeling her warmth. Ikari’s understanding, quiet support, care, concern. Asuka’s passion, determination, drive for her best.

Beneath her closed eyes, Rei smiled.

One would think that on a building roof, there wouldn’t be many places for hiding. And yet, it appeared Touji had simply vanished into thin air. Try as they might to find him, Shinji and Asuka just couldn’t. They were meeting again in front of the pilots’ container, frustration on both their faces clearly communicating that neither had had any success.

_Damned again. We need the stooge. Or he’ll follow Akagi’s orders._

“Where could that idiot be?” Asuka shouted, in lieu of a greeting. Shinji just shrugged and shook his head. “Well, we need to…”

She stopped when she heard a melody. Somebody was whistling. The unsung lyrics entered her mind automatically. ..._betreten, feuertunken, Himmlische, dein Heiligtum. Deine Zauber binden wieder…_ She furrowed her brows – _Can’t escape the music classes back at school_ - and looked up. Somebody was sitting on the edge of the box, one leg dangling down and one leg pulled close to his body, and was whistling the Ode to Joy.

“Hey, what are you doing there?” she shouted up.

“Singing,” was the only answer. Now Asuka recognized who was sitting there: The weird silver-haired boy that had come with Dr Heck. _What was his name? Kaworu something something._

“Well, do that somewhere else!” Asuka ordered him.

Kaworu just smiled down at her. “That’s the beauty of music. Location, surroundings, individuals, that all is transcended. It is a remarkable achievement of culture, isn’t it?”

“Then why _zur Hölle_ are you up on that roof?” Asuka demanded to know.

In a swift move, Kaworu let himself glide down to the ground. Asuka would have judged the height too great for a safe landing, but the boy touched down on the ground gracefully, barely needing to bend his knees. _Huh. Must be an acrobat or something._

“I was hoping to meet you, Asuka Langley-Soryu and Shinji Ikari,” he told them.

“I see you’ve been briefed on us,” Asuka answered curtly.

“I see you’ve been briefed on us,” Asuka answered curtly.

Kaworu laughed, a sparkling and clean laugh. “That wasn’t necessary. Not to be rude, but I wouldn’t have thought you of all people to be so ignorant of your position. You are well known and renowned, Soryu. One of the three… though I guess now four… pilots who defend the world.”

“Ah…” Asuka voiced. She annoyed at how stunned and dumbfounded she was, and yet…
Renowned? That was everything she had hoped for these past years. But why am I now latching onto this? How do I even know he speaks the truth? And yet… He certainly seemed to respect her…

“And the same is of course true for you, Ikari,” Kaworu now addressed Shinji. “A great burden was suddenly heaped onto you, and you’ve carried it remarkably. Despite the nature of your soul.”

“I… uh…” Shinji stammered in response, but in Asuka, suspicion immediately grew again. Nature of his soul? Where did he learn Japanese? ‘Kaworu Nagisa’ was a Japanese name, of course, but Dr Heck was from Germany. She had even once seen him in Berlin’s NERV facility, but no more often than that. She intervened, “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Kaworu shrugged. “Humans are by nature lonely, because their hearts are separated from each other. This hurts some people more than others. Ikari, your heart is fragile like glass. That earns you my sympathy, and my admiration for the burdens you have accepted to carry.”

“Don’t talk nonsense like that!” Asuka shouted at him. That guy is creepy! “How would you even know?”

Kaworu smiled again. “You two and I, we are similar. As I think you’ll see soon.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Asuka raged on. Shinji by contrast seemed to be fascinated by the nonsense the grey-haired boy was spewing. “Damnit, shouldn’t you help your mentor or whatever? Shouldn’t you busy studying the angel? One of us is inside there.”

Kaworu nodded gravely. “So she is. She whose fate is maybe the saddest.” He smiled faintly. “But maybe it can still be overcome. Don’t worry about her now. She will survive – one way or the other.”

“Her energy will run out in four hours!” Asuka argued.

“Yes,” Kaworu conceded. “Do not worry. Dr Heck is in fact studying the angel. Though I very much suppose the answer is not with him, but in that angel. With Rei Ayanami.”

“Spiritualist nonsense,” Asuka scoffed.

Kaworu shrugged again. “If I’m wrong, I’m wrong. But I may be right. So why not take consolation in what I’m saying? Those creatures you have created, the Evangelions, are remarkable. Didn’t hers move in the last fight even though its energy had been used up? Didn’t she command one she didn’t even pilot? There is more to Evangelions and to Rei Ayanami than meets the eye.”

Asuka grunted. Against her better knowledge, and in a way against her wishes, something inside her began to hope. Because the boy was right – under stress, Evangelions could indeed act very weirdly. And hadn’t EVA-01 protected Shinji in his very first fight? On the other hand, there was no guarantee for any of that, and that creepy guy surely wasn’t an expert to tell them any of this.

“Ah… even so…” Shinji spoke up. He seemed kinda awkward. “Uh… have you seen another pilot? Uh… Touji Suzuhara. He should be wearing a black plugsuit.”

Kaworu, what else, smiled faintly. “Suzuhara seems to want to be alone. I find this rather sad. He has friends to speak to, and that is something that can lead to happiness. It’s a good thing. Humans
can’t overcome their isolation, but they can make themselves forget it.”

“That wasn’t very helpful,” Asuka snorted.

Kaworu tilted his head. “Personally, I haven’t seen Suzuhara, but I got a good overview from up there. If he isn’t on the roof, he must have gone down somewhere, no?”

Asuka’s palm hit her forehead. “The external staircases! Of course! Come, Shinji!” She grabbed his arm and began walking.

Shinji still had time to look over his shoulder and say “Uh, goodbye, Nagisa,” before being dragged away by her.

“Creepy guy,” Asuka grumbled when they were a few steps away.

“I dunno,” Shinji muttered. “What he said… I think I’d like to ask him more about that.”

Asuka looked at him with narrowed eyes. “You can’t be serious! I bet the guy will make a good televangelist some day. Or New Age conman.”

“Tele… New Age…?” Shinji echoed without understanding.

Asuka sighed. “Let’s just find Touji.”

Asuka was half relieved, half annoyed when Kaworu’s tip actually turned out to be helpful. He had in fact climbed down some stairs of an exterior staircase, and had sat down on one of its metal platforms. She saw him first, but to her annoyance, it took Shinji to get him to come to the pilots’ container. Asuka could only roll her eyes at that. They had important stuff to discuss, and his petty personal feuds were getting in the way!

“What’s with that jacket, anyway?” she asked dismissively as they walked to the container. “Isn’t it a bit too hot for that?”

Touji raised his head defiantly. “That’s hardly the point.” He pulled the jacket closer around him.

“What, afraid someone will see too much of you?” Asuka chuckled.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Touji told her. “These… plugsuits are just no proper clothing for a boy.” He looked over to Shinji. “No offence man. Even if you’ve apparently gotten used to them, they really aren’t.”

“Well, I did feel uncomfortable at first,” Shinji reluctantly admitted.

Asuka scoffed. “Nonsense. They’re our professional attire. What marks us as EVA pilots. As elite. There’s nothing to be ashamed about. Treat the whole thing with some professionalism yourself.”

“Akagi said the same thing,” Touji replied. “Well, she gets to wear a labcoat. I wonder what she’d say if she had to wear such a plugsuit beneath it.”

“She isn’t an EVA pilot,” Asuka argued aggressively. “Don’t be such an idiot.”

Touji shrugged. “Whatever you say, Miss Professional. If you want to prance around like that, fine.
Those are girls’ clothing, anyway. But I’m a boy! So I’ll get myself a proper longcoat as soon as possible for the job at NERV.”

“That’s stupid!” Asuka exclaimed. In fact, the idea suddenly infuriated her. Touji was devaluing their status as pilots. Plugsuits were their mark as pilots, and to be a pilot was to be a thing of pride, so the plugsuits had to be worn with pride! Who was he to suddenly wear jackets or coats as if plugsuits were something to hide? That was insulting! “They won’t allow it at NERV!”

“I know I can’t wear it in the entry-plug,” Touji conceded, “but I can shrug it off shortly before I get into there. And get it on as soon as I leave the entry-plug again.”

“Yes… but… but… it’d still be unprofessional,” Asuka argued. Touji was making her whole life, which so far had always circulated around EVA, something to be ashamed of!

“Why do you even care so much about what I’m wearing?” Touji exclaimed.

“Well, I’m your fellow pilot, am I not?” Asuka countered. “What you do reflects on me. Unfavourably so, most of the time.”

Touji harrumphed. “Hardly my problem.”

Asuka was still fuming as she opened the door to the container and entered. At least Kaworu was gone now, but Touji was such a goddamn idiot! He was a pilot now, he should be aware that this would come with certain expectations, like for example a certain standard of professionalism! Why couldn’t he see that? He was ruining everything with his amateurism!

And Shinji had been no great help. He had remained awkwardly silent during the whole debate, most likely wanting to offend neither side. He was adorable at times, but the very same nature made him such a pushover at other times! And as for Touji, if they hadn’t needed him right now, if they hadn’t planned on convincing him to disobey Akagi’s order, then his ears would soon have started ringing from all the shouting Asuka would have commenced.

“Don’t you agree with me, Shin-man?” Touji asked once inside the container.

Oh no, you didn’t just…

“Well… uh… I mean…” Shinji stammered. Typical… “I mean, the plugsuits are kind of our uniforms. But… maybe they could design coats like that.”

Now both Asuka and Touji looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?” Asuka asked, half aggressive and half dumbfounded.

“Like… coats with a NERV logo maybe,” Shinji suggested. “So they’re like an uniform. It’d still be a mark of being a pilot then.”

Touji wrinkled his nose, but admitted, “Yeah, maybe. But I’m not waiting until they do so.”

Shinji smiled now. He apparently seemed to like the idea. It was kinda nice to see such enthusiasm in him. “Imagine it, Asuka. A red longcoat, your colour, with a NERV logo and ‘02’ on it. And we all have coats with identical cuts.”

Asuka laughed, now genuinely amused. “I doubt NERV will go running to the tailors just because...
of us.” She tilted her head. “But it would make for a good look, maybe...” Then again, Asuka had used the plugsuits to get some good looks at Shinji and Rei already. It would be a shame to lose that.

“I think I would like such a coat,” Shinji stated, retaining his smile.

“I’m surprised you’re in favour of that,” Touji told him. “I would’ve thought you would like to look at your girlfriend.” He grinned broadly.

“It… ah…” The obvious ‘It isn’t like that’ died on Shinji’s lips, and he looked at Asuka. Asking me to field this? Typical.

Of course, it was complicated. Asuka would dearly love to claim Shinji for herself, openly and for all to see. At the same time, she really didn’t want to show any vulnerability, like her maybe needing such a relationship. And besides, that relationship, such as it was, was on hold, and there was Rei to consider.

“What perverse thoughts are you having now again?” Asuka shouted at Touji. “Neither Shinji nor I are answerable to you.”

Touji smirked. “Whatever you say. Or maybe Shinji is ogling Ayanami’s butt instead.” We can do that together… When there was no outraged reaction coming, Touji furrowed his brow, obviously disappointed. “So, why did you two drag me here?”

Asuka and Shinji looked at each other. All concern for trivial side matters was now lost. Now they were coming to the actually serious topic. It was Shinji who first spoke up, “It’s… it’s about Ayanami. Well, she… she…”

“She only has four hours left,” Asuka spoke up brusquely. It had to be said. And they needed to go forwards.

Touji sat down on one of the chairs and looked down. “Yeah. I was briefed on that,” he stated quietly. “And they’ve already had twelve hours to come up with something. Well, nothing happened. It looks pretty grim, doesn’t it?”

Shinji sat down besides his friend and looked at him with worry, but Asuka had no time for that. Still standing, she told him, “It’s even worse. Akagi has a plan. But it will kill Rei.”

Touji whirled around on his chair to face her. “What? You can’t be serious!”

“What she wants is to get her precious Evangelion out of that so-called Sea of Dirac,” Asuka explained. “She wants to drop nearly a thousand N2 mines on the angel. EVA-01 will survive that. Rei won’t.”

“She… she’s ready to sacrifice Ayanami? Just like that?” Touji asked aghast.

“Now you’re getting it, rookie,” Asuka declared. “And she wants our help in that. She wants our Evangelions’ AT Fields to direct the blast.”

It appeared, however, that Touji’s thoughts hadn’t held pace with her explanation. “They’re sacrificing EVA pilots that easily?” he asked, unbelieving.
“Apparently here in Japan they do,” Asuka answered aggressively. “But we won’t allow that. So listen up!”

Rei opened her eyes. Visions of wild strains of red hair and of shy smiles and gentle hands disappeared from her sight.

*It is evening. It is getting dark.*

Of course, it wasn’t the fading sunlight which caused the darkness. Rather, the LCL in her entry-plug was becoming dark and muddy. The filter systems were losing power. But that was a sort of evening. The evening of her life. The evening of the life that had started four days ago, or the evening of the life that had started several years ago? Rei still couldn’t say.

*This place reeks.*

Unfiltered, the LCL was now revealing its true nature.

*My previous self… it hated red? It loved red?*

**YOUR PREVIOUS SELF?**

Rei suddenly jerked her head up. “Who’s there?” There was no answer, but Rei *felt* something. “Who? Who is it? Who?” And suddenly, Rei saw a mirror in front of her. She saw herself, in her plugsuit, reflected from it. “It is… me.”

The Rei inside the mirror changed. Now it was wearing her school uniform. “But who am I?”

Rei felt compelled to answer. “I am… I am… I am Rei Ayanami.”

“But who *are* you?” the Rei in school uniform insisted.

There was no entry plug anymore. No cockpit and no LCL and no EVA. The Rei in the plugsuit and the Rei in the school uniform were now directly facing each other, with no mirror in the way.

“Are you Rei Ayanami as well?” the Rei in the plugsuit asked.

“Yes,” the Rei in the school uniform answered. “I am that which is referred to as Rei Ayanami.”

“We are all things known as Rei Ayanami,” a childish voice called from the side of the two other Reis. They turned to find a little girl in a pink dress standing there.

“All of us are Rei Ayanami,” the Rei in the plugsuit concluded. “I am Rei Ayanami. But how can all of us be me?”

The childish Rei giggled. “Because none of us are real.”

“Real?” the Rei in the plugsuit echoed.

“They refer to us as Rei Ayanami, because they see the surface,” the Rei in the school uniform explained. “What’s beneath it is...” She hesitated.
“Not all of them see only the surface,” the Rei in the plugsuit insisted. And as she was saying that, she was lying on a futon, surrounded by the sleeping figures of Asuka and Ikari.

The Rei in the school uniform stood beside the futon and looked down on it. She tilted her head. “That is true. But even they did not know who we are. They still do not.”

The childish Rei giggled again. “It doesn’t matter”. She was floating in the room, upside down over the futon, looking down so that the Rei in the plugsuit could only see her face. “You possess a false soul and a fake body. Do they know that? Do you know that?”

The Rei in the plugsuit stood up. Asuka, Ikari, the futon, the room disappeared. The childish Rei was now floating in front of her, her head still bent towards her. “I am neither false nor fake,” she declared matter-of-factly. “I am simply me.”

“No,” the childish Rei insisted. “You are an empty shell with a false soul, created by a man named Gendo Ikari.”

Suddenly, the Rei in the plugsuit and the Rei in the school uniform were both holding something in their hands. It was a pair of half-broken glasses. The Rei in the school uniform carefully put them away, while the Rei in the plugsuit kept staring at them.

“You are just an object that is pretending to be a human,” the childish Rei went on.

“I am a tool,” the Rei in the school uniform agreed. “I am created for the day Commander Ikari needs me.”

“The day Gendo Ikari will abandon us,” the childish Rei corrected her.

**A THINKING TOOL? A FEELING TOOL?**

“If our existence is my existence, then there has to be more to it,” the Rei in the plugsuit muttered.

“There is, but you reject it,” the childish Rei claimed. “See. Look deep within yourself. Do you perceive the almost intangible, invisible presence that lurks inside your darkest fears and thoughts? It is there that your true identity lies.”

“Are you stupid?” A suddenly appearing Asuka grabbed the childish Rei from the sky and put her on the ground. “There is no such thing as a true identity! There is the part of you which observes itself, but there is also the part which is observed by others! This is the Asuka as observed by you. There is also the Asuka observed by Shinji, or by Misato, or by Ritsuko. They’re all different Asukas that only exist within the minds of those people, but each of them is a true Asuka.”

“The instrumentality of links between people,” the Rei in the school uniform observed.

Asuka… changed. Her figure became flatter, her face more sullen, her hair shorter and brown. She became Ikari. “Yes,” Ikari agreed. “It is an emergent phenomenon.” He smiled at the Rei in the plugsuit and then just disappeared.

She understood. “I am me, because I am formed by my interactions with others. I create them, just as they create me. That is what shapes the patterns of my heart and my mind.” She closed her eyes, and was at the place of her heart’s content again: In the arms of Ikari and Asuka.
THIS IS THE NATURE OF ATTACHMENT BETWEEN PEOPLE.

“Attachment...” the Rei in the plugsuit echoed. “Yes. That is what I share with those people who shape me. Whom I trust to shape me.”

The childish Rei was now steadily grounded, standing next to the futon. Her faint smile was still kind of eerie. “However, there is someone else who is your true self.” Suddenly, people were looking at the Reis. No, not people – clones. “You don’t know her, but she exists.” Suddenly, all three Reis were standing in the middle of the clone tank. They didn’t float; it was as if the LCL around them had no effect on them. The clones were circulating around them like an ocean current. “You deny that fact and attempt to suppress that facet of your reality.”

The Rei in school uniform looked down. She knew just all too well what was meant.

ARE YOU AFRAID?

“All of us are,” the childish Rei claimed. “Because she might not have a human form. Because then your present self might cease to be.”

ARE YOU AFRAID?

Suddenly, the LCL around them turned red… and the clones began to disintegrate. Arms, legs, heads fell off their bodies, crumbled into ever smaller parts.

The childish Rei seemed completely unaffected by that. She just stood there, on nothing, while around her bodies fell apart. “This is what you fear, that you will become nothing. You are frightened that you will disappear from the minds of others, if another exists. Because then your current self will never have existed.”

AREN’T YOU AFRAID?

The Rei in the school uniform just… left the clone tank. Walking through the glass as if it didn’t exist, she left the scene. The others followed her. The Rei in the school uniform was now overlooking a cliff with a view down on Tokyo-3. The other two stood behind her.

“No,” she finally declared. “That is what I wish for. That is what I have always wished for. I want to return to nothing. But I cannot. He will not let me. Not yet. He still has need of me. Only when that need is fulfilled may I return to oblivion.”

The Rei in the plugsuit walked up to her. “But now you fear that day. I do. I am afraid.”

“It is our fate,” the Rei in the school uniform claimed. “We will vanish. And people will forget us.”

Impulsively, the Rei in the plugsuit hugged her counterpart from behind. “No. Look.”

And suddenly, the two Reis were the centre of attention in the hospital room. Ikari, Asuka, Katsuragi, Akagi, Kaji… they all were regarding her. Tears were on Ikari’s face.

“They missed us,” the Rei in the plugsuit told her counterpart. “We can trust them not to forget us.”
“They… they shape who we are,” the Rei in the school uniform conceded.

While the other figures in the scene still paid all attention to her, the Rei in the plugsuit walked over to a corner, where the childish Rei just looked on. She knelt down to address her. “We are not her. Not if we do not want to be.”

“You want to turn a dream into reality by willpower,” the childish Rei stated. “But it will always remain a dream.”

>>>Reality is what we do with it. Every place can be heaven if you have the will to live.<<<

The Rei in the plugsuit… Rei did not know where that came from, but she felt emboldened. “We aren’t her. And we aren’t Commander Ikari’s. We’re theirs.” She looked at the ongoing scene of her reunion with Shinji and Asuka.

The childish Rei took a step forwards… and hugged Rei. “We are Rei Ayanami.”

“We all are,” Rei confirmed. “And we are one. You are just as much part of me as those memories.”

Rei stood up again… and was alone. No more reunion scene, and no more two other Reis. There was darkness around her.

In the distance, she saw a cone of light, and someone standing inside it. Walking up to it, she could see that it was Commander Ikari.

“He still has need of you,” the Commander said.

“I don’t care,” Rei answered softly.

The Commander nodded. “Good. Tell me, who are you?”

“I am Rei Ayanami,” Rei answered. “Not the First, not the Second, not the Third. Not her, and not a tool. Just Rei Ayanami. What that means is up to me and the people around me.”

The Commander nodded again. “Then you have no further need of me, and I have no further need of you. Give my regards to his wife.”

He turned to go and step into the darkness, but Rei called out, “What did you want? Where will you be going now?”

The Commander stopped. Rei could just barely still see his back. “Do you know where you are?” Rei shook her head, and even though the Commander was turned away from her he seemed to have understood. “This is a gate to endless possibilities. I do not need to triumph in this one. But I want to learn. Your case is extraordinary. It goes beyond self-hate and self-enslavement. Beyond guilt, martyr complexes and indoctrination. Thank you for that.”

“I think I should thank you,” Rei answered.

The Commander turned around again, so that now only his face was in the light, but the rest of his body in the dark. “You are… you hold her soul, don’t you?”
Rei nodded. “And that makes you… my enemy?”

The Commander smirked. “Think carefully about who your enemies are.”

And with that, he turned around and stepped into the darkness. He vanished and the cone of light went dark.

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Even though the cool evening wind was sweeping through NERV’s observation base on the roof of the city building, the air seemed tense. Akagi had had her working place fortified by tarpaulins around her desk. She was now standing in front of it, facing away from it. She was looking at the three pilots that had taken up a position across from her. Asuka was notably in front of them, while Shinji and Touji looked more subdued. The latter was still wearing his jacket. Misato was standing to the side of the two parties.

Akagi crossed her arms in front of her. “So, Misato told me you three urgently needed to talk to me. I’m rather busy. So whatever it is, make it quick.”

Asuka raised her head defiantly. This was the moment of truth. “We are here to tell you to work out a new plan. We won’t participate in yours.”

“What?” Akagi merely replied.

“We will not be accessory to Rei’s murder,” Asuka declared. At her side, Misato’s eyes widened.

“So you eavesdropped,” Akagi concluded and tensed her arms. “But you do realize that this plan is the only chance we have to save Rei, yes?”

“Bullshit!” Asuka yelled. “I did hear you. You only care about salvaging EVA-01!”

Misato retained a carefully neutral and stony face, looking back and forth between Asuka and Akagi without intervening. Asuka had been concerned about that part. It had been clear that Misato didn’t approve of Akagi’s plan, but she was part of NERV’s military hierarchy, after all.

Akagi loosened her arms and began gesturing. “Regardless of priorities, it still remains the only plan we have to save Rei! Even Dr Heck couldn’t think of a better idea, and he is the top expert on this matter. There is no way we can manipulate the Sea of Dirac in a controlled manner. We have to open it by force!”

Dr Heck was notably absent. Useless guy. “And I’m sure your plan is in fact the best shot at salvaging EVA-01,” Asuka argued. “But we won’t take part in a plan that won’t prioritize Rei’s survival above all other concerns.” Now she crossed her arms.

“That’s mutiny,” Akagi hissed.

“Yes,” Asuka agreed, now with a smug smile on her face. “And it has the backing of the entire pilot corps.”

Akagi took a step forwards. Asuka instinctively assumed a defensive position, as she had been drilled in close combat quarter training, and Misato rushed forwards as well, her eyes on Akagi… but nothing happened. Akagi just stopped and glared at Asuka, and then at Shinji and Touji.
“So you would leave your friend to die,” she accused them.

“No,” Asuka disagreed forcefully. “We’re forcing you to come up with another plan. The only way you’ll get our help, the only way you’ll have a shot at salvaging EVA-01, is if you devise a plan that prioritizes Rei’s survival.”

“A new plan?” Akagi shouted. “In two hours?”

“That was the only way to ensure you would indeed do that instead of looking for other alternatives,” Asuka told her coldly.

Akagi’s glare now found another target: Misato. “You’ve slipped in your duties, Captain. Your pilot corps is starting an outright mutiny.”

Misato nodded gravely and then turned her face towards the pilots. “If you truly disobey this order, then this will have consequences, you know.”

“Saving Ayanami is worth that,” Shinji whispered, though he was looking down on the ground, apparently unable to face Misato.

Touji had his hands balled into fists. He was speaking more forcefully, but not without uncertainty in his voice. “Ayanami saved my life. I owe this to her.”

“Besides, Akagi is technically wrong,” Asuka stated. “This isn’t a mutiny because we aren’t officially part of a military hierarchy.” Something that Asuka actually found really, really, silly, but she would use that fact whenever it was convenient for her.

“Oh right,” Akagi spoke up now with a false sweetness in her voice. “You’re just helping us with ‘EVA research’. Well, NERV can end the ‘cooperation’ with you.”

“With all of us?” Asuka asked rhetorically with a scoff and grinned.

Now Akagi was grinning as well, ever so slightly. “No, Soryu. Only with you.”

That took Asuka aback. She literally walked a step backwards and raised her right arm, as if to ward off a threat. She had been sure she couldn’t be touched, because after all, NERV couldn’t just fire its entire pilot corps. But if she were singled out for punishment… they could in fact make her lose her pilot status. And what would her life be worth then? Without that pilot status, what had she truly accomplished in life? She would be nothing. Ordinary. Less than ordinary.

Shinji still didn’t looking up. And he spoke very, very quietly. But speak up he did. “And we can end our ‘cooperation’ with NERV.”

“If Touji does this, that results in his sister losing medical coverage from NERV,” Akagi reminded them. At that, Touji looked away and didn’t comment. “And would you have him walk into battle alone?”

Misato now openly frowned at the Science Director, who didn’t seem to regard this.

Asuka was both desperate and furious. A life changing deal was now becoming a threateningly realistic prospect. Her entire life could well be turned upside down. She could lose the one thing
which had given her a sense and purpose in life. And she feared that, very much so. At the same time, NERV needed them. Akagi was in no position to make such threats. Who was she, anyway, to do that?

And to browbeat Shinji with emotional blackmail like that… Asuka decided to call the bluff.

“I don’t think NERV will,” she spoke. Her heart thumped as it had never before, not even in angel battles, and she knew her voice was cracking at times. “You have a vested interest in defeating the angels after all.”

“So do you. So does every human,” Akagi argued.

“Would you sacrifice that goal to petty power plays then?” Misato asked quietly.

Akagi glared at her. Asuka and Misato glared back. Shinji was looking down, Touji was looking away. Nobody spoke. They had come to an impasse.

The silence was broken by a comm signal from the laptop on Akagi’s desk. “Director, something’s happening! The shadow has disappeared! The Dirac Sea is visible. Something… something’s moving inside there! You better come see this!”

The entire group, no matter the side they had just taken, ran over to the nearest edge of the roof, and pressed themselves against its railing. From here, they could see where the shadow ball had been. And indeed, now they instead saw the black morass on the ground which had already had half drowned some of the buildings of the central city.

And there, in the middle of it, the light of the setting sun was reflecting off something.

Small waves raced through the black shadow. And then something rose from the middle of it. Something big and purple and humanoid. EVA-01.

“REI!” Asuka shouted.

Besides her, Shinji was breathing heavily. She looked at him and saw a broad smile on his face. There were single tears running over his face. Next to him, Touji looked intensely at the scene. So did Misato and Akagi, with the latter muttering something Asuka couldn’t hear.

Asuka looked again how the Evangelion ascended out of the shadow. Head, upper body, legs… she realized how tired she was. It was time to go to bed, normally, and the day had been exhausting. Now that the adrenaline of the confrontation with Akagi was lessening, she could feel it. Relief turned into sheer tiredness. She just wanted to fall onto her futon and sleep. But not without seeing Rei safe first.

When EVA-01 was finally entirely on the surface again, the shadow moved away from it… and the Evangelion fell down. It just collapsed on the spot.

“We gotta help her!” Shinji exclaimed.

“Hey, is that one of ours?” Touji spoke up next to him.

He pointed into the air. A big, black helicopter was flying there. It seemed to chase the retreating shadow.
The helicopter was now flying directly over the angel’s body. Kaworu marveled at the spotless black that gave his brother the name he had among certain Lilim. *Leliel, what are you up to now?* Kaworu himself was standing in the helicopter’s open door, looking outside. His hair was ruffled by the moving rotors above him.

“It is time, Tabris,” Dr Heck said from behind him, speaking German. He had remained sitting on one of the passenger area’s benches.

*Tabris.* Kaworu preferred his other name more, but it didn’t matter. He was both, and more besides. He knew his nature and his destiny. Those people were trying to utilize and exploit both. Kaworu wasn’t yet sure if he would let them.

“How remarkable and convenient that my brother of the night would appear now, after the Nevada incident,” Kaworu remarked with a faint smile and looked back into the helicopter. “Did your vaunted scrolls tell you about that?”

“Everything has its time and its place,” Dr Heck remarked. He was looking down at a small computer on his lap, his long hair covering his face on all sides. “As do you, at the end.”

“Alpha and Omega,” Kaworu muttered.

“Exactly,” Dr Heck agreed. “But your time hasn’t come yet. You still have to earn your place among those Lilim. So, if you would, please do your job.”

“I am loath to do violence to my brother,” Kaworu admitted.

“Your brother and rival,” Heck reminded him. “How else do you want to fulfill your fate?”

*Do I?* But Kaworu turned around again and looked at the sea of black below him. He concentrated on it. Blackness, Sea of Dirac, Fruit of life, all at the same time – and also Adamite tissue. He could work with that. His brother would spill forth his secrets and his bounty, whether he wished to or not.

The Nevada incident… Kaworu concentrated on that. A whole base lost to the Sea of Dirac. But he had no interest in the entire base. He focused on what had been at the centre of the Sea washing over it. The cause of that storm. A marvel of the Fruit of Knowledge, and yet something the Lilim should consider an abomination – a golem wrought out of the flesh not only of their enemies, but of their very antithesis. They did this to survive, but Kaworu couldn’t understand this. *Valuing life that much?*

And finally, it appeared. A giant white head with a short snout. Then shoulder pylons – and unlike all other units, they were not orthogonal to the main body, but parallel. And then the entire rest of the white and chrome unit spilled forth: The Evangelion Unit 04.

“It is done,” Kaworu announced. He grinned. “I wonder what the Lilim are thinking now. I wonder if Dr Akagi can figure it out. Or Soryu, maybe. One day, the pilots deserve to know.”

“Survival is not their lot,” Dr Heck disagreed. He stood up from his seat and begun to speak irritatingly softly. “And no. You aren’t done yet.”
Kaworu looked at him with narrowed eyes. “EVA-04 is salvaged. Our job is done.”

“Leliel yet exists,” Dr Heck pointed out. Kaworu didn’t answer. He realized what the man was asking of him. He knew why he did so, and thus didn’t hold it against him, but… there weren’t many descendants of Adam around. For all they differed, he felt kinship with Leliel. Heck continued, “You know what your role will be here, Tabris. You cannot avoid harming those whom you deem your brothers.”

“They will attack,” Kaworu argued, “But look at him!” He gestured outside. “He is retreating.”

“That is so,” Dr Heck allowed, advancing towards him. “But as long as it exists, our Scenario can’t be advanced. And as long as our Scenario stagnates, you can’t unite with Adam. In that case, the crippling loneliness about which you have complained time and time again will never go away.”

Kaworu balled a hand into a fist. That was what SEELE had promised him from the very moment he had first awoken: Salvation from his eternal loneliness. There was a hole in his heart that could never be filled by normal ‘human’ contact. Every angel was one its own the equivalent of humanity, every one of them the only representative of their kind. Even the solidarity he felt with Leliel was superficial compared to that loneliness. There was only one thing which could end it: Union with the Mother.

“The one angel who doesn’t attack, and you want me to slay him,” Kaworu muttered.

“It is the only way for the Scenario to progress,” Dr Heck insisted, now standing behind him. “As long as angels are around, the Union will fail. You know that.”

“So we must kill each other,” Kaworu muttered. “Mother, why have you created us this way?”

“Neither of our existences are perfect,” Dr Heck answered. “Man is always lonely because our hearts are separated. Your kind is always lonely because you are incomplete. For us, only death can overcome this separation. For you, it has to be the death of all other offspring of Adam.”

“And is it right that we sacrifice others for our own happiness?” Kaworu asked quietly.

Heck laid a hand on his shoulder. “That is how Lilim and Adamim alike survive. If they can’t win happiness at all, how is that different from death? So the principle of life itself dictates that sometimes we have to sacrifice others.”

“But usually not unto their death,” Kaworu pointed out.

“No,” Heck admitted. “But usually, we aren’t confronted with the fate of all of Adamite and Lilithian life.”

This is indeed a pivotal moment, Kaworu realized. And not ‘only’ for Adamite and Lilithian life, but for him as well. To slay a brother, not in combat and defence, but in an assault on a peaceful retreat… But where would the Angel of the Night even go? As long as it was around on the Earth, Kaworu indeed wouldn’t be able to achieve union with Adam.

He closed his eyes and turned around. Opening his eyes again, he once more focused on the other angel. Leliel was such a delicate organism. His Fruit of Life, his entire body built around a fragile physical mechanism. His tissue would only need to be manipulated the tiniest bit…
Apparently Heck had similar thoughts. “It is a pity this won’t work on other angels. It would be good to have you here as an ultimate safeguard. But I suppose you’ll still be able to do enough.”

Kaworu breathed out and did it. Soon, the delicate processes inside Leliel were disturbed – stopped, bent out of place, crippled. The sea of blackness seemed to be boiling now. Where once there had been an almost perfectly two-dimensional area, now it seemed to dissolve. One could see hunks of black now, separated by red blood. The Lilim would probably call it LCL.

And finally, that was all that Leliel was: A dissolving mess of blood and lumps of darkness. The ground was filthy with both.

Kaworu lowered his head. *Forgive me, brother. Their scenario is not to be denied.*

“Very good,” Dr Heck lauded him. “Congratulations on your first angel kill… Fifth Child.”

Kaworu looked at him angrily, but didn’t say anything. He stepped aside… and an orange octagon materialized behind Heck. It pushed forwards.

*The lilim of SEELE wish for death. They call it their particular form of hope. So surely for them it doesn’t matter when it reaches them.*
Awakening

Sunshine fell into the sparsely decorated room through a large window front. Rei blinked. Was she back in reality, or was the angel showing her another scene? By now it was amply clear she had had contact with it. She realized that she was lying in a hospital bed and was looking up at a sterile ceiling.

*I'm in NERV's medical wing.*

Of course, she had been there so often that this could well be another vision derived from her memory.

*No. I simply accepted all my visions. This is…*

“She’s awake, Asuka!”

Rei instinctively smiled at the voice. *Ikari is here.* That made her glad. She turned her head to the voice. Even that much strained her. She watched Asuka’s head slowly rise from Shinji’s shoulder. That made her glad as well. Then Asuka saw Rei and lit up.

“Rei! Are you feeling alright?”

“Better now,” Rei said quietly.

“What happened?” Asuka inquired further.

Visions of three Reis, of Asuka and Ikari and the Commander and a strange voice in her ears – no, two strange voices – tumbled in Rei’s head. But she did not quite know how to put them into words. Just a few months ago, that would have meant saying nothing for her. It wasn’t mission relevant, and what would be the point in saying anything if you can’t actually explain the matter? However, she could not just remain silent to Asuka and Ikari. Besides, now she actually felt the urge to say something.

“There was… a contact,” she stated. “I think I was let go.”

Asuka looked at Ikari and then back. “Let go? You didn’t kill the angel?”

*Killed…? Rei closed her eyes. “What happened?”*

“Well,” Asuka tried to explain, “the angel spat you out again, and then started dying. They had sent an expert team over from Germany, and they managed to salvage EVA-04 from the corpse. The team head managed to stumble out of a flying helicopter and fall to his death, though.”

*EVA-04? Rei opened her eyes again, looking at the white ceiling and considered that. Yes, it had fallen into a Sea of Dirac, so that kind of made sense. But how…? And Rei was fairly sure she had not in fact killed the angel.*

There was no point in trying to understand it. Not now. She was just glad her… friends were there? No, not friends, not exactly. Rather, those whom she… loved. And looking at them now, that feeling gripped Rei with a surprising strength. She had felt warmth and comfort and closeness
towards the two before. Two points of light in an otherwise dull and hard life. But that feeling itself had been blunted. She had known she wanted to be cuddled up to both, but that had been more of an instinctive need. Now she looked at them and wanted to be held by both, in a fashion that made her heart thump and her stomach flutter.

It was a strange new feeling.

“Uh… you okay, Rei?” Asuka asked.

There was a tiny amount of heat Rei felt in her cheeks. That was new as well. “I was still thinking about what I experienced. Why are you two here?”

There was a small bit of red on Asuka’s cheeks, similar to the heat Rei was experiencing. Ikari took over explaining: “We came here first thing in the morning. We had to see if you were alright.”

Rei stretched her neck to look at the small bedside table beside her. According to the digital clock on it, it was 11:21. “How long have you been here?”

“Uh, they let us in shortly after eight,” Ikari reported. He looked at the clock himself now. “So… a bit more than three hours?”

Rei nodded. Three hours waiting, doing nothing, such things had been the norm for most of her life. Of course, she had done it for the sake of the Scenario. They had done it for the sake… of her. Everybody else had always made her wait…

“Thank you,” she finally said, softly.

“It’s no problem!” Asuka hastened to exclaim. “I mean, you saved the day again yesterday, didn’t you?”

“And… we were really worried,” Ikari continued. “We thought… we thought we had lost you yet again. We just had to come and make sure you’re okay.”

They value me… “Why?” Rei asked simply.

“ ‘Why?’” Asuka echoed. “Are you stupid? Of course we do! Because… well… because…”

Asuka’s speech got lost in stuttering.

“We… uh… we weren’t in a good spot when we thought you were dead, Ayanami,” Ikari explained quietly. “You are… uh, well…” He turned red. Not just the cheeks, either, and his voice grew small. “Importanttous.”

Oh. Rei remained quiet for a while. Then she spoke up, “Rei.”

“Huh?” Asuka and Ikari both voiced.

“You should call me Rei, Ikari,” Rei explained. “We kissed.”

Ikari’s mouth opened slowly as that memory apparently came over him again. Besides him, Asuka grinned at the sight. “Ah… ah… I suppose, you have a point… Rei,” Shinji stuttered. “P…Please call me Shinji then.”
Rei nodded again. “Did you like the kiss?”

That further reduced Shinji to an inarticulate mess. In the end he could only make vague grunting noises and nod furiously.

“Lucky boy,” Asuka muttered, still looking at him. It sounded amused, but it had a serious undertone that could not be mistaken.

“We should do that eventually as well, Asuka,” Rei commented.

The redhead’s eyes went wide. “Ah… sure… I suppose…”

With two stuttering messes next to her, caused by her, there was yet another new feeling inside Rei. She was… amused. That was it. She kind of liked that she could do this to the people she loved.

“How long will you stay?” Rei asked. A purely factual question, the sort she would always have asked.

“Well, they always give us the day off after an angel battle, of course,” Shinji answered. “So, uh… we haven’t anything to do all day long. I suppose we’d like to have lunch, eventually…”

“And sitting on those hard chairs is kinda uncomfortable,” Asuka muttered.

Shinji smirked over to her. “Right. ‘Sitting’. Not ‘catching up on sleep’.”

Asuka defiantly raised her head. “It was a long day yesterday. Really long. Whereas you sat the whole time here and stared at Rei, didn’t you?”

“Oh…” Shinji voiced. “…kinda?”

Asuka grinned, but Rei spoke up: “I really don’t mind Shinji looking at me. Or you, Asuka.” Unsurprisingly, that shut up both again. “Would you mind staying here for a while?”

“Of course not, Ay… Rei!” Shinji hastily exclaimed, and Asuka nodded vigorously.

Rei weakly patted the bed to the side of her – the side opposite of Asuka and Shinji. “You can sit here if your chair is too hard for you, Asuka.”

“Uh… sure,” Asuka said, stood up, went around the bed and sat down there.

A faint smile appeared on Rei’s lips. As if to compensate for being the one now most distant from the others, Shinji pushed his chair closer to the bed. And so now, Rei could lie here, surrounded on both sides by the two people she loved. By the two people she trusted and cherished, who still were the single points of light in her life. That way, she felt snug, secure and warm.

Right now, she had no concerns or sorrows, other than how to ensure this continue…

A well groomed, old man with grey hair walked the immense distance between the door of Commander Ikari’s office to his desk. He carried a stack of papers with him. His superior sat at his desk, his hands interlaced, his face half hidden behind them. Just as Ikari always did. At this point,
Fuyutsuki didn’t even bother being annoyed at Gendo’s mannerisms anymore. It was just as it was. In these last few months of the Earth, everything was predetermined, anyways.

Or nearly everything.

“It seems we arrived a day too late,” he commented as he laid the papers on the desk: Even more reports about what had happened.

Ikari grunted in response. “The Scrolls were vague on that threat.”

“Or incompletely translated,” Fuyutsuki pointed out. “Our dependence on them is dangerous.”

“The old men face the same problem,” Ikari pointed out.

Fuyutsuki furrowed his brows. To the Commander, everything was about the grand game between SEELE and him. After all, he had to subvert SEELE’s scenario to reach his grand aim… which came coincidentally close enough to Yui’s aim that Fuyutsuki supported him. Not that he had ever even so much as told him that Yui had an aim in all of this. But over all this, Ikari seemed to sometimes forget that there was in fact a real threat to humanity present.

Fuyutsuki didn’t point this out, though. It would have been pointless. Instead, he remarked, “We could have lost both Evangelion 01 and Rei.”

“They had the means at hand to salvage the unit. And as soon as we had our hands on the entry plug, we could have reshaped Rei again, if it had proven necessary.”

“Even so, they have outplayed us,” Fuyutsuki claimed. “We expected the SEELE boy, but not now. Using him to retrieve Evangelion 04... “

“They don’t know we know,” Ikari pointed out. “We have Agent Kaji to thank for that.”

“You know what I think about that,” Fuyutsuki answered. “His data has proven to be useful, but his price...”

“Kaji cares nothing for money or fame or authority,” Ikari answered. Now, finally, he ended his typical pose and looked at Fuyutsuki. “There is nothing else that can incentivize him but information.”

“Nearly nothing,” Fuyutsuki pointed out. “But I guess threatening Captain Katsuragi right now would be more than just counterproductive.”

It would also be distasteful. Highly distasteful. Fuyutsuki didn’t like the role he was sometimes playing. But then, he hadn’t liked his life for a decade already. Some more sour taste in his mouth would make no difference anymore. The first time he had set foot into the Geofront he had held so many ideals. Now, he merely tried to salvage what was still possible and was ready to sacrifice anyone and everything for it.

He only needed to close his eyes to see hair of blue and hair of red. I’ve sunk so low. Even at the very end I won’t find salvation. I can only make it happen for others. For those who have remained innocent.
Gendo grunted again. “It doesn’t matter. He still does not knows half as much as he thinks he knows. Let him have his scraps and morsels.”

“Very well,” Fuyutsuki conceded. “What do you intend to do about Rei?”

Ikari assumed his typical pose again. “There isn’t much we can do. If mental contamination has taken place, it will have affected the soul as well. A new clone hence wouldn’t help. All that remains for us to do is to watch her and wait.”

“We can’t entrust any of the other pilots with entering Terminal Dogma,” Fuyutsuki pointed out.

“Agreed,” Ikari answered. “For the moment being, the Spear can’t go to its proper place.”

“Pretty much the opposite of its ‘proper place’,” Fuyutsuki muttered.

“Much suffering would have been avoided if it were,” Ikari conceded. “But so would have human life.”

“The old men want her,” Fuyutsuki steered the topic back to Rei.

“The aftermath of the Apostate Incident has shocked them,” Ikari answered. “Now that Rei may have had contact with an angel, their interest only rises further. They dearly want to question her. They suspect what she is. If we allow it, they will find out, and we’ll lose her. We can’t allow them to get a hold on her.”

“We can’t afford open conflict with them,” Fuyutsuki argued. “Not yet.”

“But they’d lose out in a conflict as well,” Ikari replied. “I’m sure they’ll accept a compromise.”

“A compromise?” Fuyutsuki asked, more sharply than he had intended. *What else could SEELE accept?* He didn’t feel good about this at all.

Ikari didn’t explain. “In the meanwhile, we must strengthen our own position. Matsushiro needs to be functional again. There are too many eyes of the old men here.”

“That project will only help us so much,” Fuyutsuki cautioned. He had long since been used to Ikari changing topics at his whim.

“But we will pursue it,” Ikari declared. “Is she ready?”

Fuyutsuki sighed. “As ready as she’ll ever be. *I’m doing it again. Oh Yui, what heavy burden have you laid upon me?*”

“*What’s the matter, Rei?*”

The blue-haired girl had simply stopped walking. She, Asuka and Shinji were walking to school again.

“The smell,” Rei simply answered, in her normal monotonous voice.
Asuka sniffed. An aroma of coffee was in the air. “Well, yeah, that’s the nearby bakery!”

“Indeed,” Rei merely responded and continued walking.

There was a bit of silence between the three as Shinji and Asuka tried to process what just happened. There were many odd things about Rei, of course, but this had been a blatantly weird scene. Finally, Shinji spoke up carefully, “Uh… Rei… you never noticed the smell before? I mean… we walk past this bakery every day.”

“I noticed the smell,” Rei answered. “But I never noticed that smell.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Asuka asked.

“It is the same smell I have passed by all the other days,” Rei tried to explain. “That smell… registered with me. But only now do I notice it.”

Shinji was walking in the middle of the three. He and Asuka exchanged a look. Shinji was a bit concerned.

Something has happened to Rei. Something… while she was inside that angel? If so, that was worrying.

Still… Rei was behaving oddly, but apart from that she seemed to be her old self again. Already back at the hospital she had reported that she had no gaps in her memory anymore. Just as Akagi had promised, her amnesia had proven to be temporary. Though Shinji wondered if that really was all there was to it. Rei had sunk into the angel with those issues, and come out again without them…

Even so, he was glad things were back to normal. Or… back to better than normal. For years, “normal” had been a sort of grey, blurry loneliness. Nothing that had really hurt him, but also nothing that had really stood out. It still wasn’t quite “normal” for Shinji’s sensitivities to daily walk to school with two girls he, uh, at the very least liked, and who seemed to return that feeling. Girls he had in fact cuddled with. Girls he… loved. And he had to admit, the more often he did spend time in their company, the less unusual it became to him that this applied to both of them. And seeing how close the two girls were themselves, it didn’t seem like they minded.

Yeah, definitely better than normal. Shinji very much didn’t want to look that gift horse too deep in the mouth. With all this mutual attraction within the trio, maybe someone should do something about it. Maybe he should. But that would risk the whole setup, and he really didn’t want that. He was happy with the situation as it was.

Rei was stopping again, now looking up. They had reached that spot at the park where she had always waited for Shinji after school. A tree stood in that park, its branches extending over the pavement. Apparently, it was the new object of Rei’s curiosity.

An odd smirk appeared on Asuka’s face, as if she didn’t quite know how to deal with that, either. “The tree also only registered with you?”

Rei nodded without turning her gaze from it. Finally, she stopped looking, and without a further comment got going again. After a while, she commented. “It stands out in the city.”

“The city could really use a bit more green,” Shinji muttered.

“Pfah,” Asuka disagreed loudly. “We’re in civilization here, not the wilderness.”
“All the skyscrapers here...” Shinji mused. “Sometimes it feels like you can’t even see the sky.”

“They are human achievements!” Asuka insisted.

“The city... protects us from the sky,” Rei stated. Two heads turned towards her. **What does she mean with that?** “Humans have built the city around themselves, like a protective embrace. We don’t need to fear nature anymore. Everything here is under our control.”

_Huh._ “If that’s an embrace, it’s a smothering one,” Shinji argued.

“Those happen,” Rei agreed.

_and besides, there are the angel attacks... _Those were definitely not under human control, but Shinji didn’t want to bring up this dreadful subject now.

He and Asuka went on to debate the advantages and disadvantages of city life for a while, even as they reached the school. When the two entered the classroom, Asuka was loudly insisting that the countryside produces dullards. Shinji nodded towards the classmates already present, was about to contradict Asuka, but then noted that Rei was missing. He stopped and turned around.

Rei stood in front of the doorframe. Then she stepped over it, and greeted, “Good morning.” It was soft and so silent that it could have easily gone ignored. Instead, everyone in the classroom turned their heads towards her. And then the whispering started.

Touji always described the midday break as the best part of school. He was an idiot, of course, but Asuka had to admit he had a point there. The break was great, because it was Shinji lunchbox time. And even though she basically spent all her time in the company of Rei and Shinji anyway... living in her apartment with Rei, the way to and from school, the shared meals, NERV... sitting together with them still beat listening to these boring old teachers they had here by far. Their company was simply something she just could not get sick of.

Besides, who else would she spend time with? Hikari was okay, but apart from her and the pilots the class consisted of male meatheads and female gossiping hens. It was important to be socially respected by those people, but Asuka increasingly didn’t want to have anything to do with them.

However, as she stood up to walk over to Shinji’s desk, she did notice Hikari. Uncharacteristically for the class rep, she didn’t act serious or dignified, but ran right up to Touji’s desk. **What the hell now?**

Shinji had been watching the scene as well. As Rei and Asuka brought over their chairs to his desk, he commented, “Huh. Looks like Horaki was worried.”

“And the stooge?” Asuka sneered. **Herr im Himmel...**” The three watched as the class rep gave a lunch box to Touji. “She mentioned once how she’s the one who makes those boxes at home, but this is going a bit far.”

Shinji shrugged. “Well, he did come back from a fight. I guess it’s natural for others to be concerned then.”
“Yeah, the perfect opportunity for Hikari,” Asuka muttered. “She’s such a fool...”

Shinji furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

Asuka stared at him flatly. “You can’t be serious.” Then she laughed. “Only you would miss that.”

“Miss what?” Rei spoke up softly.

Asuka’s palm went to her face. It really did seem like she had a thing for cute puppies. Eventually, she rested her chin on her hand. “What else would you call ‘Hikari pursuing Touji’ but foolish?” She kinda enjoyed this advantage in knowledge.

“Pursu... oh,” Shinji answered. He bent his neck to look at the two. “But...”

“Exactly!” Asuka agreed. “They fit together as well as... as Fuyutsuki and competence. Or Misato and cleanliness.”

Shinji looked aghast at those comparisons. Even Rei stopped eating and looked at her. Then Shinji’s lips began to tremble slightly. “Only you, Asuka...” he muttered.

Asuka turned her head. “Or like Kaworu and ‘being alone’, it seems.”

That had been the second great surprise for the class this morning, after Rei’s greeting: A new, exotic student from abroad. The class’ female population, and maybe also a good part of its male population, had instantly started swooning about him. Kaworu had gotten a desk next to the windows, directly behind Rei’s, and now a great gaggle had formed around it. In fact, just about all female class members except Asuka, Rei and Hikari seemed to be there.

Well. At least Mana is leaving Shinji alone for now. Heh. I wonder if she’s just hot for pilots... The news about Kaworu’s status had, as usual, spread quickly.

Though now that she thought of it, that bothered Asuka. “Look how they fawn over the new pilot. Nevermind they’ve had three pilots here already.” Shinji looked like he was about to correct that statement, but then apparently thought better of it. “Idiots, all of them.”

“You’re still the best pilot,” Rei spoke up.

Asuka’s eyes widened slightly. Damn right she was, but Rei bringing that up... Rei trying to find the right words? She smirked. “Of course I am. It would just be nice if certain idiots here would recognize that.”

“I told you: I respect you.” A giggle.

Asuka’s head turned around. Mana was standing behind her. The EVA pilot growled. “Shouldn’t you be busy throwing yourself at the new pretty boy?”

Mana sighed and looked at Kaworu’s desk. “He seems busy enough already with the people around him.”

Asuka chuckled. “No luck there, is that it? So what makes you think you will have luck here?”

Shinji was visibly uncomfortable. “Uh... Asuka...”
The redhead furrowed her brows. This was probably just Shinji being Shinji, i.e. too nice for his own good and too conflict-avoidant. Probably. But there was a part of her that couldn’t be sure if it wasn’t about something else…

Mana got serious. “Ikari told you what… happened, didn’t he?”

Asuka was stunned for a moment by so much bluntness. Then she got angry. “Yes, he did. So you can see why you aren’t welcome here.”

“Well, I… it seems I should maybe apologize to you as well,” Mana answered.

“What?” Asuka exclaimed.

“Not to be impolite,” Mana explained awkwardly, “but there have been rumours. Ah… about you two.”

Rumours? Where would anyone have learned… One instinct of Asuka’s was to shout that it wasn’t like that. She was Asuka Langley-Soryu, and to admit that she had allowed a boy to become close to her was unacceptable. The other, equally strong instinct was to loudly confirm those rumours, to claim Shinji right here and now. Of course, the problem with the latter option was Rei. She wasn’t quite sure if she would settle for Shinji over Rei. But she was quite sure she didn’t want to see Shinji with Mana.

So, not wanting to commit to either choice, Asuka just growled.

Mana became yet a bit more awkward and hesitant. “Uh… whatever it may be… well… I am sorry, Soryu.” She bowed. Not too long, but it was a clear apology.

Asuka scoffed. “And you think that settles it?”

Mana tilted her head. “I’d like that. But that isn’t why I did it. I just wanted to apologize. I mean, after you saved the city yet again two days ago… we’re in your debt again. We didn’t get to see much of the fight… but you defeated that angel again, didn’t you? And I saw the videos about how it tried to drown half of the city. There are… rumours that it even sucked in one of your mechas! Is that true?”

“Rumours again, huh?” Asuka muttered.

Of course NERV would keep as many details as hush-hush as possible. And this suddenly irritated Asuka. Here was maybe the central reason she didn’t get as much attention and respect as she was owed. And besides, she had it to here with NERV’s ‘keeping face’ policy. And nobody had told her to keep information classified; as Misato had told her NERV would like the pilots to not spread information, but those things weren’t actually classified.

So Asuka made a decision and spoke up, “I have no idea why that wasn’t in the news. Yes, Evangelion 01 got sucked in. One of us had to spend fifteen hours cold and alone and fearing death because we once again had to save the city. And our chief scientist was ready to let her die if only the EVA could be salvaged!”

Let NERV lose face. They deserve it.
Mana’s eyes widened. “But that’s terrible!” Something was off about that. She didn’t sound all that shocked. There was something else to her facial expression… Mana looked over to Rei. “‘Her’? So it was you, Ayanami?” The blue-haired girl nodded. “But I thought Ikari was the pilot of that mecha, Evangelion 01.”

“We can both synch with it,” Rei stated monotonously.

Shinji looked down at his lunch box and smirked sadly. “I… kinda sat out that battle.”

Asuka’s hand darted forwards to touch his arm and smirked. “And if you hadn’t, it would have been you getting sucked into that shadow!”

Shinji muttered, “Maybe that would’ve been…”

“No!” Asuka insisted. “I… uh…” She wanted to tell him that she would not lose him. That she liked him too much for that. After all, with Rei the incident had ended well; who knew what would have happened if Shinji had piloted EVA-01? But then she realized where she was. And where she had put her hand. She awkwardly withdrew it and glanced over to Mana.

The girl looked… oddly serious, her brows furrowed. Then she softened her face. “You have fought your battles already, haven’t you, Ikari? Saving the city two times by yourself. What more can be asked of you?”

There was a certain logic to what Mana was saying. In a way, despite only being fourteen, Shinji was a kind of… injured veteran. Who had done his duty heroically and saved everyone, but had the mental wounds to show for it. That idea fit very well to Asuka’s notions of EVA pilots as an elite fighting troop. It wasn’t that Shinji was weak; rather it was time that others took over for him. And Asuka was definitely up to the task.

That was a nice way of looking at things. Though the thought was disrupted violently when Mana laid a hand on Shinji’s shoulder. “So don’t worry about such things, Ikari.”

Asuka tried to shoot lightning bolts with her eyes, but Shinji merely said, “Thank you, Kirishima.”

Mana withdrew her hand. “You can still call me Mana, you know?” She grinned broadly, as if oblivious to Asuka’s murder attempts by staring.

So was Shinji. *Of course!* He looked up at Mana. “But, uh… you called me Ikari. So, uh… just so that matters are fair, you should call me Shinji then.” He looked apologetically at Asuka.

Asuka growled again. This level of intimacy between the two was unacceptable, so… “This whole Japanese custom is weird anyway. We are to call each other by family names, but adults can call us by personal names. What nonsense! So why don’t we simply all call each other by personal name here!”

“Ah… if you wish so… Asuka,” Mana answered. She seemed surprised… in fact, more surprised than by the earlier revelations, which was a bit odd. She looked to Rei, who simply nodded. Asuka grinned. She had forced through her own naming customs and thus relativized the bond between Mana and Shinji.

With the conversation thus satisfactorily concluded, the trio could finish their meals in peace. The class’ attention remained on Kaworu for the rest of the day, much to the dismay of the teachers.
Asuka defiantly jerked her head sidewards at one point… and saw Hikari glancing over to Touji. She sighed. It was bad enough that idiot had been made part of the pilot corps. Now he would think he was something special, and that… just, no. He was not on the same level as Asuka. And now Hikari would only reinforce him in that misguided idea.

Eventually the daily slog ended. *What the hell did I get a college degree for if I’m here now…* She sighed. The remainder of the day would be okay. No synchtests, so she and Rei could hang out at Misato’s apartment together with Shinji. Maybe they should go to the city or something. Asuka laid a finger at her lips and thought about that. *Then again, if I take Hikari to the city and Shinji does… whatever… with the Laurel and Hardy duo, then maybe Hikari won’t run into her mistake…*

She shrugged and got going. Those considerations had time. Hikari was surely not the girl who would be quick to escalate a relationship. By chance, when she, joined by Shinji and Rei, walked into the corridor, she passed Touji, Hikari and Kensuke. The three stood in a corner, and Touji was talking loudly.

“I only barely escaped that shadow,” he retold the story of the fight. “I saw it coming to me. My EVA had its knife in its hand, but well, you can’t stab a shadow. So I knew I had to flee. I…”

Urrrgh. “And that’s all you did, bonehead! Flee!” Asuka intervened.

“And you did so much better, oh glorious team leader?” Touji snapped back. “If you hadn’t fired on that thing, none of that would’ve happened.”

“Misato authorized opening fire,” Asuka reminded him. Sure, she had pushed for that – but as Operations Director, Misato did bear the responsibility, as far as Asuka was concerned.

Touji shrugged. “Point remains. You’ve been trained for years, and couldn’t do jackshit. Me, I got in a very bleak situation due to your trigger-happy reflexes, but got out of with a pretty neat trick.” He crossed his arms and looked mightily smug.

Asuka suddenly felt ice cold. *Useless…* That just couldn’t stand. “All I heard,” she retorted, now suddenly speaking in a very low, hostile voice. “was you screaming on the comm channel the entire time.”

Touji began to look a bit nervous. “Yeah, well, it was an exhausting feat! Bet a girl like you wouldn’t have had the muscles for it.”

“Screaming in pain!” Asuka shouted now. “Like a little baby!”

Touji’s face froze Then he furrowed his brows. Then he looked… angry. He sneered. “You’re just like everyone else at NERV, ain’t you?”

That was the last straw. Asuka whirled around. “Have fun with that rotten-brained meat mountain, Hikari!” She stormed off. After a few steps, she shouted, “Schlappschwanz!” and began running.

*How dare he!* Touji was a goddamn rookie who hadn’t been any use in the two battles he had already been in. Hell, he hadn’t even been able to fire a single shot! Worse, his loss of control had caused the battle against that parasite angel. What standing did he have to accuse her, a proven veteran with a respectable battle record?
...of course, as such, she should have been better than him. But EVA-03 had made short work of her, and against the shadow angel she had been forced to flee as well. Against both angels she had been just as useless as Touji. Goddamnit…

She could just guess what would happen now. Of course Shinji and Rei would come after her. They already had done so before, after all, those silly, adorable, trustworthy idiots. But she had to be better than that for them. Not a pathetic shrieking fury running away from conflict. She couldn’t burden them with that. Hell, Rei had nearly died because of her inability, hadn’t she?

She had quite an advantage on them, though, and was sure she was fitter than both. She should be able to keep a distance. They’ll assume I’ll leave through the main entrance… So of course she began running towards a side entrance. That would hopefully shake them off.

Once outside, she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. Then she heard voices from around a corner. That is… what is Kaji doing here? As if things weren’t bad enough. Kaji would be a further complication. She still resented him for having chosen to stay with Misato after the Bardiel fight instead of looking after her; he had proven to be just one more person who had abandoned her in the end. But… she had looked up so much to him. Had had prospects on him. And that didn’t just go away. So having such a source of ambiguity nearby, right now, that was just very unlucky. She had to get away from here before Shinji and Rei would think to start looking here, but she couldn’t just pass by Kaji.

Carefully, she came closer to the corner. She recognized the other voice – the creepy new guy, Kaworu. She peeked around the corner.

“I am sorry to say so, but you could have done that in many easier ways, Inspector Kaji,” Kaworu said with a smile on his face.

Kaji stood opposite him, facing the wall. He was likewise smirking. “Well, I figured it would be convenient to catch you here. I have some questions for you.”

“Very well,” Kaworu answered. “Let’s see if I’ll answer them.”

Kaji’s grin broadened. “You’ve got the right attitude, kid. So, where are you from?”

“The past years, I was involved with NERV Germany,” Kaworu answered. “At their Hamburg branch.”

“Hamburg, eh?” Kaji muttered. “How convenient… Still, strange name for a German.”

“Just as strange as Asuka Soryu, I think,” Kaworu deflected the comment with a broad smile… and looked right where she was standing. Asuka froze for a moment in surprise, long enough for Kaji to see her.

“Asuka...” he said with some surprise himself. “What are you doing here?”

With defiantly raised head, Asuka walked around the corner. Meanwhile, Kaworu gave a sheet of notebook paper to Kaji. “If you have further questions, that’s where you’ll find me. A good day to you, Inspector.”

Kaji looked visibly uncomfortable letting him walk off, but he was more focused on Asuka now. “Are you eavesdropping on me now?”
“You are on the grounds of my school,” Asuka reminded him.

Kaji chuckled, his left hand reaching to the back of his head. “Oh, yeah, I suppose I am.”

Asuka worked her mouth. “So, gathering information, Inspector Kaji? There is something I have to tell you, anyway. A first hand after action report of the battle against the angel designated Bardiel. And let me tell you, NERV fucked up.”

“Language, Asuka,” Kaji muttered. He rubbed his chin. “Hm, sounds like a plan. When do...”

“Now,” Asuka interrupted him. “Get me to your car and drive away.”

“Very well,” Kaji conceded and led the way.

Behind him, Asuka grinned. It would be good to rant at NERV to someone with at least a measure of official power.

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Rei was worried. That… actually was something she had felt before. However, in her second body, she had never admitted that to herself. As far as she had been concerned back then, she was a tool, and tools didn’t feel worry. They did as they were told, without concern for themselves beyond their functionality. In truth, even back then she had been relieved when the second re-activation test of EVA-00 had worked without injuring her again; she had simply not admitted to herself that she had been concerned.

Now… On some level, she was still a tool. She had in fact been created by Gendo Ikari with a false soul and a fake body; it was just that this had created a real person, shaped by her connections to other people. But still, “Rei Ayanami” was defined as the Commander’s tool to bring about Third Impact. And maybe the Scenario was still necessary. However, now she would allow herself emotions.

It wasn’t that she was worried about Asuka’s physical security right now; the redhead probably simply was somewhere in the city and had turned off her phone. She had run away, after all. Rather, Rei was worried about Asuka’s emotional wellbeing. The German pilot had not left the scene in a good state of mind. Had for a moment not been this beacon fire in Rei’s life, inspiring and (quite literally) moving, but a raging blaze that had finally collapsed to ash. And Rei felt somewhat guilty for not having prevented that.

Shinji seemed… no, Rei knew he was feeling much the same. They were both in her apartment, waiting for Asuka to return. There would simply have been no point in searching the city, and additionally, that was what Section 2 was for. At first they had considered splitting up, Rei in her apartment and Shinji in Katsuragi’s, so that no matter where Asuka went one of them could greet her. But neither of them wanted to be alone right now. So now Shinji sat at Rei’s and Asuka’s kitchen table, usually used more for homework than eating, and… was moping. His head was buried between his arms on the table.

Rei knew Asuka and Shinji had gotten close. It was plain to see. They sometimes seemed to try to hide that from her, but she didn’t know why. The two looked great together. They made each other content. And Rei wanted to see them content. When Shinji smiled, it was a sign for Rei that everything was right in the world. When Asuka smiled, it was a sign that things were about to get
better. When both smiled, maybe around her, maybe close around her...

...that really was something Rei wanted. She had, back then, logically deduced what she was feeling for Shinji was romantic attachment; now she didn’t need to deduce anything anymore. Slowly, she reached out with her hand to Shinji’s head. Then she ruffled his hair.

Somewhat tiredly, he looked up to her. He looked curious. “Rei…?”

“Yes?” Rei answered.

Shinji just shook his head, as much as its position still half between his arms allowed for, and sighed. “This sucks, you know. I can… I can kinda understand them both.”

Rei pulled a chair very close to Shinji and sat down. He didn’t complain. His lips even curled up a bit. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Asuka and Touji,” Shinji explained. “Both of them. Piloting EVA… it’s important to Asuka. Very important. That we have a fourth pilote now, and that it’s Touji… and then he even brags about it… yeah, hearing that must have sucked for Asuka. But at the same time, Touji really doesn’t want to pilot, and yet he has to, so… he should get some bragging rights in return.” Rei didn’t know what to say to that, so merely nodded to indicate him to go on. “And then, of course Touji has to defend himself. And he couldn’t have known he was hitting Asuka’s most vulnerable side. But also… of course Asuka wouldn’t take that well. It’s… it’s… they both were in the right, but now they hate each other.”

Still not commenting, Rei simply laid a hand on his shoulder and rubbed it comfortingly. Shinji looked at her oddly, but then actually smiled. A fluttery feeling...

“It’s time for dinner soon,” Rei remarked.

Shinji nodded. “But we should stay here. Asuka will want to draw as little attention as possible, and you two don’t have keys for over there. She’ll come to here.” A sad smirk. “Trust me, I have experience with this.”

“So what should we do?” Rei asked.

Shinji sighed. “Nothing. If she wants, this all...”

