Summary

Two years after Instrumentality's end, Shinji investigates phantom sightings of Rei, and a malevolent force starts driving humans back to the sea.
In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Forty-eight

The greatest downside of merging with the minds of all humanity and separating from them by choice was that everyone who came after you knew your face and your name.

“You’re that boy….”

Invariably, he was that boy. Twenty years in the future, he would still be that boy, even as a grown man. What was worse, this idiosyncrasy of Instrumentality seemed to work only against him, never for him. Passing other people on the street, he might recognize something familiar in a smile, a lock of hair, a laugh, but the names and faces of every human being on the planet blended together and eluded him. They were too many for any one man to remember, yet everyone else knew him. They knew him right away, for he was the first, the one who inspired others to follow.

It was an honor, in a sense, yet also an uncomfortable burden, never having anonymity wherever he went.

“You really are! You’re that boy, aren’t you?”

Sheepishly, he nodded. It was all he could do after a half-day spent traveling. When a fellow passenger had spotted him, he was obliged to entertain a whole traincar with tales of the battles between Eva and Angels. Only some fell for the grandiosity of his descriptions. Others nodded politely, knowing that the truth was much darker than the brave depiction he shared with them. Perhaps he should’ve tried a different story, one people hadn’t learned from collective memory, but at that point, tales of Eva had become well-rehearsed to him. Even the embellishments he added—about the Fifth Angel blasting through half of Mount Futago to get to him—came to him as surely as if they were fact.

From the train station, he’d taken a taxi, wishing to avoid undue attention. The driver knew his face, of course, but unlike most others, the cabbie focused his questions on life after Impact, not before. “When you left, what was it like? Desolate everywhere? Fragments of the Giant’s body all over? A red sea lapping at your feet?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“So it is, then.” The cabbie tapped a hand on the steering wheel. “In two years, from abject desolation to civilization. Hardly seemed possible back then.”

*It isn’t possible. Not for humans, anyway.*

And so, the taxi came up to a house by the sea. The coast was rocky, awash with jagged black stone. The red mist from the waves put a foul, bloody taint in the air—even with the windows up, the smell was palpable.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said the boy, “why did you come back, sir?”

“Are you going to label me a damned cultist if I tell the truth?”

The boy shook his head. “Not at all. Actually, that answers my question already.”

“It’s a strange world we live in these days.”

The boy nodded. The cabbie was quite right about that.
Leaving the taxi, the boy fished through the leather bag on his shoulder and tossed a handful of bills at the cabbie, not bothering to count them. When the driver called out, asking to give back the change, the boy waved him off, and the cab sped away. He stepped down a path to a dark brown, wooden two-story house. A man with gray tufts of hair around his ears waited for the boy at the door, and that’s when the glimmer of recognition shone in the stranger’s eyes. “You’re that boy,” he said. “You really are; you’re that boy, aren’t you?”

Yes, he was that boy. He’d learned quite quickly not to deny it. “That’s right,” he answered, bowing. “I’m very sorry for your loss, Nakamura-san.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” said Nakamura. “Please, come in.”

The boy stepped inside, marveling at the decor. The carpeting was a light, creamy color, yet it showed no signs of wear, totally spotless and pristine.

“Yes, my wife insisted on the carpet,” Nakamura explained, leading him through a white-walled hallway. “She was quite obsessive about it and cleaned or bleached every last stain as soon as one appeared.”

“Oh, so your wife—is she the one…?”

“Yes, that’s right. She’s the reason you’re here.” He huffed to himself. “To think I’d be walking this hall with you, of all people! You manage to keep your identity hidden pretty well. An anonymous post box, an untraceable phone?”

“I enjoy my privacy,” said the boy.

“As you should; you deserve it. Someone looking for her—it would have to be you. Can’t believe I didn’t figure it out sooner.”

The boy opened his mouth but said nothing. All in all, it was for the best. He was looking for someone lost in this calamitous world, and people like Nakamura volunteered their stories, their information to him when he asked for it. The anonymity of bulletin boards and chat rooms protected him, impersonal though it may have been.

The two of them walked on. Family photos adorned the walls. Nakamura and his wife on vacation in old Tōkyō, posing by a tower the boy had never known. Another photo showed Nakamura slaving over a workbench, building circuitry with a soldering iron while a young girl—no older than ten, in the boy’s judgment—watched from a safe distance.

“Is she…?”

“Yes, my daughter,” Nakamura straighted the golden picture frame. “She passed on a few months after this photo was taken, about six years ago?”

The boy frowned.

“Pardon me,” said Nakamura, shaking his head. “Thirty-six years ago. Time—it confuses me.”

The boy nodded. “What happened to her?”

“Terminal illness. She was never in the sea, either.”

“I see. I’m sorry for asking.”
“It is what it is. Really, this is all I could’ve asked for. When I came back to this house after the Impact, I hardly expected any of it would be left, but here it is—it’s perfect, untouched. It’s like I never left. Hardly a speck of dust collected anywhere. Do you know what the odds of that are?”

At least a few billion to one. “Is there some place we can sit and talk?” asked the boy. “I’m afraid I do have to catch the train home at two-thirty.”

“Of course. Please, let’s go downstairs.” Nakamura opened a door, leading down to a basement. Shelves lined each wall, housing electronic equipment, computer parts, and unfinished circuit boards. Nakamura sat at his workbench, putting aside a voltage meter, and offered the boy a stool beside him. From the leather bag, the boy took out an SDAT tape player and a folding microphone with a stand. He connected the input jack and set up the microphone on the workbench, halfway between him and Nakamura.

“Nakamura-san, are you sure this is a story you want to tell?” asked the boy.

“It’s the truth, and it needs to be heard. That’s what I’ve decided. My wife has convinced me of it.”

The boy nodded, bowing before his benefactor. “Thank you, again.” He hit the rewind button on the player, but it clicked instantly. Pressing record, he cleared his throat and began. “It’s July 21, 2048, or Year 33 After Impact. I’m with Nakamura Daisuke, an electrical engineer. We’re talking in his home in Toyama. It’s roughly eleven-thirty. Please, Nakamura-san, you may begin whenever you like.”

Nakamura drummed his fingers on the holed cardboard covering of his workbench. “In the time since my daughter died, my wife and I grew apart. She devoted herself to cleaning the house over and over, several times each day. She’d complain about our child running through the house, treading specks of dirt in impossible places—impossible, of course, because our daughter had long since died.

“For my part, I’d been working on robotics. I hoped, perhaps only slightly, that I could rebuild her somehow, as if I knew a damn thing about programming an artificial intelligence, as if it would even be right to try to recreate a person’s mind that way and to give them a metal body. Grief does funny things to you.”

“It sounds natural to me,” said the boy.

“Don’t kid yourself. It wasn’t natural. Rebuilding a child out of machine parts never ends well. Haven’t you ever read any science fiction?”

The boy sniffed at the scent of blood in the air.

“Right, well, where was I? Ah yes, I remember that day. With my wife upstairs, I was building a robotic arm. I couldn’t tell you how long I’d been working on it. Ten hours? Twenty? A hundred? It’s amazing how, if you put your mind to it, you don’t need to see the sunlight. You don’t need to sleep. I’d been fired a month before, so I had nothing else to do. I contacted professors in metaphysical biology, hoping to somehow imbue a hunk of metal with my daughter’s soul. One of them was crazy enough to say it could work. The others said I was the crazy one, that I needed a shrink. I don’t know which possibility was worse.

“So as I slaved over my daughter’s robot body, I was surprised to find someone else down here, in this basement. I didn’t expect guests or visitors, but I heard a voice clearly. It said, ‘Papa.’ That’s what my daughter called me. I looked to the staircase. There she was—angelic and beautiful and alive. She walked toward me, and I knew something was wrong. It didn’t make sense. Never mind
that she shouldn’t have been alive; in the months before she died, she needed a wheelchair to get around, but I didn’t care. Every step she took toward the bench pulled at me, like there were happiness and joy waiting if I would just embrace her. And you know something? That feeling was right. Maybe it wasn’t happiness per se, or joy either, but relief? Yes, there was relief, even though she was fake.”

“That’s what most people say,” the boy agreed. “It was a relief.”

Nakamura nodded. “I don’t remember much in the time right after that. It’s all jumbled and blurry. I know your face. I know you were there. Others, like my neighbors, my wife’s family, my own, sure. Everything else is too indistinct until we separated again. Instead of one among many, I was myself again. To be honest, I don’t know if I felt or thought anything at that point, not until something tried to reach me. It spoke with my daughter’s voice, but I wouldn’t be fooled again, dammit! That’s insulting, humiliating, and I would have nothing of it. I lashed out, telling it so, and, it stopped trying to fool me. It spoke with a girl’s voice, quietly, like a whisper. It was no voice I knew. It asked me why I was still there, in the sea, and I told it I didn’t know. I didn’t see the harm. There were others in the sea, and I could feel them, if not so keenly as I had before. My wife was there, too, but though I knew it, I couldn’t feel anything from her. I didn’t know where her pain ended and mine began, but I began to think it was better to share these emotions and not have to deal with them on my own. My daughter wouldn’t come back to me if I summoned the will to pull away, so why try? What good would it do for her? Then the voice started to argue with me. It said,

“ ‘Your daughter is dead. She can’t see what you’re doing. She can’t know how you sleep here, in the sea. Staying or going makes no difference to her, so why should her existence determine what you do? If life isn’t worth living without her, why do you choose to live at all?’

“And I thought about that for a while. I tried to defend myself, to say it was natural, that I was still grieving, and whatever that voice was, it had no right to judge me, but then I realized I wasn’t being judged. The voice wouldn’t come back to argue with me. It had said its piece, and it only hoped I would listen and think. And it was right about one thing—my life wasn’t defined only by people who’d gone before me. I could still make something new and be proud of it. That’s when I felt myself floating and came up in the sea. My wife came out, too, hours after me. We decided together to try to rebuild our lives. We both heard that voice speak to us. We both thought to thank it for trying to help us move on.”

Nakamura looked away, rubbing his eyes. He took a deep breath to collect himself before continuing. “My wife is dead now. That resolve we gained two years ago to step out of the water and reclaim this house from the elements didn’t last. Not for her, anyway. Though I encouraged her as much as I could, each passing week took its toll on her. She began to think there were voices talking to her, putting words in her mind soundlessly, like characters on flashcards. She tried to volunteer at the school down the road, but they became too much for her. One day, she walked into the ocean and made it three hundred meters from shore before I realized she’d gone. I found, in one of her letters, that she thought they told her to return there, that she’d find our daughter there, along with solace and comfort and peace.”

The boy pursed his lips, unsure what to say.

“But regardless,” said Nakamura with a shudder, “I wanted to tell the world, and all the people who feel like they’re losing hope, that something did speak to us, encouraging us to come back to this world. Maybe it took the form of a loved one or friend, an image we’d find comforting, but that doesn’t change what really happened, and I want no one to forget the hope they felt when they came out of the water. No one else should try to go back in.”
A moment of silence passed between the boy and Nakamura until at last the boy regained his wits
and cleared his throat. “Um, um, you didn’t recognize the voice, you said, right?” asked the boy.
“The one that convinced you to leave the ocean?”

“No, never have. But I remember, as I wiped the water from my eyes and swam to shore, I saw
someone standing over the ocean. Not on the shore, but actually over the water, hovering above it. I
couldn’t see her eyes, and when a wave came over me and turned me around, she was gone. I could
never be sure, but I’ve felt for some time that was the image of whatever thing had spoken to me in
the ocean. I’d stake my life on it.”

The boy pulled out a drawing from his bag—a pencil sketch on plain white paper. “Is this her?”

“Boy, I know who she is. Couldn’t you take a photo of the petrified skull or something?”

He shook his head. “That wouldn’t be a photo of her.”

Nakamura sighed, his brow creasing. He studied the drawing and nodded after a short time. “Yes,
that’s her. Almost looks human when you look at her that way.”

Fingering a button on the SDAT, the boy frowned. “Yes, well, thank you so much, Nakamura-san.
This has been very helpful. And I’m sorry again, about your wife. I wish I could’ve done something,
if I’d been able to get a message like this one out sooner…”

“Don’t concern yourself over it. Why don’t you come upstairs? I can get you something to eat.
Should be plenty of time before your train.”

“That’s all right,” said the boy. “I’ve got some things to think about.” Staring at the drawing, he
wandered up the stairs and out of the house, and thankfully, Nakamura was kind enough to call a
new taxi for him to get him back to the station.

You’ve been helping people, haven’t you? Making them realize they have something they can do
with their lives, bringing them out of the sea: not just me, but strangers too, like Nakamura-san, the
taxi driver. Are you so busy reaching people in the oceans that you have no time for anything else?
No time to live like you did before? Or maybe you can’t?

Gently, he folded up the drawing—an image of a girl sitting at the side of a hospital bed, reading
from a book and guarding a tray of food. Though the picture was monochrome, he looked into the
girl’s eyes intently, as if he could glimpse from the penciled shading a distinct, vibrant red hue.
Where are you, Ayanami? What are you doing now?

As the train back to Tōkyō-2 passed through a tunnel, Ikari Shinji glimpsed his own reflection in the
window and realized the last two years had done him some favors. His body had matured. He was
taller. His face had taken on a sharper, more adult shape, mostly in the cheeks. He felt under his
lower lip for a hint of stubble. When unshaven, his image reminded him of his father—at least, of
what he could remember of Gendō’s younger days.

And it wasn’t like the old commander could be found to tell him differently.

Shinji ran a finger along the metal of the traincar wall. It was a smooth, polished surface, free of
scratches and devoid of rust. It shouldn’t have been possible. It shouldn’t have been so pristine, but it
was. This Shinji knew absolutely, for though he was the first of mankind to emerge from the LCL
sea, it took him over thirty years of dreaming to do it. In that time, humanity’s great works—the
evidence of civilization—should’ve decayed. Grasses should’ve poked through the cracks in asphalt. Railways, like the one he rode on, should’ve become impassable and overgrown, but as more people reasserted their individuality, what they found was a world suspended in time. Power plants had continued to run unabated. Food stores years past their expiration date stayed fresh and safe to eat. Without such impossible marvels, humanity surely would’ve descended into abject chaos and madness. Instead, civilization quickly picked up where it’d left off, and in two short years, the trains were running once more, but that left one significant question:

How?

Or, better yet, who was responsible?

The answer was clear to Shinji. It was the answer he’d been searching to prove on and off for at least twenty months. Word of his quest had become rumor and the fodder for ridicule, yes, but Nakamura had heard about it and had the story to back up his claims—nay, what Shinji knew to be true as soon as he realized how impossible the world had become.

Ayanami Rei was alive.

Though her severed, petrified head still marred the beach where he’d emerged from the ocean, she was undoubtedly alive. She touched the minds of men and encouraged them to realize their individuality, to walk from the waves of LCL and back onto land once again. To ease the transition back to living, she preserved human civilization. She protected technology and foodstuffs from the weathering effects of time. Such feats we well within her powers, for Rei was hardly the stoic, bandaged girl he’d met years before.

She was Lilith—an Angel, or something like one.

No, no. Ayanami is Ayanami, whatever else she may be. When she spoke to me, she did so with the face of a friend, not an alien’s face, not something foreign and unknown and unfathomable. Lilith is the name of a creature, something that isn’t from this world. That’s not Ayanami at all.

But in that respect, Shinji was largely alone in thinking so.

“Excuse me.”

Instinctively, Shinji looked toward the voice in the aisle but tried to avert his gaze as soon as he could manage it. He pulled on the hood of his green sweatshirt, hoping to hide his face, yet if someone had spoken to him, his efforts to conceal his identity must’ve been for naught. “Yes?” he asked. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I know you don’t like to be approached.” The voice belonged to a girl, teenaged, with bright green eyes and curling locks of blonde hair. “It’s just—I recognized you as I was going to the toilet, and, um…” She turned her hand toward him, palm forward. On her third finger, there was a ring with the jewel facing in. It had a diamond shape, taller than it was wide, with the right half wholly dark and the left largely white, save for a black void in the upper quarter. It too was diamond in shape, but set sideways, and placed to evoke the image of an eye.

This design Shinji knew well. It mimicked the look of Rei’s petrified head after half of her broken face slid into the water, never to be seen again.

It was the emblem of the Cult of Lilith.

“You can sit,” said Shinji, patting the empty seat beside him, “but please don’t speak too loudly.”
“I understand completely,” said the cultist girl, stepping in from the aisle. “Archon Juniper says you don’t like to be approached by strangers. I’m sorry again.”

“It’s not being approached,” Shinji assured her. “It’s the attention. And tell the archon I know some things about her, too.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Now, er, what was it you wanted to ask me?”

The cultist blinked. “Oh, um…my, you’d think I’d know by now what I wanted to ask. I can’t remember…”

Shinji laughed to himself. This movement of believers in the all-knowing, benevolent Lilith might be better called an order or church. No doubt others fearful of their hold had labeled them a cult, and the name was just too ingrained by that point to change it.

“Well, let’s start with what she was like,” the cultist concluded. “You knew Lilith when she walked the earth with mortals. You were her favorite. There must be something interesting you can tell me.”

“First of all,” said Shinji, “to me, she was always Ayanami. Second, I was never her favorite. Third, our lives were interesting, yes, but Ayanami kept to herself most of the time. She was in sad circumstances. It’s better that she’s free of them now, that she’s helping people on her own terms.”

“So you do believe in Lilith—that she exercises her will in the world each and every day.”

“I absolutely do.”

“Then why don’t you join us? Your insight into her life would be truly enlightening.”

Shinji shook his head. “I could tell those stories, yes, but I couldn’t join your cult and worship Ayanami anymore than I could pray to my father or my girlfriend. She was a dear friend to me. I can’t see her as anything else.”

The cultist nodded to herself, pondering his words. “I see….”

They talked politely for the rest of the ride to Tōkyō-2, with Shinji trying to steer the conversation away from “matters of faith” as best he could. The cultist’s name was Masuyo, and she’d been running an errand for one of the archons in the capital. Popular stigma had it that the cultists were deluded, radicalized after their experiences in the LCL sea, but Shinji knew that not to be so. He had friends in the movement—a particular archon among them—and though there were some desperate, fanatical people in their midst, most that he’d met were well-adjusted, well-meaning people, this Masuyo included. Her only flaw—like some others in the cult he’d met, but not all of them—was her insistence on seeing everything in terms of “Lilith’s” benevolence. Delaying a train five minutes because it had a malfunction on the tracks, for instance, so one tardy passenger could make his ride. Most people would call it good fortune or luck, but to Masuyo, it was the will of Lilith manifest. To that, Shinji could only politely smile and resist the urge to shake his head. The thought of Rei acting so like a god he’d wrestled with many times over the past two years, and not once had he come to embrace it. He could scarcely understand the idea at all.

When the train pulled into their destination, the two cordially parted ways. “It was very nice meeting you, Ikari-san,” said Masuyo. “Perhaps you could join us for a service at Kakō tomorrow?”

Shinji made a face. “I’m sorry; I don’t like to go to Kakō, or the ocean in general. The smell of blood—I don’t care for it. Never have. Going to Toyama was hard enough.”
“Did you find what you were looking for, at least?”

“Yes.” Shinji smiled. “Yes, I did, for now anyway. Thank you.”

The cultist Masuyo beamed. “May Lilith watch over you. I know she has and will.”

Shinji smiled again as the young cultist disappeared in the crowd at the station. Though he didn’t share her capacity for worship and faith, he believed in her blessing—that just as he looked over the ocean one lonely day and saw the image of a schoolgirl floating over the water, all he had to do was turn around, and maybe, just maybe, he’d glimpse her looking back at him one more time.

Abruptly, he glanced over his shoulder, and by a bench in the distance, he glimpsed a janitor collecting an empty paper cup.

Straight away, Shinji returned to his apartment, a penthouse in a high-rise of the old Matsumoto district, before the city was converted into a replacement capital. On his back, he carried a small sack of letters—the day’s mail, or at least what’d made it through screeners and tests to ensure the contents were safe. That process in itself cut the volume of mail in half. Shinji didn’t know how other people of some fame (or infamy) dealt with the influx of messages, or the vast numbers of people hoping to communicate with them in some way. “They throw it all away, of course,” his roommate had said once. “They pay people to read it all and send meaningless responses. No one would read through every single letter like you. No one else has the patience.”

She was right, of course. Shinji doubted there were many who had the time or inclination to read through strings of expletives damning him. Many a letter cursed him for abandoning paradise and condemning all humanity—whether people chose it or not—to live isolated lives, separated by the AT fields that enclosed their souls. In the minds of some angry, restless citizens, the departure of just one mind from the sea created a barrier and asserted individuality and incompleteness whether they wanted it or not. Shinji understood their feelings, having wanted nothingness once himself, but to the last man, he encouraged them all to search for some purpose in life, something they could make their own. Even if that purpose was encouraging others to return to the sea, a goal and drive were better than nothing at all.

This day, however, picking up the mail was force of habit more than anything. While he would doubtlessly find time to peruse his letters, they’d have to wait for later in the evening. Nakamura’s story had given him a lot to think about, but more importantly, he had dinner to prepare. That too was one of his daily distractions, the ways in which he passed the time. Though civilization had resurrected itself, society hadn’t been so quick to rebound. For every teacher and peace officer who chose to stay in the sea, the need for a replacement had to be assessed. School districts shuffled students between half-empty buildings. Though he’d attended classes for a while, picking up where his education had stalled, recognition of his face made it impossible for Shinji to continue as a normal student. Even with Tōji and Kensuke’s support, Shinji dropped out and only saw them on weekends from time to time. The prospect of a private tutor he also rejected, not willing to endure that kind of environment again. It would be little better than total isolation, and he wouldn’t fool himself into thinking otherwise.

So looking for evidence of Rei, reading letters and responding to them, cooking meals—these were the things Ikari Shinji did with his time. That wasn’t to say he hadn’t tried other pursuits. Uncertain of his skills in most fields, Shinji’d thought cooking meals would bring him peace. He’d volunteered at a nearby refugee shelter for a time, mastering the menu in less than a week. Shutting himself in the kitchen, he didn’t have to deal with the pressure of being recognized outside of his coworkers in the galley, and the staff could pass along messages of gratitude from the people he fed.
But for all his efforts on the stove, Shinji could do only so much for the many hundreds of displaced souls that frequented just his shelter alone. So many had come from the ocean with nothing but the clothes they imagined themselves in. Though abandoned buildings and houses provided plenty of shelter, so many had lost much more than just their homes. What does a man do when his depressed wife refuses to come back from the sea? If he had baked bread for a village that could no longer grow enough grain, what was he to bake instead? Though many had found ways to cope, adopting new pursuits and vocations, the rest meandered through the new world, looking for new direction, new purpose, and found all avenues closed to them.

With every day, the aimless masses grew more numerous, and what Shinji saw in them—the desperation in their jaded, sullen eyes—convinced him to act. He approached politicians, bureaucrats, and officials at all levels of government, but their excuses were all the same: you can’t make people work if they don’t want to. You can’t create jobs out of nothing. As long as rations and frozen foods were good enough, as long as the empty skyscrapers hadn’t fallen into disrepair, these people had no real shortages or needs. What more did they want their government to do for them?

Shinji wouldn’t leave the matter there, though. He spoke out. Where television failed to reach people, he went on radio and told the story of what he’d seen. Mankind hadn’t come back from total dissolution for people to drift with the currents of civilization listlessly. He told the world and everyone who’d listen—mankind needed to wake up and make an effort to change. And what did he get for that?

A gunman who barged into the shelter’s kitchen with a pistol, who got five shots off as Shinji and his fellow volunteers ducked behind stoves, holding metal trays before their bodies as improvised armor.

“You have the gall to decide for humanity that we should live alone in this painful world?” he cried, firing a shot that ricocheted off the interior wall. “You coward! You’re no better than your father, Ikari! At least his way, we would’ve known no isolation, no fear!”

The gunman rounded a corner, unloading three shots at a female volunteer. The bullets dented her round serving tray, and she dashed for the exit door, screaming for her life.

“That’s right, Ikari,” said the gunman. “I know you’re here! I feel your fear pulling at me, tugging at my heart. Weaker men who accept your crime might resist it, but I don’t!”

He peered around a cream-colored locker, and there, Shinji crouched in a corner, unable to fit entirely behind a large pot.

“Now you die, the way you should’ve thirty years ago.” He leveled the pistol, taking aim.

And his heard jerked away, reacting to something invisible, inaudible. His eyes widened; his face twisted in recognition…and horror.

“Lilith?” he whispered.

*Lilith*? thought Shinji. *Ayanami*?

The gunman fired across the room, at an angle out of Shinji’s sight, and the rest of the staff whimpered in fright. The gunman frowned, displeased with his shot, and looked to Shinji once more.

“No matter. Your so-called god can’t protect you, Ikari.”

Click!

The gunman pulled on the trigger repeatedly, but the slide disengaged from the rest of the frame, and
metal scraped against metal in a gesture of total impotence. The shooter turned the weapon to the side, starting at it in disbelief.

And a cadre of peace officers tackled him, shoving his body to the wall and kicking the gun away. The shooter would’ve succeeded in assassinating Shinji if he hadn’t wasted his last shot on air. That was the official report, yet Shinji thought differently. Something had distracted the man before he could pull the trigger the tenth time—something no one else in the room heard or saw.

Even the gunman denied it afterwards, refusing to admit the possibility that “a false god had appeared to him to save her prophet.” He called his error a mistake in judgment nothing more, but Shinji refused to believe him or to be deterred. In walking from the ocean, Shinji’d made a choice for himself; that was all. That others felt compelled to follow or isolated for being separated from even just him, that wasn’t anything that’d crossed his mind. The genie couldn’t be put back in the bottle; even if he went back to the sea, and he had no desire to do that, others would stay behind. There was no use in being so angry about it—that was the only way he could see the issue. Having read thousands of letters from the angry and dispirited hadn’t changed his view.

But coming to the shelter the next day and finding it half-empty, abandoned as word of his presence there had spread, convinced him of something far more profound: to those who’d emerged from the sea, only to encounter a world without greater meaning and promise, no amount of pragmatism and reason would change their feelings. They needed hope and weren’t getting it, so they found someone to blame instead.

Shinji hadn’t been back to the shelter after that.

Since then, Shinji had spent his time how he pleased. He wasn’t prone to extravagances, though the high-rise penthouse did give him privacy and seclusion. He read letters. He practiced cello. Mostly, he kept on the trail of Rei—questioning officials, investigating sightings, and collecting stories of her appearances both before and after Third Impact. As far as he’d known, no one had seen her in the real world since he’d made it to shore that first day—at least, not until Nakamura told him otherwise. Really, the engineer’s tale had only confirmed what he already knew: Rei was watching and helping people out of the ocean, and not just in the circle of people he knew. In the same way she’d appeared to people from far and wide to beckon them to Instrumentality, she’d reminded them what good it was to assert their individuality and live again. If people could only remember that, maybe no one would write him angry letters.

If only.

For the moment, however, Shinji cooked. He couldn’t bring himself to use meat when it was scarce compared to prepackaged rations, so he crafted a meal from tofu, carrots, onions, and mushrooms. It was more of a boxed lunch than a true dinner in style, but the meal had to be portable, for at six o’clock that evening, he was going to make a delivery.

Though the artifacts of human civilization had been preserved through the decades, the men who’d built such marvels were much scarcer than before. Counting heads across the world was no easy task. Though some of the industrialized nations, including Japan, had emerged from the sea peacefully, in other parts of the world, the first people to awaken laid claim to the lands and homes of their enemies. Southeast Asia was a hotspot, just as it had been after the Second Impact. Central America, the Middle East, the Balkans—even the so-called First World nations were in strife, if of a different sort. News of Canadian and Spanish ships trading fire over untainted fishing rights off the North American coast was the talk of the week. Considering how little was understood about the effects of LCL on marine life, any clean patch of seawater was well worth the price in lives and
gunpowder, or so it seemed.

How anyone could be so cavalier with human life when less than two billion souls walked the Earth Shinji couldn’t understand. Granted, for most of mankind’s existence, the world had been less populated than that, but even two billion could be difficult to house, clothe, feed, and supply when half the farmers in the fields refused to emerge from the sea, when packaging and distribution plants closed down for lack of supplies and workers. Mankind had become efficient in numbers. Increasing population permitted specialization. With humanity having dwindled by almost a factor of four in a short span, that efficiency and specialization was forfeit. It could no longer provide enough for humanity to survive.

Even with a miracle to put them back into their cities and homes, the shock of being dissolved and reconstituted still lingered.

But in some circles, the greatest minds of humanity convened to find ambitious solutions for the problems of a post-Instrumentality world, backed by the trust of the public to solve crises with intellect and science instead of with labor and machinery that couldn’t be maintained or didn’t exist. It was to one of these laboratories Shinji went that evening, three boxed dinners in hand. He presented a gold visitor’s badge to the Self-Defense Force soldiers in the lobby. A great, steel skyscraper it was, and every time he went there, it was a small relief to him to go up in an elevator, toward the sky, rather than down, into the Earth, where secrets would stay buried and forgotten.

Nevertheless, though it was a different environment, Shinji found the laboratory eerily familiar. The sight of men and women in labcoats, running experiments and tests on things Shinji could hardly understand—it dredged up memories of sitting in the entry plug and looking out to the monitoring room as technicians studied his progress, with Doctor Akagi overseeing the affair.

Shinji paid no more mind to the thought. Through hallways pungent with chemical aromas that tingled the nose, Shinji found the thick wooden door he sought and knocked twice.

“Come in!” said a voice.

He turned the knob gingerly and peered inside. By the bench on the far wall, a woman sat on a metal stool. A pair of safety goggles rested on her head, for she looked through a microscope with one eye and at a notebook with the other as she jotted down her observations. Her vibrant red hair she’d tied into a bun, keeping stray strands out of her way as she worked.

“What took you so long?” she demanded, not bothering to look away from the slide. “If you’re going to the toilet more often, maybe we should invest in diapers?”

Shinji found another stool and set the three boxed dinners there, unwilling to expose them to chemicals or other hazards by placing them on a lab table. “Sorry,” he apologized. “I thought it would just take a second?”

The woman dropped her pen and turned from her microscope. “Shinji?” She blinked, puzzled. “Ah, what the hell—what time is it?” She turned back to the lab table, sliding the notebook away. “Where’s my watch?”

Shinji looked up, studying the clock on the wall. The minute hand moved smoothly at an incredible rate while the second hand was entirely still.

“It was about six when I left,” he said.

“Christ!” Asuka Langley Sōryū yanked the unused safety goggles from her head and cast them...
Rubbing her eyes, she took a deep breath. “No wonder I feel like I’ve been working for fifteen hours straight.”

“You have been.”

Asuka shot him a curious look, then tilted her head as she thought about the remark. “You’re probably right. Ah well, nothing to be done about the past.” She looked to the stool beside Shinji. “And you brought food! This late?”

“I took the train to Toyama this morning, remember? Didn’t get back until the middle of the afternoon.”

“Ah, that’s right.” Lazily, Asuka kicked off her shoes, stood up, and stretched, yawning. “How did that go? The old man didn’t tell you anything interesting, did he?”

“Actually, he told me he saw Ayanami after he woke up.”

“You’re kidding!”

“I’m not. I mean, it’s not concrete proof, but until now, no one else has seen her in the real world. I think it’s time to spread the word.”

“Let me guess,” said Asuka. “You called our favorite Special Attaché?”

Shinji shuffled his feet. “It seemed like the easiest place to start.”

Smiling to herself, Asuka rose from her stool. “Shinji.”

“What?”

“Close the door.”

Confused, Shinji inched the door shut, and Asuka removed her labcoat. In working with chemicals and reagents, she had to choose practical clothing—long pants and shirts, closed-toe shoes—to protect her body from accidental contact as much as she could, but as Asuka sauntered up to Shinji, he knew well that she didn’t need to wear a short skirt or a low-cut top to get his attention. She paced toward him one step at a time, placing one foot in front of the other to give her hips a suggestive sway. Her gaze was controlled yet intense, for she stared him down, and Shinji found himself unable to look away.

“You know, Shinji, a girl could get confused if, when she’s alone with her boyfriend, he keeps talking about other women,” she teased him. “I mean, right off the bat you start talking about First and then the colonel. Who’s next? You’ve been friendly with a particular archon, I’ve heard.”

“That’s not what I was saying,” he protested.

“Oh, I know; I’m just reminding you.” She smirked. “But, since we’re all alone here in this lab, you could give me some additional assurance.”

Shinji fought off the grin on his lips. “I’m sorry, Sōryū-san, but I really don’t know what you mean by assurance. Is there something I should do now?”

“Why yes, there is,” said Asuka, nodding gently. “Close your eyes, and we can assure each other of our mutual intentions, repeatedly.”

His eyes fluttering shut, he listened for Asuka’s footsteps. He winkled his nose, waiting to feel her
breath on his upper lip. She put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. She pulled him downward ever-so-slightly, and—

Click, squeak! They both realized one of the door hinges needed oiling.

“Oh my.” With a wry smile, a woman with dark hair and thin, black-rimmed glasses stepped around Asuka and Shinji and walked right up to the microscope, peering over her spectacles to look at the slide. “I could’ve sworn I was in the LCL concentration lab, not the reproductive rates experiment. Since this is the cell culture I was looking at before I had to go to the toilet, I think my first assumption was correct. How strange it is, then, to find a dashing young man about to smooch my daughter here, even if they have been going out for close to a year.”

Shinji bowed, his cheeks red with embarrassment. “I’m very sorry, Aunt Kyōko. It won’t happen again.”

“Well, I should hope it will!” she answered. “After all, the world needs repopulating, but it shouldn’t happen here. You might contaminate my samples.”

Her mouth hanging open, Asuka looked aghast. “Mama, please!”

“Besides,” said Kyōko, “these tables aren’t comfortable. Nor are the stools.”

Eyes widening, Asuka grew even paler. “And just how do you know that?”

“I was young once. How do you think I met your father?”

Shinji frowned. “You worked in a lab together, and then—”

Asuka covered his mouth with her hands, muffling the rest of the question. “Stupid Shinji!” she cried. “You really want to finish that?”

“Oh, no, we didn’t work together,” said Kyōko. “I was in graduate school, and one day, I walked in on him canoodling with a first-year who’d just joined our group.” She leaned back from the microscope. “She was kicked out after I reported them for that, but right after, he asked me out for coffee. You’d think I would’ve realized he was a cad at that point.”

With a look of utter horror, Asuka glanced away from her mother. “Mama, what have I said about telling these stories?”

“Yes, yes, I know, too much information.” Kyōko peered through the microscope once more. “Go take your break, Asuka. Eat something. I’ll eat later. And if you need an extra fifteen minutes to yourselves, I know a place—”

Asuka, Shinji, and two of the three boxed dinners were out of the lab in a flash. The door slammed behind them with definite finality.

Glancing back with curiosity, Kyōko pursed her lips. “Well, my little cells,” she said, changing the slide under the microscope. “You never tire of my stories, do you? No, you don’t. Well, there was this one time in Munich, underneath a scanning-tunneling electron microscope, when I finally realized the meaning of perturbation theory…”

As peculiar as Kyōko could be, her revival had had a profound positive impact on Asuka. In the weeks and months after the two of them met on the desolate beach, Asuka and Shinji had always
stayed together—on one level because they had no one else to turn to, on another because each knew what the other felt exactly. Perhaps they knew too well, for that knowledge made their initial advances toward one another feel forced, like acting from a script both parties had already read and grown tired of. Though Shinji had distanced himself from his father and seen his mother off to the stars, Asuka still held something back, something that didn’t come out until one mild day in December—warm as it was with Japan’s eternal summer—when Shinji and Asuka were being honored at a private, outdoor dinner to recognize the Eva pilots and staff. Though Asuka had looked proud to receive a medal and recognition, her pride had vanished quickly, disappearing in a somber, brooding mood. Only when a strange woman stumbled into the party, rambling incoherently, did Asuka truly come alive again.

After that, the party was more than a ceremony for the pilots. It celebrated something thought impossible—the reconstitution of a human body from the soul contained within Eva, one believed to have been damaged and corrupted through madness and despair. Though Kyōko still behaved somewhat erratically, Asuka had embraced her mother eagerly that evening, and for the first time, Shinji shared intimately in Asuka’s elation and joy. Unfair though it may have been for Asuka to get a parent back when both of Shinji’s couldn’t or wouldn’t return, the complete transformation of his friend and lover had been well worth seeing. From lethargy and caution, Asuka was energized. She and her mother, both scientists by trade, found jobs in a new government laboratory in the capital and worked together every day. Though Asuka lacked the graduate degree her mother had earned, having finished university by fourteen was more than enough qualification for her. She put her intellect to good use.

In fact, perhaps she used it too much. As with Eva piloting before, Asuka had a tendency to put a great deal of herself into her work. When Asuka wondered aloud when the last time she’d eaten or slept, it hardly surprised Shinji. Left to her own devices, Asuka would likely work twenty-five hours in a day somehow.

As it was, Shinji and Asuka stopped in a small break area one floor up. With microwaves and refrigerators and tables, it was a common place for researchers to store food or drink and rest from their work. With a heavy sigh as she sat, Asuka closed her eyes, and Shinji placed her meal and chopsticks before her.

“Did you hear that?” asked Asuka. “She wants grandchildren.”

Shinji made a face. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“In a minute.” Asuka pushed the box aside, and though Shinji had already opened his, he laid his chopsticks down and watched her carefully. Her eyes fluttering open, Asuka leaned back in her chair, looking lazily around the room. “You know, I used to think I didn’t want to have children.”

“I know that.”

She scowled. “Not finished.”

“Sorry about—” Shinji winced, catching himself. “Go ahead then.”

“Do you want to have children, Shinji?”

“Someday.”

“See, that’s what I think, too. Why would anyone want to worry about having to raise children the way the world is right now? We’re young. We’re sixteen. We could wait ten years for things to settle down and still be plenty young enough to start a family. I’d probably have my doctorate by then.”
“You’ll have a doctorate by twenty-one, Asuka.”

She beamed. “Damn right.” Revitalized, Asuka took the cover off her boxed dinner, thanked him for the meal, and dug in. “Wow, what is this? This is tofu? It doesn’t taste a thing like it!”

“I had to get a little creative to make it seem that way,” said Shinji.

“Creative’s good. I’m telling you, Shinji—you should do something with this. This or your cello playing. It’s better than going around hunting for ghost stories.”

Shinji nibbled on a piece of carrot, thinking carefully on what to say. This was no new argument for them. She’d made it no secret she didn’t think much of him looking for Rei. It was nothing mean-spirited; she just didn’t see the point.

“If she’s alive, good for her; all the best to First in whatever she does,” said Asuka. “And if she’s dead, like the people who collect her stone body parts will tell you, then I don’t think she’d want you wasting time looking for her. So, why look at all? What does it accomplish?”

Maybe nothing. Indeed, to that question, Shinji could think of few answers. Everyone else he could account for in some way or another. Was it so wrong to want to solve a puzzle, to feel like one of those detectives in an old murder mystery?

“You don’t read murder mysteries,” Asuka pointed out.

That was true, but he could pretend!

Asuka narrowed her eyes skeptically.

“All right, that would be silly,” Shinji agreed, “but Ayanami played a big part in convincing me to come back into the world. I think she would want me to keep telling people the same things she told me, even if it is a personal decision. I owe her that much.”

“Why do you need to be the one to do that? If she’s going around, contacting people and trying to get them to come out of the ocean, she doesn’t need your help.”

Shinji shrugged, saying nothing, and Asuka let out a breath in frustration.

“It’s not like she was that convincing…”

The chopsticks slipped from Shinji’s fingers, clattering on the table. “She spoke to you, too?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But that’s exactly what you said! Asuka, I’ve been trying to find evidence of her for months, and you’re just saying this now?”

“That’s not what happened,” she insisted, “and I don’t want to talk about that time! Not another word about it. If you want to keep chasing after that perfect girl, go ahead. You’re no one’s man but your own, so I won’t stop you, but that doesn’t mean I have to have a part in it, too. She wasn’t really a person, Shinji. She was something totally alien and different from us. Humans can’t get the kind of power she had. We have to live with just our own two hands. Just remember that, out of the three of us, she was never the same as you and me. If you’re asking yourself how she can be alive and why she wouldn’t have talked to you or anyone else, God only knows. You can’t forget that she never thought, never felt, the way we do, and it’s a mistake to believe otherwise.”
What she said was nothing that hadn’t already occurred to Shinji, doubts that had given him pause at one time or another, but every day, he had to get up in the morning and decide—was it better to awaken or to sleep? He chose to wake up every time, affirming the decision he’d made years before, and that alone could give him the drive to see things through.

Nevertheless, there was one thing he wouldn’t let pass. “She was a person, Asuka,” he insisted. “Whatever else she was, she was a person.”

Asuka’s face twisted with regret. She let out a breath, shaking her head. “Sorry,” she said. “That was too harsh. All of it.”

“Not all of it,” Shinji reassured her.

“It was! It was.” Collecting herself, Asuka leaned forward, folding her hands on the table. “I’m glad you found something out about her, really. It means it’s not empty and foolish. There’s no value in meaningless pursuits, you know. People like us are important in this world. We should be doing important things to match that.”

Shinji nodded. “This is important to me, Asuka.”

“Well, duh!” she cried, grinning. “You’d think after going out for a year I could at least see that much!”

She laughed, and Shinji laughed with her. It warmed him inside, to see Asuka smiling like that. Her energy was truly infectious, and in recent months, it’s become more and more frequent to see.

Relaxing again, Asuka returned to her food. She leaned back in her chair, slumping slightly. And her stockinged foot rubbed against the inside of his shin.

“When do you think you’ll be home tonight?” he asked.

“Ah, who can say?” She picked up the boxed dinner tray, continuing to eat as she slumped further. Her foot slid upwards, past his kneecap. She wiggled her toes, tickling his thigh. “Even with Mama going at it while we’ve been eating, I’d say there are still half a dozen cultures to examine? Four stains to examine for each one, then follow-up work. And if we have to pack everything in for the night, it’ll just take longer to get back to where we were tomorrow. It’s really for the best if we do it all as soon as we can.”

Shinji cleared his throat. “So you’re going back to work right away, then?”

“I didn’t say anything about right away.” By then, she could hardly contain her grin. “Honestly, Shinji, sometimes you’re difficult to read.”

He cleared his throat. “How’s that?”

“Well, just when I think I know how you like to do things, we’re here having dinner, and you’re just looking at me, totally stiff. Am I wrong?”

“No, no, very stiff right now,” he said with exaggerated nods.

With a knowing smile, Asuka set aside her dinner and scooted closer to the table. She leaned forward and whispered, “You know what I like?”

“Um, yes?”
Asuka blinked. “Okay, that wasn’t a real question. You understand why I push you sometimes, don’t you, Shinji? It’s because when you get pushed hard enough, you push back, and there’s no one more driven and courageous than that person you become when you feel that way. Now, if you didn’t have to be pushed around to get there, you could do something amazing, I’m sure. You already have.”

“That’s, um, nice of you to say, Asuka,” he said, glancing under the table.

“Think about it,” she insisted. “But maybe…after we’ve had a chance to do something for each other?”

“The sound transmission lab?”

“No, no, those bums changed the locks on their door. We’ll have to improvise.”

“Or we could wait until you come home tonight,” he suggested.

She tilted her head. “Why wait?”

Taking Shinji by the hand, Asuka led him out of the break room, to parts of the research building that would be sheltered from others’ eyes and ears. When Shinji was with her, it felt like nothing else in the world mattered, like the cares and worries of humanity were fleeting things that would pass in time, as long as they worked to overcome them. Though it hurt to recall those moments with her too closely, Shinji remembered every touch and caress as he took the empty containers back home, washed them out, and watched the kitchen clock tick off every second of the rest of the day. Eight o’clock, nine, ten, eleven…

At midnight, he washed up and headed for bed, finding it cold and empty.

That’s why they kept cots in the break room closet, too. It was no fault of Asuka’s. She truly loved her work, and being able to spend that time with her mother, who’d been taken from her when she was so young, was all the better.

It was the way things were.

At six-thirty the next morning, Shinji rose, finding no hint that anyone had been beside him, even briefly. That was no surprise, either, and it didn’t bother him. Once again, he had places to go, people to meet. He fixed breakfast and sat before the television, taking in the news of the day. Wreckage washing ashore from Tōkyō-3, riots on the island of Formosa as the mainland Chinese government hoped to solidify their seizure of Taiwan with martial law. That was the sad, sad nature of humanity, one that hadn’t changed in thousands of years. Given a reason—nay, an excuse—people would fight with one another. It was the way they were. That didn’t mean humanity should be dismissed or written off as a lost cause. Man just had to find a better reason not to fight.

And sometimes, the better reason was because the other guy had a bigger stick. Since Second Impact, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces had swelled, becoming a multifaceted, traditional military in all but name. As Matsumoto became the capital and was rechristened as Tōkyō-2, all of the governmental functions were relocated to the new capital—at first, using local and regional offices as temporary facilities; then later, in buildings commissioned for a grand National Square, which held new chambers for the Diet, a home for the Ministry of Defense unoffically dubbed the Amber Moon, for it stood vertically like an egg on its large end, and the concrete exterior bore a peculiar yellow tint. Beyond that, most of the Square had yet to be finished.
Thus, to the beeping of forklifts in reverse and the clattering of jackhammers, Shinji visited the Square that morning, taking a seat at a stone bench and watching water spew forth from a statue of the Shintō sun goddess, Amaterasu. On that bench he passed the time, eying the sun as it rose over the Amber Moon. Workers in hardhats walked together, griping about construction regulations and the lack of unfouled water. Men and women in uniform went by and paid him no heed, for Shinji wore a green hooded sweater with shiny sunglasses, hiding his face and eyes from the outside world. At one point, a capitol police officer looked at him strangely and asked what he was doing, but he only had to pull down his sunglasses and look the man in the eyes to make clear that he was no troublemaker or suicide bomber. His presence shouldn’t be questioned, and the officer bowed in apology, tipping his cap as he went on his way.

Beyond that, Shinji waited, not knowing how long he would be there alone. Nine o’clock went to ten, then eleven. It would’ve been better if he’d brought a book, but he had no books to read, for no one had told him to buy any. He closed his eyes, listening to the idle chatter in the Square.

‘Come to me.’

His eyes snapped open. The impression of the words was that they were faint, like a whisper, but he couldn’t place the origin or source. Seeing no one nearby, he closed his eyes again, trying to relax.

‘Come closer.’

He bolted upright from his seat, eyes sharp as a falcon’s as he scanned the surroundings. What kind of person should he be looking for? He tried to analyze the voice, to classify it as either old or young, high-pitched or low, soft in tone or hard and demanding, but all of these descriptions seemed ill-fitting somehow. It was as if the voice wasn’t a voice at all but an impression, a suggestion, a silent thought.

Ayanami?

His stomach clenched. His heart beat faster. Without thinking, he found himself led by his legs across the Square, to the fountain that spewed endlessly in the center of the mall. There was a wide, circular pool into which the water and coins thrown in by passing visitors collected, and the statue towered above him, four-and-a-half meters high. It was made of marble, unapainted, so but for the taint of stains and pollution, it was nearly pure white.

As Rei had been, in the life that came after her human one.

‘Look. Lean over. See. Breathe.’

He peered into the pool, through the clear water to the smooth white floor of the fountain. A force pulled at him, bringing his face ever-closer to the surface of the water. Was there something he would see there? Some trace of Rei? Was water the only way she could make herself be seen anymore?

But all he glimpsed was his reflection instead, growing larger and more detailed as he leaned in, until the tip of his upper lip kissed the water.

“Desperate for a drink, are we?”

Shinji backpedaled, glancing about nervously. He heard no more silent whispers, felt no more attracting pull to the fountain. Perhaps he’d convinced himself of such in desperation, in fleeting hope, but no matter. Hopefully no one but the owner of the accosting voice had seen him, and from her, he had little to fear.
It was a woman who’d addressed him, her uniform almost entirely green. In front of her heart, she bore various decorations and medals. On her shoulders, she wore insignia comprised of two golden cherry blossoms side-by-side atop two stripes. The stripes marked her as a field-grade officer—more experienced than fresh, young company officers, but inferior to any general. The blossoms signified her status within that broad group—two for second-class. In the nomenclature of Western military tradition, she would be called a lieutenant colonel.

Apparently, transferring back to the Self-Defense Forces came with the perk of a promotion as well.

“No answer?” Katsuragi Misato laughed to herself. “Strange, I could’ve sworn you were the one to call this meeting, Shinji-kun.”

He looked both ways before answering. “Just trying not to be heard,” he said quietly.

“I see. In that case, shall we find some place to sit down?”

Shinji bowed slightly, leading Misato to the bench he’d once occupied, and the colonel gladly laid her briefcase down. She put her hat atop the leather case and kicked off her shoes to stretch. So easily the former major had returned to this world. As she told it, in the final seconds of her life, she was bleeding out from a gunshot wound, having seen Shinji to the elevator with a kiss to shock him back to his senses and save them all. She lay in a puddle of her own blood, but just before the hallway was pulverized in a blast, she saw something. With the last gleam of light in her eyes, she glimpsed a glowing image of Ayanami Rei. That girl couldn’t have been there. She was far beneath them in Terminal Dogma, but Misato had been adamant about what she’d seen. She said Rei came to her in the chaos of Instrumentality and rescued her from death, convincing her that her task in this world was as yet incomplete. Though the deaths of the Angels sated Misato’s need for vengeance, she was still a soldier at heart, and soldiers fought until the end. Thus, she too came from the ocean, finding a blood-stained pendant of a cross waiting for her in the sand, far from where Shinji had left it.

“That much,” Misato had said once, “I think was Rei’s doing, too.”

It was her insistence that Rei had helped her—along with Shinji’s own experience—that compelled the boy to search for traces of the First Child, and from that, the rumors spread of Lilith’s interference and plan for humanity, something unsubstantiated as long as the so-called goddess spoke not to waking souls. For the moment, then, Katsuragi Misato took a position in the Self-Defense Forces, returning to the vocation she’d once left for Nerv. Her energy and drive for her work hadn’t suffered through the past two years, either.

“Isn’t it great, being outside?” said Misato, stretching her arms. “It makes you feel alive again, doesn’t it?”

“You’re the same as always, Misato-san,” said Shinji, fighting back a smile.

“And don’t you forget it. Now, I’d start with pleasantries, but I’m a busy girl, and I know you must’ve been out here for ages. Sorry I couldn’t tell you a more specific time, but I’m at your disposal now. What can this Special Atachée to the Prime Minsiter do for you?”

Shinji lowered his glasses, peering over the square. “I’d really prefer if we could do this privately. Do you have an office we could—”

“Nope! With half the Square unfinished, a lowly lieutenant colonel can’t get an office before all the brass do, now can she? I just ping-pong around wherever I’m told to go. In fact, someone may come up with a paddle and spank me while we’re talking!”
Yes, definitely the same old Misato-san. Wincing, Shinji fumbled through his pockets, producing the SDAT player and a pair of earbuds. “I was hoping you could listen to this. Tell me what you think.”

Taking the items gingerly, Misato eyed both, and her scatterbrained, ditzy air gave way to hardened, serious tone. “Shinji-kun,” she said, “this is about Rei, isn’t it?” She placed the SDAT and earbuds behind her, next to the suitcase. “I don’t need to listen to that. I’m just a simple military girl. You really should be talking to someone else about this matter if you’re looking to push it. Every minister in the cabinet would have no choice but to grant you an audience.”

“I have no trouble meeting with them,” said Shinji, “but making them listen? They just nod politely and do nothing, and then they can ask me to appear with them at events and parties when they never followed through! That’s why I need your help, Misato-san. You’ll actually listen, even if in the end you tell me no.”

Misato bit her lip and sighed. “What is it you want me to do? Say you have something there that proves Rei’s alive. What does that do for us? It’s still incumbent on people to have faith in the world they live in, whether they know a living god made it possible for them to emerge from the sea without humanity destroying itself in strife doesn’t matter. They have to make the choice not to make anymore chaos themselves, regardless of what Rei made them realize to get them to walk the earth again. And to blow the lid on this—you know what it would do. That crazy cult would get even more followers, more downtrodden, unhappy souls looking for a way to cause organized mischief. The government won’t allow that.”

Taking off his glasses and blinking, Shinji stared at the fountain in front of them with world-weary eyes. “The government already knows.”

“So of course,” said Misato. “It was, to be honest, one of the first conclusions we came to. Telling people that it was Rei who saved them is to tell the truth, yes, but it won’t give the kind of hope you think it will, Shinji-kun. I think it’s for the best if you dispel yourself of that notion right now. The road to peace and security is going to be a lot harder than that.”

“And how are you seeing to it?” asked Shinji. “What exactly do you do?”

With an undignified giggle, Misato put a finger to her lips playfully. “That’s a secret, you know. Someone like me can’t work in the open. I’ve spent too much of my life in the shadows, and I’m happier that way.”

So it was. With Misato, there was still a wall to hide behind, a veil of secrecy that, though she freely admitted was there, she wouldn’t pull up even for Shinji. Misato kept some distance between herself and others, even with her new boyfriend, whom Shinji and Misato discussed at some length as their conversation turned to less serious matters. Misato offered to take Shinji to lunch and give him more advice on his relationship with Asuka, but Shinji politely declined. Her frank acknowledgement that the government knew Rei had existed—perhaps still did—but wouldn’t reveal the truth had struck a chord in him. It posed a serious question that he had no answer to, one only Misato could put to words.

“Say you do prove Rei’s alive,” she said. “What then?”

What then indeed. Shinji struggled and struggled to understand that question, throwing out reasons and rejecting them instantly. To see so many of the people she’d bothered saving start to lose themselves to despair—someone had to be angry in her stead, right? Or, he was desperate to thank her for saving him, and felt compelled to find her and say it in person. Neither of those made any real sense, however. If the treatment of the aimless and downtrodden were really such a crime, one should be angry and discontented over it regardless of position or status. If he wanted to thank Rei
for her efforts to rescue his soul, then he should feel that desire burning inside him, bursting at the seams to come out.

But as he pondered Misato’s question, he felt nothing—perhaps an emptiness, a sense of loss, the bewilderment of a traveler who has no idea what path to take or where any of them might lead.

With the matter of Rei’s legacy and existence put to bed (at least, as far as he could see), just what else was he to do?

On the way back home, Shinji walked slowly, for these questions weighed him down. He found a public phone and called the lab, reaching Kyōko as Asuka was too busy dealing with samples to come to the phone. He apologized for not calling sooner about lunch, but it seemed mother and daughter had gone to a nearby restaurant anyway. There was no need for him to drop by with meals. There was no need for him to do anything.

It was a dilemma of his own doing, really. In running away from school, he’d isolated himself. In refusing to be a figurehead and symbol for the government, he’d preserved his dignity but could get nothing done. In searching for Rei, he’d given himself an impossible task to pass the time, pushing away any thoughts about the last two years, how the world he’d come back to, though almost perfectly preserved over three decades, wasn’t really what he’d hoped for. Asuka had warmed to him, but with her mother, she’d also grown past him. She had the chance to make peace with the past, a chance Shinji lacked—and had done nothing to confront or understand, either.

Like the poor creatures who’d wandered into his shelter, staring emptily at the walls without drive or direction, Shinji had busied himself with pointless pursuits. He’d behaved no differently than them; only the mystery of Rei and Asuka’s needs had kept him occupied, but they put him in a position of stasis, of stagnation. That’s why he too was one of the aimless, the displaced.

No more, though. He hadn’t come to walk this earth again to be satisfied with that.

His mind resolved on that point, Shinji set out to confront both the past and the present. He mailed a copy of the Nakamura tape to a friend in the media, someone with a sympathetic ear. Some would dismiss him and Shinji as deluded frauds, but Shinji thought nothing of it. Nakamura had done him more than a small favor—he’d relived the tragedy of his wife’s suicide in the hope of restoring faith in humanity. If no one chose to listen, that was their fault, not his, and Shinji felt compelled to make good on the debt he owed.

The balance of the present thus settled, Shinji went to the train station and booked a new ticket—this time for a trip to Kakō, meaning “Crater.” Japan was a seismically active archipelago, but since the end of Instrumentality, only one place in Japan could be called Kakō and be instantly understood:

It was the ruins of Tōkyō-3, the remnants of old Hakone, where the Geofront had risen from the earth and left a gash a mile deep.

Since the Instrumentality of mankind, the oceans had run red with LCL, and though two billion had come back to walk the earth, their resurrections had only dimmed the tint, not eradicated it. Thus, the ocean was still a deep crimson, and anywhere there was red water, there were worshippers of Lilith to welcome reconstituted souls back to the earth, but no shore was considered more holy than that of Kakō. The eruption of the Black Moon had created a depression wide and deep enough to erase Lake Ashi and merge it with the red seas. In this way, a holy site was born.

So once more, Shinji found himself on a train, thinking darkly on all the moments of introspection
he’d endured on trains, whether real or imagined. Though he found himself facing this unexpected question of what he was doing and why, he thought back on the chaos of Instrumentality feeling self-assured. He’d known even then that to come out of the sea would be difficult, that eventually, someone would betray his trust and heart. That hadn’t happened as yet, but this difficulty he faced was something like it, so he accepted his disquiet and didn’t fear it. Going to Kakō would just give him a chance to find out what he was looking for, to find himself.

The train to Kakō hit the end of the line at Odawara, which had only just managed to survive Third Impact and now stood on the edge of the new cove. It was a lengthy trip, over five hours in total, so by the time Shinji left the train, the sun had begun to cast lengthy shadows. Not knowing where exactly the Cult’s service would be, Shinji made for the ocean to the south and west.

Odawara was an ancient city, inhabited since antiquity, but disasters and earthquakes had ground the settlement down from a position of power in the feudal era. Much of the city had been damaged or erased in the Impact, but its location as the closest town to ground zero had made it a Japanese Mecca. Traffic generated business, yet that growth jarred against the poverty of refugees and the desperate, some of whom called themselves cultists too. With those clashes, there was strife, and where there was strife, police walked the streets in armor and riot shields. For the moment, however, there was peace—and a trail of cultists on a precession to the ocean.

They common folk wore no special attire. What most of them did have was some sign of their affiliation on them—the Cult’s symbol, the Diamond and Eye—emblazoned in patches or on simple, otherwise undorned, rings. It was their leaders, the archons, who wore gray robes with hoods down. In the distance, Shinji saw them. They set up on a stage on the beach, with one at a microphone to welcome all comers. A pole on each end held a banner with the Cult’s emblem embroidered in for all to see.

And on the horizon, beyond the archons, one could make out a shadowed blob. Shinji couldn’t discern its details, but he knew what it was: the severed, petrified head of Lilith, split in two and unmoved since Instrumentality’s end.

Already, the beach was crawling with people—cultists and interested non-members alike. Shinji could hardly come off the sidewalk and touch the sand without running into a mass of bodies.

“Come, brothers and sisters,” said the archon. “Bask in Lilith’s love. She has sacrificed Her physical body, Her existence, so that we may walk as human beings once again. Every day, She speaks to the lost souls in the ocean to remind them what they can accomplish only as individuals. We’ve all heard Her voice, and that’s why we gather here—to rejoice and celebrate and spread the message.”

“To who?” cried a voice. “I live by the ocean; I haven’t seen anyone swim to shore today or yesterday or the day before that! What happened to Lilith’s ever-present love? Is She working tirelessly every day to restore mankind or not? Where are the people receiving Her grace?”

The archon hesitated a bit, covering the microphone with her hand. She looked to her colleagues and conferred with them before responding. “We don’t worship an all-powerful god; Lilith respects the free will of men, and if they don’t wish to emerge from the sea, She will respect that…”

But the questions for the archon didn’t end there. Others chimed in, asking what Lilith was doing to bring their loved ones back, why they should work and toil when Lilith could plow fields and mend broken water mains herself. Shinji paid their demands no heed. He gently pushed his way through the crowd, inching closer and closer to the ocean. The blood-smelling spray irritated his eyes. Where others faced the stage, directing their grievances and questions of faith, Shinji turned to the ocean and fought his way through the mass of humanity until the surf lapped at his feet.
Two years it had been. Two years of rebuilding civilization and seeing it teeter with mankind’s worries and despair. In the end, as much as had been resurrected, some things were still missing. Rei, for one. His mother, Yui, who would surely never return.

And his father, Gendō, who—if he had been a part of Instrumentality—made little impact on Shinji’s mind, so little that Shinji wondered if his father had survived at all. Still, Shinji looked over the ocean, wondering where missing pieces had gone or if they’d ever be found. Asuka’d had issues with her mother, a connection that’d been severed, scarring her, but they learned to live together again, right?

As much as Shinji told himself he didn’t need Gendō’s approval anymore, he still wanted it, wanted that feeling of reconciliation and forgiveness, yet as long as Gendō couldn’t or wouldn’t walk the earth, those feelings wouldn’t come. Third Impact had transformed humanity, but not everyone felt the burden equally. Shinji had had the privilege of choice in the matter, but he, like anyone else, felt the ongoing weight of coping with the consequences.

In the end, all any of them could do was try to move forward, for the only other choice was to walk back into the ocean, hoping to dissolve, just as Nakamura’s wife had. To Shinji, that was unfathomable. He’d invested too much in life to abandon it. The next day, he would consider what Asuka had said. He needed something to put his energy into, something constructive and worthwhile. Maybe that was a job. Maybe that was school. As long as it was a quiet, low-profile existence, it would do fine.

The Cult of Lilith’s service dispersed at dusk. Shinji had stayed through the end of the gathering, though from a safe distance, away from the crowd. The longer he spent with people elbowing and jostling for position, the more likely it was his sunglasses would fall off, and he’d be paraded around as an apostle to Lilith.

Back at the train station, Shinji had to buy his return ticket and wait, having lacked the forethought to figure out when he should head back home. He sat beside a tree in the station lobby, taking a breath, and the fatigue of the day washed over him.

*I guess I’ll see you when I see you, Father, Ayanami.*

He shut his eyes, losing himself for a moment to the translucent voids beyond his eyelids.

‘So you give up?’

Yelping, Shinji jumped to his feet. The words—the thought—penetrated his mind silently.

‘I’m out here, looking for you….’

His eyes darted about the lobby, but he saw nothing, no one, certainly no ghostly girls with bright red eyes.

‘Come outside….’

He ran out the automatic doors. Even at night, the station was busy, with cultists returning home by bus and rail.

‘Come and find me.’

Something pulled at his insides. A force drew him to the corner, a nearby intersection with a four-
lane highway crossing a station access road, from which buses came out. It didn’t make sense. Rei wasn’t one for ploys or games, but who else would speak to him this way? Who else had the power?

‘I’m over here….’

Across the four-lane road. He saw nothing, but the sense of the voiceless words was definite. He looked both ways, finding the light red and the crosswalk signal beckoning. His right foot found the edge of the curb, and it was only then he dared consider an alternative, another possibility:

It was a voice that spoke to him, yet its words made no sound, even in his mind.

It was a pull that had guided him, demanding all his will to resist.

The thing that had whispered in the mind of Nakamura’s wife, that drew Shinji’s would-be assassin to the refugee shelter and to his target even while Shinji took cover and hid…

They were one and the same. They were the same as the force that flashed dozens of words in his mind. ‘Walk,’ it told him. ‘Forward. Come to me. I’m waiting for you.’

He hesitated at the curb as the signals changed. Green turned to red, and to his right, beyond the intersection, a six-wheeled truck barreled down the road, its headlights only beginning to touch him.

‘Walk.’

Though he shut his eyes to keep the words out, the will of the soundless voice was branded on the insides of his eyelids. He tensed his leg, trying to control it, and it quivered with competing forces as his muscles pushed and pulled in opposite directions.

‘WALK.’

The truck driver blared his horn, for the headlights cast Shinji’s shadow long into the night. Shinji grunted, focusing all his effort on the heel of his foot. It wasn’t Rei waiting for him in the darkness. It was something else, something sinister, and he refused to heed it, to listen to it, commanding though it may be. What he wanted was in this world, not where the bumper of that six-wheeled truck would take him, but still, despite all his force of will, his foot would not move.

SCREECH!

So it was the truck that moved for him. Tires skidded on the asphalt, and the six-wheeler swerved toward the far side of the road, darting around an oncoming car. It bolted over the far curb, and sparks shot off the undercarriage as metal scaped against cement. This time, wholly under his own power, Shinji dashed across the street, going around to the driver-side door. A man slumped over the airbag, his nose bloodied, but he looked groggily at Shinji as the boy pulled at the door’s handle.

“I didn’t hit her, did I?” asked the driver. “She’s okay, right?”

“Who?” asked Shinji.

“The girl in the street! You didn’t see her? Her eyes—her bright red eyes…”

Ayanami…you saved me again.

Tumbling from his seat, the driver stumbled and rolled on the ground. Already, sirens blared in the distance.

But from what?
Once again, he felt a tug in his gut, a small compulsion. He glanced to the sky, to the innumerable stars that populate the cosmos, each one a window to the past as light travels as fast as the laws of physics allow, telling the tales of planets and systems that time might already have snuffed out.

And for an instant, Shinji felt that those points of light were eyes instead, all fixed upon him, making him shrink under their withering gazes. Their thoughts bored into him, but not in silent words. Instead, their intentions came to Shinji in a form he could more easily understand.

POP!

He reached blindly for the ground, searching yet unwilling to look, and found warm, freely-flowing liquid that seeped into the earth.

CRUNCH! On the street, two cars collided head-on, flinging fragments of broken windshield glass over the road, but instead of broken, wounded bodies in the cabins, orange-red fluid gushed from otherwise empty seats. A mother and her daughter waiting at the street corner clung tightly, knowing what was to come again, and they too exploded, evaporating in a shower of LCL.

At last, Shinji looked to the ground beneath him, confirming his fears. The driver had gone first, and in the expanding puddle of LCL he’d left behind, Shinji glimpsed a reflection, the shape of a face.

A pasty white head with a purple mask. Five slits allowed it to see, with two on its right and three on its left, both sets lined up in columns. Its eyes were lazy and unfocused—mere dots that seemed to point in several different directions. Then, Shinji leaned closer, provoking a reaction. The eyes snapped forward and narrowed, subjecting Shinji to their collective, incomprehensible gaze. The more he tried to look away, the more he sat transfixed, even as the surroundings grew louder and chaotic, as the driver’s LCL puddle touched his knees, bathing them in warmth, as—

“Sir? Sir!”

There was a cold, shocking touch on his shoulder, and Shinji collapsed to the earth. His stomach rolled and churned, and his mouth sprayed bits of chewed up noodles and acid on a dark blue uniform.

The uniform of a paramedic.

“Are you all right, sir?” The paramedic withdrew his latex-gloved hand, fetching a flashlight from his shirt pocket. “Were you in the truck, sir? Are you hurt?”

Shinji wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He looked back to the truck, where another paramedic was tending to the wounded truck driver—the dazed, but entirely intact truck driver. “No, no, I’m all right,” said Shinji. “I went to help him, and…I was overcome.”

“That’s understandable, sir. Please, step aside.”

The technician joined his partner in treating the driver, and Shinji backed away without a word. There was nothing he had to say to them—no one else would understand what’d happened. The paramedics would dismiss the driver’s vision of Rei as a hallucination, a figment of his imagination that never really existed, but it wasn’t so. Rei had saved Shinji. She’d saved him from the thing that spoke with a soundless voice, that pulled at his heart when he was too careless to resist.

It was the giant with five eyes—not Lilith, not Adam, but one of their kin, and its vision had told Shinji all he needed to know. It and its brethren were coming to Earth to reduce human beings to LCL once again. For the simple minds of mere mortals, these creatures could not be bargained with, confronted, or understood.
Nevertheless, Shinji resolved to fight them, for that was a purpose in life that would have meaning, and maybe, just maybe, it would keep him alive.

That was the day the First Ones made their intentions known to humanity.

It was also the day that man chose to resist.
About ten minutes after the paramedics came, police arrived to investigate the accident. They too recognized Shinji right away, and thanks to that, they instantly believed his story about a six-wheeled truck that simply veered off the road for no apparent reason. Shinji had been standing right there. If he didn’t see her, how could she have been there at all?

Few people would believe him on the merits anyway. People in the Cult would take it as truth without questioning it. Skeptics would dismiss it as superstition and lunacy. Neither side could appreciate the true significance of the deed. Rei had saved Shinji from something strange and frightening, not just a quick death by the bumper of a speeding truck. Without a doubt, the giant with five eyes had had a hand in it, in trying to lure Shinji to the road where he could be slain.

And what was he to do about it? The night air was muggy; the stars were bright. When that mind no longer invaded his thoughts, he knew no way of finding it to confirm what he’d felt, what he’d seen. Hopefully Asuka would believe him, if she could take the time to step away from her microscope.

Beyond that, all Shinji could think to do was board the train for home and watch the lights go by in the window. They flew past rhythmically, casting a glow on the front edge, penetrating the cabin with a narrow beam, and fading away. Like a child listening to his mother’s lullaby, Shinji leaned back in his seat, and exhaustion overcame him.

Really, he had no other way to oppose them otherwise.

A sound stirred him—a warbling, distorted bell. Shinji’s eyes opened, and there was light. A burning yellow light poured through the windows of the traincar, so bright and blinding that Shinji could make out nothing through the glass, save for that uniform glow. The train was not as Shinji remembered it, either. Instead of rows of seats facing forward, the bench he sat on put him sideways to the train’s length, with the great blinding glow through the windows right in his face. The floors were wooden, made of planks, with the edges between pieces visible.

And opposite him, on the other bench, sat a girl with golden locks and bright green eyes.

“Masuyo-san?” he said. “It’s you, isn’t it? The cultist girl from the train yesterday?”

She eyed him starkly, her gaze intense, not at all like the polite, sweet girl Shinji had met. Her clothes were different, too. She wore something suitable for winter—long white pants with tan boots, a matching jacket made of fuzzy cloth with the oversized black buttons lined up in columns—two on her right, three on her left.

“Why are you alive?” she asked. “Do you know? Do you know why you exist?”

Shinji looked away, finding her stare uncomfortable. “I’m here because I choose to be. That’s all.”

“No, Shinji. Your existence was preordained.”

Frowning, Shinji glanced back at her quizzically, but what he saw across the traincar gave him pause. The cultist Masuyo’s clothes had changed. She wore a purple skirt with white kneesocks. Her blouse was white, too, and short-sleeved, but where the buttons on her jacket had been, there were purple, horizontal diamonds instead, and in the same pattern: two on her right, three on her left, in
“You were created, and in being created, Lilith fulfilled her purpose,” said the cultist Masuyo.

“I told you,” said Shinji, “her name is Ayanami Rei.”

“What is your purpose?” asked Masuyo. “You live, but what do you do with life?”

Shading his eyes from the glare through the window and Masuyo’s gaze, Shinji pondered the question. “I know how, in searching for Ayanami, I was distracting myself before, but I can change that.”

There was a sound of heels clattering on the wooden floor. The cultist Masuyo crossed the traincar and knelt before Shinji. Her eyes were unnaturally wide, and this time, she wore a simple pink dress with green gemstones in the fabric of the top—again, arranged in columns like the diamonds and the buttons before them. Shinji fixated on the pattern, wondering where he’d seen it before.

“You kill one another. You know strife and fear and panic. That is not what we were tasked to do. That is not life. That is misery. It’s the antithesis of life.”

“I’ve never done anything like that!” cried Shinji. “Please, Masuyo-san, you’re too close….”

“You will see. When people are separate, they inevitably turn on each other. That suffering is contrary to life, and life is what you should be given, not suffering,” she said. “That is my sister’s true purpose.”

The cultist Masuyo leaned closer, her lips inching toward Shinji’s, but her eyes remained wide and tense. Pushing against the bench, Shinji turned his head away, but Masuyo took his chin in his hand, forcing him to meet her eyes.

Her five beady eyes as they stared at him through a purple mask.

‘And it is my purpose, too.’

“GAH!”

Shinji snapped awake, panting. His sunglasses clattered on the floor, and he curled into a ball, trembling.

*Stay out!* he thought. *Stay out of my head! My thoughts are mine. My thoughts are mine. My thoughts are mine. My thoughts are mine….*

Feeling no words invading his mind, seeing no visions of alien LCL oceans, Shinji caught his breath and shuddered. He blinked twice, his eyes adjusting to the light. It was the traincar he should’ve been in, one made of metal with dark night outside, but instead of dimmed interior lights to let people sleep, Shinji found the cabin brimming with a halogen glow. From front to back, the traincar was alive with passengers talking or peering out the windows. Few others were even asleep, as he had been.

Shinji followed his fellow passengers’ gazes, spying a set of stationary city lights in the distance. The train had stopped, though for what purpose Shinji could only guess. Unlike the mystery of the five-eyed giant, however, this was one question he could get answers to. Shinji stepped into the aisle, trying to flag down a nearby conductor.
“I’m sorry, young man, but unless you’re headed for the toilet, it would be best if you retook your seat,” said the conductor. “We could be back under way at any moment.”

“I didn’t mean to cause any trouble,” said Shinji. “I was asleep, so I don’t know what’s going on. Why are we stopped?”

“Just a small problem with the track going into the capital,” said the conductor. “Nothing to worry about.”

Shinji frowned. That seemed an awfully brief explanation for a total stoppage of the train. He removed his sweatshirt hood and folded up his sunglasses, shooting the conductor a skeptical glance. “Is that really what’s happened?”

The flash of recognition in the conductor’s eyes told Shinji he really had the man’s attention now, but the conductor had few answers for him. “The truth is I don’t know much more than that story,” said the conductor. “Word is all the lines into Tōkyō-2 are shut down. No one’s going into or out of the city. In fact, we’re just getting ready to reverse the line and head back east. It’s a state of emergency out there, but for what…” The conductor shook his head. “I really can’t say. I’m sure people already know that something’s wrong. I’m just trying to maintain some calm here. Sorry I can’t tell you more.”

An emergency? What could it be? On the way back to his seat, Shinji tried to reason out an answer to that very question. Trains shut down, all travel to the capital restricted—it had to be some kind of a disaster. It couldn’t have been an earthquake. They would’ve felt something, or at the least, it wouldn’t have been kept secret. A terrorist attack or a riot were the first possibilities that came to mind, but Shinji asked around, finding that no one in the traincar had heard such a thing. From a generous fellow passenger, Shinji borrowed a cell phone—a relative rarity in post-Instrumentality world, for the manufacturers of sophisticated electronics had grown scarce or, in some countries, been nationalized to make military hardware. He dialed Asuka’s lab, hoping to hear something from within the city.

“We’re sorry, but the network is currently being utilized for emergency communications only. Please remain calm and try again later.”

How assuring that was—to hear a machine telling him to “remain calm” while he sat totally isolated from the outside world. It was an empty, helpless feeling. Against the speeding truck with its blinding headlights, Shinji had done nothing. He’d hardly been able to hold his ground against the overpowering thoughts of the five-eyed giant. Only Rei’s intervention had saved him, and here again, he was powerless and impotent. For all his lofty stories of having protected the world as an Eva pilot, when he had only his own mind and body, he was insignificant and small.

But when before he might’ve donned the earphones of his SDAT and distanced himself from a world, Shinji dismissed such a notion straightaway. The giant with five eyes could speak to him no matter how he’d try to keep it out. The world outside couldn’t be ignored without consequences, and he refused to sit still, either. Some thing from across the universe had touched his thoughts—his dreams, too. That was no peaceful, introspective vision from that hellish train through his psyche. Only one person had protected him from the giant’s madness, and that was Rei.

That she hadn’t yet appeared in some way—or warned someone of danger—he took as a hopeful sign.

Hope doesn’t answer questions, however. Nor does it put troubled minds at ease indefinitely. As the
train reversed its course, the lights dimmed to comfortable nighttime levels. Anxious passengers briefly occupied the aisle, and in groups of two, the seats turned themselves around to face the new direction of travel. Shinji sat by the window once more and leaned back, hoping to rest and sleep in silence, but his eyes stubbornly remained open, looking out to the city lights in the dark. Though they grew smaller and more distant with each passing second, Shinji watched them anyway. They were something he could understand.

Unlike the eyes in the dark that watched him. Though no visions came to him, the weight of invisible stares was like an extra force pressing him to his seat, and whether it was real or imagined Shinji couldn’t say. Still, he listened closely to his fellow passengers, and it seemed that they too felt that weight. Worse yet, they didn’t know what it was or why they should be afraid. Rumors abounded through the traincar about the possible reasons for this evacuation. Some feared it was another nuclear bomb and recounted the chaos after Old Tōkyō had been destroyed. Others thought it to be a new Angel attack, but where such an Angel might come from or why was a mystery to them.

The why would be easy, thought Shinji, shuddering. You don’t understand; you can’t understand. There’s something out there, watching me, watching all of us perhaps. Be thankful it’s so far out there, though. Even the closest star is an impossible distance away.

True enough, that was the nature of the universe, of the galaxy—four years it would take as the photon flies to reach Proxima Centauri, our Sun’s closest neighbor, and in just the Milky Way, over a hundred billion stars lay further than that. With the tremendous energy required to reach even a significant fraction of the speed of light, it would take decades, centuries, or even millennia just to get from one star to the next. That was basic physics.

Then again, what “basic physics” underpinned AT fields or synthetic humanoid fighting machines that should’ve collapsed under their own weight before they could take even a step? How could a five-eyed giant from outer space speak to him across the vast distances of the cosmos? Could he dismiss all that as undiscovered science he just didn’t understand? Perhaps, but as Shinji gazed through the window at the lights and the stars, looking for solace, there was one thing he knew absolutely:

Stars on the horizon weren’t supposed to visibly move.

Shinji wasn’t the only one who noticed it. A number of people came across the aisle to see bright specks of light rise above the earth. At first, Shinji thought they were planes, but they were too bright and too numerous. Dozens of white dots hurtled toward the heavens, making for a surreal, slow-motion show.

“Are those rockets?” a man wondered aloud.

“Not just rockets,” said another. “ICBMs—intercontinental ballistic missiles. If we aren’t at war with someone, we will be very, very soon.”

“With who?” asked a woman. “China? Russia? What could’ve happened in the time we’ve been on this train to justify that?”

“Wars start in seconds,” was the answer she got. “Why else would they be evacuating the capital if they didn’t think it was about to be blown up?”

“If we were the target of a first strike, we wouldn’t even know it before the city had been vaporized. A missile submarine off the coast would launch a nuke on a depressed trajectory and totally evade detection, obliterating the capital in minutes.”
“Wow, we have a real military geek in the house!”

Shinji tuned out this speculative chatter, drawing closer to the window to get a better look. The missiles streaked through the sky with surprising speed against the fixed star background. Shinji counted twenty missiles in the first wave before they became impossible to count, and dozens more launched in a second batch as well. They tracked upward, and Shinji slumped lower and lower in his seat to watch them until he saw, at the very top edge of the window, a solitary shooting star drifting across the sky. The first wave of launched missiles converged on this object, making a trail from the earth to the stars until the individual missiles could no longer be distinguished from each other.

This isn’t a nuclear war, or if it is, it’s not working like anything I’ve ever heard about. They’re not attacking something on the ground. It’s that shooting star they’re trying to—

A flash! Brilliant and awe-inspiring, it lit up a swath of the night sky above and cast shadows from the faces of frightened passengers.

“Look away!” cried a man. “Look away, damn you! Do you want that kind of light searing your retinas? Get back from the window!”

Some of the passengers slammed the sunshades down in a panic, but Shinji was too curious for that. He did move over a seat, coming adjacent to the aisle, but he left the shade up and watched the countryside through the corner of his eye. Light pulsed through the window, for each distinct brightening of the atmospheric glow meant another missile had exploded silently, too far into space for Shinji and his fellow passengers to hear. Only after a couple minutes did the train feel anything at all—a faint rattling, with dust and other light debris spraying the windows.

But what was more, when the orange-red glow of the N2 missiles dissipated, the lone shooting star in the sky shone brighter than ever before.

“What could’ve survived that?” said one passenger. “A comet? An asteroid?”

“They threw three dozen ICBMs at that thing, and it did nothing,” said another. “A pathetic last gasp for humanity.”

“Mother,” a little girl began, “if the big rock is coming for us, why can’t we call Willis-san again like in the movie?”

“Because he’s an actor and Cape Canaveral is underwater,” said the second passenger. “It has been ever since 2000.”

Not to mention a warhead of any kind—nuclear or not—was woefully insignificant against a sizeable meteor. Even a hundred or a thousand would never be enough to break something even a mile wide apart, but to blast away a small proportion of its mass, to alter its course by even a fraction of a degree…

Well, an asteroid on a path for Earth was something Shinji could understand as a reason for this sudden state of emergency. Detecting one on its way to impact had to be difficult still, and maybe it was just a lucky break that they found it before it could hit, when they could do something to try to change their fate.

Their fate to sit in one place and wait as something from the depths of space came out to touch them, to merge with the earth irrevocably.

And with that thought, a pit formed in Shinji’s stomach. Logically, one would think this happening a mere coincidence. He could even question whether something from the depths of the cosmos had
touched his mind at all, for he had no proof of it, only belief, but that belief was as solid as the meteor his fellow passengers feared might come.

But what frightened Shinji most was the thought, however faint in the back of his mind, that the tiny dot high above them wasn’t an asteroid or a comet or anything so natural, so innocent. The thing that was coming for Earth could’ve been something artificial instead, something painted from top to bottom with the design of the five-eyed giant’s purple mask.

Yet with that fear came determination and resolve, for Shinji refused to sit in that train car and let something so dangerous come without knowing what he could do to prepare for it. He bolted from his seat, cut through the aisle to the lavatory at the front of the car, and shut himself inside. The space was narrow and smelly, but he needed the privacy—the chance to look in the mirror and speak his mind, for every time he’d been in mortal danger, someone had watched over him, and he hoped she was attentive enough to hear.

“Ayanami, I know you’re listening,” he began. “I want to talk to you. First, some alien that looks like you tries to speak to me, tries to kill me, and now I’m on a train going nowhere, with Asuka unreachable, a meteor or something coming, and no one knows what’s going on. They’re not connected, are they? Tell me they aren’t.”

A fly buzzed about the room, landing on Shinji’s arm. It rubbed its front legs together and crawled toward his shoulder, and with a frustrated sigh, Shinji swatted at it, slapping only his own flesh instead. The buzzing was incessant, but he went on, looking straight ahead, into the mirror over the sink.

“You know I’ve been looking for you, right? I mean, I know I thought for a while it was a pointless search, that it was keeping me from doing something better for myself, but…” He let out a breath, puzzled, and scratched the back of his head. “I get along better with Asuka now. You must already know that.

You haven’t been watching for that, have you?”

Buzzing. Somehow, that incessant noise was worse than total silence. It seemed Rei wasn’t at his beck and call. He couldn’t summon her to allay his fears, not just by asking her to appear at least. She was leaving him alone to fight the five-eyed giant, to try to keep its thoughts out of his head. Though she’d saved him and he was at peace for the moment, nothing she’d done had blocked out the perverse vision of the cultist girl in his dreams.

With that in mind, an idea came to Shinji. He ran a hand through his pants pocket, finding a long, slender object with a thin shaft. He concealed it in his closed fist and raised the item to his neck, watching himself in the mirror. “Ayanami,” he said coldly, “I have a needle in my hand here, so please, listen. I won’t live with things talking to me in my head, sending me visions that make me sick. I need to know that’s not going to happen again. I need to be sure, or I’ll end it all now. Do you hear me?”

Buzzing.

“I’ll do it!” he cried. “I didn’t think I’d be betrayed this soon, but if this is all you can do for me, it’s not enough! I’ll stab myself in the neck and bleed out, Ayanami. Is that what you want to see? I’ll die!”

Buzzing. The noise of the fly’s wings sapped his resolve, his will. Frustrated, he tossed aside the object in his hand—a cotton-tipped swab—and hung his head. It was a pathetic ploy on his part, one Rei surely had seen through and disapproved of. She might not have been all-powerful like the cultists believed. Maybe she wasn’t even omnipresent, either, but she surely had an eye on him.
Whatever supernatural sight she had would’ve easily shown her that he’d never had a needle in his hand at all.

And so, Shinji was alone to face whatever was coming from the sky, yet that wasn’t even his primary concern. Instead, he looked to the mirror once more, hoping his voice would be heard.

“You know, over these past two years, I’ve had a lot of time to think about what’s changed. I don’t know if Father’s could come back—or even if he would. He did terrible things to me. He treated me like a thing that was outside himself, like something he didn’t know how to deal with except through neglect, but I still would like the chance to make up with him. We never really had a chance. Misato-san came back, thankfully, though she’s distant to me, and I don’t really understand what she does. Kaji-san’s gone. Ritsuko-san too. Asuka’s happy, I think, but I’d like to see her more. I worry that she works so much because she doesn’t know what else to do. As for me, I think I’ve learned to stand on my own a little more, but I could be wrong about that.” He shrugged. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that all of us have changed—me, Asuka, her mother. You have too, haven’t you? I’m not talking about whatever you became. Even when you died and came back, I never thought you would abandon me. I just didn’t know if I could understand…”

He trailed off, watching his own reflection and finding no one looking back but himself.

With a resigned sigh, he undid the lock on the lavatory door, leaving the unused cotton swab behind.

As Shinji left the lavatory, the conductor from before approached him, walking down the aisle. “Ah, pardon me, sir,” he said, “if I could just have a moment.”

Not wanting to have a discussion in front of the other passengers, Shinji hung back by the lavatory door. “Yes?” he answered.

“Please forgive the intrusion, Ikari-san. It’s just there’s growing tension in the cabin. People are worried about what might happen, and as much as I’ve tried to keep everyone calm, it seems like a new voice might be helpful.”

Shinji peered around the man, and from the lavatory at the front of the car, he saw the truth of the conductor’s words. A woman in a nearby row wept endlessly, suffering in silence. A man took his son in his arms and stared out the window as the boy shook. Further down, an old woman babbled incoherently, so hysterical she couldn’t be understood. The conductor was right, of course, but Shinji was no one to be telling these people to stay calm. He was a boy. A sixteen-year-old boy. What weight could his words carry? He told the conductor this, yet the man smiled as if Shinji had misunderstood.

“I don’t know how you can say you’re just a boy, Ikari-san. You’ve stood up and faced things I can hardly imagine. If there’s even just one word you can say to assure the other passengers, I think it would do more than you know.”

Shinji winced. Perhaps it was a mistake to have approached this conductor earlier and shown his face to him, for the man was asking Shinji for something impossible. To go out before a dozens of people and speak? With all those eyes on him? Every last man on Earth knew who he was. He had no protection of anonymity. If he took off his hood and folded up his glasses before them, they would know him right away, and their stares would tell plainly their opinions of him. Some would love him for having made a “courageous” choice. Others would think him a weak-willed fool who should’ve shown bravery instead of cowering and pitying himself. Others still would loathe him. They might wish he were dead. What could he possibly say to inspire such people? How could he go before
them and be judged by them once again?

“I’m sorry,” said Shinji. “I really don’t know if I can do that. I’m no different from anyone else here. I can’t tell people not to be afraid when that’s what I feel, too.”

The conductor nodded. “I understand completely. Well, at least I can take heart knowing I’m not the only one uncomfortable in this situation. You can go back to your seat, Ikari-san. I won’t trouble you any further.”

“Ah, actually, if you don’t mind, please don’t call me by name in front of anyone else. I know it’s a strange thing to ask, but…”

“Not to worry, not to worry,” said the conductor, chuckling. “To me, you’re just another passenger on my train. Be safe, sir. The ride might get a little bumpy ahead.”

With a polite nod, Shinji bade the conductor farewell, and he put on his sunglasses as he hurried back to his seat. Curious about the state of things outside, he peered through the window, but the view had grown distorted. A light shower fell on the train. Droplets accumulated on the windows, warping the light from outside. What once had been a sharp, clear image of the city in the distance became smeared and clouded. The rain picked up quickly, and soon enough, the downpour was as good as the sunshades for blocking out light.