“...never happened,” Rei finished the sentence. Shinji grinned. “I have experience with that as well.”

It was just then that the apartment door was opened. A moment later, Asuka walked into the kitchen, with a defiantly raised chin and a thin smile on her lips. Shinji and Rei, now fully focused again, looked at each other in surprise.

Then Shinji turned his face towards Asuka. “Ah… welcome home,… Asuka… I guess you had troubles with your phone?”

“Oh, that thing?” Asuka replied. “Yeah, I turned it off. It was annoying.”

“R… right,” Shinji answered. “Well, good thing that you came back just in time. I’ll soon start preparing dinner.”
Asuka looked at him with some amusement. “I’ve been at Kaji’s place. Didn’t look bad, but I think I prefer living here. I talked with him about, oh well, recent NERV screw-ups.”

“He is the right person for that,” Rei remarked.

“Right,” Asuka agreed. “Yeah, he is,” She breathed out heavily. “So, uh… dinnertime?”

Shinji nodded. “Dinnertime.” He and Rei stood up slowly. Meanwhile, Asuka was pacing back and forth for about a meter.

As soon as Rei and Shinji had even only made their first step after standing up, Asuka had already turned around to hasten to the apartment entrance. However, Shinji managed to grab her shoulder, which made her stop. He closed the distance between them and whispered quietly, “Welcome home, Asuka.”

Asuka breathed out again, but this time it sounded calmer. She remained standing on the spot, and just smiled faintly as Shinji hugged her. A moment later, Rei joined in.
Experiences

The entire conference room was dark. If there were chairs, tables, people here then they could not be seen. There was only one weak, red light cone shining from the ceiling at the front of the room. A woman was standing firmly at attention in the middle of that light, but it was too dim to show more than just her stature.

“Captain Katsuragi,” a deep and growling voice from the opposite end of the room sounded.
“Despite our earnest requests, we were denied any questioning of the pilot of EVA-01, the only person directly involved in the incident. Can you explain this?”

“Yes, sir,” Misato answered. “The pilot needs specialized treatment, which can only be guaranteed at NERV Headquarters. Furthermore, her emotional stability is of paramount concern for her ability to pilot the Evangelion in the first place. As the organization tasked with defending the world against the angels, NERV has therefore decided that subjecting the pilot to questioning would be an unacceptable risk to combat readiness.”

“Then you will stand as her proxy,” the voice declared.

Another voice, higher and slightly grating, spoke up. “In this incident, didn’t the angel attempt to communicate with a human being?”

“I find no indication of that in the pilot’s report,” Misato answered. “The visions described seem more likely to be a result of being completely isolated and probably having feared death for fourteen hours at this point, and seem to revolve entirely around the pilot itself. As a contact measure they would be highly ineffective.”

“If the report is correct,” a third voice spoke up. “It may not be complete. The pilot’s memory may have been tampered with.”

“There is no evidence for this suggestion,” Misato stated.

“There could not have been,” the same voice replied. “The EVA’s AC recorder was not functioning. We cannot exclude such tampering.”

A fourth voice spoke up. “That all the visions were about the pilot herself leaves another possibility: Was the angel interested in the human spirit? The human mind?”

“We do not have enough data to answer this question,” Misato explained. “We do not know whether the angels even have a concept of what a ‘mind’ is, whether they can understand human thoughts, or whether they would be interested in them.”

“Then let us talk about strategic factors, Captain,” the same voice continued. “The first six of the current wave of angels relied on pure strength. The last two angels operated more subtly. One infested an Evangelion, the other one tried to take an Evangelion into itself. Could it be that the angels are becoming more interested in their most direct enemy, the Evangelions? And could it be they are shifting their strategy?”

“Based on the previous attacks, there appears to be no systematic organization among the angels,” Misato answered. “Therefore, there can be no trends or patterns in their attacks.”
“Quite so!” the grating voice answered. “The angels always work alone. That is obvious.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Misato asked.

“You are not allowed to ask questions!” the first voice told her.

“Understood, sir,” Misato confirmed.

“Dismissed,” the voice ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Misato confirmed.

The light cone went dark. For a short while, nothing at all could be seen. Then 12 large objects appeared in a circle, all of them of them twice as large as a human being. The room must have been considerably larger than first assumed. They were illuminated, but didn’t seem to light anything else around them. Broad, black monoliths with the word “SEELE” written on each of them.

“Your friend’s dedication to protecting her pilot is commendable, don’t you think… Dr Akagi?”

In the middle of the circle, in front of the monolith labeled 01 a woman could now be seen in the faint light. Ritsuko Akagi was standing there, completely in the nude.

“She doesn’t know what is going on,” Ritsuko replied. “But her instincts have always been good. She has a tactical intuition.”

The voice was booming from Monolith 01 again. “Now, Dr Akagi, please understand we do not want to disgrace you. We’d like to carry this out calmly.”

“I feel no disgrace,” Ritsuko answered blankly.

She was not ready to reveal her true state of mind, her emotions to the metaphorical face of the enemy. SEELE. The Old Men. Gendo had spoken about them. His enemies. She would have to stay firm. By now, she had studied so much in Biology and Metaphysical Biology she could probably graduate in them. To a woman of science like her, a body, even a nude body, should just be a body. A thing that served a purpose. Nothing to be ashamed of.

“You’re a strong woman,” the grating voice congratulated her.

“It is clear why Ikari entrusts you with so much authority,” another, rather soothing voice spoke up. “You are responsible for the medical treatment of the pilot of EVA-01, the former pilot of EVA-00, is that correct?”

“The ‘First Child’ as we designate her at NERV,” Ritsuko confirmed.

“We spoke of the angel trying to contact a human mind, but that is not strictly speaking true, is it?” the voice asked. “Is the First Child human?”

Ritsuko remained stoically silent.

“Is she a projection of the Second Angel?” the booming voice now asked. “Did Gendo Ikari commit this blasphemy?”
Ritsuko managed to suppress a sneer. *Like you did with the First Angel?* Though she supposed there was a certain difference. Second Impact had been necessary, after all.

The soothing voice spoke again. “We understand the situation you’re in, Dr Akagi. We would have much rather interviewed the First Child herself as well. But Ikari did in fact withhold her from us.”

*He had to.* Rei was too important for all their plans. Ultimately, everything rested on control over her. She was a tool of utmost importance...

“So we came to an agreement,” the grating voice stated. “A compromise.”

“In order to not endanger the First Child, Ikari sent you,” the booming voice announced.

“You are here with his knowledge and cooperation.” The grating voice. “You are the First Child’s substitute.”

“So you see, unfortunately we have to interrogate you, not her.” The soothing voice.

From the start, Ritsuko had tried and managed to keep her face even. But as the truth slowly dawned on her, surrounded by droning voices, her view became simply blank. Unfocused.

...not her. Gendo has chosen her over me. He knew. He agreed with them. He sent me. I’m going through this because he prefers her to me.

...I’m just Rei’s substitute. Always have been.

The droning voices had come to a halt. Ritsuko hesitated. Then she spoke up.

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*Rei was back in the lava of Mt Asama. But there was no tension here. EVA-00 simply swam in the lava like in NERV’s swimming pool. Not piloted by her, but her as the EVA. Rei, as Rei, emerged from that pool to walk outside, and saw a black and white striped ball above her in the sky. Three of them. Dozens of them. The city around them stretched for miles and miles. Rei could now see it from a nearby cliff. The city below her was vaguely like Tokyo-3, but mostly just an unfocused blur of detail less buildings and streets. And it grew ever further in the plain around it. Like a flower field. Rei walked towards that flower field.*

*She could see two human shapes in the distance. She smiled, knowing who they were. It was an unfamiliar feeling on her face. She walked up straight to them, but the distance to them remained ever the same. She was wearing the dance training outfit now. The flowers around her were gradually turning to fires, but even amidst the two fires she could see the human shapes. She felt hot, very hot. There was something inside Rei that did not just want to reach those two shapes, be close to them, but also... more.*

*And the closer Rei now came, the larger the shapes grew, until Asuka and Shinji were towering above her. Rei was confused. She was with them now, but they were so far away. But... she was also the EVA. And suddenly she had the same height as them. They looked at her oddly, as if they didn’t understand. And then there was a roar in the distance, and an entire armada of Ramiels were approaching. One of them heated up. EVA-00 sprinted forwards and held up its suddenly appearing shield. The beam hit the shield, burned through, hit her...*
...and she was in a dark room.

She was in a dark room.

Her body lay motionlessly on her futon, but her heart was beating so loud as if it were a drum. Rei’s face was expressionless as she kept looking up to the ceiling. *This is reality again.* The images were more in focus, things made sense, and didn’t randomly shift around. *Is this what a dream is like?*

She simply kept lying there, eyes wide open, face rigid, and didn’t know what to do. Fear was spreading inside her. *Is this my mind? What is inside me?* That angels could induce visions was one thing. But this had come totally out of nowhere. And the images of that dream still reverberated inside her. The fire, Asuka’s and Shinji’s look, the Ramiels, the beam… it had all been so terrible. It was over now, in fact it had never really happened. *But then why won’t this fear go away?* Rei was terribly confused and frightened.

She needed… she needed… stability. Something to make the fear go away. A safe harbour from the storms inside her…

*Asuka.*

Her face lit up a small bit when she remembered her. Only just that Asuka was in the same apartment, that she could be there if things got bad, was an immense relief to Rei. She could know what to do. Would be stability, in any case. Safety. Comfort. Rei didn’t quite know what the redhead could do, what she expected from her, but she really had the urge to see her now.

In one determined movement, she got up, left her room and walked up to Asuka’s. Moonlight was falling into it as she opened the door. Asuka lay spread all over the futon, her long hair falling every which way from her head, almost creating a small blanket of its own. Even in sleep, Asuka looked vibrant. Rei remained standing at the door and looked at her. She was still shaken from her dream, but now didn’t know what to do.

“Asuka...” she whispered, too afraid to be louder. There was no reaction. And yet, Rei still craved her support. So she spoke up, “Asuka.”

Asuka’s body began moving on the futon. She rolled around, slowly rose her head and looked up sleepily. “Ah… Was… Rei?”

“It’s me,” Rei confirmed from the door.

Asuka sounded sleep-drunken and grumpy. “What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I had a dream,” Rei explained. “It was the first dream I ever had. I do not know what to do.”

Asuka supported her upper body on her right lower arm to look closer at her. The redhead’s view became more focused. “What do you mean? Your first dream?”

“I have never dreamed before,” Rei explained.

“...huh,” Asuka just replied. “You sure that angel hasn’t screwed with your head?” Rei didn’t reply. Couldn’t explain the entire situation now, in the middle of the night, standing in the door frame to
Asuka’s room. The angel was not the problem. What would happen now was. After a while, Asuka spoke up again, “So... what’s the problem?”

“I am... afraid,” Rei answered. She tried to articulate her response. It helped her to find the main problem. “The dream shocked me. If I return to sleep, this might repeat itself.”


“Asuka?” Rei prompted her.

“Remember the night before the Israfel fight?” Asuka asked flatly. “I had a nightmare. And then... I didn’t anymore. After I had stumbled onto your futon.” She became quiet again.

“I remember,” Rei told her.

Asuka chuckled softly. It sounded... unsteady. “Come here then. Who wouldn’t sleep peacefully safe in the arms of the great Asuka Langley-Soryu?” Rei hesitated, fearing she could misunderstand her. Asuka groaned. “Get into the damn futon, Rei. I’m tired.”

With small rapid steps Rei moved to the futon. She hesitated only a second; she had been there before after all and it had been nice. She hadn’t even finished laying down when Asuka’s arms came around her.

“Hmmm. Teddy bear,” Asuka commented. “Sleep now, Rei.”

And Asuka was right. Rei did feel safe now. Maybe dreams would claim her again, but she would always have Asuka here for her. And it just felt nice to be wrapped up in those arms, her arms. Rei had always felt adrift in the world of humans, had never felt connected to any of them. Only piloting Evangelion had let her felt associated with humans at all. Now, she was physically anchored at a safe harbour. Anchor...

Though, there also was something else she was feeling now. A certain kind of heat. She was suddenly very aware of the details of Asuka’s body behind hers. How it rubbed against hers when one of them moved. How soft it was. How certain parts pressed against her back. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it was new. And confusing. It was a sort of emotion that demanded to be acted upon, but Rei didn’t know how.

Asuka... and she thought of Shinji as well. Would she feel the same with him? She suddenly had the urge to know. The two... the two were always a pleasant thought, and now Asuka was right here, pressed up against Rei.

It took a surprisingly long time until Rei could sleep again. But then she had a very sound and calm sleep.

What would we do without Asuka?

Well, Shinji would probably just sit out the day at home. Which wasn’t the worst prospect in the world, especially if it was together with Rei. But it was better to have Asuka around, both in general and in particular because she actually initiated stuff. Like her suggestion now to go to the
city. She also had left little doubt why she had had that idea.

“Do try not to stop and stare open-mouthed at every mundane thing, though, Rei,” she had teased the blue-haired girl.

That proved to be easier said than done. Already on the way to the city there had been many things that raised Rei’s interest. The way the train there moved beneath her. The glass dome the central rail station used as roof. The loud song of the cicadas at a park the three were passing by.

“How long have you lived in Tokyo-3 already?” Asuka asked with considerable amusement.

“All my life,” Rei answered.

Shinji didn’t mind these episodes at all. Rei was adorable whenever yet another sudden interest caught her. Her wide-eyed looks, even while the rest of her face remained entirely calm, tilting her head, the sheer sense of wonder in it all. He liked seeing that on her. And the excitement was infectious. Just the fact that Rei, the quietest of the three, showed such an interest in things now… that excited Shinji as well.

He carefully blocked the question of how else he might excite Rei, even though it was burning in the back of his mind. Rei was not just adorable.

Asuka sighed as they walked on. “And to think that those bugs will go on with this all year round here. I guess I’ll miss winter this year, but hopefully not next year as well.”

Shinji furrowed his brows. “You want to go back to Germany?”

Asuka shrugged. “I got deployed here because of the angels, nothing more.”

“Oh,” Shinji voiced. That was blindingly obvious, even. Why had he never thought of that? So I will eventually lose her. But why then did she coax all those promises out of me about never leaving her? Not that they aren’t true, but it’s actually irrelevant… “Don’t you like it here?”

Asuka scoffed. “Japanese society, Japanese customs, Japanese school… Kanji, unlocked doors, paperboard walls… Japanese food, well, yours is quite good, but you know what I’d really want again? Some plain, normal bread. And not just this toast bread stuff, either. A real loaf of bread. I heard that is usually what German expats miss first. Seems like it’s true.”

Shinji’s mood darkened. He was speaking quietly now. “So… you’ll return to Germany...”

Asuka hesitated a moment before speaking up. And she sounded considerably less self-confident now than she usually was. “When I do… why don’t you two come along? I mean, by then I’ll surely have spent one or two years here. Seems fair to me if you then do the same in Germany.”

“To Germany?” Shinji echoed surprised. “But… I’ll still need to visit school!”

Though it was a tantalizing prospect, actually. Not so much going to Germany, but the thought of a future in general. Asuka seemed sure the angel war would eventually end and she could go home. A world without EVAs and angels… Shinji hadn’t thought of the future in a long time already. It had never mattered to him. Now he was wondering about that. A future… together with Asuka? Together with Rei? Maybe it was better after all not to think about that...
“You can do that in Germany as well,” Asuka argued. “No more of this stupid learning by rote! What do you say, Rei?”

Rei remained silent for a while before she answered. “We should focus on the present. That is where we are.”

Asuka stopped short. “Huh. Wouldn’t have expected that from you. But you’re right. Carpe diem!” She glanced sideways at Shinji and grinned.

He sighed and smiled tolerantly. “I indeed don’t know what that means.”

Asuka loudly and happily explained as they finally entered the shopping district. Here, Rei basically couldn’t even stop and pause staring. The lights, the facades, the shops… it seemed like everything was a whole new world for her. That was of some concern to Shinji; after all, it had come so suddenly. But seeing Rei like this… surely, this couldn’t be a bad thing?

She and Asuka surely were Shinji’s two favourite people in the world. The three spent so much time together, talked with each other, laughed with each other… trusted each other, had been together in one futon already… Sooner or later, something would have to give. They couldn’t stay in this weird state of a mutual, un-acted upon triangle attraction forever. But as soon as somebody were to move, that triangle would be destroyed.

And Shinji would, maybe, be all alone again.

“So, where do we go first?” Asuka asked in a booming voice.

Shinji smiled weakly. For now he still had their company. “Well, there is a music shop, right there, where I wanted to go.”

“Hrmpf, fine,” Asuka conceded. “But afterwards we’re going clothes shopping.”

Shinji shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Asuka did a double-take. “Wait, what? Aren’t you boys usually dead set against that?”

“That always seemed like a silly attitude to me, anyway,” Shinji mumbled. “It’s not like I’m unused to just waiting, you know.”

“I guess that’s true,” Asuka conceded slowly. Then she turned around. “What about you, Rei? Do you want to go to any particular place?” The blue-haired girl shook her head. “You don’t need to come along everywhere, you know.”

“It’s okay,” Rei answered softly. “I enjoy your company. And doing something.”

Asuka mumbled something while a faint smile appeared on Shinji’s face. Then the three got going to the music store. Shinji wanted to look for certain note sheets, and generally see what they had. With some luck even some old tapes, but then, his SDAT player was usually occupied by the same tape anyway.

The three entered the store… and Rei froze. This was more than just her ‘noticing’ something again. She actually had her mouth slightly open, and her body went rigid.
“Rei?” Shinji whispered softly.

“I’m hearing...” Rei said blankly.

_Hm? Oh! “The music?”_ Shinji asked.

Rei looked at him and then nodded. Shinji didn’t recognize the song that was being played. Some popsong in English, with a heavy reliance on electronic sounds and definitely not cheery-upbeat or sappy enough to be by some idol or boy band. It wasn’t bad – it wove a rich tapestry of sound – but it wasn’t anything _that_ special, either. Yet Rei just stood there and listened, apparently totally enchanted by the music.

Asuka gently touched her shoulder. “Rei?”

The bluehead just shrugged her off and continued to listen. She did so for the full remaining length of the song. Asuka and Shinji were too surprised by that, and also slightly worried about her, to move. Once the song ended, Rei relaxed. Without looking further in the store, the three just left.

“That… seems to have had a strong impact on you,” Asuka commented.

Rei nodded. Then she turned to Shinji. “Give me your SDAT player, please.”

“Uh...” Shinji voiced. He hardly used that thing in public anymore, but he still always had it with him. “Sure.”

Rei plugged in the earphones. Shinji showed her the controls. Then she skipped forwards. To a very specific song. Shinji smiled when he saw which one it was. As they walked on, Rei seemed to be in her very own world.

“Why do you even go to such stores?” Asuka asked. “I haven’t actually _bought_ any music since Misato showed me torrenting years ago.”

Shinji furrowed his brows. The idea bothered him somewhat. "But isn’t that wrong, to use someone else's work on the Internet without permission?" When Asuka just scoffed, he went on. “I mean, you also wouldn’t download a car.”

“What kinda argument is that, idiot?” Asuka complained. “You could also say you wouldn’t download a person and it would make as much sense.”

Besides her, Rei missed a step but caught herself again.

“So,” Asuka continued. “To the boutiques and clothing stores it is now.”

Shinji smirked. _Waiting time it is_. He didn’t think he needed any new clothes. And truth be told, he also kinda doubted Asuka _needed_ new clothes. That was not how it worked, after all.

Luckily for him, Asuka didn’t even try to get him interested in new clothes for himself. But she seemed very interested in Rei getting new stuff, commenting how this or that dress or pair of trousers or whatever would look on her. And she was usually right. Shinji had a sneaking suspicion Asuka only did that to see Rei in as many different clothing styles as possible, but he had no complaint about that at all. He had… similar interests.
And during all this, Rei never removed her earplugs. She went into changing rooms with earplugs, and came out to present the new clothing item with earplugs as well. Shinji doubted she had them out inside the cabin. She seemed very eager to listen to that music. That meant Shinji couldn’t do what he usually did while waiting, using his SDAT player, but that was quite alright. It looked very good on Rei. He liked how she enjoyed the music, how enchanted she was in her own, quiet way, the look of it on her. But then he supposed he would find almost anything look good on Rei.

Though she also looked very good with nothing on her... He was about to banish the thought, but then wondered if this changed Rei would react likewise. Which brought forth images of Asuka on Rei, and how Rei might have reacted and…

Shinji was very quiet as they walked to the next store.

Inside it, Asuka exclaimed, “You know what we need? Swimwear!”

Shinji just blinked at her. Rei reacted with some delay, still focusing on the music in her ears. “I already have…”

“Yes, yes, that boring white swimsuit,” Asuka interrupted her dismissively. “How about you try some bikinis? And I think I also should get some new ones.”

“But we’ve seen that we can’t even go to the beach somewhere!” Shinji protested. “And it’s not like you go to the pool all that often.”

Asuka waved her hand dismissively. “You’re missing the point.” She stopped short and looked at him more intensely. “Do you even have swim trunks?”

“Ah, sure,” Shinji replied.

Asuka scoffed. “Well, knowing you they will probably be as fashionable as Touji’s tracksuit. We should get you some new ones as well.”

Shinji’s exclamation of “But why?” wasn’t even heard anymore as Asuka already dragged Rei forwards. Shinji followed the two with some uncertainty. Asuka seemed to have planned something. That could be something good, or something to run away from. Sometimes both.

To be fair, at least she was very good at picking out stuff. What she chose all looked nice, all had reasonable prices, and she was very quick about it. Shinji was relieved by that.

Asuka looked at a bunch of bikinis in her hand and mused, “You know… if we’re buying them anyway, we might as well see what they’ll look like.”

The tone of her voice made Shinji wary. “What do you mean?”

She grinned, but it looked unsteady. “That we’ll try these things on, of course.”

“What?” Shinji exclaimed.

“Oh you heard me,” Asuka answered. “The changing rooms are in a secluded corner and there’s nearly nobody here. And as you say, it may be some time until we can actually use what we’re buying here.”
“But why then...” Shinji stammered.

“Don’t fret so much!” Asuka told him. “You’ll look good in those trunks. Are you coming Rei?”

The bluehaired girl nodded. Seeing that Shinji was still hesitating, Asuka took his hand and dragged him forwards. At that point, he just turned off his thoughts and followed.

“Very well then,” Asuka stated. Now she did sound a bit nervous. “Everyone pick a cabin.”

Fully undressing to change was something Shinji had to do every time he had to get into the plugsuit. Even so, it was a bit uncomfortable to do that in a clothing store, changing room or not. His head was slightly red when had finally put a pair of swim trunks on.

“Are you all ready?” Asuka asked from her room. “Then let’s come out.”

Three curtains rustled at the same time, and three teenagers in swimwear now stood face to face. Even now, Rei was still wearing the earplugs. Her bikini was blue, with purple whirling patterns on the sides and on… uh… Shinji looked away, fearing his view may have lingered a bit too much, to Asuka. Her bikini was multi-coloured, a red gradually turning into orange. It looked really nice. Its cut only just so stayed on this side of being decent, though. Shinji felt more warmth spreading on his face.

“Eyes up!” Asuka commanded him.

“You’re one to talk,” Shinji muttered in reply. Asuka’s eyes were definitely not resting on his face. He turned to look at Rei again… and was kinda shocked to see that she was openly looking him up and down, as if scanning his whole body. Or not just his – she was giving Asuka the same sort of looks.

“W-well, Rei,” Asuka addressed her, “What do you think? Does this all look good?” She threw her arms into the air and half-turned her waist to present her bikini. Or more properly, herself.

“We will buy this anyway,” Rei reminded.

Asuka groaned. “Yes, but still. Does it look good?”

“You look very good in this,” Rei told her. “And Shinji looks very good as well.”

“Ah… I also really like… your… uh...” Shinji stammered.

“You look great,” Asuka told her cheerfully. “Even if this idiot here can’t spit it out.”

“I, uh, also like your bikini,” Shinji managed to tell Asuka.

Asuka snorted amused. “Yes, I can tell by where you are looking.”

“Ah… s-sorry,” Shinji apologized, suddenly feeling very self-conscious and guilty.

“I don’t think Asuka minds you looking,” Rei observed. “I don’t.”

Shinji, with his head still hanging low, glanced up to Asuka. “...oh?”
Asuka raised her chin defiantly and looked sidewards. “Well, let’s just say I have come to terms with people always looking at me. After all, it isn’t like this isn’t warranted.”

Shinji smiled weakly. He still feared he might have offended her, still feared he might have acted improperly in general, but Asuka didn’t seem to mind at all. Rei was probably right. *Wait, does that mean…*

“Well then,” Asuka spoke up again. “Let’s also try the other stuff.”

*Oh gods…* But Shinji complied, of course. So he got to see a black bikini, a white bikini, a a purple bikini, a pink bikini. And the girls both looked *gorgeous* in them. Which was nice, but…

Asuka walked over to Rei, laid an arm around her shoulders and leaned against her. “What do you think, Shinji? If the day ever comes, are we ready to go to the beach?”

“Oh… yes?” Shinji answered. Then he quickly turned around and retreated into the changing room. Lest the girls take too close a look. He could hear Asuka suppress a giggle outside. *Oh GODS…*

“Well, I think that was it then,” she called from outside. “Get dressed again, we’ll go to the till.”

By the time Shinji had paid for his new trunks, his heart was more or less running normally again. It was almost a pity to see both Asuka and Rei in their normal clothes again, but also much more peaceful for his mind. He managed a weak smile. Actually, this hadn’t been so bad…

He had some swim trunks now he’d probably never use, but Asuka and Rei had looked really great in those bikinis. And everybody had looked at everyone. *Hmmm…* Slowly, he trotted behind Rei and Asuka as they all left the store.

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In theory, Misato could understand Kaji’s wish for protection from surveillance. He was probably a bit paranoid about this, but then he had always fancied himself some sort of secret agent. So Misato had agreed to meet at an outlying bar. But did it have to be such a hovel in order to be secure?

Located in a back-alley in the west of the city, near the condemned district in which Rei had used to live, it was a ridiculous construct of wood and corrugated iron leading to a dark and seedy interior. The dim light hardly could break through the smoky haze everywhere. The seating groups were separated by low wood walls and thin cloth sheets.

*He’s probably trying to show me how roguish and ‘dangerous’ he can be. Bah. Hasn’t changed at all…*

There he was now, sitting in front of her. Unkempt hair and stubble; cultivated uncultivatedness. It was a deliberate style with him, nearly an act. If he was always looking grungy and subdued, always the man who is smiling weakly and pretending to not really care what’s happening around him, then people would start underestimating him. But not Misato, that was for sure. On his request, she had come in private clothing, not uniform. Except for the service pistol she was carrying on a belt around her waist, beneath her shirt.

“I hope they at least don’t poison the drinks here,” Misato grumbled.
“Your highly trained liver should be able to handle it,” Kaji joked.

Misato gave him an angry stare. And then drank from a beer can in front of her. The bar didn’t even have style enough for cups. “So, why did drag me out here?”

“There are some things I thought you should know,” Kaji told her seriously, but then smirked again. “Just so you can see that I am being productive.”

Misato scoffed. “What is it?”

“Your organization hasn’t exactly covered itself in glory recently, has it?” Kaji began. “Our plans were brilliant, of course, against Ramiel and Israfel.” He smiled broadly but then got serious again. “But afterwards… the failure to cooperate with the conventional forces against Israfel, the frankly disastrous tactical handling of the Bardiel fight, the failure once again to cooperate with the JSSDF in the clean-up of the Matsushiro disaster…”

Misato sighed. “Asuka talked to you, didn’t she?” She took another swig.

Kaji shrugged. He made an exaggerated gesture out of it. “Let’s just say I have a first hand source for such information, as any good inspector should. And said source also told me something else. About Ritsuko’s planned actions against the latest angel. Seems she has become quite hard and cynical, don’t you think?” He took a minimal sip from his can. Mostly he had only ordered it for show and décor.

Misato’s face became hard. “She has. We have tried to rekindle our friendship now and then, but… here in Tokyo-3 she has always remained distant. I have no idea what has happened to her.”

“That’s one reason why I was against her joining us,” Kaji explained. “Another one is this: The Marduk Institute doesn’t exist.”

“What?” Misato hissed.

“Officially, the Institute consists of 108 companies, laboratories and offices around the world,” Kaji told her. “No way I could check them all by foot. But from NERV Headquarters I could check NERV’s contacts with them, make some inquiries in the countries where they’re supposed to be located. And every single one of them is an empty shell. None of them exist beyond their mailboxes.”

“But why?” Misato asked. “Why would NERV put on such a charade?”

“That’s a very good question,” Kaji agreed. “And only just recently the Institute sent the papers verifying Kaworu Nagisa as Fifth Child. To our dear friend Ritsuko.”

“You think she’s in on that?” Misato asked.

“She has to be,” Kaji claimed. “She oversees all the technical details of Project E. You couldn’t dupe her with some letters from nowhere. Also, the Marduk Institute’s so called report on Shinji only came after his first battle. How did Ritsuko know he would be able to synch with EVA-01?”

“Ritsuko as part of some grand conspiracy?” Misato asked. “Rits, what have you gotten yourself into?”
“But this may not be our most acute concern,” Kaji continued. “Ritsuko has worked at NERV for years without anything happening. But that new boy...”

“Kaworu Nagisa,” Misato spelled out the name.

“Yes,” Kaji replied. “There is a lot about him and the last battle angel that just doesn’t add up.”

“Like what?” Misato wanted to know.

“Dr Heck’s official cause of death is an accident,” Kaji explained. “Officially, it was him who managed to break the Dirac Sea which made up the angel, but in doing so he leaned too far out of his helicopter and fell to his death. But according to the first witness reports of the helicopter crew, he stumbled. They have changed their reports now, and Kaworu has always claimed Heck had leaned too far out of the helicopter.”

“Witness reports are notoriously unreliable,” Misato reminded him. “Though the official after action report is in fact weird. The timing at the end...”

“Yeah,” Kaji agreed. “Officially, Heck found a way to raise EVA-01 and EVA-04 from the Dirac Sea and in doing so destroyed the angel. But as everyone present could see, EVA-01 emerged several minutes before EVA-04 did. And the angel still appeared fine then. Only afterwards did it begin to break up. Now it could be we’re just too stupid to understand the physics behind it all, but I’d say this smells.”

“So, what about Kaworu?” Misato asked.

Kaji grimaced. “The boy is just... weird. Always this creepy smile on his face.” Misato had to smirk at that. You’re one to talk. “Seemed completely unperturbed that the man who was supposedly his mentor fell to his death right in front of him. And he has a tendency to warble philosophically, even at the most mundane questions. That’s just not how fourteen-year-olds talk. There is something not quite right with him. He’s so... detached. As if all this is just a big game to him or something. And he is like that all the time.”

Misato smirked again. “Seems like he has made quite an impression on you. I really can’t comment on this, I haven’t met him yet. He wasn’t yet officially part of NERV Japan at the battle, so I couldn’t debrief him, and Section 2 took over the questioning concerning Heck’s death. I suppose I’ll see what he’s like at his first synch-test.”

Kaji shrugged. “I could live with a weird boy. That isn’t really what’s worrying me.” He grinned. “Guess I just needed to rant. Anyway, I tried to find information about him in databases from NERV Germany. I left... certain backdoors there in my time. And doing it from Japan has some advantages; this is supposed to be the headquarters after all.”

“Let me guess: You found nothing?” Misato guessed.

Kaji shook his head. “They won’t be that stupid. But all the files I found were pretty... blank. Very sparse, always the same formulations... I’d say they’re all rather recent fakes. There don’t seem to be any genuine files on him in NERV Germany.”

“Hm,” Misato voiced. She sipped at her beer can as she tried to process this information. “What do you think this all means?”
“I have no idea,” Kaji admitted. “Certainly neither of us have ever met the boy at NERV Germany. He said he was at the Hamburg branch, so it could be... but that’s very convenient don’t you think?”

“And Hamburg never really did EVA development,” Misato added. “After all, only we had something to work with. EVA-02.”

“Exactly,” Kaji agreed. “But seeing that the Marduk Institute is a scam, that Kaworu now is a pilot and that he has apparently always been with NERV... it stands to reason he was always slated to become a pilot. But why keep this secret? From the rest of NERV Germany as well?”

“Beats me,” Misato muttered. Then she considered. “Ritsuko couldn’t have known what would happen. Otherwise she’d never have presented her insane plan. So, if Kaworu isn’t from her conspiracy...”

Kaji suddenly became very serious. A shadow fell on his face. “There is a far vaster conspiracy out there, Katsuragi. And that’s why we need to be careful. Kaworu may be their tool.”

“A far vaster conspiracy? What’s that supposed to mean?” Misato ask. Kaji just returned to smirking, which infuriated her. “And why are you telling me all this, anyway?”

“Standard procedure,” Kaji claimed. “If they get me, who would pass on all my investigation results to the U.N.? Agents and inspectors should always make sure someone else is kept abreast of their progress.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Misato grumbled. “Nobody will ‘get’ you. You’re being stupid.”

“... don’t be so certain, Katsuragi,” Kaji stated flatly. “That’s another reason. All this shady stuff is happening in NERV. Your organization. That puts you at risk for whatever may come.”

“You don’t trust NERV,” Misato stated.

“After all this? Not a bit,” Kaji confirmed. “So please, Katsuragi, watch your back.”

_He sounds so sincere._ Misato knew how rare this was for him. So she relented. “...okay. I will be careful. Even though I don’t even know about what.”

“Ritsuko,” Kaji suggested.

Misato remained silent for a while and then admitted, “There’s that. But I’d hate to lose our old friend for...”

Suddenly, the cloth curtain to her and Kaji’s seating group was violently torn open. A group of five men entered. All of them were burly. Their hair was either short cut, or as a pony-tail. Some wore sunshades, and Misato could see tattoos on two of them. Her danger instincts kicked into gear.

“Look what we have here,” one of the men bellowed. “I don’t think you two are from here.” Kaji wanted to stand up, but the man raised his hands. “Oh no, but that’s fine, just fine. We like to have guests around. But it’s a bit rude for guests not to announce themselves, don’t you think?”

Another man spoke up in a high-pitched voice. “Let’s sit down with our guests, shall we?”
The man who had spoken first had reached Kaji and put a heavy hand on his shoulder. Kaji reacted calmly, grabbing his beer can. Misato, however, jumped to her feet. “I don’t think so. I think we’ll just go.”

“Oh, but I insist you enjoy our hospitality,” the man near Kaji told her.

“You heard the man, Katsuragi,” Kaji said calmly. “We wouldn’t want to slight the honourable Mr Imamura, now would we?”

The man next to him grunted. “And who are you? I figured you for a NERV type, but...”

**Yes. What is he playing at?** Misato walked backwards to retreat into a corner.

“And how is Mr Marukawu?” Kaji continued. “I am looking forwards to another game of shogi with him.” Apparently feeling a bit unsure about him, the man next to him let go of his shoulder. “Now...”

“I am sorry to interrupt, and I apologize if we have targeted a man in good standing with us,” the man who was obviously a yakuza interrupted him. “But what about her? You called her Katsuragi. Misato Katsuragi, NERV Captain, isn’t it?”

Kaji sighed, stood up as well and took some steps backwards. “You are well-informed as well. So, what now?”

“We don’t like NERV people in our locales anymore,” the Yakuza answered. “So I’m afraid we’ll have to teach her a lesson.”

Kaji’s smirk became very lopsided. “I’m afraid that won’t be...”

“Oh shut up all of you,” Misato shouted. She had used the time everyone was focused on Kaji to draw her weapon. Adrenaline was rushing through her body, but her military training and experience was stronger. She had seen plenty of would-be tough bravados down in South America. She was entirely calm. “Now, back off, all of you. There are enough bullets in this thing to shoot you all twice over, and that’s exactly what will happen if you come too close.”

Someone in the mob scoffed. “Do you even know how to use that thing, babe...” He hadn’t even finished when a shot lodged itself right in his foot.

Misato grinned a predator grin. “Convinced of my marksmanship skills now?” Beside her Kaji whistled in appreciation. When the mob still didn’t move, Misato added. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to report failure to your oyabun. You can only decide if you want additional injuries, or worse.”

A lengthy stand-off ensued, but finally, the mob relented. They dragged their injured comrade outside and made way for Misato and Kaji. This was the tricky part now: Getting to the exit door, without a wall at their backs to cover them. She wished she had brought along a second pistol to give to Kaji. It figured that that idiot thought knowledge alone would be a sufficient defensive weapon.

She breathed in relief when both had in fact made it out the door. Then they ran.

When they reached Misato’s car, both were already somewhat breathless. She had parked the car a
good distance away from that rundown bar, both for its own security and because it was just too flashy; it could too easily be tracked back to her. It was parked in a well lit and secured parking lot. They should be safe here.

“What the hell...” Misato wondered breathlessly, supporting her body on the bonnet of the Renault Alpine.

Kaji, meanwhile, was too busy just panting. “I need to... cut back on those cigarettes,” he finally managed to say.

Misato snorted. “Thought some name drops would protect us, huh?”

“Hey, it nearly worked, didn’t it?” Kaji answered. The grin on his face died down. “But they knew you. Were looking for you.”

“Well, they didn’t get me,” Misato answered. “Also, since when do you play shogi?”

The grin reappeared, broader than before. “Who said I do? But I do know that Fumio Marukawu of the Inada-gumi is a very passionate shogi player.” He hesitated. “In fact, I do think he plays regularly with Vice Commander Fuyutsuki.”

“Well, some spy you are,” Misato said dismissively. “And yet you had to be bailed out.”

Kaji walked up to her. “And I can tell you, Katsuragi, there is nobody by whom I’d rather be bailed out.”

Adrenaline was still rushing through Misato’s bloodstream. And Kaji was coming closer. Sure, he maybe was no great fighter, but he did have this roguish charm that he cultivated so fastidiously.

She raised her chin. “And why would I want to do that again?”

Another step closer. A broader grin. “Because you’d miss out.”

Now Misato smirked back, leaning against the bonnet. “And I suppose you’ll show me now on what?”

“Yes,” Kaji simply answered. He leaned over her.

Then they kissed. Kissed as they hadn’t in a long time. Kissed with all the passion bottled up for several years.
Ritsuko sneered bitterly at her own thoughts, at her own situation. The incident had only been three days ago, she had come only the previous day, and here she was again already, working. Like a good little drone, just fulfilling her task. She hated this, hated Gendo, hated herself. But what else could she do? Confront Gendo? She could do that, but to what avail? If she just complained and whined, he probably wouldn’t even listen to her. Gendo respected strength and competence, and wouldn’t abide anything else. Attack him? He was too well protected for that, and besides, with that thing now attached to his hand…

There was nothing she really could do. And really, what else did she have left in life besides her work? For years now she had always put her work first, hoping, trusting that her support for Gendo would eventually pay off, that he could actually love her. What a fool I have been. Mother and daughter alike. She had to go to work, because she had nothing else. And even besides the manipulations of Gendo and SEELE, NERV had a purpose. If an angel reached Terminal Dogma, they would all die, schemers and innocents alike.

This is pathetic. Ritsuko resented herself for her weakness. For her self-pity. She was not some fragile flower that would now retreat into her apartment and just die. She would go on. Just… for what? What sense did this all still make? She was simply going through the motions at the moment.

Normally, she would have been very interested in some results of the ongoing synch-test. For the first time, there were five entry-plugs on the other side of the window. Five children, all trying to synch. And the test results from their newest pilot, Kaworu Nagisa, the Fifth Child, were interesting. He slightly beat out Rei, but couldn’t nearly come close to Shinji’s values. But the synch-rate he did achieve was impossibly stable. It didn’t swerve even the slightest bit up or down. Normally, changes in the sub-percent range happened constantly.

Interesting… but right now completely irrelevant to Ritsuko. She was pacing back and forth behind the computer terminals, barely paying attention to them. The techs in front of them sometimes gave her worried looks, most of all Maya, but this didn’t really register with her, either.

“How long are we supposed to sit in here?” came a voice through the comm channels. Touji Suzuhara, Fourth Child. His synch-rates had been the lowest so far, even lower than Rei’s – but then, Rei had made steady progress over the last months. Touji was still at the very beginning of that development. If he would ever develop at all.

“The test is schedules to last another half hour,” Maya told him. “Sorry.”

Touji groaned. “This is all nonsense. We’re doing this to raise our synch-rate, yeah?”

“Uh, yes…” Maya answered.

“But why?” Touji exclaimed. “It’s ridiculous, I tell you. We’re training to feel more pain in battle!”

“Will you shut up now?” Asuka hissed over the comm system. “Are you so goddamn afraid of pain?”
“I’m not afraid,” Touji defended himself, hurt pride in his voice. “I’ll take on whatever angel will come our way. But it still doesn’t make any sense at all.”

Ritsuko walked over to one of the terminals, forcefully thumped her hand on its upper edge and shouted into the comm system, “Quiet now, all of you! Touji, you agreed to pilot. This is part of it. Remember what we do in return!”

Everyone looked at her with shock. Maya was right next to her, and she felt her gaze. She ignored it. The young woman was idolizing her far too much, anyway. It wasn’t that Ritsuko didn’t like Maya. She did, and that was exactly the problem: Maya was young, fresh, innocent… naive. And if she were ever to follow in Ritsuko’s footsteps, she would lose that innocence. Even at her current level of involvement, she was beginning to sully herself, like with her involvement in the Dummy Plug development. Ritsuko had long since stopped caring about that stuff for herself, but there was no reason to drag Maya down with her.

Ritsuko’s face was stony as she stepped back from the terminal again. She couldn’t allow the pilots to get even more unruly. Asuka had demonstratively refused any communication with her at the briefing. Shinji had been less bold, but his resentful voice and furrowed brows had been a language of their own. Rei, of course, had simply been Rei, confirming orders in that monotonous voice and showing no emotions at all. And now Touji was complaining. After Asuka’s mutiny during the last fight, they all apparently were thinking they could do what they want. And sure enough they could – outside NERV.

It wasn’t just the pilots, though. Misato had been overly formal and very distant with her. It seemed none of them had forgiven her for prioritizing EVA-01 over Rei in her rescue plan – nevermind that the plan hadn’t come to be enacted. Nevermind that it was the only thing Ritsuko could have done. And nevermind that Rei was an expendable thing, a tool, and would in way or the other have survived anyway. With the plan she had designed, everything and everyone would in fact have been saved. The way things had gone down was better, but Ritsuko still felt a bit insulted about being given the cold shoulder for simply for doing her job.

In the end, she let Maya do the debriefing. She simply stood in a corner and watched. Maybe once everyone had cooled down again, then she would be able to do her job again. If by then she still wanted to.

Rei and Asuka were stable; compared to the last test their synch-rates had all slightly increased, but not by much. Meanwhile Shinji was slowly but surely catching up to Asuka. It looked like a head to head race would soon start. Then Maya turned towards the newer pilots. Touji was still oozing uneasiness in his plugsuit, whereas Kaworu was almost serene: Calm like Rei, but with an aura of confidence.

“Touji, I’m afraid your rate remained consistently low through-out the test,” Maya told him. It sounded almost apologetic. “I know you have your reservations about these tests, but… they really are part of the job. Synchronization is what allows you to move and control your unit.”

“Yeah, and feel it if it gets punched,” Touji retorted. “Look, I could move my EVA just fine in the battle, right? What do I need more synch for?”

“Reaction times, you idiot!” Asuka exploded at him before Maya could answer. “Dodging a shot, raising a shield, in combat a tenth of a second can mean life or death!”
Touji looked glum. “Well, then at least I won’t have to hear your bitching.”

“Please, Touji, Soryu...” Maya intervened. She sounded a bit overwhelmed. “Let’s all be calm, yes? Just do your duty, okay, Touji? Now, Kaworu. Your readings were, uh, interesting. But for a starter you have a rather high synch-rate! There wasn’t much improvement to it during the test, but I’m sure we can work on that.”

More like it stayed the exact same for an entire hour...

Kaworu smiled. “Your confidence is quite reassuring, Ms Ibuki. Thank you for that. Every living being should always strive to improve, isn’t that so?”

Everyone looked at the strange, grey-haired boy now. Even Rei seemed to take an interest. Maya hesitated for a moment, and her voice was rather awkward when she replied. “I, uh… suppose that is the case, yes. Ah, well, it’s a good attitude to have, in any case!” When nobody answered to that, she continued, “I think that will be all. I really wouldn’t want to keep you here any longer. Sorry we’re taking up so much of your time here, I hope you can enjoy the rest of your day!”

“What’s left of it,” Touji muttered. Ritsuko furrowed her brows. Spoiled brat.

Given those attitudes, it was of little surprise that Touji was leaving the room first, rushing towards the showers. Kaworu walked at a much more leisurely pace. And finally, Asuka, Shinji and Rei… they didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Shinji leaned over close to Rei to ask or tell her something, something which caused Asuka to laugh and lay her hands on the shoulders of the other pilots. Why didn’t we see this coming, how close they have become? It must have happened during Rei’s and Asuka’s synchronization training. Misato’s stupid idea...

Finally, they turned to go. In doing so, Asuka’s gaze fell on Ritsuko. She narrowed her eyes and shot a hostile glance at the scientist. Then she touched Rei’s back to nudge her and Shinji forwards again.

So, I get thrown to the wolves and my replacement is suddenly the popular star of the pilot corps. It isn’t enough that she has just Gendo’s heart. By all rights, there should be no reason for Rei to establish close contacts with others. The clone girl knew what would soon happen, and knew what role she would have to play in it. She hence had to know that she was just a tool and that her purpose was at hand. Hope. She has gotten hope. And that after she has taken away mine. Ritsuko decided to keep that situation under observation. If she can take away my hope, maybe I can take away hers...

“How the hell did you even get access to these areas?” Misato muttered. “That goes even beyond my security clearance.”

Kaji chuckled. “So, you shouldn’t even be here?”

Misato felt conflicted. No, she really shouldn’t be here. This wasn’t part of her job. But Kaji had made her suspicious of NERV… and the information she had gotten this morning had made her suspicious of Kaji. So she was here, nearly three kilometres beneath the surface of the Earth, in a part of the Geofront that looked like a network of bunker tubes. It was hot, the air was rancid, and the light was dim – when the illumination worked at all. Many lamps were flickering.
She growled. “Just go ahead with whatever it is you’re doing.”

“That’s the plan,” Kaji told her with a smirk. “Don’t be so stiff-necked. Above, everyone is busy with the synch-test. It’s the perfect time to sneak down here. And after Thursday…”

“Thursday was a mistake,” Misato said curtly. Inside, her heart thumped. This was turning out just like in college. Kaji was still like… like… Besides, she couldn’t be sure if he was trustworthy.

That wiped away that smirk. “I see.”

The two walked on through the lonely tubes with their barren walls and a general atmosphere of being caged. Neither of them spoke. Misato’s hand touched her pocket. Everything was still in place. She would be able to go ahead with her plan.

After a few minutes, that silence became unbearable for her.

“There have been further attacks, you know?” she finally spoke up. “We weren’t the first NERV personnel to be attacked by Yakuza.”

“I heard,” Kaji answered. “Though probably from other sources than you.”

“I talked to Major Matsuno of Section 2,” Misato reported. “Yakuza thugs have been roughing up NERV personnel all over town. Or the bad parts of it, anyway. Nothing bad, just some bruises and black eyes. But it seems they’re picking a fight with us.”

“I suppose there will soon be a security advisory for NERV personnel not to visit pachinko parlors and those kinds of bars anymore?” Kaji guessed.

Misato made an agreeing sound. “And not brothels, either, for that matter. Hm. The Yakuza are clearly not trying to sabotage us or even really only harm us. This seems more like sending a message.”

“It is,” Kaji confirmed. “NERV is now plagued by its own arrogance.”

“What do you mean by that?” Misato asked. “Argh. I hate it when you play your ‘I know something you don’t’ game.”

“You don’t know in fact,” Kaji stated authoritatively. “Because NERV didn’t inform you. I assume you have read the dossiers on all your pilots?”

“Of course!” Misato answered.

“Yeah, well, nearly none of them are entirely correct,” Kaji told her. “In Shinji’s case it’s just a detail, like the death of his mother, but with Rei and Kaworu I bet the whole thing is just made up. The only dossier that seems genuine is Asuka’s.”

“And what does that have to do with the Yakuza?” Misato demanded to know.

Kaji just smirked. Misato groaned.

The corridors the now passed were much more elegant and sleek. The walls were panelled here, with orange lamp stripes on them. Obviously, this section was in more frequent use. Finally they
arrived at a very large, very well secured door at the end of one of the tubes. Kaji came to a halt and looked at with appreciation.

“And you can get us inside here?” Misato asked. Kaji smirked, drew an electronic card out of his shirt pocket… and then his face froze as he watched Misato draw her pistol and aim it at him. “It seems your friends at the Ministry of the Interior have done good work.”

“...oops,” Kaji merely said.

“You underestimated us,” Misato told him. “You underestimated me. Did you really think a bit of kissing would keep me from doing my job? You seemed entirely too well informed at our little meeting. So yesterday, I made some inquiries of my own. Mentioned some of the stuff you said in a phone call with the Ministry. I got a call back today, and it mentioned you by name.”

“Clever,” Kaji granted. “I suppose it’s no secret for NERV that the Department has tried to gain access for some time. I… wanted to keep you out of this, Katsuragi. But I really felt I had to warn you. Maybe that was a mistake.”

“So, whom do you really work for?” Misato asked. “The Department? The U.N.? The Committee? Commander Ikari?” Kaji once again just smirked at that. That unnerved Misato. “Kaji, if you don’t concentrate on just one job, you’ll die.”

“As long as Commander Ikari finds me useful, that won’t happen,” Kaji stated with certainty.

“The Department of the Interior isn’t above cutting off loose ends, either,” Misato cautioned him.

“I merely use their resources,” Kaji defended himself. “NERV is hiding something from the world. I need to see it uncovered. I need to, do you understand? And the Commander and Ritsuko, they are hiding this from you.”

“What do you mean?” Misato asked. “What is this about needing to know?”

“You know what topic drives me,” Kaji told her bitterly. “And here is an answer to it… if you let me show it to you.”

Misato hesitated for a moment, though she couldn’t say why. This was what she had come for, after all. Maybe I’m still too much the good, little NERV soldier, even now. NERV had given her a new purpose in life, a position of authority, respect. And a chance to atone for past sins. But if the secret Kaji had mentioned really had to do with Second Impact… She nodded, but kept her pistol at the ready.

Kaji swept the card through a reading machine. The door opened slowly, its heavy steel making its way upwards and downwards. There was a sort of orange glow coming from whatever was behind it. Then the door was fully opened. Misato froze.

A vision of a white giant of light passed before her inner eye.

“That is… That’s impossible!” she whispered. “Not here!”

There was a small heightened path that led from the door, surrounded by an orange liquid. At the far side of the room a huge red cross had been erected in that liquid, as large as an EVA. And on it, nailed to it by its hands, was a giant white creature, with a purple metal mask covering its face.
“Here.” Kaji confirmed. “This is the source of everything since Second Impact. The cause of Second Impact. Adam.”


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“Can you believe that?” Asuka hissed.

She and three other pilots had just left the Geofront by foot, to go to a nearby train station. The eternal summer sun was shining down harshly on all of them, its hue already shifted to the orange of late afternoon. Asuka was glad to be finally free of that underground dungeon and to feel the fresh air. Wide jeans and a rather loose shirt made sure that she could enjoy it… and Shinji’s gazes, which were not at all as discreet as he probably thought they were. Watching that was kinda fun.

Shinji followed Asuka’s gaze. “Uh, believe what?”

“That’s Touji there, isn’t it?” Asuka told him. “And look who he has been waiting for.”

Shinji strained his eyes. “Is that… the class rep?”

Asuka scoffed. “Such a reasonable girl, but such bad taste.”

“I don’t understand,” an unnervingly calm voice spoke up. Asuka rolled her eyes. She had tried to get Shinji and Rei away fast enough not to be stuck with the creep, but they had dawdled. Worse yet, they didn’t even seem to have a problem being stuck with Kaworu. “Why do you disapprove?”

“Because Hikari is far too good a girl for the meathead,” Asuka told him.

“She has a different opinion,” Kaworu answered. “Her s- …personality is quite different from yours. Even so, shouldn’t you be happy that she is pursuing some happiness for herself?”

“Oh, um Himmels Willen… does that guy even have the theoretical ability to speak normally? “That is exactly my concern,” Asuka shot back. “Her happiness. Do you really think some idiot like him could take care of that?”

Kaworu shrugged, a flowing, elegant gesture on him. “I think it is very much possible. Human contact can only ever distract from the loneliness inside everyone’s heart anyway. And I think those two can manage that.”

Asuka groaned loudly at that pseudo-mystical bullshit. “You don’t even know the two one bit! So stop this nonsense!”

Kaworu paused for a moment. “I am sorry if I have caused offence. You seem… agitated.”

“Agitated?” Asuka echoed angrily. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Uh, well...” Shinji spoke up hesitantly. “Ever since we’ve left the Geofront you seem kinda… uh...”
“Your head is red,” Rei simply observed.

Asuka jerked her head sidewards, to look away from these people. There was a good reason for that, and Rei should know it best. To be precise, Asuka was flustered, and that for a good reason. Ever since she had come to Tokyo-3 she had shared the showers with Rei, of course. But today the blue-haired girl had openly looked up and down her body with an admiring gaze. She hadn’t even tried to hide it. And given that, how could Asuka not have looked back just a bit? Rei had even commented that it was a pity the showers were gender-segregated… and while Asuka had protested that surely she wouldn’t want to be ogled by the creep or the stooge, how could she not have begun imagining what it would have been like to have Shinji in the shower?

And while Rei appeared entirely calm, Asuka just kept thinking about that episode. She tried to distract herself with other stuff, but… phew. It wasn’t quite correct to say she felt uncomfortable. Rather… well, flustered.

Asuka was uncharacteristically quiet as she and the others boarded the train.

Kaworu entered right after her. He had halted for a moment to look down… at the train’s wheels? It seemed he was odd like this sometimes, staring at mundane things. A bit like Rei in her current state, actually, but of course not a tenth as adorable. That behaviour didn’t go unnoticed by Shinji, either.

“Uh, Nagisa, what were you looking at there?” Shinji asked.

Kaworu smiled at him. “You can call me Kaworu, Ikari. You all can. We’re all part of the chosen.”

That seemed to catch Shinji by surprise. He didn’t seem averse to it at all, though. “Ah, then you really should call me Shinji.”

Asuka snorted. At least Kaworu was reasonable on this point. Wait. Isn’t he supposed to be from Germany? Shouldn’t calling other teenagers by first name be standard for him? Maybe that was in fact why he made this offer, and he was just needlessly polite, in contrast to her. In any case, it was a good suggestion. It just grated her how enthusiastic Shinji was about it.

“Very well,” she said, “let’s all drop this addressing by family name nonsense here, shall we?”

Rei nodded, and Kaworu answered, “Fine by me. To answer your question, Shinji, I was looking at the train’s mechanisms, as much as was visible. Humans don’t change themselves. They’re in fact quite bad at coping with any change afflicting them. They go to great lengths to change their environment instead.”


“Exactly,” Kaworu agreed. “But fire is easy to make. A single person can do it. The engine of a train must be made out of several parts, which must be produced by tools that themselves need to be constructed, the production powered by a plant and energy grid that also needs to be there… every such product is an achievement of human culture as a whole.”

Asuka scoffed. “Which means if we lose any of those parts, everything will just break down.”
“Everything beautiful is fragile,” Kaworu opined. “But I think you give your culture too little credit. It can be quite robust. Has not life gone on here despite all the angel attacks? And has not civilization come back from the brink of collapse in a mere fifteen years?”

“Only if you just look at Japan and Germany,” Asuka argued. She didn’t even know herself why she was taking this position. Hadn’t she recently said much the same thing about cities as Kaworu was saying now? Maybe she just wanted to oppose him. Or maybe she was just in the mood for a destructive opinion. “And Tokyo-3 could never go on if there weren’t a whole outside world unaffected by the attacks.”

“I suppose those are points to consider,” Kaworu conceded. He looked genuinely thoughtful about that.

Asuka’s dislike for him grew. It wasn’t just the nonsense he spewed. It was also how Shinji seemed to hang onto his every word. *Come on, idiot! You should be more intelligent than to fall for that nonsense!* Rei as well seemed to be interested in Kaworu. The way she looked oddly at him, with a quiet curiosity that seemed to be aimed at himself rather than his words… That left a very bad feeling in Asuka. After all, she was very aware that Rei could *appreciate* both boys and girls. Which led to another terrible thought: As she should really know best, she shouldn’t make any default assumptions about Shinji. What if the same was also true of him?

Asuka felt a tight grip around her heart. Those two wouldn’t abandon her as everyone else had, right? She should know better than that, and they were better than that. Right? But she couldn’t suppress a certain anxiety. She had pretty much aligned her whole life in Japan with those two. Without them, she’d have… well, her status as EVA pilot. But it would still be a lonely, frustrating stay here.

It briefly occurred to her how ridiculous this was. She was jealous… regarding two people at once? So, what did she want regarding those people in the end, anyway? *To not have them leave… neither of them.* Which was the reason her relationship, such as it was, with Shinji had gone cold. She didn’t want to exclude Rei. *But what’s the alternative?*

She was still caught in those dark thoughts when the train stopped at the next station. She barely noticed it. She did however notice when a bright voice chimed, “Oh, hello there!”

Asuka looked up… and saw a cheery face framed by coppery hair directly in front of her. *When it rains, it pours.*

“Where are you all coming from?” Mana asked. She was standing in front of the bench where all four of them were sitting, holding a hand grip and bending slightly forwards.


“Deep down the earth?” Mana asked in a cliché ‘curious cute schoolgirl’ voice. *Urgh.* “What have you been doing there?”

“Synch-tests,” Rei answered blankly.

“Synch-tests?” Mana echoed.

“You know… how we connect to our Evangelions,” Shinji explained. “That’s something that needs to be trained.”
“Oh,” Mana voiced. “So it seems piloting is not only dangerous, but also a lot of work.”

“You could say so,” Asuka said coldly. “Why are you so nosy about all of this, anyway?”

“Ah… that wasn’t my intent, honestly!” Mana apologized. “I’m sorry if it came across as such. I was just… curious. Being a pilot… it must be so different.”

Shinji just snorted at that. Asuka furrowed her brows at him. As annoying as Mana was, she was right about that much. Being pilots made them special.

“There is honour in being one of the chosen ones,” Kaworu answered. “The tests are part of that. But they are considerably less grandiose.”

“One hour of lying in a test plug, doing absolutely nothing,” Shinji muttered.

“Part of the job!” Asuka scoffed.

“Today was odd,” Rei spoke up softly. Since this happened so rarely, she got everyone’s attention, which finally prompted her to go on, “I usually find the tests relaxing. Today was not. I had the urge to do something, but couldn’t. Yet I didn’t even know what I wanted to do.”

Asuka laughed. “Boredom! You were bored. Another first for you?” Rei seemed to consider that, then nodded shortly. Mana seemed to want to comment on it. Shit, shouldn’t have talked so much. So Asuka cut her off, “What about you, Mana? Where are you coming from?”

“As home,” Mana answered. “I wanted to go to the city before it gets dark. See some shops.”

“Bit late for that, isn’t it?” Asuka commented.

“I had lots of homework to catch up on!” Mana defended herself. “And now I want to see the city. I’m sure I haven’t explored everything yet.”

Idea! “So the city is still new territory for you to explore?” Asuka asked, now surprisingly conciliatory.

Mana giggled. “I suppose you could say so. And I’d hate to get used to it too quickly. I like being able to explore stuff.”

“Well, you’re new here as well, aren’t you, Kaworu?” Asuka asked her fellow pilot.

“Quite a bit newer than Kirishima, I think,” Kaworu commented.

“Why don’t you show him the city a bit, Mana?” Asuka suggested. “You want to explore it anyway. And you know first hand what newcomers need to know here.”

Mana stopped short for a moment, then her face lit up. “Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea, Asuka! But why just us two? I’m sure you all had a long day, but there are spots in the city where we could relax together.”

“Well...” Shinji began.
No, Shinji! “I think we can do that better at home,” Asuka cut in.

Mana couldn’t hide a disappointed face. Disappointed and… flinching? Just a bit.

Kaworu smiled directly at her. “If that is what you want, I would be happy to accompany you.”

Mana smiled again. That was fast… “Great! I’m glad I won’t be alone.” She giggled.

And Asuka grinned. Two more stations, and she would be rid of both the creep and the walking cliché. And she would have… well, she would have Rei and Shinji all for herself.

The door to the bedroom opened. Misato groaned and drew the blanket over her head. It was Sunday, and way too early to wake up now.

“Let me sleep, Shinji, will you?”

“Shinji will. I, on the other hand…”

Beneath her blanket, Misato groaned again, now loudly and dramatically. Memories were returning to her. She had been shaken after seeing Adam again… again after fifteen years. And even while she had continued her work in her office in the Geofront, a room that looked barely better than her apartment before Shinji had moved in, she hadn’t been able to shake off the thought that the First Angel, the being which had devastated the world and taken her father from her, was right now right beneath her feet.

So she had gladly accepted Kaji’s offer to go out for some drinks after work. She had needed the distraction, and this time they had gone to a far more high class bar. And then, as the phrase went, one thing had led to another. Now Misato was here, fully unclothed in Kaji’s futon. Fuck. She still distrusted Kaji, but at the same time… she hardly trusted anyone more. One couldn’t rely on his good intentions, but Misato could rely on him understanding and accepting her. Even when they maybe were working against each other. That was why she had latched on to his offer.

And that was why, back then, she had fled. This intimacy had become frightening.

“You, on the other hand, have no tact,” Misato accused Kaji, still from beneath the blanket. “Let a woman sleep, will you?”

“Come on, don’t sleep in too long or you’ll have trouble getting up tomorrow,” Kaji argued. “I know you have an early shift tomorrow.”

“Of course you’d know,” Misato muttered. Her head peeked out from under the blanket. “Let me get dressed, will you?”

Kaji grinned. He was already dressed. “Now why would I want to do that?” He picked something up off the ground. Misato pushed back more of the blanket to see what it was… her clothes. Then he left the room.

“Hey!” Misato complained. She jumped up from the futon. “Give that back, Kaji!”

She had little choice but to chase Kaji without her clothes. The chase ended in the kitchen. It took
some time until Misato was clothed again and the two could sit down for breakfast. They had had better things to do before.

But this didn’t leave endorphines in Misato’s body as could be expected. Rather, she was subdued now. This had been fun. And it had been with Kaji. In fact, it had been rather like back in college. When…

She didn’t quite know what had come over her, but it was something that had to be said. “Kaji…”

The man looked up from his coffee mug. “Hm?”

“It’s just… I’m sorry that I broke up with you, back in college,” Misato told him.

“As I remember, you weren’t in college much longer afterwards,” Kaji answered. Taking it lightly, as so often. But it was true; shortly afterwards Misato had signed up with the JSSDF. Running away… “What brought this on?”

“What do you think?” Misato whispered. “Being here with you again… it made me realize… You were so much like my father, Kaji.” She looked at him, but his face was now set in stone. “When I realized that I wanted a man like my father, I was scared. I was so afraid. Being with you… being a woman… everything scared me. I hated my father, but fell in love with someone just like him. So I ran. I ran to the JSSDF. I ran to South America to fight there. I once again broke everything off and ran to NERV. I swore vengeance upon the angels, but that was just running away from my feelings, burying them…” She breathed out heavily.

After a while, Kaji answered calmly. “And you still blame yourself for what you did back in college?”

“It was cowardly,” Misato declared. Suddenly this sullen mood had come over her, that pent-up guilt released by the close contact with Kaji. She now couldn’t not talk about this.

Kaji shook his head. “It was your decision, Katsuragi. There is nothing to be sorry about.”

Misato scoffed. “That wasn’t a decision! I was just trying to escape from reality. From the reality called Father…” She noticed how her vision got blurry. “I’m just a coward. Even… even Shinji is staying now, knowing why it’s necessary. And me… me, I’ve always run.”

“That’s enough,” Kaji declared harshly.

“I have no right to tell him anything, and yet here I am… just a child myself,” Misato chastised herself. Tears were now flowing down her face.

“Katsuragi!” Kaji almost shouted now. Misato looked up, silently, without understanding. “You told Shinji he can go any time, didn’t you? That it is his choice. That he could stay with you, even if he doesn’t pilot. Didn’t you?” Misato just nodded. “It is his choice. Nobody can blame him for how he chooses, or it wouldn’t actually be his choice. And back then, it was your choice. Nobody can blame you for how you have chosen, otherwise it wouldn’t actually have been your choice. And I’m not about to impose choices on you!”

“Okay, so I chose,” Misato conceded, angry at herself, “but it was a pathetic choice. A choice born out of fear. I am pathetic!”
“Stop it!” Kaji demanded.

“Why do you even care?” Misato almost shrieked.

“Because… because I won’t let a good person be slandered,” Kaji answered with determination. “A resourceful, clever, fun, interesting person. A person I happen to care about. I won’t allow her to be slandered. Not even by herself.”

“But...” Misato began to protest.

“You blame yourself from running away? Running away from me?” Kaji asked in a hard voice. He stood up and walked around the table, up to her chair. Then his trademark grin appeared on his face. “Well, seems to me you have stopped running. And that’s what counts.” He bent over to kiss her. She didn’t resist.

Was that it? Had she already stopped running? Was it that easy? Misato doubted it, but right now she didn’t want to look at it too closely. In the past two days she had conspired with Kaji, slept with him, threatened him with a gun, gone out with him. This rather seemed like turning the run into a complex dance. Could she really trust Kaji, just like that? Could she trust herself?

But she didn’t break off the kiss.

It was Kaji who ended it. “Convinced yet that you have stopped running?”

Misato remained silent for a while, with Kaji standing at her side. “I’m not sure that makes it better,” she finally whispered.

“What do you mean?” Kaji asked.

“I run to get away from troubles… and if I stand, I only create more trouble,” Misato explained. “I came here with you to… we both knew what would happen. Nevermind that Shinji is at home, that I left him behind there.”

“He can take care of himself,” Kaji told her. “Doesn’t he cook most of the time, anyway?”

Misato shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. I should look after him. It’s bad enough that I go here to… to… but that’s my business. I shouldn’t let Shinji walk down a similar path. Or Asuka, or Rei.”