In fact, with his sunglasses on, Shinji had trouble seeing into the night at all. Were it only for that, he wouldn’t have minded the rain. Better not to know what was going on outside if he could do nothing about it, but a nearby passenger’s alarmed cry roused him from his listless stupor.

“The hell?” said a man. “It’s raining blood!”

Shinji yanked off his sunglasses, and he saw it, too. The passengers in the row ahead of him had taken a flashlight to the window, and with the bright yellow beam shining into the darkness, the crimson tint of the liquid outside was unmistakable. It wasn’t blood. LCL, yes. In that way, the fluid was nothing foreign to them—except for one tiny problem.

LCL didn’t evaporate. It stayed in the sea indefinitely, never tainting the clouds. It couldn’t rain LCL. It never had and never would.

And everyone above the age of five in that traincar knew it, too.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please, don’t be alarmed.” The conductor scampered to the front of the car, raising both hands in an effort to keep the passengers at ease. “Stay in your seats. I’m sure this strange rainstorm will pass quickly.”

“‘Pass quickly’ my ass!” cried a man. “This is eight levels of impossible! If I’d known madness like this would happen after coming back, I’d have stayed in the ocean! We’re like ants in some giant’s playground, and I for one am tired of being sprayed with a cosmic garden hose just to see how fast I scurry to put the mound back together! No way, man! Game over! Stop this train; I’m getting off. Fourth Impact is coming, and I’m not staying to take it at two hundred kilometers per hour! Stop the train!”

“You think we’re going to be safer stopping in this mess?” said a woman. “Even if we put on the brakes, we’re going to be trapped here. I’m not walking out in that, not with my daughter!”

A half-dozen passengers rose from their seats, some arguing the woman’s point, others continuing her line of thinking and begging for reason, for sanity. The dispute overflowed into the aisle. Calm voices rose to shouts. A man ripped the fire extinguisher from the wall, yelling, “Go for the
emergency brake!"

The conductor blew at a high-pitched whistle, but the noise hardly slowed the commotion. Three men bowled over the conductor and crowded around the locked yellow box with the emergency brake lever.

“Wait!” Shinji sprang from his seat, but the aisle was awash with bodies. “Please, just wait a second! Let’s think about this!”

The base of the fire extinguisher bashed against the padlock, but the metal held. The passenger raised the pressure vessel once more, preparing to deliver a shattering blow to the lock, and—

SCREECH!

Shinji’s body lurched forward, pressing him against the back of the seat in the next row. From the overhead bins, luggage shifted and spilled out, bombarding the passengers like an avalanche. The brakes made an unholy cry, something between a scratch and a squeal, but the initial jolt quickly subsided, and the train glided to a halt.

At last, Shinji relaxed. His fingernails had dug into the soft material of the seat in front of him, and he breathed heavily, coming off a jolt of adrenaline. He stepped into the aisle, over a ripped suitcase and its questionable contents of Hawaiian shirts. At the front of the traincar, the angry mob’s inertia had carried them forward even as the train beneath them slowed to a halt. A tangled mass of humanity crowded the aisle and the small open space around the emergency brake box—a casing of thin metal painted in yellow that was still very much intact.

“I don’t understand,” said a man. “We didn’t break it open, so why…?”

Shinji knew. He felt it in his gut, along with the sensitive bruise there.

_We panicked, and so did the people in the other cars. Someone else must’ve pulled the brake instead. They beat us to it._

And it had done them precious little good. So they were stopped, sitting on the tracks. That didn’t shield them from the impossible rain. If anything, the downpour had strengthened—LCL streamed down the windows in a thick film, syrupy like molasses. So much LCL had already fallen that Shinji had to wonder: it took the equivalent of billions of people to tint the oceans red with LCL, so how many more would be needed to make this viscous layer on the outside of the traincar?

His eyes bulged slightly, and he went over that last thought again.

_How many more…people?_

Shinji put a hand to his head, feeling dizzy. How could he be realizing it only then? It was obvious! It made too much sense. The giant with five eyes had shown him its ideal world, right? In the vision he’d received by the crashed truck, all people turned back to LCL. If that giant had spawned life the same way Lilith had—the same way Rei had—then it must’ve had children, too.

Then the shooting star in the sky was a spaceship? A vessel that oozed with the stuff of life and rained that alien LCL over Earth? If all that were true, then Shinji could breathe easy. How much harm could some LCL do? Sure, it would contaminate the environment and disrupt the normal cycles of life for a few days, but there was one advantage of living in a world with red oceans: mankind had learned quickly how to clean up and filter LCL. The worst Shinji could imagine was that LCL making it to the sea and merging with the people still in water there. How bad could that be?
“Hey, do you see this? The power in the next car went out.”

That, Shinji believed, was the universe answering him: it could be very, very bad. Pushing his way through the aisle, Shinji made his way to the front of the car, struggling to see through the small square window on the door to the next traincar. Sheltered between the two boxy metal cars, the window there was clearer than the sides’. Orange lights illuminated the back of the next car, but the view through their window was dark.

“Strange.” The conductor took position at one side of the door, taking a flashlight to the window. “I can’t think of a reason we’d still have power while they don’t.”

“Maybe they decided the world was ending and they should have a dance party in the dark?” said a man.

Crunch. The traincar out the window rattled on the tracks.

“That doesn’t sound like a dance party,” said Shinji.

The growing crowd by the exit eyed Shinji incredulously for a moment, as if they couldn’t believe just who’d spoken in their midst, and it was only for that silence that they could hear something else over the incessant downpour of LCL rain:

Screaming.

There was a rumbling and a series of dull bangs against the metal of the other car’s walls, but the screaming was the most noticeable sound. It was muffled, of course. The distance, the glass, and the air all damped the cries, making them feel far away. The dark traincar rocked back and forth, but as the seconds passed, the movements settled, and the screams died out.

“What on earth was that?” said a passenger—a man in his thirties with a well-trimmed beard.

_The way things have been going today, thought Shinji, I don’t want to know._

WHAM! An object careened through the darkness, impacting the door to the outside. The crowd of passengers surged backward and spilled into the aisle like a tide flowing out.

“What was that, Mother?” asked the little girl in the car. “What was that thing outside?”

“That’s not a thing!” The conductor shined his flashlight through the window, revealing the face of a young woman in the darkness.

“She banged on the window with her fist desperately, glancing over her shoulder. “Please, help me! Let me in!” Droplets of LCL ran down her face, but the color was weak and translucent, for the red liquid mixed with salt and water. She sobbed inconsolably, her breathing short, quick, and panicked, and she collapsed against the outside of the door in a daze.

“Miss, you need to step back!” The conductor jiggled the door handle, trying to push on the exit. “The door only opens outward, miss! Please, move back!”

“No, no! Don’t tell me to go away, please! I can’t go back in there! They came inside; they’ve killed almost everyone!”


She shook her head frantically. “No, no, you don’t understand! They came through the windows and
cut open the ceiling! They don’t have hands, you see? They don’t have hands….”

The passengers by the door looked to one another. “‘They don’t have hands’?” said a woman. “What does that mean?”

The conductor put his hand back on the handle and leaned into the door with his shoulder, but the man with the trimmed beard grabbed the handle, too.

“Hold on,” he said. “If we let that girl inside, we’re just inviting those things or whatever they are to come after us, too! Is that really what you want?”

Gripping his flashlight, the conductor stared back at the bearded man, shooting him an icy gaze. “My duty is to the safety and wellbeing of passengers on this train, sir.”

“Your duty is to us, the people still alive in this car! How do we even know she’s who and what she says she is? You’d really risk all of us for that one beat-up woman?”

“Every time!” cried the conductor, brandishing the flashlight as a baton. “Step aside, sir. Step aside, now!”

The eyes of the bearded man flashed; he seized the flashlight handle and grappled with the conductor for the weapon. A group of passengers joined the fray, some coming to the conductor’s aid, others pulling on the exit door to keep it shut even as the girl on the other side clamored for them to open it.

“Hurry!” she begged them. “I can feel them coming; it’s like they’re tickling the back of my neck. Please, let me in! Let me in, let me in, let me—”

Ka-PANG! The door buckled inward, and a stained, cream-colored tentacle speared through the middle. Suction cups on stalks covered the appendage, standing up like hair and then flattening out in waves. At the end, five of these suction-cupped stalks came together like fingers, radially arranged around the tip. Just beyond the tentacle’s grasp, hexagons shimmered in air, like a shell or shield. Their colors ran the gamut of the visible spectrum and shifted quickly, without apparent pattern or rhythm.

An AT field?

The tentacle slithered back through the gap in the door, taking with it red streaks of LCL, and the passengers and the conductor backed down the aisle just as cautiously.

“Mama.” The little girl in the traincar whispered in a deathly quiet voice. “Where did the lady outside go?”

Against his better judgment, Shinji crept forward, weaving through the other passengers. He peered around them, trying to catch a glimpse of the shattered door.

“Boy, what are you doing? Are you mad?”

Perhaps he was, but something in the back of his mind nagged at him. The girl outside the door hadn’t made a sound; maybe she’d died instantly, but Shinji didn’t think so. There was hardly any blood on the white tentacle—not that it was easy to tell blood apart from LCL. Still, Shinji looked out the window, finding creamy white mass of suction cups and stalks, but the woman who should’ve been out there, speared on the outside of the door, was nowhere to be found.

Not an AT field. An AT field would’ve pulverized her, but she’s just gone.
Gone, so that the only thing coming in from under the door was a seeping puddle of LCL.

But an anti-AT field—that would take us back to LCL, back to the sea.

And they wouldn’t stop with just one traincar on a rural railway. All these people—Shinji included—were just ripe for popping.

SMASH! Windows shattered; sheets of metal ripped and tore like wrapping paper. The passengers shielded their heads with their arms in fear of falling debris, but all that fell through the gaps in the roof was the LCL rain. In flickering light, pools of LCL formed on the floor, and from those, white tentacled beasts grew. They were shaped like men, but suction cups covered their entire bodies, save for masks that obscured their heads. The masks were purple and bony, and while they had slits only for two eyes, three more had been etched on as decoration. Their legs terminated in hoof-like structures, circular in nature instead of like feet.

They wielded no weapons. They didn’t need to. Anti-AT fields shimmered around their “fingertips.”

That’s when the last lights went out and the screaming began.

The sound of people bursting, losing all cohesion and reverting back to LCL, was something no man could forget. Try as he might, Shinji couldn’t shut that sound out. The traincar disintegrated around him in rainbow-colored flashes, and on top of the impossible rain, LCL splattered over his face. A flashlight rolled along the floor, slippery with LCL, but the beam was the only light in the rain and darkness, so Shinji picked it up and left the switch in place.

And made himself a target for the creatures; a bright white flashlight was a conspicuous signal of his existence, but that was all right with him. The feelings of dread and panic, the surge of adrenaline in his veins—they were all familiar. Though over two years had passed since he’d piloted Eva, the sensation of fighting impossible monsters came back easily, and with it, Shinji found something deep inside him. Some might’ve thought it courage, but he knew that wasn’t the right word. When an animal is cornered, facing predators on all sides, its ferocity isn’t a calculated, conscious expression of its will. Rather, it fights because its reached an inviolable limit. That was all Shinji knew—to fight because the only other possibility he thought left was to die.

The others in the traincar knew it, too.

“Come, Matsuri!” A woman and her daughter fled down the remainder of the traincar. The mother shoved a man in her way aside, putting him squarely in the path of the creatures. When a tentacle ran him through and dissolved his body from the inside out, she hardly looked back.

Shinji couldn’t be that ruthless, though. He couldn’t be that cruel, and with his fragile, squishy human body, what could he do against soul-crushing aliens from another world?

He could find a weapon. He scanned the floor with the flashlight, and with luck, he found a rusted crowbar. He thought back, back to the times he’d sat in an entry plug and allowed himself to lose control. Whether it was the soul within the Eva—his mother’s heart—that give him the strength or something in his own psyche he couldn’t say, but he’d done great damage before. He just had to discover it within him to bring that out.

Like the battle with the Fourteenth Angel, the one called Zeruel, when all power left Eva-01 and Shinji pleaded helplessly for it to return to life, even as the Angel’s tape-like appendages severed the Eva’s arm…

Shinji gripped the crowbar and left the flashlight on the ground. He approached one of the creatures
from behind, and with both hands, he swung the crowbar mightily at the creature’s skull.

CLANG! The metal vibrated; the creature staggered, dazed, and this time, Shinji turned the crowbar around, so that the point of the end would form a claw.

Shink. The crowbar ripped at the creature’s flesh, and with every slice, Shinji’s attacks hastened. Grunting, he attacked his foe in a frenzy, casting aside pieces of suction-cupped skin like layers from an onion. Succumbing to Shinji’s fury, the creature hunched over, gushing blood from its back, and melted into a puddle of LCL.

Panting, Shinji dropped the crowbar, letting it clang on the floor. He wiped bits of the alien’s white skin from his face and stepped back. The rush of hormones ebbed off, if only for a moment, while he came to terms with what he’d done.

That’s one, he thought. I killed one out of how many?

The puddle before him bubbled and frothed. The alien creature reformed itself from the LCL it’d become, and this time, it faced Shinji, spreading its suction-cup fingers like a pair of claws.

Shinji looked about. He listened. He gulped. The traincar was quiet. Any screams had long since been silenced. The flashlight he’d dropped flickered out, and a leg tentacle crushed it underfoot. He could run, but they’d catch him, wouldn’t they? More of them would form from the otherworldly orange-red rain; with each step they would grow from nothing to hack and slash at his heels.

So he looked upon his would-be attacker. He looked it in the eyes and stood his ground. Dissolving into LCL—he’d done that before and come back. He wouldn’t fear that again.

‘No, Ikari-kun. You mustn’t.’

Shinji snapped to attention. “Ayanami?”

Through the broken frame of the traincar, he spotted the glowing girl—the figure of a schoolgirl in the distance, radiating light against a dark backdrop. Her thoughts came into his mind silently, like words flashing on an empty screen.

‘Run away.’

But where would he go? What would he do? Turning to LCL, at least Rei would come to him again if needed, so why would she—

There was a horrible sloshing sound, the sound of flesh sinking into flesh. He shuddered. A white, alien tentacle speared him through the gut, and he watched it, horrified, as the suction cups on its length twittered about. With his blood leaking out of him, staining his clothes, Shinji realized the truth, the only reason why Rei would warn him so.

The giant with may have wanted to reduce humanity to LCL, but for Shinji, it sought only his death.

The LCL rain turned cold—or was it his skin instead? In the body’s attempt to redirect blood to vital organs, it was only natural…and futile. A haze settled in over his eyes, shrouding out all sights in the distance, but when a glow approached him, he saw clearly. Ayanami Rei stepped before him, facing the creature that’d speared him. She spread her arms, as if to shield Shinji long after he’d taken a mortal wound. The creature cocked its head, raised its remaining arm tentacle, and with shimmering rainbow hexagons, it thrust!

It thrust through Rei’s ephemeral, translucent body, and the last thing Shinji saw was his torso.
turning to goo.

In the sea, Shinji had endured years of reflection and philosophical visions. He’d imagined himself as an angry child kicking over a sand castle shaped in the image of Nerv Headquarters. He’d explored alternate conceptions of reality. In one, he lived as a regular high-school student with the choice between childhood friend Asuka and the transfer student Rei. In another, he existed as a line drawing in an underfunded anime, wondering where the rest of the budget had gone. In another still, he watched as an invisible specter, looking on as the people he knew lived as common office workers. In that world, never touched by Angels, the people he cared about never knew him at all.

But in everything he experienced, the voices of others were never too far. Sometimes, they spoke to him directly—a hazy memory of Asuka looming over him with her skirt hiked up as Rei and Misato looked on came to mind. Other times, they were harder to hear but no less important and prying. Calling them “voices” didn’t do them justice. They were more like impressions or feelings, akin to looking upon a painting with one’s eyes crossed and out of focus: the colors came out well enough, but the fine details like brushstrokes escaped him.

That was what Shinji had become accustomed to in the sea, but all of that had come after the initial panic, after people had come to terms with the stress of being dissolved. What had transpired in that transition period before was something Shinji had seldom wanted to revisit. It wasn’t that it was painful, that the others screamed or demanded that their minds be left to themselves, but they did know how they’d come to be there. They remembered, for example, hiding out behind a broken seat, only to have a sickly white tentacle tear through the fabric and turn their flesh to goo. Or maybe they ran instead, and in the bloody rain, a group of those things caught them and ripped them apart, liquefying their limbs one at a time. So many had had the barriers to their souls abruptly shattered. Shinji couldn’t keep all of their experiences apart. Their voices began to creep into his thoughts—and they weren’t just human voices, either.

The creatures were there, in that LCL puddle, and from their minds came familiar images to Shinji—the view of an endless LCL sea, ruled by the five-eyed giant that hovered over it like a god, seeing that it was good. There was no pleasure in that world; there was no pain, either. In that sea, there was existence and nothing more. People didn’t need to feel or think. They’d stopped being separate beings long ago because the giant’s thoughts had penetrated their minds, too.

‘Ikari-kun…’

It called to them irresistibly, taking the appearance of someone they cared about, too.

‘Ikari-kun…’

Shinji tried to shut it out, but he had no hands to cover his ears, no eyelids to block the his retinas. These impressions came to him directly, like a computer cable linked directly to his brain, and nothing could sever that connection, nothing could block out the silent voice of a giant that called to him, like—

“Ikari-kun.”

It was a beach. Hey lay on his back, on warm sand, and sniffed a salty breeze. Short waves lapped at the shore. The water was blue and foamy. The sun shined from straight overhead. Sand extended as far as he could see in one direction, and seawater occupied the other. The only feature on that beach was the image of a girl, her skin unnaturally pale.
“Ayanami?” he said.

She sat by his feet with her back to him, and strands of her light blue hair fluttered in the wind. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Shinji planted a hand in the sand, trying to sit up, but then he saw himself—and her back—more clearly. Going red in the cheeks, he lay back down, staring straight up at the sky. “I—I’m just glad to see—no, I mean, it’s good to see you. Why should you be sorry?”

“Because I could’ve done more to keep you from this, but I didn’t.”

At that, Shinji had to sit up to watch her, awkward situation or no. As discreetly as he could, he studied her. Though it had been years since he’d looked upon her for longer than a fleeting moment, Rei hadn’t changed at all. The cut of her hair, the shape of her torso—they were both very familiar. Indeed, she was still a fourteen-year-old girl in appearance, and that made their attire all the more uncomfortable for him. For that matter, Rei must’ve had complete control over what she looked like. Her physical body had long since petrified. It stood to reason that she’d choose something familiar, but this…

This was a little too familiar.

“What do you mean?” asked Shinji, glancing back to the sea respectfully.

“I knew she would come for you. I have known for some time.”

‘She’? The giant with five eyes?”

Rei nodded once.

“Who is she? What does she want with us, with me?”

“She is one of my people. She is…” Rei paused for a moment, considering her words. “She is similar to me. You know what she wants with humans.”

“You didn’t answer my other question.”

Her head tilted slightly, and Shinji glimpsed part of her cheek moving. Though hard to tell from behind her, Shinji thought it was a hint of a wry smile. “You’ve changed, Ikari-kun,” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s easy for me to forget that.”

“Why is that? Please, don’t say things that just make me want to ask more questions. Look at me, Ayanami. What’s going on here? What’s going to happen to me? To all of us?”

“I cannot know the answers to those questions, but don’t worry. I will not let you die, Ikari-kun. That outcome is unacceptable to me.”

“But she’s been trying to kill me for months now,” said Shinji. “And all along, you’ve been watching me, but I never knew.”

“I thought if I protected you from her long enough, she would lose interest in you. That was my mistake. I’m sorry.”

“And people told me I say that too much,” Shinji chuckled to himself. “Stop that, Ayanami. None of this is your fault, is it? It’s not like you’re the one trying to reduce us all to goo again. You’ve saved me at least three times now. I know you must be doing everything you can to keep us alive against
that thing, whatever she is. There’s no need to apologize for any of that.”

She froze for a moment, but at last, Rei turned her head, just enough to put one of those stark red eyes on him, but at that moment, her gaze was soft and kind. “Thank you, Ikari-kun,” she said, smiling slightly.

Shinji smiled too. Whatever else she was, Rei wasn’t one to show false warmth. All along, she just had to learn how to express herself, that it was safe and good for her to do so.

And it was safe there, for on that infinite beach, nothing could intrude on them or disrupt the cool sea breeze.

“Ayanami,” he began, “why are we here?”

“This is a sanctuary,” she said. “In this place, you won’t hear anyone else’s thoughts. You can stay as long as you like. I can protect you here.”

“From what? The creatures?”

“Perhaps. My sister must know how I tricked her children into violating your AT field instead of killing you, but she can’t reach you here. You don’t have to go until you’re ready.”

Averting his eyes, Shinji stared at the sand. “But why do we always have to be naked here?”

“There are no boundaries in this place except the distance between us.”

That was hardly a comforting explanation when it was all he could do not to stare. How on earth did he deal with all this rampant sexuality when he was fourteen?

By locking the door to Asuka’s hospital room, he thought with a shudder.

Shinji gazed upward, at the sky that was uniform in its blue hue. Clear skies certainly could put him at ease, and in a sense, it was real—in the sense that anything the mind imagines is real. Sights and sounds and the warmth of the sun on his skin meant nothing to Shinji, though. There was one meaningful thing in that fantasy world, and that was the person, the being, who’d helped create it—Ayanami Rei. But how could he reconcile her presence there when she’d gone to such lengths to avoid him? Even as she watched over him like a guardian angel, she’d refused to let him see her.

“Ayanami, you know what I said earlier, right? In the toilet on the train?”

“I see everything,” she said.

“Everything?”

“I see you, Ikari-kun. I see you as a young boy, crying as the Commander sent you away. I see you standing by a public phone with a postcard from Captain Katsuragi in your hand. I see you on a beach next to her as waves of red water break on the shore, and it is impossible for me to know which Ikari-kun I should be talking to.”

Shinji went cross-eyed. What did any of that even mean? That they were fundamentally different, that they couldn’t possibly see the world the same way?

“My sister and I are in conflict. Where and when we are in conflict, what happens is uncertain. That is why I can’t guarantee your safety outside of this place, Ikari-kun.”

He shook his head. “I’ll have to leave eventually. I can’t stay here forever. I don’t want to. I’m tired
of living in my own private world, Ayanami. I almost started doing that again, too. Can I leave, or is it not safe?"

“It will always be unsafe. She is constantly searching for you.”

Letting out a breath, Shinji took a handful of sand and let it run out between his fingers. “Then it doesn’t matter when I go. One moment is as good as the next. Thank you, Ayanami, for making this safe place, but I don’t need to be here any longer. I’m ready to go back.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“But there is one thing,” he went on. “I don’t know how different we are now, but if you’re always watching, then…I don’t want it to be two more years before we speak to each other again.”

“It isn’t.”

Shinji blinked.

“It won’t be,” Rei corrected herself. “I promise.”

“I’m glad.” Shinji glanced to the sky. “Now, to go back…”

“Think of what you have to go back to, what you can do only when you’re a part of the world.”

Shinji closed his eyes. What did he have to do in that world? Could he act as a harbinger for the coming threat? As the one person who understood why those alien creatures had come and what their purpose was?

No, he was one man—and only just barely that—but he’d stayed alive, kept going. He was the example people looked to, even though he felt he’d done nothing to deserve it, nothing special on his own. All he’d done was make a choice for himself; others decided for themselves whether they wanted to follow.

Others, like Asuka—the girl who took to life like a blazing flame, a flame that might burn too brightly and risk extinguishing it, but a beautiful flame nonetheless. Compared to her, he was a slow-burning brown dwarf to her blue supergiant. She understood scientific concepts that were well beyond him, and he enjoyed learning about them from her. He welcomed the push she constantly provided to do something bigger and better when, left to his own devices, he might choose to hide behind sunglasses and be left alone.

Sure, she might still be in her labcoat, toiling away at a sample while oblivious to the chaos that was unfolding outside her lab, but maybe that day would be the day she took a break. When he told her this story, she’d have to come home and hear it and listen. She would come home, and Shinji would be there to see her.

There was a cracking, breaking sound. Light poked through the sky, as if the bright, sunny day weren’t bright enough. A white glow came through pinholes in the air, like tiny pricks cutting through a dome.

“Goodbye, Ayanami?” he said tentatively.

She shook her head. “Not goodbye. You taught me never to say that. When you go out into the world again, you will always have a friend to watch over you.”

Shinji nodded, shutting his eyes, but the white glow came through his eyelids anyway. The fantasy
world shattered like a hammer taken to precious glasswork, and—

And he sat upright, coughing furiously, drenched in cold LCL from head to toe.

“Colonel!” a voice called out. “He’s over here!”

Shinji spat out residual fluid and rubbed his eyes. A view of the outside world came back to him in a fog. It was daylight—that much he could discern right away, and slowly, the rest of the world came into focus. In the broken hulk of a traincar, Shinji sat in the aisle. The car had broken in two, and in the bend, LCL had collected—the LCL from which he’d returned. Outside, a layer of overcast clouds glowed almost pure white. The brightness stung Shinji’s eyes; he shaded them with his elbow as a woman called to him.

“Shinji-kun!”

*Misato-san?*

Combat boots thudded on the floor. Shinji blinked, and his eyes adjusted to the light. It was a different uniform for Misato—brown and green camouflage gear, with her hair pulled up and stuffed into her helmet. Instead of bright yellow pins, her rank insignia was stitched into her collar with dark thread: two stars side-by-side over two horizontal bars. They showed she was in command, and she had come armed for the task, with a rifle strapped over her shoulder. Men with rifles and combat gear was something Shinji had seen before, but to see Misato that way too was disorienting to say the least.

“What?” she asked him, offering a hand to pick him up. “Is there something on my face?”

He shook his head, beginning to laugh, and thanks to Misato’s helping hand, he climbed to his feet. “It’s just…I don’t think I’ve seen you like this before. Slobby and with only short shorts and a muscle shirt? Yeah. Dressed up in a formal uniform, sure, but you look like you’re ready to overthrow a small country.”

“Japan’s not as big a country as we might think,” said Misato, “and we’re not here to take it over, just to save it. Come on; there’s a helicopter waiting. We need to get you out of here.”

As if on Misato’s cue, Shinji heard the hard *thump-thump-thump* of helicopter rotors. Misato led Shinji outside, and there, he glimpsed the full scale of the devastation: from end to end, the train had been gutted and the cars smashed, ripped, and broken like a giant’s plaything. That was the damage the creatures had wrought, and around the tracks, the soil ran red with LCL as it seeped into the earth. So unsettling it was that Shinji hesitated to step on it.

“Don’t worry; most of those slimy things have headed north,” said Misato. “Their craft came down outside of Chino, and we think that’s where they’ve retreated to, but it’s hard to say. SDF have set up a safety zone around the object, just to be sure. We’ve been trying to rescue as many people as we can, but right now, it’s more important that we get you far away from here.”

As they left the traincar, Shinji saw more of what Misato meant. A squad of SDF members had secured the area and tended to survivors.

“Some people have managed to come back from having their AT fields dissolved,” Misato explained, “but others…” She shook her head. “I think their encounters with the minds of the Zenunim have changed them.”
A woman ran over to Shinji, grabbing his wrists. Disheveled and with her eyes wide, she shook his arms and stared, chanting nonsense. “Awth xmf heiniim hm cpiih lk dot! Awh xmf heiniim hm cpiih lk dot!”

Shinji struggled, but the woman’s grip was like a vice. Only with Misato’s help could he pry the crazed woman off him, and he rubbed his arms afterward, feeling soreness from her grasp.

“Corporal!” cried Misato. “Keep a closer eye on this one, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” An SDF member dashed after the crazed woman, who wandered aimlessly from Shinji, still chanting to herself the unintelligible phrase.

“What does that mean?” asked Shinji.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Misato. “There’ve been a couple like that, all saying the same thing.”

“Not that,” Shinji clarified. “‘Zenunim’—what does that mean?”

“Oh, that’s what we’ve been calling the creatures. We figured we’d name them after their monster mother. The children of Lilith are Lilin, right? So in the same way, the children of Eisheth Zenunim are the Zenunim. Yes, I know; it’s not very creative, but everything else I tried to come up with just didn’t sound appropriate to me.”

Shinji stared. “Eisheth…Zenunim…?”

Misato’s mouth hung open for a moment, and she looked at him with a pitying gaze. “Oh, I’m sorry. I thought Rei told you. That’s who she is—the giant that’s like Rei but isn’t like her. Eisheth Zenunim. That is her name.”

There was a lot for Shinji to take in from that handful of sentences. The giant had a name—well, that was convenient. He was getting tired of thinking of her as only the five-eyed giant, but Misato had seen Rei? And she didn’t tell Shinji? For how long? And why would she keep that secret from him?

“Oh—oh dear,” said Misato, alarmed. “She didn’t tell you anything, did she? Honestly! I’ll have to give that omnipresent alien hybrid a piece of my mind! What is she thinking? I thought she would tell you everything that’s happened before you came back.” She sighed, shaking her head. “All right, listen, Shinji-kun. I don’t know what you must be feeling right now, but I promise you we didn’t keep you out of this because we didn’t trust you. We absolutely do, but knowing that Eisheth was targeting you, we hoped that if you didn’t know what Rei and I were planning, the five-eyed monstrosity would give up on trying to kill you and prioritize more important things. We thought ignorance would be your best protection—and Rei made sure to watch you constantly because of it—but despite our best efforts, Eisheth must see you as some kind of symbol. You represent everything she’s trying to work against.”

To protect him—Rei and Misato had tried to protect him the only way they knew how. Perhaps that explained why Misato had always been secretive with her work, but that didn’t tell him why Rei had felt the need to watch him yet never show her face. No, there was something else there. What had she said? Something about not knowing which of him to talk to at any given time? The complexities of that made his head swim. He’d have to ask Rei about it later. She’d promised to see him, after all, so he went on faith that that would come sooner rather than later.

Shinji turned his attention back to Misato. “So, you’ve been working with Ayanami to fight the giant?”

“That’s right. All this—everything you see here—is what I’ve been doing since I came back. Rei
came to me; she knew that Eisheth would come and how long we’d have to prepare. My post with the prime minister’s office, my position with the SDF—it’s all for that. The human race’s ability to determine its own future is at stake. That’s why we need to get you out of here. I know some people resent you for the choice you made, but everyone else who has a lick of sense about them respects you and looks up to you, too.”

Shinji chuckled to himself. “You don’t have to convince me to save my own life. I think I’ve done enough to show I’ve grown past wondering if I should live.”

Misato smiled, at last showing a little relief. “So you have.”

The SDF helicopter—a massive, lumbering beast with two horizontal rotors, one near the front, the other at the back—landed about a hundred meters from the train tracks, and Shinji boarded as just one of a dozen refugees looking for sanctuary and relief. There was the addled woman from before; she sat alone, across from Shinji, chanting the same phrase or sentence over and over, and though the noise of the chopper’s engines was deafening, the roar couldn’t quite drown the words out.

“If she’s going to just jabber in some alien language, why did she bother coming back?” wondered a man, another survivor who sat beside Shinji. “Maybe she’s not a person at all. Maybe she’s one of those things come back in human form, just here to mess with us.”

“I don’t think they can do that,” said Shinji, shouting over the rotors.

The man stared at him, a glimmer of recognition in his eye. “I guess you’d be one to know, if anyone, eh? Or does strangeness just follow you?”

“At this point, I’d say it’s a little of both.”

“Must be a wonderful curse.” The man looked to his right, where a young boy sat under his arm. Though the child had earmuffs on for hearing protection, he pressed his hands over the cups, crying.

“Is that your son?” asked Shinji.

“Yes. We were on our way back from a job on the coast. I’m a carpenter; I was hired to do some repairs on a train platform. They needed a dozen of us to fix the damage from a group of rowdy cultists.”

“You took your son with you?”

“His mother stayed in the ocean; I can’t afford to leave him with a stranger. People are crazy these days. I don’t let him out of my sight.” The carpenter sighed. “I didn’t, anyway, until last night.”

Shinji winced. “The creatures came for you.”

“Right. We tried to hide. I took him to the toilet and told him to keep quiet, even as other people in the car were practically beating down the door. The creatures didn’t come after us that way, though. They ripped right through the skin of the car. I put Matsuo down and just threw everything I could at that beast. I ripped the toilet off the floor with my own bare hands; can you believe that? But one minute, Matsuo was beside me, and the next, he’d run off through the car. I tried to look for him, but I didn’t dare call out. Those things were everywhere. I couldn’t imagine that he’d survived without being liquefied. I ran outside instead, and I hid under the train. I didn’t find him again until morning, when one of the SDF discovered him in a corner, wedged behind a seat. I don’t know how he got there unharmed. There wasn’t a spot of LCL on him! But he was covering his ears then, too. The earmuffs don’t make a difference. He’s not trying to keep the helicopter noise out.”
The little boy Matsuo curled up by his father, his hands still clasped over the earmuffs. He seemed to shrink before Shinji, and he hid his face in the strands of his brown, bowl-cut hair.

“At least we stayed alive,” said the carpenter, squeezing his son’s shoulder. “We’re not like that woman over there, babbling something incomprehensible, but…”

“But what, sir?” asked Shinji.

The carpenter shook his head. “I just feel like I let my son down. I should’ve gone out and tried to find him, whatever the risk. I’ll never know what he saw last night, what I could’ve shielded him from, but I won’t make that mistake again.” He pinched the boy’s cheek. “That’s a promise, my son.”

The boy stared into space, mute and unresponsive, and the carpenter sighed, patting the boy’s head.

That was just one story, one of many Shinji heard from survivors on the ride back to Tōkyō-2, and their tales convinced him that he had to know more. He couldn’t leave the details to someone like Misato, apt and capable though she may have been. He had a personal stake in what was happening —after all, the children of Eisheth had come to kill him, whatever else they intended toward the rest of humanity.

But what could he do? What more could he do than he’d already done? He’d resisted the silent thoughts that had invaded his mind, trying to get him killed. He’d withstood the creatures’ attempt to impale him, as painful and traumatic as it had been. He still felt uneasy to his stomach, and when an SDF member offered him a hard nutritional bar, Shinji politely declined. As much as he could trust that all his insides were back, he didn’t feel well enough to test that notion.

Regardless, Shinji had managed to escape with his life, but that was a far cry from what Misato had done. She had the resources of the Self Defense Force at her disposal, and she was using them to find survivors and organize the relief effort. She was in charge—the colonel with a radio headset, rattling off orders. It was her natural element, and in that helicopter, surrounded by armed SDF members, pilots, and survivors, Shinji was entirely in Misato’s care.

Still, he felt safer, having her near. Surely, Misato wouldn’t allow him or any of the other survivors to come to harm. They’d fly back to the capital, and then all this business about aliens and pasty white giants could be sorted out. They were safe, for the children of Eisheth couldn’t possibly reach them there, hundreds of meters off the ground.

“Awth xmf heiniim hm cpiih lk dot!” The mad woman from before reached across the aisle of the cargo hold, snatching up Shinji’s wrist. “Awth xmf heiniim hm cpiih lk dot!”

“Please, let go of me!” cried Shinji, trying to pull his arm away. “I don’t know what that means!”

The woman looked pointedly down the aisle, and an icy chill went through the hold. Shinji turned his head slowly, peering from the corner of his eye. He himself saw nothing, but the mad woman stared at the rear of the craft, and her incomprehensible rambling turned to a shaky hiss.

“Her five eyes are watching you—the eyes of Eisheth Zenunim! She sees through your lies. She knows what you desire in your heart, and she offers peace and absolution to anyone who obeys her command.”

“What command?” asked Shinji.

The mad woman curled her fingers, and the nails dug into Shinji’s skin.
“To kill you,” she said.

Shinji’s head pounded with the rapid beating of his heart. “How? How will she have someone kill me here?”

“As Lilith merged with Adam, taking the Fruit of Life, so too has Eisheth consumed that gift. Five Seeds are one within her flesh. Her children are not the only ones who come for you. Those with the Fruit of Life withstand travel through space, ferrying those with Knowledge to this island in the void.”

Fruits of Life? Adam? But that would mean…

He tore at the straps that fastened him to his seat, and only a lucky bout of turbulence wrenched him free from the mad woman’s grasp. His forearm stung from where the woman had scratched him, but Shinji didn’t bother to tend to his wounds. He made for the cockpit, where Misato and the two pilots stood watch.

“Misato-san!”

The colonel put a hand over her headset microphone. “Just a minute, Shinji-kun; we have a bit of a —” She glanced at the cuts on his arm. “What happened to you?”

“Never mind that; please, Misato-san, this may sound crazy, but hear me out: you said the children of the giant came in a craft, right?”

“That’s right. There are probably fifteen government agencies trying to study it as we speak.”

“But did you see it?”

“No, as soon as Rei told me you were out here, I made arrangements to come find you. What’s all these questions about a ship?”

“That’s the problem,” said Shinji. “I don’t think it was just a ship.”

Misato’s mouth hung open as she stared at him in surprise and horror. “Lieutenant,” she said, regaining her wits, “put that object on our six. Run the engines until they explode if you have to. Contact Contingency Fourteen. Tell them the drop will occur on our position but only on my orders. Understand?”

“Wait, wait,” said Shinji. “I don’t understand. What’s happening?”

“Some thing is blocking our radar returns, and it’s coming this way.” Misato huffed. “And here I hoped it was just a little bad weather. We’re not that lucky today. Shinji-kun, how did you know about this?”

“The woman who grabbed me before—she started making sense. I wish she hadn’t, but she does. She speaks for the giant.”

“Then it’s about time someone talked back to her.” Taking Shinji by the hand, Misato marched back into the cargo hold. Two of her men had moved in on the mad woman, binding her hands with plastic ties and gagging her with a strip of black cloth stuffed into her mouth.

“Sorry, Colonel,” said one of the men. “She just wouldn’t shut up or sit still!”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Misato. “Keep her tied up, but let her speak.”
The corporal yanked the cloth out, but the woman paid him no heed, staring at Misato with wide brown eyes instead. Her hair was black and cut just beneath her chin, but it’d become frazzled and wild with her thrashing. She moved her shoulders erratically, leaning in and out.

“You speak for Eisheth, do you?” asked Misato coldly.

“Her five eyes are watching you—the eyes of Eisheth Zenunim! She sees through your lies. She knows what you desire in your heart. She offers peace and absolution—”

“Hey, hey!” Misato slapped the woman lightly on the cheek. “We’re not here for the orange juice sales pitch. What is it you want, you five-eyed monstrosity?”

“She wishes to preserve life,” said the mad woman. “Yes, yes, that’s what she wants. To preserve life—all your lives.” She looked to Shinji. “But not this boy’s. He would persuade all of you to leave the sea and experience fear and pain and strife. Only if you kill this boy will you know peace.”

Misato stepped between the woman and Shinji, shielding him from her wide eyes and crazed stare. “And if we refuse?”

“Then this metal machine will be crushed like an empty soda can in a man’s grasp,” said the woman. “Her mercy is limited, and if you mean to test her benevolence…”

“What does that mean?” asked the carpenter, the man who’d sat next to Shinji. “Who is ‘she’?”

“She is the sister of Lilith, the fifth Seed of Life, and she sends an Angel to kill the one foolish, haughty, stubborn boy. Kill the boy, or be killed with him!”

“Snap out of it, woman!” Misato slapped her again, more firmly this time. “Why do you speak for her? What has she polluted your mind with to make you her servant?”

“‘Polluted’?” The mad woman laughed. “She has freed me. I came back because of that boy, and to what? The life I knew no longer exists. My home lies beneath the sea. My friends and family had the good sense to stay liquid. She knows the futility and pointlessness of living in this world. In the sea, nothing will happen to us.”

“That’s sick and pathetic, and I hope you tell Eisheth that! Life isn’t easy, but she’s blinding you, don’t you see? Nothing good will come of going back to the ocean, and we’ll fight you to the last to prove it!”

“Is that your decision?” asked the mad woman.

“It is!”

“She isn’t asking you.” The mad woman turned her gaze across the aisle.

…where the carpenter snatched Misato’s backup pistol from its holster and pointed it at Shinji’s head.

“Carpenter-san?” said Shinji, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry, kid,” said the carpenter. “I need to protect my son.”

Misato’s men turned their rifles on the man, and Misato borrowed a pistol to join them, but the carpenter yanked Shinji by the collar and spun him around as a human shield, pressing the tip of the pistol to the back of Shinji’s head.
“Sir, I will shoot you if you don’t stand down,” said Misato. “I once gave my life for that boy you’re holding there. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for him, so stand down!”

“What choice do I have? We will all die if whatever Angel is coming decides to smash us into pulp! Please, just—I don’t want to shoot him, you understand? I don’t want to do this. Someone, get the kid a parachute! That thing won’t kill us all if he’s not in the chopper anymore. Then he’ll have a chance of surviving! Isn’t that the best thing for everyone? What else am I supposed to do?”

On the red canvass bench, the carpenter’s son held his hands over his ears, but he looked on with uncertainty and fear in his eyes. The other survivors in the helicopter had mixed reactions. Some watched the unfolding scene intently; others shied away, simply counting down the seconds until a shot was fired or until an Angel loomed in the windows. The SDF members under Misato’s command kept the carpenter in their rifles’ crosshairs, but Shinji saw in them the rush of adrenaline, the anxiety inherent to their mission. They could receive orders to shoot, even if it would ultimately cost them their lives.

“Sir, I will not warn you again,” said Misato, pulling the hammer back on her pistol. “This is an SDF operation, and I am in charge here. I will not sacrifice anyone to Eisheth, but I will absolutely shoot you if you don’t put that weapon down!”

“It doesn’t matter what you do to me,” said the carpenter, pressing the gun against the back of Shinji’s head. “None of that matters. Now I’m asking you nicely: get this kid a parachute pack. We don’t need to do this here, you understand? Bring the kid a parachute, or I’ll do it, in front of everyone, and then you’ll have to shoot me, too!”

Shinji balled his hand into a fist, trying to be reasonable, trying to think. Not that it was easy to think while a gun was pointed at his head—he could hardly breathe without fearing a wrong move on his part would set the carpenter off—but still, something the man had said didn’t quite add up to him. If the carpenter were so convinced he was right, why would he want to avoid shooting Shinji at all? Because he didn’t want to make his son see it? Yes, that had to be it. The carpenter felt he’d failed his son, that he hadn’t protected him. That regret had forced him into this snap decision, into something he didn’t really want to do. He’d acted out of fear and panic; when those emotions drove men to act, the result was only feuding and strife. That’s what the vision of the cultist had told Shinji, wasn’t it? Fear, panic, and strife. Those were the flaws she’d found in humanity, and they were the same flaws she was manipulating even then, compelling a man to bring a gun to Shinji’s head.

Shinji turned so the tip of the gun pressed against his temple instead.

“Shinji-kun, don’t move!” cried Misato. “Any little thing, and he could—”

But Shinji calmed her with a raised hand. “It’s all right. I know what I’m doing. I know why the carpenter has to do this.”

“You do?” said the man.

“Yes, I understand completely. You’re afraid, and that’s all right. It’s good to be afraid because it tells you when you’re in danger, and we’re all in danger right now. I’ve been afraid, too. I’ve been scared out of my mind. I’ve been brave once or twice, but I’ve been scared many more times than that. The thing that sent the Angel out there—it thinks all we can do is hurt each other, that there’s no hope for living as individuals in this world, and all you’re doing while you have this gun to my head is proving her right. If you shoot me here or if you force me out to go face my death, then we’ll just be one step closer to falling apart and becoming LCL again. Isn’t that what you wanted to protect your son from?”
The man faltered, at a loss, and gradually, his grip on Shinji’s collar wavered. Shinji faced him, putting the tip of the gun right in the middle of his forehead.

“Shinji-kun, don’t!” cried Misato.

“It’s all right,” he said, taking a shallow breath. “The carpenter here isn’t going to kill me, and we’re not all going to die.”

The carpenter put both hands on the gun, gritting his teeth. “How can you say that? How can you stand there and talk so confidently? How?”

“Because I believe it. Because I believe in someone else watching us, someone who’s doing everything in her power to keep us safe. Because Misato-san is here, and she’s never failed me. But most importantly I, unlike the giant who sent that Angel, believe in the human race despite the wars we fight, the people we hurt, and the lives that we take. The giant spoke to me in my dreams; she thinks you’ll pull that trigger. She thinks it’s human nature to do so. I don’t believe that. I believe you have a choice; we all do. We can have faith in the world we’ve tried to rebuild, or we can go back to the sea.”

But for the thumping of the rotors, the helicopter was silent, and though Misato’s men and the colonel herself swayed with the motions of the chopper as it maintained position in the Angel’s grasp, the riflemen kept the carpenter squared away in their sights. Misato’s index finger pulled at the trigger millimeters at a time…

And the tip of the carpenter’s pistol came off Shinji’s forehead. He looked away in shame and turned the gun over to one of Misato’s men. They forced him down, strapped him to the bench, and bound his hands in plastic ties like the mad woman, but at no time did he resist. He stared into space with a dull expression, resigned to whatever fate would bring him. “I don’t know how you can do it,” he muttered. “How can you believe in mankind when some people out there would just as soon kill you for what you’ve done?”

Shinji let out a breath—the first breath he recalled taking in minutes. “I remember what happened when I stopped believing,” he answered. “I thought there should be nothing but what I wanted, yet when I got that, it was all empty.” He glanced over his shoulder, at the mad woman across the aisle. “Do you hear that, Eisheth? What you’re trying to bring us is nothingness. We won’t have it; none of us will!”

The mad woman smiled wide, like a child given a cone of ice cream. “Then you will find nothingness in death instead!”

“Colonel!” came a cry from the cockpit. “The bogey’s on our six, thirty seconds out!”

“Radio in for the drop, and take us down, as low as you can!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The chopper lurched forward, and Shinji strapped himself to the canvass bench beside the carpenter. He peered through the windows, looking to the back of the aircraft. Outside, a shadow crept over the landscape. It was broad and triangle-shaped, like a flying wing, but the leading edges fanned out like feathers into fingery appendanges. Shinji couldn’t see all of the Angel’s shape, but he heard its cry. He felt it.

SCREEEE!

The helicopter rattled, bouncing back and forth in a pocket of turbulent air.
I know what I said, thought Shinji. I believed we could survive this, and I still do, but it'd help if I could see how. An Angel versus a helicopter is a fight that would end quickly. I know that well enough.

Faintly, a reflection appeared in the window—the image of a girl in a school uniform with short blue hair.

‘It will not be easy, Ikari-kun, but help is coming. Your faith will be repaid.’

Shinji smiled. Thank you, Ayanami.

‘You shouldn’t thank me yet. Turn away from the window.’

Why?

The image of Rei vanished, and Shinji’s eyes focused on the outside again, where one of those tough, gray, fingerlike appendages loomed. Short black hairs standing on end covered its surface, and it pulled back like a baseball bat in the hands of a cleanup hitter.

SMASH! The windows shattered; the frame of the chopper buckled and bent. Glass sprayed the cargo hold, and the whipping wind roared. The chopper tumbled, rolling chaotically. Shinji gripped the restraining straps, desperate to stay in place. The view through the windows alternated between blue sky, the dark shadow of the Angel, and green and brown earth. Trees and grasses spun by, and —

And then it all went black.

“Shinji-kun! Shinji-kun, wake up!”

He shook his head, trying to get the blur out of his eyes. Sticky fluid ran down the side of his face. He touched a finger to his temple, feeling a tender, open wound. If he’d hit his head on something, that had to be why the person talking to him—shaking him incessantly—appeared to be sideways, right?

“Dammit, if you’re not going to answer, then I’ll just carry you!” Misato cut at the restraints with a combat knife, and Shinji fell forward, into her arms. She carried him toward the front of the helicopter, where the side door by the cockpit was part of the ceiling instead. She and hoisted him through the gap, and lamely, he climbed onto the side of the downed chopper.

And he sat there, facing the Angel—the giant, flying wing with its hairy finger-like appendages. It stared at him with a single red eye on its underside, and it swooped in like a bird of prey against a small rodent in the grass.

TING! A wall of rainbow-colored hexagons lit up the surroundings. From a crouch, a single, man-shaped being stood in opposition of the Angel. It was plated in dark green armor, and the pylons on its shoulders bent outward at a slight angle. Shinji couldn’t see its face, for it kept the helicopter at its back while it protected Shinji and the survivors from the Angel. It towered over the helicopter. Six-story buildings would’ve been like hurdles for the Eva to jump over.

“Hey, don’t just sit there!” Misato climbed through the side doorway. “Give me a hand already! Unit-14 won’t be able to hold that Angel there for long!”

“An Eva…?” muttered Shinji. “When did you…? How?”
“I don’t think this is the right time to be asking that!”

Hurriedly, Misato and Shinji slid down the side of the chopper. Other passengers came out through the back as the SDF members blasted the cargo ramp off, and though the Angel assaulted the Eva’s AT field with its hairy appendages, the sanctity of the barrier held.

_I should’ve known. A secret project that Misato-san was working on—it could only be an Eva. She and Ayanami must’ve been working on this from the start, knowing that the giant would come._

And while the survivors fled the downed chopper, Eva and Angel traded blows. The Angel wrapped up the Eva’s arms with its hairy appendages and tried to pull the Eva apart, but Unit-14 held together, snapping the bindings instead. Angel blood spewed from the wounds, and a horrific cry rang out over the countryside.

“The pilot is pretty good,” Shinji mused, glancing over his shoulder to watch. “Who is it?”

“There is no pilot,” Misato whispered.

And that explained it: the Eva’s brutality. Shinji had thought himself out of control and crazed sometimes when he’d piloted Eva, but one of the worst moments in his memory was when he’d had no control at all. Under the dummy plug’s influence, Unit-01 had mutilated Unit-03 ruthlessly, indifferent to saving the pilot inside. Unit-14 was the same way—untethered by the pilot’s restraint, it assaulted the Angel in an uninterrupted flurry. It leapt high and forced the Angel down with a monstrous kick.

The earth shook; the Angel plowed into the ground. Shinji and Misato wavered on their feet, letting the shockwave pass, and a cloud of dust rose into the sky.

But the Eva wasn’t finished there. It yanked on one of the Angel’s fingery appendages used that as a tether to swing the Angel about, flipping it onto its back. The Eva pounced atop the Angel’s red eye—the core—and pounded on it. It stomped on this precious spot like a frenzied child throwing a tantrum, and its kicks flashed with the collisions of AT fields. The Angel tied up Unit-14 once more, however, and this time, it didn’t bother to try to rip the Eva apart. It gathered the Eva close to its body and wrapped around it into a ball.

“Get down!” cried Misato.

Shinji crouched in place, and Misato shielded his body with her own. A searing pink flash penetrated his closed eyelids. A pressure wave picked him up off his feet and threw him like an action figure in a toddler’s backyard. He hit the ground hard, rubbing his palms raw as he tried to break his fall. Shinji rolled onto his back, blinking the dust from his eyes.

“Misato-san?” he called out. “Where are you?”

“Here!” The colonel picked herself up off the ground slowly, spitting out dirt.

Shinji worked his jaw, trying to clear his ears. The other survivors were scattered about in various states of shock and injury, but in large part, they’d withstood that last blast to look upon the scene of the battle with awe and horror. Where the Angel had been, a mammoth pink cross burned, looming over the landscape and casting dark shadows despite the morning sun. The Eva walked from this persistent explosion in silhouette, like a monster retreating to darkness.

“Let’s go, Shinji-kun,” said Misato, motioning for him to follow. “This fight is over. It’s time to go home.”
Home—a place of rest and sanctuary, yet Shinji expected neither. As he followed in Misato’s footsteps, he glanced back, over his shoulder, at the cross-shaped tower of pink energy. The Eva stomped into the distance, its steps rhythmic and even, but something else caught his eye. In the middle of the nowhere, he spotted her: the image of a cultist with golden locks and bright green eyes. She stared at him, her glare unwavering, but it wasn’t her eyes he couldn’t tear his gaze away from.

It was the five black buttons on her thick coat.

“What are you staring at?” Misato shook him by the shoulder. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Shinji forcing himself to face forward. “Nothing at all.”

He walked on alongside Misato, knowing that wherever he went, the five-eyed giant Eisheth Zenunim would be watching. She would send her children and touch the minds of the weak to bring humanity back to the LCL sea, and until then, she would bring chaos and destruction upon planet Earth to force mankind to despair.

And what could Shinji do to oppose her? He wasn’t a pilot anymore, even with an Eva that could be driven again. He wasn’t a leader or a commander, like Misato, but fate and the choices he’d made had put him in a position to be heard. That was what the conductor in the traincar had asked him to do, wasn’t it? To use the fame and notoriety he’d gained for the greater good? He’d refused the conductor then, trying to stay hidden and anonymous, and watched good men fall victim to panic and dread as a result.

No longer. He couldn’t afford to stay silent or hide behind a hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses. As he’d spoken to the carpenter when a gun was pointed to his head, Shinji could cry out against Eisheth. He would stand up and shout his belief in humanity, however much the winds of panic and doubt might whip against his face.
With the threat of Eisheth and her children neutralized for the moment, the survivors of the train from Odawara followed the nearest road on foot. Though SDF helicopters and planes zoomed overhead, the survivors’ rescue came in a convoy of humvees. In case Eisheth had anything else up her sleeve, the rescuers came prepared, manning chaingun turrets and wielding shoulder-fired rocket launchers. Even so, such firepower might not have meant very much against another Angel. One could only hope these arms would rip apart and destroy the flesh-and-blood Zenunim before they could dissolve their bodies into LCL and reform undamaged, too.

For these reasons, Shinji didn’t feel safe outside the capital, and even when the convoy entered the outskirts of town, that uneasiness didn’t pass. SDF members stood on nearly every street corner, whether actively securing invaded areas or merely looking out to maintain the illusion of order. It was an image reminiscent of post-Second Impact chaos, of the need for martial law and increased security that had given rise to the Special Self-Defense Force and a more proactive Japan. At least then, the major trial of the Impact had come and gone. Shinji could hardly say the same of Eisheth and her invasion.

“As soon as Eisheth became aware of us—of our existence—she sent this first wave,” Misato explained, keeping Shinji close to her in the second car of the convoy. “Rei said it’s been coasting across the cosmos for thousands of years at least, so that as soon as it arrived, Eisheth could observe the madness that would ensue.”

Why would a being billions of years old send a small expeditionary force just to observe the results?

“So she could improve on their first strike,” said Misato. “So when the next one came, she would know how we’d react. Now, she can orchestrate something even more devastating. We’ve repelled their first wave, but more are on the way. That’s why we’ve been preparing—to do everything we can so we’re ready when they arrive.”

“But are we ready?” asked Shinji.

Misato smirked. “We have to be. We have what we have. We have Eva, and we have good people willing to fight. If that isn’t enough, nothing is. The only thing I’d take back if we could is having to use the Eva so publicly. So far we’ve been working in secret even from our friends. Now, too many people know what we’ve been doing to hide it. A fight between an Eva and Angel isn’t something you can really keep quiet.”

True, anyone with a pair of eyes and a memory that wasn’t Swiss cheese would know an Eva and an Angel when they saw them, but Misato had called in the Eva over an isolated stretch of countryside. How much could anyone have seen?

Shinji said as much to Misato on the matter, and all she did was adjust a few dials on her radio and hand over the earpiece to Shinji.

“It was a hundred meters tall, I tell you!” said a voice. “And the thing it was fighting had to be at least twice that in width!”

“Are you sure that’s what you saw, sir?” asked another voice. “I run an honest program on these airwaves. I’m not in the business of giving in to sensationalism or fanning the flames of rumors. If you’d be so kind, be specific about what you saw for the benefit of the audience.”
“You want specifics? The Angel swallowed up the Eva whole and tried to take it out with a suicide attack! I was here when the first one came to Tōkyō-3, you know. You’d think they’d have learned that doesn’t work by now, but that’s what they did!”

Wincing, Shinji handed the earpiece back to Misato.

“And that’s with military censorship,” Misato mused. “Never mind the part about slimy suction-cup creatures dissolving people with just a touch, either. We’re going to need to get ahead of this before too many rumors get spread around. We can take you home first—though with Eisheth touching people’s minds, I have to insist that you have some protection—or you can come with me and help try to save the world. What do you say to that?”

To Shinji, that wasn’t even a choice. “You already know what I’ve decided.”

Misato winked at that. “Thought so. That’s why I have someone waiting for you.”

Most of the convoy headed for area hospitals to give the survivors treatment and care, but two vehicles went with Shinji and Misato’s humvee on the way to National Square. Without regard for street signs, curbs, or right-of-way, they lined up outside the Ministry of Defense headquarters—the yellow egg-shaped structure dubbed the “Amber Moon”—and a girl in a white labcoat streaked from the glass doors, taking Shinji into her arms as soon as he stepped out of the humvee.

“What the hell were you thinking?” cried Asuka, nearly in tears. “When I said you should go out and do something, taking the train to fight some alien invaders wasn’t what I had in mind!”

“It wasn’t what I had in mind, either.” Shinji placed a hand on Asuka’s shoulder, assuring her. “I’m all right, really. Thanks for being concerned.”

“You’d say you were all right if you were chopped in half. Misato? Tell me he’s fine.”

“He may have taken a bump or two and been liquefied by aliens, but he’s good now. We’ll have to get him cleaned up a bit, though.”

Shinji blinked. “Cleaned up for what?”

“The press conference,” Misato explained. “The world has too many questions right now. We’re going to be the ones to give people answers.”

With the finest tailors in the capital hurrying to craft a suit for Shinji, Misato led the young man into the bowels of the Amber Moon. The amenities were usually reserved for officers and the defense minister’s staff, so, in Misato’s words, he should be “honored to shower where such self-important men wash off the perfume of attractive lobbyists and secretaries.”

For Shinji, it was more of a reminder of the past. When piloting Eva, he’d sometimes come from the entry plug and stood there, in the spray of a showerhead, and let his thoughts drift for minutes or even hours at a time. It wasn’t his water bill to pay, after all, and no one was about to complain to him about how long he spent in the shower.

“Don’t dally in there,” said a voice behind the stall door. “The last thing you want to do is go on television with your hair still wet.”

Shinji smiled to himself. “Didn’t mean to make you wait, Asuka.”

“You’re not making me wait, just the rest of the human race.”
“I’m surprised you’re not getting cleaned up, too,” he observed.

“I don’t mind a little sweat on my brow. It shows I’ve been working hard.”

“I mean, if you were going to be here, I thought you’d be in the stall with me.”

“Mm, I like it when you tempt me. But no, now’s no good. I’d have a hell of a time fixing my hair, and I don’t think Misato sent out for a dress for me, either. I’m here to hurry you up, so get scrubbing, Ikari! Leave no trace of dirt or Angel blood behind, or there’ll be no repopulating the human race tonight!”

Shinji rubbed a dollop of soap between his hands. “You know, you’re the one most concerned with the birth rate.”

A third voice echoed through the shower room. “That’s because it’s a nine-month investment for a girl, so she’s right to consider the matter more thoroughly,” said Asuka’s mother, Kyōko. “Ah, what’s this? I thought you two would be making like fruit flies by now.”

Scrubbing at his arms vigorously, Shinji made a face. “Fruit flies?” he echoed. “Why fruit flies?”

“There’s a reason we use fruit flies in so many experiments. Their genome is easy to understand; many of their traits can be observed through a microscope; and they have lots and lots of—”

“Mama, please!” cried Asuka. “There’s no time…”

“No time? Perhaps Shinji-kun here just needs to learn. An experienced man ought to be able to get you quivering on your knees in under a minute. I once had an advisor in Nuremberg—a charming man, really, but he knew almost nothing about biology except what applied to the bedroom. Anyway, he had the problem that he couldn’t contain himself for longer than forty-seven seconds, but oh, what he could do in those seconds! I actually timed him over several weeks just to be sure of the number. I thought that phenomenon in itself might be worth a paper, perhaps in the Journal of—”

Another voice interrupted from a few stalls down. “Doctor Sōryū, maybe you could let Shinji-kun finish up without more stories?” asked Misato. “Honestly, when even I’m uncomfortable with tales of your sexual escapades through the metaphysical biology circles, there’s a problem!”

“I really don’t see the issue,” said Kyōko. “Out of maybe a hundred metaphysical biologists in the world before Third Impact, I only remember meeting about half of them. Now, how many I don’t remember meeting—that’s a bit hazy. Can’t be more than ten or twenty of them, though. Bear in mind, there never have been many women in the field, though I do remember once I was at a conference in Sydney and this lovely graduate student girl was giving a talk on soul capture and transfer. When she said the words ‘imperfect extraction of phantasmal essence,’ I just knew I had to take her card….”

The good thing about Kyōko regaling them with her stories of scientific revelations and sexual discovery was that they encouraged Shinji to get out of that shower stall as soon as he possibly could. Indeed, it was all he could do not to run out of there naked and screaming when Kyōko suggested he could learn something if only he had more experience, and given that either she or Misato was the most experienced woman they knew…well, at least Kyōko had the good sense to add that she would never compete with her daughter for a man.

Once cleansed in body (though perhaps not in mind), Shinji was shown to some private quarters to dress for the press conference, and since time was of the essence, Asuka came along to help him with the small things—for example, making sure his collar was down behind his head or tying his tie.
while he focused on a dazzling array of buttons and zippers. At least, that was the plan until both of them realized they didn’t know how to tie a tie.

“Why the hell is this so difficult?” Asuka muttered, unknotted the red fabric for the tenth time.

“You’d think after being turned to goo we’d have taken away this bit of knowledge to file away. Shinji, you’re a man. You can do this, right?”

“Ties were never part of our uniforms. I’m just an ordinary Japanese boy; didn’t they teach you anything like this in Germany?”

“I wish.” Asuka ducked her head out. “No, Mama, stay there. Misato, we need some help here. Military types ought to know something about this.”

Her hair up in rollers, Misato marched into the room, tweaking a row of ribbons on her dress uniform. “Aha, I see what the problem is. Well, on the scale of crises we could be facing, I think I’d take this one over what we had earlier. Don’t worry, Shinji-kun—you tell the crazy five-eyed aliens to go to hell. I’ll fix your tie.”

Asuka raised an eyebrow, glancing at Shinji. “You really did that?”

Shinji nodded. “It had to be said. No one else knew how to stand up to Eisheth. People needed to know—or be reminded—that our lives are worth fighting for.”

Pursing her lips, impressed, Asuka took Shinji’s coat jacket and opened it for him to put on once Misato was finished. She brushed the lint off the arms and looked over his shoulder, watching his reflection in the mirror. “Looks like you found something worth doing after all,” she said, and she pecked him on the cheek. “Knew you would.”

Shinji wiped his face with his hand, smearing the pink lipstick away. “Asuka, we’re going to be on camera soon.”

“Leave it be; people want to know that the savior of the human race is getting laid! It gives them hope they will, too!”

In more ways than one, mother and daughter were very much alike. They had a way of thinking all their own, and it went beyond their background in the sciences. While Kyôko’s stories were embarrassing and awkward, they told of a woman who had a need for intensity in her life. Asuka was exactly the same way, and indeed, judging by the kiss on the cheek he’d received, he was starting to find something worth putting all of himself into as well.

At the top of the hour, Shinji, Asuka, and Kyôko journeyed upstairs to a small media room and stood to the left of a simple wooden podium. The new suit itched all over, but Shinji gritted his teeth to bear the sensation. Indeed, he was rather thankful he had something else to occupy his mind than the stares of the press corps. It didn’t take long for rumors and speculation to run rampant through the rows of seated journalists, for even the cameramen to focus in on Shinji—that is, if they weren’t drawn to Asuka and the sweater top underneath her labcoat instead. Whatever the media’s focus, Shinji and Asuka’s presence was a tacit admission of the truth: people had seen an Eva, and now they wanted to know why.

And, frankly, while Shinji knew what the Eva was for, he was as curious as they were. Just what Misato had in mind for this press conference had Shinji mystified.

Not for long, however. Sharp and professional in her uniform and short heels came Misato, and the cascade of photographic flashes didn’t seem to faze her. She raised both hands to quiet the room.
“Please, please,” she said, “we will take questions after I’ve made a statement. Ladies and gentlemen, you all know who I am and what the people beside me have done. I’ve been authorized by the prime minister to speak regarding the events that have transpired overnight and into this morning. At approximately 2230 last night, Air SDF detected, in conjunction with other military forces worldwide, an object of considerable mass and velocity on a collision trajectory with Earth. An international effort was undertaken to deflect or destroy the object with all available weaponry, but we could not break it up before it came down approximately twenty kilometers outside of Chino around 2345. But, as you can see, we are all still here. We were not obliterated in that impact because the object was not a meteor or any other natural phenomenon. It was made and created to be capable of powered flight. It slowed its descent to cause minimal damage and to deliver its payload: a scouting force of alien creatures with remarkable abilities to heal injuries and survive combat.”

The room was deadly quiet, and Misato allowed for a moment to pass before continuing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you have believed what I’ve said so far, I’m glad. I wish I could say the government of Japan and the Prime Minister’s office weren’t concerned that this information could cause panic or fear. We are all concerned about that, but in the end, we all felt it was best to bring the world together on this day and ensure that humanity will band together to fight for its right to live the way it chooses to. Now, I’m sure you have many questions—for instance, why these alien creatures came or what their motives are and how much we know about them. For that, I must defer to someone else—our resident expert, our most ardent defender. If for some reason you don’t believe me, I think she will convince you.”

Misato stepped aside, and for a moment, Shinji, Asuka, and Kyōko looked to one another. Based on Misato’s last remark, it wasn’t Shinji who should go up there to speak; he hardly considered himself an expert on Eisheth anyway, and neither Asuka nor her mother, who’d just heard about the giant, could possibly go up there, either. If not them, then who did Misato mean?

A gasp went through the room, and the photographers within the press corps whet crazy, peppering the podium with an array of flashbulbs. At center stage, a faint glow materialized and took form. Her body see-through and translucent, Rei nevertheless took position behind the microphone, even though she wouldn’t need it. While her junior high uniform looked airy and ephemeral—and they were—her red eyes transfixed all who saw her.

“Oh my God,” Asuka muttered. “The geist is here! And she’s alive!”

Rei turned her head slightly, eying Asuka. “My body is dead, but I am everywhere and nowhere. Past and future are the same to me. That is how I can be here. That is why I am still alive.”

She faced forward again, and just a look from her silenced the raucous press corps.

“I was sent to Earth to bring about life,” she said. “I was not the only one. There was Adam. You know of him, but there were others, too, who have seeded life in parts of this galaxy. One of them is my sister, Eisheth. She has lost faith in her children. She’s lost faith in all our children. She believes the only beneficial existence lies in forcing you back to the LCL that made you. She is watching you, and she tells her children what she sees so that when they arrive here, they will run through all defenses and dissolve mankind.

“I won’t let that happen. I have been watching her, too. I have been watching over you, even when I wouldn’t let you see me. To fight against Eisheth, I have given you my body. My flesh has been reanimated, and from it, Eva are born: one for Colonel Katsuragi and the Japanese, one for the Americans, and one for the Germans. They are people who know how to build and work with Eva. They are humanity’s best hope against my sister and the force she will bring.”
One of the members of the press shot up from his seat. Notepad in hand, he stared skeptically at Rei. “So this is what we’re supposed to believe?” he demanded. “The Prime Minister would invoke Lilith’s name to get the support of cultists and justify rebuilding an Eva despite the political ramifications? Colonel Katsuragi, don’t insult us with what’s clearly a projection, a technological ruse! The people demand to know the truth about what their leaders are doing!”

Through narrowed eyes, Rei answered the journalist. “If you do not believe what you see,” she said, “then I will convince you.” She raised her eyes, looking about the whole room. “I will convince all of you.”

She vanished.

The room erupted in confusion. Even Asuka, Shinji, and Kyōko looked between one another, clueless. Misato ran to the open microphone and urged the journalists to settle down, but an overwhelming thought penetrated all their minds, rendering the colonel’s efforts obsolete:

‘Look outside.’

The various monitors in the briefing room switched to an exterior shot. Over a bright, partly cloudy day, a set of giant, branching wings loomed. They attached to a female figure, one whose skin was pure white.

“There’s a balcony here!” cried a voice.

The journalists abandoned their seats, and Shinji too left the stage, fighting his way through the crowd just to see. They came across a series of glass panels leading to a balcony—one that circled the entire building. Shinji managed to push and weave his way to the railing, and from there, he saw her—the giant that had come to him when he wanted it all to stop. Her skin and hair were totally white. Her body faced the Defense Ministry, but it extended far above the clouds, hiding everything above Rei’s waist. Still, though the weather preserved some of Rei’s modesty, Shinji politely averted his gaze.

‘People of Earth, you are my children. You will listen to me.’

An image of Rei’s face—white-haired but with stark red eyes—flashed into Shinji’s mind. The seven-eyed mask of Lilith followed it, and the two merged together, superimposed in Shinji’s thoughts.

‘Eisheth is coming. This is not a joke. This is not a game. You will band together and use the Eva in peace and against Eisheth. I forbid any other use for them. Band together. Cooperate with one another, or be dissolved. I have faith that won’t happen, but I have done all I can. You must choose to save yourselves.’

The clouds above parted briefly, and for a moment, Shinji thought he saw Rei’s red eyes high above them, gazing to the Earth below.

‘Until then,’ she finished, ‘I will be watching.’

All in all, the world did not take Rei’s stark warning well. In large part, cultists came out in droves to welcome back their goddess to planet Earth and pledge their loyalties to the fight, but even that bit of good news came at a price. Some cultists viewed Rei’s appearance as a vindication not only of their philosophy but their faith. They grew more outspoken and evangelical about their beliefs, and where others had become despondent over the news, tensions erupted into brawls or even riots. As the
people were restless and confused, so too were the nations of the world. The Chinese and Russians expressed outrage over Japan being given an Eva to hold over them once again, despite Rei’s insistence that Eva would never be used against men. Nevertheless, both nations stepped up their military presences, mobilizing naval ships to closely protect their waters and running air patrols close to Japanese airspace.

All this Misato heard about during a long and involved phone call with the prime minister. She took his angered ravings with a smile, even while Asuka, Shinji, and Kyōko could hear the man clearly through the speaker of Misato’s phone.

“The next time a disembodied alien tells me I must disclose to the world that humanity is on the brink of annihilation, I will resign!” he insisted. “I am the Prime Minister of Japan! No intangible ghost girl should be telling me what to do!”

“Sir,” Misato began, “you do realize Rei can hear you, right?”

The prime minister went very quiet at that, abruptly leaving Misato in peace. “Well,” she said, putting away her cell phone, “it’s really best to leave the politics to him. We have a war to fight. All of the other troubles we face until Eisheth’s main invasion force gets here are secondary. As Rei said, Eva is our last, best weapon against whatever Eisheth will bring to bear, and we need to make sure we’re up to the task.”

“And that burden will largely fall on the Eva,” noted Kyōko. “Or rather, the child unlucky enough to pilot it.”

Shinji shook his head. “There isn’t a pilot. When Unit-14 saved us, Misato-san said there was no pilot, just a dummy plug.”

“A dummy plug?” echoed Asuka. “Who on earth could think a mindless clone would know anything about how to really fight? Put me in there. I know how to get things done. Or Shinji, too. We could take turns.”

“That might be difficult,” said Kyōko. “Once a pilot is old enough, the neural interface—”

Misato held out a hand, stopping the doctor in her tracks. “No, no, that’s exactly what I want to try, theoretical hangups aside. As Asuka said, I don’t trust a dummy plug to do what a thinking, intelligent person would. I know the Americans and the Germans are unwilling to subject anyone to the stress of piloting Eva, but they’re wimps. We’re better than them. I’d rather rely on a person I can talk to and strategize with than some unthinking brute. A person would’ve done all they could to get the Angel this morning as far as possible from us. That way, when it exploded, we wouldn’t have been precariously close to the blast zone. The dummy plug’s been a good test pilot to demonstrate that the Eva has the right capabilities, but now we should put our trust in human hands. Come, Shinji-kun, Asuka, Doctor Sōryū. Let me take you to the Eva, so we can see who will determine humanity’s future.”

Their destination was Hachibuse Mountain, a scenic peak to the southeast of town, but the way they were going, they wouldn’t get to see the sights. Instead, Misato led them down through the Defense Ministry building, explaining some history along the way.

“When Old Tōkyō was nuked and the capital relocated to Matsumoto, the government scrambled to set up alternate contingencies. To start, they struck ground on a new SDF base—having the Eastern Army headquarters located a full three hours away in Gunma Prefecture would’ve been horribly inconvenient, let me tell you. Not only that, they started work on a security bunker under Hachibuse Mountain to shield high-ranking government officials from attack. At least, that was the plan before
Rei and I came along, looking for a place to build and test an Eva in secret.”

Misato snickered, momentarily unable to contain herself, but she went on.

“You should’ve seen the look on the PM’s face when Rei told him she needed the Hachibuse complex! He said to her, ‘But what am I to do if we’re attacked again?’ And Rei answered back, ‘The death of a politician would be regrettable, yes, but not half as tragic as you make it sound.’ So that gave us a rudimentary bunker and a place for scientists to work on cajoling Rei’s petrified body into something useful. It still took time and effort to develop that into an Eva, but here we are.”

“There” was an underground subway platform of sorts, much smaller in size and scope than any public transport Shinji had seen. With SDF guards posted in almost every corridor, the sense of security was palpable. A set of pure white railcars, rounded on their tops, were waiting for Shinji, Misato, Asuka, and Kyōko, and they were the only ones to board. A six-minute ride under rock and earth brought them to a bustling subterranean complex with gray concrete walls and boxy fluorescent lights providing a stark, artificial glow. A man with two thin, golden stripes on his collar awaited them at the arrival platform, and after a closer look, Shinji recognized him.

“Hyūga-san?”

Captain Hyūga nodded. “Good to see you again, Shinji-kun, Asuka-chan. Unit-14 is waiting for you in the cage. I’ll lead you to the pilots’ lockers and your plugsuits. Colonel Katsuragi, your presence is requested in Control.”

“Now, now, Makoto-kun,” said Misato, winking, “no need to be so formal among friends.”

The young captain grinned at that but said nothing. He showed Asuka, Shinji, and Kyōko through a maze of corridors and down two separate elevators to get them into the heart of the base. A small, pristine, and inert locker room had but two green and black plugsuits hanging out for Shinji and Asuka to try, and while Shinji found it agreeable enough, Asuka chafed at the color scheme.

“When I show I’m able to pilot this thing better than Shinji, we’re painting it red!” she announced. “Count on it!”

“First things first,” said Kyōko. “We need to see that either of you can pilot it. In children and adolescents, the human brain is constantly changing. The influx of hormones with puberty, for example, is what turns childish avoidance or innocent fascination with the opposite sex into a raging drive for—”

“Mama, please,” said Asuka.

Kyōko sighed. “Oh very well. My point is that trying to sync with an Eva at this age could be difficult—even painful. You both have experience with it, so that’s a plus, but don’t think it will be as easy as it used to be, especially because Yui-chan is gone, and I have no intention of being in one of those things again.”

That’s right. Shinji’s mother was gone; she wouldn’t be there to protect him from within the Eva. Any pain he felt there would be his own, but he’d prepared for that. He’d made his decision to join the fight, whatever it might take from him.

Shinji went first, leaving Kyōko and Asuka behind to watch from the observation room above the cage. All alone, he descended in a wiry elevator to face an Eva once again. All in all, the resemblance of this new facility to old Nerv Headquarters amazed him. While the colors and lights were somewhat brighter, the recreation was canny enough to give him shivers as he stepped onto the
walkway before the Eva. Just as before, technicians helped him into the entry plug, and the old sensations came back. Had he imagined this scenario before Third Impact happened, he would’ve thought it a nightmare, something he never would’ve chosen to be a part of again. But here, two years after waking up, there was a tiny element of nostalgia. He’d done some incredible things as a pilot—all the things people honored him for. He’d always dismissed those accolades as overblown, but a kernel of truth remained.

Still, Kyōko had said the process could be painful this time. That much Shinji felt prepared for. Piloting Eva—having a connection between a mammoth, powerful body and a human’s fragile mind—always had carried that risk.

“Shinji-kun?” A communications window opened to his left, giving a view of Misato and Hyūga in the control room. “We’re all set here. Are you ready?”

He opened and closed his fist, feeling the give of the material in the plugsuit. “Go ahead.”

The entry plug screwed into the back of the Eva’s neck. The LCL in the plug went clear, and a shimmering light surrounded Shinji. He gripped both control handles, closed his eyes, and let the technician’s voice on the other end guide him into sync with the Eva.

“Beginning synch test. Initial synch ratio will be limited to baseline minus eight nepers, one neper increments to a maximum of zero. Initialization—baseline minus eight.”

The Eva tugged at his mind, and he let it. He wanted to feel the cool, outside air through the chinks in the Eva’s armor.

“Minus seven.”

This stage was a little like falling, except forward into an unfathomable abyss. His heart rate quickened, but he held fast.

“Minus six.”

Shinji gasped. The Eva was grasping at his mind, as if it held his brain in its hands and could crush him at any opportunity. He winced a bit, gritting his teeth. It was undeniably unnatural. No man should enjoy another presence in contact with his mind.

“Minus five.”

His chest tightened; he struggled to speak. The Eva pressed in against him. It was too much, too fast! If he let it come in any more, it would swallow him up, but to resist it was like having razorblades run through the veins in his head.

“Shinji-kun,” said Misato, “your vitals are going a little crazy here. We can stop if you like. There’s no need to rush things.”

He coughed. “I’m all right!” he managed to eke out. “I won’t run away. Take me to the next level. We’ll see if I can do it or not.”

Misato nodded, signaling the technician. The woman’s voice was cool and steady. “Minus four.”

The jump in intensity surged through his body. He struggled to keep his eyes open against the throbbing pain. A swirl of colors overcame his vision, and the weight of the Eva’s presence engulfed him, turning the world black. It cut him off from Misato and rendered the world silent—that was, silent but his anguished screams.
For all his good intentions to be brave and show tenacity, all it had done was put him in a hospital bed to stare at an unfamiliar ceiling once more. To the pulsing of a heart monitor, Shinji sat up slowly, cradling his head as it pounded and ached. There was no light from outside to stream in from the window in that room—just pure white, artificial light in two long rods overhead. In naught but a pale blue hospital gown, he turned, letting his legs dangle off the side of the bed. He exhaled, holding his head in his hands.

“That really sucked, didn’t it?” In a low chair beside the bed, Asuka sat with him, looking drawn out and exhausted.

Shinji glanced around. “What time is it? How long have I been out?”

“Three or four hours,” said Asuka. “That thing did a number on you. On me, too. Hell, foolish me. When they said you’d be all right I hopped right into that thing, thinking I’d do better. I only made it halfway between four and five before they shut it down to rip me out. Even that felt like downing half a dozen shots, but I still wanted to go. I mean, you got to minus four. How hard could it be to get from that to zero?”

“How hard is it?”

Asuka shrugged. “It turns out their ‘minus four’ is only about a two percent synch ratio! Two percent! Why don’t they just say two percent if that’s what they mean?” She winced, putting her head down, and went quiet. “Good thing I didn’t go any further. I feel cheated, like I have a hangover but didn’t get to have any fun.”

“We’re too old.”

“I guess. Real great system they have here so that only fourteen-year-olds can pilot! Because junior high kids are paragons of mental stability, right?”

There was a soft rustling as someone stepped around the curtain dividing Shinji from the rest of the infirmary ward. “I heard some chatter in here,” said Misato. “I’m glad to see you’re all right, Shinji-kun. How are you feeling?”

Shinji shaded his eyes from the ceiling lights, wincing. “Like someone put a drill bit to my forehead.”

“That’s to be expected, sadly. I think it’s fair to say we’ll have to be cautious about putting you or Asuka back in the entry plug. It could be with time you’d get used to the way it feels. It did take Rei months to get Unit-00 synchronized to a combat-ready level, after all. Not everyone can walk in with a forty-percent synch ratio right off the street. Still, I’ve been talking with Doctor Sōryū and the rest of my people here, and I think the best thing to do is investigate some other candidates—children of the right age, that is. We’ve been preparing for that case for some time anyway. All we have to do is interview the candidates and see who’d be willing to volunteer. If anyone knows what it takes to pilot Eva, it’s you two. If you’re willing, you could help with the selection process.”

That seemed agreeable enough. Anything Shinji could do to help was fine by him. Then, at least, he could feel like he was a part of the effort, even if he couldn’t fight.

After an initial workup from the base medical staff, Shinji was cleared to get back on his feet, provided someone was with him at all times for at least the next day or two. Asuka was more than happy to do that, and Misato gave the two of them a stack of file folders to look over and a conference room with a long table to deliberate and, ultimately, entertain guests, for already, her
people were rounding up a set of pilot candidates, a group of children who would be tested and interviewed to gauge their fitness for the task.

Of course, Shinji didn’t know the first thing about interviewing people—more often he himself was the subject, not the interviewer—but Captain Hyūga was there to provide Shinji and Asuka with a little guidance. For the first few candidates to arrive, Shinji said little, merely taking notes on the questions Hyūga asked and how the children responded.

“The training might interfere with your after-school activities,” Hyūga had informed one of the candidates. “Would that be a problem?”

“My student council work?” asked the girl, a demure thirteen-year-old named Nagase Ayumi. She adjusted her glasses nervously, and her pigtails quivered slightly as she considered the question. “Oh dear. I mean, I can only imagine after the news that we’ll be very busy organizing school events, information, and activities to try to prepare, but I’m more than willing to do my part, I promise! I’ll do my best to keep humanity safe if chosen.” She looked to Shinji and Asuka, smiling brightly. “Just the way both of you did.”

Such innocent enthusiasm. To see that the children of this day could find it in themselves to volunteer comforted Shinji, but still, the girl gave him too much credit. Had men not found it within themselves to come back after Third Impact, no one would be around to laud him, even though he knew the choice he’d made was good.

And Shinji hadn’t even really wanted to pilot in the first place. He wasn’t alone feeling that way. While Ayumi had dutifully accepted the task, some of the other candidates were more guarded.

“We all know we’re the right age for this.” This came from the fifth candidate, a tall, lanky boy named Maeda Kenichi. “I’d rather be out playing ball, honestly, but my family would look at me like I’m insane for passing this up. My friends and I were talking after the announcement, and they were all hoping they could kick alien ass in an Eva. I’m not like that. If you need me to do it, I’ll do it, but I’m not one of those crazy, death-seeking guys who want to stomp on the heads of Angels. In baseball, if you’re reckless, you can run right into an out. That’s not me.”

That was something all the pilots should understand. More and more, Shinji realized through these interviews that he couldn’t afford just to take notes and relay his opinions to Misato and Hyūga. Though he was at a loss for how exactly to do that or what he should say, the opportunity came to him—forced itself upon him—before he was completely prepared.

“Where’s the next file?” wondered Asuka, stretching her arms over her head once the Maeda boy had gone.

“It’s here,” said Hyūga, and he slid the matched pair of folders over to Shinji and Asuka deliberately and with care.

“What, no creepy fifteen-second rundown of every aspect of this kid’s life from birth to this morning? You know, it’s a little unsettling how much you know about these people, or to think how much Seele must’ve known about us.”

“There is little that is truly outside our capabilities, yes, so I do know quite a bit about the girl you’re going to meet shortly, but I won’t insult either of you by telling you what you may already know.”

Asuka frowned at that, and she flipped through her folder anxiously, finding the cover photo at the beginning of the file. She winced at the image, looking ill.
“You know this person?” asked Shinji.

Nodding meekly, Asuka slid the collection of documents to him. “See for yourself.”

The girl in the photo had straight dark hair, tied high on her head into a ponytail that stopped around her shoulders. Her expression was blank, and while something about her nagged at him as familiar, he couldn’t place her.

“Didn’t you meet her?” said Asuka. “Hm, maybe you didn’t. Well, look at her name.”

Shinji glanced at the opposite page, reading the top line. “Candidate number 00914286 - Date of birth: 2004-03-15 - Name: Horaki Nozomi.” He met Asuka’s gaze. “Her sister?”

“I’ve not talked to her much,” Asuka explained. “When I stayed with Hikari, her little sister didn’t come out very often. The hell is this, Hyūga? You and Misato of all people should know what happened to Suzuhara and how that affected Hikari. You’re going to make her go through all that worrying again as a pilot’s sister now, too?”

“She’s a qualified candidate,” said Hyūga. “I urge you both to consider her fairly in spite of any personal connection to her and her family.”

Such words were easily said, but it was difficult advice to follow. Asuka looked upon the file folder with a pained and sickened expression, and Shinji shared some of her discomfort. Though Shinji hadn’t seen Tōji and Hikari for some months, he counted both of them as close friends. Hikari had sacrificed her time and energy to tend to Tōji after he lost his leg. That trial had drained and distracted her. It sapped her of her commanding presence in distributing cleaning assignments and other tasks, leaving only a soft-spoken, wounded shell behind. That was over two years ago, granted, but to Shinji, the memory was fresh and new. While Asuka frowned over Nozomi’s file and life details, Shinji looked over a copy of his own and came to a resolution: he’d do all he could to protect Hikari and her family from further trauma, and he’d give the youngest Horaki sister, Nozomi, all the wisdom he could to help keep that promise.

As with most of the other candidates, however, Shinji had too few minutes to prepare for meeting Nozomi and the rest of Hikari’s family. An SDF guard showed the group of four into the conference room, and it was a bittersweet reunion, considering the circumstances. Asuka embraced Hikari, trying to be as apologetic and assuring as possible, but Hikari only nodded absently, stunningly calm about the whole affair.

“I won’t pretend I’m happy with this,” she admitted. “You have to understand—Nozomi’s just a child. She’s not prepared for this sort of thing. It’ll be painful and dangerous, and Nozomi’s just not ready for that. She’s not like the way we were when you two were piloting Eva. Everything we’ve done as a family since then has been to shield ourselves from that burden.”

And that much Shinji could appreciate. How far had he gone to get out of the spotlight, to avoid cameras and attention to live his life the way he wanted? Still, Hikari’s concern wasn’t shared with all the family. By the end of the table sat a man in glasses with steel frames, and he scribbled diligently on a notepad while Shinji, Asuka, and Hyūga talked. This was the father of the Horaki family, and Shinji read in the file that he was an earnest reporter for one of the few newspapers left after Impact.

“Horaki-san, your insistence on performing your job is admirable,” said Hyūga, as he motioned for two guards to confiscate Horaki’s pad, “but we’re not here to have you run another exposé on sex scandals within a high school baseball team.”
“I don’t do sports anymore, Captain, and I think you know that,” said Horaki. “I think the people have a right to know what you and Colonel Katsuragi are doing to safeguard mankind—or at least what the two of you are doing after hours.”

Hyūga narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps you could tell us what your feelings are on your daughter being a potential Eva pilot?”

Horaki opened his coat jacket, looking for extra notepads to no avail. “I have no concern about it. Nozomi will do as she pleases. I’m sure she has an opinion on the matter. Nothing I say would change that. I work afternoons and evenings well into the night, Captain. My articles are what I’m qualified to speak to. Everything else I leave to Hikari and Kodama. It’s best that way. Whether Nozomi pilots or not doesn’t bother me in the slightest. You understand?”

Captain Hyūga jotted that down on his clipboard deliberately, much to Horaki’s chagrin. It seemed an interesting point, one that Shinji couldn’t quite fathom. How could a father be truly indifferent to what his daughter did? Was it that he had so much confidence in Nozomi’s ability to choose that he felt comfortable either way? No, Shinji didn’t think so. All throughout the interview with the family, Horaki seemed distracted and outright inattentive. Shinji wasn’t sure just what was going through the man’s mind.

Last in the family interviews was the eldest sister, Kodama. Aged twenty-one, she had attended culinary school in Nagoya before Third Impact, in the resulting chaos after mankind’s reemergence, she had returned to her family’s home as a caretaker, practicing her skills under a mentor at a local hotel during the day while serving her family at night. Despite her profession, she had a cold, demanding feeling to her, and gaze was as tight and precise as the braided ponytail on the back of her head. Her opinions weren’t much different, either.