Now Kaji seemed to understand. He laughed softly. “You think Shinji will sneak over to the girls? Come on, Katsuragi, he’s much too straight-laced for that.”

“He already has, once,” Misato told him. As she was calming down from her crying attack, it was good to talk about something else. Anything else. “They all ended up sleeping in the same futon.”

That took Kaji aback. Despite her situation, Misato had to chuckle, even though it still sounded somewhat sad. She hadn’t seen Kaji surprised in years. The guy always seemed to be prepared for everything.

His face relaxed into a typical, broad smirk again. “So, whom do you think he’ll pick?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Misato mused. She breathed out, shedding some more of
the turmoil that had built up inside her. “After Sandalphon… I think Shinji might have collapsed if he hadn’t had Rei as support. And she had never opened up to anyone this much before. As for Asuka and Shinji, well, you’ve seen it. And both were devastated when they thought Rei was dead. In fact, I also think Asuka… appreciates Rei.”

Kaji almost jumped back. “Asuka? The Asuka we both had as ward? Are you sure about that?”

Now Misato truly had to laugh. “Is that so shocking to you, Kaji?”

“I just…” Kaji rubbed the back of his head. “I wouldn’t have thought that. I mean, Asuka was never exactly the most proper of girls, but…”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Misato asked with a certain annoyance in her voice.

Kaji shrugged. “Well, I suppose it isn’t my business anymore. So… what’s going on with the three then?”

“To be honest, I don’t think even they know,” Misato told him. “But still, that means the fallout if something goes wrong while I’m away, because I needed to get laid,” she sounded cynical, “will be twice as grave.”

Kaji chuckled. “What are you afraid of? That he might dishonour the girls? I seriously doubt Asuka would see it that way.” Misato just remained silent at that. Kaji was probably right, but that didn’t make it a good thing. Sometimes Misato thought she just couldn’t connect to Asuka. It was all good and well to tease her about relationships, but the prospect of her actually entering and enjoying one… Some part of Misato did think in old-fashioned terms of innocence and purity. That part she had always rebelled against. Kaji continued, “Besides, as I’ve said, you’re giving Shinji too little credit. Or too much, as the case may be. He would never go on such… adventures while you forbid it.”

“And yet, maybe he’d deserve them,” Misato whispered.

“So would Asuka,” Kaji reminded her. When there was no answer, he sighed. “Well, there’s still business I need to take care of. Even on a Sunday morning… not that it isn’t really morning anymore. You can stay here, if you want. But I really need to go.”

“Now?” That seemed cold to Misato.

He grinned at her. “Duty calls.”

Ritsuko was alone in a dimly lit room. The only source of light came from an object that nearly fully encircled her: A giant tank of LCL. Inside, there were dozens of bodies, all looking like Rei. All of them were Rei, after a fashion. Dozens of mindless objects giggling and looking at her. Showing autonomous reactions, but not actually possessing a soul. Instruments of Ritsuko’s work, nothing more.

Ritsuko hated them.

Or maybe not them, but Rei. Yes, it was unfair. Yes, it was not Rei’s fault for how obsessed Gendo was with her. But Rei should never have been more than a tool – a thing. A thing Ritsuko had
worked on the past ten years. And now even that thing beat her for Gendo’s affections. Worse yet, she had been forced to go through… what had happened, in order to save that thing. Wouldn’t it make sense then for Rei to feel the pain she had felt? Rei wasn’t guilty, no, Ritsuko realized that. But it should have been her going through that all.

Ritsuko breathed out.

She could destroy the clones, of course. There would be a certain poetic justice in that. She would be killing Rei several dozens of times over, and she would be sabotaging one of Gendo’s most important tools. There would be no dummy plug without the clones, no soul transfers, possibly no endgame. It was tempting. That way, she could hit both of them, and it would be such an easy thing for her to do. But that was just the issue: It would be too easy.

If she destroyed all the dummy plugs now, then this would mean the end for Rei. Without spare parts, without reference points for Ritsuko’s medical checks, Rei would literally fall apart. And that wasn’t what Ritsuko wanted. She didn’t care if the tool were rendered inoperative. What she wanted was for Rei to go through the same pain as herself, an equivalent amount of pain, because it should have been Rei in the first place.

And if that meant Ritsuko had to bide her time and wait for her chance, then so be it.

With that decision made, Ritsuko left the dummy plug room. It was just one of many creepy places here, in the lowest bowels of the Geofront, below even Terminal Dogma. The chaotic place for NERV’s dirty secrets and its old trash of over a decade. A junk room of enigmas and atrocities. Or in other words, one of Ritsuko’s regular places of work.

She moved through its corridors, thinking ahead what else she had to do today. The worst part of it would surely be the planned medical check up of Rei. That… would hurt. But Ritsuko was a professional, she could do it. She was mentally going through the list of tests to apply when she noticed movement in front of her. And that was something that absolutely shouldn’t happen in this part of the Geofront.

She sped up her steps, looking left and right for the source. She turned her eyes left again… and found a person trying to stand as far in a corner as possible. A person she knew.

She stopped. “Kaji, what are you doing here?”

Ryoji Kaji walked out of the shadow. “Fancy seeing you here, Rits.”

Ritsuko scoffed. “This area is strictly off limits to just about everyone. You have no business here!”

“And neither do you,” Kaji replied. “If I’m not mistaken, your official schedule doesn’t actually take you here. And your use of the elevator surely was registered. So people may wonder what you have been doing here.”

Ritsuko raised an eyebrow. “Seriously, that’s it? You’re slipping, Kaji.” She actually was a bit amused. In a way, that was like their old games… just with significantly higher stakes now. “I’m the head of Section 3, Science, at NERV HQ. At any time, I could cite a dozen reasons for me to come down here.”

Kaji tilted his head to signal a concession. “Granted, you could convince the Commander and the
Vice Commander that way. But what if I tell Katsuragi that you have been sneaking around here? What you may be doing down here?”

“Misato?” Ritsuko reacted with some shock. “Keep her out of this!” Ritsuko knew she probably had lost Misato for good, but there was this last shimmer of hope for things to get better again between them that she didn’t want to lose as well.

“That was my plan,” Kaji told her. “So I’ll make you a deal: I won’t tell Katsuragi anything. You won’t tell Ikari or Fuyutsuki anything. Deal?”

Ritsuko looked straight at him and remained silent to think. She should report his presence here. Kaji was dabbling in dangerous matters. But then again, there was no way this could remain going well for long. If that idiot wanted to get himself killed… then Ritsuko would actually be sad. She would mourn him. But he just seemed to be a lost cause. There was no stopping him, anyway, so why should she get involved?

“Deal,” she answered.
“Rei!”

Asuka jumped up from her desk and ran towards the classroom door. Her favourite blue-haired girl had just appeared there. Then she stopped, suddenly becoming aware how many pairs of eyes were resting on her. She stopped at the door, cleared her throat, and asked in a level voice, “Are you alright?”

“I’m exhausted,” Rei answered bluntly and monotonously. “Dr Akagi’s medical tests were longer and more intensive than anticipated. I spent the night in the Geofront.”

Asuka furrowed her brows. And why would you even still trust that bitch with your health? The last two times Rei had returned from Akagi she had been a living zombie, and Akagi’s plan during the Leliel fight had made it amply clear the doctor cared little for Rei’s well-being. And now again Rei had spent most of Sunday and half of Monday morning in the Geofront. What’s up with that? All those medical check-ups, and they all take that long...

Rei entered the classroom. “Good morning,” she greeted the class in a voice so quiet that it was more of a formality… but even so it was something she had never done before the Leliel fight. Then she turned her head towards Asuka again. “I’m glad to see you and Shinji again.”

Asuka allowed herself a smile at that, if one faint enough that only Rei could see it. It was good that their little trio was back together. Shinji had already been all mopey walking to school, and also on Sunday… but then, he had good reason to. Today was a special day for him. He could really use whatever comfort and distraction Rei’s presence could provide him.

The boy had slowly followed Asuka and now spoke up from behind her, “Come, there’s still time to eat, Rei.”

“You still made a lunch box for me?” Rei asked. It was just the faintest hint of emotion, but she sounded surprised.

“If I hadn’t and you still had appeared, I would have felt bad,” Shinji explained.

Just like him… But these days, Asuka found that endearing, rather than weak.

“I had not expected that,” Rei simply stated, and then walked rather quickly over to Shinji’s desk. He and Asuka grinned at each other and then followed her.

Shinji got the lunchbox out of his schoolbag and let Rei have his seat. Her movements were still somewhat mechanical, but her eyes were fixated on the box, and she opened it surprisingly quickly. And while she wasn’t one for gorging herself, her mouth never remained empty for long.

Shinji looked at her with some satisfaction, obviously proud of his work. And it was good to see him take pride in something. Asuka grabbed a chair and sat herself down at Shinji’s desk as well. Her eyes wandered over the class.

She laughed. “I wonder how long that will last.”

Advancement
“What do you mean?” Shinji asked.

Asuka nodded towards a corner of the room. Touji, Hikari and Kensuke were all sitting there, eating together. “I’m just wondering how long it will take for our Toy Soldier to be a fifth wheel.”


And whom will we exclude then? That question made Asuka feel uncomfortable and she looked down at the desk. Me, maybe? Though truth be told she would also feel bad to have Shinji excluded, or Rei.

“Ah, I see you could still make it to school, Rei,” a voice approaching the desk spoke up. “I’m glad about that. I was already worried about what might have happened to you.”

Asuka sighed exasperatedly, turned around and looked up to Kaworu’s face. He was smiling broadly. It was a genuinely warm smile, but Asuka still didn’t like how it was focused on Rei. And she definitely didn’t like the look of quiet curiosity and interest Rei returned. Not that it stopped the blue-haired girl from eating; she continued to pick from her lunch box while looking directly at Kaworu.

Finally, she found enough time between bites to reply, “I underwent a medical check-up.”

Kaworu nodded. “I know what that’s like. We have similarities, you and I.”

That made Rei stop short. She even stopped eating for a moment. “I see,” she finally stated and resumed.

Kaworu smiled at her again and then turned to Shinji. “I heard something interesting about you, Shinji. You seem to appreciate music, and that style they call ‘classical music’ in particular.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Shinji confirmed. He seemed a bit self-conscious about that fact.

“Mana told me,” Kaworu stated and then waved the girl over.

Oh, um Himmels Willen…

With small, rapid steps Mana came over. She looked very cautious in doing so. And of course she giggled when she arrived. “Oh, that’s true. Shinji told me he likes Bach.”

“Ah,” Kaworu voiced as if that provided a great insight. “So you value skill, Shinji?”

“Well… that’s kinda the point, isn’t it?” Shinji asked. “People are appreciated because they’re good at something.”

Kaworu furrowed his brows. “There are many reasons to appreciate people.” For some reason that made Mana… smirk. Such a non-cutesy facial expression looked odd on her. “If you just look at skill and achievement, you aren’t interacting with them, only their work. It’s like shying away from people, and only dealing with them indirectly.”

“Uh… but… we are talking about people’s works,” Shinji argued. Despite his initial hesitation, he sounded surprisingly insistent now. “About what Bach and the others composed. Their lasting
“But doesn’t that make music a bit too sterile?” Kaworu argued. “Music is people trying to circumvent the barriers of their heart by using a powerful non-verbal medium. People can never fully relate to one another; there is only so much one can say. But they can try to pour their essence into sound and poetry. It’s still a doomed endeavour, but a grand one.”

“Sounds like angry metal and punk would be just the right sort of music for you then,” Asuka commented dismissively.

“Perhaps,” Kaworu allowed. “I’m sure many of those songs display genuine emotion. But I myself like classical music as well. However, Bach seems a bit sterile, and Mozart too artificial. Myself, I prefer Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann or Wagner.”


Kaworu shrugged. “Whatever his attitudes were, if factually correct or not, what matters is if they were genuine.”

You can’t be serious! Asuka was aghast at such a stance. “Some attitudes should just be shut up!”

Kaworu seemed to accept that opinion without any rancor and instead turned to Shinji. “What do you think about that?”

“Ah well… I’ve never listened to Wagner…” Shinji stammered. “But… isn’t that how people go through life? Hiding their bad sides, only showing their good ones… That seems natural to me.”

“Hm, but is it good?” Kaworu asked. “In everyday life, people hide their true selves. But music should allow them to at least pierce a hole in the barrier of their heart.”

“People are alone,” Rei spoke up in almost a whisper. “That means they need comfort, not the truth.”

Now everyone was looking at her. It was rare enough that Rei spoke up in the first place, but now she sounded… well, she sounded a lot like Kaworu, actually. It was a side Asuka hadn’t really seen in her before.

Kaworu smiled faintly. It looked almost sad. “Of course you would stress hope.”

Nobody really knew how to react to that. Kaworu and Rei seemed to be having a conversation of their own, one nobody else understood. So a deafening silence ensued.

Finally, Shinji broke it. “Well… ah… most of the composers you’ve mentioned came later than what people consider classical music, didn’t they, Kaworu? I’m afraid I don’t know much about them.”

“We could listen to them together,” Kaworu suggested. “I’m sure Mana would like that as well.”

Grr… what is Paleface McGreyhair aiming at now? Asuka didn’t like this one bit. Had Kaworu become Mana’s agent now? Shinji, however, just nodded. “One of these days. But… not today.” Suddenly he became silent and glum. Asuka looked at him in sympathy. Yeah… not today.
“I see,” Kaworu simply stated. “I’ll ask again another day then.” Shinji nodded again, entirely silently this time.

After some hesitation, he and Mana walked away again. To Asuka’s surprise, they walked over to Hikari’s desk. Kensuke got up and tagged along with them. *Huh. Well, he was probably looking for an excuse to leave the two alone…*

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*Three years. It’s been three years.*

It had been so easy to just ignore this day coming up. With angel attack after angel attack, with everything that had happened to Rei, with just being around Rei and Asuka all the time… the truth was, Shinji hadn’t *wanted* to remember this day coming up. But this had become completely untenable over the weekend. He had already been a nervous wreck the day before, on Sunday, and to make matters worse both he and Asuka had been worried about Rei.

And now, he was here, at that gigantic graveyard spanning the hills near Tokyo-3. Thousands or ten thousands of graves from Second Impact and its aftermath.

The last time he had been here, the last time he had seen his father before coming to Tokyo-3, had been three years ago. He had run away back then and not returned since then. But now that he was living in Tokyo-3, he had no excuse for not coming, to not visit his mother’s grave on her day of death.

He didn’t want to run away again. But maybe he was just running away from the shame he would have felt if he hadn’t come. Maybe he was just more afraid of that than coming here, instead of coming here of his own will.

Yui Ikari’s tombstone was polished so well one could see reflections in it. Shinji was squatting in front of it, having laid down a bouquet of flowers there, and he could see the the legs of another person reflected on the tombstone. A person standing behind him, the person who made his being here so terrifying: His father.

“She isn’t even here, is she?” Shinji muttered.

His father remained silent. *How can I even visit Mother’s grave together with him, now that I remember how she died?* His father had never mentioned a single word of that to him.

“She…” Something made Shinji hesitate. He doubted it would get him anything to tell his father that he knew how his mother had died. And he was afraid… afraid of confronting his father. It was easier to remain quiet.

“This grave is just a decoration,” Gendo finally confirmed. “There is no corpse.”

Shinji stood up, but didn’t turn around to face his father. “You never told me how she died.”

“It wasn’t necessary for you to know,” Gendo answered. “Death comes in many forms. What is important is what we remember… and what we don’t.”

*Not necessary for me to know?* His father had him pilot the very machine in which his mother had died, and that was not important to know? Shinji tightened his hands into fists. *And it’s easy for*
“I never got that choice,” he muttered sullenly. “I can’t even remember her face.”

“People survive by forgetting,” Gendo stated. “There are only some things a person should never forget. Yui showed me them. This place confirms what she taught me.”

“You threw away all pictures of her, didn’t you?” Shinji accused him sadly.

“I keep everything in my heart,” Gendo answered. “That is enough.”

Now Shinji turned around. He wanted to look up at his father’s face, but he didn’t manage to. He turned his head away sideways. “And what about my heart? I would have liked to not forget my mother’s face.”

Gendo remained silent. Shinji remained standing in front of him and looking away. A light breeze whistled over the hills of the graveyard, but otherwise the afternoon heat was nearly unbearable. Nobody spoke. Nothing made a sound.

After what felt like an eternity, and might well have been several minutes in objective reality, the silence was interrupted by the sounds of a NERV helicopter descending onto an open area in the graveyard, kicking up dust into all directions.

“My time is up,” Gendo told Shinji. “I’m leaving now.”

_of course you would._ Shinji felt disappointed. His father was just leaving him here. He had found at least _some_ courage to confront him, and his father now just turned around and left. He felt helpless and impotent as well: There was nothing he could _do_ about this situation. He couldn’t _make_ his father reply to him.

Shinji watched his father move towards the frankly gigantic helicopter. A small two-person copter would have found more space to land, but this one… Shinji blinked. He saw a familiar blue mop of hair at one of the copter’s windows. _Rei…_ She stood up and vanished from the window.

Shinji looked down on the ground and made a grimace. So here he was, at the grave of his mother, after a confrontation with his father, and whom was Rei with? His father. He knew she had a close connection with the Commander, and he knew he hardly could stake any claim on her, and yet he still felt dis…

“Is something the matter, Rei?”

Shinji looked up. Rei had just stepped out of the helicopter.

“I wanted to see if the Third Child is doing okay,” she told Gendo.

“There are no problems with him,” the Commander stated.

Rei nodded. “I wish to accompany him home.”

“We have an appointment,” Gendo reminded her.

“I’ll be there,” Rei simply told him.
Gendo hesitated. “Is the well-being of the Third Child important to you?”

“Yes,” Rei merely answered.

“I see,” Gendo commented. Now it was him and Rei who just remained standing there, looking at each other, without moving or speaking. Finally, Gendo turned around and entered the helicopter, leaving Rei behind.

Seemingly entirely unperturbed by its lift-off, as if surrounded by an aura of serenity that mere mundane forces like wind could never hope to disturb, Rei slowly walked up to Shinji, not once looking back at the helicopter.

“Rei...” Shinji muttered. He didn’t know what to make of this. Was insanely glad about her presence, but too surprised to act on it.

“Are you… alright?” she asked.

“I’m...” Shinji began, but then looked down. His voice became dark. “No, I’m not.” This was Rei. The one person he had always been able to be honest with. “I’m... Why does my father do this? Cut me off entirely from the memory of my mother?”

He saw something flash across Rei’s usually blank face, but Shinji couldn’t say what it could mean. “I don’t know.”

Shinji scoffed sadly. “I’d have thought that if anyone knew, it would be you. You seem to know my father pretty well.”

“I don’t,” Rei merely said.

That surprised Shinji. “But... he’s been your guardian for ten years...”

“He never showed me his personality,” Rei explained. “I didn’t know anyone well before you arrived.”

“...oh...” Shinji voiced. He felt a bit bad now for having misjudged her. She had chosen to come with him instead of his father, and she seemed to be closer to him in comparison as well. That was... touching, actually.

Rei took some more steps forwards. Shinji’s eyes widened slightly when she stood only some centimetres apart from him. She looked at him intensely, but didn’t say anything for a long time. Finally, she managed to say, “I’m sorry.”

“Ah... what for?” Shinji asked. He had been physically closer than that to Rei before, and he felt weirdly comfortable even with such minimal distance between them, but this still came as a surprise.

“I should say something to help you,” Rei stated. “I don’t know how to help you with the memory of your mother. But I know it’s important to you.”

“Ah... it’s alright...” Shinji stuttered.
Rei shook her head. “No. It isn’t. But if I can’t help you with having good memories… maybe I can help you with having good times?”

Shinji smiled faintly, touched once again. That was so Rei. She had maybe learned to articulate herself better, but she had always tried her best. And had always been there for him. “I think… I think you always do.”

Was there a slight amount of red on Rei’s cheeks? Huh. That was surprising, coming from her. “You should go home. I’ll accompany you.”

Shinji nodded and started moving, Rei always keeping to his side. To both sides of them were endless chains of graves, one tombstone after the next. Some, very few, had flowers in front of them. Apart from that, there was no decoration at all, not even pathways, just dirt and some grass. It truly was a place of death. And it was good to have Rei here. He didn’t know in what condition he would have been in by now if she hadn’t.

She took his hand.

Shinji missed a step, but caught himself relatively quickly. Heat shot into his face, but he smiled. It was good.

For hours now a dark cloud of tension, disappointment, feeling powerless and longing for a half dead memory had hung over his head. Now, it was slowly being driven away. Shinji began feeling content. It wasn’t a directed sentiment. He didn’t think about anything in particular. It was just nice to know that Rei cared about him, that she tried to put this into words, that she held his hand.

So, when the two left the graveyard and entered the lonely road leading to it, Shinji even had a sad smile on his face – still feeling melancholic about being cut off from the memory of his mother, but also feeling hopeful. He sighed and began walking the street towards the nearest train station… only to stop again after some steps. Somebody was walking up to him and Rei. Somebody with red hair.

Both sides came to a stop in front of each other. Shinji looked in surprise at Asuka. She looked in surprise at Rei, then at Rei’s hand holding Shinji’s.

“What are you...” both began. Then Asuka laughed and continued. “Rei. Didn’t expect to find you here.”

“I came with the crew that picked up Commander Ikari,” the blue-haired girl explained. “I decided I’d rather accompany Shinji home.”

Asuka laughed again, one of her sharp and vicious laughs. “Choosing Shinji over Mr Pedobeard? Yeah, not a difficult choice.”

Shinji allowed himself to grin, even if it was lopsided. Asuka’s familiar utter lack of respect for anyone was a refreshing change from the silent and rigid atmosphere of the graveyard. He thought he should protest how she addressed his father, but he couldn’t really bring himself to do so.

Asuka looked at the interlocked hands again and grinned just as lopsided as Shinji. “Though I think he can walk on his own.”

Shinji was about to loose the hold, but Rei just strengthened her grip. “He seemed to need support.”
“Yeaaahh,” Asuka drawled. “I can understand that.”

Silence followed that statement. Rei and Shinji were still holding hands, while Asuka looked a bit awkward. As if she constantly were about to say something, but didn’t. Finally, Rei spoke up, “And why are you here?”

Asuka shrugged. “I’ve seen Shinji fret the whole day. I figured… well, I didn’t want to leave him here alone. Couldn’t have known he was already in good hands.”

“You came… to look after me?” Shinji asked.

“Yeahhh,” Asuka confirmed. “And you better not forget that!”

Shinji’s lips trembled, as if they didn’t know whether to smile or to cry. Two. Two! Two people who both cared about him. That was… that was… He shook his head, a gesture the girls didn’t understand. That was just something that had never happened for as long as his memory went back.

“Thank you,” he whispered to Asuka. He turned his head to Rei. “And thank you, Rei.”

“No need to thank me,” Rei told him.

“Hah. Don’t make him take you for granted,” Asuka advised. “Come on, let’s go.” She put herself on the side of Shinji opposite of Rei. After a short hesitation, she put her hand on the shoulder opposite to her. So when the three began walking, Shinji held Rei’s hand at one side, while from the other side, Asuka’s arm was warmly coiled around his neck.

Two people… Of course that had gone on for a while now. They both care about me. And I care about both of them. And they… also care about each other. Rei had even suggested to Asuka that they should also still kiss. They all… care about another. We all… love each other? It was difficult not to consider this while walking this way. It was clear, in any case, that the three were some sort of… thing.

And that was a thought frightening in its hopefulness. It was everything Shinji could ever want, besides maybe an end to the angel attacks, but that meant there was so much he could screw up here. So much that could literally fall from his grasp. The thought almost made him panic…

…but then he realized it would be foolish to run away from this. There was nothing really expected of him, after all. Things were good as they were, and he could just wait and see how they would develop from here. He was content with the way things were going.

“Maybe… it’s a nice afternoon. Maybe we can walk home?” he suggested… softly, hesitantly, almost feeling bad about this very transparent suggestion.

However, Rei just nodded. And Asuka answered, “Walking into the sunset? I suppose that’s something everyone should do at least once in their life.”

“Our efforts were successful. She passed all the tests.”

Gendo sat at his desk in his usual pose and didn’t even look at the person he was talking to. As so
often, Fuyutsuki was standing behind him.

“She did,” the former professor confirmed. “We can consider her operational.”

Gendo grunted. “The old men certainly had us invest enough resources in that foolish project. She’s the only success. But now we will use her.”

“One out of two dozen,” Fuyutsuki whispered.

Gendo didn’t regard that comment. Fuyutsuki could get sentimental at times, but at the end of the day, he would do what needed to be done. As for himself, Gendo only had one goal, and he would pursue it no matter what. Sentimentalities like guilt had no place in this.

He was so close to success. All pieces were in place. Now, he just had to make sure they didn’t stray from the path. Of course he had never expected that people would just perfectly behave like he wanted them to. There were so many things to keep under observation. Ritsuko, now that he had been forced to throw her to the old men. Inspector Kaji, whom he still intended to use, but who might stumble upon things he was not supposed to uncover. And Rei.

He had been surprised by Rei’s actions the previous day. He wouldn’t have thought Rei to show such concern for a fellow pilot. Maybe he had evaluated the connections between the pilots wrongly. After all, going through battles together could in fact create such bonds of solidarity. And with Rei’s soul united once more, she would be more susceptible to such influences. But so quickly?

It was another development to keep an eye on. So far, there was absolutely nothing suggesting that Rei’s conditioning would break. For over ten years, Gendo had made very sure that the artificial girl knew nothing else but her purpose – that she would have nothing else in her life but her purpose. That she would leap at that purpose because it was the only thing that would provide her stimulation and contact with other people at all. He had been very rigorous in ensuring such a treatment of her, so now he trusted that conditioning to hold.

Still, maybe it had been a mistake to allow Rei to move in with the Second Child. It had been necessary to enrol Rei in school. An EVA pilot would have a certain public presence, if only in certain Internet forums and conspiracy theorist hangouts. Questions would have been asked if Rei hadn’t been just an ordinary schoolgirl. But even then, Gendo had made sure that Rei would be kept in a state of mild sensory deprivation, placing her far away from all classmates in a rundown apartment.

Unfortunately, Captain Katsuragi’s plan to defeat Israfel had toppled this state of affairs, and both she and Inspector Kaji had moved very fast to make that state of affairs permanent after the angel had been defeated. Protesting too much would have drawn suspicion. In this as well, Gendo trusted Rei’s conditioning. Drawing suspicion wouldn’t have been worth the risk. He still thought so, and he still saw no reason for immediate concerns… but he would keep the situation under watch.

As for Captain Katsuragi herself, she was another element that needed supervision. Her close connection with Inspector Kaji meant that she potentially wasn’t as stable an asset anymore as she had used to be, and her argument with Ritsuko during the Leliel mission, and the ensuing alienation between the two women, could lead to the Captain beginning to distrust NERV leadership as a whole. That wasn’t something Gendo could just let stand.

In fact, that was the reason why a few minutes after Gendo’s and Fuyutsuki’s short conversation,
Katsuragi entered the office and saluted sharply.

“Sir, you wanted to see me?”

Fuyutsuki took over addressing her. “Captain Katsuragi. The Commander and I have reviewed your actions during the latest battle. We understand there has been some conflict with Dr Akagi and the pilots.”

“Sir,” Katsuragi answered, keeping her voice perfectly under control. “Dr Akagi and I disagreed about her plan to salvage EVA-01. The pilots learned of that plan and refused to comply.”

“Isn’t maintaining discipline in the pilot corps part of your job, Captain?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“It is, sir,” Katsuragi confirmed.

“Then please explain the breakdown in discipline,” Fuyutsuki ordered her.

“Sir, under the plan, the pilots would have been accessory to an action that would most likely have led to the demise of the First Child – one of their own,” Katsuragi explained. “Given the bonds between them, bonds necessary for a military unit to function coherently, that was unacceptable to them. I do not think any sort of disciplinary measure or motivational approach could have swayed them.”

“What about your own estimation of Dr Akagi’s plan?” Gendo spoke up now.

“I disagreed heavily with it, sir, but would have carried it out,” Katsuragi answered.

“But your failure to keep the pilots in line speaks against you, Captain,” Fuyutsuki commented.

“Yes, sir,” Katsuragi replied.

“Captain Katsuragi,” Gendo addressed her, finally raising his head over his hands to look directly at her. “You are well aware of NERV’s significance. You know that the angels threaten all of humanity. That is why sometimes drastic measures have to be taken.”

“Yes, sir,” Katsuragi confirmed.

“And what’s more, you know what those measures are aimed at,” Gendo continued.

This made Katsuragi hesitate for a moment before she answered. “Protecting humanity, sir.”

“Killing the angels,” Gendo corrected her. “You have seen their power. So even NERV sometimes has to resort to such methods. But only NERV can kill and defeat angels. The government in Tokyo-2 can’t. The JSSDF can’t. The UN Conventional Forces can’t. That is why NERV is necessary.” And that is what you have signed up for…

“True, sir,” Katsuragi answered.

“So far, you have been exemplary at that job,” Gendo told her.

“We have also reviewed the battle against the angel dubbed Bardiel,” Fuyutsuki spoke up again. “In retrospective analysis, it is clear that your tactical acumen was sorely missed in that battle.
Furthermore, despite the problems in the fight against the angel dubbed Leliel, you showed your ability to organize an anti-angel operation without direct supervision.”

Gendo stood up. “Therefore, the Vice Commander and I have decided to promote you. You have shown the competence and independent action required of a Major within NERV’s command structure.”

Katsuragi hid her surprise well, but it was still audible. “Sir… thank you, sir.”

Gendo opened one of the desk drawers, and took out a box barely larger than two fingers. He put it on the desk, far away from him. “The promotion has been registered as of today. You’re already cleared to wear your new insignia, Major Katsuragi.”
Maya Ibuki sighed as the pilots entered the Pribnow Box. Immediately, hostile glances were shot all around. Whatever cordial working atmosphere had once existed in NERV Sections 1 and 3 currently seemed to be entirely gone.

Asuka… Soryu and Ritsuko seemed to consider each other mortal enemies by now, at least going by how they looked at each other. At the same time, Soryu seemed to have nothing but scorn for Touji and Kaworu as well, and at least Touji gave as good as he got. And whatever friendship there once may have existed between Ritsuko and Captain Katsuragi seemed to be dead. The two were still polite to each other – but indeed, very polite, formal and distant.

But what worried Maya most was Ritsuko herself. The head of Project E had been cold and hard to everyone the entire day. In fact, she had been that way ever since her sudden and still unexplained three days’ absence. Something had happened there, but Ritsuko wouldn’t tell anyone what. That frustrated Maya. She knew Ritsuko would never return her feelings, but even so she just wanted to help her sempai – her friend. Ritsuko was brilliant, hard-working, caring, always supportive of and attentive to those working under her… she had more than earned the right to get support in return. And Maya wanted to offer it; not to get something in return but just to help Ritsuko. However, the faux-blond remained quiet and icy.

But even now, apparently stressed as she was, she maintained enough good sense and oversight to leave the debriefing to Maya. A delicate hand in leadership and a dedication her the work, as always. Maya just hoped that eventually, things would be able to return to how they had been.

...though maybe not completely so, she decided as she saw a shy smile on Shinji. The boy’s mood had clearly improved, and he seemed quite close with both Soryu and Rei. Maya wondered if he and Soryu were still together. Those things could come and go so quickly at their age. Well, normally. She at their age of course had had little choice but to abstain from romance…

“Well then,” she began with a fake cheeriness in her voice. “I’d say the test was very productive. Touji, we noticed an improvement of 2.8 percentage points over the course of your test. That’s a good start to your development!”

The boy merely rolled his eyes. “Yeah, whatever.”

He made for a stark contrast to the other pilots. Without awaiting authorization, he had simply brought a thin wool or cotton longcoat to wear over his plugsuit, a plain, gray thing going down to his ankles. Ritsuko had sighed in exasperation when he had appeared in the EVA cages with it, but had raised no principal objection. She just found the whole thing incredibly silly.

Maya could see why. Wearing the plugsuit was in fact a very minor thing, after all, nothing to make a fuss over. But then, just having a longcoat ready really wasn’t much of a fuss, and if Touji did have problems appearing in the plugsuit, then it was a good solution.

In fact, it was Asuka who made much more a fuss about this. She had been livid that Touji had been allowed to keep the coat, despite the (quite careful) attempts by Shinji and Rei to intercede on his behalf. Even now she was still fuming, while Touji of course had no problems rubbing his “victory” in her face.
The other pilots were stable as always. Due to scheduling issues, the synch-test had to be held in the morning, so at least they had all gotten free from school for the day. Maybe that had helped with motivation. Asuka was still at the top, with Shinji catching up to her, while Rei improved slowly but gradually. And Kaworu was, just like last time, too stable. There had to be something peculiar about the way he synched. Showing absolutely zero deviation in synch-rate for an entire hour was just unnatural.

“You seem to be able to concentrate very well,” Maya addressed the grey-haired boy.

“It seems to come naturally to me,” Kaworu answered. Which of course didn’t help Maya at all.

Before Maya could continue, the debriefing was shortly interrupted by Ryoji Kaji entering the room. As U.N. Inspector he had access to all parts of the Geofront... or at least all parts NERV would admit existed. Maya knew there were some ultra-secret locations, secrets that she shouldn’t even know the mere existence of, nevermind what they were. Kaji might find it difficult to go there; but he could enter the Pribnow Box whenever he liked.

As long as he doesn’t come too close to me... Kaji was a charming, friendly man, but he also was a bit too forward and pushy at times. Now that he had backed off and didn’t try to seduce Maya anymore he was pleasant company, though.

“Oh hey,” he spoke up. “Thought you guys were finished here already. Sorry then. I’ll shut up and wait.”

Maya sighed and then shrugged. “Actually, I think we are finished here.” There was really no reason to drag this out.

“Oh, that’s good then,” Kaji said. “Say, Katsu... hey now. Are those two stripes? You got promoted! Congratulations!”

Maya took a closer look. And indeed, the insignia on Katsuragi’s collar had two black stripes on silver, denoting a major, not a captain. And she didn’t even tell anyone!

“Congratulations, Major!” she chirped.

“Yes, congratulations, Misato,” Shinji added with a smile.

“Does that mean you get more pay?” Asuka asked with a smirk. “Because I think there are some more high quality ingredients Shinji wanted to stock up on.”

Touji and Kaworu added congratulations as well, while Rei remained silent, and Ritsuko just stared silently. Kaji didn’t let that sour the mood. “I think this should be celebrated, Katsuragi!”

“Oh, that’s a good idea!” Maya agreed enthusiastically. “What do you all say we go to a karaoke bar?”

“There’s really no need...” Katsuragi grumbled quietly.

“Nonsense!” Kaji disagreed. “Opportunities for celebration must be taken as they arise! Who knows when we’ll have the next chance?”

Sensing an opportunity indeed, Maya turned towards Ritsuko. “How about it, sempai? Let’s take
some time away from work! Have some fun!”

Ritsuko scowled. “I don’t think so. I have yet more work to do.”

“Ah come on!” Maya insisted. “Surely that can wait a while?”

“No it can’t!” Ritsuko shouted. An awkward silence followed. Then she rushed out of the room.

“Wellll… so much for that,” Kaji muttered. “But I still think it’s a good idea.”

Maya looked at the door through which Ritsuko had just disappeared, and felt a pang in her heart. If she could just find out what was bothering her sempai so much. If she could just comfort her… well, okay, she probably wouldn’t be able to in the way she wanted. But she still wanted to help.

“So much for partying,” Misato muttered. She was watching the door as well and sounded sorrowful.

A feeling of defiance rose in Maya. She would get to the bottom of what was bothering Ritsuko, but for now she would not let her sour the mood. “We still have enough other people here!” She grinned as an idea hit her. “What about it, Shigeru, Makoto? Wanna celebrate Katsuragi’s promotion?” She looked especially at Makoto while suggesting this. While Kaji was behaving now, well, Maya wasn’t above encouraging some competition for Katsuragi as a small revenge for his behaviour.

“Uh… I suppose…” Makoto stated unsurely, while Shigeru demanded, “Only if we go to a karaoke bar.”

“Great!” Maya exclaimed. She turned to the pilots. “How about you all? Celebrating the promotion of your Operations Director?”

“She isn’t my Operations Director,” Touji corrected her. Maya cursed herself for not having seen that coming; of course Touji always put as much distance between himself and his job as possible. And purely technically, the pilots, as minors, were indeed not part of the command hierarchy.

“Hey now! Do I get a say in this as well?” Katsuragi intervened.

“Your authority is strictly limited to NERV related matters,” Maya told her with a grin.

“Come, Touji, you can bring Hikari along,” Kaji suggested. He was grinning as well now. “A perfect cover to get her into a karaoke bar with you, wouldn’t you say?”

“And what do you mean by that, Mr Kaji?” Touji protested. “I mean… well… hm.”

“Well, that means someone needs to keep watch over you,” Asuka declared.

“Unfortunately, I have already agreed to meet with friends,” Kaworu spoke up with a polite smile.

“Well, call them and invite them as well!” Maya prompted him. “The more the merrier!”

Katsuragi just groaned.
Nobody was surprised that Shigeru knew all the karaoke bars in Toko-3. Half of them were currently no good to visit, due to NERV’s security advisory about yakuza attacks, but then the seedier and cheaper bars were no proper place to celebrate a promotion, anyway, or so Ibuki had claimed. Following that logic, the parlor they went to was clean, upper-class and most of all _large_. The establishment had no problem to produce a table for thirteen people on the spot, and that with a karaoke stage directly next to it.

Kaji and Ibuki had basically dragged Misato to her own celebration. Hyuga and Shigeru, the other two ‘bridge bunnies’ as Asuka usually called them in the irreverence so typical of her, had come as well, and so had all the pilots – five of them by now. It was no surprise that Touji had brought Horaki along. What _was_ surprising was that Kaworu had brought Kensuke and Mana along.

Everyone was quite loud as the sat down at the table, and apparently quite occupied by gossip, banter and laughing. So nobody noticed when someone pulled at Shinji’s collar. Ibuki quite literally pulled him aside.

“Ah...” Shinji voiced.

“Don’t worry,” Ibuki laughed. “I was just… wondering how you were doing.”

“Uh… I’m fine...” Shinji answered non-committedly.

“Well, hmmmm...” Ibuki hesitated. “The last time it was just us two… talking… you weren’t doing so well. So… I’m just concerned, is all. Have things become better since then?”

“Oh, definitely!” Shinji answered immediately. Then he looked down, abashed, remembering what had happened ‘last time’. He felt too awkward now to say more.

“How are things with, hm, I suppose, I should call her Soryu here? And with Rei?” Ibuki inquired.

“Ah... good, good,” Shinji answered. Still looking down, he smiled faintly. “That is... that is why you don’t need to worry, Ms Ibuki. I’m... I’m still anxious about having to pilot EVA. About having to fight angels. I don’t like it. I _fear_ it.” The smile vanished and his body became rigid.

“And... and nobody seems to give me any thanks or respect for it. But...”

“But?” Ibuki prompted.

“I feel like I can’t reach certain people,” Shinji explained. “Can’t understand them.” He thought back to his visit to his mother’s grave. “Can’t question them. And they remain cold, despite… despite everything I’ve done. But...” He thought back to what had happened after his father had left. He looked up to Ibuki and smiled again. “But not all people are like that. I... I know that now. And I, uh, I have those people around me. That’s what matters.”

Ibuki smiled back. “That’s good. You... you and Asuka and Rei have become close, haven’t you?”

Shinji looked over his shoulder to see Asuka arguing with Touji, the two shouting over the whole length of the table. Rei was keeping very close to Asuka. A certain redness spread over his face, but for once he didn’t back down. “We... we all know how it is,” he clumsily tried to explain their bond. “Piloting. Living alone.” He shrugged. “That all.”

“And you and Asuka?” Ibuki asked. “Are you two still... together?”
“Ah… it’s, uh, complicated,” Shinji evaded the question.

Ibuki chuckled. “That’s good.” When Shinji looked at her oddly, she explained, “Shows that you three still are teenagers. ‘It’s complicated’ is what every teenager feels.” She winked.

Smiling awkwardly and unsurely, not knowing what to say to that, Shinji went over to the table and sat down next to Rei, on the other side from Asuka. Meanwhile, Shigeru had already climbed up the karaoke stage and begun singing. And while Shinji had no idea what he was singing, he was pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to be sung that way.

Asuka had never heard Elvis so maltreated as Shigeru was doing right now. Not that she was really paying much attention. She was too busy shouting across the table.

“Yes, as it so happens, I do think I’m essential for the existence of the world,” she declared, looking Touji square in the eyes. “No goddamn robot could do what I can.”

“Pff, whatever,” Touji dismissed her. “If they had those… what were they called… dummy plugs in every EVA, they wouldn’t need to coerce us into being pilots.”

“And then your sister wouldn’t get special medical treatment from NERV,” Asuka pointed out. “Ever considered that, Mr Bathrobe?”

Hikari chuckled. It sounded nervous, and too loud. It was obvious she just wanted to intervene and end the argument. “Bathrobe?”

“The guy appeared in one during synch-training today,” Asuka explained.

“It was a longcoat!” Touji insisted, and then grinned. “And both Akagi and Katsuragi allowed me to wear it. Because, you know, not all of us are exhibitionists.”

Not that she could see it herself, but Asuka’s face turned a really unhealthy shade of red, distorted by a rather worrisome grimace of anger. “The fate of the world rests on our shoulders, and you’re worrying about decency?”

Touji scoffed. “You might get off on this ‘fate of the world’ thing, but I only pilot due to my agreement with NERV.”

Asuka scoffed back. “Figures that an ape like you wouldn’t care about the world.” She defiantly threw her head back. “Me, I fight for the world and its people!”

Touji rolled his eyes. “Yeah, whatever.”

It was then that Shinji finally joined them, sitting down on the other side of Rei from Asuka. So why care about that buffoon; I have Rei and Shinji. However, it seems Touji wasn’t quite done. After Shigeru finally, finally left the karaoke stage there was some hesitation as to who would go next. Apparently, nobody really had the courage to. Asuka already was about to stand up and just do it, annoyed at everyone’s cowardice, when she was beaten to the punch by the jock.

And unfortunately, even though he was very much a below-average student in school, he seemed to
have a natural knack for languages. For English. And he couldn’t contain a grin when he started singing.

“You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you.
You're so vain, I'll bet you think this song is about you.
Don't you? Don’t you?”

The way Touji now turned his grin to Asuka was impertinent.

This challenge of course couldn’t go unanswered. As soon as Touji was finished, Asuka stormed onto the stage and took a hold of the karaoke equipment. The list of songs there was vast, including some quite obscure bits going all the way back to the 80s, 70s, 60s… Aha. Just what I need. The song was synthpop with speaking parts rather than singing, but what mattered were the lyrics. Asuka smiled overly sweetly at Touji when she sung.

“Oh, mystical East, you've lost your way
Your rising sun shall rise again
My western world gives out her hand
A victor’s help to your fallen land.”

The song was actually sarcastic here: An anti-globalist/capitalist message about western commercialism spreading everywhere and how that is presented as ‘help’. But of course, that wasn’t the way Asuka was using it. She just wanted to get a rise out of Touji – and it worked: The jock was fuming. Of course, everyone else was giving her irate looks as well, but she didn’t care about that. Okay, maybe she had overdone it a bit here, but… but… well, it was Touji’s fault for having provoked her. With her head held deliberately high in defiance she sat down again.

There was some awkward pause now, which was ended when Kaworu went up the stage. That wasn’t a surprise, given his musical leanings. What was a surprise was that he was singing metal – German metal.

“Erst wenn die Wolken schlafen gehn,
kann man uns am Himmel sehn.
Wir haben Angst und sind allein;

Gott weiß ich will kein Engel sein!”

In all honesty, this made Asuka’s opinion of him rise at least tiny little bit. For one thing, he wasn’t doing his usual cultivated fancy-pancy style of things, and second, Rammstein was cool. Of course half the people in the room couldn’t follow the lyrics, but oh well. She, Mana, Rei, Misato and Kaji all did… though Rei’s grasp on German was tenuous enough that she might not understand it through all the growling, and Misato was too busy drinking one beer after the other.

Afterwards there again were no volunteers stepping forwards. What a bunch of boring Weicheier… She had expected better of Misato and Kaji, at least. But Kaji was just doing his usual enigmatic smirk, and Misato – she was prone to doing crazy things, normally, but maybe she didn’t want to part with her beer. Or whatever. So it of course fell to Asuka again to keep things lively. Determined, she stepped forth. She had seen another song on that list she quite liked.

She provocatively grinned at the assembled NERV personnel as she was singing.

“We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teachers leave them kids alone.”

Her voice rose considerably to stress this part… and she adapted the lyrics a bit.

“Hey! Officers! Leave them kids alone!”

Asuka was still grinning, flush with sense of victory, as she was hopping down the stairs from the stage and sitting down again. She pretended not to notice Misato’s stares, but of course she did, and she enjoyed them. Of course, she also knew that her guardian wouldn’t be all too offended in reality; it was actually really difficult to offend Misato.

“Your provocations seem to be working,” Rei commented flatly.

“Is there a daily quota you need to fill?” Shinji muttered with some amusement.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought the same thing about NERV,” Asuka answered.

“Well… yeah,” Shinji admitted. “But it’s strange hearing it from you.”

Asuka knew what he meant. And truthfully, she never had had much problem with NERV’s training and regulations. It wasn’t like she had ever been subjected to full military discipline; she was a warrior, not a soldier. And that training was part of being a warrior, something Asuka was proud of. However… that wouldn’t keep her from needling Misato and other NERV personnel. Now and then she needed to remind them that she couldn’t be taken for granted.

While they were talking, Mana had taken the stage. She was singing some 80s thing, Heart of Glass by Blondie. Shigeru seemed to disagree with the choice of music, Ibuki seemed to listen to everyone, Kensuke was listening intensely, Touji and Hikari were too busy with each other, and Kaworu… Kaworu seemed to smirk at the music.

“Your first song was… uh… well maybe a bit over the top?” Shinji mentioned cautiously.

Asuka snorted. “It worked, didn’t it? It got Touji.”

Shinji almost winced. “I really don’t like how you two are attacking each other. He’s my friend and you’re… you… well…” He trailed off, his head red.

Huh. Yeah. It was difficult to discern just what they were right now, so Asuka seized on a different point. “You have really bad taste in friends.”

“Aren’t we his friends as well?” Rei asked.

“We’re… well, we’re… hm…” Asuka muttered. Now both she and Shinji were red-faced.

“I see,” Rei answered… and ascended the stage.

It was unsurprising that Rei had a melodic voice. But Asuka wouldn’t have thought that it could also be that full, that powerful. Soft and melodic, yet strong. And utterly captivating.

“You can tell by the way
She walks that she's my girl.
You can tell by the way she talks she rules the world.
You can see in her eyes that no one is her chain.
She's my girl, my supergirl.”

Rei wasn’t looking at anyone in particular, and yet…

“And then she’d say, it's okay; I got lost on the way
But I'm a supergirl and supergirls don't cry”

Asuka felt addressed. And she was feeling surprised and touched and hot all at once. Rei was singing about a girl who was maybe flawed… but determined and strong and pushing on. And Shinji realized that as well. His head was still red when he said it, but he whispered over to her, “Our supergirl.” Asuka looked straight down to hide her heavy blush, but under the table she grabbed Shinji’s hand.

“She's sewing seeds, she's burning trees,
She's sewing seeds, she's burning trees.
She's a supergirl, a supergirl,
A supergirl, my supergirl.”

By the time Rei was finished, Asuka felt her face positively burn. Is that how she sees me? Of course, those were just the lyrics to the song, but… It was Rei who had sung it. And surely not without reason. Am I that to her? Her supergirl?

And what are we? Asuka thought as she let go of Shinji’s hand when Rei sat down again.

There also was the question what others thought of this all. Certainly, Kaji had a massive grin as he went up the stage. And just as Rei had just interpreted a piece by a male singer, Kaji now took on a piece by a female singer.

“You're begging me to go,
Then making me stay.
Why do you hurt me so bad?
It would help me to know,
Do I stand in your way,
Or am I the best thing you've had?”

For some reason, Shigeru laughed at this to Hyuga, who looked really unhappy. Maya, meanwhile, walked over behind Asuka, and just as Rei was leaning over to Shinji, to listen to something he had said, whispered: “You know, Soryu, after this, you just have to respond to Rei, don’t you think?” She sounded amused, but good-willed.

Nevertheless, Asuka hissed back silently, “I have no idea what you mean!”

“Of course,” Maya allowed. “Just keep in mind we can talk about that idea if you want to.” And with that, she left again.

This left Asuka grumbling. And what the hell does she mean by that? Who is she even, to intrude like this? But the idea had taken root inside Asuka. And it wasn’t like she could just back away from a challenge.
It was the third time she entered the stage, but then, people weren’t exactly fighting for the chance to be up there, so that was okay.

“I don’t mind spending every day,
Out on your corner in the pouring rain
Look for the girl with the broken smile
Ask her if she wants to stay awhile
And she will be loved
And she will be loved.

Tap on my window, knock on my door
I want to make you feel beautiful
I know I tend to get so insecure
It doesn't matter anymore.”

She also avoided looking at anyone directly. She simply sang a song she had found in the playlist. But she did have Rei in mind as she did so. Her own insecurities did indeed not matter. What mattered was giving Rei that feeling, that feeling of being… hm. Well, she had already admitted to loving Rei, and it was true.

Still, she was uncharacteristically quiet and subdued when she sat down again. And when this time there was some hesitation about who would go next, Asuka absolutely didn’t volunteer.

“What about you, Shinji?” Misato spoke up. She sounded like she already had quite a buzz going on. “Asuka has been up three times already, and you haven’t at all!”

“Neither have you,” Shinji muttered.

Misato took a large swig from her beer glass. “I…” Then she hesitated and winked at Shinji. “I’ll let you go first.”

“I’m curious about your singing voice,” Rei pitched in. And there was so much earnest interest in her statement…

Shinji smiled faintly and sighed. Then he got up. His hesitation and general awkwardness actually just served to draw even more attention to him. Once up on the stage he didn’t seem to know what to do. Finally, he simply settled on one of the more popular songs on the playlist.

“Fly me to the moon.
Let me play among the stars.
Let me see what spring is like.”

As he walked down the stage again, Shinji told Misato, “But now it’s your turn!”

“I… eh, maybe later,” Misato deflected, taking yet another large swipe of beer.

So it was actually Kensuke who sang next. And Asuka rolled her eyes when she recognized the song.

“Brothers everywhere - raise your hands into the air.
We’re warriors, warriors of the world.
Like thunder from the sky - sworn to fight and die,
We're warriors, warriors of the world.”

Asuka could just scoff at this. Yeah, right, Kensuke. You’re a warrior. Sure. She almost felt insulted by this. She was a warrior. Rei and Shinji also were warriors. And, much as she disliked it, but Kaworu and Touji could at least also make that claim. But Kensuke? Kensuke was just a scrawny nerd boy with false delusions about the military and NERV. Someone who was taking himself too seriously. Someone who…

Asuka grinned. She had just the right idea for the follow-up song. And while Kensuke might not be able to follow the lyrics, the song was famous enough that he would understand the message.

She looked straight at Kensuke for the third stanza.

“99 Düsenjäger,
Jeder war ein großer Krieger,
Hielten sich für Captain Kirk,
Das gab ein großes Feuerwerk.”

Of course he didn’t know what she had sung. About fighter pilots who thought themselves great warriors and nobly shot down the threat of 99 balloons. That part fit to Kensuke like a glove. But he did know the song in general of course, and he didn’t look pleased that Asuka was singing it at him.

For the next stanza, Asuka looked at Misato and Hyuga again.

“99 Kriegsminister -
Streichholz und Benzinkanister -
Hielten sich für schlaue Leute,
Witterten schon fette Beute.
Riefen Krieg und wollten Macht,
Mann, wer hätte das gedacht,
Dass es einmal soweit kommt,
Wegen 99 Luftballons.”

Hyuga looked confused. Misato growled. And Asuka grinned once again as she left the stage. Curiously, Kensuke seemed to have left the table, and so had apparently Kaworu and Mana. Oh well, all the better.

Asuka spent the next minutes explaining the song to Shinji, so that she nearly missed Hyuga’s turn:

“All I'm saying it takes a lot to love you
all I'm doing you know it's true
all I mean now there's one thing
yes one thing that turns this grey sky to blue.”

It wasn’t exactly a top performance, but it was solid. Next up was Shigeru again.

“We dared to ask for more,
But that was long before
The nights began to burn.
You would have thought we'd learned
You can't make promises
all based upon tomorrow.
Happiness, security are words we only borrowed.
For is this the answer to our prayers,
is this was God has sent?
Please understand this isn't what we meant.”

Huh. Asuka had never heard that song before, but it seemed quite powerful. Not everybody was paying attention, though. Hyuga and Kaji were eying each other coolly.

“Always interesting how many love songs are sung at such events, isn’t it?” Kaji remarked and made it sound like idle small talk.

“One would think there are other topics to sing about as well,” Hyuga agreed. Both sounded rather stiff.

“Well, I suppose sometimes a message needs to be repeated multiple times before it gets through to certain people,” Kaji observed.

“It isn’t always a matter of the message coming through,” Hyuga argued with a thin smile.

Kaji tilted his head. “I guess you’re right. Sometimes people are just averse to all sorts of romance.”

Misato groaned. And grabbed her glass beer more often than before. And refilled it more often as well.

A guitar solo played in the background. And on stage, Shigeru was playing his most beloved instrument – the air guitar. Bending his knees and moving his fingers as if he were actually playing the most epic solo of all time. Certainly showing more enthusiasm than he ever did in the NERV command centre.

Asuka became slightly flustered at Rei’s next song again, but then, so did Shinji this time.

“Take all your goodness and shyness away.
I’ll tell you the things I’ve been longing to say.
I’ll break it to you just so you understand
The force and control that you hold in your hands.

You are loved.
You are loved.
You are loved.”

And unlike Asuka, Shinji was terrible at hiding the blush that was now spreading across his face. Again, Rei was not looking at any person in particular, but if anyone had remained clueless so far about what existed between her and Shinji… well, now they surely weren’t clueless anymore.

Loved. That was a nice thought, though. To be loved… Shinji deserved that, for sure. And maybe, just maybe, Asuka was as well…

Even Touji, that meathead, couldn’t escape the general theme of romance.

“I’m gonna try for an uptown girl.
She's been living in her white bread world,
As long as anyone with hot blood can.
And now she's looking for a downtown man;
That's what I am.”

He was pretty good at English pronunciation, but he didn’t seem to have one musical bone in his body. The rhythm and melody were all wrong. But even so, Hikari was blushing pretty hard when he returned to his place next to her. He seemed to make some quiet jokes to her, but then actually stood up and left her, looking for where the hell Kensuke had gone.

It was now that, finally, Misato was walking up the stage. Maybe she has finally drunk together enough courage. She certainly wasn’t exactly fully sober anymore. Her voice was kinda slurred, and she had an even worse sense of melody than Touji.

“All time I see you falling,
I get down on my knees and pray.
I'm waiting for that final moment
You say the words that I can't say.”

All during Touji’s song, Hyuga and Kaji had continued their ‘cooler than thou’ banter. Now they were shut up.

And it was Shinji whom Misato addressed when she returned to her seat. “See, Shinji? I can do this as well!”

“Barely,” Shinji muttered.

Misato laughed at that. “Do it better then!”

“That shouldn’t be difficult,” Shinji accepted the challenge and went up the stage.

His song was one of the few post-Second Impact songs played here.

“You are beautiful, no matter what they say.
Words can't bring you down, oh no.
You are beautiful in every single way.
Yes, words can't bring you down, oh no.
So don't you bring me down today...”

This time, Asuka didn’t blush. Of course, it was equally likely that Shinji meant her or Rei, but it really made no difference. They all were beautiful… maybe beautiful together… and somehow, Asuka was increasingly getting used to the idea…

She smiled broadly at Shinji when he sat down again. Meanwhile, Maya was snickering. When Shinji looked at her oddly, she asked: “Ah, do you know the history of that song? Who is using it?”

“Using it?” Shinji asked, but before Maya could respond they were interrupted when Touji quite loudly took his seat again. Something seemed to have upset him.

“Ah, who cares what others use the song for!” Misato, now quite drunk, exclaimed. “You will all see how beautiful you all are on Thursday!”
Asuka looked at her drunk guardian with some disgust. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Hastily, Maya spoke up. “Ahhhh... it’s a chance for you to… to excel in the synchtests!”

Misato grinned broadly. “Ah, but it’ll be a very special synchtests!”

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to tell them!” Maya hissed.

Misato waved her hand dismissively. “Nonsense! This is an opportunity for endless fun! Because… you five… will do the test… ab-so-lu-tely na-ked!”

“What?” Asuka exclaimed. Suddenly all talk at the table died down. Shinji and Touji looked aghast.

Misato snickered again. “Ritsuko needs baseline data. How the synch goes without any clothes or even only the plugsuit on. So, tomorrow, you five, all nude in your entryplugs. And the EVA cages. And the way to there.”

“You want us to run around naked???” Asuka demanded to know.

“Ritsuko wants you 100% disinfected,” Misato explained, apparently deriving great enjoyment from this. “So you’ll get disinfected at length and then can’t come into contact with textiles again until you reach the entry-plug.” She put her chin on a hand and grinned. “So imagine that, you five all walking to the plugs butt-naked.”

Asuka jumped up. “I think not! Who the hell do you think we are! I’m not doing this!”

“You’ll have to,” Misato simply declared.

Asuka was fuming. All colour had been drained from Shinji’s and Touji’s faces, but as for her… a cold fear was spreading in her guts. If this truly was a NERV test, then there was indeed nothing she could do about it. But to be paraded around naked in front of the creep and the stooge… and then, how would that affect things with Rei and Shinji? That was absurd! But it was a NERV directive, apparently, so…

“Du perverses, dreckiges Schwein!” she insulted Misato and stormed off, out of the bar.

A minute later Rei and Shinji had caught up to her.

The previous afternoon had been cheery. Now, it was like a big dark cloud was hanging over the pilots. Shinji hadn’t talked with Misato since storming out of the karaoke bar. He, Rei and Asuka had eaten something in the city and then returned home very late. Shinji hadn’t responded at all to communication attempts by Misato, but had simply gone straight to his room without saying a word. Misato had knocked several times, even opened the door to speak to him, but he had never responded. And this morning he had woken up early enough and gone over to the girls’ apartment so as not to come into contact with the Major at all.

As the three had begun walking to school, Misato had waited for them at the door of her apartment. They had simply ignored her. That in turn had sunk the mood of the trio, and made the whole situation awkward, so that they had made most of the trip to school in silence. Only towards the
end had Asuka begun to speak, and eventually to rant about Akagi’s plans.

Shinji felt very uncomfortable about the prospect himself. He supposed it was worse for Asuka, though. She would have to worry about Touji and Kaworu. As for Shinji, well, he was a boy as well and as for Asuka and Rei, he trusted them. But… it still carried the risk of making everything awkward. And walking around naked in the EVA cage? That was just a mortifying thought. But what can we do?

During the lunch break, the pilots barely spoke. Touji sat with Hikari, but was sullen and quiet. Kaworu was nowhere to be found. And while Rei, Shinji and Asuka ate together, they almost desperately avoided any conversation, knowing it would only have one topic, a topic they surely didn’t want to breach here.

So even after school, there was an awkward silence. Kaworu was walking next to Asuka, Shinji and Rei. Differently to them, he seemed to be in good spirits. Finally, when they had left the school premises behind, it burst out of Asuka, “Gottverdammt noch einmal, I don’t want to run around naked in the EVA cages for Misato’s goddamn enjoyment.”

“The Major is acting unprofessionally,” Rei stated.

“When isn’t she,” Shinji muttered sullenly.

“She’s crazy.” The three stopped and turned around. Touji was closing up to them. “That’s what she is.”

Asuka scoffed. “Why are you complaining? You get to ogle.”

“And you don’t?” Touji shot back. “Maybe I don’t want to have your grubby eyes on me?”

“Don’t you worry. There’s no danger of that,” Asuka assured him acidly.

“And you think there’s a danger you will be watched? You’re not as important as you think you are,” Touji told her.

“It still sucks. For every one of us,” Shinji hastily intervened. He didn’t want all this bickering between his friends, and besides… they all were victims of this crazy policy, weren’t they? So why argue among each other?

It was now that Kaworu spoke up. “You all seem quite displeased with that upcoming order.”

Shinji winced. That had been a rather thoughtless thing to say. Asuka would not react w… Ah yes, there it is. She growled. “And you aren’t?”

Kaworu shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me. But I must confess, I don’t see your problem.”

Shinji had expected Asuka to again react angrily, but now instead it was Touji. “Hey man, not all of us want to prance around in our birthday suits!”

Kaworu smiled faintly. “That isn’t what I meant, Suzuhara. I respect that you have problems with appearing in NERV in the nude. And yet you all seem intent to do so nonetheless.”

“Akagi will make it an order,” Asuka stated flatly.
“So?” Kaworu simply commented.

That caused dumbfounded looks between Asuka, Shinji and Touji. “What… are you saying?” Touji asked suspiciously.

“The case seems rather simple to me,” Kaworu explained. “You don’t want to appear in the nude. That is fair enough. So simply don’t do so.”

“…mutiny?” Asuka whispered.

“That seems like a drastic formulation. I simply think humans have free will, do they not?” Kaworu asked rhetorically. His smile was quite enigmatic. Then he turned his gaze ahead. “Ah, there they are.” Shinji followed that gaze and saw Kensuke and Mana. “Well, I hope this idea will help you. See you tomorrow!”

He began moving. Next to Shinji, Asuka balled her hands into fists and shouted out: “Hey! Kaworu!” The greyhaired boy stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “It’s a plan. That’s what we’ll do. But don’t tell anyone. We’ll spring a surprise on Misato and Akagi.”

Kaworu nodded with a broad smile, then continued on his way to Mana and Kensuke.

“‘That’s what we’ll do’?” Touji snorted when the Fifth Child had gone. “Who died and made you Queen?”

“I’ll have you know that my mother did in fact belong to a noble house[1],” Asuka answered haughtily. Her spirits seemed to be rising. “Come on! You were complaining as well!”

“Yeah, but… can we really do that?” Touji asked. “I’d be all for that, but… my sister.”

Asuka scoffed, but had no good answer for that. And Shinji could understand his friend. It was well possible that, in the long run, his sister’s life was on the line here.

“We can if we all do it,” Rei spoke up. Given the combative nature of that statement, she sounded oddly soft.

“And then what?” Touji demanded to know. “They can still kick Sakura out of their hospital.”

“Not if we then refuse to pilot,” Rei explained.

Asuka began to grin viciously. “As long as we’re a united bloc, there’s nothing NERV can do. They need us. Hah. A general strike! I’ll bring the red flags!”

Touji seemed to hesitate. Then he answered, “Fine. We’ll try that. I’m sick of being bullied around by Akagi anyway.”

Asuka’s heart was thumping heavily. And yet, there also was a wild battlelust in her. It was a battlelust completely different from the one she felt in the entry-plug. She enjoyed showing her skill against the angels; this proved the superiority she had over most people. But angels weren’t people. They had no personality; they were just forces of nature. Angel fights were only chances to
show off. But this… now she would directly triumph over people.

Maybe. If everything went well. And it carried great risk.

She, Shinji and Rei had again avoided Misato the entire previous day and the day so far. Nobody had spoken a single word to the Major, much to her growing despair as Shinji reported. Misato was realizing she had screwed up at the bar, and what was more, she was fearing she’d lose her wards in an emotional sense. *Well, it’s a justified fear.* As far as Asuka was currently concerned, Misato and Akagi could go to hell. And Ibuki as well – she had known and not said a single word.

The pilots had taken a train directly from school to the nearest Geofront entrance. Misato had offered to take them by car, but of course they had declined – or, rather, not answered at all. So now the pilots were entering the Geofront, were preparing for the big confrontation. Asuka did her best not to let it show, but she was anxious. If this went wrong, her whole life could end up ruined.

She looked to her left and right side and grinned faintly. *But that won’t happen.* She had Shinji and Rei supporting her. And she had Touji and Kaworu backing them up. The five pilots were walking united through the corridors of NERV Headquarters. The pilots corps stood together. They had the power. It was an invigorating feeling.

To nobody’s surprise, Misato was waiting at the top of the large escalator that led down towards the EVA cages. She had her arms crossed in that position peculiar to her, where her right hand held her left elbow. She was looking down.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Look, I wanted to… apologize. I’ve acted unprofessionally. The test needs to…”

“Can it,” Asuka interrupted her aggressively. “We need to speak to Akagi.”

Misato looked up again, at her. “Why?” She sounded suspicious. *And rightly so.*

“For exactly the reason you suspect we do,” Asuka told her. “We won’t do this test. None of us will.”

The people around her looked uneasy, but none of them protested at this. Meanwhile, Misato did a double-take and then let her gaze wander over them. Then she put an extra effort into responding calmly. “Asuka… I promise you all we’ll do this professionally. And no, you won’t have to run around naked in the EVA cages. We…”

“I. Don’t. Care.” Asuka answered her forcefully.

“Asuka, this is an order,” Misato told her, still staying calm.

Asuka crossed her arms. “And we refuse that order.” Her heart threatened to jump out of her chest, but she managed to maintain a calm exterior. She had worn a mask for ten years; this was nothing difficult anymore to her. “Now take us to Akagi. I have no desire to explain myself twice.”

Wordlessly, Misato got moving, even forcefully walking down the steps of the escalator. The pilots followed her.

Asuka held her head high. In truth, as anxious and at times even fearful as Asuka was, the current situation was also intoxicating. A rush of hormones flooded through her body. This was something
she could get used to seeing herself in: The defiant fighter against injustice, the one who leads the righteous resistance. The centre of attention. In fact, if she was honest with herself, this was right up her alley.

The six people had just entered the Pribnow Box when Misato already announced, “Ritsuko, we have a problem.”

Akagi looked up from a terminal. Her face was icy. “What is it now?”

Misato nodded to Asuka, who took the cue. “We’re refusing the planned synch-test.”

Well, that has gotten everyone’s attention. The room was dead silent now.

Akagi walked over briskly to the group. “Refuse? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We are pilots,” Asuka told her. “Do you know what this means?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me what you think this means,” Akagi answered.

“It means our job is defeating the angels,” Asuka answered. “Defending the world. Not playing guinea pig for you. Not becoming a… a Wichsvorlage for people’s perverted thoughts. Piloting doesn’t require us to give up our dignity.”