“Of course Nozomi should pilot,” she’d said simply. “That’s the problem with people in this world. They want others to bear hardships, not themselves.” She looked to Hikari. “The girl can’t be coddled endlessly. She needs to show that she can grow up and take on a task even if it doesn’t agree with her. Show responsibility. Show courage. Anything else will only lead to this Eisheth gaining a little ground on humanity, if only by our indifference.”

Shinji had felt the weight of those duties, and he himself had run away from them more than once, so how could he ask that anyone else face them boldly and without hesitation? It was natural to hesitate. It was natural to find it frightening, yet Kodama couldn’t see that.

All throughout these opinions, the prospective pilot, Nozomi, had said nothing, not even looking at Shinji or the rest of the interview panel. At times, she’d stared at the walls and corners, but more than once Shinji looked her way and found her looking back at him with an intense, scrutinizing gaze. Most people knew who he was and recognized him as soon as they laid eyes on each other, but few bothered to watch him once they’d realized who he was.

Despite Nozomi’s unsettling stare, Shinji listened closely while Hyūga interviewed her. The rest of the family had cleared the room while Hyūga asked some basic questions about her school, her grades.

“I passed my last math test,” she said flatly. “I don’t know much about my classmates. I don’t find many of them interesting.”

“Why not?” asked Hyūga.

“They mostly all think the same way. They do problems the way the teacher instructs them to. They watch films like Nobi and see Private Tamura, the last of his Imperial platoon, wander into the fires
on the plains of the Philippines, and when he falls over under the Filipinos’ gunfire, they all think he must’ve died to giving in to his own cowardice, that he wandered there to out of helplessness and despair. I don’t believe that. I think he was still looking for a way to escape, and he knew that only a Filipino bullet would do the trick. I’m not saying I’m right, but if almost everyone believes the same thing mindlessly, it leaves a lot of room for too many people to be wrong.”

Hyūga nodded, writing down a summary on his clipboard. “So if I said most of the children who come in here want to pilot Eva, what would you say to that?”

“I’d say they’re fools. Maybe some of them have their heads on straight, but how many are looking for fame and glory? Too many, right? Those are the people who haven’t learned anything. Just because you save the world doesn’t mean people will recognize what you’ve done.” She nodded at Shinji. “You know that, don’t you?”

Shinji gaped, saying nothing.

“No, they didn’t,” said Shinji. “My father didn’t even tell me why I was coming to Tōkyō-3.”

Nozomi blinked in surprise and sat upright, curious. “So you started piloting because of your father?”

Shinji pursed his lips. It was difficult, yes, to dredge up these memories and bring them to the surface of his thoughts, but his pain could save this girl much more in the long run. Really, his memories and experiences were the guidance he’d come to offer, and he would be remiss to keep silent any longer.

“Yes,” said Shinji. “I came to Tōkyō-3 because my father asked me to, and I wanted to feel needed. My father sent me away after my mother died. I thought, finally, I could prove to him I was worth something, that I could be a son to him after all.”

“That’s pathetic.” Nozomi’s eyes flashed instantly as she realized what she said. “Ah, not you. People, I mean. People do things thinking others will notice them and judge them correctly when they don’t.”

“That’s why some people want to kill me?”

“I guess so. You can’t expect anyone else to do what you want them to do. If those people want to go live in the sea, they can. I wouldn’t try to stop them. All you did was give everyone the choice before we were irreversibly made into a single, mind-merged thing. If people don’t appreciate that, then they don’t know what’s good for them. You were a kid then. You were a kid like me, and I screw up all the time. No one should want you dead for that.”

“To be honest,” he said, “I don’t blame anyone for thinking I did some things wrong back then. I did have a part in bringing about Third Impact. I wanted everyone and everything in this world to go away, to leave me alone. Ayanami gave me the power to do that, and I’m glad she did. Only that way could I realize that I was wrong, that that inability to interact with others, to risk being hurt by them, wouldn’t give me any joy at all. Still, it cost a lot for me to see that. My father’s gone now, and I don’t know if he’ll ever come back. All I can do is try not to make those mistakes again, even if no one in the world notices. I know what we’re doing is right, and that’s what’s important. I can hope
that doing things differently will help change the legacy I’ve left behind, but that would be a luxury—a luxury I might not earn, and if I don’t, that’s okay. I just do the best I can.”

Nozomi’s mouth hung open slightly, but she said nothing, and it was only the rapping of Captain Hyūga’s pen that roused everyone else in the room.

“Nozomi-chan,” he said, “it’s time to answer the big question: do you want to pilot Evangelion?”

She looked between Shinji and Asuka carefully, considering her words. “Honestly, before I came into this room, I thought I didn’t. I know what it’s done to Hikari and her boyfriend. It would be painful and difficult and without reward. And as Ikari just said, you can go in thinking it will prove something and realize that’s just not true. So, no, I didn’t think I was interested.”

Hyūga nodded at that. “We’ll keep records of this transcript and profile in case you change your mind or the situation changes. We thank you for your cooperation. The guards outside will take you back to your family.”

Nozomi nodded, and she watched Shinji through the corner of her eye as she left. That much Shinji took as a good sign—to see someone take his advice and make an informed, reasonable decision, based on their feelings and how piloting Eva would affect them was truly encouraging, and he gave the same speech or something similar to it to all the subsequent candidates. Some decided to pilot anyway; others turned away better informed. Either way, the pool of pilots was better for it.

Nevertheless, these children were their own people, and they had a great capacity to surprise him.

As the day wound down, Shinji was given a pile of synch test results to look over, for all the candidates who’d accepted the chance to pilot Eva had been put into the entry plug to assess their initial abilities. And none other than Horaki Nozomi, with a first-day synch ratio of 36%, had claimed the top of the rankings.

“Ah, you’re wondering why she’s there, right?” asked Hyūga, catching Shinji’s surprise. “It seems she changed her mind. She demanded that she speak to me, and she said, ‘I still think it’ll be without reward, but I realize now not everyone will understand that. If what I’ve figured out makes me even one percent better at piloting than someone else, then I have to try. I have an obligation to try because I don’t want to see us reduced to goo again.’ ” Hyūga laughed to himself. “Well, not the kind of speech I expect from a second-year in junior high school, but I’m glad she reconsidered. With scores like these, she could very well be the next pilot.”

And if she did end up on that path, it would be because Shinji had guided her, not just to realize her own inadequacies but to find a way to look past them and aspire to something better, something he’d never been capable of at her age himself.

Nozomi wasn’t the only pilot candidate, of course, and thanks in large part to his initiative in the interviews, Misato arranged for Shinji to take up a position in the new Eva program as a mentor of sorts, an advisor and counselor to the children, so that the potential defenders of the human race could learn from his experience, his trials, and his mistakes.

At first, Shinji approached this new task with dedication. After months of searching for Rei and finding her at last, he didn’t mind the chance to do something meaningful with his life during the day. Every morning, he made his commute to National Square and boarded the tram under the Defense Ministry, and after navigating the maze of corridors and elevators, he’d find his way to his office—a single, spacious room with a handcrafted desk, a computer, and an endless supply of paper, pens,
and staples for him to use. In that room with “Special Assistant to the Colonel” engraved on the door’s nameplate, he interviewed the other pilot candidates—about twenty in all—and reviewed their progress on a daily basis. In the mornings, he’d analyze the candidates’ test scores from the afternoon and evening before. At noon, he’d take time off to deliver lunches to Asuka and Kyōko, for the Sōryū family was once again quite busy, this time with new funding for their work. Misato and her men were eagerly co-opting their research to build biological LCL detectors and filters, so that if even trace amounts of LCL penetrated the water supply, it would be found and weeded out.

“It’s the perfect defense against the Zenunim,” Misato had explained to him. “The only way they’re going to sneak up on us is if they try to get into the water to go place to place. If they come over land, we’ll be ready for them. Even a good grenade or two can damage them enough so they don’t reform. The defense of planet Earth is ongoing, Shinji-kun. It didn’t end when the Zenunim moved on to bide their time in the ocean, and it won’t suddenly pick back up when Eisheth’s children from space arrive en masse to take us all into her sickly paradise. This is about more than just using Eva to beat her back. We have to make sure people feel safe as long as we can.”

Knowing that, Shinji wondered if it was any small surprise that Asuka and Kyōko’s research proved so integral to this defense effort. Maybe Misato had orchestrated it that way to keep people she trusted in control. In the hands of a more unscrupulous person, such manipulations could be very dangerous indeed.

Thankfully, Shinji thought to himself, Misato-san is on our side.

In the afternoons, Shinji had the task of seeing to the pilot candidates, who had a staggered schedule to come in for testing and simulations, but from time to time the tests would run long, and Shinji would do his best to keep the children company while they were waiting for their turn in the Eva. Almost to a man, the children were cognizant of the weight of what they were doing. Some of them viewed the role of pilot as a true honor and treated their duties with reverence and respect. Others felt burdened by it, and Shinji took careful notes on them, in case he had to report to Misato that they should be removed from the program before they succumbed to the stress.

The only outlier in the group was the young Horaki girl, Nozomi. Despite her earnest plea to Hyūga to let her back into the program, Nozomi kept any eagerness to pilot to herself while Shinji was around, exuding an air of objective indifference. Her attitude puzzled Shinji, but he found her without a doubt an intelligent girl, and he tried to use that to engage her and explore her attitudes toward what she was doing. For the most part, Nozomi spent her spare time on art and studying how it would be perceived, whether biologically or psychologically. Still, she was conversant on a number of topics, and when she questioned him one day on politics—how he would appease the Russians and Chinese over Japan having the only Eva in the region—Shinji was frankly at a loss. He seldom paid attention to such things, even given the obvious relevance to what they were doing, to the defense of mankind.

“You really haven’t thought about it?” asked Nozomi. “Here I thought you guys had some master plan to share piloting duties with them or something, so that way they’d be put at ease. You could have a Chinese pilot and a Russian pilot. Maybe even a Korean pilot if they insist on it. You don’t think that would help?”

“It might,” admitted Shinji, “but it’s really not my concern. Misato-san probably has an idea about that, I’m sure. I’m just here to look after the pilots.”

“That’s all you do?”

“Um, yes?”
Nozomi snorted—a definitively unladylike sound—but Shinji suspected she wouldn’t be very concerned about that, and as she’d often done while waiting for her testing time, she pulled out a drawing pad from her school bag and started to sketch. Nozomi’s pencil drawings were, as she’d put it, mostly scenes from her day. When Shinji’d asked why she wanted to keep a record that way—why not keep a diary instead—she explained herself simply.

“When I look at one of these sketches, I remember everything right away,” she’d said. “I don’t even have to check the date. I don’t have to read anything to figure out what my state of mind was that day. People forget so much, day in and day out, but I don’t.” She offered the pad to him. “Pick a page, any page, and I can tell you whatever you want to know.”

Shinji took her up on that offer, flipping through the pages, and he stopped on a drawing of a short-haired boy who looked to be giving a lecture in front of a group of his fellow students.

“The president of the school Art Club has an intense love for Sōtatsu,” Nozomi explained. “You probably don’t know him. He did fan painting and screen work in the Tokugawa period, so yes, a junior high school Art Club president is giving daily lectures over the infinite wisdom and mastery of an artist who died almost four hundred years ago. The boy is half out of his mind!”

“You’re in this sketch,” Shinji observed. “You’re sitting right next to him. You decided to draw this like you were at the other end of the table, facing him instead?”

“Yeah. It would’ve been awkward, trying to capture him standing up from a seated position with my perspective. It would’ve made him look larger than life, and that’s the last thing he needs. He made me vice-president of the club, and I’m just a second-year. How does that make sense?”

“It makes enough sense if he’s not just interested in seventeenth-century art.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Shinji pursed his lips, suppressing a smile, but he said nothing more on that. Instead, it was Nozomi who had a question for Shinji.

“That stuff you said about your father,” she began, “is it true?”

“Yes, every word. I didn’t understand it at the time. He gave me a choice to be the pilot or to go away and watch someone else do it instead. That was Ayanami. I’d like to think I took her place because she was in pain, because I thought I had to or no one else could, but I don’t know. Maybe I did it just to impress Father instead. Maybe the truth is somewhere in the middle.”

“You don’t talk like someone who helped bring about the end of the world,” said Nozomi. “Or like someone whose decision brought us all back.”

“I don’t know what that person is supposed to be like,” said Shinji. “I just know who I am and what I’ve tried to do.”

“I see. You’re not quite the hero people make you out to be, are you?”

“Does anyone live up to those types of expectations?” asked Shinji.

To that, Nozomi had no answer, and with her silence, Shinji saw something all too familiar—a faraway stare, a person lost in reflection and thinking. Throughout this process, Shinji had endeavored to tell all his candidates the honest truth as he saw it: this task was important but unglamorous, and none of them should think any differently about it, but perhaps he’d tried too hard not to sugarcoat things. Maybe he should’ve been doing something to give these children confidence
and empower them instead. His intentions were good, but that didn’t make his actions the right course. In the end, these children were going to struggle with the toll that piloting Eva would exact on their minds, and Shinji would be there to watch every second of it.

Over the span of several weeks training these children and evaluating their progress, some of the candidates dropped out, citing pressure from competition with the other pilots or tensions in their families as the stress and time commitment grew too difficult to ignore. Some of them experienced visions from their contacts with the Eva, and Shinji was hard-pressed to explain these phenomena in simple terms. What exactly were these children making contact with? The soul of someone locked away in the core of the Eva? The twisted mind of a beast? Some combination of the two? These were technical questions, and he did his best not to speculate on them. Some of the children reacted badly to that presence, whatever it was, even though they’d tolerated it well at first. Even the ones who didn’t leave the program had to struggle with it. Some dared to speak to Shinji about their experiences—how sitting in the Eva, they recalled distant memories they thought they’d forgotten, perhaps of someone dear to them long since dead. The rest bottled these experiences away, none more than young Horaki Nozomi.

Though Nozomi stayed on as a candidate, her promising early scores soon plummeted. Shinji tried to press her on whether something might be weighing on her—trouble at school or at home—but there was an emotional wall between them that only her sarcastic observations on humanity seemed to pass through. Nevertheless, Shinji had an obligation to look after her, not only as a candidate under his care but as a friend to Hikari, but despite his best efforts, he couldn’t find anything obvious that might’ve unsettled her. She’d had to cut down on her school activities, yes, but that was unavoidable, and Hikari made sure to walk Nozomi to the Defense Ministry every afternoon, but unlike some of the other candidates’ family members, she never stayed around for Nozomi’s tests. As far as Shinji could tell, she’d wait around for Nozomi in the Square instead, even well past dusk if need be, with only the trickling of the central fountain to keep her company. Shinji had seen her more than once waiting there while he was on his way home, yet as alone as she looked, he couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

And that was all just the affairs of one girl—one candidate to worry over. Even with some of the children dropping out, he still had over a dozen to consider. It was a daunting task, one he couldn’t have grasped fully when Misato proposed the idea, and as much as he wanted to do something to help mankind rise up against Eisheth, he wondered whether his efforts to guide the children were nearly enough.

At the end of each day at the base, Shinji would return home. His workdays ended late, typically an hour or two before midnight, but that suited him fine, for it matched up with Asuka’s tendency to work until she dropped. Still, she’d forced herself to mitigate that habit. Knowing what dangers Shinji had faced on the train from Odawara while she and her mother had been safe in a shelter changed Asuka’s outlook for the better, and she made sure to come home for a late dinner each night. It was an opportunity for both of them to wind down and discuss their work. As it turned out, Asuka would usually be too worn out to go into details with her problems, so she’d act mostly as a sounding board for Shinji to work out what he was seeing with the children instead. In response to his growing concerns that they were having a difficult time of it, Asuka wasn’t too worried as yet.

“Give it time,” she said blithely, savoring a plate of homemade apple curry. “Not everyone can jump into an Eva and save the capital in fifteen minutes.”

Shinji chuckled nervously at that. “I didn’t have to do very much for that, though. I just feel over and acted as a training dummy until the Eva took over. The hard part came later—living with it, day in and day out.”
“You always did worry about things like that.” She pursed her lips, thinking for a minute. “Not to say you were wrong to. But really, what else can you do? Tell them how it’s going to be, and the best candidate will pick herself. You’re not there to make everyone into a pilot. We just need one, maybe two to have a backup. That’s it. Easy as pie. You’re doing a fine job with these kids, Shinji. I don’t even know half their names, but you? You’ve memorized their files. If I ask you what score candidate number fifteen got in simulated combat last Tuesday, you know the answer. Every day, I see you trying to find something new to say to these kids so they can succeed. You’ve really taken this job to heart. It makes me want to say to people, ‘Hey, you know my boyfriend? He’s helping choose the person who’ll save the world.’ Well, if I wouldn’t get jailed or shot for blabbing about that, anyway. Trust me, you’re doing just fine.”

It was a real comfort to hear her say that, and it reminded Shinji that just as the candidates needed more than just his honesty but his willingness to show confidence in them, he needed the exact same thing from time to time. And these days, he was looking for it from Asuka, who could actually give it to him, and not from his father who wouldn’t or couldn’t show him more than token approval a handful of times.

After dinner that night, Shinji dealt with the dishes while Asuka retired to the bedroom, and given that she’d shed her labcoat and socks before she was halfway down the hall, Shinji had a fairly good idea of what she had in mind for the rest of the evening, but still, it was his responsibility to clean off every last trace of curry sauce before putting everything away.

Were it not for that, he and Asuka might already have been in bed by the time the apartment phone rang.

“Yes, hello?” answered Shinji.

“My apologies for ringing at this time of night, sir; this is the door,” said the building doorkeeper on the other end of the line. “There is a young lady here to see you. She says her name is Horaki? I know you prefer not to speak to visitors, sir, but she tells me you’re acquainted?”

“We might be. Could you describe her?”

“Ah, let me see—young girl, about thirteen or fourteen, stands between 155 and 160 centimeters, with her hair tied off in a short ponytail.”

“I see. Did Nozomi-chan say what this is about?”

“I’m afraid not, sir, but she tells me you’re acquainted?”

That was definitely Nozomi’s style—if she wanted something, she would press to get it. But what could she want at almost a quarter to midnight? For her to even be out that time of night must surely have worried the rest of her family.

Whatever the issue was, it was critical enough for Nozomi to pound on Shinji’s door as soon as she reached his floor. If he and Asuka had had neighbors, Shinji would’ve worried about the commotion. As it was, he did his best to assure Nozomi as he made his way to the threshold. “Coming!” he said, and he undid the array of locks and latches that kept them both safe from the outside world.

SMACK!

Only for that world to reach out and slap him across the cheek for his trouble.

“You lying bastard!” shouted Nozomi. “I trusted you because I thought you were telling it to me straight, but you didn’t do that! You didn’t tell me some thing could come into my head and haunt
Cradling his cheek, Shinji eyed Nozomi from head to toe. She was far from the crisp and clean girl he usually saw. Her hair was unkempt, and the green hairband that she used to keep her ponytail in place was loose and ineffective. She’d come to his door in little more than a short-sleeved top and spotted pajama pants, and instead of shoes, she wore indoor slippers. Her bloodshot eyes teared up even as she watched him with a trembling stare.

“You met her,” Shinji realized. “You met Eisheth.”

She nodded, and with that confession, her anger and resolve melted away. Unsteady on her feet, she drifted into the apartment. Her knees buckled, and Shinji caught her, easing her down to the floor. Her labored, shuddering breaths gave way to sobs, and she curled into a ball, burying herself in a corner for protection and solace.

“Nozomi-chan, just listen to my voice, okay?” said Shinji. “She’s not here now. She won’t touch you here. Repeat after me now. ‘My thoughts are mine.’ Can you say that?”

Sniffling, Nozomi wiped away at her tears, and with heavy breaths, she repeated his mantra. “My thoughts are mine,” she mumbled. “My thoughts are mine; my thoughts are mine.”

In little more than a skimpy yellow nightgown, Asuka tip-toed quietly to the door, carrying a tray with three cups of tea. Shinji took one for himself, and though she was still shaky, Nozomi took a cup with both hands and sipped.

“You know,” said Asuka, “Eisheth had the nerve to try to get into Shinji’s head, too.”

Nozomi nodded. “She told me something like that.”

“Then what she probably didn’t say that Shinji told her to fuck herself, and anyone else can do the same! So whatever she tried to show you, don’t be fooled. She isn’t as powerful as you might think; you’re safe here. Just tell us what happened.”

Sitting back, Nozomi rested her head on the wall and closed her eyes. “I was dreaming. I thought I was in one of the elevators on the base with Hikari, and we were talking, but she wasn’t talking the way she usually would. She was harsh and cold, always staring at me, and every time I looked at her, she’d be wearing something different—like I couldn’t really see what she looked like at all.”

“What did she say to you?” asked Shinji.

Nozomi shied away. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“You don’t have to listen to her. Whatever she said, about people inevitably hurting each other—it’s not true. I don’t believe that, and you shouldn’t either.”

Asuka drew in a sharp breath, giving Shinji a stern look. “Nozomi-chan, can I ask you a different question? I admit, I haven’t put it all together because I can only go off what Shinji tells me, but I have to ask—what are you doing here? It’s got to be at least fifteen minutes to get here from your place. Shinji and I are happy to help and all, even…” She winced. “Even when it’s almost midnight, but why come to us? Why not talk to Hikari or the rest of your family? There’s a reason you didn’t want to talk to them about this, isn’t there?”

Nozomi sighed in weariness and frustration. “Yeah. Eisheth talked to me about my sisters, about my father. She said, ‘Why do you keep looking for validation from people who won’t give it?’ She said that was the flaw of flesh and blood, that people can’t recognize each other’s accomplishments, and I
was a fool for wanting that.” She met Shinji’s gaze. “I should’ve listened to you, to that story about your father, but I didn’t. I thought it was just a good thing to do, entering the pilot program, is that why I did it? No. Hikari has been treating me like a child ever since our mother died. Kodama is bitter because she’s had to put aside her dreams to keep the family stable. Father spends so much of his time at the office, and he just doesn’t care what happens to us. Do you know what he was doing when we got home? We’d been separated all night because he was at the office, and the first words out of his mouth were, ‘Kodama, where did you hide my potato sticks?’ Can you believe that? So why should I want those people to notice me? Why should I care what they think?”

Perhaps there was no good answer to those questions, no logical reason to seek recognition from people who’d never recognized her before, but they were family, and Nozomi knew that. She must’ve, Shinji reasoned, or else she never would’ve bothered to search for a reason at all.

Over the course of half an hour, Shinji and Asuka did what they could to shelter Nozomi and calm her down. Shinji kept her close by, engaging her with simple tasks to keep her mind off things, like having her help with washing the silverware and dishes.

“Some hosts you two are,” Nozomi quipped in amusement as she rubbed a knife clean with a rag. “Making me help you with cleaning. You guys use Western silverware?”

“Asuka’s more comfortable with it, so we keep at least one set handy,” Shinji explained.

Nozomi frowned to herself, looking at her reflection in the metal of a knife. “You know, if Kodama catches anyone touching her set of kitchen knives, she loses it. They were a gift from her mentor, and he didn’t come back after Third Impact, so it’s like they stand in for what she had before then. They’re her most precious keepsakes, and no one else should use them. It’s like we’d get them dirty if we even breathed on them. She never shows that kind of concern for anyone alive.”

It was one thing to get Nozomi steady and calm, but it was quite another to resolve the problems she faced, ones that were reminiscent of his own in the past. Ultimately, Nozomi had to go back home, but she didn’t have to go and confront her family alone. To give what aid he could, Shinji called a cab and accompanied her. This, too, was part of his duties, a part he faced with trepidation and uncertainty. Though he wanted to assure Nozomi that things could change in her family, he knew too well that sometimes they didn’t. Asuka had grown up a lot in the last two years, sure, but she’d had help doing it, in both him and her mother. As Shinji rode through those deserted, dark streets, he looked to the horizon. The capital was far from the ocean, but Shinji felt like he could see waves breaking on shore all too clearly. Nozomi had deceived herself, saying one thing but wanting another in piloting, just as Shinji had done, as others like her would do again and again. For all Shinji’s efforts, perhaps all he’d accomplished was to see children like Nozomi repeat his mistakes, in spite of his best intentions, for he was ill-equipped to truly change their course.

Such gloomy thoughts festered in Shinji’s mind, and he couldn’t deny there was an element of truth to them, but to let them stand unopposed would’ve been foolish and cynical. No one would learn—and nothing would change—if people didn’t try. That was what made them different from Eisheth in viewpoint and ideas, and Shinji did his best to keep that thought solid and fresh in his mind as he and Nozomi journeyed toward her home. The Horaki family lived in a comfortable condominium about fifteen minutes from Shinji and Asuka, and it was the same twentieth-floor abode that they’d lived in since before Third Impact came. Thus, their building with the brick façade around ground level was familiar to him, as was the iron knocker under their room number and nameplate. Shinji rapped twice on the door, and the response was exactly as he expected.

“Thank goodness!” cried Hikari, taking Nozomi into her arms. “I was so scared, just thinking what could happen to you out there at this time of night!” She looked to Shinji. “I’m so sorry she had to
“Come bother you.”

“It’s really no trouble,” said Shinji.

“Still, I apologize on Nozomi’s behalf for her imposing on you. Thank you again for seeing that she got home safe. Is your taxi still waiting downstairs, or can we call you another?”

“Actually, I think there’s something I need to stay here for, something Nozomi-chan wants to say, too.”

A look of worry came over Hikari’s face, but she allowed Shinji inside. The girls’ father was waiting for them in the main room, idly flipping through channels on the television and muttering to himself about possible stories for the next day.

“Ah, you’re back?” he said. “Good. Let’s all get back to bed, then, shall we? It’s dreadfully late.”

“Actually, it seems Nozomi has something she wants to talk about,” said Hikari. “Sister, can you come out here, too, please?”

Wearily, Kodama stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands with a rag. “You know I’ve got something on the stove right now. Really, if we’re going to talk about Nozomi’s nightmares, can’t we do it on something more than an empty stomach?”

“This isn’t about nightmares,” said Nozomi. “This is about our family. Please, all of you, just listen to me this one time. I’ve been doing this piloting thing for the better part of three weeks now, and every time we talk about it, it’s the same old song. Hikari, you don’t want to even bring up the subject because it reminds you how your boyfriend was hurt, and you keep trying to look for excuses for me to quit. Kodama, you never think what I’m doing is good enough, and if I say that I found something difficult or that my scores or slipping, you question me! You say I’m not dedicated enough, that I have to stop being so selfish! And you, Dad—you treat it with the same level of interest as watching paint peel off a wall in the sun. You say, ‘Ah, that’s nice,’ and then it’s right off to talk about governments and politicians, all the stuff you’re interested in. I’m sick of it! I know I’m not an adult, but I’m a bigger girl than I was when Mom died, okay? I’m taking this job seriously, and even if it’s not important to you, it’s important to me. I just want all of you to recognize that. I believe you guys can. When that thing tried to get into my head, I told her that same thing, and maybe part of it was to be stubborn, to fight back against her, but I feel it, too. So please, do you understand me now?”

The room was quiet for a time, with only Nozomi looking between her two sisters and her father. Hikari shied away from her, visibly wounded. “I haven’t been looking for ways to make you quit,” she insisted weakly. “But you’re right—it hurts me to see you piloting that thing. Knowing what happened to Asuka, to Tōji-kun, I worry. Every second you’re in that thing, it’s like a tiny piece of you dies inside. That’s what I worry about, Nozomi—that you won’t come back the same. You’re my little sister; it’s my responsibility to protect you, and if I’d had my way, you wouldn’t have been allowed to pilot in the first place. This is dangerous, and you’re still too young to be making these kinds of decisions for yourself.”

Kodama huffed. “There you go again, Hikari. What’s Nozomi asking for right now? To be treated like a big girl? Well, that’s easy to do. Nozomi, you shouldn’t need anyone’s approval—not Hikari’s, not mine, not Father’s. Whatever you do, it should be because you’re behind it completely. You don’t need to prove anything to me. Prove it to yourself.”

At a loss for how to follow that up, Horaki put his pen and pad down and tried to work through his confusion aloud. “I know I’ve been a busy man, and that’s cost me the chance to be more like a father to you. There’s not a lot I can do to change that now except give advice where it’s needed.
Nozomi, it doesn’t matter to me whether you pilot that thing or not. Do you really want my drive-by opinion in the first place?”

“Maybe not,” said Nozomi. “Maybe I was wrong to ask anything of all of you. Excuse me.” She made for the hallway.

“Ah, Nozomi-chan!” said Shinji.

But he was far too late. Nozomi ran for her room and locked the door behind her without another word.

Not wanting to intrude any more on the Horaki family, Shinji headed downstairs to the building lobby, where, as usual, he raised a green hood and put on a pair of sunglasses to hide his identity from the public.

“You can never be too careful these days, can you, sir?” That was the security guard on duty, a genial man with a slight belly who worked a newspaper number puzzle to pass the time. He sat at a reception desk and only glanced at Shinji briefly before looking back at his puzzle.

“Careful?” asked Shinji, taking a seat in the corner.

“Bright lights.” The guard touched a finger to the corner of his eye. “They give my son headaches, too. Must be terrible. How long have you had them?”

Shinji chuckled nervously. It was probably better to let the guard think that than to explain the real reason. “A couple years now.”

“You need someone called to pick you up?” asked the guard. “A cab, maybe?”

“Ah, if it’s no trouble…”

“Not at all.”

It was nice not to have to worry about one thing, but getting back home was the least of his worries. Twenty floors above him, Nozomi had faced her family and bravely expressed her desires only to be disappointed. That was no act of malice, or so he believed. All the Horaki family were good people, yet still there was an impossible gap between them. If Shinji could take comfort in something, it was that this gap had existed long before he’d ever met Nozomi and unknowingly encouraged her to pilot Eva. He could bear no blame for creating it, but still, Shinji felt helpless to do anything about it, at least right then and there. More than anyone else in the program, Nozomi was his responsibility. Even though he didn’t understand it at the time, he’d persuaded her to be a pilot, to take up the task despite her initial doubts and skepticism.

But right then and there was probably not the time. Nozomi was in no state to be bothered further, at least not that night. Tomorrow, Shinji would take her aside and gauge how she was holding up—and if necessary, remind her that she didn’t need to stay in the program, that she shouldn’t if she was indeed looking to prove herself by piloting. That was the wisdom no one had given him when he was a pilot, and it was exactly the experience he could bring to the candidates as an advisor.

If he should even be the one advising these children at all.

Knock-knock-knock. Three dull thuds rattled the glass door to the lobby. Had Shinji lost track of time? Bewildered in his own thoughts, had he forgotten about his taxi and made the driver come out
just to find him? Shinji rose from his seat, thinking so, but the gleam of a golden badge in the darkness quickly corrected him.

The security guard scribbled one last digit on his puzzle before picking up the phone beside him. He looked out to the door. “Officer, can you hear me? If you want to talk, it’s just the black button in the top left. What can I do for you?”

The officer’s voice was muffled through the glass, but Shinji could just make out his words. “We got a call that there was a disturbance in room 2048; something about a girl trying to harm herself. Need to check it out.”

Room 2048, the Horaki apartment. Shinji cringed to hear it, and he could hardly believe that Nozomi would take what’d happened so hard, but if the policeman said it was true, it had to be so. It was just one more thing for him to regret.

The security guard hit an oversized red button on the wall and let the police officer in, and as the officer went for the elevators, Shinji rose from his seat.

“Excuse me, but you said you’re going to 2048? I know the family there. Can I come with you?”

“I’m sorry,” said the officer, “but for your own safety, I have to insist—” He frowned, studying Shinji. “You—you’re wearing sunglasses.” He glanced at the security guard, who was just returning to his seat by the wall opposite from Shinji. “In the middle of the night, too,” mused the officer. “I see.”

Shinji felt a knot inside him, and he moved back half a step. It was always uncomfortable to have anyone recognize him or come close to doing so, but something about the officer’s piercing, critical stare unsettled him and made his heart beat fast.

“Officer, though you’re right it’s a bad idea for the boy to go with you, I feel I should come along,” said the security guard. “Safety in this building is my responsibility. I had experience as a medic in SDF before Impact; if she’s hurt, I can help.”

“That won’t be necessary.” The officer waved the security guard off and put a hand on his hip, right next to his belt and holster. “I’m sure there’s no need for anything but a little restoration of order here.”

Shinji looked back at the officer, wanting to argue—what harm could it do if he stayed back and out of sight?—but a faint glow caught his eye. Past the security guard stood Rei, and her eyes were bright and red with earnestness and warning.

‘Run, Ikari-kun. Do it now. Your life is in danger here.’

How could that be? With two officers of the peace to protect him there, what did he have to fear? The Zenunim? If they’d come back, Misato and her people would know. They had the technology for that.

‘It’s not Eisheth’s children you should worry about. That man in front of you isn’t a police officer.’

Not a police officer? But how could that be? The light blue color of his shirt—that couldn’t be faked, could it? From the cherry blossom insignia on his vest to his sturdy belt to his gun—

All the hairs on Shinji’s arms and neck stood on end. There was a man with a gun in that lobby, and he stood no more than an arm’s length from Shinji.
‘Go now,’ said Rei. ‘Run, Ikari-kun!’

As much as his mind told him to listen to Rei, his legs felt like cinderblocks, and all he could do was creep toward the lobby door while the guard continued to press the officer for information.

“Where’s your partner?” asked the guard. “I’ve almost never seen a lone officer out on the beat, let alone taking a call.”

“We’re understaffed; that’s all.” The officer looked to Shinji. “Where are you going?”

“Um, nowhere?”

The officer nodded, saying nothing. He took a step toward the elevator—an act that seemed harmless for but a fleeting moment.

Then he whipped out his pistol and fired. BANG BANG BANG!

Shinji shuddered, and three red circles formed where the bullets had hit. His sweatshirt was undamaged, however, for the stains appeared on the security guard’s plain white uniform, and the man staggered back behind his desk, stumbling to the floor.

Only then did adrenaline come to Shinji, and it propelled him like a rocket through the lobby door. The metal frame clashed against the hinges, and two more bullets shattered the glass, leaving channels of hot, disturbed air that brushed past Shinji’s cheeks.

Shinji raced around the corner of the building façade, and he put his back to the wall, panting and listening. “Ayanami?” he cried. “Where should I go?”

‘You’re safe for now.’

Shinji looked back to see Rei at the top of the building’s ten steps. She stared through the broken glass door, watching Shinji from just the corner of her eye. Curious, Shinji tip-toed up the stairs to join her, looking out from around the frame of the door. Inside, the fake officer stole the guard’s stun gun and baton, leaving the body to soak in a small but growing puddle of blood. The fake officer pushed up on the elevator control panel, and when the lift arrived, he slipped inside. As he turned around to face forward, Shinji pulled away, lest he be seen, but the faux officer had one thing to say before the elevator doors closed.

“Yes, yes, call out to Lilith if you want, you misguided boy,” he said, “but know that she won’t save you or anyone who serves with you. She can’t. Her contract with Eisheth forbids it.”

A faint bell rang as the elevator rose to the next floor, and the man was gone.

Shinji trotted back into the lobby, and he knelt down beside the wounded security guard.

“No, no…” Even with three bullet holes in his chest, the guard shook his head, trying to send Shinji away, but he could do little more than blink weakly and groan. “You need to go, Ikari-san. If he comes back…”

“You knew who I was?” asked Shinji. “All the time, and you didn’t say anything?”

The guard laughed, but his mirth turned to a fit of coughing. Still, he managed to eke out a few last words. “Who else would be so desperate to hide his face? But please, you have to go. I know who that man is after. It’s not you. Room 2048—they don’t like to go by their names, but I know. You know them, too. Hurry, kid. Hurry….”
With gulping, shuddering breaths, the security guard looked away, staring at the ceiling. There was truly nothing he could do for the man without compromising his duty and obligations to someone he was responsible for, someone whose life was in danger with every moment he took to stop and think. Eisheth couldn’t have known he would be there. The fake officer had been surprised when he realized who Shinji was. He’d come for Nozomi. He’d come as part of Eisheth’s promise—and threat—to anyone who opposed her.

Shinji raced to the elevators and jammed the up button, but the wait for the next car was maddening. He found a door to a stairwell instead and pushed it open.

“Don’t,” said Rei, staring him in the face. “You can’t run up there in time to catch him. Be calm, Ikari-kun. Be patient. Don’t panic.”

Ding! The second elevator from the right opened its doors, and Shinji jammed both the 20 and door close button as hard as he could. “Is it true?” he demanded. “Eisheth’s coming for Nozomi-chan? What about the others?”

Rei stepped in beside him. “Colonel Katsuragi will see to their safety. In five minutes, SDF personnel will be on scene at every candidate’s home to evacuate them. I’ve made sure of it.”

“That doesn’t do a whole lot for Nozomi-chan right now!”

Rei’s chin fell slightly in a grim nod. “No, it doesn’t. That’s why I’ve shown you here. Even without weapons, you can do something to help save one person, and I know that capacity is within you.”

Ding, went the elevator. Floor three, floor five, floor six…

“How?” Shinji demanded. “How can I do that? With my own body as a shield against a gun? Nothing I told Nozomi-chan or anyone else really helped them. Nothing I did helped them avoid what I went through; it’s all happening again, almost exactly the same way!”

“Because they must learn the same lessons you did,” said Rei. “They are children. Children must learn to understand their parents, their families. You, Ikari-kun—you are not a child anymore. You are like a parent to them. What you must learn is that your children will not always succeed the first time they try to walk. Sometimes, they will fall flat on their faces and have an Angel beat them down for it.”

Shinji shook his head, and he took several shuddering breaths as he watched the lights above the elevator pass twelve and fourteen. “That doesn’t help me. Tell me, Ayanami—what am I supposed to do?”

“I truly don’t know the answer to that. Time and space are the same to me, but where Eisheth and I share influence, they are both equally unclear. The only thing I know with certainty in this moment is that you are the only one in position to help. I can’t know if that’s something you can do, but I believe you can.”

Breathing through his mouth, Shinji prepared himself like a swimmer about to go halfway down an Olympic-sized pool underwater. Only gods could know what lay outside those rusty elevator doors as the car passed floors eighteen and nineteen on its way to twenty, and if even Rei couldn’t tell him, then he would really be on his own to figure it out.

Ding, floor twenty, and Shinji peered out cautiously, glancing down both ends of the hall.

Crunch! Wood cracked and splintered. Shinji tip-toed to the corner, and four apartments down, he glimpsed the fake police officer bashing at the Horaki family’s door with his shoulder.
Shinji looked about. He needed a weapon—he needed something to deal with this man—but what? There was a small, decorative table by the elevators, and maybe if he shattered some glass he could use the shards to cut and slash at the man, but as close as he’d have to get to the man, he couldn’t help but think that would just get him killed.

‘Look to your left.’

He glanced out of the corner of his eye, finding a glass case and a sturdy red canister almost as long as his arm.

“Ayanami, this doesn’t count as us getting to talk,” he said, taking out the fire extinguisher. “So that means I’m coming back from this, right?”

‘I will permit nothing else.’

With a deep breath, Shinji turned the corner, pointing the nozzle of the extinguisher down the hall. He fumbled with the discharge lever, but when he got a hold of it and squeezed, a cone of white gas enveloped the fake police officer, blinding him.

BANG, BANG! Two stray shots ricocheted off the walls. Shinji retreated, backing off—all the man had to do was guess where Shinji might be and a stray bullet would do the rest. Shinji put his back to the wall around the corner, with the nozzle of the fire extinguisher in hand, but the false officer had other priorities.

CRUNCH, SNAP! The Horaki family’s door gave way, and Shinji looked back around the corner to see the false officer climbing over boxes and tables that had been stuffed into the threshold.

“Hikari, go with your sister; both of you, hide out in her room!” cried Horaki from out of Shinji’s sight.

“Kodama—”

BANG!

And Horaki went silent. There was a scream and a thud, and Shinji ran to the broken door. Beyond set of boxes, chairs, and other furniture put in front of the door to slow the false officer down, Horaki lay crippled halfway down the entry hall, bleeding from a bullet wound to the thigh. Shinji climbed and maneuvered through the opening, a clumsy effort with the fire extinguisher slowing him down. When he reclaimed his footing, Shinji checked into the kitchen, where the eldest sister Kodama cradled her head, bleeding from a wound above of right eye.

“That man could’ve taken my eye, hitting me like that with his gun,” muttered Kodama, struggling to her feet. ‘Go on; I’ll tend to Father. Go, Ikari-san!”

With both hands on the extinguisher, Shinji went for the bedrooms, and once again, a locked door had the false officer briefly stymied. He kicked and shoved at the plain beige bedroom door, and Shinji decided to make it look a little whiter. He sprayed and sprayed at the false officer, covering the man in retardant residue.

“Nozomi-chan is my responsibility!” he cried, “and I won’t let you hurt her or anyone else!”

CLANG! He bashed the false officer over the head with the bottom of the extinguisher, and the man tumbled on his back, stunned.

“Nozomi-chan, Hikari-san!” Shinji rapped on the bedroom door. “Come out; we have to go, now!”

The girls burst from Nozomi’s room, scampering off in their pajamas, and for good measure, Shinji
hurled the fire extinguisher at the false officer, smashing the man in the ribs. Shinji snatched up the man’s pistol and watched him down the barrel of the gun as he and the girls fled.

Back by the threshold, Kodama vainly tried to clear the debris in front of the door for Hikari and Nozomi to pass through, but Nozomi stood transfixed over her father’s wound.

“Nozomi, please,” said Hikari, pulling on Nozomi’s arm. “There could be others with that man; we need to get somewhere safe.”

“And leave our father here? He’ll die if we go!”

“I’m fine, really!” grunted Horaki, but he winced in pain and lay on his back, the bloodstain already spreading through his dress pants in an unsightly blotch. “A child should expect to see her father die, and that’s okay because at some point, children have already learned everything they can from their parents. Nozomi, Hikari, Kodama—all of you know so much and do so well for yourselves on your own. Why should you ever listen to me when I’m gone writing articles and interviewing politicians more than half the time?” He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes tightly. “That’s what I thought, anyway, but I’m still your father. I see that now. You’re not wrong to want me to care. I do! I just never know what to say. At least I could admit that before I die.”

“You’re not dead yet!” cried Nozomi. “Hikari, get a sheet or something to carry him on. We need a bandage or something to stop the bleeding, right?”

Shinji took Nozomi by the shoulders, trying to catch her frantic eyes. “Nozomi-chan, please—Misato-san’s men will be here soon. Eisheth isn’t after your father, just you!”

“And if I can’t protect my father from Eisheth, what is the point of anything I’ve been doing?” She looked to Hikari. “This all happened because of me. None of you asked for this to happen. I made this choice by myself, and I’m going to fix it, all right? I’m not going to force anyone else to suffer for it. Hikari, Kodama, if you want, go. I’ll find something to get Dad out of here. You too, Ikari. Do whatever you like, but please, Hikari, don’t argue with me anymore. This is exactly what I meant to do. I can put myself at risk if I believe in it. I just want you to believe in me, too.”

Hikari pressed her lips together, looking at Nozomi pleadingly, but after a moment to consider Nozomi’s words, she nodded twice to herself, even though she averted her gaze. “All this time, I just wanted to protect you, Nozomi. I didn’t want you to go through the painful moments that I had to endure, but maybe I was wrong to do that. Maybe you’re stronger and bolder than I ever was.” She looked to the kitchen. “I’ll find some rags to stem the bleeding. Sister, what about—”

Kodama held up a hand, interrupting her. “We’re not alone,” she said, putting down a box of photos and toys from the rubble and junk piled in front of the door.

Sure enough, the false officer emerged from the bedroom hall, brandishing the fire extinguisher that Shinji had used. With a mess of residue on his powder blue uniform, a fiery look in his eyes did away with any pretense of him being an officer of the law.