Akagi rubbed her nose. “Of course this would result in problems. Misato just had to get drunk and run her loose mouth…”

This irritated Asuka. “And you? You would have sprung this as a surprise on us, wouldn’t you? So that we have no chance of defending ourselves. Just exposed us naked.” She shot an angry glare past Akagi, at Ibuki. “And you pretended to care about us.” Ibuki furrowed her brows in response.

“What exactly is the problem, Soryu?” Akagi almost exploded now. “I promise you this will be handled professionally. Yes, you’re pilots. That means there are certain necessities. This will serve to better your synch-rate out in the field.”


“A better synch-rate would be nice,” Asuka admitted. “But it isn’t worth this. And since it is us who go out there and fight for our lives, surely that’s our call.”

“But… Asuka… you honestly never had a great problem showing your body!” Misato intervened now. “I mean, when we went to the beach…”

Oh jeez thanks for telling people that!

“Besides, it isn’t just about her, you know,” Touji added.
“Well, Fräulein Professionell,” Akagi spoke up sternly. “It’s time to let your feelings take a backseat. This is a necessary procedure...”

“No, it isn’t,” Asuka interrupted her. “We’ve done fine without it so far.”

“I still don’t see what the fuss is all about,” Akagi complained.


“Dignity!” Akagi scoffed. “Dignity and twenty yen gets you a coffee. Surely survival is more important.”

“Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar,” Asuka quoted the first article, the basis, of the German constitution – *Human dignity shall be inviolable.*

“Major Katsuragi,” Akagi hissed now. “Keep your pilots under control!”

“Asuka,” Misato spoke up. “And that goes for you as well, Shinji. If you don’t comply with orders, I may have to restrict your video game and TV privileges.”

“Abusing your role as guardian over us, I see,” Asuka answered darkly. “So that we have no choice but to blindly follow orders, because otherwise we get punished at home.”

Misato’s voice now began to match Asuka’s. “You have all the choice in the world. You’re free to leave NERV. But inside NERV there is a command structure to follow.”

“I’m not part of it!” Asuka reminded her.

“But I am,” Misato argued. “And I have a job to do. And as part of that I will make sure you will comply with orders.”

Now Asuka was fuming. “Make sure. Right. So, our guardian will have us walk around naked for everyone to observe and analyze, or else we will be punished. What do you think Child Protection Services would think of that?” Not that they’d dare go against NERV, but Asuka was trying to guilt-trip Misato. “Or for that matter, what do you think our resident U.N. inspector will think of that?”

Misato crossed her arms. “If you find this to be unbearable, you can quit. I’d make sure you can stay in your current apartment then, and you’d be free of all obligations.”

Akagi furrowed her brows at Misato. The Major was probably being too lax with Asuka for her liking. But as far as Asuka was concerned – that comment only made her angrier. “Maybe I will do exactly that!” she shouted. She didn’t mean that, of course, she just wanted to see people’s reaction.

And she wasn’t disappointed. The pilots around her were looking at her aghast. Even Rei showed a reaction. And Misato did a double take. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe I will quit,” Asuka told her. “What will you do then?”

“Maybe we’ll all quit,” Shinji added darkly, which made Asuka’s heart beat yet a bit faster.

“I think that *would* be inconvenient,” Kaworu joined in.
“Alle EVAs stehen still, wenn dein starker Arm es will,” Asuka said. She grinned.

Akagi made a sweeping hand gesture. “Right! That’s it!” Her voice filled the entire room and beyond. “Okay. We’re doing just a normal synch-test. For now. But you, Asuka – you’re suspended!”

“What?” Misato exclaimed, turning her head to Akagi.

“I do outrank you,” Akagi reminded her. “And if you can’t create order, I will!” Wordlessly, Shinji turned around and walked towards the door. “Shinji, where are you going?”

Shinji stopped, but didn’t turn around again. “I told you. It’s Ikari for you.” His voice signalled controlled anger. “And if Asuka is suspended, then there won’t be a synchtest today.”

Kaworu nodded. “That seems like a reasonable conclusion.” He turned around.

Asuka grinned triumphantly at Akagi as behind her Rei turned to go as well, followed by Touji.

The feeling was exhilarating.

Her entire life, Rei had just been a machine. A tool to be used that just so happened to have a human form. She had had free will; but that free will had followed what others had demanded of her. People had demanded she pilot, and she had piloted because it was the only connection to the world she had. People had demanded she obey the Commander and she had, because he was the only one who would interact with her at all.

So she had endured everything. The pain. The treatment at the hand of others, especially by Akagi. Her other self in the EVA. She had known nothing else. The elder Akagi had killed part of her, and the younger Akagi had mistreated her, and she had just endured it. So now it felt absolutely amazing to defy the younger Akagi. There was a part of her, a part that had rejoined her soul, that burned in hatred for both Akagis, and that part was rejoicing now.

There had been so many new emotions since her contact with Leliel. All the experiences she had never had before. Seeing, smelling, hearing stuff. And a feeling of deep, moving love for Asuka and Shinji. For that feeling alone she would have followed Asuka’s plan, just as Shinji as well was now solidarizing with her. But now she discovered that she enjoyed doing this.

That it was enjoyable to follow one’s own will, in defiance of others. Maybe she wouldn’t have before. Maybe she in her second body wouldn’t have done this at all, not even for Asuka’s sake. But then, her second body hadn’t contained her full soul. And that new part that had rejoined her soul… that spurred her on to do more things like this.

“Touji!” Akagi called out. “Remember our deal!”

Suzuhara only stopped for a short moment. Rei did so as well, watching him. “You won’t end it just because of one missed synch-test. You need a pilot for EVA-03.” The two got going again.

“Rei!” Akagi shouted now. Rei paid her no mind and simply continued walking, out of the Pribnow Box. Akagi ran after her and grabbed her upper arm. “What are you doing?”
“Going home,” Rei told her bluntly. She stopped, and so did everyone else.

“I don’t think so,” Akagi answered. “I think you’ll stay the night here.”

Rei tried to free herself from Akagi’s grip, unsuccessfully. She noticed the new posture Asuka was taking – ready to physically attack. “I will not,” she simply said.

“The Comm…” Akagi began, but she didn’t come far. In a single motion, Rei turned around in Akagi’s grip and pushed her to the ground. NERV sensors would no doubt record a Pattern Orange, but right now Rei didn’t care. The part of her soul that had been missing from her second body took over. This had been the woman who had mistreated her for ten years. And now she’d. had. ENOUGH!

Angrily, Rei sent another AT Field push against Akagi, who was now groaning in pain. But Rei wasn’t touching her; surely the Doctor’s fall must have been simply very unlucky. Rei looked down at her, her face still entirely blank, but inside dark thoughts were rising to the surface.

“You will never touch me again,” she told Akagi, as monotonously as ever. Inside her various impulses were vying for control. A return to former calmness. Just leaving. Sending another AT Field push. Sending enough of them that Akagi would never be a threat again.

But before she could act on any of them, she felt someone carefully grab her wrist. She turned her head around and saw Shinji gently smiling at her. “She won’t, Rei. Let’s go home.”

Rei nodded and got moving. Neither Akagi nor Katsuragi followed them. When they were far enough away, Shinji’s hand slid down her wrist and took hers.

Shinji was feeling terrible.

That was the reason he had slept the night in a closet room. He and the two girls had agreed that he should spend the night with them, away from Misato. And strangely enough, the Major hadn’t even tried to get him to come back. Nevertheless, Shinji had felt and still felt terribly guilty about this all. He would all do it again, of course, just to support Asuka, but… he had disobeyed a direct order. Had taken part in a mutiny. There even had been a bit of a brawl during which Akagi got injured. And Shinji had been part of it all.

He hadn’t deserved any reward for that. Even though it had remained unspoken, the idea of him sleeping in the same futon as Rei and Asuka again had been in the air. But Shinji had just not been able to do this, not after what else he had done that day. So instead, he had gotten a spare futon and had it unrolled in the apartment’s closet room. [2] He hadn’t gotten much sleep.

Breakfast was an awkward affair. Nobody spoke. And after some time, Shinji got the impression Rei was deliberately looking away from him. What have I done now? But, after all he had in fact done the previous day, maybe he did in fact deserve scorn.

They hadn’t even finished breakfast when the angel alarm went off. Hastily, they scrambled from their chairs and ran to the apartment door.

They were just running past the doors of Misato’s apartment when the Major emerged from them.
“Hey!” she called out to them. “I’ll drive. Don’t worry, I won’t ask questions or comment on anything. Let’s just get to HQ.”

The three stopped and looked at each other. Nobody was really looking forward to spending any amount of time in Misato’s company, not after what had happened, but they also realized that this wasn’t the time for such sentiments. They had to go to NERV HQ as quickly as possibly. So Asuka, communicating for the entire trio, nodded.

Truth be told, Misato looked terrible. Her uniform wasn’t sitting straight at all, and there were dark rings under her eyes. She probably hadn’t gotten much sleep either. Shinji’s guilt flared up again: He had helped to cause this mess.

Just as Misato had promised, she didn’t talk during the drive. In fact, nobody did. The atmosphere was tense and awkward. It only was interrupted by an incoming call to Misato’s phone. As she was driving, she had put it in loudspeaker mode.

“Major.” It was Ibuki’s voice. “The Pattern Blue notice was transmitted from Hawaii, from NERV Space Command. The Pattern Blue was picked up by our satellites. It appears the angel is holding position high up in orbit.”

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[1] Kyoko Zeppelin-Soryu. It was Count Zeppelin who invented the flying machine named for him; the family is noble. So, Asuka is canonically descended from a German noble house (though probably not from the Count Zeppelin).

[2] That is what happened in canon. The pilots had no idea what the test was until they were suddenly naked in the corridor leading to their entry-plugs.

[3] In canon, after Asuka moves in, Shinji moves into a smaller room, which is basically a closet room. So basically, here he has slept in the equivalent of his canon room in Rei’s and Asuka’s apartment.
“This is interesting,” Rei remarked.

Both Asuka and Shinji turned towards her. “What is?” the former asked.

“The smell,” Rei simply answered.

Asuka had no idea what the blue-haired girl was talking about. She took a whiff. It smelled… normal. It was actually Shinji who realized what Rei was talking about. He grinned. “I’ve gotten used to it, but… yeah, the coolant. It’s in the air.”

*Oh.* The EVA cages were mostly filled with a purple-ish coolant liquid. And sure, that liquid had a certain, mostly inoffensive scent. Asuka, who had trained at least every week in an EVA for nearly a decade now, hadn’t even realized that anymore. *So Rei isn’t the only one who needs to ‘register’ smells…*

“It smells… terrible,” Rei commented.

“Oh,” Shinji voiced. “I’m sorry…”

Rei shook her head. “It’s exciting. I haven’t smelled anything terrible yet. I wish I had more chances to.”

“What.” Asuka stated flatly.

Behind her, Touji scoffed. “I tell you. All you EVA pilots are weird.” As he was saying so, he shot dark glances over to Kaworu.

Asuka turned around. Ever since they were in the same room, Touji had looked at the Fifth Child with distaste. Asuka had no idea why, and frankly, she didn’t care. She was just glad the two had been able to cooperate the previous day, when the pilots had faced down the staff.

All pilots were in their plugsuits, but Touji was wearing his bathrobe, or as he called it, his longcoat, over his. Asuka groaned, but for once didn’t comment. It was just silly that Touji made such a big fuss about being seen in a plugsuit, considering that plugsuits were supposed to be a source of pride, a mark of the elite. *But whatever…* As far as Asuka was concerned now, everyone should be able to decide for themselves what they saw as infringing their dignity. At least, after yesterday, she was *strongly* holding that opinion. So she refrained from making a comment about that.

That didn’t mean she would *completely* refrain from commenting. “*We* EVA pilots?”

Touji raised a finger. “Well…” He hesitated. Then he lowered his finger again. “Hmm…” Asuka snickered. However, Touji sounded surprisingly serious now. “Well, I guess… I should include myself. We did stand united yesterday, didn’t we?”

That sobered Asuka up. “Yes. Yes, we did. We’re all EVA pilots. Part of the same pilot corps.” She was kinda surprised by that realization. But Touji had stood by her side the previous day, and so had Kaworu. Maybe she’d never *like* either, but it was clear the *enemy* was NERV command.
Well, them and the angels.

“Pity it took a mutiny to build esprit de corps.”

Asuka turned around again to see Misato, now wearing her full uniform, approaching them. The Major’s face was cast in stone, betraying no emotion. Misato was entirely defined by her job again. It was in fact her who had ordered them to all come to the EVA cages after putting on the plugsuits. There was an angel alarm, but nobody seemed to be in any great haste.

“Sorry for the delay,” Misato apologized. “I was going through the data on the angel with Dr Akagi. So far, it is holding a stationary position above Japan in orbit. Whatever happens, it seems we have time.”

“‘It’?” Asuka asked. “Just what are we dealing with here?”

“Unknown,” Misato admitted. “The angel shut down most of our satellites with some kind of electromagnetic distortion signal. We only have some low quality pictures.” She shrugged. “Basically, imagine a bird with enormous wings, made entirely out of light. Not that it matters much for now, because it seems so far it has absolutely no intention of coming down to the surface.”

“Good for us, isn’t it?” Touji asked.

“Yes, but we can’t assume it will stay that way,” Misato answered. “All angels so far have attacked Tokyo-3. This one will be no different. Eventually it will have to descend, and when it does we need to be ready. Therefore, you will deployed on the surface. Or nearly all of you.” Among questioning sounds from the pilots she turned towards Rei. “Rei, there are still concerns over your contact with the last angel. So far, Dr Akagi has still been unable to rule out mental contamination. Therefore, having you synch with EVA-01 would be too large a security risk. If there is mental contamination, you could spread it to the unit.” She turned towards Shinji and continued softly, “I’m afraid you’ll have to pilot.”

Shinji was looking down. “Don’t worry. I knew this would come again, eventually.”

Not quite daring to take his hand in this public setting, but also quite unwilling not to offer support, Asuka grabbed Shinji’s arm. “Hey, we’ll be in this together. Four units. That angel will have no chance.”

Misato looked awkward – which was remarkable: That she would let anything shine through her ‘Major’ mask. “Actually,” she spoke up quietly, and then breathed out. “Asuka, I have gotten orders from Vice Commander Fuyutsuki. You are to enter your entry plug, but EVA-02 will not be activated. You will be held in reserve.”

“Reserve?” Asuka exploded. “Why would there be a reserve in this fight?”

“I was against this as well,” Misato continued, still speaking softly. “But since we do have four units now, apparently the Vice Commander thought it justifiable to hold you in reserve.”

Realization dawned on Asuka. “To bench me. For what I did yesterday.” A cold fear spread inside her. The prelude to losing EVA-02 altogether. They’re taking my status away from me.
Misato nodded. She seemed very subdued now. “I assume as much, yes. I’m sorry, Asuka, there’s nothing I can do. That’s the tactical situation we have: Shinji in EVA-01, Touji in EVA-03 and Kaworu in EVA-04. You three will deploy.”

“You can’t be serious!” Asuka raged. Hot rage was better than cold fear. “What makes you think I’ll enter the entry plug at all then?”

“I don’t foresee any trouble, but if anything does happen… we’ll need the fourth Unit then,” Misato told her. “Shinji might need that backup. It’s him and two newbies out there.”

“Gottverdammte Scheiße, that old fossil again shows his masterful tactical awareness,” Asuka ranted.

“Not to mention his spite,” Shinji added with a sullen voice. “To insist on having Asuka punished, even in the face of an angel attack…”

Misato sighed. “He claimed he also needs to think of future attacks. And ensure a proper military discipline for them.”

“Discipline?” Asuka exploded once again. “Who does he think I am, a combat drone? I…”

Kaworu cleared his throat. “Uh… Asuka?”

The redhead whirled around on the spot. “What?”

“I just wanted to remind you about the power of Evangelions,” Kaworu told her. Asuka didn’t know what he meant with that and his facial expression was as mysterious as ever. “When Rei seemed lost inside an angel I told you not to worry, for there is more to Evangelions than meets the eye. And that proved to be true, didn’t it?”

Asuka furrowed her brows. That all still sounded nonsensical to her, but it had turned out okay back then, and besides, she couldn’t dismiss Kaworu as easily anymore. “And how will that help me now?”

Kaworu grinned. “Just trust in your Evangelion. Even if it is deactivated.” He walked some steps over the metal gangway that bridged over the coolant liquid, and now stood right in front of said unit – EVA-02. He looked at intensely. Then he looked over his shoulder to Asuka. “It’s a remarkable being.”

Being? But before Asuka could ask, Kaworu was already walking over to his own unit.

These days, the only time the sky over Japan would go dark during the day was during the summer storms – the only kind of storms the country still had. More or less exactly as NERV had gotten word of the angel being detected, such a storm had begun over Tokyo-3. The sun was blocked out by a thick, grey wall of clouds, rain came pouring down in torrents, wind howled between the city’s skyscrapers.

All in all, it was a perfect reflection of Shinji’s mood.

The tensions of the past days still weighted heavily on his mind. And now, he would have to pilot
yet again. Fight against an angel yet again. He had always known there was a chance this would happen, of course, but as he realized now, he had only ever thought of it as a merely theoretical possibility. Rei could pilot EVA-01, and they had all agreed it was better she did it than him. He still had been a pilot, but only a reserve pilot at best, and secretly, he had been just fine with that. But this lofty state of affairs had been destroyed now. Worse, he felt guilty about feeling bad about this. Last time Rei had piloted, an angel had swallowed her and she had nearly died. So it was better he piloted, right? Right? But he still just couldn’t help but feel terrible about that.

Even worse, this would be the first time in a long while he would be in a fight without either Rei or Asuka being at his side. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Touji and Kaworu. Touji was his friend and Kaworu a nice boy, maybe a potential friend. But both were in fact newbies. NERV had had less time to train them than they had had for Shinji, back after Sachiel. Shinji had been able to be trained in piloting for three weeks afterwards; the new guys now hadn’t even gotten two. However, that wasn’t even the crux of the problem. Even if they had been master pilots… they just weren’t Rei and Asuka.

Though at least he wouldn’t have to go entirely without them.

“That overgrown dove sure is taking its sweet time, neh?” he heard Asuka over the comms.

That was at least one positive thing Misato had done. She had ensured, apparently against some resistance, that EVA-02’s comm system would be active at least, and that Rei would have her own comm console in the command centre. His guardian knew how close the three had become. It made him kinda wonder what conclusions she drew from that… but of course, right now, she was in ‘Captain’, well, that is, in ‘Major Mode’, and that meant she was just coldly pragmatic. It didn’t matter what that relationship meant. It only mattered that being able to keep in contact would most likely help Shinji’s morale and hence his synch-rate.

Even so, Shinji was very grateful for her actions.

“As far as I’m concerned, it can stay up there forever,” Shinji muttered back.

“A thousand yen say it won’t,” Asuka quipped.

“Sucker’s bet,” Touji muttered.

Shinji looked outside his cockpit to see Touji’s black EVA some distance away. Truth be told, amidst the storm and rain he could only notice it because he knew where to look. The three available units had been dispersed throughout the central city. While it was a safe bet the angel would attack Tokyo-3, nobody could foresee where, and from orbit, it could reach just about anywhere.

“I can understand Shinji’s wish,” Rei’s soft voice could now be heard. She hesitated. “Eventually, the angel attacks will be over.”

Shinji smiled faintly. He was glad to be able to hear her comforting words.

“I guess. But leave it to the Commander to pull stuff like this,” Asuka sneered. “Put two boys who don’t want to fight on the frontline, and bench the girl who would in fact like to fight.” Apparently, after being benched, she had decided to not even maintain decorum any longer. Having someone openly sneer at and defy the people responsible for Shinji’s current situation, that was reassuring as well, in its own, very Asuka-ish way.
“Shinji,” Misato spoke up now. “Is the positron rifle working?”

Shinji sighed. That was another thing. Not only was he fielded in a fight again, not only would he have to go without Asuka and Rei, no, the main burden of the fight would also rest on him. As the most experienced of the fielded pilots, he had been given NERV’s newest toy: A miniaturized form of the positron cannon used against Ramiel, a ‘positron rifle’. He could only hope it was not quite as worthless as the pallet rifle.

The positron rifle came with a helmet with a targeting visor. It worked just like the positron cannon’s aiming system had worked: Fire when the two symbols on the visor met in the middle. That meant the target was in range. So far, the two symbols were quite far from each other.

“I guess,” Shinji said. “I don’t think you want me to demolish some buildings just to test it.” That had been maybe a bit snappish, but…

“I’m sure some people here would like such test data,” Misato muttered. “But no, thanks. Just keep an eye out for the angel.”

Shinji pulled the irritating helmet back and just looked outside. The black shape of EVA-03 to one side, the greyish-white shape of EVA-04 to the other. Not that they were really visible right now, but Shinji of course knew both looked very much alike in form. He sighed. It really wasn’t the same as having EVA-00 and EVA-02 on the battlefield. The two new EVAs had ugly snouts and looked like they were grinning evilly.

“Angel’s orbital height is lowering!” That was Lieutenant Ibuki.

“Here it comes,” Misato announced. “Try to shoot it down as it approaches, Shinji!”

Shinji sighed yet again and pulled the helmet over his head. His heart beat in his chest. In a few minutes he would be in battle again. Would feel pain again, most likely. It would all happen once again. Sachiel nearly breaking his skull, Shamshel whipping him and literally piercing through his body, Ramiel boiling him alive until he passed out, hearing Rei nearly die to defeat Bardiel… and now, something would happen again. Fear gripped his heart.

“Come on, you bastard,” he snarled quietly. He wished this would all be over now. So now he wished the angel would finally show its face, so that he could get the inevitable pain over with.

Shinji gasped in shock.

Something was touching him. Not his body, not his skin or limbs or organs – him. His mind. His soul. And suddenly, there was light all around him.

Something wanted to enter his mind. Wanted to see his darkest secrets. Shinji knew it was malevolent and destructive like this; he could feel it. And yet, he was powerless against it. It wanted to have its way with him, and it would. There was no denying it. It was forcing itself on him, and he couldn’t resist.

“Nooo!” he screamed. The positron rifle clattered on the ground in front of EVA-01, breaking.
And just like that, the battlefield had turned into chaos.

A beam, or maybe more a ray, was now falling down from the sky, hitting EVA-01, engulfing the unit. Shinji’s tortured screams could be heard over all comm channels.

“Not again,” Kaworu heard Suzuhara mutter. EVA-03’s pilot sounded determined. “Not on my watch.” Both their EVA units ran towards their comrade. EVA-01 was twisting and bending, its head held between its hands.

“Retreat, Shinji!” Misato ordered. “The nearest elevator is 200m away!”

But it didn’t seem Shinji was even capable of understanding her. His screams began to sound hoarse.

Touji reached the cone of light first, just some seconds before Kaworu could. He tried to ram into it, possibly in order to push EVA-01 out of the way… but it didn’t work. As soon as EVA-03 hit the edge of the cone, Touji began to scream in pain and his Evangelion just… collapsed. It seemed Touji had lost all control over it. Kaworu had EVA-04 run around the light and dragged EVA-03 away from it… all the while looking worriedly at EVA-01, which by now had sunk to its knees and was still holding its head.

“Activate me!” he heard Asuka scream over the comms. “Gottverdammt, activate me now! Shinji needs my help!”

EVA-04 now stood over EVA-03, which was slowly getting up to its feet again, and looked at the ray of light. Kaworu breathed out… and charged forwards. His brother was pouring a part of its soul down here, and Kaworu had no idea what powers it held. Even so, he couldn’t leave Shinji in agony.

But as soon as he entered the light, he felt his body searing all over… felt his EVA searing all over, even though he wasn’t even synched to it. He grunted and moaned and finally a pained scream escaped his lips. So much pain… if he had been properly synched, surely that connection would have broken down by now. Even so, he found it supremely difficult to maintain his control over his EVA’s flesh. He managed to step back from the light just so… and his EVA fell down on its knees outside.

Pain… pain… pain…

That was new. He panted. He had had no idea the world could hurt so much. He had gone through life watching people, but always cold, always aloof, always from a distance. Their pain was just a detail to be observed. Something to help with, of course. Kaworu had always tried to help people. Even now, when it seemed like the world might soon end, when it seemed he might soon end the world, he tried to help. Tried to make people smile. Tried to make some certain people smile. But he had never really been invested into this. It had always just been… maybe not a game to play, but still just an exercise. He had had no idea. No idea what hurt and pain were and now he did.

Is that what Mana feels? What Kensuke feels? That thought shocked him. Even as he was still hurting himself, he began to also feel worried.

“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS!” Asuka’s voice, still raging through the comms. “SHINJI NEEDS ME! GET ME UP THERE!”
And now, there was something inside Kaworu which understood. It was an eye-opening shock to experience such pain himself, an excruciating torture because he had never felt anything like this before. But if he imagined that certain other people would have to go through it...

Asuka didn’t need to imagine. She was experiencing it. She loves Shinji, he realized. And yet she is powerless.

He had already given a gift to Asuka. He had unlocked the potential inside her Evangelion. But maybe, maybe that wasn’t enough. Shinji was still suffering. And even if they ended his suffering… the only way would be to kill the angel. To kill yet another one of Kaworu’s brothers.

Kaworu closed his eyes. He still felt mental burns all over his soul. It ached when he moved it. And yet he had to, had to extend his mind… extend his soul. He hoped his Pattern Blue would remain subsumed within that of his brother and hence not be detected.

Stop this, Brother.

---Another one of us? Shock/excitement/disbelief.

Kaworu didn’t address this. He was still aching too much. He had to focus. You’re hurting the lilim. You have hurt me.


So I know now how the lilim feels. Your analysis is throwing him into an agony worse than our loneliness, brother. You need to stop.


There are three other units down here. If you try to unite with Mother now, you will be killed. Just end this.

---No. Resolve/finality/passion.

You’re only causing suffering here and your own death later on!

---If I don’t unite with Mother, you will. I won’t leave the Holy Union to you. Accusation/spite/hostility.

If you don’t retreat, I may have to kill you. And I will protect the lilim you’re hurting!

---Do as you wish. Only one of us will be able to unite with Mother anyway.

This defiance, this hostility, this blocking of each other ended the communication. There was no convincing the Angel of the Sky. If Kaworu wanted to defend Shinji, then he would have to act. Then he would have to fight his brother. But how?

He could easily protect EVA-01, actually. He held his Mother’s soul inside him, after all. There was only one other soul on this Earth with the same kind of power, and Kaworu didn’t know where that one was… though he had his suspicions. His soul, Mother’s soul, had a light of an incredible
strength, a barrier none were allowed to pass, a fortress that could only be taken by one other force on this planet. Certainly not by the Angel of the Sky.

If he extended his field around EVA-01, Shinji would be safe. Nothing would be able to hurt him beneath that protective wing. But at the same time, everyone would know just who and what Kaworu was. Last time he had encountered that dilemma he had been sure in the aftermath that he should have acted. But now...

EVA-01 was cowering on its knees. There was only tearful crying coming through the comms from it now. It sounded like Shinji had collapsed into tears, unable to perceive his outside world. Kaworu heard Rei’s soft whispers through the comms, trying to comfort him. Trying to tell him this all would soon end, that he had friends to help him, that he didn’t need to fear. Unfortunately, Shinji didn’t seem to hear.

“Goddamnit!” That was Touji. EVA-03 was on its own feet again. It threw its head back and roared... “I’ll save you this time! I’ll pay you back, Shinji!” EVA-03 charged towards the cone again... only to collapse yet again at its edge, amidst Touji’s tortured screams. *His actions were brave, but in vain.* There was only one being who could do something: Kaworu himself.

“Ihr verfickten Wichser, lasst mich endlich auf die Oberfläche!” Asuka, of course. “Shinji! Shinji braucht mich! Ich muss ihm helfen! Ihr verdammten Arschlöcher! Ich werd euch alle zerquetschen! Ich werde…” [1]

The ranting voice was cut off. Asuka’s comm system had probably been switched off. And Shinji continued to cry. Kaworu had to act… had sworn himself to act rather than to let another person suffer again... but found that he just couldn’t. His existence would be over then. NERV would then have the perfect excuse to get rid of whom they had to suspect was a SEELE spy. And what about the other pilots, what about Mana and Kensuke? He was their enemy. An angel. If he revealed that…

Kaworu heard Shinji crying and despaired.

Something was inside Shinji. He had never thought it possible, but there was something foreign, something alien inside his soul. Inside his very being. It felt invasive and dirty and humiliating. This was him, his sacred space, the space that should be just for him alone, and now he had even this taken away from him. Something entered without his agreement, without his consent. It was an abject lesson in being completely powerless. It was degrading.

Now he understood the value of people being apart. It was something that would never have occurred to him before, because people being apart, that was just how things were, nothing to think about. But this angel, it was becoming part of him, invading him. Shinji wasn’t standing apart anymore, with a well-defined sense of identity vis-a-vis others, vis-a-vis the angel. And now he realized how that sense of identity provided… well, Asuka would have called it dignity.

Separation meant dignity. And Shinji’s dignity was being torn to shreds right now.

At will, the foreign entity moved through his mind, through his memories. Shinji desperately begged it to stop, but to no avail. The entity didn’t even regard him. It simply exercised its full power. And so Shinji could do nothing as memories from his childhood kept being dragged up.

* A young boy of four, crying at the train station. His father leaving him, abandoning him. He is
alone at the train station. Nobody cares for the crying boy. All he knows is that he has been abandoned. His mother left him, and now even his father doesn’t care about him anymore. That can’t be a coincidence. It has to be his fault. He is unlovable.

The same boy, a year older, playing at the playground. Forming a castle out of sand. Other boys come and go. Some want to play with him. But he just continues to form his castle. It gets dark, and he is still forming his castle. Alone. The castle is all he has.

“Don’t… no… don’t...” Shinji knew about how lonely his life had been, of course. But it had always been best not to think about it. That is how he had gone through life for the past ten years, always living day by day, never thinking ahead, never reflecting. It was something that provided him a peace of mind. But now, whether he wanted or not, that peace of mind would be destroyed.

A classroom. Elementary school. School begins for the boy. Some others take an interest in him, but he just sits in his desk and looks outside. He still hasn’t gotten used to the new town. He feels like he doesn’t belong here.

Coming home. If ‘home’ means anything. His tutor is never mean, never shouts at him… never looks at him, rarely speaks with him. He takes some interest in his grades, but he only seems to care that he functions, never about his well being. Even the clothes he sometimes leaves in the boy’s room never seem to quite fit. And the few times the boy came home bloodied, it didn’t seem to concern the tutor at all.

There are some neighbourhood kids. Now and then they try to visit the boy. But they’re coming ever less often. The boy likes when they come, but he doesn’t know what to say, what to do, and he never visits them in turn. He isn’t good around people. How could he, after everyone has just abandoned him or is ignoring him? Over time, the neighbourhood kids lose interest.

Shinji was crying now. All these memories... Why why why... He didn’t want to see them. He didn’t want to have it reconfirmed over and over again what a failure he was. He knew that well enough already. But he had no power, no power at all. Not even his mind was his own anymore. The entity held no regard for him, simply ravaged everything inside him. One more being who just saw him as a tool and nothing more. A tool to collect information. He was being used once again, and he had no power to stop it. He felt dirty.

There were some people in the boy’s class with which he had good relations. But even that amounted to little more than nodding at each other in greeting before class, mutual questions about homework, practicalities. And over time, the boy got afraid of anything more than that. He didn’t respond to anyone coming closer to him. The prospect was just too frightening.

Life simply goes on for the boy. One day like the other. And he begins to... maybe not like it that way, but he still begins to prefer it. It means security. At least, nobody will abandon him. He can fend for himself. He cooks his own meals, buys his own clothes. That’s alright. At least then nobody can hurt him. And his grades are good enough, so even his tutor won’t show any disapproval. He goes through life without feeling disapproval or unfriendliness from anyone. If that also means feeling no friendship or friendliness, then that was quite alright.

A kaleidoscope of pictures, all showing loneliness. And they were all the same. There had always been other people reaching out to him. Maybe not many. But there never was a community of people totally bereft of members who would look to the lonely boy and walk up to him. But that boy, he never had used his chances. He had always remained alone.
...and it had been his own fault.


Deep down he had always known that of course. He never had been good for anything besides piloting Evangelion, and that was something he hated. The one thing he was good at, and he was shying away from it because he was a coward. But now he had proof of it, laid out to him in great detail. All his trouble in life, all the loneliness – his own fault. He had so wished for… for a family, for someone who would praise him when he had arrived at Tokyo-3. That was why he had stayed. That was why he had piloted, despite all the pain. That was why he hadn’t left Tokyo-3, because Misato had at least shown some concern for him.

...he had longed for something deep down, and it had always been his own damn fault that he had lacked it. He was an abject, utter failure. He had nobody to blame but himself. Not his father for abandoning him. Not his tutor for never caring. Not Misato for sending him out to fight. Only himself. And why would anyone care for such a failure as himself?

Other memories. Watching his classmates talk to each other cheerfully. Boys boasting among each other, girls giggling among each other. Watching the families of his classmates. Seeing love, connection, closeness. Everybody seemed to have that, except him. He had long since given up hope on that. He simply went through life hoping things wouldn’t get even worse.

...but how else to determine the value of a person than by the people who like them? And nobody had ever liked Shinji. He had always been alone. So what worth did he have? He had none. After coming to Tokyo-3, there were Rei and Asuka now, but Shinji was sure that was transient as well. Just like the neighbourhood kids who had eventually stopped visiting him. It wouldn’t last. They would end up not caring about him as well. After all, why would anyone chain themselves to such a failure as himself?

Shinji simply sat in his entry-plug and cried. The entity was still inside him, still held no regard for him. But that was appropriate. Why should anyone? Whatever it did to him, it probably was well-deserved. He was dirt. Lower than dirt. A pathetic, lonely boy, so desperate for attention and praise that he would let himself get whipped and stabbed by angels and still come back, because he had failed to make any friends on his own. So why not this… this… intrusion as well?

In the end, his entire state, all the loneliness and all the pain, were all his fault.

[1]”You fucking wankers, let me up on the surface already! Shinji! Shinji needs me! I must help him! You damn assholes! I will crush you all! I will throw you to the next angel! I will...”
Shinji’s sobs were coming through the comms. So was, periodically, the Second Child’s raving and rambling. Gendo just sat at his desk in the command centre, head hidden behind his hands, and observed the situation.

The fight was turning out badly, but that in itself presented a chance to him. He had not expected the Angel of the Air to stay above the air. Maybe Fuyutsuki had a point about their over-reliance on the scrolls… he dismissed that thought. The Fruit of Knowledge allowed them to adapt. He had planned this manoeuvre for later – maybe against the Angel of the Womb. But it would serve nicely here.

But for now, first, he had to cut his losses.

“Lieutenant Ibuki, cut the synchronization between the Third Child and EVA-01,” he ordered.

“But sir!” Katsuragi immediately protested. “That will make it impossible for Shinji to retreat.”

Gendo looked down at the lower tier of the command centre. Katsuragi was looking up, her hands balled into fists. She was worried for Shinji… the worry and concern that he himself had never been able to show. But that was for the better now. Shinji was a pilot now. The Third Child. He would have to treat him accordingly.

“He doesn’t seem able to retreat anyway,” Gendo countered. “All we can do now is cut our losses. Prevent additional damage to EVA-01.” He should have given the order earlier. All his plans, all his schemes, his entire scenario would be worthless without EVA-01. I let concern for Shinji cloud my judgement. That was dangerous. That could not happen again. And now he would have to act decisively. “Lieutenant Ibuki, proceed.”

Ritsuko’s assistant nearly cowered down in her seat as she executed the order.

“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS!” Loudspeakers carried the angry voice of the Second Child through the command centre. “SHINJI NEEDS ME! GET ME UP THERE!”

“Sir,” Katsuragi spoke up, again looking up to Gendo’s and Fuyutsuki’s tier of the command centre. “I do recommend launching EVA-02.”

“Request denied,” Gendo answered coldly from his desk. “We already have three units up there who can do nothing against the angel. EVA-02 would simply be an additional target.”

“In concert, they might be able to push EVA-01 out of the light cone,” Katsuragi argued.

“Unlikely,” Fuyutsuki spoke up now. “And that low chance doesn’t justify exposing EVA-02 to danger. Rest assured, we’re working on a solution.”

“Ihr verfickten Wichser, lasst mich endlich auf die Oberfläche! Shinji! Shinji braucht mich! Ich muss ihm helfen! Ihr verdamnten Arschlöcher!”

“Shut down EVA-02’s communication system,” Gendo ordered.
“We could just mute it here,” Katsuragi suggested. “Shinji may depend on support from...”

“The Third Child will survive,” Gendo cut her off. “And NERV can’t allow itself to be held hostage by the moody whims of a teenager. She has to come to realize that. Shut down EVA-02’s comm system.”

Gendo noticed how Lieutenant Hyuga still looked at Katsuragi first. Only when she gave a tiny nod in his direction did he enact Gendo’s order. The Commander didn’t care as long as he did, but it was a trend to keep a watch on.

“Ich werd euch alle zerquetschen! Ich werd euch den nächsten Engel zum Fraß vorwerfen. Ich werde...” The ranting stopped.

Fuyutsuki used the quiet to whisper into Gendo’s ear. “This is bad, Ikari. You think the JSSDF’s positron cannon might have enough reach?”

“Operation Yashima required hours to be put in place,” Gendo reminded him. “We would again have to draw on the energy output of all of Japan. This isn’t feasible. No. We’ll use the Spear.”

Fuyutsuki backed away in surprise. “The Spear? But the old men...”

“We have the perfect justification to use it now, don’t we?” Gendo argued. “If we wait for a better, later opportunity, it may never come.”

“Very well,” Fuyutsuki conceded. “But who can use it? Rei isn’t available. We could use Asuka...”

“The Second Child is disposable,” Gendo agreed. “But that doesn’t mean we should waste her. We still have a use for EVA-02. And since Rei has been barred from synching with an Evangelion ever since we brought the Spear back, it isn’t at its intended place. It isn’t held at a secret location. Any pilot could fetch it.”

“So who do you have in mind?” Fuyutsuki asked.


Gendo didn’t need to look over his shoulder to know Fuyutsuki’s face was darkening now. “You know what Dr Akagi told us about him. Her suspicions.”

“They are irrelevant,” Gendo told him. “There is nothing he can do with just the Spear on its own.”

He pushed some buttons on his console. An image of the Fifth Child inside his EVA appeared.

“Kaworu Nagisa, you are to enter the nearest EVA elevator back to base,” Gendo ordered him. “I’m transmitting a path through the NERV HQ to you. You are to fetch a certain weapon and return with it to the surface.”

“A weapon?” the grey-haired boy asked.

“A weapon that will destroy the angel,” Gendo explained. “And you will use it.”

“I… Understood,” Kaworu answered. He sounded hesitant. But as long as he carried out the order, Gendo didn’t care.
As soon as the comm connection was closed, Fuyutsuki was whispering into Gendo’s ear again. “Even if the opportunity is perfect, the old men will not keep quiet about this. We need to…”

Suddenly, a shout from the lower tier. Lieutenant Ibuki. “EVA-02 is activating!”

“What?” That was Ritsuko.

“It… oh my god,” Maya’s voice almost fell to a whisper. “Sempai, take a look at this data.”

Ritsuko ran over to her console, and then groaned. “Can we have just one goddamn battle without one of the EVAs going berserk? And maybe just one battle where Asuka isn’t out of line? Is that too much to ask for?”

“Doctor Akagi,” Gendo called from above. “Is this confirmed? Is EVA-02 going berserk?”

Ritsuko glared up at him. “Yes, sir. It is.” She sounded acid and cold.

“Flood EVA-02’s cage with bakelite,” Gendo ordered.

The lights in the EVA cages had been dimmed. With all active units out to fight, there was no need to waste energy. It wasn’t entirely dark, but it was sort of grey.

Four green lights flared up in that grey.

Asuka felt energy and power all around her. Her Evangelion was responding to her. The one thing in her life upon which she had always been able to depend. And once again it wasn’t failing her. She didn’t consider that this should be impossible. Didn’t consider how stable the Production Model was, that it shouldn’t be able to go berserk. Right now, she didn’t even consider that this was EVA-02 going berserk.

All she knew was that she could count on her Evangelion – and that Shinji would be able to count on her.

A purple mass of sticky stuff was now raining down from above, right onto her EVA. Bakelite. Asuka had read the NERV manuals. She knew what the stuff was. A sort of fast hardening plastic that, once solid, had an incredible strength. Conceivably, it could even restrain Evangelions.

But not this one. Not EVA-02. Not the first standard production model. Not the German model. Not MY unit!

For a while, the red Evangelion wrestled with that sticky, purple goo that seemed to ensnare it everywhere. It managed to rip its strings apart, shove it away, free itself from it, only for ever more to come raining down. Asuka had the strange feeling that she was controlling only part of the Evangelion. Many of its actions seemed to happen on their own. But that was alright. It was her trusty unit. It still did what she wanted it to do.

And as soon as the Bakelite had in fact hardened, EVA-02 simply broke out of it. Inside the entry-plug, Asuka laughed manically. And outside, at the same time, the Evangelion roared, that mighty sound echoing off the walls of the cage. And then it ran, right to the EVA launchers.
It only stopped for a short while once it had stepped onto the launcher. *Asuka* hesitated for a bit, wanting the launcher to activate, but she still had her comm system cut. But *EVA-02* didn’t hesitate. It knew exactly what to do. And Asuka simply went along with it.

The unit *jumped*. Leaping towards a wall of the launch tunnel, it clawed its fingers into it. Asuka groaned in pain, but also grinned. That was it. That was the way up. *EVA-02* would literally claw its way upwards. It now hung onto the walls like a spider. Like a *beast*. Asuka’s grin became… deranged. Vicious. She leaned forwards in her cockpit.

*EVA-02* jumped again, and once again rammed its hands into the walls to hang onto them. At this point, the unit felt only nominally like a *humanoid* battle unit. Instead, Asuka now felt something much more basic, more archaic, more primal. More animal like. In her cockpit, she was leaning so far forwards now, her face sporting a predator’s grin, that she was nearly on all fours.

Whatever had made *EVA-02* go berserk, it seemed to also have *transformed* it.

It was still an arduous task, but it didn’t feel that way to Asuka. She was single-mindedly driven right now, acting on animal instinct rather than human reason. And while she was climbing and leaping she *heard* something. Voices that seemed to come from inside the Evangelion.


“I will support you. I will help you. I will protect you. Always.”

“One final battle. Let us die together!”

“*Live! Live and love and laugh!*”

But in her current state, Asuka paid those voices no heed. The Evangelion was speaking? Who cared, she had a person she loved to save! In fact, in her current state spoken language seemed barely accessible to her at all!

Finally, *EVA-02* reached the surface. It hung right below the surface hatch… and pushed. It roared once again as the hatch broke into a dozen parts, and the Evangelion emerged. Somewhere in the distance, thunder could be heard. *EVA-02* climbed onto the surface amidst heavy rain, flanked on both sides by grey skyscrapers. As if it hadn’t realized the climb had ended, even now it didn’t stand completely upright. Asuka still de facto was on all fours in her entry-plug, and so was the unit. It moved on the ground not dissimilarly to a four-legged spider, its head spinning all around looking for threats.

Asuka saw *EVA-01*, barely visible behind several buildings, as it cowered on the ground, its head sunk beneath its arms. A ray of light surrounded it on all sides.

*EVA-02* twitched. Something was approaching it, a quick movement, coming right at it through the streets. Already, *EVA-02* wanted to jump at it, fight, defend itself ferociously… but Asuka could stop it. It was an Evangelion, the white-silvery *EVA-04*. Kaworu’s unit. It carried something in its right hand, holding it high over its head: A giant red spear, which seemed to be woven out of two strands. At the end of the shaft, they were bound tightly together, but they loosened up over the length of the artifact, showing a clear double helix structure, and finally ending in two distinct spear points.

*EVA-04* ended its run only a few dekametres away from *EVA-02*, which it seemed to completely ignore… and threw the spear, at nearly a right angle to the ground. It darted upwards through the clouds.
Impossible. In school, Asuka had been top of her class in physics. She intuitively knew no thrown object should fly like that. But apparently, the Spear didn’t. And as it reached the clouds, they were torn apart by it, scattering to all sides. The rains stopped. And only seconds later, the ray of light that had engulfed EVA-01 vanished.

Slowly, EVA-02 came to its feet. As the sky cleared up and sunshine began to fall on Tokyo-3 again, Asuka, amazed and astounded by what she was seeing, seemed to come to her senses again. The raw power she had felt only moments ago seemed to recede.

“He is safe. He is safe. He is safe.”
“Die with him. Die with me.”
“Live! Live with him!”

The voices... those voices again... what does this all mean...

Suddenly, the comm system worked again. She heard Shinji, a never ending series of quiet, desperate sobs. And she heard Commander Ikari’s cold voice. “Until further notice, we have to assume that EVA-01 and its pilot have been mentally contaminated. All units are to stay away from the Unit until it has been cleared.”

The fire inside Asuka was there again – her anger, her defiance, her general rage at the world. And with it came that feeling that she could draw from a limitless pool of power inside EVA-02. Shinji was suffering right there in front of her eyes... audible to her. She knew what that was like, to cry and have nobody to hear. In fact, that was why she hadn’t cried in over ten years, not even at the funeral of her mother. It was senseless, anyway. Nobody would come for her if she were to cry.

But by all gods and powers out there, she was going to come for Shinji.

Again, the four green eyes flared up. EVA-02 destroyed the entire upper level of a building as it swung its legs over it and then ran over to EVA-01. The purple unit didn’t move a single metre, didn’t even twitch. It’s de-activated, Asuka realized. Which meant that Shinji couldn’t even get out of his entry-plug... and he was still crying. To hell with that.

Asuka felt the power around her, the power in her Evangelion, waning. She had her unit grab EVA-01’s neck, and opened the entry-plug hatch by brute force. Then she pulled out the plug and carefully laid it above a nearby building. With the last bit of power she felt inside EVA-02, she had the unit turn its back to that building and kneel down. Then she released her own entry plug, just as she perceived the last reserves of EVA-02’s strength dwindling.

It was still an act of acrobatic mastery to leave the plug, which was now half sticking out of of EVA-02’s neck, four metres or so above the rooftop. Asuka’s landing on that rooftop was not quite as elegant and graceful as she had hoped. But she had no attention to spend on her aching knee and ankles. Shinji was more important.

It took nearly a minute until she had opened the plug door from without. A wave of LCL splashed over her. She fought her way through it, not willing to wait a single second longer. Already she could hear Shinji crying again, and that was an unbearable sound. She had to help him. She just had to; it was a physical need. The boy was a ball of misery, his head between his legs and his arms around them. His sobs were heartbreaking. The LCL had not even sunk below his shoulders when she grabbed him and pulled him up. He fell into her embrace.
Quietness. The entity had left Shinji’s mind. The only experience remaining was the sound of his sob. He couldn’t stop crying. Not after what he had just been through. There was a wound in his mind that just wouldn’t close.

The angel was gone, but the damage was done. His mind… that place was soiled now, dirty, damaged. It would never be the same again. He was soiled and used. There was an essential feeling of uncleanness that he was quite sure would never go away again. How could it? The body was a mere a shell. You could have entire limbs hacked off and still go on living. So surely, a hand or a foot weren’t essential, weren’t what made a person that person. But the mind was. And it was Shinji’s very mind which had been invaded, which had been altered, which had been defiled. His very self was unclean now.

There was no safe refuge for him anymore. No privacy of thought. No space to retreat to. Even his mind and his very self had been invaded. He felt utter revulsion at that thought. He would never be safe again.

But then, it was his own damn fault, wasn’t it? It had been his decision to pilot, and his decision to stay and continue piloting, even when Misato had offered him a way out, several times. He had gotten his head head smashed in, his chest pierced, his body whipped all over, his chestplate torn open and himself boiled in LCL and strangled… and yet he had always come back for more. This violation was just one more item on the list.

But it wasn’t like he was a hero, oh no. He hadn’t started to pilot out of conviction or idealism. He had followed that weird idea that maybe he could get his father’s praise that way. That was why he had fought. He had been disappointed that his father hadn’t been there for the Shamshel fight, had even questioned why he then fought at all. And then he had simply been surprised that there was a person who had cared about him at all, at least in some fashion – Misato. But of course, she only cared because he piloted, so he had to pilot. Despite all the pain that brought. That was why he hadn’t taken the train, why he had let himself be brought back by Misato.

And when Misato had offered he could stay with her even without piloting… by then it had been too late. He already had been too involved. Had been involved because piloting EVA had been the only way for him at all to get some praise, some concern, some attention.

But as the angel had shown him, it was his own damn fault he had been so lonely before. He was lonely because he fucked up any attempts at relationships, he had started piloting because he was lonely, and now he had his mind gotten violated and defiled because he had piloted. So, ultimately, it was his own fault. He had nobody to blame for this, not even the angel. It was probably just doing what was in its nature. Meanwhile he, he had had a choice, several of them. He had had chances. He just had blown them all.

And after ten years of blowing those chances, why would this change now?

Shinji’s crying escalated to an anguished scream. For over ten years, people had tried to approach him, had tried to build up friendships or other relationships with him, and he had just shunned everyone and remained lonely. People were still trying, but he would inevitably end up shunning them as well. He would remain like this forever – lonely, pathetic and ultimately a failure. And now dirty, despoiled and worthless as well.

He snapped for air. The LCL… the LCL was draining out of the entry-plug. He was breathing normal air again. He just shook his head and kept it between his arms and his legs. It didn’t matter.
He didn’t want to go anywhere. It would be the same everywhere. He would fuck up and end up lonely no matter the place. And he couldn’t see people, not now. Not after what had happened. He was a filthy, worthless pathetic person and…

He was pulled up forcefully. In his dazed state, he only vaguely recognized a red plugsuit, but that was enough. That signalled… home. Safety. He fell against the plugsuit and felt arms closing around him. For surely several minutes he just cried against Asuka’s chest, his mind empty of any coherent thoughts.

But then, even as his body shook from the sobs, doubts were beginning to creep in again. He had Asuka now, yes. He could rely on her. But how long would this last? Eventually, he would fuck up and lose her as well. Rei, too. Relationships never lasted. Only loneliness did.

“You’ll leave… you’ll leave… you’ll leave…”

Even as he was incoherently blubbering this he was still crying into Asuka’s chest.

She grabbed his shoulders and pushed him upright, away from her so that he could look into her face. She looked… angry?

“Why would you say that?” she demanded to know.

It all came pouring out of Shinji. “Because everyone does… everyone leaves… it’s my fault… I drive them all away. That’s… that’s the reason why I’ve always been lonely, I’ve driven everyone away, I’ll drive you away, and Rei, why would I change now, I’ll just stay lonely forever and maybe it’s for the best who would want to…”

He stopped when Asuka shook him. It was just once and rather gently, but still, she looked very displeased.

“That’s it. It’s happening now. I’ve fucked up.”

“Shinji,” she just told him. The boy looked down, tears still running over his cheeks. “Shinji!” That made him look up. Asuka’s face was stern. “I’m telling you, I will not abandon you. You have shown no sign whatsoever of driving me away. As long as you want me around, I will be around.”

Shini shook his head. “You… you say that now and you believe it, but… it has always happeed. I always fuck up. Why should this be different?”

Asuka withdrew her hands from his shoulders. Her body seemed to go rigid. Then she breathed out loudly and softly laid a gloved hand on Shinji’s cheek. The boy jumped back in surprise, but only a centimetre or so. Asuka’s face was enigmatic.

“Because…” Her voice got softer. “Because I love you, you idiot. Everything you’ve done… when I came here I did think you where a whiny brat who only got his job due to nepotism and who shouldn’t complain so much.” Shinji winced. “But I was wrong. Everything you did… it didn’t drive me away. It convinced me I was wrong. That you’re caring and serious and helpful and always just want the best for people.”

“That’s… that’s not me,” Shinji protested hoarsely.

“Yes it is, Dummkopf!” Asuka insisted and grabbed his shoulder again to look him square in the face. “It is you and I love you!” Shinji looked at her in wide-eyed shock. Asuka hesitated, but then
stated decisively: “And so does Rei. And that’s good. You’re loved, Shinji, and nobody is going to abandon you. Not ever again. Do you hear me?”

For several moments, nobody said a word. Then Shinji replied quietly, “She loves you as well. And… so do I.” Asuka’s mouth opened, as if she were to say something in reply, but no words came out. Again Shinji shook his head. “But you’re amazing and fiery and so full of life… always striving for perfection, standing up for what’s right, fighting… whereas I…”

“Whereas you – without your support I wouldn’t be able to fight,” Asuka said firmly.

And now, Shinji just didn’t know how to respond. He was a failure as a human being, had always been alone, and now he was dirty and stained… nobody should love him. But Asuka sounded as determined and fiery as ever. She left no doubt as to what she was saying.

Shinji couldn’t cry anymore. All his tears had already been spent. But he had a feeling inside him… as if he had fallen down an abyss and now had been picked up by a guardian angel. It moved him. So much that he didn’t know what to say.

“Come,” Asuka merely said. “Let’s go home.”

She laid an arm around his waist… and Shinji clung on to her. He had to feel that it was true. That Asuka was still here, that she hadn’t left him, that she’d be at his side. That fear was still inside him. Even now, he did expect her to vanish any minute. So he clung on to her… like a shipwrecked man clinging on to a beam of wood. He would drown without her.

For all of her life, Rei had been powerless. But now, for the first time, she actually felt that.

Out there in the city, fighting the fight she should have been, was the boy who had first shown care and tenderness to her. The boy who had first treated her as more than just a tool with which to reach Instrumentality. The boy who had mediated between her and Asuka, had allowed the relationship between them to grow. And now the boy was crying in desperation over the comm channels and there was absolutely nothing Rei could do.

Her heart went out to him. She felt almost sick that she now couldn’t repay all the kindness he had shown her. All her softly spoken reassurances and attempts at comfort over the comm system didn’t even seem to reach him. Not that this would make her stop. If there was even the slightest chance that he would, if only for a second, break out of his near-catatonia, even the slightest chance that he would hear her, then she would speak and speak for hours on end if need be.

Asuka was of course reacting in her own way, all fire and flame, and Rei wouldn’t want her to be any other way. She could maybe reach through the walls and misery Shinji had built around himself in order to support and comfort him, but Asuka was a fighter – given the slightest opportunity, she would go out there and help Shinji.

And then, Asuka’s comm system was shut down. Rei shot a quick glance up to the Commander’s desk. It was a justifiable decision, but… but… Rei was torn between the part that had been in her second body and the part that had been in the EVA. It was justifiable, but the Commander had cut off Asuka. And he had deprived Shinji of whatever comfort her voice may hold for him.

In truth, she didn’t know anymore what to think about the Commander. She still believed in the
Scenario, but that was a holdover: It had been ingrained into her during her second body, and it just had never changed. She had never really questioned it. She didn’t know where she now truly stood in regards to it and the Commander. She was in some ways living a completely new life, and some things in it were still confusing.

Others were clear, though. Like her love for Shinji and Asuka. So when EVA-02 started going berserk, Rei’s heart leaped, even though she simply continued to speak softly to Shinji. And when the destruction of the angel was announced, she breathed a sigh of relief. However, somewhat to her surprise, Major Katsuragi didn’t show any sign of relief or joy. The Operations Director simply turned around and walked up to Rei, her face still cast on stone.

“Let’s go, Rei,” Katsuragi told her. She crossed her arms, grabbing her left elbow with her right hand. “We need to get to the scene.”

“Why?” Rei just asked.

“For Shinji’s sake,” Katsuragi promised her. “And Asuka’s.”

That convinced Rei. People were staring after them as they left, apparently quite surprised the Operations Director would do so. Only Lieutenant Hyuga wasn’t; he simply took over for Katsuragi in the command centre.

Apparently, Katsuragi was planning to take a helicopter, but in stark contrast to her former haste, it took quite a while until one was ready. She seemed to want a specific pilot even though several were available. That pilot was a small woman not much older than the Major herself, and similar to Asuka obviously not fully Japanese, sporting more ‘European’ eyes and a slighter darker skin. She seemed to be on first name basis with Katsuragi.

Rei was still musing over the Major’s perplexing actions when the pilot finally started a small copter from an entrance port to the Geofront, more than five minutes after the angel attack had ended. It almost seemed like Katsuragi had a plan, but if so, Rei couldn’t decipher it.

It took another five minutes for the copter to reach its destination. Rei could see EVA-01 and EVA-02, two motionless giants, the latter propped up against a building side, its entry-plug hanging out from its neck. On that roof, another entry-plug, its hatch open. There was LCL everywhere on the ground. And in front of the entry-plug… Rei’s heart leapt again. Shinji. Asuka.

The copter landed on the roof. Rei saw Asuka watching the process with furrowed brows. Shinji… Shinji was clinging to her. He was in an almost hunchbacked pose, his left arm slung around Asuka’s back, his right hand grabbing her right arm. Without Asuka present, he would literally fall down.

Both Katsuragi and Rei left the copter before it had even properly touched the ground, splashing orange goo as they did so. Rei didn’t know what to do. She wanted to run over to Shinji, comfort him, tell him she was there… but she had never done such things. Such things just weren’t in her nature. She wanted to do this but couldn’t.

“What are you doing here?” Asuka snarled at Katsuragi. “Shouldn’t you be at Headquarters? Together with the Commander and the Vice Commander?”

Rei’s heart beat faster. Asuka was misdirecting her anger, but… it was because she was in a ‘ready for combat’ mode. She would defend Shinji – against any possible threat. It was for this passion
that Rei loved her.

“I needed to be here, on the field,” Katsuragi answered her. Her voice was measured and emotionless.

“Why? To ‘see him’?” Asuka asked aggressively. “What good will that do?”

Katsuragi shook her head. “No. To make justifiable field decisions.” Now Asuka just blinked at her. “Given Shinji’s current state, it is justifiable that I just send you all home, for his sake.” Now Asuka seemed to understand. She looked surprised. “This is a temporary measure, of course. There will be consequences for what you have done here, Asuka.”

“I understand,” Asuka replied quietly. “But as long as I can take Shinji home now...”

Rei understood as well. Katsuragi was creating a fait accompli, using her authority as Operations Director. And indeed, her decision was justifiable even to NERV. But she still had had to act quickly in order to enact it.

Misato nodded. “Akiko will take you two and Rei home. I... well, I came here in order to lead the recovery and clean-up efforts, discovered you two on the way, and made my field decision. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Asuka answered firmly. She passed the Operations Director, half-carrying Shinji with her. When she had, she stopped for a moment. “Thank you, Misato.” Without looking back to see whether Misato had acknowledged this, she walked on.

The two reached Rei... and Shinji basically fell against her, his knees bent, his face against her chest, his hands holding on to her shoulders. Rei was surprised for a moment. What if the Commander... Then she saw Katsuragi faintly nod towards her. We’re among friends. She laid her arms around Shinji, pushed him up, and held him in a tight embrace. She was surprised how... physically needy he seemed to be. Just as he had with Asuka before, now he clung to her, tightly and almost motionlessly.

Soon afterwards, Asuka, put her arms around them both. Eventually, she said: “Come. We need to be gone before someone else from NERV arrives who can countermand Misato’s order. Let’s go home.”

Shinji didn’t seem to fully understand. Asuka and Rei had to coax him into the copter. And one of them had to leave his side; there was no room for three people in a row on the copter. On her own, Asuka took the spot at the copter’s front, next to the pilot. Shinji held his arm out as she left his side, but then just let it sink down again, as if defeated. He always maintained physical contact with Rei. So she tried to stay as close as possible to him, to make him feel that he wouldn’t be abandoned.

The copter started, with Rei and Shinji on the backbench. “We’re going home, Shinji”, she whispered to him. “It’s over. We’ll take care of you.”

She had an arm around his neck, and the other hand holding his. She continued to whisper soothingly to him as the copter made its way to their apartment bloc.
Comfort

Rei was slowly coming around to video games. At first, she hadn’t understood the principle. She had called the games too abstract to make a good training simulation. Then, she had tried them, but as a complete novice of course hadn’t been very good at them. Normally, for Asuka, that would have been no reason at all to go easy on her, but Rei…

...Asuka had always had an incredibly soft spot for Rei.

The blue-haired girl had become quite good on her own, though, especially in fighting games. Asuka would still win four out of five games on Tekken, but she wasn’t invincible anymore. What dismayed her was how Rei defeated her now and then. Asuka was, on principle, always going for the tanky characters. It was unsubtle, yeah, but she made it work. Rei, though, went for the light and graceful characters. The ones people claimed “required more skill”. It felt like a slight vindication of those people whenever Rei won.

It could have made Asuka angry. But now and then when Rei won her lips curled upwards, and it was the cutest thing to see. Not that this would stop Asuka from always trying to win, but it made it bearable whenever she didn’t.

Right now, their gaming session was a bit unusual, though. More pleasant, but in a melancholic way. They were sitting on pillows on the ground, in front of the TV, close to each other… but still with Shinji squeezed in between them. Currently, the boy was nestled under Rei’s arm, just leaning his head on his shoulder and watching the game. A few minutes ago he had been cuddled up to Asuka.

Not only did Asuka not mind, she was glad to be able to help him. Normally, this would even have been enjoyable – her and Rei so close, and Shinji cuddled up to them. But it was sad that Shinji needed that, or rather, the reason for that need. Whatever the angel, which NERV apparently now was calling ‘Arael’, had done to him, it had messed him up good. He was deathly afraid now everyone would leave him. Only constant physical contact could convince him otherwise.

*His mind. The angel has entered his mind. Has... violated his mind.* When Asuka had first come to Japan, she had envisioned glorious and ultimately victorious battles against the angels. Wild brawls in which she would have the upper hand. After all, that was what NERV had trained her for, wasn’t it? Physical combat. But it turned out NERV had lied to her. The angels were fare more insidious than that. Bardiel had nearly made them lose Rei and now Arael… *Mind rape. That’s what it is. NERV is sending us out against beings that would rape our minds.*

All three had spent the night in the same futon, of course, this time with Shinji in the middle. He had shaken and cried, and they had held him. Asuka just wished… Asuka just wished she could help him. She knew she already was by simply not leaving him, but it pained her to see Shinji like this. Gentle, soft Shinji, who already was caving under the burden put on his shoulders as it was. The nicest boy she had ever met, and how was the world repaying him?

So if constant physical contact was what Shinji needed, Asuka and Rei would give it to him. It wasn’t like that was really a burden on Asuka, and she doubted it was one on Rei, either. The two looked so… peaceful together. So adorable. So… Asuka didn’t have the right words. To see them both, well, maybe not happy, but content in each other’s presence, bringing each other peace. Asuka thought it odd she was thinking so. Shouldn’t she be jealous of the two?
She had been jealous, when the whole crisis with Shinji and Mana had happened. She had been jealous of the giggling airhead and still didn’t like her. But it seemed she just couldn’t get jealous of Shinji and Rei. When they caused each other to smile, then that was… good. The two looked good together.

“You won!”

Asuka’s attention snapped back to the TV screen. Her character lay beaten on the ground, Rei’s was doing a victory animation. She jerked her head around to look at the blue-haired girl… but Rei’s attention was now entirely on Shinji, giving him a faint, comforting smile.

Then she looked at Asuka. “Another round?” she asked softly.

“I’m sorry,” Shinji muttered into her neck.

Rei looked down at him. “What for?”

“Well… it’s not like you two can do much,” Shinji muttered an explanation. “Not with me around. With you needing to take care of me as if… Sorry. I can’t even prepare food for you…”

“You have for the past months,” Rei simply told him. “Now it’s our turn.”

It was blunt, but it seemed to quieten Shinji at least for now. That was Rei’s nature. She never pretended to care. She genuinely did, and she told people how she felt. One didn’t have to guess with her. And that was comforting in its own way.

The doorbell rang. Asuka and Rei looked at each other. The redhead got up on her feet. “I’ll go see who it is.” As much as Shinji needed the contact… it wouldn’t do if people were seeing it.

So Asuka opened the door only slowly and carefully. It was Misato standing behind it. Her face was the same stony, emotionless mask she so often wore during missions. She has a key to this apartment, Asuka realized.

“Can you let me in, please, Asuka?” Misato asked.

The girl merely nodded, opened the door and stepped aside. For all her faults, Misato could be trusted… or at least, could be trusted to be on their side. She had proven that after the battle. That didn’t mean Asuka liked her right now. Not after everything that had happened.

The two entered the kitchen. “I was wondering how Shinji is doing,” Misato stated.

“He got his mind violated,” Asuka answered, suppressed aggressiveness in her voice. “How do you think he’s doing?”

Misato looked down. “I know. But… is he getting better?”

“Yes,” Asuka answered. She felt slightly sorry for the outburst. After all, Misato had in fact helped them after the battle. But the whole situation was getting to her. She continued more softly, “He isn’t doing well, but he’s… stable. I think we can help him.”

Misato nodded and walked over into the living room. She looked at Shinji, who, seemingly
oblivious to the new arrival, still simply sat leaning against Rei. She didn’t comment on it. After a while, she spoke up, “Shinji?”

Very slowly the boy lifted his head from Rei’s shoulder and looked around. “Mi… Misato?”

Again, the Major nodded. “Are you feeling better?”

“I… I don’t know,” Shinji answered. He sounded utterly defeated.

“You should come home,” Misato said softly. “I can get us something nice to eat.” For a short moment it seemed like Shinji would panic, until Misato added, “Rei and Asuka can come as well, of course.”

“I… uh...” Shinji looked at Rei, her face right next to his, then to Asuka. He seemed very unsure.

“And then?” Asuka asked.

“And then what?” Misato asked in turn.

“Will we just eat there, or are you coming to ‘bring him home’?” Asuka inquired. She sounded tense. It made a certain amount of sense Misato would do so, but she didn’t like the prospect.

“I’m his guardian,” Misato told her, softly but firmly. “I need to make sure he is okay. That he is recovering.”

“I understand,” Shinji almost whispered. He visibly tensed, and Rei tightened her half-hug around him.

Asuka walked over to him and knelt down besides him. “Shinji… is that what you want? You can stay here with us as long as you like.”

“I… I’d just be a bother,” Shinji muttered.

“You aren’t,” Rei whispered to him from the other side.

“Tell me, Shinji,” Asuka prompted him. “Would you rather go with Misato or stay here?”

Shinji looked down onto the ground. His answer sounded ashamed and was barely audible, but it was enough for Asuka. She stood up again and turned towards Misato.

“I’m grateful that you two looked after him,” Misato told her as soon as she had her attention again. “Truly, I am. I am in your debt. But… do you want to make this permanent?”

Asuka crossed her arms. If need be, she would fight for him. “Yes,” she simply stated.

That took Misato aback. “What?”

“Unless he says otherwise, Shinji will stay here,” Asuka told her. “With us.”

Misato sighed. “I get that you’re concerned, Asuka, but…”

“Look, I know you’re concerned as well,” Asuka conceded. “And… yeah, okay, that’s good.
But… what do you want to do? After everything that has happened to him, drag him away from here kicking and screaming? You think that will help him?”

She looked over her shoulder at Shinji again. He was still a ball of misery that even under Rei’s care seemed to have withdrawn entirely into itself. She doubted he could kick and scream, actually. He would most likely just collapse and think everyone had left him. No, no, no!

“I need to make sure he gets the proper care and… “ Misato began.

Asuka laid an arm around her stomach and semi-pushed her towards the kitchen. “Come with me. We need to talk.”

Once there, Misato asked, “What’s the matter, Asuka?” Her voice was subdued. She had apparently correctly guessed why Asuka had guided her to here.

Asuka worked her teeth. This would be difficult. And she wasn’t sure she had any right to tell Misato this. But she had to convince the Major. “Look...” she began, her own voice just as low. She breathed out. “What do you think would happen if you take Shinji back to your apartment?”

“Well, I think...” Misato began.

But Asuka didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ll tell you what will happen. He will wait until night. He will then go onto your balcony. And then he will try to climb over the railing. Again.”

Misato breathed in sharply and stumbled two steps back. “A... gain?”

Asuka looked down. “I... wasn’t there. He told me afterwards. Apparently, Ibuki had pulled him away from there. Look, I’m sorry, Misato. I didn’t mean to...” She frustratedly fumbled for words. “But I can’t allow this to happen again! If Shinji dies...” She couldn’t bring herself to end that sentence.

“I... understand...” Misato replied. She still sounded utterly shocked. She turned on the spot, and walked over to the living room again. “Hey, Shinji? If you want... you can stay here as long as you like.” There was an awkward silence as Shinji didn’t answer to this. Didn’t even seem to acknowledge Misato had said anything at all. “And... Rei? The Commander wants to speak to you at 18. I can drive you to HQ. You can ring my doorbell a quarter of an hour before that.”

“Understood, Major,” the girl answered softly. And after a pause, “Thank you.”

Misato just nodded, turned around, and left the apartment with large steps.

For a decade, Commander Ikari had been the only point of light in Rei’s life.

She would sit in her room deep in the bowels of the Geofront for a week at a time, and only his brief visits would brighten her mood. Throughout the years, he would remain her only social contact. Only his Scenario gave any purpose to her existence. Only by doing as he told her, by piloting EVA and standing ready to return all souls to their source, could she connect with humanity at all. She had never had anything else, and she had never had any body else.

Commander Ikari had always been associated with fond memories and good moments. One reason
she had always followed him without question.

Another reason, though, had been Rei’s years-long passivity. For six years, she hadn’t been fully there. Or rather, hadn’t been fully there in one place. The part of her soul within her second body, torn asunder from the rest, had just accepted whatever had come its way. Had accepted being kept in a dirty, barely lit room in the Geofront. Had accepted being used for activation tests and piloting and the dummy plug, despite all the pain and indignities. It had never been something bad, just… that what was. The few, scarce times that painful monotony had been interrupted, like when the Commander visited her, had been good, but she never had a problem with the rest.

And even now, she didn’t know any better than to follow the Scenario… at least in principle. She had no intentions to get off the tracks of the Scenario. She literally didn’t know any better than to follow them. However, that increasingly began to annoy her. In her second body, she had had no problem with seeing herself as nothing more than a tool. But now, part of her rebelled against that thought. Part of her was infuriated that others had made her a tool.

And in any case, even while she was maybe still following the Scenario, her world now consisted of more than just that. Even if soon she would recall all souls to their source, that was no reason not to receive and give joy. Rei had Asuka and Shinji now. It was still unclear what they were, but in a way, it didn’t matter: Rei loved them, both of them. Shinji had looked so afraid when she had gone. But Rei was reassured that Asuka was now taking care of him.

These attachments were also a danger, though. The Commander could end this with a single word. If he made it an order… what else could Rei do but obey?

He mustn’t know.

That thought formed as Rei stood several metres in front of the Commander’s desk. It was a new thought. Before, Rei would never have dreamed of intentionally withholding information from him. But then… it wouldn’t affect the Scenario, now would it? Even if it was his Scenario. Rei would still fulfill her role. But she would also love and be loved in the meantime, even if it meant keeping the Commander in the dark about that.

“Rei,” he spoke up in his raspy voice. “How are you feeling?”

Asuka or Shinji would have meant her emotional well-being, what she was thinking or feeling in general, or whatever else Rei might have wanted to tell them. But the Commander only cared about functionality. “I am alright,” Rei answered.

“There have been irregularities in your recent behaviour,” Ikari told her.

“I see,” Rei merely replied. That was probably the best strategy: To answer like she would have had in her second body. And indeed, that was what still came easiest to her.

“You disobeyed an order from Dr Akagi and Major Katsuragi,” Ikari observed.

“Yes,” Rei merely confirmed.

“Why?” Ikari asked.

“Everyone else did as well,” Rei explained.
“Is that a reason to disobey orders?” Fuyutsuki spoke up now.

“If I hadn’t, I would have been alienated,” Rei answered. “Our sense of collegiality would have suffered.”

“Is that why you joined this mutiny?” Ikari asked.

Rei nodded. “I judged esprit de corps to be more important than Dr Akagi’s test.”

“That’s not your call to make!” Fuyutsuki snapped.

“Yes, sir,” Rei answered.

“And is that the only reason?” Ikari asked.

Rei hesitated, but no longer than she would have had before her life-changing encounter with Leliel. “No.”

“Did you also do it for the other pilots’ sake?” Ikari asked.

“Yes,” Rei answered. It would have been pointless to lie on that issue.

“Explain,” Ikari ordered her.

“Ikari… the Third Child…” Rei began. “I don’t want him to be depressed.”

“That is the reason you accompanied him back from the graveyard?” Ikari asked. Rei just nodded. “How would you describe your relationship with him?”

“We are colleagues,” Rei explained. “He saved my life.”

“Ah,” Ikari grunted. It was a short sound, but Rei knew what it meant. Ikari thought he had finally understood. Let him think that. “What about the Second Child? What is your relationship with her?”

“She is my flatmate,” Rei answered. “I have become… used to her.”

“Used to her?” Fuyutsuki inquired.

“I always follow a daily routine,” Rei explained. “The Second Child has become part of it. It would confusing not to have her around anymore.”

“Worrying, but predictable,” Fuyutsuki muttered.

Ikari turned his head around and looked at him. “It doesn’t yet sound like friendship. Her estimation of the Third Child is more problematic, even if it just hero worship.” Then he turned his attention on Rei again. The blue-haired girl was used to it. People talking about her as if she weren’t even there. Anger began to slowly cook inside her, but she suppressed it. Right now, that fact was convenient. “Rei. Why did you attack Dr Akagi?”

“I don’t know,” Rei answered.
“Explain,” Ikari ordered her.

“Ever since Dr Akagi brought me back, I’m having sudden impulses,” Rei explained. “Sometimes they are uncontrollable.”

“Predictable as well,” Fuyutsuki muttered.

“Impulses?” Ikari inquired.

“Sudden bouts of anger,” Rei replied. “Impulses to lash out. They’re sudden and unpredictable.” Of course, ever since Leliel things weren’t as bad anymore. The part of her that was in the EVA now truly was part of her again, and those ‘impulses’ part of her personality now, not something random and foreign compelling her to do things. But Ikari couldn’t know that.

“Hm,” Ikari grunted. “Those will stay around for a while. Maybe until the end.”

“Understood,” Rei answered.

“So what do we do now, Ikari?” Fuyutsuki inquired.

The Commander didn’t look at him. “Rei. Those attachments to the Second and Third Children are dangerous. You only exist for one purpose: The Scenario.”

“Yes,” Rei confirmed. “Do those attachments threaten the Scenario?”

“They could make you turn away from your purpose,” Ikari told her. “That is unacceptable.”

“Understood,” Rei answered.

“We should get her out of that apartment again,” Fuyutsuki advised.

“Commander… Vice-Commander… I would like to stay in that apartment,” Rei told them.

“Explain,” Ikari ordered.

“The sudden bouts of anger are dangerous,” Rei stated. “In fits of rage, I have already destroyed physical property at the apartment, and hurt myself. Soryu watches over me. If I lived alone again I could seriously injure myself.”

“Hm,” Ikari grunted. “That’s a complication.”

“If Rei becomes too damaged we can simply replace her,” Fuyutsuki urged his superior.

“We still have that option,” Ikari told him, without looking at him. “But it would be foolish to use it without need. For now, you can stay in that apartment, Rei. But you have to keep away from Soryu and my son. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Rei answered.

“Good,” Gendo judged. “One more thing before I dismiss you: The Second Child. You can tell her she is currently suspended as pilot of EVA-02, pending further deliberations as to what to do about her. She is to appear at synch-tests to maintain readiness, but for the time being won’t be
deployed.”

“I will tell her,” Rei confirmed.

“Good. Dismissed.”

The office remained eerily quiet even minutes after Rei had left. Fuyutsuki thought Ikari could sit there all day and not move. He wondered why he did it. Certainly, Ikari didn’t need to play up his oh so mysterious and dark aura around him anymore. Maybe it had just become second nature to him.

So eventually, Fuyutsuki spoke up. “If we lose Rei, we lose the Scenario.” Ikari just grunted. “We need to keep her under better control.”

“I underestimated the depth of the new experiences she would have, once outside the Geofront,” Ikari admitted. “But for now, those experiences seem to still confuse her.”

“But for how long? More than a third of the angels still remain,” Fuyutsuki reminded him. “Enough time for her to come to grip with her new emotions and act on them.”

Ikari remained silent for several seconds before answering. “This isn’t a problem that can be solved.” That much was true. Even if they killed Rei and readied a new clone, that clone would then have her memories. It would simply be a continuation of the problem. “We can only limit it and mitigate the effects. But that would require recalling Rei to the Geofront and keeping her under lockdown there. That would create additional problems.”

“Such as?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“For the first time in years somebody has shown some interest in the Third Child,” Ikari argued. “If we remove Rei from his life, he might rebel.”

“Doubtful,” Fuyutsuki judged. “In the incidents so far, he has merely followed the Second Child’s lead. Besides, even if he rebels, he’s only a reserve pilot now.”

Ikari grunted. “We’ll keep close watch on the situation. If Rei socializes too much with the other pilots, we’ll recall her to the Geofront. So far, the situation isn’t that dire, and it may not ever be.”

“What about the Second Child?” Fuyutsuki asked. “She is another problem.”

“A manageable one,” Ikari declared. “She’s a constant nuisance, but she doesn’t threaten the Scenario.”

“If an angel reaches Terminal Dogma, the scenario is over,” Fuyustuki stated sternly. This got Ikari to look at him. “Soryu’s rebelliousness threatens the entire defence effort against the angels. Quite frankly, use of EVA-02 isn’t worth having her around.”

“You want to fire her,” Ikari concluded.

Fuyutsuki nodded. “We never really expected to have more than three units, anyway.”
Ikari turned around again, looking straight ahead. His head sunk behind his hands again. He grunted. “But the Second Child doesn’t act alone. The other pilots follow her lead, as you have said. If we fire her, we could lose more units than just EVA-02.”

Fuyutsuki furrowed his brows. “So what do you suggest?”

“We need to wait,” Ikari declared. “If we fire the Second Child, the Third and Fifth Child may well quit. Loss of two units would currently be less acceptable. We have to wait until it is.”

“Oh,” Fuyutsuki voiced. Now he understood the Commander’s position.

“We have to wait until she is ready,” Ikari continued. “Then we can deal with the Second Child once and for all. Then all options are open to us. For now, she will simply remain suspended.”

Two days weren’t enough to get Misato’s apartment all dirty again. However, the first signs could already be seen: Clothes were left unattended on the ground in the living room. The packaging from ready or take-out meals remained behind on the kitchen table. Misato knew she should clean this up, especially if she wanted Shinji to return… but she just couldn’t muster the motivation. What would be the sense of it all? Shinji was with the girls, and that was even for the best. She didn’t deserve to have him around.

Suicide… I’ve driven him to a suicide attempt… True, Shinji already hadn’t been the most sociable boy when he had arrived. But he had in fact had some strength. He had even countered her, a complete stranger who had just picked him up, with some sass. And what remained of that boy? After Misato had heartlessly sent him out into several battles? Just a meek, subdued boy who had attempted suicide. It was all her fault.

The angels need to be destroyed. That was a constant in Misato’s thinking. But she realized that for this aim, she had used the children like they were nothing more than tools. And she couldn’t even tell herself that she had done so for the sake of the Earth’s defence. In truth, she had done so for revenge. And she had made children tools of her revenge, no matter what they had to suffer. Shinji and Asuka had already fallen unconscious in pain when Ramiel had boiled their LCL. Was it any wonder then that Shinji had tried to take his own life? And Misato hadn’t even noticed it!

She had always closed her eyes before the truth. Had always made light of it. Always joked and teased. But the truth was she had raised up and utilized children. Children whom she had sent into life and death battles. She had sent them against whips, against being boiled alive, against mind rapes. Of course one of them would sooner or later attempt suicide. It was the logical choice to get out of this all. To get out of what Misato had obliged them to.

It is best if Shinji stays as far away from me as possible. Asuka as well. I deserve their hate. So what else could Misato do? She was just a pathetic, abhorrent woman who used children for her aim. Who drove children towards suicide. She could lead battles against the angels, but nothing more than that. And once the angels were defeated… she hoped she would get justice. Punishment. She would deserve that.

Her thoughts immediately ground to a halt when she heard something at the door. Someone was trying to open it. Instead of morose ruminations, now combat instincts took over. Misato ran to her room and grabbed the NERV pistol she had stored there. When she returned, she heard how the door was opened. She leaned against the wall separating the living room from the kitchen, breathed
out, swung around…

…and aimed the pistol at the smirking face of one Ryouji Kaji.

“Kaji you goddamn idiot!” Misato cursed. “I could have killed you!”

“You’re far too well trained for that,” Kaji countered, still smirking. He stood in the kitchen in a relaxed position, a small bag in his right hand. “And your reflexes and aim are too good.”

Misato had the weapon lowered already, but that didn’t stop her from continuing to rant. “What the fuck were you thinking? What you’ve done here is breaking and entering. You’ve committed a crime! I could drag you to the police!”

Kaji shrugged nonchalantly. “As U.N. Inspector to NERV I’d be let go within the hour again, most likely.”

That annoyed Misato further… probably his intended effect. “So you think your shiny ID card gives you the right to just break into homes everywhere?”

Kaji’s grin got broader. “No. Just yours.”

“You goddamn little…” Misato was too furious for words. “I should have just shot you on the spot!”


“Oh, just shut up and tell me why you’re here!” Misato shouted at him.

Kaji got serious now. “You didn’t answer any calls, neither on your landline nor your NERV mobile phone. You weren’t at NERV. You didn’t react when I rang here.”

“Maybe you should have taken the hint,” Misato grumbled aggressively.

“Katsuragi… what’s the matter?” Kaji looked around in the kitchen, his eyes falling on the left over takeout food bags and emptied ready meal containers. “What’s….” He stopped.

Misato walked over to the kitchen table and put her pistol there. “Nothing that need concern you.”

Kaji hesitated and then spoke softly, “It’s the children, isn’t it?”

Misato had placed her hands on the table and was leaning against it. Now they were getting weak. She sat down. “How could it not be?” she asked hoarsely. “Look at what happened to Shinji…”

“Why isn’t he here?” Kaji asked.

Misato just shook her head. “It’s better for him if he isn’t.” Now that Kaji was here… she trusted him. Trusted him to understand at least. So she continued talking. “I sent him into that battle, after all. Just like in all the ones before. Even though he never wanted to be pilot. He’s only piloting because I insisted. He got his mind taken apart because of me, ultimately.”

Kaji sat down opposite of her, laying his bag on the table. He looked at her intensely. “There were reasons for what you did.”
Misato scoffed. “The angels, yeah. But...” Again she shook her head. “Look, maybe we do need those children. Maybe I do need to send them into battle. But did I need to be an utter ass about it? Now Asuka probably hates me, and she has good reason to.”

“Shinji is with her?” Kaji asked.

“And Rei,” Misato confirmed. “None of them have talked with me since Tuesday, since...”

“I see,” Kaji just stated.

“And you know, that goddamn test really wasn’t necessary for them piloting,” Misato went on. “Asuka was right about that. So... what happened to Shinji might have happened regardless. Someone needs to pilots the EVAs, and someone needs to send the pilots into battle. But I... I behaved like an asshole about that. Instead of then showing respect and gratitude to those pilots, the pilots I send into life and death battles, or to stand up to others on their behalf, I just had to make fun of them as well!”

“But surely... what you did maybe wasn't okay, but still not very important,” Kaji tried to argue. "Shinji's state..."

“Don’t you see?” Misato interrupted him. “The problem is that such things happen to the pilots, that I send them out to face such things, and then don’t even properly support or respect them! It’s pathetic!”

“You still can, you know,” Kaji told her softly.

“What do you mean?” Misato snapped. What could possibly still be there for me to do?

“The current state of affairs can’t go on forever,” Kaji predicted. “The relationship between NERV command and the pilots is in tatters. What Asuka has told me... but that can’t stay that way. NERV needs the pilots to defend the world from angels. And the pilots needs NERV to defend the world, and thus ensure their own survival as well. Eventually, the two sides will have to come to an understanding. And you can be on the pilots’ side then.”

“That’s rather little and a bit late, isn’t it?” Misato argued.

“But it’s something you can do,” Kaji argued back. “The pilots won’t be helped by you moping around here. But they will be helped if from now on you do speak on their behalf and do stand up for them to others.” He smirked a bit. “And if you don’t make them the butt of your jokes anymore, maybe.”

For a long time, Misato was silent. Kaji didn’t push her for an answer. Finally, she said, “It might still be too late. The kids have already fought nine angels, without me ever showing the proper gratitude or respect towards them. So starting now might still be too late to earn back their favour. But then... maybe I don’t deserve their favour. What matters now... what I can still do... is to make up for at least a bit of my previous behaviour. And that is what counts, regardless of how the children may react.”

Kaji smiled. It was a surprisingly warm smile on the rogueish man. “I’m glad you understand that point.” He hesitated. “Sometimes, a certain guilt can haunt one their entire life. There is nothing then people can do. But I don’t think you’re that far gone, Katsuragi. And in any case, all people
can do is to start changing now, once they have realized their mistakes.”

Misato smiled weakly and sadly. “I wouldn’t have taken you of all people for a philosopher.”

“Oh no,” Kaji answered with a grin. “I’m not a philosopher. I really am a rogue. And as such, I have made contact with local yakuza.”

That got Misato’s attention, though she was a bit surprised about the sudden change in topic. “You want to talk with them about the attacks?”

Kaji shook his head. “No. We will. That is something else you can do. And if you manage to make them stop attacking, imagine how you could use this fact in NERV… for the good of the kids, for example…”

Misato scoffed, but it sounded amused. “A rogue indeed. But I see what you mean.” She hesitated. “Thank you for that chance.”

“There is also something else,” Kaji continued. “Another reason I’ve come.”

“Go on,” Misato prompted him with some suspicion.

“I told you how the relationship between NERV command and the pilots has gone downhill,” Kaji explained. “Hell, you know so yourself. So, if you side with the pilots, you’ll side against NERV. That… would come with problems.” He took something out of his bag, an electronic device. “So, I’m here to help you with some of those.”

Now Misato got even more suspicious. “Explain.”

“I’m here to detect whether your apartment is bugged,” Kaji told her seriously. “Of course, I’ll only be able to sweep up wireless bugs, but I don’t think NERV would have been able to lay wires here. They don’t own the building, after all, and when you moved in they had no reason to assume you would become… problematic, maybe. And Asuka and Rei moved into that other apartment far too quickly for NERV to react. No, they won’t have wired bugs. The only problem are recording bugs. They don’t send out wireless signals, either… they just record stuff and then need to be picked up manually. So I would advise you to get a security cam or something, so you can check if people have entered your home.”

“Kaji…” Misato hissed in shock. “You can’t be serious!”

“Really, Katsuragi?” Kaji countered. “We’re talking about NERV here. Keep in mind what they’re keeping in their basement. I’ll check for wireless bugs here, and then I’ll go over to the girls’ apartment and do the same there. Also, give them the same advice. Trust me… it might well become necessary. Going against NERV is something you can do… but you need to do so well-prepared.”

Misato just sat there at the table and looked at it glumly. She didn’t like the sound of this at all. She had so far maintained a high opinion of NERV as an organization. It was after all the organization that fought the angels. She didn’t like the thought of really standing against them.

*But for the pilots’ sake... I will, if necessary.*
Shinji reveled in feeling Asuka around him. Whenever he might panic once again about ending up lonely and abandoned he could concentrate on that physical contact and calm himself down. She was sitting on a pillow in the living room and his head was lying in her lap. Thus, he had a constant reminder that he wouldn’t be abandoned, at least not right now. And an hour ago, he had spent the dinner with Rei keeping an arm around him.

The two were there. They wouldn’t abandon him… at least, not now. He could count on them. And they were constantly reminding him of that. It was… it was a gigantic relief for Shinji. He hadn’t thought it possible. That people would sacrifice so much of their time, just to care for him. He felt almost overwhelmed by that realization. It was like Asuka and Rei defiantly thrashing all the memories and revelations the angel had brought up in his mind.

He… he loved them. He needed them. They were the best thing that had ever happened to him.

And now they were saddled with him. Yes, they did spend time and care on him, but that was exactly the problem. They had to, just because of him. He hadn’t even been able to make that dinner that they had eaten. Instead, they had let something come from a nearby Korean place. And the packaging of that takeout was still on the kitchen table. Normally, Shinji would have cleaned it up immediately, but…

…but right now, he couldn’t do anything. Right now, he was completely useless. A drain on Asuka and Rei. All he could do was hang on to Asuka like a big, fat parasite. Not that he would let go. That would have meant letting go of the flotsam he was clinging to and drowning. But exactly this weakness was what Shinji blamed himself for.

Rei appeared in the living room, already wearing her night gown. Shinji sometimes thought she looked otherworldly beautiful in it. Desirable. But that was also a thought he hated himself for. Rei was a being of beauty and grace, whereas he was just an useless slob dependent on her and Asuka. What business did he have thinking about kissing her or touching her?

“We should go to bed,” she announced softly.

Asuka looked down on Shinji and smiled sadly. “Yes. Rest.”

“I should maybe,” Shinji muttered. “So that you can also do things without me.”

“We won’t leave you alone,” Asuka told him sternly.

This made Shinji feel both relieved and guilty. “But you deserve some time off from me,” he insisted.

“Time off from you?” Asuka asked. Then she caressed his face and her voice softened. “Shinji… This is no duty. Rei and I could just bring you over to Misato’s apartment again. There is absolutely no obligation for us. We want to help you. That is why we’re doing this. We want this. And that is why we’ll continue doing it. As long as you need support… well, you’ll have it. Because we want to help you.”

“But… why?” Shinji pleaded. “I’m not… I’m just a drain on you two. I don’t deserve…”

He stopped when Rei knelt down next to Asuka and him. “You’re important to us,” she simply stated.
“Why?” Shinji asked.

Asuka and Rei looked at each other. Even in his current state, Shinji could see how much understanding and how much tenderness was in that look. Finally, it was Rei who continued, “You’re Shinji Ikari. You and Asuka are the most important people in my life. It’s only due to you that these days I can feel and smile and live. And you in particular have shown compassion for me since the day you arrived.”

“It wasn’t right,” Shinji muttered. “Wasn’t right what my father tried to do with you. You deserved someone to help you. But I...”

“No!” Asuka cut in.

Rei shook her head. “It isn’t a ‘prize’ you’re getting. What matters is how this was indicative of your personality.”

“You’re a good boy, you know?” Asuka continued, naturally sounding more forceful than her blue-haired counterpart. “The... the best I’ve ever met.”

Tears welled up in Shinji’s eyes. “I’m not! I’m just a pathetic helpless boy who’d break down if you weren’t constantly around.”

“Then we will be constantly around,” Rei told him softly.

“When Rei needed help, we were there,” Asuka reminded him. “I’m sure should I ever need help, you two will be there. And now, it’s simply your turn. That is all.”

“But...” Shinji tried to protest again.

Asuka looked down at him with hard eyes. “Listen to me, Shinji! I won’t abandon you! Not after... after all this. I won’t remain behind alone myself!”

“You’d still have Rei,” Shinji muttered. Their strange threeway attraction was a problem, anyway. If he fell out of the triangle, the way would be free for Rei and Asuka. That would probably be for the best.

“Yes,” Rei took the cue. “I’d stay with Asuka. But both of us are also staying with you.”

The tears were now flowing down Shinji’s face. Asuka was stroking his hair. He didn’t understand this. Didn’t understand any of it. All he had ever been good for was cooking, and now he couldn’t even do that. Why would anyone bother with him? Much less two such wonderful, amazing people like Asuka and Rei. But they did! They do! It was an almost religious mystery to Shinji.

Rei took Shinji’s hand. “Come. We’re going to bed.” Asuka got up and helped Shinji up in the process as well. The boy simply let himself be led by Rei now, too overwhelmed by all the love and care he was receiving. Once again, he clung to that hand, a physical reassurance that this all
wasn’t a dream, that the two were still there, that a miracle had happened and despite all odds they continued to care about him.

Even as they changed, the three didn’t stay far apart from each other. They had gotten… comfortable around each other. Even so, Shinji still felt a bit guilty for looking. The curves and smooth bodies of the two were something that could fill him with other emotions than his ongoing anxiety and depression, but he didn’t really feel worthy of those emotions. Not in the context of Asuka and Rei, at least.

Once again, they laid Shinji in the middle of the two. Asuka wrapped her arms around him, so that he could feel her on one side, and Rei’s lithe figure to his back. They were both there. They were both caring about him. And right here and now, surrounded by them, Shinji felt… safe. Calm, even. Whatever happened, he had those two.

“Shinji,” Asuka spoke up softly. Her face was mere centimetres apart from his. “We’re here. And we’ll stay with you. Forever, if need be.”

Shinji felt Rei tightening to his back. But when she answered, her voice was, by her standards, full of emotion. “Yes. Together.”

“But…” Shinji tried again. “It’s Monday tomorrow and… school…”

Asuka scoffed softly. “That isn’t even remotely as important as you. We’re staying right here with you for as long as you need. Sleep now. We’ll be here when you wake up. And school can be damned.”

He breathed out heavily several times, nuzzled his head into Asuka’s neck and felt calmed by Rei resting her head against his back. It was… extraordinary. Something he had never thought possible. To be held by two incredible girls, to be allowed to sleep between them. He had fucked up so many times in his life that to receive a second chance like this felt almost unreal to him.

And yet, this seemed to be reality. The girls never interrupted physical contact with him. They were there. And they were not leaving him.
Misato was in a bad mood.

One reason was that she didn’t like being blindfolded. By her estimation, she had been in a driving car for about an hour, but for all she knew she had maybe been driven around the block a dozen times. But even now that the blindfold had been removed – another reason was that she didn’t like all those thuggish-looking men around her, people who were trying to intimidate her and make sure she understood this was their turf. And she especially disliked that she had no gun on her. As a compromise, she had been allowed to bring a combat knife with her, but that would only help so much when surrounded by people with guns.

Of course, this was the only way to meet the oyabun of the Inada-gumi. And some wannabe samurai would not frighten Misato. Unlike them, she had seen actual frontline battle. Even unarmed, she merely considered those gangster poseurs potential tactical threats, nothing more. She wouldn’t be cowed by them. She couldn’t; for that she deemed them far too ridiculous.

But what really pissed Misato off was what she had learned from Kaji before the yakuza had picked them up. The inspector had made the same blindfolded tour as her, always at her side. And he knew the real reason why the yakuza had thought it necessary to teach NERV a lesson. In principle, Misato couldn’t even disagree. She would still condemn how the yakuza had targeted innocent employees, but NERV had in fact acted arrogantly and recklessly and needed to be sent a message about this. And worst of all, nobody had even told her what had happened.

The building she and Kaji had been escorted to was a small house in the middle of the countryside, with no settlement nearby. They had had to move pretty far away from Tokyo-3 to reach an area like that. The house was relatively unassuming on the outside, but the interior architecture seemed quite expensive, mimicking classical Japanese design elements as if they were in the estate of a daimyo lord. And yakuza oyabuns had a habit of seeing themselves as just that, as Misato knew.

Misato held her head defiantly high, while Kaji merely had a weak smirk on his lips but seemed just as unflappable. That was how they reached their final destination: A reasonably-sized room with no more furniture inside than a small, low table in the centre; the Japanese sort at which you didn’t sit on chairs but on the ground. Their escort stepped out of the room again and left them with the other two people inside: At the table, on a pillow, sat a man in his sixties. He looked fit for his age, but was of a thoroughly unimposing stature. A thin grey beard grew on his face. And behind him stood a man in his fourties, a burly man with a bullish neck who seemed ready to snap a person’s spine at a moment’s notice. His hands were at his side, and Misato noticed that his left hand was four-fingered, while on the right hand his pinky finger was missing one knuckle.

Whatever Misato might think of the man, when Fumio Marukawu of the Inada-gumi invited one to his home, his guests were well-advised to bow. And so she and Kaji did, deep enough to show proper respect and deference to the man. Only then did Marukawu gesture Misato to sit. So she did, while Kaji remained standing at her back.

“My guards have assured me you have come here without a pistol or any other gun,” Marukawu started.

“Whatever I may think about your organization’s activities, it is widely known to be honourable and to stay true to its word,” Misato answered. “So I know I will be safe.”
“And yet you brought a knife,” Marukawu mused, as if this was just an interesting philosophical conundrum, not a concern of immediate practical importance.

“Soldier reflexes,” Misato told him. “It is not like this knife would help me much against your men. But without any weapon at all, I’d feel naked. I might as well have come here unclothed then.” And stop grinning at my back, Kaji.

Marukawu’s face didn’t change at all. “An acceptable explanation. Now, I believe there are matters to discuss between us.”

“Yes,” Misato agreed. “Though for the sake of the discussion, I must note that I haven’t been informed of the nature of these matters until very recently. So whenever necessary, please feel free to enlighten me about details I might miss.” Of course, the true message here was to claim a measure of innocence. But it would have been bad form to try to openly push off all responsibility to NERV in order to stay squeaky clean.

“Our actions were supposed to be a message to NERV command,” Marukawu stated. “It was a message only for those who would understand it. Those who wouldn’t don’t concern us. We thought as Operations Director you would be part of the former. If you aren’t, maybe we’re wasting our time here.”

“It is well possible,” Misato allowed. “In NERV Headquarters, there are three people who outrank me. I assume all of them are in fact in the know.” She paused to stress the point she was about to make. “But I can assure you none of them would come. I am but a humble Major whose rank may be insufficient, but I am the highest ranking NERV officer available for such talks.”

“That doesn’t reflect well on NERV,” Marukawu stated bluntly.

“I am truly sorry for the inconvenience,” Misato apologized. “But we may need to work with what’s there, if you want to get your message across.”

Marukawu remained silent for a moment. “Our message, yes. So you have heard of that?”

Misato had… from Kaji. The man standing behind Fumio Marukawu was none other than Toshiro Suzuhara – the father of one Touji Suzuhara. And even though NERV had to know details about Mr Suzuhara, there was no note of it anywhere on Touji’s dossier. Just as Kaji had said, the official pilot dossiers were all worthless and unreliable.

And Mr Suzuhara was furious about how NERV had gone about recruiting his son. Even though he was Touji’s father, they hadn’t even informed him about the fact, much less sought his surely legally required assent. As Kaji had said, NERV had grown too arrogant for its own good. Unfortunately for NERV, Mr Suzuhara was the kumi’s wakagashira – Marukawu’s most trusted lieutenant. Essentially, after the oyabun and the saiko-komon, the organization’s chief of staff, he was the number three in the Inada-gumi. Someone who had the oyabun’s ear and could appeal for protection of the honour of himself and his family.

That was essentially the reason for the ongoing NERV/Yakuza feud: The recruitment of Touji.

“I have,” Misato confirmed. “And even though I am not in any way involved in the recruitment process for new pilots, and have no say in how it is handled…” she now looked Suzuhara right in the eyes. “I am the woman who is sending your son into life-and-death battles.” She slowly got up
from her sitting position, and then bowed deep in apology to Suzuhara.

Marukawu nodded slightly to Suzuhara, allowing him to talk, and the man did. “That you are. Sending fourteen-year-old children, among them girls and my son to suffer and maybe die for us. Is that right?”

Misato stood straight again. “No, it is not. There truly seems to be no other way of piloting the Evangelions, and there truly seems to be no other way to stop the angels than the Evangelions… but it isn’t. NERV is necessary for defending the world, but it does so by sullying itself with guilt. And I’m in the midst of it.”

“A sullied woman,” Suzuhara scoffed.

Misato sat down again. “I know it isn’t much, but I think I, as well as Inspector Kaji here, can make conditions better for Touji and the others. NERV Command is currently in a tight spot regarding several issues, and your attacks are one of those. We can use that to our advantage… but only if your attacks do stop then.” Suzuhara scoffed again. Misato nodded. “I understand. If that isn’t enough…”

She carefully got the knife out of its sheath, holding it so as to indicate she meant no threat with it. She laid it on the table, and then took out a clean, white, small piece of cloth, and laid it next to the very sharp knife. Then she again looked Suzuhara right in the face.

“I am willing to show the extent of my chagrin over what I’m doing in other ways,” she told him firmly.

“Katsuragi!” Kaji hissed at her side. But Misato didn’t react.

Neither did Marukawu. Suzuhara had an almost shocked expression on his face at first, but then changed that to a dismissive look. He obviously did not believe she would go through with this. In any case, neither of the yakuza said anything.

So Misato folded out the cloth on the table, and laid her left hand on it. Then she took the knife, while still looking Suzuhara in the face. Only then did she look away. The task would require her full attention. She spread out the pinky finger of her left hand, brought the knife down…

“That’s enough.” Marukawu spoke calmly and gravely.

Blood was pouring heavily out of where the knife had cut through the finger’s skin… but not deeper than that. Misato had stopped immediately at hearing the oyabun’s voice.

“This would draw too much attention,” he declared. Outwardly, he showed no reaction to the display that had happened in front of him. “It would not do if a woman inside NERV who might be useful for us is drawing suspicion to herself. And a four-fingered hand is rather difficult to hide.”

“Very well,” Misato stated. The cut hurt, but she would not show that. That hand could well have hurt a whole lot worse. She had been ready to go through with the ritual. For now, she simply let the hand bleed onto the cloth, without regarding it.

Suzuhara managed to have his face well under control, but he couldn’t hide a certain shock, maybe even some concern. Meanwhile, Marukawu continued to talk. “You promised us an improvement in the situation of Suzuhara’s son. Honour would be satisfied then. After all, we can’t demand him
to be withdrawn from the defence of humanity. But we can demand that he be treated with respect and honour.”

“That is my goal as well,” Misato told him.

“If you manage to achieve that, the attacks will stop,” Marukawu promised. “If you need them to stop at a certain time, be it for a demonstration or other ways that will help that purpose, just give the signal. But you better deliver on your promise. Otherwise, I will invite you here again, and then I won’t stop you.”

“Understood,” Misato confirmed.

“Until then, our attacks will continue,” Marukawu explained further. “But as a sign of good will, we will decrease the frequency of our patrols. That should also decrease the frequency of attacks for now.”

Misato bowed her head. “That is very much appreciated.”

“Then let us all get to work, shall we?” Marukawu prompted.

Misato understood the cue. She wrapped the cloth around the heavily bleeding finger, sheathed the knife again and stood up. She and Kaji bowed again, and then turned to leave. Outside, they were expected by their “guides” again.

“That was insane, Katsuragi,” Kaji hissed.

Misato, walking a bit brasher, was a steep ahead of him. “It worked, didn’t it?” she argued coldly.

*And if Marukawu hadn’t stopped me, I would have deserved it.*

Asuka opened the door carefully. Shinji was with Rei, leaning against the living room wall and also on her shoulder. So she had been free to answer the door. One of them was always there to be near Shinji. It was a surprisingly good arrangement. An arrangement that… worked.

The opening door slowly revealed an awkwardly smiling Hikari standing behind it. When the door was fully open, she held out a bunch of papers. “The homework for you and Ayanami again. And for Ikari. Nobody answered at the Katsuragi apartment… again…”

That was little wonder, with Misato at work and Shinji here. And it had already been so the previous day, Monday, as well.

Asuka took the papers and sighed. “You’d think they’d leave us in peace with this crap, after we just saved the world. Again.”

Hikari looked a bit abashed. “Sorry, I just…”

Asuka tucked the papers under her left arm and waved her right hand dismissively. “I know, I know. You’re not the one deciding this. You’re just the class rep. I’m not blaming you. But it still is a shit system and I reserve the right to say so.”
Hikari smiled faintly. “That doesn’t always bring you very far.”

“So we should just smile when...” Asuka started and then stopped. Hikari had nothing to do with all her problems with NERV. “Never mind. You can ask Touji about details.” She was sure that he did a fair amount of complaining himself. She grinned. “How is he? Have you two finally kissed?”

“ASUKA!” Hikari exclaimed. Her head had turned red in record time. But that reaction was in fact suspiciously quick.

Asuka kept the grin. “Sure, continue playing the prim and proper class rep, if it pleases you.” It seemed she had to accept that Touji and Hikari were a thing now. And in that case, the two might as well get it over with. After all, Touji was an idiot, but apparently a well-meaning idiot that one could depend on. So why shouldn’t Hikari kiss him?

Hikari raised her head sideways defiantly. Well, she had a good coach in this. “I will have you know there is in fact nothing improper going on between T… Suzuhara and me.”

“Your loss,” Asuka declared. “And for heaven’s sake, at least do call him Touji.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Hikari muttered. With her no longer putting up a fight, Asuka registered that as a victory for herself. “Say… when do you think you will be able to come to class again? What… what is the problem, anyway?”

“The last angel,” Asuka muttered. “It hit us pretty bad. Me, Rei, Sh… Shinji...”

“I see,” Hikari merely stated awkwardly. And what more was there to say, in fact? Hikari was no pilot. She had no idea what could happen during those battles. For years, Asuka had never cared how much her status as pilot isolated her from others. Now she was feeling it acutely. “Are you… are you feeling okay right now?”

“I wasn’t hit as hard as the others,” Asuka deflected the question. “Shinji was hit hardest.” Wait, I still need a reason why I’m staying home. “But Rei and me, we… well, I’d rather spare you the details, to be honest. We aren’t constantly affected, but...”

“I see,” Hikari said again, this time barely more than a whisper. “May I come in? Maybe talking will help. And, uh… don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone if something happens.”

For a moment, Asuka seriously considered the offer. She had no doubt Hikari’s promise was genuine. So she might also not talk if she were to see Shinji constantly clinging to either Rei or Asuka. But that wasn’t what Hikari was expecting. Even if Asuka could get her to keep silent by reminding her of that promise, her estimation of the pilots could take a major hit.

“I… would prefer you didn’t, please,” she hence answered. It sounded rather meek for her standards.

“Oh, sure,” Hikari replied. An awkward pause ensured. “Well, uh… I suppose I need to...”

“How is everyone at class?” Asuka asked. A rather sad smile appeared on her lips. “What’s the news?”

So for five to ten minutes, Hikari relayed the newest gossip from class to Asuka. Truth be told, the redhead hadn’t really paid attention to that for weeks now. This all had once been so important to
her. The social standing, the gossip, the rivalries and alliances inside the class. It had been important to her to be on top of it all. And being on top was still important to her... but she just couldn’t bring herself to see the daily struggle for her place in the class hierarchy as relevant anymore. It all just seemed so trivial now... after Rei’s near-death, now with the state Shinji was in... it all appeared tiringly mundane and irrelevant.

Still, exactly that triviality made it a welcome distraction. For just some minutes, Asuka didn’t need to worry about fighting to the death, about the fate of the world, about indignities at the hand of NERV, about Shinji’s mind being violated, about him potentially being near suicide again. Compared to that it didn’t matter one bit what rumours said who was going out with whom, or the newest self-embellishments or sordid stories of people. But exactly that made it good to listen to those things for a few minutes.

Hikari hugged Asuka as a goodbye, and then left again. With a sigh, Asuka closed the door, and walked into the apartment again. She laid the papers down on the kitchen table.

“Who was it?” Rei asked softly as she entered the living room. Even Shinji, though still cuddled up to her, looked with some interest at her.

“Hikari,” Asuka answered. “We talked for a bit.” She grinned weakly. “Seems like the class can manage without us.”

It was mostly meant as a reassurance to Shinji. He was improving, but probably the only reason this was notable to Asuka and Rei at all was because they were constantly around him. He still didn’t seem to have energy for anything, he still needed the constant physical reminder that Asuka and Rei wouldn’t leave him, but at least he didn’t try to apologize anymore and at least began paying attention to things around him again.

Asuka knelt down next to the two, stroked Shinji’s hair lightly and looked at Rei: “So, I think when the doorbell disturbed us...” She grinned again, viciously so. “...I was in the process of utterly dominating you.” They had been playing Street Fighter before they had been disturbed.

“And you enjoy that,” Rei stated flatly.

“Well, yeah, I do enjoy...” Asuka stopped. Then realized what she had been about to say. Then blushed.

Rei’s lips curled up. “I do as well. But we can’t continue now. We need to catch a train soon, in order to make it to the synch-test.”

“You’re both going, I assume,” Shinji stated. It sounded dark.

Rei sounded uncomfortable. “You know we have to.”

“Do we?” Asuka challenged that assumption. “I hadn’t planned to go.” She stood up again and began pacing. Shinji wouldn’t be able to come to the test, and it wouldn’t do to leave him here alone. He might be stable again, but... it would pain him. And there was more. At the moment, Asuka had zero interest in playing Akagi’s guinea pig. Not even in a regular synch-test. “The bastards suspended me, so why even do this boring synch-training bullshit? Hell, for all we know, if we go, that crazy blonde bitch will try to spring another nude test on us. And somebody needs to stay with Shinji.”
Rei looked down at the head to her side. “That’s true.” Shinji didn’t protest or apologize, just smiled weakly.

“I mean, I know those tests are important for our combat readiness, but… urrrrgh…” Asuka complained, walking up and down the room. “After what Akagi tried to pull last time…”

“I understand,” Rei assured her. “But I could go.”

Asuka stopped and jerked her head around to look at the blue-haired girl. “What do you mean?”

“You could stay with Shinji,” Rei explained. “And I don’t mind the idea of nude tests.”

Asuka cleared her throat awkwardly as she remembered her first visit to Rei’s old apartment. No, the First Child very evidently had no problems with nudity. Her statement still came as somewhat of a surprise. “Could have fooled me,” she stated with a lopsided grin.

“Me doing the nude test was not what I objected to,” Rei explained. “I objected to it being forced on you and Shinji. And to the staff trying to spring it on us as a surprise.”

That had Asuka slightly stumped. “So you did it… I mean, it was a dangerous action, all things considered. And you did it for our sake?”

Rei looked her square in the face. “Yes.”

Again a blush coloured Asuka’s cheeks. “Well… uh… thank you. I… I’d still hate to do such a test, you know, and who knows what else NERV has in store for us…”

“If they try to force something on you again, I will help again,” Rei promised.

“But what about you?” Asuka asked. “You have no problems with how the witch doctor treats you?”

“I’m used to it,” Rei stated.

“That doesn’t exactly sound reassuring,” Asuka muttered.

“I never considered there could be an alternative,” Rei explained.

Well that absolutely won’t do! Asuka was shocked at that attitude. With large steps she walked up to Rei and knelt down in front of her. She grabbed her right arm and told her: “There is one. You… you may not mind public nudity as much, okay. But if there ever is anything… anything… you mind, you’ll come and tell us, right? We’ll help you, just as you’ve helped us.”

“I know,” Rei merely stated. Even for her standards it sounded soft.

“That Quacksalber has misused as guinea pig for too long already,” Asuka declared as she stood up again. No more. She is under my protection now.

“I still need to go the test,” Rei answered.

“…why?” Asuka asked.
It took a while before Rei answered. “The Commander. He considers me…” There was a notable
pause. “…the most obedient of the pilots. He fears my contact with you two is eroding my loyalty.
If he gets evidence of that, he will order me to move out of here again.”

“No!” Asuka exclaimed. “He… he can’t do that, can he?”

“He can,” Rei merely confirmed.

Shinji spoke up from her shoulder. “He is the commander of NERV. NERV seems to basically rule
Tokyo-3. Who… who could stand up to him?” And with a mutter: “It’s always been like that…”

Rei nodded. “I need to follow his and Akagi’s orders.”

Asuka didn’t like this. At all. It made Rei sound like… like…

Her eyes went wide.

“Only to a degree!” she shouted. “You’re an EVA pilot. You aren’t a doll, you hear?”

“I’m not a doll,” Rei agreed. She hesitated. “But I need to…”

Shinji got up from her shoulder to look at her. “I… I understand. I really wished you could stay, but
I… I know my father. We can’t provoke his anger.” He turned his head to Asuka and shook it. “We
have to play it safe.”

Asuka breathed out. She felt defeated. “Okay. You’ll go. But I sure as hell won’t. Orders be
damned.”

Another tiny smile appeared on Rei’s face. She sounded actually… amused. “I hadn’t expected
you to.”

“And please Rei… be back here quick and safe, you hear?” Asuka pleaded.

“Of course,” the blue-haired girl promised softly. Then she stood up.

The synch-test was strangely… lonely. In recent time, ever more pilots had been added to the
roster, but now only three of them were present. For the first time since Asuka had come to Japan,
Rei had had the girls’ changing room to herself. Both the redhead and Shinji were back at Asuka’s
and Rei’s apartment… No. At our home. So Rei being ‘alone’ in the Geofront… it almost felt like
the bad old days. The days when she had nothing but those tests, when she had nobody, when a
rare smile from Commander Ikari was the height of human contact for her.

Shinji had understood why she had to go, but he had still looked terrified when she had left the
apartment. She sighed into the LCL and reminded herself that Asuka was still with him. The recent
days had at least made one thing certain: None of them would ever be truly lonely again. Even Rei,
who was without the other two at this test, would then, afterwards… come home. It was a new and
infinitely reassuring concept for her.

Thinking forward to that event would get Rei through this test.
It wasn’t just the newly found concept of boredom that bothered Rei. Even so, half-floating in the LCL of the synch-test entry plugs could still be very relaxing. The problem was just that today’s test was not very conducive to peace and relaxation. Akagi and Suzuhara had practically tried to murder each other with their stares before the test began, and Rei had constantly been on guard for another physical attack by the doctor.

And even now that the three present pilots – Kaworu, Suzuhara and Rei – were in their entry plugs, the tension remained. Over the comms, Rei could hear Suzuhara sighing and making noises of annoyance.

“A bit more concentration, Touji,” Akagi ordered stiffly.

The boy just groaned in response. Katsuragi chimed in cheerily, “Don’t worry, Touji. You’ve already made it through the halfway point. Just hang in there, all right?”

The relation between the heads of Section 1 and 3 was also at an all time low, but they still seemed to be able to work together in a professional manner. Nonetheless, Akagi made a tiny scoff at Katsuragi’s friendly approach.

“Pointless…” Suzuhara muttered.

“Part of your job,” Akagi insisted. “So do your job!”

Now Suzuhara exploded. “I am! I’m here after all, right? What the hell more do you demand?”

“Some discipline and concentration would be nice,” Akagi muttered. “Just focus on the test now.”

But Suzuhara was not in a mood to end this “Or what? You’ll threaten to cut support for my sister again?”

Before Akagi could answer, Katsuragi intervened: “There’s no need for shouting. Please, Touji, focus on the test. And Dr Akagi, I think it’s justifiable if he’s a bit annoyed by the test.”

“It isn’t exactly conducive to his synch-rate scores,” Akagi insisted. “And his unwillingness to cooperate leaves me with extra work in figuring the pilot-unit harmonics out!”

“Yeah well, maybe,” Katsuragi allowed. “But he is the pilot of EVA-03. Irreplaceable. Basically, all these pilots are more valuable than we are.”

Rei couldn’t hear a reaction over the comms. In fact, an immediate, eerie quiet followed. Only after some minutes could she hear a scoff from Suzuhara again. For the rest of the test and afterwards, Rei was vaguely worried. Relationships between pilots and command remained at an extreme low. This could lead to complications if another angel were to attack now. The Commander would see a clear solution to that problem: Total obedience from the pilots. However...

*I’m not a doll.* Asuka wouldn’t *want* her to be a doll. And that resonated with Rei’s newly reunited personality – of which a part was just angry, angry about what they had done to her and were still doing to her. *I won’t be a doll ever again.*

Before she could go shower, Rei went into the Pribnow Box, together with Suzuhara and Kaworu, for the debrief. As with the previous tests, it was held by Lieutenant Ibuki, but Dr Akagi was still present.
Eventually, the Lieutenant concluded, “Well, that’s all. Let’s hope for improvements next time, shall we?”

“And that Asuka and Shinji will be here,” Akagi muttered.

“Shinji is in no state to come to a synch-test!” Katsuragi protested.

“And what excuse does Asuka have?” Akagi asked.

Katsuragi’s face got hard, but she didn’t answer that question. Couldn’t answer it, most likely.

Instead, Rei spoke up. “Asuka and Shinji prefer to be addressed with their family names by you, Dr Akagi.”

Akagi turned towards her. She seemed surprised by this intervention. “I know! But neither of them is here! That’s exactly the problem, Rei!”

Rei’s face darkened. She would not just stand here and take it. That is what the half of her soul that had been in her second boy would have done. Not any more. “…Ayanami.”

Ritsuko’s eyes widened. Suzuhara chimed in, “Yeah, and while we're at it, it's Suzuhara for you.”

“Nagisa,” Kaworu added.

“That’s ridiculous!” Akagi protested.

“Whatsoever you say… Ritsuko,” Touji replied with a grin.

“In all fairness, Asuka and Shinji have requested that of you,” Misato intervened. “And I think we in the command staff should honour such requests. Including the ones voiced here.”

“Yes of course you would think that!” Akagi exploded. “You would let them get away with anything!”

Katsuragi’s face and voice hardened. “As long as they pilot. And as long as they do, we are in their debt.”

That was a new sentiment from the Major, as Rei realized. Akagi looked down and balled her hands into fists. “Dismissed, everyone,” she simply said.

Katsuragi walked over to the pilots and gently herded them outside the Pribnow Box. Rei understood the cue and walked to the showers.

This state of affairs in NERV can’t go on.

“Everything is fine,” Asuka told Shinji with an amused grin on her face.

For the first time in four days, the boy had grown a bit restless. Maybe it had to do with Rei being absent; that made him nervous. Rationally, he knew she would come back, but that only did so
much to quell the fears inside him. He needed to do something that could maybe ensure she would come back… and thus he had decided to again cook for her and for Asuka.

Asuka had been slightly astonished. Shinji had been slow to start, almost fretful again, but it seemed his old instincts had kicked into gear eventually. Cutting vegetables, preparing sauces, he had been in his element again. Now and then he had looked slightly panicked, but then Asuka would always walk over to him, lay an arm around him, take a hand, stroke his hair. Somehow, it had all worked out.

And now, everything was ready. He would start the actual cooking as soon as Rei was back. And for that event, everything had to be perfect. Checking again and again for that was the only thing Shinji could still do.

Shinji smiled weakly. “I know… it’s just…”

Asuka embraced him from behind. “I know. And you’ve done great. I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“Sorry I couldn’t also prepare some meat for y...” Shinji began.

“You already did more than you needed to do,” Asuka interrupted him. “And your vegetarian dishes are delicious as well.”

The two just stood there in silence for a few moments. While it was mostly for Shinji’s sake, Asuka found she did enjoy the constant physical contact with him. Also, the usual closeness to Rei. The way the three had grown so touchy-feely… there was something there… it was almost like… like they were all romantically involved.

The door opened. “I’m home,” Rei announced softly.

Basically as soon as she had entered the kitchen, Shinji had fallen into her arms. Rei’s eyes first widened in surprise, then she smiled gently and closed her arms around the boy. She also granted Asuka a smile.

The German girl smiled back. It was good to have Rei back. That Rei had needed to do the synch-test all alone was something that hadn’t sat right with Asuka. Much of the blue-haired girl was still a mystery, but it seemed she had been alone all her life. Asuka didn’t wish her to be any longer, not even just for the duration of a test. Oh sure, the weirdo and the jock had been there, and they could be counted on, so Rei had been safe. But that was not quite the same as her not being alone.

Gently, Rei nudged Shinji forward a bit. The boy still stayed at her side, but now the two could walk over to the living room and sit down on the floor there.

Asuka did so as well. She took Rei’s hand and asked, “Tell me: Was the test okay?”

“We – the pilots – and Dr Akagi argued,” Rei reported. “It was tense.” She paused. “I’m glad to be home again. With you...” She looked Shinji in the face. “...and you.”

“I’m also glad you’re here,” Asuka told her. Shinji didn’t respond verbally and just nestled closer to Rei.

“It’s odd,” Rei remarked.
“What is?” Shinji muttered at her side.

“Us sitting here like this,” Rei explained. “So much bodily contact. Without inhibitions about it.”

Shinji visibly tensed. Asuka let go of Rei’s hand. “I suppose, but it came about because well… well…”

Rei tightened her hug around Shinji and took Asuka’s hand again. “I like it.”

Asuka was blushing now. *Of course* she also liked it, but that had so far been left unspoken. The truth was she didn’t know what she and Shinji and Rei were. That confusion wouldn’t stop them from helping Shinji; that concern overrode everything else. But it was still all very confusing.

Still, she managed to answer, “I… I do as well.”

Shinji murmured contently, but after a while raised the issue, “And how long will this last?”

Asuka furrowed her brows. “I told you. We won’t leave you.”

Shinji actually smiled weakly at that. “I know. But… once I’m better. Once I… I can return to Misato’s apartment.”

An awkward silence followed that statement. Shinji had raised a good point. The current state of affairs had come to be entirely because he had needed help. And once that was no longer the case… well, it would be good if Shinji was feeling better again. But she would miss cuddling with him… and with him gone, Rei would most likely sleep in her own futon again as well…

It was Rei who voiced this point. “I like having you two both here.”

Asuka didn’t know what to say. Everyone basically knew how everyone else felt, but exactly that made it difficult to talk. What more was there to say?

“But what can we do?” Shinji mumbled. “We can’t all… all of us… you know.”

“All of us be together?” Rei asked. “Why not?”

“Because… because…” Asuka stuttered. Her eyes were now as wide as saucers, and she was blushing furiously. All three of them together? Her together with *both* Shinji and Rei… *images* were shooting into her head. At the same time, Shinji’s stuttering was even more incomprehensible.

“But that isn’t done!” Asuka finally managed to say.

“I see,” Rei merely stated. It sounded sad.

Shinji chuckled sadly. He looked down on the ground. “It would be so convenient, though. I could… I could have you both.” His hands balled into fists. “But that is selfish. I don’t…”

Rei looked at him and whispered, “I love you, Shinji.” His head darted up. It nearly collided with hers, but she bent sidewards a bit. “You don’t know how special you are. You… understand. Care. More than other people.”
Seeing Shinji’s happy surprise, Asuka couldn’t help but add. “I love you as well. You’re the nicest boy I’ve ever met... the best boy. Willing to defend us all, willing to listen to my bullshit, always just wanting to help. I... I didn’t think I’d ever become close with such a person. That someone like you... you know, would be nice to me. But here we are. I... I love you.”

Neither declaration was anything new, of course. They all knew how close they were, how much... love there was between them. And yet, Shinji in particular seemingly had to always be reminded of that. And thus, he was now utterly stunned. Asuka liked seeing him that way.

“I love you as well, Asuka,” Rei said, now turning to her.

And thus now Asuka’s world was turned on its head.

Rei had promised her a kiss already. But this had then been more or less... forgotten. None of them had wanted to endanger the delicate state of affairs that existed between them after all. Until now, apparently.

“You had the passion and the force of will to help me,” Rei continued. “You are burning with passion. I want to watch that flame burn. It’s beautiful.”

Before Asuka could stammer a response, Shinji joined in, smiling faintly again. “You are amazing, Asuka. Always fighting. Never giving up. Pr... protecting those whom you... whom you love. Our guardian angel. I... I love you.”

Two people... Asuka had always gone through life trying to be the best at everything because for her that was the only way to be of any significance at all. Without her talents, she would just be a thorny bitch and nothing else. Certainly nobody people could love. And yet... Two people have confessed their love...

Asuka was so much in a sort of daze that Shinji continuing to speak only barely registered with her. “And you, Rei...” He shook his head. “You’re wrong. You are the one who always understood. With you, I never had to be afraid to offend you or anger you. You always understood. Always were there for me. Waiting at that one spot near the park, always. So... uh...” He was blushing heavily as well now. “I love you.”

Is this really happening? For weeks now, none of them had dared to move. Any move could have threatened the wonderful thing they had. And yet now it seemed they could just sweep all problems aside. Ignoring that people normally came together as pairs, as couples. Was it really that easy?

“I never thought I could have that effect on people,” Rei answered Shinji.

“Are you stupid?” Asuka spoke up now. She had to make the girl see that she did. “You’re... you’re serenity incarnate. Not just your beauty, but the grace with which you move, your voice... your patience, your quiet caring... the general peace and calm that seems to surround you like an aura. You’re amazing, Rei.”

“Does this mean...?” Rei asked quietly, not daring to finish the question.

Asuka thought she might soon die from all the heat in her cheeks. “Yes. I love you, Rei. Us two living together was the best thing that could ever have happened to me. And with Shinji now here
Rei’s cheeks began to colour as well. She looked down, but Asuka could see a smile on her face. And not just her usual style of curling her lips up, but a genuine, almost broad smile.

“But...” Shinji tried to protest. Which was funny, because he nonetheless didn’t let go of Rei. “What does that all mean? What can we do now?”

“Be together,” Rei simply said, without looking up.

Yesss… the emotional part of Asuka wanted to leap at that chance. She could cuddle with Shinji and Rei. And, uh, maybe also do other things with them. Take closer looks at their well-built bodies. Together. And just… in general stay together with them. With the security that neither of them would ever leave her.

And yet… she still didn’t quite grasp how this would even work. She felt insecure and hence said nothing. Another silence ensued. Rei still held Asuka’s hand, and Shinji’s head was still leaning against her shoulder, while she was still looking down. In that, it was a comfortable silence.

Finally, it was surprisingly Shinji who spoke up again. “We… we could try it. You… you know. I have kissed both of you, but… you two haven’t yet.”

Now Rei looked up – right in Asuka’s face. The German girl was too captivated by the prospect of such a kiss to react much. “Asuka… do you want to kiss me?”

The redhead looked at her. Her lithe figure. Her serene aura. A face liked carved out of stone. Thin lips. And that image was overlayed with so much trust. She trusted Rei… wanted to be close to her. She nodded dumbly.

Gently, Rei let go of Shinji and moved a bit over on her knees. Shinji seemed to have little problem for once with being left alone, instead watching this all with a benevolent smile.

Rei and Asuka were now face to face, both kneeling upright. Something still made Asuka hesitate. Rei was attractive. She loved Rei. She trusted Rei. And yet, there still was a part of her which associated ‘kissing’ exclusively with boys. Which was stupid. Because looking at those lips, she definitely wanted to…

Rei’s head darted forwards. Caught Asuka by surprise. But the redhead didn’t care. Just joined in the kiss.

It was… fantastic. Different from kissing Shinji. Both felt incredibly soft, and yet both were unique. Which was good. Which was amazing. She had Rei here, with her, kissing her. Her arms closed around the blue-haired girl. She wanted to never let go. Closeness…

It was Rei who finally withdrew, and at that point, both were panting. Asuka looked Rei in the eyes; the blue-haired girl was blushing and smiling. And next to them sat Shinji and… smiled as well. He looked as if he had just seen a miracle.

“That was… one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen,” he admitted in a whisper.

Asuka was still slightly panting, though maybe more because she felt light-headed rather than any actual need for breath. Her head was red and she was grinning. "Maybe… maybe we can in fact try
this.” Shinji AND Rei. Rei AND Shinji... The world was spinning around Asuka.

“So… is that it?” Shinji whispered, sounding very unsure. “All three of us? I… you both… I...”

Rei turned to him. “We both love you.”

A tear formed in the corner of Shinji’s eye. He darted forwards and grabbed both girls in a huge hug. All three of them fell forwards. Asuka laughed and giggled as they did so. It was just so much of a relief. Two people who loved her. No complications. Just, against all expectations, not just one person who could find it in them to love her, but two. And now she was in a big embrace with both of them.

They all remained lying as they were, all of them breathing heavily. Even Rei did. Even for her, this had to be extraordinary. Asuka could basically feel the happiness of her… my what? Boyfriend and girlfriend? Companions? Partners? It didn’t matter. Only their love for one another did. She got up, on all fours, and climbed on top of the two. Her head darted down to kiss Shinji. She enjoyed that feeling, then withdrew, in order to kiss Rei. It was incredible. She could kiss. More importantly, be kissed. And that by two people. Two people whom she absolutely loved and trusted. It was magical.

She straightened up and looked down on Shinji and Rei, who now lay face to face. Slowly, gently, their lips came closer and they kissed as well. Asuka smiled. She could feel no jealousy towards them. If anybody else were to threaten their arrangement, Asuka would fight tooth and nail, but those two were part of the arrangement. It was just good to see them both happy.

Shinji and Rei ended the kiss. There still was basically no space between their faces, but now they looked up at Asuka. And in a sudden and surprisingly coordinated motion, they stretched their arms out and pulled Asuka down, right on top of them. That was where an again giggling Asuka came to a rest for now, close to both her loves.

Now that their faces were in as close together as possible, kisses became so much easier. Rei would kiss Asuka, Asuka would kiss Shinji, Shinji would kiss Rei. Part of Asuka still found that all surreal. Of course, any sort of kissing was still unchartered territory for her, but that was certainly not what she had ever envisioned or expected to happen. It was wonderful, but it still also was confusing. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was that Asuka could feel both Shinji and Rei, their bodies next to hers, their warmth, their scent. And the kisses. Sweet, amorous kisses.

They did this for… Asuka had lost any sense of time. Half an hour? An hour? When somebody, Shinji, finally spoke again, he was entirely out of breath. “There is still food... I could warm up.”

“Getting hungry?” Asuka laughed. “I guess you do have reason to be exhausted now.”

“Easy… for you to say,” Shinji joked. “Up there… letting us carry your body weight...”

Asuka kissed him, quick but intensively. “Are you complaining?” Shinji just shook his head.

“Eventually we will have to eat,” Rei stated.

“I could… warm it up,” Shinji offered again.

“And let me lose out on your kisses?” Asuka pouted – half in jest, half seriously.
Shinji grinned. “You still have Rei. And I can still watch.” He got flustered. “It… It really is beautiful, you know?”

Asuka jumped up, showing off how athletic she was. “Come on then, you two beauties. Now… now we’ll have all the time in the world to continue this.”

And she looked down on her loves and knew it to be true. The future looked bright. She had Rei. She had Shinji. She had people who loved her. And she would stay with these people forever.
Even after the three had gotten up, they all remained constantly close to each other. Kisses, hugs, back strokes were constantly exchanged. It seemed none of them could really let go of the others. There was a sort of manic joy in the air, a pure relief, that things had worked out so well, that the three of them together were now definitely an item. And all of them wanted to fully enjoy the perks of that.

Rei felt as content as she had never been in her life.

That feeling itself was new. To know that she didn’t have to doubt, to be sure of her loves staying with her, to know they returned her feelings… to be kissed and hugged and touched by them. She had never, ever had something like that before. This security, this comfort. It was wonderful. She wasn’t alone anymore.

Going to bed the previous evening had involved a lot of kissing and touching. Rei hadn’t been able to get enough of it, had wanted to feel and experience ever more… but strangely, both Shinji and Asuka had eventually tensed up. Rei didn’t know how, but it seemed somewhere she had gone too far. And she regretted that. She wanted to make her loves happy; she wouldn’t do anything that didn’t, or at least not deliberately. So she had stopped and eventually the three had fallen asleep once again in each other’s arms.

In Rei’s limited experience, that was absolutely the best way to fall asleep. And waking up with lots of kisses and Asuka’s giggles and Shinji’s remaining wide-eyed disbelief that this all was happening was the best way to wake up.

Of course, it made everything take a bit longer. In her second body, Rei would most likely have felt uneasy about such an inefficient use of time. It took more than an hour until they could even only start breakfast. But right now, Rei considered this an absolutely worthwhile investment of time. Right now, there was nothing more important on her mind than kissing Shinji or snuggling up to Asuka.

The three only really got more than a metre apart again when they sat down to actually eat the breakfast. Shinji had made most of it, insisting it was the least he could do for the girls. Of the three, he was still the only one who not only enjoyed the touch, but who still seemed to need it. The one who most quickly got uneasy or panicked. But he was doing better already. And while it was only natural that this should be a relief to Rei, she was slightly surprised by how much. Shinji’s well-being was paramount to her and had been ever since the battle. Right now, if she had to choose between that and the Scenario, she would choose the former without hesitation.

These days, Rei didn’t think much about the Scenario at all.

The breakfast was accompanied by a silence that was slightly awkward. What could one say after all this? Rei was quite content with the silence, though. She had never been one to say more than necessary. And now all three had admitted their love; all three were together now. So why say anything at all? Love was enough.

But finally, the silence became too much for her two loves.

“This is… unusual,” Shinji muttered.
“Isn’t it just!” Asuka agreed, sounding relieved anyone had spoken up at all. “It’s just surreal! Like… a dream I could wake up from any minute now. But I don’t want to wake up!”

Rei reached over the table and laid a hand on one of Asuka’s. “It’s reality.”

Asuka smiled. It looked slightly abashed, in a way that made Rei’s heart leap a little. “I like what we are now. But… I have no clue what we’ll actually do now.”

Shinji grinned faintly. “A rare admission from you.”