Shinji leveled the pistol on the man. He’d never fired a gun before, but he braced himself for recoil and an unbearable sound. “Step back,” he warned the false officer. “I’ll protect Nozomi-chan and her family no matter what.”

“Go ahead,” the false officer intoned. “Shoot me. I will die, and Eisheth will reward me for my service, my courage, as she rewards all who fight in her name! But the reward will be even greater if I claim Horaki Nozomi’s life and then yours! Do you doubt that I’ll do it? No, I think not.” She stepped closer, raising the fire extinguisher overhead. “I’m vulnerable. You can shoot me in the heart
if you’re afraid. All creatures of flesh are afraid. You’re no different, are you, Ikari Shinji?”

No, he wasn’t. At most, he wasn’t afraid to admit that he could feel fear, and because of that fear, he fingered the trigger of the pistol and pulled.

Click!

Shinji was fairly sure that wasn’t supposed to happen.

Click-click!

The false officer grinned. “Every gun runs out of bullets eventually. Now, come to me and face your fate!”

CLANG! The officer clubbed Shinji with the extinguisher, smashing his shoulder. Shinji’s arm tingled and went numb, and he crumpled over Horaki, the ringing through his body unbearable.

“No!” cried Hikari. “You can’t hurt—”

CRACK! A quick backhand sent Hikari tumbling into the wall.

“Now, Horaki Nozomi, come and die,” said the false officer, raising the extinguisher overhead once more. “Eisheth gives her word, as will I, that it will be as quick as can be.”

Eyes wide with fright, Nozomi slid with her back against the corridor wall. She felt for a corner, and when she touched one, she bolted. The officer took two steps in chase, wrapped both hands around the extinguisher, and swung!

“YAH!”

CRASH! The extinguisher went through the wall, breaking a hole in the plaster. A body staggered there, but it wasn’t Nozomi’s. She was quite safe. Instead, the officer let out a short and sharp cry and felt at his chest, finding a kitchen knife sticking through his ribs…

And it was Kodama’s hand that held it there.

“Don’t kid yourself, jackass!” she cried. “What you’re doing takes no courage. Nozomi is ten times—no, a hundred times—braver than you will ever be! She’s willing to do something that a dozen good men could find terrifying beyond their wildest imaginings! What are you willing to do? It’s easy to take a life. It is so much harder to risk your own.” She forced the man to the floor, and though one of her eyes was half swollen shut as she did so, she smiled at Nozomi. “That’s why I’ve never questioned your courage,” she admitted. “I just thought you needed the chance to show it yourself.”

Within five minutes, SDF members and medics arrived to secure the scene and tend to the wounded. Nozomi’s father managed to stay conscious despite increasing blood loss, and Nozomi held his hand as the medics walked him out on a stretcher. Hikari was only bruised, and Kodama could still walk on her own, though the medics did insist that she get her eye checked out. As for Shinji, the medics improvised a sling for Shinji to wear after taking the brunt of an extinguisher to the shoulder, and he politely declined any further treatment in the meantime. Misato soon arrived in person, seeing that the Horaki family would be sequestered to Hachibuse Mountain and treated in the base infirmary.

But this bold attack from a follower of Eisheth wasn’t the only one that took place that night. Though
Nozomi had emerged unscathed, several of her family members had taken blows, and the other candidates had fared only somewhat better with SDF protection, as the followers of Eisheth had shoot into crowds or come at the children with shivs despite significant protection. Many children left the program, fearing for their lives, and even those families that hadn’t been attacked largely followed, for the vision of Eisheth in a child’s dreams could terrify anyone and frighten them into submission.

Yet that day was not entirely devoid of hope. In a time of desperation, young Horaki Nozomi had found the validation from her family that she was looking for in respect from both her sisters and love from her father, and when news of the other candidates’ retractions reached her at the base, she made her feelings on the subject very clear.

“I won’t criticize anyone else,” she said, from her father’s bedside as he lay resting, “but I know enough about what I should do from what I’ve seen and experienced today. What I went through is proof of the best and worst of humanity—how people can struggle to recognize what they want from each other—but when things get tough, do we lie down and let that overwhelm us? No. We can find it in ourselves to get past that, and if no one else can stand up to say that, then I will. I’ll do it by piloting Eva.”

And pilot she did. With her sisters in the command center, looking on in support, Nozomi climbed into the entry plug of the Eva once more. Shinji, too, watched from safety, glancing briefly between readouts of synch rates and vital signs. Alas, from that position, he could only imagine what was in Nozomi’s mind—what relief, joy, and satisfaction she must’ve felt, knowing that her family was with her and behind her always. He would never know it for sure, but he could see and hear the results as the lead technician in the room counted upwards—first one percent, then two, then four, and in a few quick moments higher still, to sixteen, thirty-two, and finally, a synch ratio of just under sixty-three percent.

“Congratulations, Nozomi,” said Misato, her voice reverberating through the intercom. “You’re first pilot we’ve had to reach the combat-capable range. Well done.”

The command center burst into applause. Kodama and Hikari embraced one another, and Shinji watched them all, taking in the moment. From then on, he could only be part of humanity’s success or failure from this position and no closer—watching through a screen as Nozomi or someone like her held humanity’s fate in their hands.

Once freed from the entry plug, the presumptive Sixth Child raced up from the cage to the command center, joining her sisters and bathing in the cheers of the command center staff. Shinji backed away from the spectacle, content to have had a hand in it and that all had turned out well, but with the pilot chosen in all but name, it was time for him to step back. The world would be safe in the hands of far more capable people—people who wouldn’t cripple their charges with doubts and in an effort to teach them from personal, past mistakes without recognizing their problems in the present. All had turned out well, and Shinji counted his blessings for it, but he couldn’t be sure he’d do any better in the future, and that’s why it was time for him to go.

“Ikari!”

But as he meandered his way down the corridor back to the base elevator, Nozomi called after him and chased him down.

“Where the hell are you going?” she demanded.

“My work here is done, Nozomi-chan,” he said. “I’ve done what Misato-san asked me to do, and I’ll continue to look for ways to help the world fight Eisheth, but all this is yours now. I don’t think
there’s anything more I can teach you, and even if there were, I’m not sure I could do it well enough. You were under stress for weeks before I really understood what was wrong. I brought too much of my own problems into this job; I did all of you a disservice like that. It’s better this way. You’ll be fine. You’re in good hands here.”

She eyed him skeptically. “You might be right about that, but what you’re saying is bullshit, and I hope you know that.”

Shinji gawked. “Excuse me?”

“Come with me,” she said. “If you’re going to leave, then I’ve at least got a going-away present for you.”

“You don’t seem like the type for that kind of sentiment.”

“Just follow me, all right?”

Through the maze of corridors, stairs, and elevators, Nozomi brought Shinji to the pilots’ changing room, and from her locker, she produced her most prized possession—the cream-colored drawing pad.

“You’re not—you can’t give me this,” said Shinji.

“I’m not giving my pad to you; are you out of your mind?” Nozomi flipped to a specific page. “It’s just one sketch. Here, look.”

She handed him the pad, showing him a drawing of himself: a simple boy who brandished a fire extinguisher against the false officer with a gun, who urged Nozomi and Hikari to get to safety while he held the enemy at bay. He took up almost all of the frame, putting every detail of the bloodstains on his shirt and the welt on his cheek in full display.

“I thought you said you didn’t like to draw subjects from too close,” said Shinji.

“I don’t, but this time, I made an exception. See, when I first met you, Ikari, I expected someone different. I don’t mind saying that. Everybody knows your face, but I thought they all misunderstood you. Someone who could’ve made the choice to bring us back from the sea had to be bigger, better, and wiser than anyone could appreciate. I expected a hero, and seeing you as just a kid, just a few years older than me—it was a surprise. But this person here, on this sheet of paper? This is a kid who can be hurt and still grit his teeth to get through it. He knows people will wound each other, but they have to get up out of the mud and fight on anyway. He doesn’t gloss over the truth; he just tells it like it was for him, so we won’t come in with false hopes—just real ones we can hold on to instead. And he can be wrong sometimes, but I sure hope that doesn’t stop him.

“Honestly, I thought I’d be meeting a hero, and I realized I had to change my expectations—not of you, but of what a hero was. So, I want to thank you, Ikari, for teaching me that. If you’re going to leave, then take this drawing, and use it to remember what you taught someone. But, if you change your mind, then I’ll hold on to it because you’ll still be teaching me, and with every test and battle and whatever else that might come, maybe another drawing—another memory of mine—will make a better reminder of what we’ll have accomplished. After all, we’ll have beaten Eisheth by then, right?”

It was a tacit offer of a promise, and the obstacle to Shinji taking it wasn’t his willingness to fight. Was he capable of this duty? Could he stand up and see this through, no matter what happened to Nozomi, no matter what challenges she faced that reminded him of his own, while he’d be helpless
to do anything but advise her and tell stories while she did all the fighting?

Perhaps not. He had to admit the possibility, but it was better to try, if Nozomi was anyone to believe, his refusal to gloss over the true horrors she’d face had prepared her, at least in some small way. In that respect, his efforts may have been more successful than he could ever know.

“Keep it,” said Shinji, pushing the pad back in her hand. “You’re right—you might find a better shot of me to draw after all.”

Nozomi nodded, and she put the pad back in the locker, fastening the combination lock when she was done.

While the children of Eisheth Zenunim hurtled through the cosmos, the world would never know Horaki Nozomi, the Sixth Child, stood ready to defend it. Concerns over Nozomi’s safety in the wake of Eisheth’s attack led Misato to arrange for quarters for the Horaki clan to stay in, at least as a short-term measure until the danger passed—if it should ever pass at all. The attacks on the pilot candidates and their families were covered up as random, unconnected acts of violence. The world could not know what had really happened that night, but in Misato’s judgment, that was a temporary state, and either mankind would emerge triumphant or the truth would come out when all men merged together in the LCL sea.

And Misato was always one to prepare for victory. In the control room of the Hachibuse Mountain Complex, the staff under Misato’s command held a memorial, with a bouquet of cherry blossoms for the first casualty of the war against Eisheth: the unassuming security guard whom Shinji had left to die in the hope of saving another. It was a difficult ceremony for him to attend, for Shinji hardly knew the man or paid attention to his face, and there, the guard was being remembered without any family to hear why he’d truly died.

Still, two GSDF cameramen recorded the event for posterity, so there would always be a record of what had really happened, even if the world wasn’t ready to know it yet, and Shinji was there, in another uncomfortable, itchy suit, with Asuka on one side, bearing a string of pearls around her neck, and on the other Nozomi in a modest, plain black dress. She let her hair down and applied a few spots of makeup, just enough to look decent on camera.

On their shoulders, the hopes of mankind rested, and the three of them stood as a wall, prepared and vigilant for the coming of Eisheth, her children, and whatever horrors their arrival would bring.
“Come, brothers and sisters, and bask in Lilith’s love.”

The speaker was a woman, hooded in gray robes, who carried a small, terracotta bowl. A single red candle floated within, and dozens more lit up the room with irregular, twinkling light. Two great windows from floor to ceiling spanned the wall by the door, showing a view of an empty city street at night. Posters for DVD releases lined the walls, but they were torn, faded, or halfway taken down, and at the counter by the door, there was only a faded outline where a cash register had been. There were no shelves full of videos to rent in that place—not any longer. In that abandoned rental store, adherents to the Cult of Lilith met to hear the great news of her wonders, and it was their Archon who delivered this message for all to hear.

“She has sacrificed Her physical body, Her existence, so that we may walk as human beings once again,” said the Archon. “Every day, She speaks to the lost souls in the ocean to remind them what they can accomplish as individuals. We’ve all heard Her voice, or else we wouldn’t be here, and that’s why we gather today—to rejoice and celebrate and spread the word.”

The Archon pursed her lips and went silent for a moment, and her followers nodded their heads slowly. On firm cushions, eight rows of ten men and women kneeled before the Archon in deference to her knowledge, wisdom, and experience, and she wouldn’t make them wait long to hear her guidance.

“Now, more than one person has approached me over the last few weeks,” said the Archon, “asking me why Lilith would permit Eisheth to exist and if we have something to fear from Eisheth’s coming. I admit, I’ve wondered the same thing, but I’ve thought very carefully on the matter. I’ve talked to the other Archons and studied what Lilith had to say to all of us after the attack, and let me share with you my belief. I don’t think anyone should worry or think that Lilith has abandoned us. Why would She appear to us in warning if She cared nothing more for us? I believe Lilith won’t interfere in the free will of men. She has done everything she could to undo the damage She herself had a part in, but the rest is up to us. It is our imperative to live good lives, to prove that we’re capable of overcoming the flaws that brought forth Third Impact in the first place.

“But, if you’ve been paying attention, you might realize that that answer has nothing to do with the other question—why does Lilith permit Eisheth to exist? To that, I can only say I don’t believe Lilith is all-powerful. She was and is a person as we are, and she must have limits to her abilities. Some of you might think that saddening, but I don’t. I wouldn’t want to pin my hopes on a being without limits. How could I hope to understand Her that way? How could I believe She thinks the way we do? Yes, it means Lilith can make mistakes, but it also means that She understands who we are in a way that a truly omnipotent and omnipresent being never could. That, I think, is a comfort beyond words.”

The cultists bowed their heads once more.

“Now, let us think on our friends and loved ones who are still in the sea,” said the Archon. “I’m sure Lilith will take your thoughts to them. Masuyo will come around and take any messages you have for them—they could be to family or to someone you’ve never known.”

One of the Archon’s helpers, a high-school-aged girl with blonde locks, passed around cards for the other cultists to write on. Each was then folded once and handed back down the rows, where Masuyo picked them up. From there, the Archon invited other cultists to come forward and tell stories of how Lilith came to them in the sea—what form she took to reach them, how her message
impacted their lives and continued to do so, for that was the goal of these meetings: to encourage people to speak and share their hopes with one another.

Still, the Cult of Lilith was far from an organized religion, and the weekly meetings were purposefully kept restrained—an hour and a half long at most. When no one else wished to speak, the Archon closed the meeting with kind words for all.

“Thank you all for coming to help spread the word of Lilith’s continued life and message,” she said. “Let me just remind everyone that this weekend, there’s will be a charity marathon held between here and Chino to help raise money for victims of Eisheth’s attack. You can run in the race or volunteer. If you have any questions, you can talk to Ami outside. She’ll have flyers and other information for you.”

A blonde woman with a long ponytail raised her hand with a bundle of flyers for everyone to see. “Oh, and please, please, please, if you plan on coming, we could really use some umbrellas,” said Ami. “Archon Juniper and I have about six between us, but there’s rain in the forecast, and we don’t want anyone getting soaked, so if you can donate some money or loan us an umbrella to share for the weekend, even if you’re not coming, we’d be very grateful! More information outside, once again!”

As the cultists dispersed—some congregating around Ami outside the window, others leaving in groups to head to the nearest bus or train station—Archon Juniper took to extinguishing the candles, putting the wooden podium she’d spoken at away, and securing the locks on their improvised meeting site. She went through the storage room and out the back door, but on her way through the building’s back alley to the street, a boy emerged from the shadows, wearing sunglasses and hooded sweatshirt. Only one boy she knew went to such lengths to hide his features.

“Hello, Archon Juniper,” he said. “How was the service?”

“Fine, thank you,” said the Archon, smiling, “but you really don’t need to call me that. What brings you here, Shinji-kun? Are you considering joining us after all?”

“I really couldn’t imagine worshiping Ayanami,” he said, “and I’m afraid that’s not why I’m here. Misato-san and I—and Ayanami, too—we need your help.”

“With Eva?” The Archon turned away. “I don’t do that kind of work anymore. We did awful, awful things to you, Shinji-kun—to you and Rei and Asuka. I’d rather not be a part of that again.”

“I wouldn’t ask that of you,” said Shinji, “but you can help us in other ways. Trust me. I’ve listened to your sermons. I know you believe people can find something good in this world. That’s what we’re fighting for. Please.”

The Archon pursed her lips, and with a steady hand she lowered her hood, revealing her short, brown hair and smooth, fair complexion. She met Shinji’s eyes and hesitated before speaking.

“What do you need me to do?” asked Maya.

As a child, Ibuki Maya hadn’t grown up with any particular religious devotion. Her family had raised her with an awareness of Shinto and Buddhism, but as her interests turned to science and biology, she found most talk of deities and planes of existence truly incompatible with her views. The pantheon of Shinto gods made for good stories, beautiful shrines, and festive holidays, but she approached talk of spirits and higher powers with intellectual curiosity, not belief or fervor. It was useful to understand what others believed, if only to avoid offense through ignorance, but that was
In the days after Instrumentality’s end, however, a new movement cropped up. Most people Maya met had some kind of experience in the sea, encountering someone familiar to them—a parent, a child, a wife or husband, or a dear friend—who encouraged them to return from the ocean. Many would meet with the people they thought had convinced them to return from the ocean only to find the other didn’t remember such a thing but had a different experience instead. The rumor spread that maybe something or someone else had appeared to each person, that Lilith herself had seen to it people would imagine themselves in their own hearts, enough to piece themselves back together from being dispersed and spread to the winds. Combined with the miraculous preservation of human civilization despite the passage of time, Lilith’s power and influence over mankind was difficult to ignore.

Thus, the Cult of Lilith began to take shape, with followers gathering to worship her image and calling Rei little less than a god, but that was something Maya could never believe in, either. Whatever powers Rei had, whatever being Rei had originally been, Maya had known her as a person—someone who had been wounded and bandaged trying to do something that wasn’t even her choice. Still, many people had found the new world difficult to adjust to. The idea that some powerful being had spoken to them and encouraged them to live on proved a profound comfort. With some family and loved ones still missing or gone, with whole sectors of the economy disappearing amid disorder and strife, the Cult was giving people hope. And people desperately needed that. Maya, too—after the horrors she’d seen, the perversions of the mind and body she’d participated in to help make Eva come to pass. All her life, she’d pursued the quest of science—how body, mind, and soul interact in terms of electrical impulses, molecular forces, and so on—but science was a tool, and people without hope could use that tool for ill. Without some belief in the prospects for the future, mankind would never use the tools it had for good.

So Maya joined the Cult, aspiring to help spread their message of one good miracle in the world. While she wasn’t nearly as recognizable as Shinji, her name was one people knew, and her status as a distant associate of Rei and Shinji gave her significant influence. When followers came to cult meetings, more and more they wanted to hear from her, hoping for stories about Rei and what they could learn from her life. For a time, Maya felt like one of the apostles who’d witnessed Jesus’s life. Had they been heeded over time for their own wisdom or their association with Christ? Both? Who could say? Maya wasn’t sure why people really wanted to hear from her, but she used that position to her advantage. Over and over, she emphasized to people that Rei shouldn’t be looked upon as an all-powerful god. She’d given mankind a new opportunity; that was all. And while that message seemed to run counter to what her fellow cultists expected at first, over time Maya had built a like-minded group of followers—adherents, rather, to the teachings of Archon Juniper, the name she’d given herself. While it seemed a bit pretentious, that title helped her keep her identity as a private individual and as a leader in the Cult separate, and she preferred to keep it that way. Her true identity was no secret, though—not to the Cult at large, to the public, or to Shinji. Truly, the only person Maya’s adherents in the Cult revered as much as Rei was Shinji. She had given him the choice to initiate Instrumentality—or to step back from it when he saw it was wrong. Shinji himself was a subject of some fascination within the movement, then. That much Maya knew well, for one of her followers had been so bold to corner Shinji on a train a few weeks before, but Shinji hadn’t wanted any part of the Cult, and Maya understood that. It was difficult for her to affect such reverence for Rei on a routine basis. Shinji had been closer to Rei and would most likely find the Cult’s attitudes toward her impossible to fathom.

Despite their difference on this matter, Shinji and Maya had run across each other from time to time, and though they’d hardly known each other while Shinji was a pilot, he treated her with respect even after hearing of her new position within the Cult. That’s why Maya felt safe trusting in him as he
implored her to lend a hand, regardless of where that might lead.

At the end of the alleyway, an SDF vehicle had been waiting for them, and the men gently tied a black cloth around her eyes. Though Maya would never know the way to wherever they were going, Shinji at least had the heart to explain why.

“Maya-san,” he said, “we think some of your people have chosen to follow Eisheth.”

Maya shook her head at that. “That just can’t be. The people in the movement appreciate what Rei has done for them. Why would anyone choose to believe in this Eisheth instead?”

“I don’t think I’d ever really understand it, but I’ve seen them. More than one of them, too.”

Maya couldn’t see anything, though—not while the SDF members and Shinji drove her across the city, walked her through a security checkpoint with her eyes still blindfolded, and stayed with her on some sort of subway car. A journey through narrow hallways and by several elevators at last led Maya to her destination. The SDF removed the blindfold, and Maya blinked twice to adjust her eyes. It was a small room with a wide window into the adjoining one, and the lights through the window—harsh, white, and fluorescent—were noticeably brighter than where Maya was.

“Welcome back, Lieutenant Ibuki,” said Misato, who stood by the window, looking into the other room. She didn’t face Maya. “Think you can help us out?”

“I’m not a lieutenant anymore.” Maya followed Misato’s gaze. In the other room, a single man sat on a metal chair with his hands bound behind him and his ankles tied to the chair’s legs. There was no table there, only one other chair. “What’s the meaning of this?” she asked. “Who is that person?”

“A follower of Eisheth, or so he claims to be.” Misato handed her a sealed plastic bag, just big enough to hold a piece of jewelry or a bracelet. “He was carrying this ring when we found him. Take a look.”

The ring was of a strange design—double-sided with decorations that were identical in shape. On one side was the Diamond and Eye, the insignia of the Cult of Lilith, but if one wore this ring and spun it around on their finger, the other decoration would be most visible. It was, on first glance, similar to the Cult’s insignia, but instead of a single shape for an eye, there were three on the face’s left and two on its right.

“Do you know him?” asked Misato.

Maya squinted, looking through the window. The man’s features were common—brown eyes, dark and disheveled hair. There was a small mole the left side of his neck. Surely, if she’d known anyone like that, she would’ve recognized him then.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t,” said Maya.

“No surprise. The Cult is a growing movement, isn’t it? More and more people are joining every day, particularly since Rei went on television after the attack, am I right? The Prime Minister’s office is concerned about so many people flocking to a single ideological movement. Maybe you think this cult of yours is benign and good, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t bad seeds mixed into the crop. If you can already worship Rei as a god, worshiping Eisheth isn’t that far off, is it?”

“That’s not what we do, Colonel, and I’m shocked that you think so! What evidence do you have other than this one ring? Is that going to help us find others? What did this man do, and why are you holding him?”
“He tried to kill a pilot.” Shinji pulled at his collar, revealing a nasty bruise on his shoulder. “I lost feeling in my arm for nearly a week from what he did. This is a bad man, Maya-san, and while I don’t want to believe there are others like him in your cult, there might be. We have the ring, and he promises there are more like him. Misato-san, if you could?”

Misato nodded, going to the radio that was velcroed to her chest. “Hyūga-kun, go ahead.”

The door to the interrogation room opened, and in walked Captain Hyūga with a file folder and a pad for notes. He sat in the empty chair, with several feet separating him from the prisoner, whose seat was fixed to the ground by sturdy bolts.

“Let’s try this again,” said Hyūga. “What is your name?”

The man narrowed his eyes, saying nothing.

“You call yourself an ‘acolyte of Eisheth’?”

The man nodded once, still silent.

“Are you alone, or are there more of you?”

At that, the man grinned. “We are everywhere. When you buy bread and fruit from the market we are there. We’re buying vegetables and canned goods same as you. When you go out to watch a movie or see a show, we’re in the seats all around you. We’ve seen all there can be in this world. We’ve come back from the ocean and found this Earth empty and devoid of meaning, but Eisheth gives us purpose. When you ride a bus or a train across town, we’re standing all around you, holding on to the support poles or straps, but soon enough, when the bus takes a turn, we’ll let go. We’ll throw the whole cabin into panic. When you’re sitting at the theater, we’ll stab you in the neck, and when you’re shopping for ice cream, we’ll make you choke on it. There is no place you can go to escape us. Eisheth abhors this violence, but as long as you continue to fight her, you are a taint that contaminates the consciousness of mankind with false promises. We will pursue you wherever you may hide. You cannot stop us all, and until you submit or die, you will never know peace or safety. We will draw out these destructive tendencies of men so they can be seen for what they are and then destroyed. Only at that time will mankind be free—in the ocean, where we should’ve stayed, if not for Ikari Shinji, Lilith, and their foolishness.”

Hyūga yawned. “Wake me when you’re done with the diatribe. We want specifics. Names, places. It’s in your best interest to cooperate now before we resort to other methods of persuasion. I don’t think you want to see those. I don’t know what Eisheth’s done to you, how she’s broken or confused you, but it’s not worth suffering over.”

“You think she’s confused me? I chose this of my own free will, as any reasonable man should. That is why we will outnumber you. It is an undeniable truth people still maim and murder and threaten one another for love, money, and other petty reasons. There is no chance of salvation from that but what Eisheth offers. Lilith can’t help you. She is powerless—too afraid to do anything of consequence. The more you resist, the more difficult you make things for yourselves. Be assured, Lieutenant, Eisheth has tested the mettle of men and found it lacking, and soon, she will spur us on to a Reckoning—to determine who will fight for her and who will be considered an acceptable loss. Our numbers grow by the day, as do our powers.” The man looked past Hyūga, directly into the window, making eye contact with Maya.

“Can he see me?” she asked.

“No, that’s a mirror,” said Misato. “He’s just looking in a random direction.”
“We take from your misguided believers,” the man went on. “You can’t keep control of your flock, Archon! And Colonel, even your men betray you. Otherwise, how could I do this?”

The man’s handcuffs snapped, and despite the bindings on his ankles, he stood upright and defiant even as SDF guards swarmed the room.

Misato jammed an black button on a wall-mounted panel. “Hold your fire!” she cried, her voice resonating through an intercom. “We need him alive!”

“You mean you need me talking!” the prisoner corrected her. “If you think you can keep me here—if you think you can keep any of us here—then you’re wrong. You cannot touch us, Colonel Katsuragi! Eisheth gives us the ability to realize our true selves, and when she comes for all of you, she’ll reward us for our sacrifice. She’ll join us with all mankind. Watch!”

The man shut his eyes, clenched his arms, and—

POP!

He splattered into LCL, with a fine mist of the stuff peppering the one-way mirror. The guards and Hyūga recoiled as the fluid ran up against their boots.

To deal with this mess, Misato summoned clean-up crews to vacuum the LCL and store it in an impenetrable tank (just in case the man wanted to reconstitute himself). Once the interrogation room had been cleared, Maya was escorted out. With the prisoner reduced to goo, there was little Maya could do then and there to help them—at least, for the moment. Though Maya hadn’t wanted to believe it, the possibility that followers of Eisheth had been recruited or turned from Lilith’s Cult was too great to ignore. The prisoner had himself—thay they were not safe. Any wandering person on the street could worship the “five-eyed monstrosity,” as Misato called her. Whether such a person was a member of the Cult or otherwise, Maya agreed to be watchful, even though she hadn’t the faintest idea where to look. Though a scientist had to be skeptical, such a discerning eye had never been in her nature. She’d looked up to mentors to learn and help develop that sense, but it never came easily. As much as she’d admired Ritsuko, that woman’s cautious, discriminating eye was something she could never emulate, no matter how hard she’d tried.

Then again, Maya had had the temerity to return to the world while Ritsuko, as far as Maya knew, had not.

Regardless, Maya resolved to keep a watchful eye within the Cult and without, whatever good that would do, but any watching would have to wait until morning. With less than ninety minutes to midnight by the time SDF dropped her off at her apartment building, Maya stomach was rumbling mightily, and her eyes stung and watered up with fatigue. But whether she could eat or sleep after having watched a man blow up into LCL right before her eyes she couldn’t say. For the moment, it would do well enough just to be home.

No sooner than she put the key into the lock of her third floor apartment’s door, the knob turned all on its own. The door flung open, and Maya was embraced before she could speak a word in protest.

“Thank goodness you’re safe!” said the other woman, holding her tight. “Some people on the street said they saw SDF taking you away, and I thought that just couldn’t be! You would never do anything wrong. It all just had to be a misunderstanding, but then you didn’t come back…”

“It wasn’t a misunderstanding,” Maya explained, unable to escape the embrace. “They just wanted
some help from me. They’re very secretive, though. It’s always been like that.”

The woman pulled away, meeting Maya’s gaze. She had blonde hair halfway down her back with a hint of darkness coming up from her roots. Her wide brown eyes watched Maya carefully.

“So it was for him?” she asked. “For Ikari-san?”

“Among others, yes,” said Maya. “Now, why don’t we go inside? What are you doing up so late? If it’s for me—oh dear. I wish I could’ve called you. They wouldn’t let me near a phone.”

“It’s all right, really. I couldn’t have slept not knowing if you were safe. Why don’t you get out of those robes? I’ll heat up your dinner, okay?”

Maya smiled to herself. Her roommate, Ami, was always thinking about others before she took care of herself, and this incident had proved to be no exception. Their two-bedroom apartment was somewhat small. The kitchen and dining areas jutted right up to each other, and the bedrooms and bath weren’t far from there. Still, the balcony outside the dining area gave a great view of the mountains outside the city during the day.

An empathetic nurse, Ami had joined the Cult about a year before, finding that all the medical and scientific truth she could bring to her patients couldn’t give them all the hope and will to live that they needed to go back out into the world. Though cautious at first, she’d grown enamored with the notion of Rei’s power and how humanity had been given a second chance that they should make the most of. It might not be easy, but in Ami’s words, “I don’t think Lilith would’ve given us this chance if She thought we would fail. We just need to have a little faith in ourselves, the same as She does.”

From their first meeting, Maya knew that someone like Ami was perfect for the continuing evolution of the Cult. She could be idealistic, yes, but was that such a bad thing in these times? Her duties as a nurse spoke to her responsible nature, and she’d applied those skills toward organizing community events and programs to help turn the Cult from a movement of like-minded individuals to a group of people trying to help others in both philosophical and material ways. How she found the energy to do this despite long hours on the morning shift at the hospital Maya couldn’t fathom, but Ami never seemed to fade out or let her work get her down. Indeed, the only thing that could put a dent in her positive personality was the suggestion that fellow cultists might secretly worship Eisheth instead.

“That simply can’t be!” Ami insisted. “How can you even say that? Every single person we’ve met and brought into the fold has felt Lilith’s grace and wisdom. There’s no way anyone would be taken by Eisheth’s lies!”

Maya shook her head, poking at a plate of tofu, seaweed flakes, and rice. “It just takes a few people. On a statistical basis, even if we were 99.9% certain that the people we bring into the Cult are good, one in a thousand would be susceptible to being turned. That’s no fault of ours, Ami, and it says nothing about the message Rei has tried to send us all along. It’s just unlikely that every single person in a movement as big and dispersed as ours would be completely immune to Eisheth’s deceptions. I’ve seen the evidence.” Maya held out her right hand, showing a ring with the Diamond and Eye emblem. “The man had a ring like mine, but corrupted and defaced to celebrate Eisheth instead.”

“Maybe a few people, but only a few.” Ami nodded at that, convincing herself. “All right. Let’s not talk about that. Tell me about Ikari-san. I really would’ve liked to meet him, you know.”

“I know. I wish you could’ve had the chance. He’s getting taller, I think. He looks a little more like his father, but his face isn’t tainted with that creepy, sinister air that Commander Ikari had. Shinji-kun is doing well, at least from what he said. I think Eisheth’s been doing a lot to try to get to him, too.”
“If he’s not safe where he is, tell him he could stay with us. Between the two of us, we can make sure he won’t come to harm.”

Maya chuckled slightly at that. “I don’t think Asuka would approve of Shinji-kun staying with two women.”

“She could come too. I just love the color of her hair. Besides, even if I were interested in men, a woman my age couldn’t possibly make a move on a sixteen-year-old boy.”

Maya winced. “You might be surprised.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. I was just saying that, um, Shinji-kun is probably fine with Colonel Katsuragi and her men to protect him. And speaking of not being interested in sixteen-year-old boys, is there something about last Saturday night that you’d like to tell me?”

Ami laughed nervously, her cheeks lighting up. “Whatever do you mean, Maya? I don’t know what you’re talking about, honest!”

“You might be surprised.”

“Of course you do. You come back at five-thirty just long enough to wash up and go to the hospital. And the blush on your face tells me I’m right. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I’m just glad you’re having a good time and meeting people. I’m sure you’re making quite a few women happy—and more than that, jealous.”

“It’s not a lot of women!” Ami protested. “It’s…just one.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah. We met a couple weeks ago at the bar by the square, and I went to her place that night. I didn’t think we’d meet again, but we ran into each other last week as well, and it was just awkward enough that I tried to strike up a conversation. It turns out she’s a nuclear engineer, and we talked for over an hour about the prospects for something clean and safe like fusion power and such. I’m really excited to have met her, and we’re planning on meeting up this weekend, too. Isn’t it great?”

Maya nodded twice, deliberate and firm. “Yes, yes. Very great. Very, very great.”

“Maybe you should come with me,” Ami added. “I’m sure there’s someone there you’d find interesting.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. I’d just be a third wheel, and that’s no fun for you. No, I’ll be fine. I’m just glad for you, honest.”

At that, Ami beamed. “I think I might want to make myself pretty for when I see her next, too. I could go get my nails done and buy some new makeup. I was also thinking it might be time for a change with my hair. What do you think—just a trim, or…” Ami ran her fingers through her long blonde hair. “Maybe a change of color?”

Maya pursed her lips, putting down her chopsticks. She studied Ami closely, from her cheekbones to her eyelashes.

“Maybe,” Maya said at last, “you should cut it short. Halfway down your neck, I’d say, with bangs. That’d be really cute, don’t you think?”

After a moment’s contemplation, Ami nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I think I’ll do just that. Thanks
so much, Maya.”

“I should be the one thanking you for keeping my food out. Now, go to sleep so you don’t miss your shift. I’ll clean up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes, it’s fine. Go to bed.”

At that, Ami climbed up from her cushion and left the table, but she squeezed Maya’s shoulder as she went past. “I’m glad you came back,” she said. “Lilith truly must’ve been watching over you.”

“I’m sure she was,” said Maya. “Good night.”

“Night.”

As Ami headed down the hall behind Maya, the former lieutenant mopped up her dinner leisurely, lost in thought. Ami represented the best hope the Cult could offer—the hope of someone who’d witnessed the horrors mankind could fall to and yet who still believed in humanity as a whole. Ami’s positive outlook stood despite her past, for she was no stranger to grief or sorrow. It was a story Ami told often to new members of the Cult, just to hit home that her belief in Rei was more than just platitudes or rhetoric. Maya could still remember the first time Ami had told her the story. When Ami had approached her wanting the join the Cult, Maya had asked her why and if she’d felt Rei had really changed her life.

“Absolutely,” Ami had said. “She appeared to me as someone very close to me, someone I lost just a few months before Third Impact. You see, my girlfriend Minori and I—and yes, that is what I meant to say—had gone for a day trip to the ocean. We’d been dating for a little over half a year. We were going to call it a half-anniversary, if you can believe that. Minori went to the bar to get a pair of strawberry daiquiris—she was just crazy about them, and I’d never had one. I waited by our umbrella. It was dark, and a man came up to me, smelling of beer and staggering. He tried to make a pass at me, and at first, when I refused him, he just walked off muttering. When Minori came back with our drinks, that changed. The man came back, angry and rowdy. He yelled at us, saying, ‘You dirty dykes think you’re so superior, huh? Can’t appreciate what a man has to offer. I’ll show you!’ When my Minori and I tried to leave, even without our things, the man slapped the tray of drinks out of my Minori’s hand. I never got to taste them. The crushed red ice splattered over the sand, and so did Minori’s blood. I tried to step in, but he swatted me away, and I hit my head on a rock. I didn’t stay conscious for what happened next. I’m told it’s a blessing I didn’t. When I woke up, they were already taking me away in an ambulance. That man—that senseless, hateful bigot—had violated her in the most ugly and horrific way. They never found him, either. They could never get justice for what we’d gone through.

“When I got out of the hospital, Minori’s family made arrangements for the funeral, and they barred me from going. They blamed me for tempting their daughter, for keeping her in a childish, immature relationship. They blamed me, not the man who brutalized her. Maybe it was because he wasn’t there to blame, but it still hurt me. And I knew that even twenty or fifty or a hundred years later, maybe then no one would hate a person like me, but there would still be something people found a reason to fight each other over. When Third Impact came, I felt all that just reinforced what I’d believed. So, honestly, I wasn’t going to come out of that ocean. I could feel other people’s hate and loathing, and it just made me so sad. What did I have to do to convince them I was a person just like them? And I thought, maybe, if I just dissipated further maybe I could give myself away to neutralize some of that hatred and loathing.

“But in the ocean, someone appeared to me. Minori, with her long, dark hair in curls. I was so happy
to see her; I would’ve stayed with her forever, but she asked me if there were any reason I’d go back. I thought that, knowing other people were leaving, I could go back and try to help people look beyond their prejudices, but that was assuming I, a single person, could really make a difference. Minori told me I could, though, and that her passing shouldn’t make me think it was impossible. It could be done. People can change their minds and think differently, one opinion at a time.

“In time, I heard about your Cult and how some people were afraid of it, but coming here, I see that there’s nothing to shun or consider dangerous from you, and I realize now that someone I never even knew was encouraging me. She saw into me, saw the hopes I had for people that were almost extinguished on that night. I’m ready to pledge my devotion to Her, and to you, as Her servant.”

And Ami had done just that, always keeping in mind that it was not she who had to have faith in Rei. Rather, Rei had shown faith in humanity by reaching out to her, and that was a message worth spreading. It was remarkable how much people could do when they understood others believed in them and had hope in their existence, and Maya worked every day to reinforce that message, whether in the Cult or in other ways.

Though Maya was earnest in her promise to be vigilant and look for followers of Eisheth, she had other obligations to tend to. The work of reaching out to those teetering on the precipice of despair consumed more of Maya’s life than just her time with the Cult. She made it her life’s pursuit, too, casting aside her love of science to care for those in need. Working for the city government of Tōkyō-2, Maya journeyed around town, making a two-week circuit to give aid to the destitute and homeless. While there was no shortage of living space in the post-Instrumentality world, a lack of liquidity and personal possessions made it difficult for people to assert true ownership of any space they waded into.

In a way, it made the problem of finding these people in need worse—instead of wandering the streets, they most often hid themselves from plain view. When before Impact commuters who missed their afternoon trains might put down at a net café for a night, enjoying the convenience of included food, drink, and showers, these establishments had become rife with lonely refugees from the LCL sea, victims of a sort of cyber-homelessness. Just as common were petty squatters who came to occupy abandoned homes or apartment buildings. Without steady income or support, they scrounged around for food out of sight of most people, afraid to leave lest some other unfortunate soul discovered their home and rifled through their belongings without recourse to the rule of law.

So Maya went to them. She walked her route day after day, knocking on doors and checking underneath bridges for those in need. Over the months she’d spent on this job, she’d come to know some of her charges. There was the old man Saito under the railway overpass, who fancied himself a botanist and collected all manner of flowers, weeds, and grasses. Given how thin he was, Maya worried more that he was eating those grasses instead of genuine food, but no matter how many times she gave him her business card, he merely folded it into a small, sturdy paper plane and threw it away with no small hint of amusement.

“It’s better if you eat less, you know!” he’d insisted once. “The more you eat, the more all that stuff has to go through you. It’s damaging. There’s a reason plants don’t get cancer. They don’t have to eat.”

As peculiar as he was, Old Man Saito was relatively well-off, though. He was active and energetic. The isolated shut-ins tended to be another story. Of particular concern to Maya that day was a pair of twin teenage sisters, Suō Yūko and Yūka, who’d taken refuge in what used to be a junior high school. Despite their lackluster accommodations, the Suō girls had managed to collect fine clothes,
large televisions, and jewelry, all courtesy of their “customers” who went to the girls for “aerobics training.” That the girls had been distance runners before Impact was the only scintilla of truth to this story, and Maya worried greatly over their well-being. How long could they stay independent before some thug invaded their home and insisted they work for him instead? How long could they sell themselves before an unruly customer asked for something they couldn’t give and beat them into submission?

“You worry too much, Maya-san,” said the older sister, the left-handed Yūka, who happily showed Maya into the redressed classroom. “Yūko and I are just fine. We get tested every four weeks. We’re not pregnant. We’re getting by. Yūko was just thinking about going back to school, actually. We’ve been putting some money together for that, a little at a time.”

Maya looked Yūka up and down, from the perfect curls in her hair to her glossy red lipstick, her perfectly manicured fingernails, and the large, colorful tattoo of a leaping fish on her ankle. Yes, clearly this girl had to ration out money and save up to send her little sister to school.

“Well, I wish you luck with that,” said Maya. “Any recent injuries or illnesses?”

Yūka touched two fingers to the corner of her eye, glancing away. Under her heavy makeup, the eye and socket looked pristine, but Maya glimpsed a slight inflammation in the general area.

“You covered it up,” Maya realized. “Someone punched you.”

“I ran into a chair.”

“Is that what they’re saying now?”

“Honestly, Maya-san, this isn’t your problem,” said Yūka, tying off a bag of trash. “Men use me for their pleasure, and I use their money for mine. It is what it is. You understand why it sucks. None of my men think I’ll go Julia Roberts for them. We all understand the only good way for strangers to get along with each other is in a business relationship. That’s all.”

Maya pursed her lips. “I don’t believe that. If I did, I wouldn’t be in here checking on you.”

At that, Yūka huffed, saying nothing, and Maya realized the depths of what she was fighting against. People like Yūka could be susceptible to Eisheth’s philosophy. A few bad experiences could cement Yūka’s misanthropy and convince her that mankind itself was irrevocably flawed.

“Right, well, it’s a good thing your heart bleeds so easily,” said Yūka, “or else I wouldn’t have been able to take another twenty-thousand yen from my last customer in exchange for this favor.”

“What favor?”

Yūka went to her icebox and picked out a can of coffee grounds. “He asked if you were the welfare agent who comes by and wanted me to keep a hold of this can for when you next came around. Just said to keep it frozen because it might spoil. Apparently it’s a gift. It has a Cultist mark on it. He said you and he were both members.”

Maya studied the lid closely. In the yellow plastic, there was indeed a mark, but it wasn’t the Diamond and Eye that Maya knew so well. Instead, the Mark of Eisheth had been drawn in thick black marker—a crude drawing, yet the sight of it gave her shivers. Shaking the can, Maya heard only hard bouncing within, so she put out a paper towel and poured out the contents, and five round objects rolled out.

“Oh, what the fuck!” cried Yūka, covering her face and retching.
Maya shuddered, turning away, for she withered under the stare of Eisheth, delivered by the five human eyes on that rolled on the counter.

The followers of Eisheth—could they have been watching her? Did they know her patterns? Did they know where she and Ami lived by trailing her every day? Or did Eisheth herself give them this knowledge? Could she have been haunting Maya all along?

Irrelevant. Irrelevant. How Eisheth and her followers know about Maya couldn’t have mattered less. Maya was still alive. Ami was still alive, and Maya moved to keep it that way. She called the hospital and told Ami as calmly as she could to get out of there, at least for the rest of the day. “If they could leave me a set of eyes, they could’ve left something much worse,” Maya told her. “We need to get together and make sure we’re safe.”

On the whole, Ami took that news rather well. Having a gaggle of SDF members go through their apartment looking for explosives or biochemical agents just to be on the safe side was less enjoyable, even though it was necessary.

“Just to be on the safe side, the Colonel can arrange for you to work another route.” That was Hyūga keeping Maya and Ami company outside the girls’ apartment building while Misato’s men swept the place. “As well as for you, Ami-san. A transfer to another hospital might buy some time. It really would be no trouble.”

But those were small promises, and Maya couldn’t feel safe or be satisfied with them. The threat of Eisheth and her people demanded more. She was an important leader in a cult with a worldwide following—the least she could do was stir up those cultists to do some good.

When Hyūga and his men cleared out, Maya and Ami returned upstairs, and right away, Maya started donning the garb of Archon Juniper once more. Rarely did she walk about in broad daylight wearing those gray robes, but it was long past time to make a statement—to be bold and be seen. She slipped on her ring with the Diamond and Eye, and with Ami at her side, she walked bravely through the town, with every passer-by as a witness.

“Is this really a good idea?” Ami asked, sticking close to Maya’s heels.

“If you and I can’t walk about freely, then why should anyone else? We can set an example here, an example for others to follow. They don’t need to be afraid.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” Still, Maya’s pace quickened, and she took Ami by the hand to help her keep up. They don’t need to be afraid because I’m afraid for them.

Fortunately, their destination wasn’t far, and they could see it looming ever closer with each step. A large broadcast tower with a flashing red light at its peak was their goal, for through radio waves and focused transmissions to satellites around the world, the Cult of Lilith made its message heard. This tower was the Cult’s headquarters in both Japan and worldwide. For the red beacon at its apex, it was dubbed the Crimson Eye, and the glow of that light reflected off the building’s cylindrical surface and myriad windows. The tower itself seemed overcome with that light as it pulsed slowly from nothing to full brightness and back again. With that shining beacon above the city, the Cult relayed its message far and wide, and from there, Maya hoped to stir all the followers of Rei to action.
To do that, Maya called together her peers—other archons within the Cult who represented different portions of the city. As Tōkyō-2 went, the rest of the Cult would follow. Maya needed only convince these two colleagues of her goal first.

“You want to work with SDF on this matter? With the government? Impossible!”

Alas, the task was more difficult than Maya had hoped. The three archons, along with Ami as Maya’s assistant, met in a glass-walled studio in the basement of the Crimson Eye tower, and while the microphones were off—they checked twice to be sure—that didn’t mean the four of them were immune to posturing in front of the others. Most strong-willed of all was Archon Camellia, a middle-aged woman who had long deemed herself Lilith’s most fervent follower on Earth. Her animosity toward nonbelievers was no surprise, and to Maya’s discomfort, Camellia had much more to say.

“Maybe you’ve forgotten how police patrol the outside of this building looking for excuses to arrest us,” said Camellia, pointing at Maya with the tip of a ballpoint pen. “Maybe you’ve forgotten how, when one misguided nut murders another in the mall or the park, we are inevitably blamed, and the police and SDF will chase down the first Cultist they can find. Even if he is unarmed and surrendering, they will beat and brutalize him to extract a confession, and they will kill him in disgust for his beliefs. If you think this doesn’t happen, perhaps I must show you my son’s headstone.”

Maya winced. Camellia was always quick to bring up her son’s death at the hands of the police as a reason to distrust them—and to distrust all outsiders to the Cult. “That was a year and a half ago,” Maya pointed out. “I know there’s much work to be done, but things have changed. The laws passed to protect us from prejudice and persecution are working. There hasn’t been violence against Cultists in this city for the better part of a year.”

“Until Lilith showed Herself,” Camellia corrected her. “And then, it becomes justified to ‘maintain order’ and ‘keep the peace.’ What you must understand, Juniper, is that the government is run by people who cannot understand our faith, and as such, we have no incentive to work with them. They will only use this opportunity to undermine us when we should be strong. You say SDF believe there are traitors in our midst, betrayers of our faith who follow Eisheth instead of Lilith? Fabrication. Utter, total fabrication. Lilith’s wisdom is all-encompassing and absolute. No one can deny it once they let it wash over them. Lilith is the one true God of our age. Her powers extend further than any one man or woman can imagine. We must trust that She will lead us to any perverse followers of Eisheth. I do not feel working with SDF is Her will.”

At that, the last archon in the room—the pallid, gray-haired Archon Larch—chuckled to himself, amazed and amused. “And so in time, our devotion to Lilith is to become a religion unto itself,” he said, his words colored by a slight accent—Maya thought it English or American, but she couldn’t be sure. “Please, Camellia, I have heard such words before. In my life before I came to Japan and was stranded here in the Impact, I grew up with those words, that single-minded devotion. No good can come from it. Lilith’s intentions for us were very clear. She has put her trust in Colonel Katsuragi. Why shouldn’t we do the same?”

“Because Katsuragi is one woman,” said Archon Camellia. “Regardless of your personal connection to her, Juniper, she does not control the whole of SDF or the government. There are people out there who hate us, and they will not see the light of Lilith’s wisdom today, tomorrow, or even years from now. They are too stupid to understand the truth that is right before their eyes, and if you put your faith in them to help us, you will only be burned for it a thousand times over. Speak to our brothers and sisters worldwide if you like, Juniper. If that’s the word you think Lilith wants you to spread, so be it. I will have no part in it. I will wait and gather my followers to meditate until Lilith reveals Herself to us. I know She will. Then I’ll be prepared to do whatever She commands.”
“What if she doesn’t appear to you, Archon?” asked Ami. “We have a responsibility to do something. She asked us all to help fight against Eisheth. Don’t you think She believed we could judge the situation and make our own choices how to do that?”

Archon Camellia glared at Maya. “Is this really appropriate? I thought this was a meeting between equals.”

“I think Ami has a good question that you should answer,” said Maya. “Nothing else matters.”

Camellia huffed, rising. “It’s a ridiculous question. If Lilith trusted us to make decisions for ourselves, why would She bother appearing to us in the ocean at all? Why preserve the remnants of human civilization? She knew we would destroy ourselves otherwise and fall victim to strife and panic. Lilith knows how weak and feeble we are and how we must strive to be something better. Neither you nor your pet here should forget that, Juniper. Good day.”

At that, Archon Camellia strutted out from the studio, and Archon Larch, with his unnaturally blue eyes, watched her go.

“For what it’s worth, I share your concern, Juniper,” he said. “At the same time, I understand why Camellia is so guarded. It can be difficult to find common ground between those of us who believe and the strangers we deal with who don’t. More than that, it’s one thing to ask us to be vigilant, but this accusation that our own people in the Cult may have betrayed Lilith can only divide us. It may be that division is inevitable, that we truly have some misguided people who have lost faith in Lilith, but that’s a difficult realization to accept. Of course, if someone has already lost that faith, it’s all the more reason not to look for nonbelievers.”

Maya frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it stands to reason, doesn’t it? There is no one who takes disappointment harder than the fervent, the fanatical believer. When someone feels betrayed by the person or being they believe in, they can easily turn to hate instead, to the antithesis of the one they believed in before. I can’t think of anything more disappointing than to believe in Lilith the All-Powerful only to realize She has an enemy, a counterpart. Eisheth’s very existence threatens everything some of us have believed—not you, not me, but there are others who want to believe that. To realize it isn’t true is to conclude Lilith lied to them. I don’t condone this view. I cannot see Lilith and Eisheth as gods. They are powerful, yes, but they have their own wants and desires, as do men. Men should decide on their own what they want. Would-be gods have nothing to do with it.”

“You don’t see Lilith as a god?” asked Ami. “Someone who could preserve the world while mankind made up its mind to return, who visits us and speaks to us every day, isn’t a god?”

Archon Larch shrugged. “She is what She is. To insist She must be a god is to insist on terminology, on a word.” He looked to Maya. “I welcome a statement from you, Juniper, on what you would have our movement do. Camellia may find the notion of cooperation with SDF offensive, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make a statement. Let me know what you decide.”

Hobbling out on a cane, Archon Larch left Maya and Ami alone in the empty studio.

“I don’t like him,” said Ami. “He doesn’t talk like he has any faith in himself or in Lilith at all.”

Maya didn’t reply. Ami could’ve been right, but perhaps Larch had only been making a broader point. There were people who wanted to believe, almost to a fault, that Lilith should protect them and shield them from hardship, and though the threat of Eisheth’s corrupting influence was dangerous to the Cult, the doubts her presence forced on the minds of Maya’s followers could be equally
crippling, but she could do something to mitigate that. The Cult’s message was broadcast at every hour of every day, and all Maya had to do was find a microphone. She and Ami searched through the building, finding the studio that was on the air.

“Archon Juniper, welcome,” said the producer, who covered her headset microphone as she talked. “I’d love to give you a tour, but right now we’re running a show, and—”

“Do you take guests?” asked Maya.

“Well, yes, of course, though usually it takes some weeks to prepare the program—”

“Can I sit in?”

At that, the producer’s eyes lit up. “It’d be a pleasure! Let me get everyone up to speed, all right? It’ll just take a few minutes.”

After a little last-minute rearranging of the show’s schedule, the producer equipped Maya with a headset and sent her in. It was a dizzying environment, full of blinking lights and transmitted chatter that only she was meant to hear, but in a way, it was frightfully similar to the control room at Nerv, where she’d had her own panel of instruments and sensors to monitor while Misato rattled off orders, Gendō and Fuyutsuki watched ominously, and Ritsuko moved from panel to panel, steadfastly looking for information to guide decisions on the pilot and the Eva’s safety. Ritsuko had always been better at dealing with the abundance of data than Maya. If only Maya had learned more from her then, she’d be better equipped to dealing with complex situations.

But as an archon, she would have to cope as best she could—and help others find strength in her resolve, too.

“Brothers and sisters, we have a special surprise guest for you today,” said the radio show host. “Many of you have questions and are seeking guidance, and she is here to provide. She is at the heart of our faith and movement, and I’m looking forward to her wisdom as much as you. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Archon Juniper. Archon, welcome.”

Maya nodded her head, even knowing she wouldn’t be seen. “Thank you so much. I apologize for dropping in so suddenly, but like all of you know, this is an unusual time, a time in which many are looking for answers and direction. That’s what I’m trying to give now.

“Since Lilith appeared to us, we learned that She is opposed by Her sister, Eisheth. Eisheth stands for the opposite of everything Lilith represents. She has no faith in humanity, and sadly, she isn’t alone. Lilith has brought many people back from the ocean to walk the earth, but not all of them still believe in the hope She offered. There are people who choose not to listen to Lilith. Rather, they follow Eisheth instead. I know they exist. I’ve seen them. I’ve heard their insane ravings. I know this is a difficult time—a time of uncertainty and strife—but we are Lilith’s servants on Earth. As Her servants, I implore all of you to look out for followers of Eisheth. Be responsible and be wary. It is our movement’s continuing mission to ensure the world Lilith helped make for us stays good. Watching for followers of Eisheth, the people who wish to dismantle it instead, is part of our duty. I’m confident all of you can do this. I’m as confident as Lilith was when She appeared to you and asked if you had something worth returning from the sea to pursue. Thank you.”

“Let me be the first to say thank you, Archon,” said the radio host. “I think we’re all honored and proud to play such a critical part in Lilith’s effort to save this world. Your words are an inspiration. Archon, would you stay with us a while? I’m sure many of our listeners would enjoy hearing your thoughts on Lilith’s wishes for us.”
Maya had no objection to that. She just exhaled and nodded, glad that she’d managed to stay coherent as long as she had. She’d spoken her piece; now it was time to listen to her people and give them counsel. If she could ask them to be watchful, hearing their concerns and worries was the least she could do in return, and their concerns were many indeed.

“Why hasn’t anyone else emerged from the sea lately?” asked one caller. “What is Lilith doing about that?”

“Why didn’t She appear to us after She went on television and showed Herself to the world?” asked another. “We’ve served Her faithfully. Doesn’t She appreciate that?”

“I heard Lilith let a man die after he was shot by one of Eisheth’s goons,” said a third caller. “Why would she do that? Why does she tolerate death at all? Wouldn’t people get along better if they couldn’t hurt each other?”

And that was just the beginning of the barrage Maya subjected herself to. While she did her best to handle herself adeptly, the nature of these remarks and the answers the listeners expected helped Maya realize something: the people on the other end of the line were going through a crisis of faith. Eisheth’s existence and Rei’s apparent lack of power to deal with her forced them to question all they believed in, and while the people she talked to that night honestly wanted to find relief, security, and truth, others may have already given up.

The people who expected the most from Rei could also be the most disappointed.

When Maya’s time on the radio ran out, she and Ami headed home. While Ami prepared dinner, scrounging through the cupboards to find something that hadn’t been thrown out as a possible hazard, Maya went to the phone in the hall and dialed.

“Yes, Hyūga? It’s me. I have a tip for you. It’s not much, and it may be nothing, but it could be a start. What do your people know about Archon Camellia?”

Based on Maya’s tip, SDF and Tōkyō-2 police began investigating Camellia and her followers for signs of any surreptitious activity in support of Eisheth—acts of terror or intimidation like the eyeballs Maya found or assassination attempts on “critical personnel” to the new Eva project, whatever that meant. Being an ordinary citizen, Maya wasn’t privy to most of the dangers Eisheth’s followers faced, but she’d passed on her fears to the people best equipped to finding the truth. That had to be enough.

As for Maya own safety, Misato came through and had Maya reassigned to a different section of the city. Maya regretted having to leave all her old charges behind, but she left careful notes to her successor about their whereabouts, their tendencies, and how to deal with them. Still, her first few days on the new welfare route were like being fresh on the job all over again. Each new person she dealt with presented her with an experience. She heard their stories of loss or desperation. She witnessed the expressions of their malformed obsessions and thoughts. Having dealt with the same group of people for so long, Maya had forgotten how many more had left something behind in the LCL sea—a loved one, a friend, or perhaps even a part of the mind or soul. Seeing a man with a scraggly beard barricade himself in an abandoned apartment with a collection of baseball cards as his only possession was a cruel, painful reminder of that, and there were too many more examples to count.

Still, once a few days had passed and Maya had reviewed some of the files on her new charges, she was hopeful she’d get used them. The job was the same, after all, and Maya was working to ensure
they all could get by in life. Yet while she was adapting, Ami had found the transition to a new hospital difficult. The commute was longer, and the staff seemed to resent having her dropped into their nursing corps out of the blue. One doctor even suggested she must’ve been incompetent or a screw-up to need an escape from her old position so quickly. “Either that,” the doctor had said, “or you’re just a bored, underqualified girl with too many connections for anyone to get rid of. If so, congratulations. I don’t want you anywhere near my patients.”

Ami was doing her best to prove herself a capable nurse despite this suspicion, but the confluence of circumstances around them had slowly worn her down. She’d cut her hair short on Maya’s suggestion early in the week, looking forward to her weekend fling, but as the week wore on, nothing seemed further from Ami’s mind. At the very least, she didn’t approve of Maya tipping off SDF to Archon Camellia’s opinions.

“She’s a believer like we are,” Ami insisted. “Even though she’s never nice about it, I just can’t imagine Archon Camellia betraying us. She adores Lilith.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Maya explained. “Someone like Camellia, who wants Rei to resolve everything in their life, could be disappointed that Rei isn’t an all-powerful god.”

“And you don’t see Her that way?”

“How could I? I knew her. I worked with her. She was no perfect person. Given her situation, I don’t know if she really understood what it was to be a person at all until right near the end.”

Ami frowned at that, struggling. “Then as wise as She is, do you think She has a right to impose Her will on us? Do you think She had a right to speak to us and encourage us to come out of the sea?”

“I don’t think that’s a question of rights—only what is good. People do what they will do. That goes for Rei as well. I think she wanted to make up for the fate she forced upon all of us. I’d call that a good thing, wouldn’t you?”

“Perhaps. I just don’t see how you can have faith in Her if you don’t think Her wiser and more righteous than us, than people. You don’t even think of Her as a god, but you speak to and instruct people who do. How can you do that, Maya? Isn’t that…misleading somehow? Isn’t that misleading me and everyone in our faith?”

Maya blinked. “This isn’t a faith, Ami. We’re telling people the truth about what Rei did and how that should give them a reason to keep going.”

“But you wear the robes, and you light the candles. You call Her Lilith when we’re holding services, but in private, you call Her Rei instead. And now you’ve tipped off the SDF on another Archon. Why? Is it just because she believes in Lilith where you don’t?”

Shaking her head, Maya took Ami by the shoulders, trying to calm her. Really, Ami was too upbeat—to beautiful—to be weighed down by doubts like this. Her short blonde hair and bangs spoke of a smart, strong woman, one who couldn’t be defeated or broken down even if she were stripped naked and presented for all to see. “Trust me,” she told Ami. “I believe in Rei’s message for humanity. Every one of us can come back from the ocean and put our mistakes and regrets in the past. You and I are proof of that. Look what you’ve done for yourself.”

“What about you?” asked Ami.

“Me?”

Ami touched a finger to the cut of her hair. “You’ve moved on, too, right?”
“I—” Maya’s mouth hung open, and she squinted slightly. “I’m not sure what you’re asking me. That’s what I just said, isn’t it?”

Ami looked away. “Of course. Of course! Silly me. That is what you said. Well, I should be going, right? Grocery shopping to do. I’ll be back around five before going out for the evening, okay?”

“Sure,” said Maya.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come along?”

“That’s quite all right. You’ll have fun.”

Closing the door behind her, Ami peeked through the gap as she left. “Well, I’ll be going now.”

“Be safe,” said Maya.

The door shut.

Really, it wasn’t an atypical Saturday at that point. Ami would fetch groceries and supplies while Maya cleaned the apartment and tended to laundry. Still, perhaps that was a good day to change the routine. It’d been a stressful week, and to give Ami space right then, even ostensibly out of respect, could’ve left her to wallow in her own doubts instead.

So Maya went to the closet and traded her indoor slippers for walking shoes, hoping to catch up to Ami. When there was a knock at the door, her spirits rose further—surely that was Ami coming back to ask her that they go together—but when Maya answered the door, her hopes were dashed. Two SDF officers in full camouflage gear stood outside, armed for battle.

“Ibuki-san, would you come with us, please?” asked one of the men. “Colonel Katsuragi requests your presence.”

“What’s happened?”

“Rogue cultists have taken an SDF officer hostage. Colonel Katsuragi wants your help to negotiate a settlement.”

“How? Who could’ve done this?”

“We believe they’re led by Archon Camellia.”

An armored caravan drove Maya to the scene, which was blocked off from all directions by a mix of police cruisers and personnel carriers. Snipers lined the nearby rooftops, the sun glinting off their scopes. The target was a narrow townhouse with a brick façade, and by the time Maya arrived, the occupants had boarded up the windows with plywood.

“Good of you to join us,” said Misato, who gave orders and monitored the situation from behind armored van. “Here’s the situation: based on your tip, we inserted an undercover operative into Archon Camellia’s flock. Right away, he started hearing rumors that Camellia was suspicious of SDF and was arming herself to defend her people against unjust oppression, but we think that’s all public justification for her real goal: this Night of Eisheth’s Reckoning that the monstrosity and her agents have planned. Based on our intelligence, we discovered Camellia had a car full of weapons sitting within just a few blocks of us, and not light weapons, either—machine guns, grenade launchers, the works. Our man was looking through Camellia’s home here, making sure that no other
weapons had been delivered, but somehow, he was discovered. Camellia is holding him now, hiding
out with a dozen or more of her followers, and she wants to speak with you.”

Maya gulped. With all these armed men, with dozens of lives on the line if she said the wrong thing?
It was enough to make anyone nervous, but then, had working with Eva been any different? Just as
many lives had relied on her to do her job and do it well back then.

“I’ll give it a try,” she said. “Whatever you need me to do.”

With a solemn nod, Misato motioned to one of her men, who brought over a bulky, portable phone
pack. The officer dialed, and Maya waited as it rang, with Misato intently listening over a radio
earpiece as well.

The ringing stopped. “Is that you, Juniper?” Archon Camellia’s voice was harsh and scratchy; it was
undeniably her.

“Yes,” said Maya. “It’s me. I understand you asked me here.”

“I just wanted to hear your voice and know it was true. You called SDF on me, didn’t you? You’ve
always been suspicious of my faith.”

“I did call them to investigate you. I won’t deny it. I’m here to speak the truth. That’s what our
movement is all about, isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, the truth gives us strength, and that is not something I’ll abandon at this time. I tell you,
Juniper, I did not procure any weapons. SDF must’ve planted them. I may be an outspoken woman,
but I do not condone violence.”

Frowning, Misato pressed a square, black button on the phone pack, and Maya heard a click in the
receiver. “Don’t challenge her,” Misato advised. “Let her pretend she’s noble. Keep this situation
calm, and it’ll all work out.”

Misato let up on the button and pointed at Maya to speak.

“I know that,” said Maya. “I know you don’t want any bloodshed, Camellia. How do you want to
handle this?”

“The SDF man I’ve taken refuses to admit they planted weapons here,” said Camellia. “I want a
public admission that SDF did this. I want everyone in the public to know of this duplicity—theirs
and yours. Only then will I release their man and surrender. Make the arrangements, Juniper. I know
Colonel Katsuragi is listening. She’ll make it happen. You understand?”

Maya frowned. “How do you know that?” she asked. “How did you know that man among your
followers was one of Colonel Katsuragi’s people?”

Archon Camellia scoffed. “How do you think? Because Lilith told me so.”

Click.

Her eyes narrowing, Misato yanked her earpiece out. “Rei.”

Right away, Maya felt a warmth at her back. “Colonel Katsuragi.”

Sure enough, it was Rei, summoned with but a word from Misato’s lips. She was the image of the
same sad, isolated girl as she had been two years ago, but there was a sternness about her, despite the
translucence of her body. Standing beside Maya, she met Misato’s gaze and never wavered in it.

“I don’t imagine that was you talking to her, was it,” said Misato.

“No. Eisheth has a hand in this.”

“What’s the situation inside? How’s my man?”

“Your agent is safe,” said Rei. “His wounds from interrogation are superficial.”

“What are they armed with?”

“There is a cache of weapons on the ground floor, with rifles, rockets, and plastic explosives. It’s hidden under the floor boards. Several of her people are armed, but Archon Camellia is not.”

Misato narrowed her eyes. “Camellia’s right to arm her people. She’s being played by Eisheth.”

“Played?” echoed Maya. “You don’t think she’s working with Eisheth?”

“How could she be? Why bother saying Rei told her about my man? It makes little difference to the situation right now—we have to save my man either way—but understanding what Eisheth is doing is key. Camellia was so ready to believe we were out to get her that all it took was Eisheth whispering lies into her ear to get her to do this. But that works to our advantage, too. Camellia wants a little theater? We can do that. I’ll organize her little show. I’m sure the press will be eager to get involved in it.” Putting her earpiece back in, Misato headed into the command vehicle, already rattling off orders to her subordinates. Only Rei and Maya were left behind.

Maya’s heart sank. Perhaps it was good that she’d tipped off Misato about Camellia, even if Camellia wasn’t working with Eisheth. Knowing what a hotbed of armed rebellion and dissent Camellia had built was useful, too, but still, something didn’t seem quite right about it.

“Lieutenant Ibuki.”

Maya flinched. “Yes, Rei?”

“You’re right to say I’m not a god,” said Rei. “In this time and space, where Eisheth and I both have influence, I cannot do enough. People like you will carry most of the burden in convincing humanity to fight her.”

“I’m honored to do it,” said Maya, bowing her head, “but do you really think I—”

She looked up, and the glowing image of Rei was gone.

Maya glanced about, baffled. “Where did she…?” No, that wasn’t the right question. Why did she go so quickly? Didn’t she know Maya had questions? What did she think of the Cult and what Maya had done?

Or maybe Rei wasn’t interested in hearing those questions, knowing that Maya was only looking for approval in her answers.

As the sun set on Tōkyō-2, Maya waited with the combined SDF and police forces as Misato summoned reporters and cameramen to help meet Archon Camellia’s demands. The shadows of buildings loomed larger with each passing minute, and the north wind was cool and brisk on Maya’s face. On any other summer day, it would’ve been refreshing, but then and there, it only unsettled her, for the intermittent buffeting of the wind kept her from standing steady and still. Amid the silent
flurry of red and blue flashing lights, the SDF and police forces waited, using their vehicles for cover and looking for even the slightest sign of a threat.

Within half an hour, a satellite van was allowed through the outer barricades. A cameraman—blonde, American, and with stubble—came out first. The reporter, with perfectly combed jet-black hair, smoothed out any wrinkles in her blouse and skirt before picking up her microphone. Misato’s instructions to the camera crew were very clear.

“At any time, SDF can and will cut your feed,” she said. “There will be no direct shots of the building or any of the suspects. We’re just here to make a statement. Understand?”

“Of course, Colonel Katsuragi,” said the reporter. “We have three waivers signed in blood just for you and SDF. Can we get moving with this? We’re on the air in five.”

“It’ll just take me a moment to get everything in order.” Misato took Maya by the arm eased her aside. “Listen,” Misato told her, “you’re going to call Camellia back and ask her if she’s getting the broadcast. If she is, just nod at me, and we’ll get started. As much as I’d like to believe Camellia’s just going to tell her men to put down their arms and surrender if we put out a message admitting all blame, I really can’t be assured of that. I need you to keep her distracted. Do you understand what I’m saying? The longer we can keep Camellia from giving orders in there, the better.”

Maya gawked at her. “So this is all just an elaborate trap? You’re not going to give her the chance to give up? She doesn’t know what’s really going on. You should tell her!”

“With the weapons they have? They’re not interested in giving up or listening to us. If you feel differently, I understand, but I can’t put too blunt a point on this: you can walk away, and I won’t blame you, or you can do as I ask. Give us the advantage, and we can end this quickly, with a minimal loss of life.”

Minimal loss, huh? Misato seemed to think loss of life was inevitable, and in fairness, maybe she was right. With explosives and heavy weapons in her arsenal, would Camellia really surrender herself without finding a chance to use them?

So Maya fought the empty feeling in her stomach and lugged the phone pack back onto the hood of a nearby cruiser, and when the TV team’s producer came out and counted down the seconds to life, Maya picked up the handset and dialed.

“Is that you, Juniper?” asked Camellia. “This reporter seems like a shrill young woman. I tire of her already.”

Maya looked to Misato. “So you’re getting the broadcast?” she asked Camellia.

“Of course, of course. It will be good for people to see SDF humiliated. They cannot be trusted. Even with Lilith thinking them the last, best hope against Eisheth, someone like Katsuragi should not think herself so powerful. She should remember her place.”

Meeting Misato’s gaze, Maya nodded once, and Misato put a hand to her radio earpiece. “First team, the pinball is on the plunger. Launch when ready.”

CRACK! An excruciating sound came through the receiver, and Maya hunched over, covering her ears.

“What on earth…?” cried Archon Camellia. “Juniper, what have you done?”

Maya winced, looking away from the face of the building. “Get on the ground, Archon Camellia.
They won’t hurt you if you don’t struggle. Rei will see to it.”

Camellia’s voice went faint and muffled. “What are you doing? Where did you get those? Do you work for SDF, too?”

BANG, BANG! Click! The line went dead.

Ka-PAM! A boarded window blew out in a fireball, spraying the street below with burning splinters. The police and SDF members tightened their grips on their guns, but Misato kept a steady hand out, trying to keep her men calm. “Easy!” she called out, peeking over the roof of a police cruiser. “Second team, you’re up!”

A squad of SDF members charged to the front door, and with a metal battering ram, they bashed their way inside and filed through one by one. Flashes of gunfire lit up the interior of the building, and a square of plywood boarding up a window cracked in half, opening a gap. A small, round object flew through the gap, clinking on the sidewalk. It bounced high in the air, bounding for the police and SDF’s barricade.

“Grenade! Get down!”

BANG! Windows shattered, and a police cruiser lurched and titled before falling back on its wheels. Shrapnel peppered the street and nearby cars, and a deadly fragment zipped under the car Maya had hid behind, leaving a mark on the road not four inches from her leg.

Her heart pounding, Maya peeked over the roof of the cruiser once more. Snipers’ bullets chipped and pierced at the window where the grenadier had been. Back at ground level, a gray figure appeared in the doorway, her hands in the air.

“I surrender!” cried Archon Camellia. “I surrender!”

“Keep your hands up!” Misato yelled back, reloading a magazine for her pistol. “Walk slowly!”

Obediently, Camellia came down the stairs, one at a time, as if one bad step might wake a sleeping giant. She kept her steady pace even as intermittent pop-pop-pop sounds of gunfire reverberated from the house.

“Archon!”

Just five strides from the circle of police cars and SDF vehicles, Archon Camellia halted. Under the shadow of smoke from a damaged cruiser, she turned back in surprise.

“Do you betray your own people, Archon?” asked a man, hidden in the doorway. “Do you leave them to die?”

“You are not my people!” she cried back. “I don’t know who you are!”

“Then you will die ignorant!” The man wheeled into view with a machine gun, and a spray of bullets flew from his muzzle, and four rounds pierced Camellia’s chest and torso, striking her down.

“Take him down!” shouted Misato.

A barrage of gunfire bombarded the façade, with the shots all running together in until they couldn’t be distinguished from one another, like the buzz of falling droplets in a rainstorm. With all the police and SDF focused on taking down the shooter, no one went after Camellia, who coughed and twitched a hand weakly, clinging to life. Maya didn’t have a gun, though, so while the others
might’ve had a plausible excuse for their inaction, she did not. She crawled into the line of fire, staying as low as she could, and dragged Camellia to safety by the cloth of her hood, despite the woman’s pained, shallow groans.

“Why?” Camellia asked weakly, staring at the twilight sky. “Why bother saving me, Juniper? To die here…” She wheezed, blood coming to her clips. “Or to die a few meters away, why?”

Maya looked away. The sight of blood made her weak and dizzy, but she took slow, steady breaths, trying to stay in the moment. “That’s what I wanted to ask you,” she said. “You thought Lilith appeared to you, but it wasn’t. It was Eisheth, and you believed her. You believed her because you wanted this. Why did you pick this fight with SDF? To discredit them? Is that what you wanted all along?”

Camellia shook her head mere millimeters in each direction. “I did not want this,” she said. “I didn’t —”

She coughed, gasping for air, and a spray of saliva and blood stuck to Maya’s face.

“I didn’t… do this.”

“Don’t lie!” cried Maya. “We found the weapons, Camellia. Your own men are armed like a military! Colonel Katsuragi found the shipment in your car. Just tell me why before you can’t say anything anymore.”

Camellia stared at her. “I don’t have a car, Juniper.”

To the intermittent sound of gunfire and explosions that rattled the earth, Maya went cold. Camellia’s head turned aside, and she stared along the road, into nothingness. Her eyes went empty—as empty as this operation and Maya’s tip to Misato had been.

It took ten more minutes for SDF to mop up the rogue cultists and declare the area secure, and more than the sirens of ambulances on the way to the scene, Maya remembered the moans and cries of the wounded as they waited for help that couldn’t come fast enough.

It was senseless—all of it, senseless. Eight men and women died in that brownstone, and what had it accomplished? Medics took Misato’s undercover operative out in a black body bag, and Camellia had been innocent. She had to have been. Even with her dying breath, she denied having had a hand in planning for this bloodshed, and as skeptical as Misato had been when Maya told her what the dead Archon had said, even she could be persuaded.

“Sounds like you were right about one thing,” Misato said after a fashion as she studied a new report on a clipboard. “The car we recovered in Camellia’s name? The documents were forged and planted. Her identity was stolen just to make it look like she was involved. It doesn’t explain why her people had so much firepower, but it’s enough to cast doubt.”

More than doubt—Maya was certain. She’d heard Camellia’s surprise when her people took out guns to fight back against SDF. It couldn’t have all been an act, could it? Who would go to such lengths?

And to think otherwise would be to deny the possibility Maya had been wrong. She’d pointed the finger at Camellia, suspicious of her worship and attitude, and without a scintilla of evidence or reason.
“Hey, someone must’ve thought Camellia would make a likely suspect,” Misato reminded her, “or else they wouldn’t have bothered to try to set her up in the first place.”

But none of that would’ve mattered if she’d been more reasonable, more accepting of Camellia’s worship of Rei. Even though she could never do that herself, it was no reason to worry that Camellia’s faith might drive her to some ill deed instead.

When the bodies were shipped out and the scene cordoned off with restricting tape, Maya started walking for home. She refused an SDF escort, preferring to be alone instead. Her face was sticky with the spray of blood Camellia had released with her last breath. She could rub her skin clean, but a towel or rag could never wipe away the stain of what her fear and suspicion had led to.

So Maya kept walking. She walked past her apartment, knowing nothing and no one would be there to give her comfort and solace. Instead, she pressed on north and west, despite the panicked looks of passers-by when they saw her face. It was a half-hour’s walk to her destination: a small bar on the corner of two minor roads, but despite the poor location, the place was alive with the smell of booze and happy chatter. Maya went to the head of the line—about twenty women long—and made for the door.

“Excuse me,” said a tall, dark-haired bouncer with a ponytail, who loomed over Maya in a muscle shirt. “I don’t think you should be going around all these people, Miss.” The bouncer frowned, studying Maya. “…are you all right?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just my friend is inside, and I need to take her back home,” Maya explained. “Please? We won’t be staying. I’m not trying to cut in front of anyone. It’s just…something happened.”

The bouncer looked down the line, and with a sigh, she stepped aside for Maya. “Hurry it up, all right?”

Maya nodded, trotting inside, and once she was past the door, she mingled with the crowd and became lost among them. As long as she didn’t make eye contact with them, they hardly paid her any heed. The bartenders, with their bare arms and tight black shirts, slid bottles back and forth with flair and enthusiasm. Maya found the person she was looking for there, at a stool one from the far end of the bar. The woman stared in the mirror on the wall behind the bar, touching a finger to the ends of her hair. Maya waded through the crowd, coming up behind her, and met her gaze in the reflection.

“Maya?” Ami spun around, gapping. “What are you doing here? I thought—” Her eyes went a little wider, and she studied the red dots on Maya’s face. “What happened to you?”

Maya braced herself on the edge of the wooden bar counter, feeling weak, and she sat down at the last stool. “I saw someone die today, Ami. I…I felt her as her life went out, and it’s my fault. I needed to find you.”

“And I’m here!” Ami assured her, taking Maya’s hand. She looked back down the length of the bar, catching the eye of a bartender. “Excuse me! Can I get a glass of water for my friend here? And some towels or napkins or something?”

“It’s fine, really,” said Maya. “I don’t mind it.”

Ami shook her head at that. “It’s not sanitary. Here.” With a glass of water courtesy of the bar, Ami tipped the glass slightly onto a napkin and wiped down Maya’s face, picking up every last trace of Camellia’s blood. “That’s better, isn’t it?”
Maya smiled. “It feels better. It feels better being with you.”

“Maya…”

There was a third voice just behind them. A woman cleared her throat. “Am I interrupting something here?”

Maya looked in the mirror, seeing a tall, graceful woman with cherry-red lips and long, curled black hair.

“This must be your roommate, right?” the woman asked Ami. “I thought I’d be meeting her pretty soon. Seemed like only a matter of time before you went back to her.”

Ami blushed, embarrassed. “We’re not like that. Maya here just witnessed something horrible, so she went looking for me. That’s all.”

“That’s right,” said Maya. “We’re just going to go back to our apartment. We don’t need to do anything else.”

The dark-haired woman raised an eyebrow. “That would go with what I was told—that you two had never been in a relationship. Pretty strange if you ask me. Two women living together, who are themselves interested in women, but the topic never comes up?”

“What about it? Maybe we’re just taking our time.”

“The way Ami-san is, I don’t think you need to wait for anything. She can get quite…excited, let’s say. I was looking forward to seeing that again.”

Ami squirmed on her stool, going red up to her ears. Maya took her by the hand and stepped between her and the dark-haired woman. “Why don’t you leave Ami alone, hm? We’re going home together tonight, and that’s the end of it.”

“Is that right.” The woman scoffed. “Suit yourselves. Ami-san, if you change your mind, you have my number. I’ll keep a candle burning just for you with the rosemary incense you like. You two have fun.”

With that, the dark-haired woman touched Ami on the shoulder and left, slipping into the crowd of patrons around the bar.

“Maya,” Ami asked sadly, “why did you do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“You told her off; you made it sound like we were together.”

“I didn’t. It’s just…it’s not the time. That’s all. I need you, Ami. I need you now more than ever—your positivity, your faith. These are things I thought I had once, but now, I’m not so sure.”

Ami looked away, her expression pained. “I’m not so sure, either, if you mean to say this to me or someone else.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the only person here right now, Ami.”

“Right now, yes, but when you look at me, do you see me? Or do you see someone else?”

Maya stared at her—at Ami, with her short, pale, blonde hair and stringy bangs. “I…I don’t…”
“Some time ago, I found a photo of her, Maya,” Ami went on. “Buried in old research papers and conference minutes. She was your mentor, right? She was brilliant. I could tell that much. Is she the person Lilith made herself look like when she asked you to come out of the sea?”

Shuddering, Maya looked away. “That’s very personal, Ami. I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Of course. I don’t mean to press you. It’s just—Maya, you know almost everything about me, but you don’t talk about your past. You haven’t been in a relationship with anyone that I’ve known about. And now, the way you acted just a minute ago, the way you suggested I cut my hair, making me look like that doctor. You didn’t take me under your wing just so we could—I mean, did you? So I would look like her?”

“Of course not; I promise I didn’t,” Maya insisted. “How can I prove it to you?”

Ami looked back at her, baffled and at a loss. Really, she was the last person who should look so lost, so confused and mixed up, and as a friend—never mind anything else—Maya didn’t want to stress her anymore. What Ami needed was a genuine show of what their relationship meant to Maya, of how much Maya needed her. A token of affection shouldn’t wait until the last moments before the apocalypse. That’s what Maya reasoned, and if she was heartfelt and earnest enough in her deeds, then Ami would understand, wouldn’t she?

So Maya leaned in and touched Ami’s soft, glossy lips to her own.

But Ami’s hand pushed her away. “No, Maya, don’t—don’t do that yet.” Ami wiped her lips clean, shaken. “I need some time to think. I might go stay with my sister for a while, just to get a handle on what’s happened. I’m sorry.” Ami dug through her handbag and left some change for the bartender to cover her drink. She made a beeline for the door, not looking back, and Maya watched her until she couldn’t pick Ami out of the crowd anymore. A pit formed in Maya’s stomach, deep and hollowing.

Ami, maybe you were right.

To sustain herself for the walk home, Maya finished the glass of water Ami had ordered before leaving, and the cold ice left in the glass was a testament to how slow things change—cubes of ice or people, for that matter. Long had Maya believed in the wonders of science and technology and what they could do to improve human civilization. That fascination drew her to work with Akagi Ritsuko, a brilliant scientist whose talents were dwarfed only by the ambition of the project she was working on. And though Maya had seldom spoken about her preferences with her coworkers, it was hard to deny to herself how Ritsuko’s cool demeanor and sharp intellect had appealed to her. Ritsuko was taken with someone else, though—the ruthless and cold commander, Ikari Gendō. Never mind that he was a man; what would anyone see in him? How could anyone see that man smile and not shudder for the wrongness of it?

Yet still, Maya had waited for Ritsuko—both then, in the days before Impact, and in the two years since returning. How such a strong, unyielding woman could refuse to come out of the sea—or choose to stay away from her—Maya didn’t understand, and in time, Maya had hoped to fill that void in her heart with Ami’s warmth and optimism instead, but she’d never forgotten about Ritsuko, had she? Her suggestion that Ami cut her hair like Ritsuko was proof of that. She’d clung to the memory of that woman, and because of that, she’d been stuck in time, trying to capture Ritsuko in Ami instead.

With these heavy thoughts, Maya returned home, finding it empty, and it might stay empty for a while. Feeling sticky and weary, she splashed her face with water from the kitchen sink, erasing any last trace of Camellia’s blood, and with a heavy breath, she headed down the hall for her bedroom.
‘Do you think you have hope, Maya?’

She stopped just short of her bedroom door. In darkness, the apartment was quiet and peaceful, but through the curtains in the main room, Maya spotted someone on the balcony—someone with short, blonde hair.

‘If you had hope for your people, would you have cast doubt and suspicion on Camellia?’

Maya threw the curtains aside, revealing a woman in a laboratory coat. She glowed in the night, appearing almost ghostly, but she faced away from Maya, gazing over the cityscape.

‘If you hoped for a peaceful resolution, why did you go along with Misato’s plan? You knew there was no hope of a solution without bloodshed. It is in your nature.’

Sliding the glass door open, Maya stepped out, onto the balcony. The space was narrow, with hardly enough space for the two of them to be comfortable. Maya tried to lean out and glimpse Ritsuko’s face, but shadows obscured every detail.

‘If you had hope for happiness with yourself and another soul, then why have you waited to enjoy it? Why do you look for someone else in her, someone who will never return?’

A wind blew across the balcony, and Maya, unsteady on her feet, grabbed at the railing for support. This couldn’t be real. How could it? Why would Ritsuko come there? How did she get inside Maya’s apartment?

Maya shivered, and more likely than not, the wind wasn’t responsible for it.

‘You stand for hope among your followers, but you know no hope yourself. Your faith was false; it fails you. That is why all humanity must be relieved of its false hopes.’

There was a distant creaking sound, and light streamed into the dark main room from the apartment door. “Maya? Are you here?”

Maya opened her mouth, but her voice was silent. The image of Ritsuko in front of her didn’t move, and an overwhelming aura of dread forced Maya back against the corner of the balcony railing. Though she couldn’t see Ritsuko’s face, the five black buttons on Ritsuko’s labcoat caught her eye.

Buttons that shouldn’t have been there.

Words that Ritsuko would never say.

A glow and translucence that, though subtle, Maya recognized. She’d seen it before with Rei, but that wasn’t Rei. It was the demon herself, the harbinger of death, destruction, and doom, and her presence could only mean one of those terrors would soon be upon her.

‘What do you say, Ibuki Maya? Do you see how your hope has been false and fleeting? Or do you cling to it in delusion?’

Maya shook her head. It couldn’t be true; it couldn’t be. Perhaps she’d deceived herself, but that didn’t make all she’d worked for wrong. Maya took those doubts and bottled them away, using them to fuel not fear and loneliness but an ounce of strength instead. “Ami!” Maya cried at last. “Out here!”

The image of Ritsuko spun, facing Maya, but where her nose and mouth should’ve been, there was only a bony purple mask instead, fused to the skull, with stretched flesh growing at the edges.
Eisheth cocked a hand back to grab at Maya, who recoiled, but though the hand went through her harmlessly, Maya’s body lurched and tipped over the balcony railing. Grasping at air, Maya caught one of the thin iron shafts of the railing, but she dangled over the side, swaying to and fro in the wind. She groaned, her arm and hand stinging from the scrapes of rubbing against the concrete balcony floor, and her palm went slick with sweat, losing its grip on the smooth iron shaft.

“AMI!”

“I’m coming, Maya!” Ami slammed the glass sliding door open. “I’m—” Her eyes went wide, seeing Eisheth, but who- or whatever she saw she didn’t address by name. “You can’t—you’re not real,” she muttered. “When she saw me, she’d always smile.” Boldly, she stepped right through the image of Ritsuko and reached her arms through the iron shafts of the balcony railing. “I’ve got you,” she assured Maya. “Just climb!”

With her dangling hand, Maya grabbed at the lip of the balcony, and by her fingertips, she pulled. Ami took her arm and tugged until Maya could wrap an elbow around the bars and keep herself steady. She struggled to the railing, and with Ami’s help, she climbed over, straddling the guard bar and falling to the balcony’s cold floor in a heap.

“How did you know?” asked Maya, panting. “Just a few seconds later, and I would’ve fallen…”

“As sad as I was over what happened, I decided I had to come back and see you at least one more time,” said Ami. “Whatever else we may have been or wanted to be, you’ve been a good friend to me, Maya. You’ve tried to tell the truth as you saw it. That’s all any good person can do.”

“You didn’t know,” Maya realized. “You came all on our own.”

At that, Ami beamed. “I like to think that, if I’d waited too long, Lilith would’ve found me and told me what I needed to do. But if people make the right choices, we don’t need Her guidance, do we? We only need it when we go astray.”

There was a faint light in the dining room, and over Ami’s shoulder, a girl in a green and white uniform stared back at Maya, ethereal and translucent. She said nothing, for nothing need be said.

“You’re right,” said Maya, smiling in relief. “I think we can both agree on that.”

“But why you?” Ami wondered. “Why would Eisheth bother trying to turn you or kill you? I like to think we’re important, yes, but we’re not SDF. We don’t run the Eva.”