“Be glad you’re so goddamn cute,” Asuka grumbled and pecked him on the cheek.

But Shinji was serious again. “What… what will we say in school? When we go to school again, that is. Or at NERV?”

“We can’t make this public,” Rei spoke up quickly.

Asuka stroked Rei’s hand with her thumb. “The Commander.”

Rei nodded. “He can end this with a single order. I would have to obey.”

“Why?” Shinji asked. It sounded almost desperate.

*Because he created me… but they don’t know that yet.* It was something that so far just hadn’t come up. And Rei had been in no hurry to reveal that stuff. But now she thought that Asuka and Shinji maybe had a right to know who she truly was. For now, though, she remained silent.

Finally, Asuka spoke up again: “Then for now, the Commander may not know. Outside this apartment…” Her facial expression faltered. She sounded almost depressed now. “Outside this apartment, we may not be an item.”

It was the logical conclusion. But to hear it spoken out aloud at the table depressed the mood for a while. This brooding atmosphere was only interrupted when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll see who it is,” Rei stated and got up.

For maybe the first time in ten years, Asuka felt she truly had reached a goal, a safe harbour. For that long, she had constantly struggled to always be on top, a struggle that had increasingly felt like treading water, like a Sisyphean task without end. That task was maybe not at an end yet, but she felt she had reached a first goal in it. Maybe, with Rei and Shinji at least, she didn’t need to constantly struggle. They admired her for her fight, yes, but they also seemed to accept her as she was. Which was, all things considered, a small miracle.

So maybe, at least inside this apartment, Asuka would be allowed to rest.

And she was just so happy! Kissing, cuddling and being together with Shinji, that had been comforting, but it had also been something born out of sheer exhaustion, back when they had both thought they had lost Rei. But now… now the three of them weren’t together as some sort of desperate measure to salvage at least a little comfort. Now they could look towards the future. And
she had two, two, people who had told her they loved her. Two people who would kiss her. Two wonderful people she would like to go on kissing forever.

Not that everything was perfect, of course. Asuka had been delighted by all the kissing and hugging that had been going on the previous evening on their futon (their now permanently shared futon, a thought that still filled her with joy)... until Rei had become bold, and had, if ever so carefully and tenderly, tried to explore certain regions of Asuka’s body. Now, it wasn’t that Asuka didn’t trust Rei, but... kissing and hugging were one thing. That had been something else. And a very serious “something else”, something far graver than the light-headed giggling and lips meeting.

Asuka had had thoughts about that and about Shinji and Rei in particular, and about them together. They were two very attractive people, two people who had dominated Asuka’s thoughts whenever her hormones went wild... but that those thoughts and dreams were now actually within reach was just such a frightening prospect. Not that Asuka would easily tell that even to the two. She was Asuka Soryu-Langley, and surely sexuality didn’t cow her! But in truth, she did fear that this perfect, tender, loving arrangement the three had just built up, this triad, could be disturbed by it.

And Rei had understood. Had ceased her actions immediately when Asuka had tensed up. And then had just tenderly stroked her cheek and smiled at her in that soft way that made Asuka just so relieved and so happy...

With a dreamy look, Asuka, sitting at the kitchen table, watched Rei walk over to the apartment door.

The look disappeared on her face when she saw whom Rei had brought in: One Major Misato Katsuragi.

Asuka knew Misato had so far been extremely cooperative. The Major had covered their retreat after the latest angel, and hadn’t interfered with their new arrangements. But even so, there was an uncleared issue between the two – between Misato and the pilots. Not just the attempted nude synch-test; that had just been a symptom of a wider issue.

“Hello,” Misato greeted Asuka and Shinji.

“Hello, Misato,” Shinji greeted back in a subdued voice, while Asuka was grumbling something incomprehensible.

There was an awkward pause before Misato spoke up again. “I see you again haven’t gone to school.”

Asuka just scoffed. That was just so silly. It was just like Misato to just try and pretend everything was normal. Like sending the kids to school as if they hadn’t just fought off a mind violating beast from space. As if Asuka hadn’t already graduated school, had a college degree in fact.

“I’m sorry,” Shinji apologized in a mumbling voice.

“You have nothing to be sorry for!” Asuka told him forcefully. “You helped to save the Earth.” She shot a hard look at Misato. “Again.”

“So he did,” Misato agreed, her face stony, her voice absent emotions.
“So he can stay home as long as he wants,” Asuka concluded.

“And this… this is home for him now, I take it?” Misato asked. She took great care to sound as neutral as possible, but Asuka still took it as a challenge.

She stood up, looked Misato in the eye, and crossed her arms. “Yes.” Then she looked over at Shinji. “Or at least, for as long as he wants.”

Shinji was breathing heavily. Finally he managed to say, “This is home.”

“I see,” Misato merely commented. And after a pause, “But I’m still his guardian. Yours as well, Asuka. I need to make sure you two have a future.”

That made Asuka scoff again. “A future? What future do any of us have? We’re pilots. We’re the ones who save the Earth.” And Asuka was damn proud of that fact. “What else do we need?”

“The Angel War will eventually be over,” Misato merely stated.

That was true. And at least outwardly, Asuka couldn’t do anything different than display utmost conviction that they would win the war. After all, with Asuka Soryu-Langley piloting, how could they lose? But she had never thought much about what would happen afterwards. Had in fact never truly cared. She was a pilot. That had always been the only important point in her life.

So instead of answering, Asuka turned towards Shinji. “Shinji… what do you want?”

The boy looked down and finally shook his head. “I… I can’t… I just can’t go to school again. Not yet. I would… I would...” He trembled slightly. Immediately, Asuka and Rei rushed to his side, each of them embracing him from one side.

Misato looked at the scene for a while. Her left elbow was held by her right hand again. “You need to recuperate,” she finally stated. Now her voice became softer. “I understand that. And I’m glad Asuka and Rei are helping you. I just…” She stopped.

Asuka glared at her. “You just what?”

Misato hesitated. Then she stated, barely above a whisper, “You apparently haven’t forgiven me yet, Asuka.”

The redhead turned her head away from her. It wasn’t that simple. Misato had been on their side after all. It was just… she couldn’t trust Misato anymore. Or no, even that was too simple. She knew she could trust Misato with the big stuff. Prioritizing their lives, keeping what she was seeing here a secret, stuff like that. But in day to day affairs, Asuka simply had lost all trust in Misato. The attempted nude synch-test had seen to that.

And she was also simply so tired of it all. She was a pilot, one of the elite - and did anyone every recognize it? The only one who ever had was, of all people, that giggling airhead Mana. Misato, meanwhile, simply seemed to take it all for granted. Always made light of it, teased and joked and pretended everything was normal. Asuka wanted to pilot, drew pride from it – but she also wanted some proper recognition of what she was doing.

“Asuka… you should at least come to synch-tests.” Misato asked of her.
The redhead whipped her head back around again. She had every intention to, actually. She was a pilot after all, no matter what those dickheads at NERV were saying. But this just showed it all over again – how Misato was taking her for granted. How she seemed to only care that she functions. And Asuka was getting sick of it.

“I’m not sure about that,” the redhead hence mumbled.

“...Asuka?” Misato asked, now sounding uncertain.

Now words exploded out of Asuka. She even let go of Shinji. “Why should I go to synch-tests? What good has this ever done for me? Did anyone ever thank me for that? Or for saving their worthless asses? No, all I got for my troubles is being suspended. Why should I go to synch-tests then? Why should I even stay an EVA pilot then?”

It felt good to say this. It was an intoxicating power rush. To finally release all the pent up anger at Misato. Not that Asuka truly meant any of that. Not that she had any plans of leaving her Evangelion. It was hers, damnit, and she would always be the one to pilot it! But Misato just couldn’t take her for granted anymore.

“I see...” Misato whispered. It sounded defeated. And then, without another word, she turned around and left the apartment.

There was nothing quite as drab and depressing as coming home to an empty apartment. Misato had already pulled an early morning shift at NERV today, so for the rest of the day she wouldn't even have an excuse to leave it. She could maybe use the day to clean up the apartment, but...

What would even be the point?

Shinji now lived with the girls. He was happier there, and why shouldn’t he be? The girls weren’t sending him out to fight and suffer, to the point of a suicide attempt. The girls seemed to understand him and care about him. Whereas she… she had wanted to help Shinji. Had tried to understand him. Had even offered to keep him around even if he were to stop piloting. But she had never told him how much she cared. Had never thanked him for what he was doing. Had never apologized for the necessity of him doing it.

She had only ever added to his hurt. It probably had been a mistake when she had grabbed him and taken him with her, all those months ago after his first angel fight. She was his Operations Director, the woman who sent him out into painful life-and-death battles. How could she then pretend to care about or for him? She had just been desperate for company, any sort of company, and had projected her own loneliness onto him. It was me who feared loneliness. He would have been just fine.

So if you find love among the girls... grab your chance Shinji. Grab it. I'm just holding you back.

Misato had no idea what was going on between the three. They all seemed close, like… like they were a couple with three people? But then, it wasn’t truly her business. The kids should do as they see it. I surely never helped them find happiness. If she interfered, she would probably just ruin everything. She would shut up about what she was seeing in that apartment, and that was that.

She sat down at the kitchen table and stared straight ahead. There wasn’t much more to do. Other
than being a NERV Major, what else did she have now? She had fled Kaji way back in college, and even now their relationship was at best at “It’s complicated”. She had used Shinji to drive away her loneliness, but that had just made him suffer, and so now he was gone as well. Sitting here in loneliness was the only thing left to her.

But what truly frightened Misato was Asuka’s attitude. If the girl were to truly stop piloting… nobody else could pilot EVA-02. Rits… Akagi had been clear on this point. For some reason, Shinji and Rei had been able to cross-synch, back when EVA-00 had still existed. But EVA-02 would only work for Asuka, EVA-03 only for Touji and EVA-04 only for Kaworu. If Asuka stopped piloting, they would lose a fourth of their fighting force. And what if others follow her lead?

She couldn’t really fault anyone if they were to leave. Shinji nearly had once, and maybe he had been right to back then. What had EVA ever offered him but pain? And how does NERV repay this pain to the pilots? With even more indignities. Was it any wonder that Asuka contemplated leaving now? Had anyone ever thanked her for saving the world – over and over again? Had anyone ever showed respect to her for that, bowed to her, made her feel the hero she was? She had sacrificed ten years of her life – her childhood. And Misato had never truly thought about it.

Misato had been afraid. She had taken part in sacrificing Asuka’s childhood after all. She had always known that she would send this little girl, which she had met when she was ten years old out to fight alien abominations, that she would have her risk her life and suffer pain. It was maybe necessary, but… Misato had always done her best to close her eyes before that fact. Had always joked and made light of using child soldiers. Had taken part in training a child soldier. Ten years with nothing but synch-test after synch-test for Asuka. Combat training at age six. A strenuous physical regime. And then school and college besides.

Was it any wonder then that Asuka would lash out now?

They had finally done it. NERV, and she as part of it, had gone and done it – they had finally pushed the abused girl one too many times. Finally, the straw that broke the camel’s back had fallen down. What have I been thinking in fact? But deep down, Misato knew. Deep down, she had known that Asuka and the others would have objected to the nude test, that it was a fucked up thing to do to 14 year old boys and girls who had just entered puberty and were probably unsure about their bodies… teenagers who, as experience showed, were always the ones to develop the most intense feelings of shame… and knowing that this was fucked up, Misato had made light of it. Again. Had treated it like a big fun to be had.

A fun at the expense of the pilots. One further thing to burden Asuka with. And that had now just been one thing too many. Maybe it wouldn’t even have been so bad by itself. Maybe the attempted nude test wouldn’t have been so grave in any other context. But for Asuka… had she ever been treated any differently than a tool or a test object by NERV? So, finally, the one time too many had happened, and Asuka had pushed back. And in doing so, Asuka had suddenly realized how much power she was holding. So now the abused girl used this power to get back at her abusers.

Misato really couldn’t fault her for that. But it made her deeply afraid. NERV had fucked up, she had fucked up, and their fuck-up could threaten the fate of the whole world. Have I doomed the world?

She didn’t blame Asuka. Not after all that had been done to her. But she did blame herself. Slowly, she got up from her seat and opened a cupboard. She took out the single bottle of vodka she had stored there.
Shinji felt terrible. Misato had sounded so miserable when she had left. He hated to disappoint her… to disappoint anyone, but especially someone he had gotten rather close with over the months. He still felt a certain pang of resentment over what Misato had done, but… most of all he wished things would simply be alright again. Like they had used to be. But this seemed to not be enough for Asuka anymore, and Shinji could understand her. After all, he had held the same thoughts at times: If he had to go out there and fight, if he had to suffer, shouldn’t he at least get recognition for it? His father was a lost cause, as much as it hurt to admit it, but at least maybe from others?

They had to pilot, of course. The world depended on it. Shinji realized that. But… that was just the point, wasn’t it? They were in fact saving the world on a routine basis. And got no recognition whatsoever for it.

However, being in the middle of such a conflict, that was just so hard to bear. As was watching Misato leave in what de facto had been defeat. He didn’t wish for that. Does Asuka really need to be so hard on her?

“Do you really mean that, Asuka?” Rei asked. Shinji felt her arms around his shoulders. It was a reassuring feeling.

“Mean what?” Asuka asked. It sounded grumbling. She sat down again.

“Are you really considering leaving piloting behind?” Rei asked. The question was entirely free of judgement. Typically Rei…

Asuka shook her head. “Of course not. A pilot… that’s just who I am. There are just five pilots worldwide. Just five people who can save the world. We’re among them. We’re special.” She breathed out. “But… it’s just… Misato doesn’t seem to see that.”

“You want to make her see,” Rei commented.

Asuka nodded forcefully. “It’s just… it’s so unfair. All my efforts to be the best. All my hard work. All the… the sacrifices. It did make me the best. But what do I get in return for it?”

There was a silence. Either Shinji or Rei could have pointed out their current arrangement, but that would have been wrong, of course. Shinji would love Asuka whether she was a pilot or not. And the attitude she spoke of, it was so well known to him. And Asuka even liked being a pilot. With him… he had always loathed it. And yet had always been forced to continue. He had had to continue in order to save the world, even when Misato had offered he could quit. We need to protect the world. But what do we get in return?

Then a memory hit him. “I remember something you once said, Rei. That… that if Asuka and I both pilot in order to get praise, we should get praise.”

He felt her head nodding behind him. “That’s true.”

“It’s just…” Shinji whispered. “It must kinda suck for Misato. She seems to have been hit hard.”

“She helped us after the angel fight,” Rei pointed out.
Asuka looked away, but then admitted reluctantly. “...yeah. I know. But... If I say nothing... things will just stay that way then, won’t they? She... she has to see that I can’t just be taken for granted.”

“Maybe... Maybe you should have told her that,” Shinji suggested carefully.

Asuka breathed out forcefully. “Maybe. But... I’ve known Misato for years now. She... she has never changed. I don’t know if she would now.” She paused. “It just sucks. Misato was one of my better guardians, you know? But...” She sounded frustrated.

Slowly, so as to give Rei a chance to disentangle herself from him, Shinji stood up. Then he walked over to Asuka... and hugged her from the side just as Asuka and Rei had done to him before. Rei soon joined on the other side.

“I can... relate,” Shinji told her. “I know what you mean, but I... I don’t like seeing Misato like this. Maybe, next time... don’t be so hard on her?”

Asuka grumbled. “Maybe. But... it’s just so frustrating.” There was a longdrawn silence, which she used to draw comfort from the physical contact. Sandwiched between her two partners her breathing slowly got more even. Finally, she asked, “And what do we do now?”

“The next synch-test is on Friday,” Rei suggested.

“I know,” Asuka answered. “But... There’s a difference between communicating my position better and giving up my position. Still, I suppose... I should try to talk to Misato until then.” Her voice got very, very small. "And maybe... apologize."

Shinji was slightly surprised. Asuka nearly never apologized. It wasn't one of her best traits, but he had always taken it as part of her fiery determination.

He kissed her on the hair. “Whatever you do, we will be with you.”

“I know,” Asuka answered softly.

There were times when Kaji could drive just as crazily as Katsuragi. This was one such time. Ritsuko had looked rather confused when the U.N. Inspector had just stormed out of the Geofront, but it seemed he was needed much more urgently elsewhere. And he had no time for such frivolities as traffic laws or speed limits. If Tokyo-3 police were to stop him he would just shove his U.N. ID in their faces.

He also didn’t really have the patience to wait long at Katsuragi’s door. When she hadn’t opened after the third urgent ringing, he simply began opening the door in the same way as last time. When he entered the kitchen he noticed an empty vodka bottle on the table. Its etiquette had Cyrillic writing on it. Her genuine Ukrainian stuff. High percentage.

“Katsuragi? Please don’t shoot! It’s me, Kaji!”

There was a gurgling sound coming from the living room. With long strides, Kaji hurried over to there... only to find Katsuragi sprawled out all over the floor. There were some pillows, but they had been tossed to all sides. Her clothes were in a state of disarray.
He darted over to her and knelt down. “Katsuragi? Are you alright?”

“Wasss… was just vodka. Can’t fell me,” Misato claimed. “The fuck… you doing here?”

“You called me,” Kaji simply replied.

“Hell I did…” Katsuragi muttered. “Would know better than that. Would never…”

The call was still fresh in Kaji’s memory. Katsuragi just mumbling incoherently, laughing manically, mumbling some more and then ending the call.

“Katsuragi, what’s up?” he asked her urgently.

“No…nothing that needs con… ththern you…” Katsuragi stuttered. “I’ll be fit for duty tomorrow again.”

“That’s good,” Kaji agreed. “But what about now? You don’t look fit to me.”

“That’ll pass,” Misato slurred. “Deserve it...”

Kaji sighed. “The kids again.”

Katsuragi sat up. She swayed a bit, but only a bit. She was a hardened drinker. “Shinji… Shinji is now with the girls. Lives there. I’m all alone here, but… deserve that. Sent him into battle after battle. Until… until Ibuki had to pull him from the balcony.”


“Didn’t even know until Sunday,” Katsuragi muttered. “Asuka told me. My… me… it’s making… making him pilot. Drove him there.”

Kaji suppressed a curse. So the situation was much grimmer than he had assumed. _One of the pilots tried to commit suicide? Because of piloting? Damnit, but something has to be done at NERV._ More than that concern, though, he was now acutely worried about Katsuragi. Shinji was with the girls. _But whom does Katsuragi have?_

“Katsuragi… you did your best…” Kaji tried to comfort her – clumsily, as he knew himself.

“Bullshit!” Katsuragi shouted now. “Always… always tried to make it as easy on me as possible. Treated it all as one big… big… joke. Always made fun of the kids… teased them… so I… wouldn’t have… face… what I was doing. Raising child soldiers. Should… should’ve given them respect. Grati…gratitude. Apologies.” Tears appeared in her eyes. “They… saving the world regularly. Heroes, all of them. We… just so used to them saving the world for us… every angel fight… after every angel fight should be parades… saviours of Earth...”

“You know why that isn’t possible,” Kaji argued. And not knowing what else to do, he grinned faintly. “And I don’t think Shinji or Rei would appreciate that.”

“Prin… Printhiple of thing,” Katsuragi insisted, still silently crying. “Deserve our thanks. Respect. Awe. We… we threw away all of Asuka’s childhood, and what’s she getting for that? More… more… indig… yeah. So she’ll quit now. We’ll lose… EVA. Others as well, maybe. Because of me.” She laughed manically. “I doomed the world.”
Kaji grabbed her by the shoulders. “What? Asuka will quit?”

“Asked me… asked me why shouldn’t,” Misato explained. “Couldn’t tell reason. Just couldn’t. We… we destroyed… childhood. And now… one push too far. Pushes back. AND WHY NOT?” She screamed the words.

Now Kaji did curse. “Fuck. Listen, Katsuragi. We’ll set this right again, you hear. I promise you. We’re going to fix this.”

“How?” she pleaded.

Kaji furrowed his brows. “The synch-test on Friday. Be there. It’s time some things change in NERV.” He shook his head. “Asuka… has always lashed out. We need to… need to talk to her. With all the pilots.”

Misato scoffed. It sounded wet. “What use… what use? Only… only command can make things better.”

Kaji started his best rogueish smile. “Then we will make NERV Command talk as well. After you made even the Yakuza agree with you… how difficult can this still be?”

“You… you think that’ll work?” Katsuragi asked.

Kaji shrugged and grinned again. It was an artificial grin, meant to reassure her. “If not, then it’s definitely on NERV then. But didn’t you tell me you wanted to do everything now to help the pilots?”

Katsuragi paused. “...yeah. Yeah… I will. Will do this. Will be… there on Friday.” She paused. “Thank you, Ka... Kaji. Onthth again.”

“Any time, Katsuragi,” Kaji whispered.

“Until… until Friday then,” she tried to send him off.

“Oh no!” Kaji disagreed. “I’m not leaving you behind in this state. I will see you to bed. I know you have a spare futon for me. And tomorrow, you will be hungover.”

Misato scoffed again. “What? And you’ll take… take care of me?”

Kaji looked her right in the eyes. “Yes.”

“This is kinda depressing,” Kensuke muttered. He sat at his desk, his upper body sprawled out all over it.

Kaworu stood leaning against the desk. Seeing his… companion beat down like that, he had the urge to ruffle his hair, but the incident with Touji had shown why such public physical affection could be a problem. Does man’s loneliness go that far? Isn’t it enough that their loneliness can never be overcome? Must they also hurt each other by preventing even the merest illusion of it? As Kaworu had learned in the previous two weeks, it was such a nice illusion. And just because it
couldn’t overcome the inherent barriers of him, Kensuke and Mana, that didn’t mean he didn’t care deeply for the other two. He did.

So instead, Kaworu merely laid a hand on Kensuke’s shoulder. That seemed to be still socially acceptable enough. Lilim rituals. They are so hurt by the separations between them...

The bespectacled boy sat up slightly straighter again and, when he was confident no one was looking, shot Kaworu a small smile, just a small sign that he appreciated the gesture. But even so... we manage.

“It’s so... empty,” Kensuke explained what he had meant. “Ayanami being absent is nothing new. But Soryu and Shinji have been missing the entire week now as well. Not that I can fault them, they… and you… have better things to do than school. And… and Mana...”

Kaworu looked down. “Yes. I am getting worried as well.” Mana was this weird mix of abashed and joyful, of serious points made and laughter… Kaworu missed her.

“Just… disappeared,” Kensuke continued. “Without a word.” They hadn’t seen the third part of their little… whatever they were since Sunday. Hadn’t heard a single word from her. Even ringing her apartment’s doorbell had yielded no results.

Kaworu knew Kensuke a little bit better by now, and he liked what he knew of him. Kensuke was just as much an admirer of art as he himself, even if he was rather particular about what sorts of art he was interested in. But his enthusiasm was absolutely genuine, and Kaworu liked whenever Kensuke could display it. Kensuke saw the world in a very special way, and that made him unique… fascinating. When he talked about his interests, entirely lost to the outside world, the eyes behind those glasses shone.

But for all his enthusiasm and for all his highly obscure knowledge, he was unused to people. It wasn’t that he was shy; he just was a little bit different than most people and hence had little interaction with them. And knowing that, Kaworu knew what he feared now.

“She hasn’t left because of us,” the grey-haired boy told his partner. “Leaving didn’t seem on her mind.”

But she is gone… It had been easy to ignore the first few days; people hastily having to leave was something that happened. But over the past few days, Kaworu had become really concerned. He and Kensuke had stayed close to each other.

“But if she hasn’t even left us a message...” Kensuke muttered. “I don’t like it. I’m worried about her.”

“Hm,” Kaworu just voiced. “She would normally have left us a message...” That fact was what made him worry as well.

After a long silence, Kensuke spoke up again. “You know... the rainstorm that hit us on Saturday...”

“What about it?” Kaworu asked. That was the last time they had seen Mana.

“Mana’s white dress was drenched,” Kensuke went on. “Drenched enough to, uh... you know.”
Kaworu smiled at the memory. The dress had become quite transparent. Though both boys had actually done their best to look away when it had become apparent that the situation was in fact rather uncomfortable for the girl. *Is she like Asuka in this matter?* Though there had been a difference. Asuka had just been outraged at what she had perceived to be an indignity, had seen her being forced to be nude as basically an insult. Mana… Mana had appeared to almost be fretful. Anxious, rather than offended.

“I saw… well I saw something on her back,” Kensuke muttered. He seemed embarrassed at the admission of having looked. “A thin white line. Like a scar. Right over her spine.”

“I saw that as well,” Kaworu agreed.

“Now, it could be coincidence, but…” Kensuke hesitated, looked around and lowered his voice. “Look. My father works for a medical company. He’s very high up in their financial department. And what they’re telling… their M200 implant has been selling very well lately. And you insert it into the spine.”

Kaworu furrowed his brows. “You think Mana has it? And what would that mean?”

“My father didn’t want me to know it, but I could look up online what the M200 does,” Kensuke explained. “It’s a cybernetic control unit. Plug a compatible machine into it, you can control it. But there aren’t really many compatible machines around. It’s not exactly an everyday item. Usually, the company delivers a few each year to universities for research, or to military forces, probably for their own research. But somebody must recently have made a breakthrough. Otherwise there wouldn’t be such a demand now for the implants.”

“And you think Mana could be involved in it?” Kaworu asked.

“I think whoever has ordered the implants probably is in Japan,” Kensuke continued. “There have been rumours on the net… classified activity around JSSDF bases, that NERV facility at Tokyo-2… some people even claim to have seen evidence of non-EVA mechas!”

Kaworu grinned faintly. That was of course always a topic of great interest to Kensuke. “That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“It doesn’t,” Kensuke admitted. “But Mana’s scar… it fit perfectly. I looked at dozens of pictures of the implant scars on the net. For hours!”

“For hours?” Kaworu echoed.

“Well…” Kensuke said, abashed. “I was… I am worried. And that was a hint. It could still all be coincidence, but what other hint do we have?”

“That’s true,” Kaworu conceded. “Hm. We may need support from specialists.”

“What do you mean?” Kensuke asked.

Kaworu turned around, now facing the desk, and smiled at him. “You’re the best data hunter on the net we could have hoped for. But I have certain contacts as well.”

He got out his cell phone and typed in a number. A moment later a voice answered which sounded slightly tired. “Yes?”
“Inspector Kaji?” Kaworu asked. “This is Kaworu Nagisa.”

“Ah, the Fifth Child,” Kaji stated. “Yes, of course. What’s the matter?”

Kaworu could hear a gurgling sound in the background of the call, but ignored it. “You told me to call you if I needed something or had something to say.” So Kaji had, after their first meeting. Back then Kaworu hadn’t thought he would use the offer; the Inspector’s nosiness could have become an inconvenience to him, after all. “As it happens, both are true now. Could you please meet me after the synch-test tomorrow?”

“I had planned to be there anyway,” Kaji stated. “Seems like it’ll be an important day tomorrow.”

“I certainly hope so,” Kaworu agreed. “Until then, Inspector.”

“Bye,” Kaji ended the call.

So Rits isn’t even showing up anymore...

That was probably for the better. During the last few synch-tests she had only ever gotten into conflicts with the pilots. It was better for Katsuragi and Ibuki to handle the test. Now, during debriefing, Touji still shot some mistrustful glances towards the two, but didn’t say anything, didn’t even show annoyance as he had with Ritsuko. And Kaworu and Rei were completely calm, almost serene. Kaji had little doubt that Rei would choose Asuka and Shinji over Katsuragi, but she seemed to be able to work with the Major and that was what mattered.

Asuka had actually visited Katsuragi’s apartment the previous day, and had said she needed to talk with her. Kaji had opened the door for her and had found that to be encouraging… but unfortunately, at that time, Katsuragi had been in no state to hold serious talks with anyone. She had been hung over the entire day, well into the evening. Damn it, Katsuragi, stay away from any bottles with Cyrillic on them. One could leave her alone with just about any sort of alcohol; she was an experienced drinker. But the Slavs had methods to bring down everyone.

It was good that Asuka was willing to talk, though. Maybe things could get better between her and Katsuragi again. And maybe also between Shinji and Katsuragi. Maybe the kids hadn’t written her off the way she thought they had. And maybe it was even useful that any talks had been delayed. Before matters could be cleared between the pilots and Katsuragi, matters between them and NERV had to be cleared first. Katsuragi was still the Operations Director, after all. No matter how much goodwill she had towards the pilots, that sentiment would always be in conflict with her role.

Kaji had slept in his own apartment again the previous night. When he and Katsuragi had met in the Geofront again, she had been entirely formal again. Kaji just didn’t understand her. He dearly believed it was impossible to truly understand another person but with Katsuragi… his relationship with Katsuragi really drove that point home. And it bothered him more with Katsuragi than with other people.

But of course, if she were to need his help again, he’d be there again.

After Ibuki had ended the debriefing, everyone not part of the science department left the Pribnow Box again. Walking along a bit, he laid a hand on Kaworu’s shoulder. The two separated from the
others and walked down some corridors.

“You wanted to talk to me?” Kaji asked.

“Yes,” Kaworu confirmed. “Wait a moment, please.” The two walked on in silence. Finally, Kaworu announced, “Too far.” He walked some steps back and then gestured. “Stay here, please, Inspector.”

Kaji grinned uncertainly but did as he was told. “What’s this about?”

Kaworu just smiled enigmatically. “Something for our own protection. Now tell me, Mr Kaji… What do you want to know about SEELE?”

Kaji did a double take. Did he just mention SEELE? What would a simple pilot know… But Kaworu was no simple pilot. Kaji didn’t know what he was, but it certainly wasn’t simple.

“This isn’t the place to talk about that!” Kaji insisted.

“No,” Kaworu agreed. “But are you interested?”

Kaji hesitated. That seemed all too easy. He didn’t believe in gifts just falling into his lap. “What do you know?”

Kaworu shrugged. “There is much I don’t know, and much about me I can’t tell you. But I… let’s just say I was raised by SEELE. As a pilot.”

That made a certain amount of sense, though it also made Kaji wonder why SEELE wouldn’t just leave such business to NERV. NERV Japan was under Ikari’s sway, but NERV Germany was SEELE’s loyal lapdog. And how did they even know he was pilot material? The Marduk Institute is a scam…

“Well, I’m interested, obviously,” Kaji admitted. This had definitely raised his interest. Too bad he’ll stay tight-lipped about himself. He narrowed his eyes. “What do you want in return?” Kaji knew there always was a price.

“Information for information,” Kaworu told him. “I will tell you everything I know about SEELE. In return, you will find out what you can about a girl… a classmate of mine.”

Kaji nearly laughed. Given the topic they were talking about and given Kaworu’s enigmatic nature, that seemed utterly mundane. “You want me to spy on a crush of yours?”

“I don’t even know where she is right now,” Kaworu answered, unfazed. “But I suspect something has happened to her. There is a suspicion she might have a M200 implant, if that tells you anything.”

“It does,” Kaji answered glumly. “Are you sure? Who’d implant that in a child?”

“What do you mean?” Kaworu asked.

“Active M200s… they have some side effects,” Kaji told him. “It’s experimental tech. They should never have started human tests with it, but after Second Impact…” He shook his head. “That’s when everything became screwed up.”
Kaworu seemed to stiffen. “One more reason then to find her. Her name is Mana Kirishima. She’s in my class. Lives with an uncle of hers… Yohei Kaneko is the name. Also, regarding M200s… some organization inside Japan may currently be ordering them en masse, at least by previous standards. So there could be a connection.”

“I see...” Kaji commented. Apparently the case was far less mundane than he had assumed at first. *Of course our mysterious Fifth Child wouldn’t be so simple.* “Well, I can certainly look into this.”

Kaworu nodded. “In that case, I will share with you what I know about SEELE.”

“Give me the weekend so I can give you at least some preliminary results?” Kaji offered.

“Alright. So shall we meet on Sunday or Monday?” Kaworu asked.

“The weekend may be busy for me,” Kaji told him. "How about I call you on Monday?"

“That works for me,” Kaworu confirmed. “Until then, let us not speak of it. Especially not here.”

“*You started the talk here,*” Kaji reminded him, grumbling.

“This is a safe zone,” Kaworu claimed and smiled. “Goodbye, Inspector.” And thus he walked off.

Kaji shook his head. He just couldn’t over how weird Kaworu was. Still, if the boy had information… and even only knowing about SEELE, knowing just the name, was a sort of proof that he did. *This will be an interesting Sunday.*

But for now, he had other things to do. With a broad grin on his face, he made his way towards Commander Ikari’s office.

That office was a *gigantic* room, full with kabbalistic scribblings all over the floor and the ceiling. *Is Ikari so insecure?* Fortunately, Kaji didn’t need to appear impressed. He wasn’t a NERV employee, after all. That was fortunate. It meant that Ikari couldn’t play his usual game with him, the game of having his underling stand twenty metres apart from his desk. Instead, as a U.N. Inspector who officially was to have free access to all parts of NERV (a lie, as Kaji knew), he could walk right up to the desk, and also keep his carefree smirk on his face.

Ikari, of course, showed no reaction. His pose and face were the same as if Kaji had stepped 20m away from him.

As always, he left it to his lackey to start the conversation. “You wanted to see the Commander and me?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“As Inspector, certain recent developments have come to my attention that… worry me,” Kaji explained. “Developments that need to be checked, either by NERV itself or by the U.N..”

Fuyutsuki, standing behind Ikari, looked at him with an iron gaze. “I think we understand your point, *Inspector.*”

“Then let me candid,” Kaji continued. “The current status of relationships between NERV Command and the pilots is highly alarming. Shinji is still a wreck, Asuka doesn’t even come to synch-tests anymore, Suzuhara and Ritsuko are openly shouting at each other, and Kaworu is,
frankly, unpredictable.” There was also Rei, of course. Kaji strongly suspected she wasn’t as loyal to Ikari anymore as when he had first met her. But he was not about to tell the Commander that. “If an angel attacks tomorrow, NERV command will have trouble to get the EVAs to even walk in the same direction.”

“The situation is well under control,” Ikari grumbled.

“Yes, I’m sure you can get Touji to follow orders… under duress.” Kaji conceded. “And Rei probably will as well. But with the angels continuing to attack, this isn’t a stable situation.”

“Odd of you to stress this point, Inspector,” Ikari cautioned him. “Maintaining the pilot corps’ discipline is after all Major Katsuragi’s duty.”

Kaji’s perpetual smirk became thin. “I’m well aware of that.” And fuck you, too. That’s why I’m doing this. For her sake.

“Don’t play dumb,” Ikari told him off calmly. “If you want to stress the lack of discipline among the corps, this will only end up reflecting badly on Katsuragi.”

“I want to stress the bad relations between pilots and command,” Kaji corrected him. “A problem for which command has its fair share of blame to carry.”

“Everyone at NERV has simply been doing their job,” Fuyutsuki disagreed.

Kaji grinned at that formulation. Asuka sure would have had one thing or two to say about this. And she surely would have mentioned Nuremberg. “The pilots have valid complaints. And if NERV won’t hear them, it will endanger the defence of the world.”

Fuyutsuki replied, “So would you have NERV be bound to the childish temper tantrums of...”

“...children,” Kaji cut him off. “That’s what they are. You want to send them into battle, but at the same time treat them as children whenever it is convenient for you. How long do you think they will tolerate that? You have bound Touji to you, but what about Asuka? Or Shinji or Kaworu? What if they finally get fed up and just leave?”

“Do you think that a likely prospect, Inspector?” Ikari asked. He made himself sound almost disinterested, but Kaji knew better.

There had been insinuations by those three pilots that they could leave. Katsuragi had been desperate about the prospect Asuka might. Having known Asuka for years, Kaji found that hard to imagine. But it served his position to make it look that way, of course. “Those children go out there and fight. They get whipped all over, their chest pierced through, boiled, their chestplate torn open, their mind violated… and yet, they get no respect. That is what they’re complaining about. Worse, they might even get degraded, as part of that job. Why shouldn’t they just leave that job then?”

“They have a duty to humanity,” Fuyutsuki declared. But it sounded unsure.

Personally, Kaji tended to agree. Some people simply didn’t have the luxury of being selfish. He had learned that the hard way, and had been carrying the guilt with him ever since. But the pilots wouldn’t need to. He could make it look like they could leave, without them ever intending to do so.
“Most of them have nothing else but piloting,” Gendo added. “And the Fourth Child is, as you have noted, bound to us.”

“And how is that working out for you so far?” Kaji asked provocatively. “How about you just sit together with the pilots and talk. Say… three people from NERV Command, three pilots. And I’ll mediate.”

“We won’t let ourselves be held ransom,” Fuyutsuki declared. “This is a military organization, not a business company with union representation.”

“And if the Children don’t like this, hey, they can just leave, after all,” Kaji commented with a grin. “Besides, if the U.N. hears you are treating your, ehem, ‘child research assistants’ like soldiers, well…”

“What do you mean?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“I have compiled a possible report to the U.N. General Assembly,” Kaji told him and Ikari. He laid a data disk on the desk. “Needless to say I have many, many copies of that. Some of them at drop boxes with a dead man switch. Unless I decide otherwise, the report will reach the General Assembly and several media outlets worldwide. It lays out in great detail how the EVA pilots are treated like child soldiers, how NERV would even have sacrificed one of them, how NERV sank a child into Mt Asama, way beyond the maximum safety line, how NERV put PR concerns above working together with the conventional forces and the JSSDF, even prioritized ‘saving face’ above rescuing people at Matsushiro… you get my drift.”

“We do,” Ikari merely confirmed, his voice emotionless.

“I have no doubt that this report would get quickly squashed by… certain forces within the U.N., shall we say?” Kaji continued. “But the same forces might ask how NERV could allow to reach that point. And regions around the world with a less than perfect control of the press might continue to carry the story. I’m sure it would be inconvenient.”

“We’d survive,” Fuyutsuki told him.

“Yes,” Kaji agreed.”The end result would be that the report wouldn’t achieve anything, but you’d have a great amount of trouble. So I think we’d both be better off if this can be avoided.”

“By holding those talks,” Fuyutsuki concluded.

“And coming to a reasonable agreement,” Kaji added. “As an added bonus, for that case, the local yakuza has agreed to stop its attacks.”

There was a long silence from the other side of the desk. Finally, Ikari spoke up, “I thought we had an agreement, Mr Kaji.”

“I upheld my end of it,” Kaji reminded him. He lowered his voice. “That does not mean I am forever in your service. And a dead U.N. Inspector would… draw attention.”

Again silence. Again, Ikari ended it. “We will send you a schedule for the talks, Inspector. The Vice Commander will take care of it.”

Fuyutsuki slightly raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment. Kaji understood his cue to leave and did
so.
Who would have thought this… this… domestic life would be for me?

Granted, it was an unusual domestic life, what with three partners living under the same roof, but Asuka was still utterly enchanted with it. She got breathless just thinking about it. Maybe it was the novelty of the whole thing and it would wear off again, but for now she just enjoyed having two people around whom she loved and by whom she was loved, without any questions or ambiguities or challenges. That was really what she liked most about it: It was so relaxing. Here there was a safe space where she didn’t need to constantly prove herself. She could trust, or at least desperately wanted to trust, that Shinji and Rei would accept her, no matter how she rated on her most recent synch-test, no matter which successes or losses on the battlefield, or what school degree she had.

It really made it easy to forget about everything else in the world. Like Misato.

Asuka had tried on Thursday to go to her, talk to her, maybe apologize. That was something very rare for her, but… now that Shinji and Rei had declared their love for her, both of them, always staying on top, always being right, wasn’t that desperately important to her anymore. And most of all, Misato had in fact been one of her better guardians. Asuka really wanted to fix up things with her. So she had gone, rang Misato’s doorbell… and Kaji had opened and told her Misato wasn’t feeling well.

Not well? Who knows what the two have been… Asuka breathed out forcefully thinking about it. That wasn’t her business. Not anymore. She had Rei and Shinji, after all.

But it had foiled her plan. Maybe she could have tried again today, Friday. Rei had said that Misato had been present at the synch-test in the morning. However, yesterday, Asuka had been full of determination to go through with it, whereas today… Well, Kaji had called them and told them about his plans to mediate in talks between the pilots and NERV command. Surely, it was just prudent to await those talks before speaking with Misato. It wasn’t that Asuka was afraid, that her courage had left her… she was just going about this in a strategically sound way. Misato still was the Operations Director, after all. Yeah, that’s the ticket.

In the meanwhile, she tried to think as little as possible about Misato. Or about NERV. Or, really, the outside world. And it was easy to keep her thoughts on her current living situation. In just a few days, she had learned a surprising amount of things about her new partners.

Regarding Shinji, the foremost thing was that he was getting better. Of course, with every one of the three reveling in the opportunity to get as many cuddles as possible it was difficult to say how much he still needed the physical contact and how much he just wanted it, but he could increasingly do without constantly having either Asuka or Rei around him. Not that Asuka had ever found that a burden. Now and then it had been a bit annoying, okay, but all in all she had just been glad that she had been able to do anything at all about his state. However, for his own sake, she was glad that he was increasingly able to stand on his own feet again, so to speak.

In fact, he was feeling well enough that he already got exasperated with Asuka’s and Rei’s unorderliness the previous day. Both girls had just superficially washed the dishes after dinner and replaced them into the cupboards without any order. And that was something that just would not do for Shinji. Asuka supposed she couldn’t really fault him. After all, after having lived with Misato, it was no wonder that he got twitchy at the smallest sign of disorder in the house. He had...
seen where it could lead to in the worst case after all.

Besides, it just wouldn’t be her adorably serious Shinji without that trait, so she had reacted mostly with amusement to his annoyed sighs. She did think he exaggerated a bit with cleanliness and order, but she and Rei had nonetheless then re-ordered the dishes. It was clear that some conflict might lie in wait that way. Asuka could hardly wait how this turned out. She just wanted to see this living together in all its aspects, as weird as that might sound.

Rei had tried to help Shinji with cooking the meal. And that was another thing Asuka had learned: Somehow, Rei managed to make an even worse cook than Misato. It stood to reason, considering how the blue-haired girl had apparently lived most her life, but still… the spices, sauces and vegetables she had wanted to add to the meal would have made for abominable combinations. For everyone’s security, Asuka and Shinji had decided to keep her as far away from the kitchen counter as far as possible.

A thing that Rei had soon learned was that her pouting was counter-productive: It was just too adorable.

In fact, as both Asuka and Shinji had found out, it was a very good thing Rei was in a triad. Over just a few days, the girl had evolved to be a real cuddlebug. It was a good thing she had two partners, so there was always someone which she could hug or cuddle or kiss. Asuka was definitely not complaining.

And there was something that Asuka had learned about herself that surprised her: The utter trust she had in her two partners. She knew she wouldn’t be excluded. It could happen that she was too utterly focused on her game console to notice anything around her. Even when Rei and Shinji then kissed passionately in the kitchen… Asuka knew she could join in. She could play her games, do homework, or kiss with them. All of those things were just things that happened in the household. She didn’t always need to be on guard about not being left out. And that was true for the other two as well, of course.

And finally, while Rei became ever better at the console’s fighting games, Asuka had learned that Shinji was surprisingly good at her FIFA games. Especially considering that before he hadn’t even known the rules of football. Though, granted, the games were more about keeping oversight of the team and pushing the right buttons than playing actual football. Most newbies were overwhelmed at first with having to control eleven people, and even Asuka still was at times, but Shinji seemed to have a certain knack for it. He still didn’t know all tricks in dribbling or shooting, but he managed to keep his team well in order.

Shinji groaned after he had lost another match. “I think… I think my eyes are closing by themselves.”

Asuka chuckled. “You just don’t want to lose again.” Rei had sat herself behind her, wrapping her arms around Asuka, and laying her head on her shoulder. Asuka moved her head backwards to gently rub against Rei’s. The blue-haired girl already seemed to be half-asleep as well.

“How do you have the energy to play games for hours on end?” Shinji asked.

Asuka shrugged. “Video games never tire me out. Back in Germany, sometimes...” She broke the sentence off. Maybe one day she would tell her partners about the times she was on her lowest, and had literally played video games eighteen hours a day, interrupted only by going to the toilet, and that for several days straight. Not something one should let a child do, maybe, but her guardian at
Asuka was surprised when she felt Shinji’s hand on hers. He smiled at her, one of those subdued but cute Shinji smiles. And strangely, that was just the reassurance Asuka had needed.

Behind her, Rei mumbled, sleep-drunken, “We should go to bed.”

Asuka grinned. “You think so, don’t you?” Ever since their first night as a… whatever… Rei hadn’t tried to push anymore. That was good. Asuka still felt that going anywhere into… that… territory could threaten their new and still fragile relationship. She was anxious about that topic. Though now Rei looked far too tired to try anything and besides, Asuka trusted her. So, in one smooth move, she moved her arms beneath Rei’s armpits… and stood up, bent forwards, thus giving her a piggyback ride.

“Asuka,” Rei just mumbled. The redhead assumed it was supposed to be a protest, but the Japanese girl didn’t even seem to have the energy for a proper protest anymore. Shinji just chuckled.

And thus, Asuka carried Rei to their sleeping room, accompanied by Shinji. With his help, she carefully laid down the sleep-drunken girl on the futon. Then she and the boy laid down on both sides of her. Soon, everyone’s arms found everyone else, and they nestled comfortably against each other.

_They want to blindside us._

Only yesterday Kaji had told Asuka about his plan: Talks between pilots and NERV command. And already now, Saturday, the first round was to be held. That smelled. Not that Asuka had been really convinced of that idea to start with. NERV had shown no signal that it found the pilots’ needs, wants and concerns to be of any importance. All she had seen of NERV here in Japan had made the organization out to be stubborn, oppressive and untrustworthy. She didn’t think they would actually negotiate anything in good faith, and this early first round seemed to prove her suspicions.

However… this still was a gigantic chance. Truth be told, Asuka missed her Evangelion unit. And she missed being an EVA pilot. For eight years, that had been the core of her identity. Whatever else she was, she was an EVA pilot. Nowadays, that part of her identity had decidedly sunken to second place. First of all she was Rei’s and Shinji’s partner. But in truth, she had never stopped considering herself an EVA pilot as well. She had been suspended, she had stopped going to the synch-tests, and she was angry how NERV was taking her for granted, and yet… she was an EVA pilot. And the threat that this could change for good still filled her with dread.

Not that she would show that here. And if this succeeded, if she could stay EVA pilot and yet improve her conditions at NERV, she could almost forgive Kaji not having been there when she had needed him.

She had been the first pick for the pilots’ delegation of course, as she had de facto been the pilots’ representative during their refusal of the nude synch-test. Touji was part of it because he had particular concerns; he relied on NERV for medical treatment of his sister, after all. And finally, Kaworu was the third in the delegation because he was a bit of a free spirit: His interests and attitudes didn’t necessarily align with the others.
Meanwhile, the NERV delegation consisted of Fuyutsuki, Akagi and Misato, while Kaji would mediate.

The two groups were sitting down at a simple long table. Fuyutsuki and Asuka sat opposite one another, the obvious heads of their respective delegations. On NERV side, Misato and Akagi thus sat next to each other. The two women were exchanging hostile glances. Kaji, as mediator, stood at the head end of the table, next to Asuka and Fuyutsuki.

“Thank you all for coming,” he opened the talks up. “You all know why we’re here. The rifts between Command and pilots need to be mended. Frankly, the defence of the world rests on it.”

Misato had her ‘Major’ face on, all stony and collected. Akagi looked defiant. And Fuyutsuki seemed slightly annoyed.

“Well, the pilots have complained,” Akagi started. “I’m sure they can tell us in great detail what’s wrong.”

“You know what’s wrong!” Asuka hissed at her. She managed to suppress ‘you witch’ or the other -itch word. “We save the Earth time and time again, and yet get no respect for it. Instead of the Vice-Commander slightly inconveniencing himself by calling in the conventional forces, we get sent out to fight. When that fungus angel took over EVA-03, you didn’t tell us a damn thing until we had visual contact, so as to keep us under control. This abysmal tactical leadership nearly cost Rei her life! And against the shadow angel, you would have sacrificed her! We save your asses time and time again, and yet you value those damn machines higher than us! And then, just to add insult to injury, as part of that job, you wanted to denigrate us! I’d say there is a lot wrong here!”

Fuyutsuki furrowed his brow deeply. It was clear he was not pleased with Asuka’s rant. However, he remained silent. Instead, Akagi spoke up, “We can discuss the necessities of battle, such as during the Leliel operation. But I did not try to ‘denigrate’ you!”

“Be fair,” Misato spoke up. “We decided to surprise the pilots with the nude test. We knew they would have objections – and instead of taking them seriously, we devised a way they wouldn’t be able to resist.”

“So is that what you want?” Fuyutsuki asked. It sounded like he was talking to a petulant child. “No more nude tests?”

“No more nude tests,” Asuka confirmed gravely and crossed her arms. “And no more sacrifices of pilots. Our recovery must always have higher priority than the Evangelions. And full information before every battle. And in general… just that our dignity is respected!”

“Dignity,” Akagi scoffed.

“We can try to patch up what has gone wrong in the past,” Kaji intervened now, “but that would be a band-aid that will only hold until the next crisis. There are still a thousand other things the pilots may, quite validly, object to. We need to make sure none of those happen.”

“And how do you plan to do this?” Akagi asked, agitated. “You want to give these children a say in everything?”

“And why not?” Asuka shouted. She and the scientist glared at each other.
The tense silence was interrupted by Fuyutsuki. “It seems there is in fact a need for better communication between Command and the pilots. I’m normally not used to justifying my decisions to subordinates, but I’d be willing to give you explanations for my command decisions.”

Now Touji sneered. “So we’ll know afterwards why we got screwed over. But how about not screwing us over in the first place?”

Fuyutsuki stared at him sternly. “And what else do you suggest then? Do you want to get to pick and choose what you can do and what not?”

“As I understand,” Kaworu spoke up now, as eerily calm as always, “it is commonly understood to be morally quite repugnant to use children as combatants. Necessities force NERV to take this route, as only certain children can pilot Evangelions. But surely that means the only thing that can be expected of those children is to fight angels. Nothing more than that.”

“That’s a reasonable argument,” Kaji judged. He put his hands on the edge of the table and leaned forwards on them. “We must come to an agreement what is reasonable to expect of the pilots and what isn’t. Asuka, you have no objections to fighting per se, do you?”

“Of course not!” Asuka exclaimed. “I’m an EVA pilot! The best! I’ll fight those angels, if NERV lets me! But that doesn’t mean I can be sacrificed! And it doesn’t require me to prance around naked!”

“It isn’t that easy,” Akagi argued. “Do you think we thought of this for our amusement? The data won from that test would have allowed me to establish a baseline for synchronizations. That would have allowed me to design better plugsuits, especially for our new pilots, that would have allowed higher synch-rates. All we do is designed to help you in these fights.”

“Sorry, we can manage without that help,” Asuka replied acidly.

“Hey, Doc,” Touji spoke up. “In case you haven’t noticed: We’re actual human beings, not just your tools for fighting those angels. We… we have more concerns than just that!”

“Right,” Asuka agreed. “You seem to look at us as just objects to be optimized!” She scoffed. “Or sacrificed.”

Ritsuko clammed up now, leaning back in her chair, crossing her arms and just staring at Asuka. Instead, Fuyutsuki spoke up with a level voice: “NERV exists to defend Earth from the angels. If we fail, all of Earth is destroyed. We have to optimize our defences, for the sake of all of humanity.”

That argument irritated Asuka. They wanted the pilots to fight, but kept all actual decision making power to themselves. They wanted the best of both worlds, and Asuka thought that an unbearable double standard. But before she could say that, Kaworu spoke up. “That is a weighty argument. It could have been used on us. Akagi or Katsuragi could have talked with us about this, about the necessity of this test, and what modalities could be used to still protect the privacy of the pilots as best as possible. But instead, they decided to try to spring the test on us.”

Kaji nodded. “The basic problem here is the lack of respect for the pilots. How that test went down is just a symptom.”
“Indeed,” Asuka added aggressively. “And I just love how NERV leaps on that issue, and completely ignores how they would have sacrificed one of us! Or how they withheld critical information from us! Or made us fight an unnecessary fight! Was that also necessary for the optimization of our defences?”

“Yeah,” Touji chimed in. “I wasn’t there for the rest, but… damn, I hope we won’t do that stupid test. But that won’t be enough. As long as everyone just keeps disrespecting us, we’ll all stay angry at each other. Things won’t improve.”

“And that does threaten the effectiveness of our defence against angels,” Kaji summarized.

“So much for a neutral mediator,” Akagi grumbled.

Kaji shrugged. “We have three adults on one, and three children on the other side here. Helping the kids with formulations is only fair. Though they’re doing great on their own.”

“As ‘mediator’, what do you suggest, then?” Fuyutsuki asked.

“We know the basic problem now,” Kaji said. “A lack of respect for the pilots and their concerns.”

“Even for our privacy and dignity…” Asuka muttered.

“And we know what needs to be cleared up,” Kaji continued. “Namely the question of what can be expected of the pilots. So, I advise that both sides work that question out. Next time we meet, both sides will have a proposal concerning that question. And then we can put the relationships between NERV and pilots onto a new foundation.”

Akagi scoffed. Misato showed no reaction. Fuyutsuki replied, “I doubt that this will be necessary, Inspector, but we will formulate our position. It is always helpful to have clarity in such matters.”

Kaji turned to the pilots. “And you three, work out what you want. Be fair about it, and work out a coherent system.”

Asuka grinned. “Will do.”

With a feeling of triumph she left the room together with the others. Maybe something will come out of this… But she knew it wouldn’t be easy. NERV wouldn’t shape up just because the pilots were asking nicely. They would have to be more serious than that.

Outside, in the corridor, by chance, she and Misato came face to face.

“Asuka...” Misato began. Then she noticed Akagi looking at them. “We’ll talk later.”

Asuka stood in the corridor and watched Misato leave. Then she glared at the faux-blonde scientist.

For days now, Rei had had this feeling of belonging, the feeling of home, the feeling of tenderness of love. Within just a few weeks her entire life had been changed so drastically. She now felt like she would never have to fear loneliness again, never have to fear this grey and drab abyss of nobody caring for her. She had been just a tool that had been stashed away, and had known and accepted that fact. It had been a monotone and emotionless existence. Shinji and Asuka had turned...
a key inside her heart, and that even before her soul had been reunited. She loved them more than anything else in her life, and now living together with both of them, as a triple pairing… that filled Rei with just so much contentedness, so much calm and at the same time so much excitement.

And yet, right now, there was something else on her mind. They love me, but they don’t even know the real me. They have a right to know. After all, could it even be called genuine love if it was based on an illusion? Rei wanted genuine love or nothing at all.

She was always very quiet, of course, even now still, but right now, at breakfast, she didn’t even react to what Asuka and Shinji were doing. She would have to tell them soon, and that occupied all her thought processes. It continued to do so as the three were storing the dishes away again.

Rei turned to go to the living room, but Shinji gently grabbed her shoulder. “Rei?” The blue-haired girl stopped, but didn’t react otherwise. “You seem… is something the matter?”

He noticed… It was somewhat inconvenient, yet Rei liked that thought.

“Is it… is it what I told you yesterday?” Asuka asked.

Now Rei turned around and shook her head. Yesterday, at dinner, Asuka had boasted about her successes at the negotiations. That the Commander has apparently assented to those talks was surprising to Rei; that didn’t seem to be in character for him. And even so she wondered if the talks could go anywhere.

“I mean, I was maybe a bit aggressive…” Asuka admitted.

“That’s okay,” Rei told her. She knew she still had to pilot for the sake of… everyone, to prevent an angelic Third Impact. But she wasn’t dependent on piloting anymore. It wasn’t her bond to humanity anymore. For years, piloting had been the only way she could have felt connected to people at all. But now, she had Asuka and Shinji. “I trust you won’t overdo it.” The world still needed pilots, after all.

“Right, I won’t!” Asuka promised.

“What is it then?” Shinji asked.

“Something I need to tell you,” Rei admitted in a barely audible voice and walked over to the living room. Shinji and Asuka followed her.

“Is it something you’re afraid to tell us?” Asuka asked with concern in her voice.

Rei looked out of the window and shook her head. “No. I trust you. But it is grave.” She turned around to look at her loves again.

Shinji gave her a reassuring smile. “Take as much time as you need. We will listen whenever you’re ready.”

Rei felt her body tense up. “Can I… can I have a hug?”

Shinji seemed surprised by the request, or maybe that she would ask, whereas Asuka’s lip slightly trembled, as if in amusement or some other reaction. Then, as if synchronized, the two walked up to the blue-haired girl and enclosed her from two sides. Rei could feel her loves all around her.
Rei breathed out. *We belong together. They’ll understand.* As physically close as the three always were when at home, how could it be any different? Rei could *feel* the confirmation of it.

Quietly, she spoke up, “Maybe… maybe I should tell you now.”

“We’re listening,” Asuka promised her softly.

She and Shinji loosened their embrace around Rei and looked at her. She stepped out of it, breathed out again. “You know that I am unusual. My appearance. My connection to the Commander. My… what happened after the Bardiel battle.”

“Yes…” Asuka answered, her voice prompting her to go on.

“There is a reason for that.” Rei turned around to her loves again. “I’m an… you could call me an angel.”

“An angel?” Shinji sounded astounded.

“Rei what are you talking about?” She hurried over to Rei and grabbed her shoulders. “Don’t be silly…”

She was slightly pushed back. An orange hexagon appeared between her and Rei.

Asuka and Shinji gasped, both taking some steps back. It saddened Rei.


“All beings have AT Fields,” Rei explained softly. “Humans and angels alike. It is that which defines your soul and your form. AT Fields are your borders to other beings, that which ensure that you are you and not them.”

“So… we could…” Shinji stuttered.

Rei shook her head. “No. AT Fields separate us. For humans that only means ensuring their identities vis a vis others. But for certain beings that separations can happen physically. As you have seen. Angels, Evangelions… me.”

“Then what are you?” Asuka whispered. She sounded disturbed.

“I am comprised of the same matter as angels and Evangelions,” Rei explained. “In a certain way, that makes me an angel as well.” *But – I’m – not – her.* That part of her identity Rei couldn’t bring up, because she couldn’t even properly think of it. She was too afraid of it. Not because of Asuka and Shinji, but because of herself.

“But… But angels are our enemies!” Shinji insisted loudly now. “And you aren’t!”

“No,” Rei agreed softly. “I never could be.” *I’d rather die.*

“Then how…” Shinji asked.

“I was created,” Rei explained. “The Commander and the Vice-Commander created me, to be their
angelic tool.” There was of course a very direct reason why the Commander had created her. She was his Third Impact tool... or that had been the plan. Right now, Rei didn't know if she still was. That was why she didn't mention that. Maybe it would soon be moot. And explaining that her purpose was to end the world... that would be difficult...

“Created...” Shinji echoed. But it didn’t sound repulsed. More like… *He’s sorry?* “That… would explain some things.”

“But how do you create a human?” Asuka asked. “Or an angel or whatever.”

“They cloned someone,” Rei told her. “They cloned some human’s, some woman’s genetic code, and transcribed it to particle-wave matter – the sort of matter angels and EVAs are composed of.”

“You’re a clone?” Asuka asked.

Rei shook her head. “I’m several clones. My body died during the battle with the angel Bardiel. It was my second body. This is my third body.”

Asuka again took a step back. “You… died?”

“Only my body,” Rei told her. “NERV has the technology to capture and retransplant a soul. It is still me, Asuka. It has always been me.” She looked down. “Beneath NERV Headquarters, there is room with a giant LCL tank. Inside, there are dozens of soul-less clones. All bodies like this one, all ready to receive my soul should the current body fail.”


“Yes,” Rei simply stated.

“That’s… that’s a lot to take in,” Shinji admitted. And it indeed sounded like he was at a breaking point. Rei didn’t even dare imagine what her loves were thinking now. *But they won’t leave. And they have a right to know.* “But… you say it’s always been you? Because, after that fight, you were… changed...”

“There was another me inside EVA-00,” Rei explained. “After its destruction we… reunited. But I’m also still the same Rei as before the battle. It’s always been me.”

“Another you?” Asuka asked.

“It’s difficult to explain,” Rei admitted. “But I’ve always been Rei. I’m just complete now.”

“You are Rei,” Shinji muttered.

“Yes,” Rei simply confirmed.

“Then… then it doesn’t matter,” Shinji declared. It still sounded subdued, but secure. “You’re Rei. What else matters?”

And before Rei could react, she found herself wrapped up in a tight hug by Shinji. Her lips curled up. *He understands. He always does.* She looked over to Asuka. The redhead still seemed to be in shock.
“We really didn’t know anything about you,” Asuka muttered.

Rei turned around in Shinji’s embrace, slightly loosening it. “No. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you earlier.”

“I… I suppose it isn’t something you could just say,” Asuka mused. Rei shook her head. “Oh, dammit. You’re still as cute as before. But… an angel? Okay, you aren’t an enemy. You could never be an enemy. And… a clone besides? So you were… produced?”

Rei nodded. “I still know the room where I was produced. That is where I lived most of my life. It is also deep below NERV Headquarters, close to the clone tank. I have been aware of them from the beginning.”

“Replaceable…” Shinji breathed. “That’s why you said you were replaceable.” Rei nodded again. “My father… my father…” He seemed to get angry, and then breathed out forcefully.

“You are not!” Asuka insisted. “I guess… You’re a person. No matter how you came to be. If… if there really are souls, doesn’t that define you?” It isn’t that easy. Rei remained quiet. Asuka stepped forward and pecked Rei’s cheek. “Thank you Rei. For… for trusting us. Shinji’s right: You’re Rei. That’s enough.” She then grabbed both Shinji and Rei into an embrace.

Shinji chuckled, though it still sounded somewhat melancholic. “You could be a tree for all I care, and I’d still love you. As long as you are Rei.”

Asuka chuckled as well. “And the fact that she is a beautiful girl has nothing to do with it? What if they had cloned a man?”

Shinji blushed. “Well… Rei is a unisex name, right?” He took a step back, out of the embrace, leaving his hands on Rei’s shoulder and looking her in the eyes. “I love you no matter what you are.”

Asuka looked at Shinji strangely, but then turned to Rei again. “As do I,” she whispered into her ear. “You’re Rei, and Rei is a wonderful thing to be. You’re loved.”

“T... An… AT Field…” “But how… how can…”
Rei was still tense. Asuka could feel it. Not that she blamed her. One didn’t reveal such fundamental facts about oneself like this every day. Asuka still didn’t fully know what to make out of that revelation. She knew the most important part – that she loved Rei, trusted her, wouldn’t leave her. Shinji had had the right idea, and looking back Asuka was a bit embarrassed that she had been frozen by shock for so long. She should have stood by Rei more definitely. But she had… overthought the whole matter. And maybe she still was.

So Rei was manufactured… Asuka was still not comfortable with that thought. It didn’t sour Rei for her, but… Who would do such a thing? Manufacture a person? NERV, or maybe NERV Japan, seemed to be even worse than Asuka had assumed. In a way, this only reconfirmed her commitment to Rei. She might be a clone, and others might have treated her as a tool, but to Asuka, she was her love. One of her loves. No matter what the world thought – she would defy the whole world for Rei’s sake, if need be.

Asuka knew she should prepare a list of demands and positions for the next round of negotiations that would start the next day… but Rei took precedence. The two girls and Shinji were sitting in the living room, closely huddled together. The outside world was forgotten for now. All three were caught in Rei’s life story… a story of misery and loneliness. It was hard on them all.

Rei talked about her first years. Growing up in a room with no barren concrete walls, mechanical devices all around, a dirty, industrial room. No wonder her apartment was like that… Rei told them how normal this had been for her. How comfortably familiar, even.

“Did you choose your apartment then?” Asuka asked softly.

Rei shook her head. “It was assigned to me. But I liked it. It felt familiar. Less troublesome than the outside world. Before I learned to appreciate that outside world. Before I met you two.”

Rei told her how she had barely any human contact at all. Only the Commander and the Vice Commander would come see her, and that infrequently. How she had always looked forward to those rare moments, and how Ikari especially had become associated in her mind with hope and human contact and even friendliness. Asuka was appalled. Conditioning, pure and simple. She was furious in fact, but for now she just held Rei and listened to her.

It was hence quite unusual when she was introduced to two other people for the first time: Naoko and Ritsuko Akagi. The Commander had spoken about them at length before their first visit, especially about Naoko. So when Rei approached Naoko on her own, she naturally repeated his words… and Naoko killed her for it. And that was when things changed.

Asuka couldn’t believe what Rei said next. Or no, she did believe, she trusted Rei after all, but she would have liked not to believe. Rei’s soul was split. Only half her soul was transferred into a new body, the body she and Shinji had first met. The other half had somehow been put into EVA-00 – her anger, her resentment, her spite. That all had resided in the Evangelion. Somehow.

What was left of Rei was hardly there at all. That was how the blue-haired girl described it. A feeling of only being half present in the world – which was the literal truth, actually. No appreciation of sights, foods or music. No spirit to resist what was being done to her. Only the barest and most primal conception of human warmth.
“And yet, you two broke through to me,” she whispered softly.

At this point, Akagi was began to take care of her. She became part of Ikari’s plan for Rei. Just like Ikari, she only saw her infrequently, and when she did, it was for invasive medical checks, orders or harsh words. She’s involved in this all... And she knew about Rei’s half in EVA-00. Actively used that fact.

Rei had had nothing. No feelings, no connection to humans, no warmth. That was why she had leaped at the chance to pilot. She hadn’t just been ordered, it had been her will. Asuka could understand that, of course. She knew how it was to depend on EVA to have anything at all. Still, she thought this appalling and… perverse. Rei had jumped at the chance to pilot for Ikari because of the conditions Ikari had created for her.

Ikari had kept her in sensory deprivation so that only his short visits would become points of light for her, so that she would do anything to get any sort of human contact. What sort of human being is the Commander?

So Rei had gone through it all without complaints. The rigid schedule. Obeying orders without question. The pains of the activation test. Constantly struggling with the version of herself inside EVA-00. Because piloting EVA was all she had had.

...She’s just like me.

And throughout all that Rei had considered herself nothing more than a tool. Created by the Commander for a purpose. Only important as a means to fulfill his aims. A tool that just happened to have a human form, and human thoughts, emotions and desires.

“If that Rei saw me now, she would be appalled,” Rei whispered. She was now half-sitting, half lying between Asuka’s legs, her body leaned against her chest. Asuka was stroking her hair, while Shinji held her hand. “For having allowed my emotions to overcome me. That is exactly what happened.”

“And that’s good!” Asuka insisted. Fuck the Commander. Fuck him. A deep, abiding rage was boiling inside her, but for now she focused on comforting Rei.

“Everyone... everyone who feels and thinks like a human being is a human being,” Shinji opined. He smiled at her. “I mean... you... must be one. Would Asuka and I fall in love with a tool?”

From over Rei’s head, Asuka could see how her cheeks coloured. You’re the best, Shinji. The blue-haired girl finally answered, “I know now that I am not a tool. You two already have convinced me. The conceptions of duty I held can’t compare to what I’m feeling now.”

She came to the end of her tale. How she met Shinji and was surprised that someone, anyone would show her such warmth. How she met Asuka and how the redhead turned her world on its head. How she died against Bardiel, how she came back to life, and how she was sorted out by Leliel.

“You... talked to the angel?” Asuka asked.

Rei nodded, something that Asuka more felt at her chest then that she saw it. “It meant well. It just wanted to understand. And it helped me to understand.”
“So even among the angels attacking us… not all are enemies?” Asuka asked.

“I don’t know,” Rei stated.

“They wouldn’t attack if they weren’t our enemies,” Shinji stated sullenly.

*Shit. My big mouth.* After what had happened last fight, of course Shinji wouldn’t give angels the benefit of the doubt.

Shinji breathed out, and then look down at the ground. “I… I can’t believe… *my father!* He did that all!”

Rei sat upright again between Asuka’s legs and grabbed Shinji’s shoulders. “You’re not him.”

“I know,” Shinji almost snapped. “But… you’re telling this so calmly… after all he’s done to you… don’t you hate him?”

“Hate…?” Rei whispered. She seemed conflicted about this. “Should I hate him?”

“If somebody locked me in a dirty room for years with no sunlight or human contact… I’d hate them!” Asuka stated with certainty. *And to do that to Rei… She did hate Ikari now.*

“I know I do…” Shinji muttered angrily. “My father… how could he do this? And I thought… I thought what he did to me was bad!”

“The Commander…” Rei began hesitantly.

She had both her partners’ attention. “Yes, Rei?” Asuka prompted him.


“Well, I do,” Asuka now admitted. She became quite forceful. “The thought of… of *anyone* doing *this* to *you*… I love you Rei. And I… I can’t accept that anyone has done this to you!”

Meanwhile, Shinji’s body was all rigid. He seemed too tense to even only speak. Finally, Rei spoke up again, “I don’t know how I feel about the Commander and his… plans. I’m just glad that this all is in the past for me.”

“It is,” Asuka confirmed softly and wrapped Rei into a tight embrace.

However, Shinji still seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. “Damn my father,” he muttered. “Damn him, damn him, damn him. How could I ever… could I ever want praise from such a person?”

Both girls looked at him from their embrace. Rei spoke up, “Shinji?”

“He’s dead to me,” Rei declared icily. “Only… only you two matter. He’s… what’s between us is just genetics. Not family. You two are family.”

Both Asuka and Rei now straightened up a bit, to drew Shinji into their embrace. The boy, who had thus far knelt upright, nearly fell over, but the two caught him.
“We’ll take care of Rei,” Asuka promised him. “And we’ll look into the future together. Without fathers or Commanders or Vice-Commanders.”

It took the whole day before any of them could speak or even only think about anything else. A day mostly spend cuddled up, each of them clinging to the others, as if they were each other’s shield against a harsh and brutal world outside – a world in which people could create girls like Rei as tools and get away with it.

So in the afternoon, Asuka was kind of shocked when Shinji declared he would go out shopping for groceries. He, of all people? It would be the first time in a week that he left the apartment. She thought about accompanying him, but that would mean leaving Rei behind. And all three of them going was made impossible by the need to keep their relationship a secret. And while Asuka was still fretting about what to do, Shinji simply left the apartment.

A bit more than an hour later, both she and Rei basically leaped at him when he came home. Both had been worried, and that apparently with good reason: Shinji was sweating and shaking. They gently led him to the kitchen.

“I… I thought I was ready…” he reported with shaking voice. “I mean… I know we’re together now, but… out there… I began doubting again. Fearing. Thinking…”

“We know,” Rei whispered to him. Both girls had their arms around him.

Shock therapy. Not always the best course of action…

It soon became apparent why Shinji had burdened himself with this journey: He had bought very high-quality ingredients. Delicacies. And as soon as he had calmed down, he began cooking. A vegetarian meal. It was clear he wanted to show to Rei how much she meant to them. That she did deserve all the best in the world. Realizing that, Asuka could have just taken him and… but he was busy cooking of course.

After the meal, after they had washed the dishes and cleaned the table, Asuka dared for the first time to ask a question that had been in the back of her mind the whole day, but had been too buried by concern for Rei to be voiced. “Rei… you mentioned souls. A part of you inside Evangelion Unit 00. I don’t understand.”

“So souls are that part within every being which creates the AT Field,” Rei explained. “The AT Fields in turn separate the souls from each other and thus ensure that individuals are in fact distinct individuals. Souls are the centre of your individuality, your ‘selfness’. Metaphysical Biology is the study of souls.”

“The subject my father studied,” Shinji muttered. “And my mother as well.”

Huh. “My mother as well,” Asuka breathed. That coincidence was odd enough, but there was more of course. Questions regarding the nature of Evangelions. Asuka was almost afraid to keep on asking. After all, she had worked with EVA-02 for eight years now, and it had become a core of her identity. “Are you… are you saying….”

There was a sound coming from the door. Saved by the bell. Asuka rushed towards the door and opened it. Misato was standing outside, wearing her best ‘Major’ mask.
“Can I come in, Asuka?” Misato asked. “We really need to talk. All of us.”

“Wait, please,” Asuka told her. She walked back into the kitchen and explained, “It’s Misato. She wants to talk. Maybe we should?”

“You were telling us something, Rei,” Shinji spoke up.

“It’s alright,” Rei said. “It can wait. Let’s hear the Major.”

Asuka nodded and then called over to the door, “Come in, Misato”.

Misato did so. After she had taken off her shoes, she entered the kitchen. A grave silence lasted in the room. The Major looked each of the pilots in the face.

“Asuka… Shinji… Rei… I’m sorry.” And then she bowed deeply.

Asuka was stunned. Sure, Misato had made mistakes. And she had fully intended to point them out to her. But that Misato would start with an apology… and then such a formal one… Asuka knew how much this was worth in Japanese society – especially from a superior to subordinates.

“Misato...” she just stammered.

Misato stood up straight again, and looked at each of the pilots in turn. “Rei, I apologize as your Operations Director. Shinji, I apologize as your Operations Director and current guardian. And Asuka…” She breathed out. “I apologize as your Operations Director, as your current guardian, and as your former guardian. I have failed you all.”

“But… Misato…” Shinji protested.

“Asuka… I’ve read your file,” Misato began to explain. “I knew you were cast off by your father to NERV. And I knew what we, NERV, did. Always pushing you. Always just looking at your synch-rate. Throwing your childhood away. I knew all this… and brushed it aside. We didn’t see you as a child to take care of, but as a tool. We didn’t raise a child, but a pilot. I did as well. And I have only now realized how awful this was. I can only ask forgiveness.”

“That’s not… that’s not how...” Asuka tried to protest, but couldn’t find the right words. Her childhood hadn’t been “thrown away”. She had been given purpose. She was an EVA pilot now, part of the elite. Surely that meant her childhood had been spent well!

...and yet, it wasn’t entirely wrong that many of her guardians had in fact seen nothing else in her, and had always just looked at her synch-rate…

“And now here in Japan,” Misato continued, “I sent you all into battle. I sent children to face alien abominations in life and death battles. I saw and heard how you suffered, and then simply sent you into the next battle. And while this may all have been necessary because of the angels… I just took it for granted. What I did was terrible, but I never apologized. Never told you you should have it better than this. Never even showed sympathy. Instead I just always laughed everything away, treated it like a joke. I never thanked you for all your sacrifices, never showed you the respect you deserve. I just treated you like normal school kids, like all your pain and suffering didn’t even matter. I… I simply used you as tools, nothing more. I’m a wretched person.”

The most shocking thing to Asuka was how calmly Misato spoke. It wasn’t a rush of emotions that
let her say that about herself; rather she seemed to have accepted that as the truth. And this shocked everyone present.

The Major turned towards Shinji. “And Shinji… you in particular I can only ask for forgiveness. I should have noticed what I was doing to you. Noticed how I was destroying you. But I never did. I never faced the facts. I’m so sorry.”

Nobody could really muster a reply. Finally, it was Rei who first shook off that spell. She stood up, began heating water, and took out tea.

“Sit down, Major Katsuragi,” she offered Misato.

Misato visibly winced at the address, but indeed slowly, hesitantly took a seat at the table.

“I really don’t know what to say at this,” Asuka muttered.

“Me, neither,” Shinji added.

“Shinji… I knew you in particular piloted in order to get praise,” Misato told him. When Shinji seemed about to protest she shook her head and continued softly, “I don’t blame you. But even though I realized… I couldn’t even give you that. Not even just praise. And you all would have deserved it. You all have saved the Earth over and over again, and that at such great sacrifices… And we at NERV just look at this, nod, and then send you out into the next battle. No gratitude, no respect, no sympathy… nothing.” She hesitated. “No… not ‘we at NERV’. I. I did this all on my own. And I nearly destroyed you with it, Shinji. If I don’t apologize now, what worth do I still have?”

The boy remained quiet. In fact, he looked sullen.

“I wasn’t expecting this…” Asuka muttered. “I thought this would be about what happened recently… Akagi’s stupid idea, me not going to synch-test, our recent talk… but this…”

“But I’m not wrong, am I?” Misato whispered softly.

Asuka remained silent for a while. No, Misato was not wrong. Respect. Exactly that what Asuka had fumed about in recent weeks. How indeed everyone was just taking them for granted. Asuka had trained long and hard to be the best EVA pilot in the world. All that effort, all that time invested… and everyone was just shrugging their shoulders. Nobody regarded it. Tools. NERV really didn’t seem to see them any other way. Just tools to be optimized. Tools to be used against the angels. Nothing else. And Misato had always just treated this as normal as well.

Rei served everyone a cup of tea, to mumbled words of gratitude. Then Asuka spoke up. “No. No, you aren’t.” She hesitated. “That’s why… why…”

“Yes?” Misato prompted her. She sounded eager to hear a response, any response, from her.

“When we last talked,” Asuka mumbled. Admitting to having done wrong was difficult for her, but, damn it!, she had told herself to go through with this. “I didn’t mean what I said about quitting. I won’t quit, Misato. I am a pilot. I… sorry that I made you believe so. Deliberately so.”

“There’s nothing to…” Misato began, but Asuka talked over her.
“I was just so angry,” Asuka vented. “It seemed you only cared that I function. That I go to the synch-tests. And I just… had it up to here. That you take me for granted. That everyone takes me for granted. Despite all that I have done.”

She breathed out. “So I apologize. I shouldn’t have tried to hurt you.”

Misato looked down into her tea cup. “Well, it’s my fault. I am your guardian. Yours and Shinji’s. I should have your interests at heart. Instead, I’m giving you orders as your de facto superior in a military organization. So that you have nobody looking out for you.”

Neither Shinji nor Asuka commented, while Rei had remained quiet the entire time anyway. As far as Asuka was concerned, there was nothing to say. Ever since she was six, she had known nothing else: Guardians who were little more than her handlers. She had never thought deeply about that; it was her normalcy. So what could she say now?

Finally, it was Misato who spoke up again. “But Asuka… I asked you about the synch-tests because I felt it was the only thing I could still do. I felt… feel… I don’t have the right to bother you about anything. I’m not worthy as a guardian. So I asked about the synch-tests, because that was the only thing I felt I still had any right to ask you about.”

Oh. That made feel Asuka stupid. She had completely misinterpreted Misato. She looked down abashed.

“So… what now?” Shinji asked. “Where do we go from here? How things currently are… it sucks. I’d like for things to just… get normal again.”

“That’s up to you,” Misato told him softly. “If you hate me… you have ample reason to. I won’t begrudge it. All of you. Rei… you aren’t my ward, but you as well are a pilot, and I never showed you any respect or gratitude.”

Rei remained silent, and Asuka just scoffed silently. Not just a pilot. Rei had been created as a tool.

“I can only say what I will do,” Misato continued. “From now on, I will treat you with respect. Whatever your stance on me will be, I will show gratitude. I will apologize for sending you into battle. And I will always side with you, Command be damned. After all that I’ve done to you… I can only try whatever I can to make it up to you.”

“I… I don’t want to hate,” Shinji mumbled. “You were the first person who was something like a friend to me, despite everything, you know? The first person who consistently treated me with some friendliness since I was four. So… you’re clearly not simply a bad person, Misato. But… the things you have said here...”

“I understand,” Misato said. It sounded hollow.

“And you were one of my better guardians,” Asuka spoke up now. “You and Kaji, you were the best. Maybe you didn’t do everything right. No, you definitely didn’t. But… there are worse people than you out there. You also did a lot right. I… we should give you a chance.”

“I would like that,” Misato muttered. “I realize now… Shinji, maybe I only brought you into my home because I was lonely. For my sake, not yours. For that I apologize as well. So maybe I just don’t want to be lonely again. Maybe I’m being selfish again. But I would like if I could be more than your Operations Director. For all of you, including you, Rei.” She breathed out and for the first time sounded unsteady. In fact, her voice was downright shaky. “But if you want to cut all
contacts with me, then I’ll respect that as well. I’ll nominally remain your guardian, Asuka, Shinji, but I’ll just leave you alone then. And maybe that’s better for you.”

Another heavy silence followed that announcement. Rei used it to warm up water again. Finally, Shinji spoke up again. “I liked it in your apartment, Misato. I didn’t like having to fight. And maybe you should have… but I did like it there. You were always so friendly, so cheerful… so don’t feel bad about that detail. And… I don’t want to lose you as a friend.”

Asuka worked her mouth. She didn’t want to, either. She wanted to be on good terms with Misato, and she appreciated her apology, but at the same time… she needed to understand. All those things Misato had apologized for, they had happened, after all. They required an explanation.

“Why?” she hence exclaimed. “So why have you never realized any of this? Why have you just thoughtlessly treated us as tools? Why have you never apologized? Why have you never thanked us? Why?” She was shouting now.

Misato looked down at the table. It seemed like her upper body could collapse any second now. “Because I was selfish. I made it easy on myself. Raising a child soldier? Nonsense, you’re just a normal kid, right? Thanking you, apologizing to you… that would have destroyed the illusion. The illusion I built up for my own selfish protection. Hence also all that teasing and joking… It made it appear all so harmless. So, even though you already have the hardest part, I burdened even more crap onto you so as to make it easy on myself.”

“And that damn nude synch-test attempt…?” Asuka prompted.

“Same there,” Misato admitted.

“You knew we would object!” Asuka accused her. “You knew it! Hence you tried to sabotage our ability to do so! What were you thinking?”

Misato leaned her head on her arms now. “You’re right. The very fact that we tried to take your away your ability to protest showed it was a big deal, but I deluded myself into thinking it wasn’t. I couldn’t face what we were doing – forcing three teenagers to go around naked. So… what may not be, cannot be. I deluded myself into thinking that hey, no big deal.”

Asuka scoffed. There wasn’t much she could say, though. What else was there to say? Misato was admitting everything, after all.

“So you won’t do such things anymore?” Shinji asked.

“No,” Misato confirmed. It sounded hoarse. “You tell me you don’t want to do a certain thing, I’ll try to make sure you don’t need to. Between yourselves, you need to pilot two Evangelion units. But that’s all we can ask of you. And if Akagi or Ikari try to force more out of you… I’ll try what I can to stop that. From now on, you will decide what you’ll do.”

“Then, maybe...” Shinji began.

But apparently Misato decided she wasn’t done yet. “And… Shinji? I really am sorry for having made you pilot again and again. I know I already offered you before to just leave, but that was just me deluding myself again. Of course that isn’t much of an option. Just something I could use to make me feel better about myself - ‘hey, he can leave after all!’'. Well, from now on I’ll try to keep you out of battles as much as I can. I promise.”
“...oh,” Shinji simply voiced.

“You wanted to say something,” Rei prompted him.

Shinji smiled faintly at her, then turned to the others as well again. “Maybe... under these conditions... we can try to start over. I mean, I can’t speak for the others, but I accept your apology.”

Asuka felt people looking at her, obviously waiting for her answer. So finally, she muttered, “Respect, hm?”

“Yes,” Misato answered. “As much as I can muster... You deserve whatever respect can be granted to you, Langley-Soryu-sama.”

Asuka blinked. Japanese allowed for a wide variance in modes of address to express social standing and respect. Certainly a a wider variance than German, with its two different forms of address, or English, which only knew ‘you’. And Misato had just address her in the most respectful manner still current in Japanese, even using her full double family name. Indeed, at first Asuka assumed Misato was ridiculing her - no way any Japanese adult would call a teenager that, much less a subordinate. But then she realized that, no, that was a genuine offer. Misato was ready to treat Asuka with the utmost respect. Even in fact going so far as to risk ridicule for herself for using such an address towards a teenager.

Of course, this would also be accompanied with the appropriate formal distance.

“I’d like if we could remain closer than that,” Asuka told her. “But... respect. No more teasing. Nothing like that dancing gear, no stupid comments, no laughing at what we have to go through.”

“It’ll be hard,” Misato admitted. “No more illusions for myself. Looking reality in the eye unshielded. But... it’s harder still for you.” She breathed out. “No more teasing.”

Asuka nodded with determination. “I accept your apology as well, Misato. You... you aren’t a lost cause. And maybe things can get better now.” She turned towards Rei. “So what do you say?”

That seemed to surprise the blue-haired girl. “I’m not a ward of Major Katsuragi.”

“But you are a pilot, Rei,” Misato told her. “My offer extends to you. You can demand whatever respect from me you want. You can hate me. It would all be justified. And from now on, I will support you where I can.”

It took a while until Rei answered, and when she did her voice was so soft as to be nearly inaudible. “I appreciate that. I don’t hate you, Major.”

“I’m glad,” Misato whispered. “I really do hope this is a new start for us. And most of all... that I can set right now what I have done wrong.” She smiled weakly. “And, by the way, you can call me Misato. Or if that is uncomfortable for you... you don’t need to call me Major, in any case. We’re not at NERV, and I’m not your actual military superior.”

“Understood... Misato,” Rei answered.

“I may have misjudged you,” Asuka commented.
“What do you mean?” Misato asked.

“The thing with the nude test...” Asuka began to explain. “NERV gave us no sign they had any interest in our concerns or well-being at all, so we didn’t even try to talk to anyone. But maybe... maybe we could have trusted you. Not as NERV officer, but well, you. Maybe we could have avoided so much escalation then. I... uh... I...”

“Don’t apologize,” Misato told her. “You’re right – we gave you no sign we were interested in anything you had to say. Not me, either. It would be difficult to expect trust of you then. But maybe... from now on...”

Asuka turned towards Shinji and Rei. Shinji nodded. “From now on, we will try ‘trust’.”

Misato smiled weakly. “This... went better than I had expected. Maybe better than I deserved.”

"You apologized," Shinji pointed out. "That alone makes you better than... many people." Asuka could think of some. Akagi, Fuyutsuki, Ikari... Shinji wasn't wrong "If you truly now... you know... do as you've said, then you deserve things going well for you."

Misato gave him a warm smile. "Still... If there is anything I can do to help you right now...”

The three shot glances at each other. Finally, Asuka spoke up. “Uh... there are the talks tomorrow...”

“Have you compiled a list of demands yet?” Misato asked.

“We had a sort of... emergency today,” Asuka told her. “So, no.”

Before Misato could answer, Rei spoke up quietly. “Maybe we should tell the... Misato what I have told you.”

“Are you sure, Rei?” Shinji asked with concern in his voice.

The blue-haired girl nodded. Asuka sighed. “It’s not a pretty story...”

And the three began to tell it. They let Rei take the lead. Asuka soon noticed that the blue-haired girl didn’t tell Misato everything. She just vaguely alluded to having been manufactured, but didn’t give any details. What she mostly talked about was how she had been raised – which after all had been the ‘emergency’ in the apartment.

She told it all in her usual monotonous voice and seemed entirely emotionless. She just droned on and on... which was not the norm for her anymore. Both Asuka and Shinji could feel how heavily this weighed on Rei. And they both could not do anything but help her. By the end of her story, Asuka and Shinji were sitting at her sides, very close by, and were holding her shoulder or her hand.

Misato didn’t comment. She was entirely in Major mode now, treating this as a sort of professional data gathering. She kept asking small questions for clarifications and finally inquired more and more about Akagi’s role.

Finally, the Major mask broke. “Gods... I knew she had gone cold, but... Ritsuko, what have you
have been doing here? What happened to you?”

“Who cares?” Asuka muttered. She was rubbing Rei’s back. “She has done it. I don’t feel like any hearing explanations for it.”

Misato sighed. “Unfortunately, we will have to keep working with her. We need the Evangelions, and I’m not sure anyone else could lead Project E. Ibuki is a nice girl and a brilliant mind, but she just lacks Akagi’s expertise.”

“What about Victoria… Dr Armstrong, I mean?” Asuka asked. Victoria Armstrong was the British head of NERV Germany’s equivalent to Project E. “She was able to take care of EVA-02 back in Germany.”

“Use of EVA-02 at the Berlin branch was very limited,” Misato pointed out. “She might be able to, but… would you risk the defence of the world on that gamble?”

Asuka groaned. “So we’re stuck with Akagi. But that doesn’t mean we have to like her. And if she ever lays another hand on Rei…”

“I’ll continue to require her medical oversight,” Rei pointed out.

Shinji laid a fist on the table. “But if she ever mistreats you during her check-ups, tell us. We will…” He stopped.

“We are piloting 23,000 ton war machines,” Asuka growled.

Misato furrowed her brows. “In all seriousness, Rei. If she does something bad to you, do tell me. I may have ways of dealing with that problem. And I have promised that from now on I will care more about you, the pilots, than NERV command… or my career.”

“I am used to…” Rei began.

“Yes!” Asuka interrupted her. “And that’s exactly the problem. You deserve better!”

“…I’ll remember that,” Rei promised her, and laid her head on her shoulder.

Now, Misato finally commented on that. “You three have gotten close.” She sounded stony again.

Asuka wanted to tell her that yes, they had. For one thing, she still had this desire for defiance inside her, and besides, she would like to shout it out to the world that Shinji and Rei were hers – were both hers (and each other’s, but all the better). But she knew she had to be careful.

Rei remained silent, while Shinji, of course, was silently sputtering in an adorable way. So it fell to Asuka to answer, and she was cautious about it. “You didn’t see any of this.”

Misato blinked. “What?” Then she looked down. “I see. It’s none of my business. If you tell me…”

Shit. Asuka hadn’t meant it that way. I’ve screwed it up again. “No!” she hastened to say. “I… I meant… NERV command. The rest of it. Ikari, Fuyutsuki, Akagi. They…” She was fumbling for words.

“We’d like them to know nothing about it,” Rei said softly.
“I see,” Misato said. “In that sense… yes, I have seen nothing here. If you want, I won’t tell a single soul even the slightest hint. If you want, I’ll actively lie to keep your cover.”

“We would like that,” Rei confirmed.

“So I won’t ask as your Operations Director or as a NERV employee at all,” Misato continued. “Just as the guardian of two of you. Or as your… well, hopefully friend. Somebody you have agreed to deal with. But… you three are… uh… hm.”

That made Asuka chuckle. And now she had full license to boast. She looked down at Rei, who was still leaned against her shoulder. “Rei?” she asked very softly.

The girl nodded. Asuka bowed down. They kissed. It was a long and passionate kiss. _Mine. She is all mine._ Well, and Shinji’s but hey, Shinji was hers as well. _They’re both mine._ And it felt wonderful. Especially that there was at least one person from which they didn’t need to hide the truth.

When their faces parted, Asuka had a broad grin on hers, while Rei sported one of her adorable, subtle smiles. And Misato’s face surpassed Asuka’s wildest expectations… a look of bewilderment, amusement and disbelief.

“And… Shinji… you’re okay with that?” Misato asked.

Shinji just grinned and gently laid a hand around Rei’s face. The girl now turned towards the other side. She certainly wouldn’t say no to yet another kiss. Once again Asuka noted how well they seemed to fit to each other when they kissed. Two quiet, amazing people giving each other tenderness. Asuka was lucky to have them both. Lucky and extraordinarily happy.

When the two parted, they kept looking deeply in each other’s eyes. Meanwhile, Asuka addressed Misato, grinning while she did so. “Does that answer your question?”

“I mean… it did look that way for a while now,” Misato muttered. “That you are somehow all three together. I just couldn’t believe it. I thought it would be one of those complicated love triangles you would have to sort out, eventually.”

“We did,” Rei stated plainly.


“How this works?” Shinji suggested. “If it is a good idea?”

Misato breathed out. “I’ll be honest. I do have worries. It sounds like something inexperienced teenagers would jump into without thinking it through.”

“We know what we’re doing!” Asuka immediately protested.

“Asuka...” Misato just said, and then sighed. “I won’t stop you, if that is what you’re fearing. But this is… unusual. I suppose it can work, but it will require some effort. I hope you’re clear on that.”

Asuka wanted to protest that as well, but Rei laid a soothing hand on her shoulder. “We are,” she said. “This is what we want. Asuka makes me happy. Shinji makes me happy. They make each
other happy. It is worth whatever effort it requires.”

Misato smiled faintly at that. She was speaking softly now. “I see. That’s good.”

“So what are you going to do now?” Asuka asked, with some suspicion in her voice.

“Do?” Misato echoed. She shook her head. “I’m not going to restrict you, if that is what you’re fearing. This is unusual, but… in the end, it’s your decision. But… Asuka. All of you. Please be careful. And I don’t just mean… physical activities. Be careful what you say and do. Be patient with each other. Don’t go around breaking each other’s hearts.”

_Huh._ Hearing such serious and supportive talk from Misato was really goddamn _weird_ to Asuka’s ears.

Misato looked at her watch. “It’s getting late… we, uh, really should talk about, ah, _this_, you know. Especially… well… I suppose you can guess what I mean.”

Asuka felt heat rising inside her. Shinji’s head certainly looked like a tomato now. Only Rei seemed to be unaffected.

“Do we really have to...” Shinji tried.

Misato sighed. “It won’t be pleasant for me or for you, but even less pleasant if you blunder into something and screw it all up. I mean, I guess you know about the bees and the flowers…”

“No thanks to you,” Asuka muttered.

Misato looked down. “That’s why now we should do it better, right? But that will probably require more time than we have now. And there are those talks tomorrow. For now, we should formulate your demands.”

Asuka grinned, happy about the change of topic. “Aren’t you on the other side?”

Misato looked her right in the face. “Only formally.”
There was an upside to not going to school currently: Even though Asuka, Shinji, Rei and Misato had sat until late into the night working on their list of demands, Asuka still felt well rested, as she had slept accordingly long into the morning. Now she was back here, at the long table in one of the Geofront’s conference rooms, the pilots on one side of it and NERV command on the other. This time, Asuka glared hostilely at Fuyutsuki as they were sitting down. After what Rei had told her and Shinji about herself, about how NERV had created and treated her… Asuka was not in a conciliatory mood with NERV. Not at all. Part of her wanted to demand the removal of Fuyutsuki and Akagi, but she knew that would never work. They had to stick to their plan.

They would deal with Fuyutsuki and Akagi later. For now, they had to ensure there would be an effective EVA defence when the next angel would come. Misato had stressed the need of that quite clearly the previous evening, and Asuka agreed with her.

There was an awkward silence, before Kaji spoke up. “Very well. I assume both sides have used the time to come up with proposals.” He sounded oddly hollow, as if he hadn’t gotten much sleep, either.

“We have,” Fuyutsuki answered. “NERV does recognize that mistakes have been made in the past. Trying to spring an uncomfortable test on the pilots was a bad idea, for example. Therefore, we will ensure that there is always proper communication with the pilots, that they are kept abreast of all developments, and that they will always be informed in advance about any irregular events.”

Asuka raised an eyebrow. “Proper communication. Does that also include the battlefield?”

“By its very nature, battlefield intelligence is sensitive,” Fuyutsuki stated. “But improvement of battlefield communication would also be one of our goals.”

“I take that as a no then,” Asuka concluded.

“And besides, isn’t that the same thing you said last time?” Touji spoke up. “Great. We’ll be informed about humiliations. But we’ll still have to go through with them.”

“While pilots are not officially part of the military command structure, we do need obedience to fight the angels effectively,” Akagi stated.

Is it me or does she sound smug about that? Asuka scoffed. Kaji intervened: “Yeah… so. NERV doesn’t recommend any structural changes?”

What’s with him? He sounded actually annoyed by the bickering, which didn’t fit to his usually unflappable demeanour.

“We see no need for it,” Fuyutsuki answered. “We admit that, in the past, we haven’t always treated the pilots as we should have. And that will stop. They will get the respect they are due. But that can’t be an excuse to get out of certain necessities.”

“It is exactly that status as ‘necessities’ we question,” Kaworu commented.

Wordlessly, but with a slightly triumphant demeanour, Asuka got some sheets of paper out of her
The list of the pilots’ demands. She handed a copy each to Kaji, Fuyutsuki, Akagi and, for appearances, Misato. “We, on the other hand, do see a need for change. Like, a change in everything, if we are to stay here. We must clear up what can be expected from us.”

“If you are to stay here?” Akagi muttered, but she focused on the piece of paper in her hands.

Fuyutsuki furrowed his eyebrows. “This is a highly concerning first point, Soryu.”

“This is the most important point,” Asuka explained. “Detailing what can be expected from us. Our duties.”

“Battles against angels… regular synch-tests… combat training,” Fuyutsuki summarized the point.

“And nothing else,” Akagi continued.

“No scientific tests, no PR actions, no team or morale-building missions,” Asuka explained. “That all has to be on a strictly voluntary basis.”

“You can’t pick and choose what you do at NERV!” Akagi protested.

“And why not?” Kaworu argued. “The angel threat is the only thing that justifies your use of, frankly, child soldiers, isn’t it? But that means that justification then only extends to actually fighting angels.”

Asuka furrowed her brows. Kaworu sounded… almost normal today. Instead of carrying his usual, creepy perma-smile, he had sounded almost grumpy now. But ‘child soldiers’… Misato had advised her to use that argument as well, but it was just not how Asuka saw herself. She was an EVA pilot, part of the elite, the only people who could save the Earth. She wasn’t a victim. She just wanted to make sure she got the proper respect.

“And we will,” Asuka confirmed. “We will fight and we will train and we will obey actual operational orders during battles. But only those orders. Anything beyond that will have to be on a strictly voluntary basis.”

“This still amounts to you wanting to be able to decide what orders to follow and which ones not,” Fuyutsuki commented. “And as for you, Pilot Soryu, your record of following orders during battle isn’t exactly great, either.”

“I know,” Asuka answered through clenched teeth. Now came the hard part, but Misato had made it clear to her why it was needed. “And I won’t defend that. I… I disobeyed orders I should have obeyed. Okay? So… any disciplinary action against me for that will be justified. I’m willing to accept those.”

“Oh how gracious of you!” Akagi mocked. “Like you would get a say in that. Why should we listen to you? As I’ve said before, we’re not doing any of this for… for… shits and giggles. We do need to keep you optimized for the sake of the defence of the world. Whatever comes with that.”

“Oh how gracious of you!” Akagi mocked. “Like you would get a say in that. Why should we listen to you? As I’ve said before, we’re not doing any of this for… for… shits and giggles. We do need to keep you optimized for the sake of the defence of the world. Whatever comes with that.”

“It’s bad enough we have to fight,” Touji spoke up. “We aren’t even talking about compensation for that. But all that stuff that comes with being a pilot that isn’t even necessary to defeat the angels. Like your crazy test idea. It’s like… we already are expected to fight, save all you people’s asses, but that then comes with additional humiliation!”
“You want to have it both ways,” Asuka added. “First you say, hey, if I don’t like it, I can leave – but then you say I can’t leave, because defence of the world and all that!”

And truth be told, Asuka didn’t want to leave. But this attitude still pissed her off.

Fuyutsuki just sat there, his brows furrowed and looked at everyone. He remained silent. Instead, Akagi replied. “I’m sorry. But we can’t just forego further EVA research altogether. There are necessities besides just...”

“Then why should I stay?” Asuka intervened loudly. Her heart was thumping. She had no intention to leave. She was an EVA pilot. She was part of the elite. But NERV couldn’t take her for granted! “If the only way to get rid of all that bullshit, the only way to... to... defend my dignity is to leave this all behind, then what else am I supposed to do?”

Touji looked down at the ground. Asuka could understand. There wasn’t much he could say there without endangering his sister. Not that she wanted to endanger her... and it wasn’t like she truly planned to leave, anyway, but... but... Asuka was just so fed up with NERV’s attitude.

Kaworu, meanwhile, looked at her with furrowed brows, and stated, “She... is right.” It sounded oddly curt and hollow. “If leaving NERV is the only way we can protect ourselves from indignities, then... why shouldn’t we leave?”

“Because the world depends on you,” Misato stated. Being in ‘Major Mode’, she said so entirely matter-of-factly.

“But I am willing to fight!” Asuka exclaimed. Misato had told her she would bring up that point during the discussions, most likely. “Willing to protect the world! But that doesn’t mean I have to endure all the other bullshit! And if the only reason to protect myself from that other bullshit is to leave... as you’ve said, Misato... then what else can I do?”

Kaji looked at Asuka, then at the NERV delegation. His mouth was thin, and one hand a fist. He said quietly, “And NERV can’t risk losing use of two EVA units.”

With a deep, growling voice, Fuyutsuki spoke up again. “Let’s get to the second point.”

“We won’t follow any suicide orders,” Asuka specified the point. “Or any orders that will result in the death of one of us. Our survival always has to have highest priority, after completing the mission, of course. And rescuing any one of us must have always have higher priority than salvaging Evangelions.”

“So even during battle you want to pick which orders to follow,” Akagi mocked.

“If we can’t even be sure you have our life and wellbeing on your mind... how can we pilot then?” Touji protested.

“Evangelions are of no use to you if we’re dead,” Asuka pointed out. “EVA-02 is useless to you without me.”

“EVA-01 is double-booked,” Misato pointed out emotionlessly, giving a cue to Asuka.

“Yes,” Asuka admitted. “It might make sense to prioritize EVA-01. Hence why we have to ensure here that won’t happen. If you try that again in battle, we will disobey. I mean come on! Of course
we will protect our own lives here! I won’t follow suicide orders! I’m not a… a...” She scoffed.

Something reached through Misato’s stony Major mask. She flinched.

Further demands were discussed: No secondary battle aims, no intrusion into the pilots’ lives, full anonymity for the pilots if they so wished, no military etiquette like uniforms being asked of them. Fuyutsuki seemed to have little problems with most of those, and they had been mostly added for completeness’ sake – this was to be the agreement to put the entire relationship between NERV and pilots on a new foundation after all. But the obvious rejections of the first two points was almost tangible in the air.

“And finally the last point,” Fuyutsuki muttered. Then he blinked. “I don’t understand… you already do get full medical care.”

Asuka sighed. This point had been added last minute by Kaworu: Full medical and veterinary coverage. “It’s about the veterinary care.”

“For my kitten,” Kaworu added with a smile on his face. Asuka sighed again.

It seemed for once, Fuyutsuki really was speechless. Then he raised his hand to his face and sighed as well.

Then he looked at Asuka. “You have demanded a lot.”

“We’re just not willing to do anything more than what we signed on for,” Asuka answered. “We’re here to fight angels. By... by what right can be more be demanded of us?”

“But you will fight the angels now?” Fuyutsuki asked of her. He sounded grave.

“Of course!” Asuka told him. “I was always willing to! I just want... to be treated fairly.”

“And you will come to regular synch-tests and combat training?” Fuyutsuki inquired further.

Asuka nodded. “To each and every such session. As long as it is regular stuff and not... you know.”

“And you will obey orders?” Fuyutsuki went on.

“Operational orders,” Asuka specified. “All orders during a battle, yes. And all orders to appear at synch-tests and training.”

“So you won’t do your own thing during battles anymore?” Fuyutsuki asked.

Asuka flinched. “No. I won’t.” She paused. “Unless you want to sacrifice one of us again.”

“I need to be clear on this, Soryu,” Fuyutsuki insisted. “Under normal circumstances you will follow orders?”

“Yes,” Asuka replied. “No more... unilateral actions.”

Now Misato took up the questioning. “And you will take responsibility for your insubordination during the last battle?”
Asuka raised her chin defiantly. “Yes.” She paused. “Though I won’t accept double standards.”

“What does that mean?” Fuyutsuki wanted to know.

“I fucked up,” Asuka admitted. “I should have listened to orders and stayed in reserve. Those orders were valid and legitimate after all. So, I deserve disciplinary actions against me. However, I’m not the only one who fucked up. People knew we would have a problem with a nude synchtest, and thus conspired to rob us of the ability to voice our lack of consent. People were planning to degrade us. That needs to have consequences as well.”

“Yeah!” Touji agreed. “That wasn’t okay! That wasn’t okay at all!”

“People fucked up there,” Asuka argued. “And we were the victims of it. True, we prevented the test, but this caused a lot of trouble for us. So I think we’re owed an apology, by Dr Akagi and other people who took part in this.”

Akagi scoffed. “Okay, maybe I didn’t…”

Asuka cut her off. “A formal and public apology, in front of the NERV crew. Otherwise, it’s worthless.”

“No way!” Akagi protested. “Under no circumstance will I do that!”

Asuka was surprised by the scientist’s vehemence. She had expected her to reject that demand, of course, but the scientist was almost shrieking.

“Then I don’t see why I should take responsibility for my failure,” Asuka stated coldly.

“You disobeyed direct orders!” Akagi shouted at her. “I was merely doing my job.”

“Just following orders, eh?” Asuka muttered and scoffed.

“Under no circumstance will I apologize to you,” Akagi insisted once again.

“Enough!” Fuyutsuki spoke just that one word, but it was sufficient to create silence at the table. “This is getting ridiculous. I will not have the defence of the world be sabotaged by such petty squabbling. Very well, I won’t order anyone to apologize. There won’t be any forced apologies or any disciplinary actions. We’re drawing a clear line, and all of you will start with clean slate from here on.” He breathed out. “NERV does in fact exist in order to defend the world from angels. And this aim may not be undermined by these petty feuds here. The pilots have presented a clear plan for a new foundation for relationships between command and pilots. I’m not happy with it. But if it works, then I’m willing to try it. Quite frankly, if the pilots don’t want to do scientific tests or PR work, then that’s no skin off my back. I frankly don’t care. But listen to me, Soryu! All of you! You want respect, fine. We want security. We’ll do it your way – but we will do it. You as well. No silly talk about leaving anymore. You’re not free to just walk off anymore. And if any of you ever disobey orders during a battle again, I will see to it that you rot in the brig, regulations and your official status as not technically being soldiers be damned! Is that clear?”

Asuka grinned, but saluted. “Yessir!” Then she hesitated. “Though I’ll have to ask Shinji and Rei if they’ll commit to this.”
“Very well, do so,” Fuyutsuki told her. “But do we have an agreement?”

“We do,” Asuka confirmed.

Kaworu merely nodded, while Touji also enthusiastically stated “Yes”. On NERV’s side, Misato nodded… and Akagi stood up and left the room.

As she was walking to the door, Asuka noticed that Kaworu hadn’t even stood up from the table yet. In fact, despite what was clearly a victory for the pilots, he didn’t look very happy. She furrowed her brows and walked over to him. After all, he had just shown he was one of… well, one of her side.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be happy?” she asked him bluntly.

Kaworu’s smile was definitely a sad one. “The joy resulting from this is unfortunately tempered by other concerns. But that shouldn’t keep you from celebrating.”

“Oh, I will, once I’m home,” Asuka assured him. Wait. Was that already saying too much? It was annoying how she, Rei and Shinji had to keep their relationship a secret, but then, Asuka would have done anything in order to protect Rei.

“Don’t mistake me, in any case,” Kaworu continued. “I am in fact very relieved that these talks ended in success.” And he genuinely sounded that way.

Asuka grinned. “So am I. We won.”

Kaworu tilted his head. “We were lucky.”

“How so?” Asuka asked.

“The Vice Commander never questioned me,” Kaworu explained. “I made it appear as if I could leave… but...”

“Oh, yeah,” Asuka admitted. “I wouldn’t have liked to leave, either. I’m an EVA pilot. That’s just who I am.”

Kaworu looked at her with furrowed brows. Somehow Asuka felt… judged. “You wouldn’t have liked it? It is more than just that. Despite his talk about avoiding petty squabbles, I feel as though Fuyutsuki relented because he feared we would leave. But if he had asked me… I couldn’t have told him I would leave.”


“I would have folded,” Kaworu asked. “I was bluffing, and not very strongly. Could you have done this, Asuka?” He sounded disappointed now. “To just leave, if these talks had gone nowhere?”

Asuka opened her mouth… and closed it again. Truthfully, she couldn’t say. She really couldn’t say what she would have done then.

“This would never have been an option for me,” Kaworu said, quite sternly. “I could never leave the Earth defenceless. There are more important things out there than what we fought for today. We do need to protect the Earth. Innocent lives depend on us. And I have… personal reasons now
Asuka looked down. She felt dismayed. Who was Kaworu to appear so high and mighty as he did right now? “But we are willing to fight for those lives, aren’t we? I am. The problem is all the other crap NERV has burdened us with.” Kaworu just kept looking at her. The feeling of being judged intensified. “Besides, we didn’t leave. We just… mentioned we could.”

“And I’m saying it’s a good thing Fuyutsuki didn’t question that,” Kaworu told her. “Because I could never have seriously threatened innocent lives. Lives I care for. Not even as a bluff.”

Asuka made a grimace. She didn’t like Kaworu’s pure-as-driven-snow moralism. On one level, it made her feel… inferior. On another, it just seemed impractical to her. “Whatever. Main thing is we succeeded.”

And with that she turned around and left the grey-haired boy behind.

“Shinji! Rei!”

Shinji’s face lit up. It was maybe not the traditionally Japanese greeting of stating ‘I’m home’, but the sheer enthusiasm in that voice was infectious. And what was more important, it announced Asuka had returned home.

He ran into the kitchen, Rei only slightly behind him. And before he could react, a German rocket was darting his way. Asuka basically jumped him, so that he staggered back against the kitchen table. Red hair framed his field of vision to all sides, and his lips met with Asuka’s.

She laughed as she withdrew again. “We got it! We made it!” Then she grabbed Rei’s head and kissed her as well. The blue-haired girl eagerly reciprocated. Shinji still felt enchanted. The kiss, and then seeing Asuka like this, so lively, so joyous, so enthusiastic...

So it was only with some delay that he realized Misato was standing in the entrance area. She had to have come in together with Asuka.

“Uh, hello, Misato,” he greeted her somewhat awkwardly.

“Hello, Shinji,” she replied. Her smile was equally awkward.

“We did it!” Asuka, still an arm swung around Rei, now announced, using the other arm for a fist pump. “Fuyutsuki agreed to our list!”

“All of it?” Shinji asked. He was somewhat surprised.

“Eh...” Asuka was hesitating. She even seemed a bit embarrassed. “Yes. However… in return he expects us to commit to piloting. As he stated it, we’re not free to walk off anymore. And he will expect strict military discipline in battles. For me, that’s fine… I intend to fight anyway, but… you’d still be free not to commit to this.”

Shinji formed both hands into fists. It wasn’t that he had intended to leave, but… he also had not planned to make such a decision. To commit to piloting for good now, without the chance to then leave. It would bind him. Then again, I’m bound anyway, am I not? I can’t leave. Not if the angels
truly do threaten the whole world. But that only made it worse.

Rei said, “I’m already committed. But...” She looked at Shinji.

“I’m sorry,” Asuka whispered, her enthusiasm now gone. “But we’d have stayed anyway, and at least this way we get some benefits. But... I know I acted on my own...”

“That was your role,” Shinji answered. He tried not to sound sullen. “And you’re right. This is better than the alternative. It’s just...”

In a nearly synchronized movement, Asuka and Rei stepped over to him and enclosed him from two sides in an embrace. “We know,” Rei whispered, while Asuka repeated, “I’m sorry.”

Shinji felt... safe. Stabilized. Whatever would happen, he had Rei and Asuka. His... his loves. He breathed out. “It’s not your fault. I shouldn't have reacted like that. You won a victory, and I sound disappointed. I'm sorry about that. And Asuka... thank you. It seems you did very well. For our sake. So... thank you.”

He heard Misato clear her throat. All three pilots looked at her now. “You’ll only be a reserve pilot. I’ll make sure of that. But it would be better if you could stay at least that. I’m sorry. It’s not something you should have to do, but... you’d have my deepest gratitude if you did.”

Shinji slowly shook his head. “I can’t leave. I’m just glad things will get better with NERV now.”

Misato bowed, not as long or deep as during her apology, but she did. “Then thank you for your service.”

“Service?” Shinji echoed. “But...” Nobody had ever thanked him for that, except Mana that one time in class. Misato had lauded him at the very beginning, saying that he had done a praiseworthy thing, but thanked? That was just new to Shinji. And doubly so coming from Misato, who so far had rarely taken anything seriously. She had promised she would show gratitude from now on, but experiencing it, that was something else altogether. “You... you don’t need to bow,” he told her. In fact, he was a bit embarrassed by it.

“Even I agree with that,” Asuka added, surprised amusement in her voice.

Misato’s lips curved up on one side. “I’ll keep that in mind.” It almost sounded like one of her old teases again. “Well, but it is good to know we can count on all of you. I should go, leave you al...”

“Misato!” Shinji spoke up now, with a sudden, if fragile, determination. “Why... why don’t you stay for dinner?”

Everyone was looking at him with some level of surprise. “Dinner? Do you think the girls will be okay with...”

“It’s his home as well,” Asuka stated with certainty. “He can invite guests.” She chuckled. “He’s the one cooking, anyway.”

“And... uh... I’d like it if we could have our old dinners again,” Shinji said awkwardly. Old... In truth, it hadn’t even been two weeks since those had stopped. But what with everything that had happened in between, with the sheer panic that had engulfed him for days and had only been kept at bay by the girls, his partners, his loves, taking care of him, it felt like an eternity to him. An
eternity he wanted to leave behind him now. “They were… nice.”

“They were,” Rei confirmed.

“Yeah…” Asuka whispered.

Misato smiled at them. It was a faint, shy smile at first, a mere polite gesture, but it grew into a genuine, broad smile. “I’d… that’s very generous of you to offer, Shinji. I’d love to.”

It wasn’t really yet time for dinner, or even to start preparing it, but would be soon. Unsurprisingly, all things considered, it was Asuka who took the initiative in what to do now.

Misato smiled as she sat down in front of the TV screen. “It’s been years since I last did this with you.”

Asuka chuckled. “At least you did. Trying to get Kaji to play video games was like pulling teeth.”

It took just two matches of Street Fighter for Misato to get used to it again. In the third match, she had defeated Asuka. And during that time, as she frantically smashed the buttons on the controller, she seemed to get less and less self-conscious and awkward. After the victory over Asuka, she even stuck her tongue out at the German girl. It was an almost reassuring display of typical Misatoness. Asuka just scoffed, and then went on to beat Misato again in the next match.

Misato also played some rounds with Shinji and Rei, and it showed that she had lived together with Asuka. She certainly seemed to have gotten some experience. And the fighting games had never really been to Shinji’s taste, anyway. So after a while, he decided he might as well start preparing dinner.

At various times, Asuka and Rei came to see him in the kitchen, reached him some utensils, patted him on the back, stroked his hair. Shinji gladly accepted these distractions. Even while cooking, he got reassurances he wasn’t alone. Would never be alone again. Even now, that was still important to him.

And when he served the meal, he did find it kinda nice to have Misato sitting at the table again. She had been the first person to be consistently nice to him, after all. She did have her flaws, of course. She hadn’t apologized for nothing. But despite all the ups and downs of their relationship, Shinji still thought she was a good person. A person with whom he didn’t want to lose contact.

And it was nice to see her reaction to eating his food for the first time in almost two weeks again. “People really undervalue ready rice with curry sauce, but… yeah, this is nicer. You’re really good at this, Shinji.”

Even now, Shinji still blushed. “Thank you, Misato.”

For a while, everyone was busy with their meal. Misato was eating quite rapidly – quite enthusiastically. After some time, it was her who spoke up first again. “You’re feeling better again, Shinji?”

Shinji nodded. The girls… his partners had seen to that. And he was infinitely grateful to them. “Maybe… maybe with some luck I can go to school again next week. Maybe… maybe not yet this week...”
“It’s alright,” Misato reassured him. “You’ve been hit hard. In the defence of the world, nonetheless. Take all the time you need. Though I think it’ll do you some good to see your friends again.”

Shinji smiled faintly. “Yes, maybe…”

“And I suppose you two will want to stay here for as long as he does?” Misato addressed Rei and Asuka. The two nodded. Misato grinned. “Well, it’s kinda sweet. But make sure to catch up on your school work. Hopefully you can then be back to school next week.”

Asuka fidgeted. “Well… actually… actually, Misato…”

“Yes?” Misato asked her.

Now the redhead got more determined. “I won’t be returning to school.”

Everyone looked at her with surprise. Asuka had never talked about any such plans before, not even with her partners. Shinji tried not to feel hurt. Maybe she simply hadn’t been sure herself yet. After all, Asuka was someone who tended towards impulsive decisions.

“What do you mean?” Misato asked.

“This whole school thing is nonsense anyway!” Asuka exclaimed. Then she caught herself. “Sorry, Misato. But it is. I have a college degree. And now I’m in middle school again. Don’t you think that’s a bit absurd?”

“But you’ve had no problems with it so far,” Misato remarked.

Asuka shrugged. “It was worth a try. But the classes don’t actually teach me anything, I only understand half of what’s written, and the people there… apart from these two here and maybe Hikari, they’re all… all… well, they’re middle schoolers. And it shows. Airheads, all of them.”

Misato furrowed her brows at that. Then she sighed. “I thought you could make some friends, but…”

“I am a college graduate,” Asuka emphasized that point once again. “What made you and Kaji think that an average middle schooler would be good company for me? These two here are special, but most of our classmates there… pfah.”

“What about… what about learning kanji?” Shinji spoke up now.

“What for?” Asuka asked. “I’m not planning to stay here.” An awkward silence followed that. “Or, well… maybe. If… if that’s the only way we can stay together. If you don’t want to come to Germany, I’d be willing to stay here. But… do I need to go to school again? Just for kanji?”

“So what else are you gonna do?” Misato asked.

“Piloting,” Asuka answered seriously. “That’s quite important isn’t it?”

“Extraordinarily so,” Misato agreed while looking her straight in the eyes. Then she sighed. “But fights and synch-test only take up so much time per week, and thank the gods for that. What will you do the rest of the time?”
Asuka shrugged again. “I’ll find something. Hell, maybe I will just stay here and play video games. Still would be more productive than those classes.”

“Is it really that bad?” Misato asked softly.

“I just don’t see any sense in it anymore,” Asuka told her. “If I ever did. School uniforms, cleaning duty… and really what the hell is up with that? Why should I clean school rooms? Old teachers who can’t teach me anything. And a bunch of immature brats around us.” Misato looked uncomfortable. “Oh come on. You can’t say I’m throwing away my future or anything. Not when I already have a degree. And I really am contributing to society already.”

Misato sighed. “That you are. And hence you should have… a chance at normalcy I guess. I recognize your genius. I respect it. A bachelor’s degree at 14, that’s extraordinary. And that while being a pilot. But after all that, wouldn’t you like some normalcy?”

Normalcy… Shinji remembered that. The relative normalcy before he had come to Tokyo-3. Before he had been ordered to Tokyo-3 with a single word by his father. He knew it was impossible, but he would dearly love to return to such a normalcy. He would not ever let go of Asuka and Rei again, but living with them in a more normal environment, that would be heaven...

But Asuka of course thought differently about the matter. “I’m not normal. I’m a pilot. I’m better than normal.”

Misato looked glum. Finally, she spoke up silently. “And how long do you think this will last? The angels won’t be coming forever. What will you be after the war?”

“Then I’ll still have my degree,” Asuka argued.

“Yes,” Misato admitted. “But then you won’t be immediately recognizable as special anymore. Then you will have to put up with people. ‘Airheads’, like your classmates now. If you then still insist you’re special, all you will achieve is driving away people. Or at least, that’s what I fear.”

“So what? Going to school is like desensitization training for me now?” Asuka asked. “Getting exposure to idiots?”

“School always is training in social skills as well,” Misato insisted.

“I can go to school; that doesn’t mean I’ll actually socialize with the people there,” Asuka countered and crossed her arms.

“Shinji, Rei… can’t you say something?” Misato pleaded with them.

Rei shook her head. “This is Asuka’s decision.”

Shinji spoke up slowly and carefully. “I… I know what you mean with normalcy, Misato. Me, I’d like to have that. But… we can’t. We fight these giant monsters on one day, and then two days later we’re at school again as if nothing has happened. We can’t even really talk about it with our classmates, because… they just wouldn’t understand. Sometimes I think they do their best to not have to think about what we’re doing. It’s just… just…”

“Alienating,” Asuka provided the right word. She sounded hollow.
Shinji nodded. That sounded correct. “As long as we pilot, we just won’t have normalcy anyway. I mean, I guess I need to go to school to get an education and all that, but Asuka does already have a degree. However...”

“Yes?” Misato prompted him.

“Asuka… do you really want to sit here at home?” Shinji asked her, sounding slightly disappointed. “Not be at school together with Rei and me?”

Asuka looked uncomfortable. “You know, *that* would be an argument, yes. But what time do we really spend together there? The way to school, the way back and lunch break. And it’s not like we can… you know, we have to keep everything secret anyway.”

“That’s true,” Shinji admitted sullenly. “If… if you want to leave school, you should be allowed to.” He looked at Misato.

She sighed. “Since you do have a degree, you’re freed from compulsory schooling. I could unenrol you, but...”

“It wouldn’t make a difference,” Asuka said. “Either way, I’ll simply not go anymore. After all, what can they do? Fail me? So what, I already have a degree. It’s of no concern to me.”

Misato sighed again. “I see you have made up your mind. Very well. As your guardian, I will have you unenrolled. But I do encourage you to go look for something else to do. I’ll be looking as well. Some sort of university-level education, maybe.”

“It would have to be in Tokyo-3, and they don’t have an international university here,” Asuka told her. “I already checked. And Japanese universities use those damnable kanji.”

“Still, keep looking,” Misato prompted her. “I’m still not super convinced this is the best for you, but if it turns out to be the wrong decision… we can enroll you again next school year.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Asuka told her. “But… yeah. I will keep looking for alternatives.” She breathed out. “Thanks, Misato. I… I thought you’d fight this harder.”

Misato’s voice got small. “Maybe… maybe I would have. Before, I mean. Before… well. This normalcy I talked about… it’s always been for my benefit as well. Maybe mostly for mine. Part of the illusion I built up for myself, so that I could justify what I’m doing to you. Even though, as Shinji said, there won’t ever be true normalcy for you as long as you are pilots.” Her voice got steadier. “Go on then, Asuka. Break through the illusion. Maybe that’s for the better.”

“You… you did try to make it better for me as well,” Asuka told her. “With your ideas about me having a normal as possible life. Maybe that was overly idealistic. But you tried, at least. It’s just… I guess you can say it was a failed experiment. And it ends now.”

Misato smiled shakily. “Shall we clean up the table?”

It was still early in the evening when they had finished with that, so Shinji decided to make tea for everyone. He liked how appreciative everyone was of his actions. It really hadn’t been this way at all when he had first come to Tokyo-3, and in his life before that… the only one with whom he had had any real contact to had been his tutor, and he had hardly regarded him at all.
“This is nice,” Rei whispered, when they all had been seated again, and she had her hands around her mug.

Asuka chuckled. “Imagine Shinji had never made you that one gift of tea. Now you’re a tea junkie.”

“I like its warmth,” Rei said.

Shinji looked at her, and said in a serious voice, “You’ll never lack for warmth again.” Another thing that had changed. When he had first come to Tokyo-3, he would never have been able to say that. But both Asuka and Rei were so important to him...

Rei looked down and smiled. “It’s just so different. Both from my life in my second body, and my life in...” She hesitated.

“Your life in the Evangelion,” Asuka ended the sentence for her. “I never did quite understand what you meant with that.”

“I... part of me... was EVA-00,” Rei explained quietly.

“Because, as you said, your soul... part of your soul... had been transferred to it,” Asuka prompted her to go on. Shinji and Misato were entirely silent and just listened. Rei nodded. “But... I don’t understand. EVA-00 had a soul? Your soul?”

“Yes,” Rei explained. “That is how synchronization works. A soul-to-soul contact. The Commander made me synchronize with myself – with the Rei within the Evangelion. It worked, but the other Rei was hard to control.”

What?

“So... my unit has a soul as well?” Asuka asked, now entirely non-plussed.

What??

“Yes,” Rei answered. “And so do the others. It has to be that way. Otherwise the pilots wouldn’t be able to synch. And otherwise, the Evangelions would not be able to produce AT Fields. Only souls can do that.”

What?? Clearly this conversation couldn’t be happening. What Rei and Asuka were discussing here, still relatively calmly, was just too absurd. The robots had souls? Whenever Shinji had synched, he had made contact to another soul?

Then it hit him. “When I cross-synched in EVA-00... I... I felt you. That was the part of your soul inside the unit, wasn’t it?” Rei nodded. Shinji was terrified. It was so absurd, yet it all kinda made sense.

“And then... what I heard...” Asuka muttered. When she saw the others looking at her curiously, she explained, “When my unit went berserk in the last battle, I heard voices. I... don’t clearly remember what they said. Some wanted me to live, and others wanted me to die... I didn’t pay them much heed. After all, strange things can happen when an Evangelion goes berserk, and I don’t want to be a nutter listening to voices in their head...”
“Every one of our units has gone berserk at one point,” Shinji pointed out. “Is that… the soul inside
the Evangelion taking over? But… does that mean they are living creatures?”

“Yes,” Rei simply answered. Shinji felt like he had just been punched into the guts.

“Why haven’t they ever told us?” Asuka exploded. “Why haven’t you?”

“I was unaware you didn’t know,” Rei simply stated. And then with some hesitation. “I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Misato reassured her. She sounded strangely calm, despite all the revelations.
“But even I didn’t know about this. But… Ritsuko. Akagi. She has to know. She is the head of
Project E.”

“She does,” Rei confirmed. “As do the Commander and the Vice-Commander.”

“Never mind that!” Asuka protested. “But… but… my Evangelion! It’s a… person? A being?”

“It is an ensouled organism,” Rei specified. “Not fully aware of its surroundings and not fully
autonomous, which is why it needs to be piloted.”

“Ensouled…” Shinji echoed.

Asuka still couldn’t believe it. “So NERV took a soul… and dumped it into EVA-02? And other
souls into 01, 03 and 04?”

“I don’t know the details,” Rei admitted. “But it stands to reason.”

“I… I always thought it was just a robot.” Asuka was speaking frantically now. “But a being? A
human soul, maybe? Isn’t… isn’t that like slavery? We’re controlling a being in its every
movement! How can… that’s monstrous! That’s…” And then it hit her. “And you have been that as
well. Or part of you. They made part of you nothing more than a… a…” Her face turned pale.
“Doll.”

Rei looked down. “I remember. But… only dimly. Vaguely. The soul inside the Evangelion is not
fully aware. It is reduced to almost animal instincts and senses. And it is inert when the Evangelion
has no power. Only in a berserk state are they fully in control.”

“Still… that’s… no wonder they tell nobody about this,” Shinji stuttered.

“I don’t know if I can ever look at EVA-02 the same way,” Asuka added. “Nevermind synch with
it… with the soul inside it!”

“And yet, the world depends on it,” Misato reminded her gravely.

A depressing silence now lay over the table. The world had just become yet another bit colder and
darker. It not only allowed for people like Ikari, who created his own personal slave dolls, its
defence also rested on stuffing people’s souls into giant abominations of science. And Asuka
would indeed have little choice but to go on piloting her own personal abomination.

“What are we gonna do now?” Shinji asked, almost pleaded.
“Next time you synch… try to be friendly,” Misato suggested. *She always has a plan…* “As monstrous as this may be, we can’t stop it. Otherwise the souls inside the EVAs will die along with the rest in the ensuing Third Impact. All we can do is… make it easy on them. *Somehow.*”

“Warm thoughts,” Rei muttered. And if she wasn’t an expert in this, then who could be considered one?

Everyone was now pretty depressed when Misato left the apartment again. A heavy mood hung in the air afterwards, as the three readied themselves for going to bed. What hit Shinji most was that for all of their suffering, it was possible the pilots didn’t even have it worst. There were people used and misused by NERV even worse than them. People they had turned into complete *dolls* who couldn’t even move on their own anymore.

And they would have to use those dolls or all die in Third Impact.

Even the presence of his two loves could only give Shinji so much comfort during the night.
Asuka groaned.

Finally, she opened her eyes. She noticed that outside, the sun hadn’t fully risen yet and that she was breathing heavily. Verdammt. The AC must have given up the ghost again. They were lucky the apartment had one of course. Both in Japan and Germany, ACs in private homes were rather rare. In Japan, however, that number had constantly risen ever since Second Impact. Summer now reigned here year round and the economy was getting on its feet again. And Tokyo-3 had always gotten the best of the best during its construction.

I’m sweaty all over. It was nice to wake up and feel Rei’s head nuzzled somewhere into her side… she looked at the blue-haired girl tenderly and hoped she wouldn’t be woken up by this… it was a constant nice reminder that she was not lonely anymore, that she didn’t need to struggle anymore, that she had found a safe harbour. And she loved her and Shinji. But gottverdammt, there are drawbacks to it. All three sleeping together sounded nice on paper, and it often was, but the Japanese perma-summer had a way to ruin this romantic fantasy.

And as for Shinji… silent coughing drew Asuka’s attention to him. After their current state of affairs had become permanent, they had laid a second futon next to Asuka’s, to give everyone more space. Asuka now caught Shinji on the other one, removing something from his mouth. He noticed her look. “Your hair… it’s everywhere!” he whispered.

Asuka smiled as she lay back again. As inconvenient as it may be at times, she had her two partners here, and that was all that mattered. To be, quite literally, surrounded by them. To be able to face all the crap life was throwing at them together…

All that crap… being abandoned… the angel battles… our EVAs are living beings… dolls…

She began to drift off again. Piloting a living being… strange. They knew I could… they chose me to pilot the very unit Mama had her accident in… just like Shinji. The unit his mother… EVA-01 absorbed his mother. And he was called to pilot it. They knew he’d be able to… She wasn’t really having coherent thoughts. Being half-asleep again, it was more like meandering dream logic. Yui Ikari… never seen again. The grave is empty. My mother survived, but… only cared for the doll… loved ‘Asuka’, but meant the doll… loved Asuka… loved… like… like the voices inside EVA-02…

...the voices inside EVA-02…

In a sudden move, Asuka sat up straight. She felt like her heart had to burst. “Mama!” she shouted. “Mama!”

She had to… she had to… she didn’t even know herself. Had to do something. Had to scream it out to the world. Had to see EVA-02 right now. The world seemed to spin around her. She crawled
over to Shinji and shook him.

“Shinji! Shinji, wake up! Oh mein Gott… you… you won’t… you can’t…”

Groggily and irritatingly slowly, Shinji sat up. From behind her, Asuka could hear Rei making some confused sounds. “Ah… Asuka…” Shinji stuttered.

“I know who is in our Evangelions!” Asuka exclaimed. “Our mothers!”

Shinji blinked. Then it seemed to sink in. “What?”

Without awaiting further reactions from him and still way too frantic to sit still, Asuka turned around towards Rei. “You’re awake, Rei? Rei! The EVAs, they…”

“I heard,” Rei simply answered calmly… then crawled over to Asuka and caught her in a hug. Both of them were sweaty and kinda icky, but it didn’t matter. Rei was here. Asuka breathed out. The blue-haired girl looked her in the eyes and asked, “Do you really believe that?” There were so many things to say, so much to explain, but if Asuka were to open her mouth now it would all just burst forth uncontrollably. So she just nodded. “Then I’m glad for you. Your mother is still alive.”

Alive… That was the ultimate conclusion from it. Mama is alive… An Evangelion now, sure, but not dead. And an Evangelion that had been a part of her life for years now. She never truly left me… Asuka couldn’t move, couldn’t think of anything else, couldn’t do anything. She was just too captivated by that one thought. Not abandoned…

Rei crawled over further to Shinji and hugged him, too. “And yours isn’t, either.”

Shinji buried his head into Rei’s shoulder, gripped her hard as if to draw in some strength or stability, and then let go of her out, breathed out and exclaimed, “But I don’t understand!”

Asuka breathed and ran her hands through her hair. “It all makes sense! Your mother was… was absorbed by the EVA, and years later you were called in to pilot it. They knew you would be able to. I was recruited to pilot the very machine where my mother...” She stopped abruptly. “She went insane in there. And then I piloted it. Rei said you need soul to soul synchronization, right? But apparently not everyone can synch with the souls inside the Evangelions. They need us. So why us specifically? The kids of the scientists who designed the Evangelions? The kids of the mothers who… were lost to the Evangelions? And why did they immediately know we could do it?”

“But… but…” Shinji stuttered. “I mean… it makes sense, but that doesn’t show…”

“And I heard her!” Asuka exclaimed now. “I heard… I heard Mama! The voice inside EVA-02. Or voices, whatever. But they… they loved me.” She began to shiver despite the heat in the room.

Shinji still had trouble taking this all in. “But… if they knew we’d be able to pilot… because of that… then… then… they don’t only know about the souls. But also which souls!”

“Of course!” Asuka exclaimed, a further realization coming to her. “Akagi’s insistence to save EVA-01 at all costs… if your father, the Commander of NERV, knows who’s really inside that unit… who is that unit…”

Now the realization seemed to finally reach Shinji. He began to stare into nothingness. “Mother...” he whispered.
“I think I heard her,” Rei spoke up quietly now. She had carefully watched her two partners, but seemed unsure what to do now.

“Huh?” Shinji made.

“Your mother,” Rei explained. “While I was inside the angel designated Leliel. While I… talked with it. Someone else spoke. It must have been her.”

“So… Mother is alive…” Shinji whispered. Then he caught himself. “But… but that means… we’re sending them into battle! Our mothers! We control them and move them and they have no freedom…”

Asuka almost leaped from her position to catch Shinji by his shoulders. “But they’re alive! We never… we never lost them!” She hesitated. “Being an Evangelion is bad, admittedly, but… it beats being dead, doesn’t it?”

Shinji nodded ponderously, as if he still had to think this over. “Mother…” he whispered again.

Asuka felt overwhelmed – almost giddy. Mama… Mama… Mama… She thought her mother had left her, had turned towards that damn doll and then abandoned her. She had blamed herself for that, she had sworn to herself not to let herself be affected by people again, she had thought she could live just for herself. And now…

She could only guess what Shinji was feeling right now. Maybe she would have felt a bit about sparing such little thought for him, on leaving a partner alone with such an important issue… but she was far too overwhelmed by her own. It took hold of her entire mind. Then again, it was two times the same issue.

“I’m happy for you two,” Rei spoke up softly. “You still have your mothers.”

That did draw Asuka’s attention, and Shinji’s as well. The boy laid a hand on Rei’s shoulder. “I… I’m sorry you… don’t. If I just think about… about still having Mother… I dimly remember she meant everything to me. And now it’s like… I have her back. But you… you never had that feeling to begin with, did you? That’s… that’s…” Unconsciously, Shinji kept clenching and unclenching his other hand.

“No,” Rei confirmed. “I never did.” It sounded so hollow and lost that Asuka scuttled forwards to her. But after a pause, the blue-haired girl continued, “But it doesn’t matter. Even so, I know love.”

Shinji rubbed her back, and Asuka took her hand between hers. “You do,” Shinji whispered. Asuka smiled. It was always so cute to see those two interacting, and she just knew, saw it right now in fact, that she wouldn’t be excluded from this.

I have Rei… I have Shinji… and I have Mama. It was… baffling. The world had done a one-eighty since her arrival in Japan. Not that this would stop her from nagging about all the annoying details about life in this country and about NERV’s idiocy, but… I’m not alone. I was never alone. That realization by itself… it was almost like a religious revelation.

“Now…” she whispered. It sounded almost hoarse. “Now we just need to survive the war. All of us. Us three, and the Evangelions… our mothers. It sucks that they’re Evangelions now, that NERV is doing those things to them, but… we can get out of this alright!” She sounded ever more excited
now. “If we all survive the war… we can have families again! You as well, Rei.” She smirked. “I think Mama will like you.”

“But… they have no bodies,” Shinji protested. “Or, uh, no human ones. They’re… they’re Evangelions now.”

“But NERV can create bodies,” Rei pointed out. She spoke very quietly, but immediately had her partners’ attention. “And can transfer souls to them. This is my third body already.”

Asuka nodded vigorously. “And they drew half your soul out of an Evangelion! It’s possible!” She laughed, and it sounded almost hysterically. “It can all be… it can all return to how it was! It can all get better again!”

Shinji blinked. “Seeing Mother again… and… and having Mother around. And you two as well. That would be…” Single tears begin glistering in his eyes.

Asuka leaped forwards and grabbed both him and Rei in an embrace. They all tumbled down onto the futons. She laughed. She acutely felt the heat of the room again, but it didn’t matter. “We can have it all!” She laughed again, and then sat up, looking down at her partners. “Whenever we synch with them… we’ll be nice. We know they’re there. We can… we can let them sense what we feel. And once this war is over, we’re getting them back!”

Both Shinji and Rei were still on the ground. Shinji now looked Rei deep in the eyes and said, “Uh… you’ll pilot, most likely. Please… please be nice to my mother, yes?”

“Of course,” Rei answered. “It is your mother. The mother of someone I love.”

Shinji smiled at her. Asuka grinned. “It’s just too bad that we don’t directly synch with our units during the test today. I really want to. Want to synch with my unit… with Mama.”

It was Tuesday again and Kensuke was feeling very mixed about matters. It seemed that Hikari was treating him and Kaworu better, even pleasantly chatting with the two before class. Kensuke was sure this was Touji’s work, no matter how much he might deny it. Even if it was slightly forced, Kensuke conceded that he was happy to be able to relax a bit without fear of being pounced on by the girl, especially since it seemed that the class followed Hikari’s suit in the matter. I guess being the class rep is not a title as empty as I thought. Or perhaps it was Hikari herself? She always did seem to go the extra mile for the kids in class. It made sense that people respected her.

Kensuke sighed. The truth of the matter was obvious – the longer Mana was gone the harder things became. This was not helped by the information Kaworu had told him after his boyfriend’s clandestine meeting with the NERV spy. It felt bizarre to Kensuke, to be involved in something like this now.

A sudden beeping coming from Kaworu's pocket brought Kensuke out of his ruminations. Who is texting him at this hour? Kaworu seemed surprised as well but intrigued. Is it something to do with Mana? Kensuke looked over at his boyfriend, who had put the phone away and was currently chatting with Touji about something. He seemed to be feeling better. Kaworu had told him that the pilots had come to terms with Command over some of the issues they were having. Kensuke was glad for multiple reasons. He was grateful that they apparently were going to be treated with more respect, but a selfish part of him was also grateful that the organization dedicated to defending the
city was no longer at war with itself.

Class had officially started, but most students were still chatting and getting ready. It usually took their teacher several minutes to complete his daily fight with the laptop system, so they all had some wiggle room. Kensuke shrugged as he looked at the door. It seemed neither Mana nor the other pilots were going to be coming today.

Their teacher addressed the class as he finished fumbling with the machine in front of him. “Ah, that should do it.” He pressed a button on his own laptop and each screen in the class lit up with their biology text. “Now remember,” he droned. “If your partner for the assignment has left the city or otherwise can no longer contribute due to complications, please see me after class and we can work out an alternative going forward.” He cleared his throat audibly “Now back to where we left off, on the former bonobo apes of the Congo, they were...”

The teacher’s lesson was interrupted by the door opening to reveal a very bedraggled Mana. Kensuke instinctively got up, and he wasn't alone. Kaworu had also gotten out of his seat at the arrival. Both were compelled to rush over for comfort and for answers, but that was stopped by a look from Mana pleading to not make a scene.

“Ah, Miss Kirishima, good to have you back. We were worried you were gone for good. Please collect your device and take a seat. I am sure Miss Horaki will be able to fill you in on what you have missed.”

Kensuke had to restrain himself as Mana made her way to her desk. She was very much the worse for wear. Her face seemed gaunt – Kensuke guessed from lack of sleep – and she wobbled when she walked. Her appearance earned her a few odd looks, but Kensuke assumed this was due to her wrinkled and misaligned uniform rather than out of some genuine concern.

Are we all so blind? Or have we all gotten so used to ignoring things around us because it’s easier than facing them? Kensuke looked to Kaworu for his reaction to the scene. It shocked him to see the carefree and warm expression he was used to gone, replaced by cold anger.

It was impossible for Kensuke to do the work he was assigned that morning for any real length of time. His mind was constantly struggling to force down feelings of concern and desperation. Is she alright? Kensuke thought as he scrolled through his algebra assignment. What did they do to her? And will she trust me enough to tell me? After working up his nerve he tried to contact her through the messaging system, but was only given a short reply that they would talk at lunch.

Kensuke sighed. At least that was something, wasn't it? He looked over again to Kaworu to gauge his reaction but the boy seemed lost in thought. Touji for his part seemed to sense the waves of anxiety coming off of Kensuke and sent him a worried message over the laptop. This made Kensuke feel terrible – not only was he unable to help Mana, he was also forced to lie to his friend about the situation.

When twelve o’clock came around, Kensuke was ready to fly out of his chair, but was stopped by Kaworu's hand on his shoulder. There had been the tentative idea to have lunch with Touji and Hikari, as a way to close the rift between them. Instead, the two quietly excused themselves from the couple and went over to where Mana was sitting in an outwardly calm appearing manner, even if they didn’t feel that way at all.

The same seemed to be true for Mana. It appeared that she was trying with some difficulty to hold herself together. Noticing the two she smiled, albeit weakly. “Kensuke, Kaworu there you are. It’s
good to see you. I’m sorry I…” She turned quiet as she fumbled for words “I have been very sick this past week. I hope you will forgive me.” The words seemed painful to say.

“Mana…” Kensuke started, not sure how to continue. It suddenly seemed so silly. They had been doing all this guessing based on a few scars seen in the rain, after all. Some part of Kensuke would have preferred that they were wrong, even if that had to mean Mana had simply avoided them. Kensuke would infinitely prefer Mana was safe and without him to her being in danger and with him. “We know about the chip,” he finally managed in a soft tone.

A dozen emotions crossed Mana’s face but it eventually settled on quiet concern. The mask of the happy giggling girl melted for a moment “We should talk in private,” she said, standing up.

It was a slow march from the classroom to the roof, and not just because of Mana’s slow pace. It seemed none of the three was too anxious to hear or speak the truth. The tension in the air was palpable. No one had suggested their destination, but there seemed to be a kind of silent communication between the trio. They seemed to be drawn to where they had made there agreement to try.

As she held onto the railing of the stairwell, Mana felt her stomach tumble. This was it, this was the moment she had been dreading. Some part of her knew that this dream would eventually break, that she would have to wake up and return to her duty. She had no illusions of what was about to happen. After everything she had done and all the lies she had told, Mana knew they would never be able to look at her with anything but hate. But even as it hurt her to think about, Mana did not regret the relationship. For a brief moment in time she had been normal, she had loved and had been loved in return. For two weeks I had roses, and that is far more than someone like me deserves.

The sunlight that glared down on the roof was almost overbearing. But it felt right to be here, to end it where it had begun in earnest. She stood across from the two boys. None of them said a word for a moment until Mana gathered the courage. It would do best to hear what they had figured out first and then fill in the rest. There were some things that Mana wanted to go into as little detail as possible. “So,” she said flatly, trying to keep her cool. “What do you guys know?”

And so Kaworu and Kensuke began to explain what they had figured out and what they suspected. Some of it was hearsay and some was it was right on the mark. Kensuke also had a few wild theories to throw in the mix that she had to force herself not to chuckle at. Mana could not help but notice tho that Kaworu seemed to consciously not reveal where some of the information had come from. The message was clear. He doesn’t trust me. And how could he? It was clear she had been lying to them, so it was no surprise that they didn’t trust her with their sources. When they were done, Kaworu and Kensuke fell silent, their words still hanging in the air between them.

Mana took a deep breath and sighed. The least they deserved was the truth. “You’re right about the chip and about the JSSDF. The truth is that I have been lying to you from the beginning.” She felt terrible saying it, to admit to her betrayal and her manipulation, but continued. “Ever since I was a child I have been a weapon and a tool for the JSSDF...”

Mana remembered that night when the three of them had been snatched by the JSSDF. It had seemed like salvation at first. They were given food and warm beds and clean clothes. They had teachers and nannies and doctors, and all those teachers, nannies and doctors asked in return was that they do the tests, to give some blood here or there, to do what what they were told. But the
gifts and the smiles held a darker purpose. While they were all friendly and warm when the kids cooperated, Mana had learned in great detail the consequences for disobedience. By the time they had come to them about the chip, Mana had known it was far too late to do anything about it. Military people had come to them proudly, saying that it would be a great honor. That the kids would be great heroes fighting for their country. They had gone along at first, but when they learned the extent to which they would go and objected... punishments ensued.

“Originally I was supposed to be a pilot for one of the JSSDF war machines...” Kensuke seemed to want to say something at this, but stayed silent to continue to hear Mana out. “But when my body rejected the chip, I was trained in infiltration...” If you can call molesting me and teaching me to be a sweet stupid perfect little girl training. Mana’s stomach lurched at the thought “And that was why I was sent to Tokyo-3, to monitor and control the Third Child, Shinji Ikari.”

When Mana saw a look of confusion on the boys’ faces, she explained, “Unlike the rest of the pilots at the time I was sent,” She motioned to Kaworu. “Shinji Ikari was scooped off the street with no formal training or experience and given control over one of the most powerful weapons on Earth. The JSSDF considered his position to be at best an unstable element and at worst a catastrophic risk.” Mana swallowed hard “And that was where I came in. I was instructed to get as close to Shinji as possible and manipulate him for the JSSDF...”

Mana’s stomach churned again. It was deeper than that, they had specifically instructed her to seduce the boy. However, she could not admit to that, not on top of everything else. The thought made her nauseous, at herself and her command. After a moment she continued, “Everything I did, even going on that city tour with you, Kaworu, that... that led to so much more. It was all in the name of my mission. I was using you to get to Shinji. It was never real.” Saying the words hurt Mana more than she could imagine. But she felt it was necessary, as she did not deserve them or their love. She deserved all the hate and scorn they could give her. Maybe they could be happy with each other if she pushed them away.

Mana looked at the two, they were stunned. Kensuke seemed to be frantically searching for words while Kaworu stood silent in defeat. The air between them felt rotten. The boys were clearly appalled by what they had heard. Mana began to shiver under their gaze. How much of their reaction was based on what she did and how much was for what was done to her she could only guess.

Kaworu was the first to speak. His face was full of concern. “Mana, I...”

“You’re wrong!” Mana and Kaworu turned to to face Kensuke, who had made the outburst. He was shaking. “Even if you’re right about everything else.” Kensuke swallowed hard “Because I love you! And I need to believes some part of you loves me, too. Even if everything else was a lie, when I kissed you... I knew I felt something back.”

Mana’s voice got caught in her throat. Does this mean...? “Kensuke, Kaworu... don’t you understand? I lied to you. I used you. I...” Mana couldn’t hold the tears back. “I am not who you think I am! I don't deserve this.”

Kensuke looked like he was going to try again but Kaworu stepped forward, trying to project his usual warm smile “None of us are who we want to be... I know that more than most. What was done to you was monstrous but that does not make you a monster.” Kaworu shifted a bit at this “And it does not change the way Kensuke or I feel about you.”

Kaworu’s words seared deep into Mana. Why did they have to make this so difficult? Why did they
Mana had to be so good? “I... I can't. As long as I am a weapon, as long as I belong to them, I can't. I can never be...” Mana did know what to say. Be yours? Be free? Be happy? Be alive? In truth it was all true, as long as she was a tool of the JSSDF, Mana could be nothing else.

Kensuke's reaction was an immediate “Then don't! You don't have to be what they want you to be!”

Mana looked at the two of them. “What are you two saying?”

“Come with us, Mana.” Kensuke looked at her warmly his eyes wet himself. “We'll get you out of there, if you want. Please let us help you. Even if you want nothing to do with us...”

Kaworu nodded. A deep intensity uncharacteristic of the boy displayed on his features. “You deserve so much more than what was given to you. You deserve to be free.”

“But the JSSDF...” Mana sputtered.

At this Kaworu became enraged. “Fuck the JSSDF!” Taking a moment to calm himself after the outburst Kaworu continued, “Mana, I swear that as long as I live I will not let those bastards touch you.”

Kensuke felt a little useless compared to the pilot but stepped in anyway. “Me too, I promise I will do everything I can. For whatever that is worth.” He smiled weakly. “You’re worth it.”

Mana was overwhelmed. She tried to think of something big and grand to say. Some way to express her gratitude and her feelings but all she could muster was to stumble into their arms. “Thank you,” she cried as they held her. She felt light, like a wound she had had so long she forgot what it was like without it had been healed.

They sat there in the sun for a while, Kaworu and Kensuke planting sweet kisses as they wiped away her tears. When she was ready, Mana looked at the two of her loves and smiled “I do want to be with you. You two... you have given me more than happiness, more than love. You gave me hope.”

Eventually, Kaworu sighed and urged the three to their feet. “We never gave you hope, Mana, the best we ever did was show you what you had within you already. However... I am afraid we have more practical concerns now. We have to get you somewhere safe.”

Mana looked puzzled, for all her life nowhere had been beyond the JSSDF's reach. “Where?”

Kensuke spoke up. “You can stay at my place. I am not much of a host but...”

Kaworu smiled. “For now I think we should go to my apartment. Even if the JSSDF follow us the place is guarded by Section 2 agents. Even the JSSDF would be cautious before outright moving against NERV.”

Kensuke looked concerned, the reality of the situation hitting him. “For now? What about long term? How are we going to protect her?”

Kaworu looked desperate. “Let’s just focus on getting Mana far away from those bastards for now.” He shook his head. “We can figure out the rest later.”
Kensuke still seemed concerned but let the matter drop. Mana on the other hand was in a sort of daze. She had not let herself dare to dream about anything like this in a long, long time. And now that it was happening... It was almost too much to take. “What about school?”

Kaworu smiled. “I think we have much bigger problems to deal with than the possibility of detention. And besides, I am sure the class rep would understand,” He looked in Mana's eyes. “If it was someone she loved.”

Mana blushed at the words as the three of them quietly made their way out of the back of the school, trying to dodge suspicion. She was tired and she was hungry, her muscles ached and her head spun but as Mana held onto her loves hands as they made their break, she knew she had never felt better.

Misato’s face showed no emotion. In a weird way, that was good, though. It showed that she took the news seriously. She treated it like battlefield information, and hence behaved like on the battlefield.

“I can see why you wanted to see me before the synch-test,” she told the pilots. She sat at the kitchen table in what had become ‘the pilots’ apartment’, while said pilots were standing around it. They still had way too much energy to sit down. “But Asuka… you realize your conclusions so far are purely speculative?”

“But they fit!” Asuka almost shouted and slammed her hand on the table. “All of them!”

“I’m not saying they don’t,” Misato told her. It sounded calm… almost dangerously calm. That made Asuka finally stand still. “But so far there is no confirmation of your conclusion.”

“There can only be once we synch with our units again!” Asuka pointed out. “Only when we have a battle, or an activation test or a cross-synch test…” She paused. “…you don’t think Akagi could arrange this today?”

“If your theory is correct, then Akagi…” Misato breathed out, a marked break from her hard professional mask maintained so far in this conversation. Shinji could sympathize. “…has always been in the know. She would get suspicious of any such requests. And ironically, we destroyed the chances of her doing scientific tests pretty thoroughly. She has to assume she won’t get volunteers for it, as is necessary now, so why should she go through the humiliation of trying and failing to get them?” Asuka thumped on the table again, a gesture of pure frustration. “It appears your next chance at synchronization will only be once the next angel comes.”

Shinji looked down. He knew that meant for him. He realized he wouldn’t be fighting against an angel anymore. He knew he just couldn’t anymore, that all the fight in him had been spent up. Even with the prospect of feeling his mother again, the very thought of facing an angel again, of looking death and despair directly in the face… it just filled him with so much dread. He had slowly come to terms with the sheer guilt he was feeling about this, this guilt of leaving the fighting to Rei, who had already suffered so much in life… he was coming to grips with it now, realizing that nobody would be helped if he shattered due to all the fighting. But now it seemed that fact meant he wouldn’t get to feel his mother again.

And Asuka was realizing that as well. “That just won’t do! What about Shinji? I mean, Rei can reach out to Ms Ikari as well, but Shinji should get some contact with her!”
“And how do you plan to do that without tipping your hand?” Misato asked. “Asuka… if they have kept this secret all this time, even from their Operations Director…” She shook her head. “We can’t reveal that we know. NERV… NERV is a darker and more dangerous place than I had first assumed.”

“It can’t be helped,” Shinji whispered. “I have accepted that.”

Asuka’s realization had left Shinji confused and disoriented. For ten years now he had basically accepted that everyone had abandoned him, that he had nobody on this world. He did have Asuka and Rei now, of course, but those had been new arrivals in his life. He had been sure that, before that, there was nothing. He did not have a family. For ten years that had been one of the certainties of his life.

So now, he didn’t know what to think. The very prospect that his mother could return to him… He resisted this thought. He didn’t want hope to come up. Didn’t want to set himself up for later disappointment again. And besides, it’s not like I can still synch with her anyway. He was glad his mother wasn’t dead, but that was all.

Asuka grunted. “You’d think they’d let us do a direct synch to our units on demand if we so wished. I mean, with all we’re doing.” She scoffed.

“They would,” Rei spoke up now. “But they would wonder why. If the Commander suspects anything, things could turn bad.”

And if anyone would know about him, it’s Rei. The girl seemed confident in her knowledge of him. What sort of man do I have as a father? He had disavowed him as family already, but it was in fact the Commander’s blood flowing through his veins… it disgusted him.

“I will follow whatever course you decide on,” Misato told the pilots evenly. “But I strongly recommend against any action that would tip our hands.”

“Very well…” Asuka conceded. Then she turned to face Shinji. “It seems you’ll have to wait. But don’t worry. We’ll get her out of there. Just like with Rei.”

Misato emitted a vague sound that might have been a chuckle. When that drew the pilots’ attention, she explained. “It’s all so strange. Rei is a clone, this is her third body already… your mothers are Evangelions… and yet you seem to take this all in stride.”

Asuka grunted again. “Not like we have a choice.”

“You did,” Rei argued softly. “You didn’t need to accept me.”

“Not like we had a choice,” Shinji repeated firmly. This was one of the few things where he could and would always stand firmly without any doubt. His mother was probably out of his reach now; he had accepted that with his typical fatalism. But Rei – that was an issue where he still could do something about. So he would.

Misato smiled faintly. “Very well. It seems for now there’s nothing we can do based on this new information…”

“We have to tell the others,” Asuka interrupted her. When everyone turned to her with a
questioning look on their faces, she explained, “If I can pilot because it’s my mother’s soul inside my unit, and the same is true for Shinji… surely the same is true for Touji and Kaworu then!”

“We don’t know the circumstances of their selection as pilots,” Misato cautioned her. “And your reasoning is slightly circular. You already wanted to prove that it’s your mothers’ souls in those units by your ability to pilot, and now want to prove that it’s the soul of the pilot’s mother in their unit by their ability to pilot.”

“Yes, thanks, I had logic classes,” Asuka reminded her. Shinji meanwhile had trouble following that argument. “But it would fit into the general pattern, wouldn’t it?”

“Touji’s mother is dead,” Shinji spoke up now. It sounded hollow. He remembered how his friend had told him that, one day. Touji had been very upset back then. Clearly, the death of his mother still was an open wound for him. “Just like our mothers.”

“There you have it!” Asuka exclaimed. “They have a right to know! They have a right to even only know about a possibility of it.”

“And so you want to tell them now, at the synch-test,” Misato concluded.

“Yes?” Asuka replied in a somewhat aggressive ‘So what?’ tone.

“At the synch-test,” Misato repeated drily. “Surrounded by NERV personnel and equipment. Inside NERV headquarters. Which is in turn inside NERV’s very own geofront.”

Asuka gnashed her teeth. “You could have made that point in a simpler way.”

“You’re right, Asuka, they do deserve to know,” Misato admitted. “So if you want to tell them, I won’t stop you, and will simply try to protect you from any fallout. But once again, I’d strongly recommend not giving anything away.”

Asuka stomped the ground with her foot. “Verdammte Scheiße...” She breathed out in exasperation. “So we now know this big goddamn thing but can’t do anything with it.”

“Yes. But at least now you do know your mothers are still alive,” Misato reminded her. She got up from her chair and sighed. “We should go. This is one synch-test we should get to in time.”

“I’ll come along.”

Shinji had a fist clenched and was looking down as he said so, and his voice was empty and emotionless. Nonetheless, he had everyone’s attention. His heart began beating hard. This was a big moment he had feared – the moment of decision.

“Are you sure?” Misato asked.

The prospect of going out there again, among people, people who would look at him and judge him and expect things of him… that was frightening. He had found a refuge here, in this apartment, a sanctuary where nothing was demanded of him, where people accepted him, where he could rest. The outside would be completely different from that. If he failed there, people would just abandon him again.

I mustn’t run away...
“The test is important, isn’t it?” Shinji muttered. “We have to show that we’ll keep our end of the bargain…”

Asuka snorted. “And that’s exactly why Akagi called it so early. A demonstration of power.” Then she walked over to Shinji… at exactly the same time as Rei. Both laid arms around him.

And that was probably the best thing in this… new state of affairs. The sheer safety and support, not having to face all the hardship in the world alone anymore. Shinji liked the physical reassurance, liked to feel the girls’ bodies against his, but what was more was what it meant. Though, now that he had begun feel safe, his mind also did routinely wander towards other things to do regarding their bodies… in fact rather frequently over the last week…

The three had discussed this issue before, of course. Both Asuka and Rei had told him that he mattered more than Akagi’s power plays, that it didn’t matter how important the synch-test was, he was more important. And Shinji was coming around to the thought that for those two, he really was. Because the two girls were both, each for herself, amazing and caring and lovable and standing for everything good in the world. Each of them was far more than Shinji had ever deserved.

He had to go out and face those threats. He had to do it for them. “I’ll… do it… somehow,” he managed to say. “I mean… it isn’t as bad as school, is it? We’ll just go in there, hang around in the LCL for an hour, and then leave immediately… right?”

Misato looked at him sternly. “That’s what we’ll do then. But Shinji… you three are aware you can’t appear in the Geofront like… that, right? You said yourselves you need to keep your relationship a secret. In fact, you’ll probably need to take care not to stand too close and so on.”

Shinji nodded. “It will be enough to know… that we’ll be here again. And that even during the test they’ll be there.”

“You’re not entirely right, Misato,” Rei spoke up. “Nobody would take notice if Shinji and Asuka were close to each other.”

Shinji didn’t like the sound of that, but stayed quiet. Will I be so pathetic that we’ll have to exclude Rei in public? Asuka didn’t stay silent, though. “What are you saying, Rei? We can’t just exclude you!”

“I don’t mind,” Rei said. “You two love each other. I like that. I want you to be happy. Even when I can’t contribute to it.”

“Still sounds a bit unfair…” Asuka muttered.

“You’re one of us,” Shinji simply stated.

“And I will be even if we don’t always do everything together,” Rei argued.

Misato first watched the three… and then turned away, looking in the direction of the apartment entrance.

“I… I don’t like the thought that you’ll be… disadvantaged just because I’m weak,” Shinji argued back.
The ends of Rei’s lip went up very slightly. “You will be able to make it up to me afterwards. I do not plan on missing out on Shinji hugs.”

“Clever girl,” Asuka commented with amusement in her voice. She bent around Shinji, her head in front of him, and pecked Rei on the forehead. “I suppose… if need be I can be there for you, Shinji, yeah. But I’d really like to keep us all… you know… on the same level.”

With forced optimism and a weak smile, Shinji offered, “Let’s see how this will pan out, shall we? Somehow we… well, I will make it through.” He took a step forward, out of the arms of his partners.

Asuka kept a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “We’ll be back here before you know it.” As she stood behind him, Shinji couldn’t see the grin on her face, but he could hear it in her voice. “Of course… since we are going now… there’s something I need to take along.”

She ran up to the sleeping room and returned a moment later, carrying a bag over her right shoulder. Misato looked puzzled, but didn’t ask. Shinji just grinned weakly. It was one of Asuka’s crazy but endearing ideas…

Kaworu walked over to Mana with tea, while she sat down on his couch. Beside her and holding her hand was Kensuke, who seemed almost as much of a bundle of nerves as her.

“I am sorry the place is so plain,” Kaworu said, waving an arm around the small, barely lived in flat. “Between synch-tests and school I have not had much opportunity to decorate.” He sat down on Mana’s opposite side and handed her the mug.

The girl seemed to have largely gotten over the initial shock of her escape. However, it was clear that it was being replaced by a seeping sense of dread. Kaworu did not blame her. Some part of him knew how rash this was. He was making an enemy of an entire army and that not just for himself. He knew that this action put far more risk on the heads of those who did not possess a powerful AT field and a fruit of life. It would be people like Kensuke and his father, like Kaji and the Suzuharas who would take the brunt of any attack. And yet when he saw Mana drink deeply from her cup and lean into the two of them with a smile, he knew it was the right choice.

Kensuke smiled at Kaworu's comment. “Well that and you were at my place every chance you got last week.”

That snapped Mana to attention. During her week testing and piloting it had been a comfort to her to imagine what Kaworu and Kensuke were doing. Trying to get at least a dash of normalcy, Mana smiled and perked up. “Besides you two playing heroes, what did I miss last week?”

Kensuke looked over to Kaworu, thinking about the boy’s own revelation. An alien and a secret agent. Kensuke almost smiled at the thought. How the hell did I end up here? A quick look by Kaworu told Kensuke what he already felt: That can of worms could come later. For now they should just focus on Mana. Running through the week in his mind, Kensuke tried to pull highlights from his memory. “Well, there was a bit of a thing with Hikari early in the week. Kaworu helped his fellow pilots negotiate with NERV about better treatment,” Kensuke blushed as his mind made its way to that Sunday afternoon with Kaworu. “There, ah, was one other thing...”
“Hmm?” Mana intoned as she snuggled into the two of them. “What are you... Oh, I see it!” Mana was almost giddy as she pointed to the white ball of fuzz that was coming out of Kaworu's room. No doubt it wondered who all these odd people were and if they had brought food. “You got a cat!” Mana cooed as she got up and ran over to the little beast, then hesitated. “Can I pick her up?”

Kaworu looked down at the furry monster and then at Mana. “I don't see why not. The little gal loves attention. Just be careful with her front right paw. When I found her, she was limping with it and while now she seems better, she still does not put her full weight on it.”

Tentatively, Mana reached down and scooped up the feline. Grinning, she turned to Kaworu. “What's her name?”

The question struck Kaworu. For some reasonm he had never thought to give the thing a name. She certainly seemed content without one. Perhaps it was a lilim urge? To control and to conquer by examination and identification. The Fruit of Knowledge – the endless drive to know more and understand. It inevitably brought confusion, disappointment and sorrow but it also brought drive and progress and passion. “I didn't see a point. It’s not like she comes when I call.”

Mana frowned at that. “She should have a name. She deserves one.” She looked at Kaworu and Kensuke with a questioning face. “Any preferences?”

Kensuke laughed. “You’d be better at that than me. If you left it up to me, I’d name jer after a battleship or something.”

Mana thought for a moment, then smiled deeply. “How about ‘Hope’? I think we could all use more of that these days.”

Kensuke laughed. “Sounds wonderful. Can I see the little girl?” Mana brought the now purring kitten to where Kensuke and Kaworu were sitting.

But before Kaworu could scratch the kitten’s ear, he was pulled away by the sound of his cellphone on the counter. Knowing that it could be critically important, Kaworu got up to check who it was. Looking at the number on the screen he saw it was Touji. The Fourth Child was no doubt wondering where Kaworu, Kensuke and Mana had disappeared to.

“Hello, Touji. I...” The gruff boy's voice spoke into his ear. “Yeah, Kensuke, Mana and I are fine, we just...” What was that expression again? “... yeah we played hookie.” Touji laughed in his ear and told him Hikari had a scolding for the three waiting for them the next day. He commented that he sure hoped Kaworu would at least come to the synch-test... which made Kaworu sit up in shock. That was today wasn't it? Kaworu cursed his forgetfulness and assured him he would be there, then hung up.

It was unlike him to forget something so important but lately he found it was difficult to focus. The last few days and their events had left him... rattled. It was a very new feeling. He was used to an almost serene, aloof joy that pervaded his life before he had come to Japan. He glanced over to Mana and Kensuke, who were sitting on the couch, playing with Hope. Was this the cost of bonds of the soul? That he would become of the world and not just in it?

Grabbing his keys and identification from the counter, Kaworu headed toward the door. Kensuke, who had overheard the call stood by, scowling. “I can't believe you’re leaving. I thought you said you wouldn't abandon Mana – and now you go?”
Kaworu sighed, furrowing his brow. “Kensuke, we must avoid drawing attention at any cost. And if I don’t go to this test this is exactly what will happen. It is a very critical test for the pilots and for Command. If I do not go, it could jeopardize something incredibly important. And don’t worry – this place will still be observed and protected by Section 2 while I am gone.” He took Kensuke's hands in his. “I need to do this. I promise I will be back as soon as I can.”

Kaworu did not hear Mana close in behind them, placing her hands on top of the other two. “Go,” Mana nodded to Kaworu. “Do what you have to do. Besides...” A wicked smile formed on her face “I think I have proven to be able to defend myself.”

Kensuke smiled and nodded with Mana. The three shared one final silent moment together before Kaworu bid them farewell and headed off toward the Geofront, his head heavy with worry.
Rei could now feel and understand the world much better than earlier. But sometimes, that still wasn’t enough.

The world used to be a grey blur to her, too indistinct to make out any details. Reaching out to people had been like trying to grip single pieces of water in a running river – always grasping at single aspects, never getting the whole picture. Now she knew why it had been so: She literally had not been fully there. She was now; now she saw the world with clarity.

And yet, she still didn’t quite know what to do.

She understood the significance of Asuka’s revelation. She understood how important their mothers were to Shinji and Asuka. Seeing the excitement and joy on the redhead’s face had been wonderful. Rei wanted to see her loves happy. They were the bright points of light that had come into her life and deserved any joy they could find. But it wasn’t that easy of course. Their mothers lived, but were now Evangelions, the very units they all piloted. And Shinji was unlikely to synch directly with EVA-01 again. So that joy was mixed with sorrow and anxiety, and Rei…

...Rei didn’t know what to do about that. Seeing Asuka’s fire dampened felt like an acute loss to her. Seeing Shinji hurt instinctively made her go and try to be of help. But she couldn’t just make that sorrow and anxiety go away. And she was insecure about how to act around her partners in such a situation. She still felt disconnected from the world in such instances. She was seeing and feeling clearly now, but she had never learned how to deal with such situations. A clone raised for a decade in an underground lab with no contact with humanity. She still stood out, was still ill equipped for a ‘normal’ life. And she knew that.

And now, she would even have to hide her relationship entirely. She could not just walk over and take Asuka’s hand, she could not hug Shinji when he looked lonely. She had to act out her old role again, behave like she did in her second body, be dead inside. It was harder than she had assumed it would be. She had gone through life like this for several years; she had assumed she could do so again, or at least pretend to. But now it hit home just how lonely she had been. It was a loneliness she never wanted to return to. She wanted to be with Asuka and Shinji, to feel them, both of them, to hold them and kiss them and…

...those were inconvenient thoughts on the car ride to the Geofront, but Rei was having them even more frequently. Looking at Shinji or at Asuka or at both, she sometimes felt as if she should take them by the arms, smother them in kisses and then… and thinking about both at once – it was just breathtaking what she could imagine then. Rei didn’t understand why Asuka kept shying away from that. The redhead clearly enjoyed being cuddled up at night, enjoyed holding and kissing Rei and Shinji… but whenever Rei pushed, Asuka recoiled. And yet Rei wanted to make her happy as well! She didn’t want to see her anxious or afraid, so she had backed off and not tried anymore, but it really began to frustrate her.

That Asuka was sitting right next to her now didn’t exactly help matters.

By the time Misato’s car had parked in the Geofront, Rei’s thoughts had returned to Shinji. He seemed tense, and she just couldn’t help but feel worried for him. Over the last week, he had been outside once, buying groceries, and he had returned to the apartment quite a nervous wreck. And this was NERV, a place connected to many bad memories for him. Worst of all, she wouldn’t be
able to be there for him when he needed it.

She saw Asuka smile at Shinji and her own lips curled up a bit. *But she will.* And that was all that mattered: That *someone* be there for Shinji. He so deserved it, and so did Asuka. *My two points of light...*

Rei’s face got slack again. She would have to start pretending from now on.

The pilots’ group met Suzuhara and Kaworu in one of the countless lounges of the HQ building. Suzuhara was grinning ironically, while Kaworu seemed… off. He had his usual faint smile on his face, but even Rei could realize that it looked forced.

“So we’re back in business, eh?” Suzuhara commented. Then he spotted Shinji, who had walked right behind Misato. “Oh, hey, Shinji! Didn’t think you’d come! Man, I’m glad to see you. I was really getting worried about you, you know! Are you… are you feeling better?”

Shinji tensed further. “A bit,” he mumbled.

Suzuhara’s grin faltered. “Oh. Well, good to hear.” The now enlarged group started walking towards the EVA cages. After some hesitation, Suzuhara added, “You take it easy now, you hear? No need to overexert yourself. We all want you… well, you *are* back on your feet now. But we don’t just want you functional, we want you all healed up again. That’s more important than whatever Akagi may demand. She’s never satisfied anyway.”

Rei was content. Suzuhara was a good friend to Shinji.

The entry of six people at once into the Pribnow Box naturally drew some attention; people at their terminals were turning their heads to see who had come. Only Ibuki looked away. Rei caught Asuka furrowing her eyebrows at the Lieutenant, but there were no comments coming.

Akagi walked up from behind Ibuki’s terminal, where she had stood, to go address Misato. “So everyone has come?”

“The pilot corps is complete,” Misato reported. It sounded stiff.

“Good, then we can get this started,” Ritsuko said. “This will be a bog-standard synch-test, just to get into the routine again. Gods know I’ve missed out on regular data from Sh... from Pilot Ikari and from Pilot Soryu for too long. It will be quite an effort to update the Evangelions with the new data.”

Ritsuko turned away again to get back to her work. Believing the briefing to be over, the pilots hence were also about to turn, to walk towards the changing rooms. However, Misato told them, “Wait, please.” The pilots stopped. Misato walked one step forwards, turned to face them, and spoke up in a loud and firm voice. “There is another matter. The matter of the ‘special’ synch-test we tried to run – we tried to *force* you into. We tried to *spring* it on you, so you would have no defence against a degrading situation, and we took no measures to protect you from that degradation. And as Operations Director, as the person tasked with managing you, this is in large part my own responsibility and hence my own guilt.” She bowed. “I apologize. I did wrong.”

Suzuhara and Asuka both emitted surprised sounds, which actually sounded rather similar. They seemed shocked. Shinji muttered, “Misato...”. Kaworu and Rei remained silent. Rei remembered that Asuka had told her about a public apology having been a talking point at the negotiations. The
Vice Commander had decided that there would be no orders for such. It seemed Misato had decided to make one nonetheless.

Misato straightened up again. Asuka emitted a satisfied sound and then walked over to her and patted her briefly on the arm. “Let’s just do it better in the future, okay? I can’t speak for the others, but I won’t further hold that test idea against you.” She shot a provocative glance over to Akagi. The head of Project E was clearly showing signs of anger.

“As I’ve told you, Misato, I never disliked you,” Kaworu told her. “And whatever missteps you might have made pale compared to...” He abruptly stopped the sentence.

“Yeah, let’s call it even,” Suzuhara said. Shinji and Rei just nodded.

Misato smiled. “Go change then,” she ordered them in a surprisingly soft voice. “And thank you for coming to this test.”

“What in the name of...”

Asuka grinned as she heard Misato’s voice over the loudspeakers. The pilots had just, as a closed group, entered the gangways of the EVA cages, to make their way to the test entry-plugs.

“Like our new style?” she shouted, knowing that microphones would pick it up.

Every one of the pilots was now wearing a long-coat over their plugsuits – not just Touji. That was what Asuka had carried in her bag to the NERV HQ. Truth be told, she didn’t quite like that style herself, but that wasn’t the point right now. In any case, it certainly seemed to make an impression, and Asuka could always enjoy that. She liked being the centre of attention.

“Uh… just make sure to leave the coats behind before you enter the entry-plugs.” That was Ibuki’s voice on the loudspeakers.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Asuka confirmed and then chuckled. Her plan seemed to have been a full success.

“Man, I still don’t get it,” Touji spoke up. “ Didn’t you say we should wear our plugsuits with pride? Mark of being a pilot, part of the elite, yadda yadda yadda?”

Asuka harrumphed. “And I still think so. I look ridiculous in this!” She looked around. Her own coat at least was a partial match to her plugsuit, being a pale, unobtrusive sort of red. Advantage of having a clear colour preference, I guess. But Shinji’s was brown, thick and with way too many pockets, while Rei’s was boring and grey and Kaworu’s full of patches. None of them looked good in this nonsense. Maybe we really should try to get uniform coats... “But... like...” She hesitated. “Look. If you disagree with that, that’s fine. It’s okay if you have your coat. Or anyone else who wants it.”

“I still don’t think I quite understand,” Touji admitted.

Asuka shrugged. “Everyone’s wearing a coat over their plugsuits today. We’re making doing that normal. Nobody will think twice now if one of us shows up in a coat to the tests – after all, we all have been at least once now.”
“Huh,” Touji just voiced. “Don’t take that the wrong way, but I wouldn’t have expected that from you.”

Asuka gnashed her teeth. “Don’t push your luck, meathead. Me, I’ll show everyone that I am an elite pilot next time again. But… well…” She fumbled for words.

“You have been uncomfortable with the plugsuit,” Rei spoke up. “Ashamed.”

“And after what Akagi tried to pull on us… let’s just say I can sympathize,” Asuka continued.

“Asuka,” Touji voiced again. “I might’ve seriously underestimated you, Red.” He grinned. “Or is that Shinji’s influence?” He turned his head around and grinned at the boy as well.

Asuka dearly, dearly wanted to tell him it was Shinji’s and Rei’s influence and see how he would react. She wanted to brag, about how she had gotten not just one, but the two best people in the world. *This secrecy bullshit is annoying…* So instead, she just walked over to her test entry-plug. She noticed how neither Shinji nor Kaworu had said anything. Shinji she could understand. The poor boy was actually handling himself exceptionally well, all things considered. But Kaworu… *No cryptic remarks?* She took a look at him climbing into his test entry-plug. His body seemed tense all over; the plugsuits really allowed one an easy view on that. Something seemed to be on his mind.

Well, for now, let’s concentrate on synching. Asuka shrugged off her coat and entered her own plug.

She had literally done this hundreds of times already, just floating in LCL, literally doing nothing. Sure, she was supposed to concentrate and she did – she wanted to succeed after all. Even now, it was still important to be the best. But after years and years of training, that now came naturally to her. In fact, it was a bit of a waste of time. One hour of boredom. A very familiar boredom by now.

*Mama. I want to synch with Mama, not these test plugs. I want to tell her I know. I know she never abandoned me. Surely, synching with EVA-02 would feel much less boring these days. I guess I need to concentrate here so that I can eventually return to the unit… to Mama.*

The previous day she had been devastated at the news of what the Evangelions truly were. But now, that fact actually promised hope. Yes, what was being done to Mama was terrible, but at least she was alive! And just like Rei she could get a new body maybe! Now, the nature of the Evangelions was a good thing, and Asuka was looking forward to the future.

“That’s a great start, Pilot Soryu,” Ibuki commented over the comms. “Keep it up.”

*Huh.* Apparently her synch-score was quite good at the moment. So she closed her eyes, concentrated and tried her best to keep it high. Despite all, she still was an EVA pilot, and that still was a mark of pride. Moreover she was the best, and she would keep being the best.

...even though it was a pity that Shinji would now not be competition to her anymore. She would have enjoyed that competition. Even worse was the *reason* Shinji couldn’t compete anymore. She realized, a bit to her own surprise, that she wouldn’t mind losing her top position to him if only it meant he was okay. It would rankle a bit, but…

*It’s a silly what if anyway.*
So right now she just emptied her mind and synched. Or… tried to empty it, anyway. Despite all the years of training, she found it surprisingly difficult now. This was her first synch-test in over two weeks, and it was also the first one since she, Shinji and Rei had entered their new arrangement. And with absolutely nothing to do or think about, her mind wandered. It wandered to Shinji’s shy smiles, to Rei’s serene gait… images and memories of looking at Shinji from behind, at looking at Rei’s lithe figure… memories of his hands stroking her hair and her head nestled against Asuka’s chest… fantasies of how it would feel to have more, see more, feel more…

But the truth of it was that she also feared this. Which was ridiculous! She was Asuka Langley-Soryu, she was not supposed to be afraid of such stuff! She was no small child, she was an elite EVA pilot!

...and yet, whenever she thought of actually doing those things with Rei or Shinji something in her stomach twisted and knotted. After all, once they had… done the deed, what more was there to her, anymore? Wouldn’t they lose interest in her then? No, of course not, that’s ridiculous! But even though Asuka knew the notion to be ridiculous that didn’t make the fear go away.

Women used and then cast aside. She had seen that before. Had heard it in the neighbouring room before.

But Rei and Shinji are better than this! They’re the best people in the world! And yet, the fear remained… so all Asuka could do was to imagine. Imagine how it would be if she grabbed Rei, kissed her, undressed her, let her hand wander over her…

“Pilot Soryu, your synch-rate is dropping,” Ibuki reported.

Oops. Asuka shook her head inside the LCL. Time to get those images out of my head and my mind back on track.

“Pilot Nagisa, we’re detecting unusual fluctuation in your synch,” Ibuki continued. “Uh… at times you don’t seem to be synched at all…”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant,” Kaworu apologized. “My concentration must be slipping.”

A moment later, Asuka could hear Ibuki mutter, “A perfectly stable synch-rate again…”

Asuka again wondered what was the matter with Kaworu. His apology had sounded distracted and absent-minded. Something is bothering him…

“Pilot Suzuhara, you’re doing really great,” Ibuki went on. “Your current synch-rate is the best you’ve ever had! Keep up the good work! Only a quarter hour more to go.”

Touji merely sighed in response.

It became a long quarter hour for all of them. Asuka certainly didn’t want to slip up again; not only was she driven to always do her best, who knew if the scientists couldn’t maybe conclude what had made her synch-rate drop. So for fifteen long minutes, she had to keep her thoughts from returning to that topic, while at the same time having nothing to actually distract her.

After the time was up, Asuka had rarely been so glad to leave a test entry-plug after a synch-test as now. Synch-tests had never bothered her; after all that was part of being a pilot, and she was proud
to be a pilot. But the last half hour of the test had been kind of harrowing, first having those thoughts, then having to suppress them… she picked up her coat, put it over her plugsuit and waited for the other pilots to emerge.

As they all were all walking on the gangways of the EVA cages, she smiled at Rei and Shinji. Soon, soon, she would have the two for herself again. The serious, supportive and quite sexy boy, and the serene and adorable girl. Mine, mine, mine! And it would be good for Shinji to be back at the apartment again. No. Back home. It is his home. And that was wonderful.

Meanwhile Touji looked just as elevated that the test was over as Asuka felt. And Kaworu… Kaworu seemed skitterish. That was something completely unheard of in regards to him. Yes, Asuka had always found his pseudo-enigmatic and pseudo-philosophical routine to be weird, but a Kaworu who wasn’t like that, that was just not right.

Asuka walked up to him. “Hey. Uh… good thing the test is finally over, isn’t it?” Kaworu looked at her oddly, then just nodded. “Uh… is something the matter?”

“Everything is perfectly fine,” Kaworu told her. It sounded tense.

“Yeah, right,” Asuka answered. “Look. You helped us with… that matter. So whatever is bugging you, just tell us so we can help you.”

A grim smile appeared on Kaworu’s face. “I’m grateful for the offer, and I’m sorry to have to say that, but I don’t think you can help me.”

“What makes you say that?” Asuka basically exploded.

Kaworu didn’t seem to regard the outburst. “It is ironic, isn’t it? We’re fighting angels. But in struggles closer to earth, we have no power at all.”

Asuka scoffed. “Look, if you change your mind about getting help, you know where to find me.”

“Getting help,” Kaworu mused. “Hm. Maybe you already have helped me.” And suddenly his smile seemed to be his usual friendly one.

Weird as always.

The debriefing was held by Ibuki, but it was actually started by Misato… who once again thanked them for having come to here, and for the time and effort they were investing into EVA. That was definitely new. Akagi just sighed at it. Afterwards, Ibuki presented their results. Shinji’s synch-rate had tanked, which meant Asuka now had a ridiculous lead over everyone else. Rei’s synch-rate had fallen a bit, but remained well within variance. Kaworu’s synch-rate was solid unchanging average as always, whereas Touji’s had taken a big leap upwards.

Asuka breathed out. “Let’s just get home.”

“I’d like that,” Shinji muttered. Ibuki had been very friendly in her explanations, and had tried to couch the report of the fall of his synch-rate in as many nice terms as possible, but Shinji still seemed to have been hit hard by it. It really was time for him to get out of the spotlight, pronto.

“Actually…” Kaworu spoke up. “Misato, you said I could turn to you if I need help. Well, I do now in a delicate matter. Could we maybe talk in private?”
What the hell now? Asuka looked at Kaworu, than Misato. Misato looked at Kaworu, then Shinji. “I’m sorry, but we are in a bit of a hurry,” Misato said carefully.

“It is rather urgent on my end,” Kaworu insisted.

Misato seemed to consider. Then she suddenly decided, “Okay. You’re simply coming with us then. We can talk at my apartment.”

Kaworu walked with Shinji, Asuka, Rei and the Misato to the Major’s car. Once out of the building the three pilots seemed to become far… closer with one another. Asuka and Shinji joked about Ritsuko’s reaction to their collective stunt and Rei followed along behind with what looked like a faint smile on her face. Kaworu supposed their time together had created a strong bond between them. One I do not think I will ever be privy to. Kaworu dismissed that thought.

Let them have their happiness. They deserve all they get.

Misato made a big display of revealing her car to the silver-haired boy when the party approached it in the corner of the lot. Apparently it was some sort of collectible and very valuable but Kaworu just saw a car – a very small car for five people at that.

A sly smile crept over Asuka’s face but was quickly forced down. “Aww dammit! I guess there is no way around it – some of us will have to get a bit... close. Rei,” She turned to her fellow pilot and seemed to restrain a smile “Would you mind sitting on my lap while Kaworu takes the front with Misato?”

Rei seemed to think for a moment and then nodded “If that is what is... required. Then of course I will.”

Shinji seemed quite interested looking at one and then the other. Kaworu, on the other hand, could barely care less, rolling his eyes a bit at the whole dance. Misato seemed to feel much the same way, opening her mouth and raising a finger before sighing and dropping it. “Just... get in the car.”

The ride to the apartment complex was not a long one, something Asuka seemed oddly disappointed by. Still, Kaworu took the time to peer out of the window at the passing city. He sighed. He knew that somewhere out there Mana’s former handler would be searching for her, trying to gain any information he could about her location. Kaworu could only hope that this search would not put any of his friends from school in danger. This city and its people had suffered enough already.

Arriving at the apartment complex, Asuka and the others seemed to brighten up, no doubt feeling solace in finally being away again from the cold of the EVA’s and the machinery of the Geofront. The three pilots were friendly to Kaworu, but the angel could tell that after the rigours of the synch-test and the confrontation therein what they desired most at the moment was returning home. And so, with a smile and a wave, the three retreated into Asuka’s and Rei’s apartment and left the Fifth Child and the Major alone to talk.

Inside Misato’s apartment, Kaworu was pleased to see that the place had undergone a cleaning since his last visit. The Major seemed much more bright and energetic as well, which Kaworu also liked to see. Sitting opposite him at the kitchen table, she looked at him with care in her eyes. “Now, you said that something was urgent?”
Kaworu was uncertain what to say. He knew that while Misato did care for him and the rest of the pilots, she by nature was also answerable to NERV command. However, after he had started talking, the boy found that he just could not stop. The dam had clearly burst as he explained everything he had found out and everything Mana had told him. To his own embarrassment, he even let slip the inspector's involvement. When all was done, his throat was hoarse and his head was in his hands. “I just don't know what to do.”

A cascade of expressions crossed Misato's face. At first she seemed amused, as if she did not believe what she was hearing. Then shock as she realized he was telling the truth. And finally a dark look. “Kaworu I... I don't know what to say.” She seemed to search for words “You said she is at your apartment right now?”

Kaworu nodded "She is with Kensuke. I figured the apartment would be watched by Section 2 and therefore safe." He breathed heavily. He was unused to these feelings. He had been taught that no force on Earth could harm him, and therefore fear... fear was a foreign element to him. But it wasn't just himself anymore, was it? No, for the first time in his life, Kaworu truly felt connected to others. It was almost painful, this ache inside him. Is this what the lilim feel? Kaworu was unsure. He usually felt so detached from all of this, being so ancient and alien to the world. But the truth was that since coming to this city, meeting with its people, forming friendships and... love... he felt barely more than a child.

Misato sat back and pinched her brow. She stayed silent for a long time. Finally, she swallowed hard and placed a hand on Kaworu's shoulder. "I think I can help you."

Kaworu looked up at the Major, eyes filled with shock. "You can?"

Misato nodded. "I have let other people suffer for me for a long time. I managed by just ignoring their pain, the pain of the people I was responsible for. Today I can do better. She can stay with me while I try to find someplace safer for her. I have a few connections within the JSSDF that I can call on and see what the hell is going on. She should be safe with me; unlike you I have no connection to the girl so the military won't think to snoop around here. And even if they do, it would be downright idiotic of them to attack NERV directly. And if you're right about this girl and what she was doing, the JSSDF can't search too publicly for her, anyway."

Kaworu was overwhelmed. He had not expected the Major to reach out in such a way. He had barely known her, barely spoken to her and yet she was willing to put herself on the line to help him in such a monumental way. "Thank you, from the bottom of my soul thank you."

Misato smiled. "When I took this job, I told myself it was to protect people. Somewhere along the way I lost that, or maybe it was never true. But I can try now. You should tell Mana and Kensuke to get ready, while I make a call to our scruffy mutual friend to pick them up and bring them here."

Kaworu pulled out his cellphone and dialed Kensuke. He felt almost giddy as he pressed the keys. Sometimes, hope did win out.

Cuddled up against Rei and Asuka on pillows in the living room, drinking a hot cup of tea, doing nothing... just enjoying the close presence of the two most awesome people in the world, feeling
snug and secure… Shinji had basically been able to feel, to almost measure how his energy was returning to him. Nothing could happen to him here, in this apartment, with his loves around him.

Going to the synch-test had worked out better than he had expected. He had just gone through the usual routine and that had worked. He hadn’t thought about how people might judge him, or what they could expect of him – until the end, when Ibuki had told them their results. Then it had felt like this relative security was all crashing down around Shinji, and he had only wanted to get away from that place, away from those expectations, away from his failure as quickly as possible.

When he had been in the arms of his loves afterwards, he had wanted this moment to never end. Unfortunately, Misato had called them over.

Asuka had grumbled. Even Rei’s face had become stern and disapproving. Shinji had merely sighed, though. It couldn’t be helped. And just going over to Misato’s apartment, surely that wouldn’t be so bad.

Shinji still had his key to the apartment. Inside, they found Kaworu sitting at the kitchen table. The grey-haired boy did his best to show them his usual enigmatic smile when the other pilots entered, but he was too nervous for that – almost fidgety. That was unusual. And there had been something about those mysterious smiles, as far as Shinji was concerned…

Asuka furrowed her brows. “So – what’s the matter?”

“It’s best to wait until the others arrive,” Misato said. “So we only need to explain once. Why don’t you sit down?”

Her voice was stern and emotionless. Something has happened – something Misato apparently saw as a tactical challenge. She sounded just like during the battles against the angels.

Rei sat down at the table, and after some hesitation, so did Shinji. Asuka, meanwhile, just kept staring at Misato. She remained quiet, though. Beneath the table, Shinji could feel Rei taking his hand. Surprised, he jerked his head around to look at her, but the girl just kept looking straight ahead. Slowly and awkwardly, Shinji turned his head around again as well. He had to fight down a smile appearing on his face, delighted that even now she had found a way to be there for him. After all, it wouldn’t do to be discovered.

The silent tension in the room was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Misato opened the door and let more people in. Kaji, Kensuke and Mana entered the kitchen.


“That harlot?” Asuka muttered and now turned her death glare to the coppery-haired girl. Mana seemed to shrink away from it, looking down in a pose of pure defeat. Instead, it was Kensuke who returned the glare. In fact, the normally so nerdy boy seemed almost agitated enough to respond physically. What is going on?

Instead, the new arrivals indeed just sat down. Shinji looked closer at Mana. When the girl noticed that, she hastily looked away. Shinji was concerned. The giggling, helpful, respectful, carefree school girl he had gotten to know seemed to be entirely gone. And while, despite her best efforts, he had never felt nearly the same for her as he did for Asuka and Rei, that didn’t mean he held a
grudge against her or anything. He disliked seeing her like this.

Asuka was still displeased, though. Her opinion of Mana had always been pretty low, after all. “I don’t like her being here.”

“Well, you’ll need to get used to it,” Misato told her. Then she turned toward the girl in question. “Mana… you need to get away from your situation. Do you agree?” Mana glanced at Misato, seeming slightly confused. Then she looked at Kaworu, who nodded in encouragement. Finally she looked at Misato again and nodded herself. “Okay. You’ll stay with me then. Not only does this apartment bloc enjoy better protection than Kaworu’s, what with the Operations Director and three pilots living here, nobody will draw any connection between you and me. You should be relatively safe here.”

“...NERV is going against the JSSDF?” Mana asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

Misato shook her head. “Not NERV. I am. What they did to you is utterly monstrous.” Her voice brimmed with determination, and she furrowed her brows.

Mana opened her mouth. Closed it again. Opened it again. “...why is everyone acting so nice to me?” Kensuke, who was sitting next to her, put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“The JSSDF?” Asuka exploded now. Shinji had wondered the same thing, but kept quiet. “What does the JSSDF have to do with it?”

Misato looked at Mana. “If you’re going to stay here, my pilots need to know the story. So, if you would, please...” She nodded at her to begin.

Asuka recommenced glaring at the girl. Shinji knew why, of course. Asuka was not a person to easily let go. He loved, genuinely loved her drive and passion, so he supposed he would have to accept if it turned into something like this. But it still made him feel uncomfortable. Mana was clearly already suffering. Didn’t Asuka see this?

“The JSSDF... I am with the JSSDF,” Mana spoke up quietly.

“Was with the JSSDF,” Kensuke insisted. His hand was still on her shoulder and now squeezed it.

“I... I guess so. That’s still such a new concept for me,” Mana admitted. She now sounded nothing like the stereotypical giggling schoolgirl Shinji had met. She’s with the JSSDF? How, even? “They...” She breathed out. “My parents got killed in the chaos after Second Impact. I lived on the streets until the JSSDF took me in. Half my life now I’ve been with them.

“The JSSDF ran... social services?” Asuka asked. It was intended to sound dismissive, and did at first, but by the end it sounded just uncertain.

“There is nothing ‘social’ about what they did,” Kaworu weighed in. Shinji turned his head around in surprise. He had never seen Kaworu without his usual angelic serenity. Now, he spoke with a demonic hatred in his voice.

Mana shook her head. “There really isn’t. I realize now... They were looking for soldiers. Not future soldiers, not when we had turned adult, but right now. Soldiers for their secret mecha program.”
“Child soldiers,” Kaji commented in a hard voice. He hadn’t sat down, but stood leaned against the fridge, and so far hadn’t said anything else.

And so Mana explained. About a secret JSSDF mecha program using teens as pilots. About how they had to participate, whether they wanted to or not. About the sudden introduction of military drill. About the chip inside her and the pain it had caused.

“Japan after Second Impact...” Kaji muttered in comment, disgust in his voice. “The JSSDF after Second Impact…” Without even asking Misato for permission, he opened the fridge and took out a can of beer.

Shinji didn’t know what to say. He had thought his own recruitment as an Evangelion pilot had been bad. Apparently, there were people who had it worse. He suddenly felt intensely guilty about having complained so much, about having felt so bad about being a pilot now. Selfish, selfish, selfish.

Nobody besides Kaji said anything. Shinji didn’t know what to say, Rei was always quiet and Asuka… Asuka looked pale.

Kaworu stood up from his seat, walked up behind Mana, and stroked her back. “That all is over now.”

“For me,” Mana whispered. “But the others…” She shook her head. “Why do I get this happy turn? Surely I least deserve it.”

“What do you mean?” It was Asuka who had asked that and it sounded strangely calm and even, coming from her.

Mana first looked down, then outright away from Asuka, as if she couldn’t face the girl. “I… I hurt you, Asuka. And Shinji. I used Shinji. I…”

“No!” That exclamation had come from Kensuke and Kaworu simultaneously. They both were looking at her with worry. Kensuke specified, “This isn’t your fault, Mana.”

Used…? Shinji was just confused. Meanwhile, next to him, Asuka seemed restless. As if she wanted to hear the story, but not push for it, which was unusually considerate for her standards.

“The JSSDF made you do it,” Kaworu now told Mana.

The girl nodded. “They did.” She breathed out. She still couldn’t look people in the face, but she continued. “My body… it rejected the implant. I still have it, but it’s deactivated. When it’s not… the pain, and the difficulties moving…” She shook her head. “It was deemed too risky. After all, there was at least a dozen other pilot candidates to use. So that led to the problem what to do with me. Well, the JSSDF found a new use for me. They used me to… to infiltrate your school and get close to you, Shinji. And I eagerly played along. I’m sorry, Shinji.” There were tears glittering on her bowed head now.

“You…” Asuka began, once again evenly, but then exclaimed, “That was because of the JSSDF?”

“They ordered me to,” Mana confirmed. “But I didn’t just go along because it was my duty. I used this chance to get away from the military base and the awful stuff that was happening there… that is happening there. It was my chance to feel at least a bit of freedom. It was selfish. I used you and
Shinji and Kaworu and Kensuke and everyone so that I could feel this little illusion of freedom… of normalcy.”

Mana once again explained matters. Why the JSSDF had seen a security risk in Shinji. Their plan to use her to exert some influence on him, and to check on him for the JSSDF. The JSSDF using their contacts to place her in Shinji’s class.

“That… shouldn’t be possible,” Kaji muttered. “Very interesting.”

“So… you and me… none of this was real?” Shinji asked.

“No,” Mana whispered. It sounded utterly defeated.

“I’m glad,” Shinji said warmly and with a smile. Mana looked up. She seemed confused. “I mean, this made things pretty awkward between us, didn’t it? But it wasn’t actually real.” Shinji was happy about it. It was one less complication in his life. At the same time, he felt a bit guilty about this happiness, given how beat up Mana seemed to be about the whole affair.

“Ah… what was never real?” Kensuke asked. He seemed a bit nervous.

Shinji and Mana looked at each other. Ah, shit. “It’s n...” Shinji began.

Mana spoke over him. “Shinji and I... no. I kissed Shinji. I’m sorry.” She began to sound frantic. “I’m... I shouldn’t be here.”

She hastily got out of her chair, throwing Kensuke’s hand off her shoulder. However, before she could leave, Kaworu grabbed her in a hug. Mana tensed, but just stopped.

“If you want to leave, leave,” he told her. “But you don’t need to on our account.” Then he let go of her again.

Mana hesitated. Kensuke took her hand. “We understand,” he said softly.

Again, tears formed in Mana’s eyes. Shinji was stunned by this display of intimacy. So were Misato and Kaji, who looked at the scene with odd facial expressions.

Asuka grinned. “Hey, Kaworu, Kensuke… is that the reason you’re so invested in this whole affair?”

“Ah...” Kensuke voiced and withdrew his hand. He looked abashed. So did Kaworu. Shinji chuckled.

“We both care about her,” Kaworu managed to say as evenly as possible.

“Both of you?” Misato asked. It sounded surprisingly serious. “Such things can lead to complications, you know. Two boys vying for the same girl and all that.”

There was a deafening silence in the room. Shinji’s eyes went wide. You don’t mean...

Finally, Kensuke admitted in a small voice, “We also care about each other.”

“So, all three of you...?” Misato asked.
Mana, already emotional before, was flustered. Kensuke was as red as a traffic light. And Kaworu’s smile was sort of awkward.

“I, ah… uh… suppose it’s a bit unusual,” Kensuke stuttered.

“I hope you don’t think badly of us!” Mana exclaimed.

Asuka chuckled, drawing everyone’s attention. “Badly? Not at all. After all…” She grinned. “Shinji?”

Shinji understood and approved. And he certainly wouldn’t say no to a kiss from Asuka. It was electrifying – that the two could concentrate on each other here, intimately locking lips, tuning the entire outside world out, in front of everyone. And the kiss had barely ended when Shinji was yanked around for another one by Rei. He certainly didn’t try to resist.

While the two were still busy, Asuka announced: “So… you’re not that special, you know. You’re not alone.”

“Shinji, you sly dog!” Kensuke exclaimed.

Shinji slowly parted from Rei, looking deeply in her captivating red eyes as he did so. Then he turned his head around. “You’re one to talk! Seems to me like you did fairly well for yourself!”

Kensuke answered by simply blushing.

Kaji grunted and took a swig from the can. “Is that some sort of new trend now? Seems like I missed the memo on this.”

“I’m a bit surprised as well,” Misato muttered.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong,” Kaji continued. “Back in college, if you and Ritsu had asked me to…”


Shinji chuckled. He felt… elevated. Dropping the now needless pretenses, Asuka and Rei had both pulled their chairs closer to Shinji’s. Rei’s head leaned on his shoulder, while Asuka had taken his hand between hers.

“So, what are we gonna do now?” Asuka asked. “I mean… we need to help Mana!”

Shinji chuckled again, this time at her quick turnaround. That was Asuka – always being fully committed to her position, whatever that might be. She was always all flame, and it was wonderful.

“We will,” Misato confirmed. Meanwhile, Kaworu, Kensuke and Mana were awkwardly sitting down again at the table. “For now, Mana will be safe here. And I have some contacts in the JSSDF I can use.”

“That’s all?” Asuka asked.

“For now,” Misato confirmed sternly. “We can’t exactly openly go against the JSSDF, now can
we?"

“We’re NERV, we...” Asuka began to argue.

“No, we’re not,” Misato told her. “After all what has happened in recent months... would you seriously expect NERV to care about the fate of a single child soldier?” Asuka looked down and then shook her head, though her facial expression remained defiant. “We don’t have NERV’s backing. It’s just the eight of us in this room.”

Kaji had been looking at the kids, especially at Kaworu and Kensuke somewhat oddly, but now he focused on the conversation. “Eight people with some excellent contacts, though. We may not have NERV’s official backing, but we could use some of its resources. Katsuragi has her JSSDF contacts. Kensuke could turn to... a friend’s father.” Kensuke just sighed. “Kaworu, I think, has some contacts in Germany. I have contacts with some government agencies here and... informants.” He paused. “But we can’t let all this inhumanity that appeared after Second Impact stand. The JSSDF...” He stopped abruptly and then fumbled for a cigarette.

“Well, I’m not sure what we can do,” Kensuke muttered. “But I won’t leave Mana behind, no matter what!”

Mana smiled at that. It looked contented.

“Well, yeah,” Asuka exclaimed. “None of us has any intent to. After all the crap that’s been done to her... we’ll help her.”

“She’s... you’re a friend,” Shinji reaffirmed their position, looking at Mana. He smiled. “I’m sure we’ll get along well while you live here.”

And Rei... Rei stood up and walked up behind Mana. She laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll protect you.”

Shinji looked at the blue-haired girl and knew that this wasn’t an idle statement. Rei had both the will and the capabilities to fulfil that promise.

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