True, Maya couldn’t make sense of it either. She was just having trouble standing up without feeling the scrapes and bruises from her near-fatal tumble. Still, with Camellia gone, if Maya had died, more than half of the cultists in the capital city would’ve been leaderless. Perhaps they would be the force rife with doubts and nihilism like she intended—there could be no more persuasive group that those who had followed Rei and chose Eisheth to worship instead. As for the rest of the Cult in Tōkyō-2, they would be embattled, fighting off such foes with Archon Larch in the lead...

Archon Larch—the man whose doubts about Camellia had reinforced Maya’s own.

“It’s Larch,” she realized. “Archon Larch is the one who serves Eisheth.”

Ami shook her head in disapproval. “Maya, please, is this really the time to point the finger at someone else? I didn’t like what Larch had to say, either, but—”

“Men should decide on their own what they want. Would-be gods have nothing to do with it.” Maya nodded, convincing herself. “All alone, it’s an innocent remark, but you have to think, Ami:
who would say that? Who wouldn’t be satisfied deferring to one godlike being or another? Someone who has his own reasons for wanting what Eisheth wants. Where do you think Archon Larch is from?"

“He said he was from America. Somewhere north, I think. I don’t remember.”

“He isn’t. He disguises it well, but I worked with a lot of them before Impact. The difference between native English and their language isn’t so big, and it can be hidden, but it’s there. I should’ve realized it sooner.”

Frowning, Ami looked at Maya quizzically. “The difference between English and what?”

Maya looked past her, to Rei. “German,” said Maya. “Archon Larch is German.”

At the stroke of midnight and not a second before, Misato and her men converged on the Crimson Eye, the broadcast tower of the Cult of Lilith in the capital. They raided the building in search of Archon Larch, but they found the studios empty, with the antenna set to transmit on continuous loop. By the strength of that antenna, all the people of Tōkyō-2 could hear and see this message and pass it along to the rest of the world. Larch stood before a simple black background, a stark contrast against the sickly color of his skin.

“People of Earth, Cultists of the Grace of Lilith, what follows is only the truth: you have been deceived.” Larch outstretched his arms as if to cradle his audience in them. “Lilith would have you believe that you can come from the LCL sea with dreams and aspirations, with the hope of going about life in peace and harmony with other men and women. That is a lie. The hope she offers you is false. Just today, an Archon of the Cult was killed in a firefight between cultists and the Self Defense Force, and she came under suspicion thanks to the tip of another Archon, the vaunted Juniper. Doubt and paranoia are the pests that make the human crop nonviable, and to ensure our coexistence with one another, we must bring those pests to light, so that all mankind may see them for what they are.

“In the months since Eisheth’s influence became felt on this Earth, I have slowly built a following within the Cult of Lilith, and I have had little trouble doing it. My people infiltrated Camellia’s ranks and planted the evidence to fuel her paranoia, and even Archon Juniper’s people are not wholly pure and immune. If you are listening and are discontent with this world that Lilith has supposedly given you, you are not alone. Join me. I do not serve Eisheth. I work with her toward a common goal, for all my life, I have known how humanity in its current form is inadequate, and the only reason I came back is to tell those who need to hear it most.”

Larch paused, and from offscreen, he retrieved a visor of some kind, a mix of red and white metal with plastic coatings.

“Til am Keel Lorenz, and my people—Eisheth’s people—are everywhere. And if this message doesn’t convince you, then perhaps what happens tonight will convince you. Join us and be part of Eisheth’s coming, or stand by while we expose mankind’s terror, selfishness, and greed. We do not make violence indiscriminate, but it would be a greater crime to stand by while humanity continues on this course, and that is what we will demonstrate now. Lilith preserved civilization. She made it easy for men to emerge from the sea. She made it too easy. We will show you the world as it was meant to be after years lying asleep. We will do what nature could not. The time of Eisheth’s Reckoning is at hand, and when you see how Lilith fails you, you must decide—will you be counted as one of Eisheth’s vanguards, or will you cling to false hope, denying the truth that is all around you? That decision is yours and yours alone, but it is our duty to show you just how terrible life on this Earth can be.”
A distant gunshot echoed through the night.

POP-POP-POP! Three more followed. Soon, they became patternless and irregular, and Maya cringed just at the sound of them, but Ami was braver. She rose from her seat and looked out, over the balcony, peering just over the rail.

“Maya,” she said, “the city’s on fire.”

Hesitantly, Maya followed her. Sure enough, scattered flames lit up Tōkyō-2, burning silently to Maya’s ears. Without feeling the heat or hearing the crackling of wood, Maya thought it more like a decoration than a danger, and that made the sight all the more horrifying. Each flame told of followers of Eisheth—one or several—and since every few blocks showed such a shimmering light, Maya knew they were many.

There was a knock on the door, and Maya and Ami both jumped a little in fright. They exchanged glances, puzzled, and together they went to answer. Cautiously, Maya stood aside from the door.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Pardon me, Ibuki-san, it’s Tsuru from across the hall. Can we come in?”

Maya opened the door, finding a woman with straight dark hair and her two children—a boy and a girl, aged five and seven respectively, who clung to their mother tightly.

“I’m so sorry to intrude,” said the woman, Tsuru. “It’s just—the children are scared, and I know you preach hope to people. I thought it might be good to have some company tonight, if it’s no trouble.”

“Of course,” said Ami. “Please, come in, come in.”

The Tsuru family entered, and Ami showed them to the table to sit around and rest. Ami kept the lights subdued, lighting only a small lamp at the table for them all to see each other, and Maya, still standing, looked out through the glass door to the balcony and the burning city beyond.

“So many of them,” she said, half to herself, half to the group. “So many people with doubts about the world they’ve come back to, about the hopes they had when they emerged. You know, we’re not so different from them.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ami.

“We can have dreams we cling to that keep us from living the lives in front of us. They know that too, but they think that means all our hopes are doomed to fail. That’s not true. I believe we can move on and find something fulfilling. I have to believe that, or else why would anyone choose to come back? It may be that we struggle with that every minute of every day, and sometimes we lose sight of how to go about it, but we have to keep trying for it. If we don’t, then when we’re hanging on to a ledge, looking for help, why would anyone be there to help pick us up?”

Ami nodded solemnly, smiling warmly and saying nothing. The woman Tsuru took both of her children by the hand. That was the role of the Archon—to give hope where there might be none. It wasn’t about worship or prayer, merely a message of faith in humanity and the truth of the miraculous choice that had brought humanity back from the sea.

As the night went on, more and more of Maya’s neighbors came by, hearing the laughter of children and the songs Maya, Ami, and the Tsuru family sang to keep the frightful sounds outside at bay. Their candlelight vigil for the city of Tōkyō-2—and for the world—grew louder and brighter with each new visitor. As the city burned and crackled under Eisheth’s gaze, Maya, Ami, and their neighbors rode out the night, their vigil forming a small light of hope amidst the black void of space.
When the human body tires, the mind feels the effects as keenly as any bundle of muscle fibers. The eyes stay open, but vision blurs. Sounds reach the ears but go unprocessed. Accustomed to the scent of a place, the brain filters out the aromas and vapors, as if they were never there.

So it was for the woman with two golden cherry blossoms and bars on her shoulders. Her legs and back tingled numbly from the stiff, inflexible material of a fake leather chair. A broad bank of monitors and flashed in a dizzying set of moving pictures and colors, but to Misato, they all ran together, formless and inert. The ringing of telephones gave way to a dull, high-pitched buzz in her ears. The smell of coffee grounds permeated the room, but Misato’s nose had long since grown indifferent to it. The dark liquid in her mug may as well have been water, for when she touched the substance to her lips, she tasted nothing. The act was robotic and unthinking.

“Colonel?”

She twitched. She shut her eyes tight, letting the stinging feeling behind her eyelids pulse and subside. Her eyes shut, she cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“Things seem to be settling down out there.”

Misato’s eyes fluttered open, and her gaze wandered to the stark red digital clock on the wall. 0531, it read.

“Are they now?” asked Misato.

“Yes, Colonel,” said the sergeant, who flipped over a page on her clipboard. “The fires in the historic district have been contained, and local police have managed to break up a mob of rioters near National Square. There’ve been no new reports of organized violence for the last half-hour.”

“But do you have Lorenz?” asked Misato, straightened herself in her chair. “Is he in our custody? Is he lying dead on a slab?”

The sergeant opened her mouth slightly, staring. “Ah, no, not that I’m aware of, but I can check—”

“Don’t bother,” Misato pushed on the armrests, rising, and her legs felt wobbly under her. She grabbed the edge of the boardroom table for support, but when the lieutenant tried to move in to help, Misato put up a hand between them, insisting on doing this herself. “If you don’t know, we don’t have him, and that self-pitying bastard has fled the city, probably the country, for good. He’ll spread his message of despair to anyone with ears.”

“People won’t listen to the likes of them forever, Colonel. Eventually, they have to see how destructive that way of thinking is. At least, I pray for that to be true.”

Misato gazed between the monitors on the large, wall-mounted bank. On one screen, a car burned in a brilliant blaze. On another, police in riot gear and shields fought through crowds of the discontented, withstanding their barrage of rocks and bricks. Bullet holes and shattered glass marred a once-proud storefront.

“Don’t pray,” muttered Misato, who took her emptied mug with her. “We’re the ones who need to make it happen, to make people see there’s more to life than Eisheth’s shroud of despair or Lorenz’s wish for nothingness. It’s an effort we need to push toward every second of every day.”
The sergeant glanced at the clock. “Every second, Colonel?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“We’re going on hour ten on watch, ma’am. I’m all right, but there are still a few men here from the shootout yesterday, or the raid on the radio tower. Some of the company commanders wish to know if they need to stay on standby any longer.”

“And if I say yes?”

“Then they’ll break out the wide-awake pills.”

Misato huffed. She could use one of those right then, if she wanted to stay awake, but what good would it do? Keel was gone. Eisheth was watching them from the depths of space, and the chaos that had taken hold in Tōkyō-2, troubling though it was, had started to wear off. The long night of Eisheth’s Reckoning was coming to a close, but the damage would linger and fester in the consciousness of mankind until someone bold—someone like Misato—stepped up to stamp it out.

But not when she was going on over twenty hours without sleep.

“It’s late,” said Misato. “So late it’s early, but we can draw down for now. Let the next watch know they’re taking over.”

The sergeant nodded. “Yes, Colonel.”

Word spread through the war room, with half of the weary analysts and watch officers putting down their headsets and retiring for the morning, but where many of them left the brightly lit room with baggy eyes and zombie-like expressions, Misato looked back at the monitors on the walls. Derailed trains, broken water mains, riot, fires, and panic—Misato took every image in. For two years, she had worked to help rebuild civilization, yet the best of her efforts were being undone in a single night.

For all that she’d done thus far to shield humanity from Eisheth’s gaze, the monstrosity’s five-eyed stare had paralyzed mankind for a night with panic, grief, and terror. Years to build something up, only days to throw it all away. Perhaps that was all meant to happen. As long as there were people like Keel—people who didn’t believe in building something for the future—then destruction of all mankind had made was inevitable. Whether it would take days, months, or years, the time would come.

So when Misato stepped out of the war room that morning, feeling chills in her body from the early hour, she left with a spot of resolve, an unshakable determination that no one would dissuade her from. She would track down those dangerous, determined minds who followed Eisheth, and though she might sleep in the meantime, she would find true rest only when those people’s poisonous thoughts were contained.

In truth, Misato recognized that she had hardly been at the forefront of the post-Instrumentality renaissance. For two years, she’d kept her work secret and in the shadows, but in her mind, there was no effort more important to the continued freedom of the human race than her own. She wasn’t just the tip of the spear. She—a long with the entire new Eva project—was the spear itself, and if she faltered, humanity would go with her.

So when she emerged from the Defense Ministry to the distant wails of sirens, she walked into the dawn with a heavy heart. Still, she was resolved. She could’ve stayed on the base—within the
mountain—and kept herself safe, but her home was not in a stuffy, cramped set of quarters that she’d hardly ever lived in. She had her own home, and she would go to it. Heavens forbid if someone like her stayed holed up in a mountain, isolated and detached from the suffering of the common man. She drove through the streets in her blue sportscar (an Alpine A310, as she would excitedly tell anyone who asked; she’d spent weeks trying to find another one after Instrumentality’s end) unafraid of what might find her on the streets of Tōkyō-2.

As it was, most of the major thoroughfares were deserted. Even Eisheth’s devotees had their limits, it seemed, and the good citizens of Tōkyō-2 had the sense not to go out after such a tumultuous night. The financial markets would be closed, or so Misato guessed. Most of the schools, too. No one would want to be the foolish, uncaring bureaucrat who said yes, send the kids to classes and open trading on rice futures, only to have the teachers gunned down or the traders held hostage by a man in an explosive vest. That was the magnitude of what’d happened overnight.

Granted, with only her small force in the mountain, what was happening in the city wasn’t technically in Misato’s purview. Even if the Prime Minister wanted SDF forces to step in to maintain order, Misato had precious few men to spare for such an operation, and the order likely would’ve come down to more conventional commanders. Still, a threat to the city was a threat to the Defense Ministry—as well as the main artery from Tōkyō-2 to the Hachibuse Mountain base. In a way, it would’ve been better if there had been something for Misato to do. As it was, she’d stayed up most of the night bearing witness to the disintegration of capital city instead.

And it had disintegrated. Not all at once of course, but the process had begun, and as all living things decay, so do cities. From fires set by Keel’s followers, smoke rose over the city, blanketing it in a sickly haze. Still, despite the chaos that had taken hold overnight, the city as a whole showed only scattered scars. As Misato drove from the square toward her apartment building, she half-expected to catch sight of bullet-riddled façades or the like, but instead, she ran into checkpoints in barricades, manned by local police who stopped every vehicle passing by. Misato’s SDF identification kept her from being harassed, though. Indeed, the bleary-eyed officers on patrol looked happy to see her. She was a sister-in-arms, after all, and though she wasn’t Shinji, she carried a decent level of recognition and respect with her, too.

“Hey, hey, stop slouching on that barricade!” said one officer to his partner. “Colonel Katsuragi’s coming through.”

The officers gave Misato a respectful, if casual, salute. Compared to the institutionalized forms of deference within SDF, the gesture had more feeling behind it, and Misato returned it with pleasure. “Carry on, gentlemen,” she said. “You do your country proud today.”

With a nod, the officers opened the barricade, letting her pass. It was good to be respected, to feel camaraderie with fellow servants of the people in this way. Prior to Second Impact, members of SDF were considered second-rate professionals at best, a fallback career for those who couldn’t get past the entrance exams for the nation’s toughest universities. The cataclysm of 2000 had changed that somewhat, for the needs of a more dangerous world put greater importance on those who would defend Japan. Without that change in viewpoint, Special branch would never have been formed. Still, Misato had found a position in Nerv far more rewarding—and important—than anything she could’ve done in SDF. Then again, had she known what Seele or Gendō had planned...

But that was all in the past. The world after Third Impact was a new and wild place. With two disasters having shaken humanity in a span of less than twenty years, what mankind needed in that dark hour was leadership—leadership that Misato was willing and able to provide. With the Japanese people’s renewed respect for SDF, Misato had the leverage to do just that as a lieutenant colonel in the Ground service. Her rank meant little; her name carried much more weight. Her name and
position gave her the influence to steer Japan—and, by extension, the world—toward a better future, one that would reject Eisheth’s nihilism, or so she’d hoped.

If that future was indeed coming, it had yet to arrive. Misato parked in a garage under her apartment building and rode upward to the fourteenth floor. The apartment she found waiting for her had soft brown carpet and pristine white walls. A door to a bedroom was open, and light streamed in from the east through a wall of windows. Fortunately, the apartment was as clean as could be. That wasn’t in Misato’s nature, of course. For that sense of order and cleanliness, she had her roommate to thank.

“Out all night, and you don’t even call.” Captain Hyūga pressed his lips together resolutely, but the ends curled upward, betraying his efforts to fight off a smile. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

Misato wandered in and plopped herself down on a cushion at the dinner table. Hyūga looked up curiously from his efforts behind the kitchen counter as he prepared breakfast.

“Shall I make a helping for you, too?” he asked. “Since you didn’t come in, I didn’t know if you were staying on the base or something else. Everything all right?”

“Have you seen the news?” muttered Misato, rubbing her temple with two fingers.

“I don’t like to be depressed.”

“Then perhaps it’s better you haven’t. You’ll never guess who reared his ugly head.”

“Commander Ikari? Chairman Lorenz? Robin Williams?”

“You got it with the second—” Misato frowned. “‘Robin Williams?’ Really? You put him in the same category as those two?”

“Have you seen the one where he dresses up as a nanny? I caught a glimpse of it in passing and had no idea ‘she’ was him. Gave me the shivers when I found out.”

“Makoto, you and I live in the wrong country to be getting away from crossdressers.”

Hyūga made a face. “You might be right about that. Let’s not speak of it any more. What happened with Lorenz?”

“He’s been hiding in plain sight in the Cult of Lilith, and he used tonight to unleash terror on the city.”

“How bad was it?”

“You can still see the smoke in the air and the cops on every corner to maintain order.”

“Sounds like Lorenz is every bit the bastard you’ve said he is.”

“Worse. He’s working with Eisheth, and if you can believe it, he actually has a following.” Misato took a deep breath, collecting herself. “Wherever he’s gone, I’m going to find him. Someone who spreads terror and chaos like he does can’t be allowed to stay free.”

“Then I hope to be by your side when you put him away,” said Hyūga, solemn yet confident.

Misato nodded, taking solace in his devotion, his loyalty, for they were sources of strength for her, even in this time uncertainty. Hyūga would follow her to the ends of the earth, after all, and were it not for that she might’ve questioned herself more. But Hyūga would be there with honest effort and encouragement, and that was enough to tell her that this long, arduous path for the good of mankind
was right.

Though it would cost him precious minutes before reporting for his watch at the base, Hyūga took the time to prepare a second bowl of miso soup, which Misato insisted was plenty considering she’d just go to bed and catch up on sleep right after.

“Are you sure?” asked Hyūga. “I mean, if you’re right, there shouldn’t be much traffic on the way to the base. I may have a few more minutes.”

“Mm, as far as food goes, I can’t think of anything.” Misato winked at him slyly. “But you can help me to bed.”

Hyūga grinned, but still, he checked his watch. “I guess if we do it quickly.”

Misato rose from her cushion, unbuttoning her jacket. She drew the curtains on the bedroom window, and Hyūga wisely turned off the stove. That was the other benefit in having a younger man. There was no shortage of enthusiasm on his part, and Misato knew well how to please him. A twist of her hips at the right time were all she needed to bring him satisfaction—not that she neglected her own, of course.

When they were finished, Hyūga hurriedly fastened his belt and made for the door. “Are you coming in this afternoon?”

Misato wrapped herself one of the bedsheets, running a hand through her hair. “Maybe. I’ve just got to get a little rest.”

“A late lunch then?”

She huffed. “Eat, sleep, eat again. Acting that way is just going to make me fat. I’m not as young as I used to be, you know.”

“Not a chance,” he said, and with a smile, he headed out.

With that, Misato prepared to wind down for the morning. She cast the sheets aside and headed to the washroom. The adrenaline from their encounter ebbed off, and groggily, Misato fumbled for a tube of toothpaste to clean her teeth and head to bed, but before she gave herself away to sleep, she needed to consult with someone. Hyūga was her partner in all matters corporeal, but when it came to the fight against Eisheth, Misato counted on someone whose presence was more ephemeral, fleeting, and rare.

“Rei.”

Like a genie responding to her master’s command, Rei appeared, and the reflection of her red eyes came into view in the bathroom mirror. “Colonel Katsuragi.”

Misato leaned forward, pushing up her lip to look at her gums. “How goes the chess match of the minds with Eisheth? Not well, I take it, given what’s been happening out here.”

Rei nodded. “I made a mistake. Eisheth has more human followers than I thought.”

“It’s disgusting,” said Misato. “Lorenz and Eisheth both—how anyone could come to reject life in this way baffles me. It’s natural, isn’t it? Life begets life. If all life chose not to exist at all, not to interact with the world in any way except to think, what would the point be?”

“What is the point of existence with pain and suffering without end?”
Misato raised an eyebrow.

“That is how she thinks,” Rei explained. “I don’t agree with it, or how she uses the worst parts of human existence to further her goal of stamping it out, but her conviction is unshakable.”

An implacable enemy, resolved and stern. That’s who Eisheth was. Admittedly, Misato had only had these glimpses of Eisheth through Rei, so she couldn’t truly judge their foe, but everything Misato had heard made it sound like Eisheth deserved a good punch in the face.

Until that could come to pass, Misato and Rei would keep fighting the five-eyed giant any way they could. That was their link, their bond, after all. For nearly two years, they’d worked together when few others even knew the name Eisheth Zenunim. Rei, in her limited capacity, provided insight and guidance into their foe, and Misato was the pair of hands to carry out Rei’s will. In some ways, it was a strange working relationship. Rei popped in whenever she saw fit and was prone to disappearing at a moment’s notice.

Distantly, there was the sound of a door creaking open. “Ah, Mi-chan?” called Hyūga.

Misato poked her head out the bathroom door. “Yeah? Did you forget something?”

“My watch log. It should be on the endtable; I was, ah, distracted.”

Misato smiled to herself. “Well, I should hope so.” She retrieved the leather-bound notebook and trotted out to give it to him, and her bouncing gave him even more to be distracted with.

“Here I thought you’d be in a nightgown or tanktop by now,” he remarked.

“You can blame Rei for that,” said Misato. “I ask her to drop by, and we get sidetracked.”

Hyūga made a face. “If it were anyone else, I might be jealous.”

“Please. I won’t consider sleeping with an alien older than age three billion.”

Hyūga looked around Misato, into the bathroom. “Is Rei still here?”

Following his gaze, Misato saw only the closed shower curtain. “Well, she was. No surprise she’s gone in a hurry, is it.”

“I suppose not.” Hyūga leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek. “See you for lunch.” With that, he hurried out.

Yawning, Misato turned back to the bedroom, and as quickly as she had disappeared, Rei stood there once again, with the glow of the morning sun creeping in behind her around the curtains.

“So quick you are to vanish as soon as someone else passes by,” Misato mused, tossing aside the spent bedsheets. She went through the dresser drawers, and just as Hyūga had predicted, she uncovered a thin white tanktop, a pair of exercise shorts, and suitable undergarments. “I’m just going to tell him everything you tell me.”

“Every time I show myself to someone, it comes with a cost,” said Rei. “A cost Eisheth exacts without exception. It’s the same for her.”

“I feel like we get the short end of things like that, considering she’ll invade Shinji-kun’s or Nozomi’s mind to drive them mad. Do you talk to the Zenunim, hoping to show them all that is good and sickeningly sweet about the world?”
“I’ve tried,” said Rei. “They don’t listen very well, but even a small seed of hope may make the difference.”

“Good luck with that. If we want to get something done, we need to do it ourselves. That’s what I want to ask you about, Rei. For Eisheth to have made a move like this so suddenly, we don’t have a lot of time, do we?”

“Eisheth hopes to happen upon a world in chaos and turmoil by the time her children reach this world in force. The Chairman’s support for her may do just that, and we may not be able to recover before the Five’s progeny arrive.”

“And it’s going to be sooner rather than later.” Misato lay back with a sigh. “Rei, Nozomi isn’t ready. The Americans and the Germans hardly have their dummy plugs tested and usable without their Eva destroying a few city blocks! And you’re telling me the Children of the Five could get here within months? Weeks?”

“It’s possible,” said Rei. “I can’t be certain.”

Misato touched to fingers to her forehead, her brow furrowing in thought. “‘It’s possible,’ she says. Honestly, omniscience isn’t what it used to be. Go get your money back, Rei. If it keeps us from having to go through Third Impact, so much the better.”

“Even God cannot know if Schrödinger’s cat is alive or dead, Colonel Katsuragi.”

“Maybe not, but anyone deserving of the title would have a much better idea whether He should buy cat food or an urn at the end of the day. I’m going to assume the latter is what’s ahead of us, and the fastest way to avoid humanity’s swift return to the juice aisle is finding and stopping Lorenz.”

“You intend to go after the Chairman?”

“Cut off the serpent’s head, and it dies. Let’s just hope he’s only a snake in the grass instead of a hydra. Can you help me do that, despite the limits you place on yourself?”

Rei stared. “He’s one man. There are many who follow him—and who follow Eisheth. I fear another would just take his place.”

“Then we’ll track down number two and number three and on and on until there is no one left to round up. What is it you like to say? That men come out of the sea only when they can imagine themselves in their own hearts? Well, here’s what I say—they can only stay out here in the world when they can imagine hope, when they see that the rest of us will not stand to be overshadowed by despair. You believe in that sort of stuff, don’t you?”

“I do. What do you need from me, Colonel Katsuragi?”

“Find me a trace of Lorenz—a clue, any clue—and I’ll take it from there.”

Rei gave a single nod. Misato shut her eyes tightly, trying to fight off one last speck of exhaustion to say something more, but when she opened her eyes again, Rei was gone. And that was fine; she’d asked Rei for a favor, one that Rei could work on while Misato herself found rest. Really, it was an odd partnership they shared. Rei had all the appearance and manners of a soft-spoken, distant, icy girl—one Misato had been content to guide and direct in her position as leader to the Children—but Rei was so much more than that. She was more human—and more than merely human. How strange it was to work with an alien whose greatest goal was to preserve the human race and its individuality.

It was Rei who came to Misato with a warning of what was to come, and Misato remembered that
day well. As daylight came in full brightness, Misato shut her eyes and slept, but her memories weren’t far from her in her dreams. Remembering why she’d chosen the path she walked gave her the strength and fortitude to press on.

Some people may have found it easy and peaceful to drift within the LCL sea, but Misato wasn’t one of them. To be in contact with others, to have her soul bared and exposed—it humiliated her. There are things no man should see in another. How could anyone understand it when she’d looked upon Kaji in years past and found the warmth and security she’d wanted from her father instead? She’d hardly known how to make sense of such a feeling. Anyone else would simply judge her—either for that, or for what she’d done in more recent days. Human beings could indeed be lonely creatures, and she’d turned to a boy for comfort and solace. Kaji had gone, and so had Rei. Asuka was in no state to be around either of them, so it had been just Shinji and Misato—two people alone in an uncaring world.

She’d thought to give him comfort, even if it meant surrendering her body to him. How else could they forget the losses they’d suffered together? At the tender age of fourteen, Shinji was a boy thrust into the position of being a man—of dealing with hardship, loss, and despair, and for thousands of years, men had found respite and relief through intimacy.

But most others in the LCL sea didn’t see it that way. She felt their hatred, their invective. Their disapproval and horror invaded her. How could she even consider that with a child? How could she have kissed him on the lips and promised more when he returned for her, even knowing she’d be dead long before he came back?

They didn’t see Shinji for the man he was becoming, the man Misato wanted to see him grow into, and for that, Misato was a loathed and despised part of the collective consciousness mankind had become. She became privy to the thoughts of others, of men and women who fancied themselves lovers of children, and their incessant thoughts of debauchery, of unseemly acts meant to defile without respect or pause, disgusted her. Others subjected her to violent, unspeakable images, the explicit wishes of what they’d wished happened to her. She felt acid burning on her skin, even though her body was no longer there. Invisible flames seared her most private places, and the only saving grace was that no one thought or image stuck with her for long. She pressed on, though, not because she had enough individuality left to exert force of will. Rather, there was nowhere else for her to go.

Until Shinji left the ocean, until the whole of the human race felt one of its number depart. From that day forward, the thoughts and minds in the ocean diminished steadily as people found hope, but where others were encouraged to go back by the specters of loved ones, family, or friends, someone different came to Misato, someone she had no special affection for.

“Major Katsuragi.”

The person—the thing—that spoke to her then separated her from the rest of the LCL sea. This dreamland was a dark place with a single wooden chair and the infinite expanse of space high above her, stars twinkling without end. Misato sat there, amid a circle of light that came from nowhere and ended just a few feet away on granular, sandy ground. The intruder in her mind stood in the circle too, lit up as if the full sun were on her, yet darkness surrounded them both.

Even in full night, the invader’s stark red eyes were unmistakable.

“Hello, Lilith,” said Misato, pointedly avoiding Rei’s gaze. “What brings you to this corner of my mind?”
Rei stared at her. “That isn’t my name.”

But it was. The person before her—the image, the specter in Misato’s mind—wasn’t any human being. It was the avatar of Lilith, the bringer of this calamity to mankind. Once upon a time, there might’ve been a person with the name Ayanami Rei, but that was before Instrumentality had come. Perhaps that was why Misato could never quite come to an understanding with Rei. She was an alien trapped in a girl’s body, and the girl was gone. The alien stood before Misato instead, with an agenda that was impossible to fathom.

“Many have left the sea, following in Ikari-kun’s footsteps,” said Rei. “Why haven’t you?”

“Trying to get your body reconstituted can just be such a hassle,” said Misato. “You have to make sure all your bones are in the right place, that you didn’t misplace a few capillaries or shift a few organs. Seems like more trouble than it’s worth, in my opinion. Shinji-kun will build up all that you tore down. My work here is done. Let me sleep. Let all the others go back, so I can be left in peace. What more can I be expected to do?”

“I don’t expect anything, but there are things you can do that Ikari-kun can’t, that he shouldn’t be involved in. This world isn’t yet safe.” Rei raised her eyes skyward, taking in the stars’ light. “There is a shadow coming, Major Katsuragi—a shadow I can’t peer into, can’t understand. I can’t fight it, but perhaps you can.”

What a foolish thought. One doesn’t simply fight shadows. One turns down the lights so that the shadows disappear. Even then, any safety gained is just an illusion. What really happens is that the shadows grow all around you until you can’t tell them apart anymore.

“You’ve lost people close to you,” Rei went on, “but Ikari-kun is still out there. He struggles to find a place in the world. Even if you can’t help me against what may come, you can help him.”

Misato frowned. “Why would he need help? He made the choice to leave. He’s okay now, isn’t he?”

“One decision doesn’t define a person, nor does it change who they’ve been in one fell swoop. I know this, and so do you.”

True enough. Misato had seen such an act once, when her father saved her from Second Impact, sacrificing himself. He’d been so distant, putting his work ahead of her and her mother, but he found it in himself to give his life for her. It would’ve been easy to say he was always a good man and always cared for her even when he’d spent days and weeks away. Perhaps that was true, too, yet still, Misato wasn’t so quick to absolve him of the mistakes he’d made. To do differently would’ve been to idolize him in a way that wasn’t true to his life, however flawed it had been.

It wasn’t a difficult decision to make, really. That Rei or “Lilith” or whoever she was had come urging Misato to emerge from the muck had been off-putting, yes, but to be free of the sea of human despair—even to go out there with few connections and so much lost—was as good a reason as any.

“What do I have to do?” asked Misato.

“As long as you can imagine yourself in your heart, that is enough,” said Rei.

“And after that, I work for you, fighting shadows?”

“You’re free to do as you wish, but I hope you will help me. There is much that I see, Major Katsuragi, both in the future and the past. It is what I can’t see into that frightens me.”

As vague and cryptic as ever. That much was like Rei. And how could Misato imagine herself in her
heart? That should’ve been easy. She knew how her body looked in a mirror, and with the thoughts and feelings of others temporarily at bay, she could concentrate and hold that image together.

But there was more to her than her body, wasn’t there? A person can be disfigured, maimed, or—as was apt in her case—scarred and still be the same in soul or spirit. There was more to her than looks. There was determination when she had a job to do. There was silliness when she passed time at home, drinking beer by the light of dawn. There was a part of her missing since Kaji had gone, and since her father years before that. A person had to be all of these things and more. Even then, the whole picture was incomplete.

But incomplete thought the portrait of herself may have been, Misato felt something in the ground—a rumbling, a movement. Her gaze shot up to the stars, but they brightened and widened, filling the once-bleak night sky with a white glow. Was it the sky falling on her, or the ground moving up to meet the stars? Perhaps both?

Either way, as the wall of light approached, Misato held her breath in anticipation, and—

**SPLASH!**

She found water instead—sickly, tinted water, tasting of blood, but water nonetheless.

“Got another one here!” cried a voice, and a life ring landed an arm’s length away from Misato.

*So this is the new world.*, thought Misato, gazing to the sky. It was blue, like always. Only the orange water and the bloody streak along the moon told her the world had really changed.

“Miss?” said the voice. “You want to grab that life ring? Or should we be on our way?”

Misato turned her gaze closer to the horizon, spotting a fishing boat as it bobbed on short, choppy waves. A three-man crew worked the deck, with one of the men holding the rope of the life ring.

“Are you always in so much of a hurry?” asked Misato, taking the orange ring in hand.

“You bet we are,” cried one of the crewmen. “We’re fishing for people. We get paid by the head.”

“So take that ring firmly or let us move on,” said the third crewman. “And if you do come aboard, don’t make trouble, or this guy here will take out a cod knife and keep only your head.”

An uproar of laughter came over the deck as Misato was pulled aboard. Right away, she was showered with towels and blankets to soak up the water and insulate her from the wind. Once she was on the deck, the crew hardly looked at her properly, for there were several survivors aboard already. Misato took this as a good sign: civilization had not only endured, but it was thriving.

Mankind was rebuilding itself with each passing day. It was a far cry from what Misato expected—just to see a hint of organization at all was encouraging, and there was more. The white fishing boat with silver trim circled about the crater bay for a while, but as dusk approached, the boat changed its course toward shore. The sailors tied up at a lively harbor, built of fresh lumber unsoiled by the passage of time in the sea. To see hundreds of boats tied up peacefully was an inspiring sight indeed. The whole of the world hadn’t gone to pieces after all.

“How long has it been?” Misato asked one of the fishermen.

“Four months since the boy came up. He was the first. You know about him, right? Most people who come out do.” The fisherman glanced at her face, and a light of recognition came to him. “You do, don’t you? You’re that Katsuragi woman!”
Misato tightened her grip on her blanket. “What about it?” she demanded.

“If not for how you inspired that kid to fight, would any of us be here?” The fisherman cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey, Skipper! Get a load of who we picked up? It’s the Katsuragi woman!”

“Katsuragi?” echoed the captain, peering from the wheelhouse. “Then let’s buy her a round, boys!”

“A round?” cried one of the deckhands. “Of beer?”

“No, soda water; yes, beer, price be damned!”

Never before had Misato been so happy to be carried around half-naked by a horde of burly, smelly men, just to be passed cup after cup of hot sake. The people in the sea hated her, but out here, among the people who’d found hope in living again, she was revered and respected—yes, even in little more than her birthday suit. Only four months since Shinji had come from the sea, and already, men could find joy and celebrate their lives. Perhaps it was a new and improved mindset from having overcome baggage, fears, and doubts by returning from the sea.

But men had only so much to do with it. Four months it had been since Shinji rose from the sea, but over thirty years had passed on Earth. The motions of the stars above were a testament to that. It’d taken that long for even one person to break through the false hope of the sea. How attractive it must’ve been—even to Misato, who’d thought it appalling. Yet what should’ve decayed in three decades remained pristine. The boats in the harbor resisted rust. The roads stayed black and smooth. It was as if the world had gone into hibernation, waiting for humanity to reappear, but even that night at the marina bar, Misato heard whispers of the truth. Sailors were historically superstitious folk, and some of the old salts by the bar would toast each other and say,

“To the ocean, to my fellow mariners, and to Lilith, may She watch over us as She has for three decades past.”

What a ridiculous concept—almost as ridiculous as the profound lack of liquor in Misato’s cup. “Bartender,” she slurred, “more please! Please please please thank you please.”

While the barman prepared more free alcohol for her, the truth of the matter became clear to her. It couldn’t have been Rei who preserved the world for them. The mighty and powerful Lilith wouldn’t have had need to ask for her help if she could alter nature itself to make it bend to her will.

‘The time will come when my powers wane, Major Katsuragi.’

Those two red eyes stared out at Misato from the mirror behind the barman. Misato turned around, but only drunken sailors singing boisterously were behind her. Nevertheless, the image of Rei kept Misato transfixed as long as she faced forward.

“What could possibly make you so power…power…” Misato frowned, trying to find the right word. “Helpless?”

‘Someone else like me.’

For a moment, Misato thought she glimpsed real worry on Rei’s face, but that could’ve been her imagination, just like the powder blue duckling she saw waddling on the counter.

“Quack!”

Definitely her imagination.
When morning came, a throbbing hangover wiped both observations from her mind. The sailors had been kind enough to let her sleep on their boat—with a pair of padlocks on the door, at that, just to protect her from unwanted nighttime guests, but that security didn’t hold for long. By half-past-ten, a series of chants roused Misato from her headache-induced stupor.

“Ka-tsu-ra-gi! Ka-tsu-ra-gi!”

Groggy and rubbing her temple, Misato peered out the side window of the cabin. The sunlight bored into her, and she winced, but the sight was clear enough. A crowd had gathered by the marina, with little more than an improvised barrier of traffic cones and wooden planks to hold them at bay. A small number of police officers stood guard at the barrier, but they were few and far between. Who would want to take a job as a civil servant after such a cataclysm?

But the beleaguered police, who seemed on edge and lost dealing with the boisterous crowd, were soon backed up by bigger guns. A motorcade rolled into the marina, headed by a black limousine. Men in black suits hopped out, symbolizing the authority of government in its most inevitable form. Six agents cut through the crowd, establishing a narrow lane to walk through, and four more escorted their charge past the masses. A balding man in a dark blue suit came down the path, his steps small but steady.

“Captain, may we speak with your guest?” he asked the skipper of the boat.

If the captain made any reply, it must’ve been silent. The door to Misato’s cabin opened, and with a gesture, the man in the blue suit waved off his bodyguards, stepping inside alone.

“Well, Katsuragi-san, you’ve made quite a commotion,” he said, putting on a smile.

“Are we supposed to know each other?” asked Misato.

The man in the blue suit laughed to himself wryly. “Probably not. I doubt we’ve ever met. Before the Impact, I used to be Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.”

“Long title.”

“Yes, well, I thought so too, at the time.”

“You’re the Prime Minister now,” Misato observed.

“Legally? No. While the Office of the Prime Minister is vacant, technically no one in his Cabinet remains in power, but the Diet has yet to reconvene. Someone must maintain order instead of allowing the country to fall into chaos. We are but a fraction of what we were, Katsuragi-san. This country, and the world as a whole, must rebuild, and to rebuild, leaders are needed.”

Misato huffed. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“I find in this world, there is precious little time to waste. Right now, there is a crowd of people outside who feel they owe you gratitude—and what’s more, who feel that your coming gives them hope. That sentiment does not reside only in the hearts of people here. You are associated with Ikari Shinji, the boy who made the first step out of the ocean. To some, you are like the Apostle John to his Christ.”

Misato’s hand went to her neck, only to find nothing around it. Whatever this new Prime Minister’s name was, he certainly had done his homework, using a comparison like that.

“If you join the government, you can make a difference. People are already predisposed to listen to
you. That can make your voice be heard even when others’ are drowned out.”

Misato sighed. “Look, I’ve been out of the ocean all of what, a day? I haven’t even had the chance to put on a proper pair of pants. I’m not ready to jump right back into the role of making the world a better place, noble-sounding as it may be.” And frankly, she added to herself, I know nothing about you or your government.

“I understand,” said the Prime Minister. “There are times I wish I could step back and leave this task to stronger, wiser, and better men. But I am in the position I am, and I know history would not look kindly on me if I left the mess to someone else, so here I am. That’s why I made my case quickly, so that we would waste as little of each other’s time as possible. But if you do change your mind, come to Tōkyō-2. If there’s still a government to join then, that is. Whatever your path, I wish you the best, Katsuragi-san.”

Nodding absently, Misato didn’t see when the Prime Minister headed out. She only heard the hatch clank as it shut, and that was fine by her. In some ways, the sea was more restful. Most things didn’t reach her with much clarity, and if they did, it was fleeting. Misato just wanted to sleep for a bit. Maybe for more than a bit, given the pain in her head that was like a power drill boring through her skull.

“Where’s Katsuragi?” a voice cried.

“We want Katsuragi! Make her come out!”

A man’s voice came on a megaphone, echoing through the port. “By instruction of the Kakō authorities, you are ordered to disperse. All those unaffiliated with the marina or its operations will be subject to fines and arrest. Please disperse.”

But the crowd grew rowdy and restless. They jeered the police and shouted. Misato covered her ears with her pillow, trying to drown the noise out.

BANG! Some thing, some object, impacted the hull of the boat, and Misato fell out of the small bed in surprise.

Whistles blared. “Step back!” said the man with the megaphone. “Throwing objects of any kind will be construed as assault and vandalism! Desist!”

BANG, BANG, BANG! A barrage of objects—rocks, shoes, and more—descended on the fishing boat, and the police and fell back with their riot shields. The ruckus pulsed in Misato’s ears, and then—

POP!

She bolted upright—and then thought better of it, taking cover behind the bed instead. A gunshot sounds deceptively powerless from a distance, but she’d have known that noise anywhere. There was commotion, screaming, but the single gunshot was all that rang out. Warily, Misato peered through the porthole of the cabin. One of the Prime Minister’s agents kept his arm outstretched, pointed to the sky with a pistol in hand. The crowd thinned and dispersed with the police’s blessing, and the Prime Minister made his way to his car.

So desperate were these people for hope that they would destroy the very thing they sought if it meant their voices would be heard, and the only way the government of Japan could control them was by the threat of a loaded gun.

That dark hour Misato witnessed did more to convince her of what needed to be done than any
speech Rei or the Prime Minister gave her.

As the shadow over Earth took shape—shape in the form of Eisheth Zenunim—Misato came to trust in Rei. This alliance was begrudging at first, but they had worked together for too long to let any suspicions linger. It made sense to Misato, anyway. Rei would do what was best for her children, and while Shinji would not publicly speak on why he left the ocean, in private he was adamant: Kaworu and Rei had spoken to him there, had given him the perspective needed to find value in living again. If she deemed it best for her children to live, Rei would do all in her power to keep it that way, to fight Eisheth’s coming with all her strength.

A pity that strength was largely tied up in arcane rules Rei and Eisheth had agreed upon, rules in place wherever their influences overlapped. How could anyone agree with Eisheth on anything or negotiate the terms of battle with such a foe?

“It is a better alternative than reducing existence to uncertain nothingness,” Rei had said once. “That, or Eisheth and I would fight endlessly for eons, with neither of us able to aid or instruct our children. What would you do then if Eisheth’s children came?”

If those were really the consequences, Misato would just have to take Rei’s word for it. But while Rei purposefully kept herself limited, the burden fell to Misato to get the job done on planet Earth, and get it done she would.

After a good day’s sleep, the first order of business was to see to the well-being of the country. As Japan went, so went Asia, and in turn, the world. Being one of the three nations with an Eva carried that weight and power, a weight that others in the region weren’t too happy with. The Chinese, the Russians, the Koreans (North or South) must’ve been ecstatic to see Keel’s goons run amok through the capital. It would speak to Japanese weakness, and that Misato couldn’t allow.

Well-rested and settled in her mind, Misato journeyed back to National Square to make her intentions known: she would meet with the Prime Minister and give him her recommendations as far as how to deal with the threat of Keel Lorenz and his band of nihilistic lunatics. He would be wise to heed her advice. The Diet was a fickle and capricious body, liable to throw out the Prime Minister and elect a new one at the drop of a hat. Misato’s displeasure with a decision could be enough to catalyze such a motion, though she was loathe to actually bring herself into any political arena. Politics was the domain of liars and cowards, nothing more, and though she practiced it when she needed, to, that didn’t mean she enjoyed it.

That Minister of Education who’d come to her, wishing to get out of the job soon and relieve himself of responsibility—he’d had the right idea, and to his credit, the Diet had overseen his ouster by the next spring.

In general, though, most affairs were best left in the hands of the civilian government anyway. It let her focus on the bigger picture, but when she spoke up on the coming of Eisheth, she expected to be heard and listened to.

“Where is my go board?”

Not ignored for the sake of a strategy game.

In the mansion on the northern edge of National Square, the Prime Minister’s staff and aides boxed up files and papers. Prime Minister Sakurai himself, a beady-eyed man with a goatee and silver glasses, rifled through the drawers of his desk, seemingly oblivious to Misato’s presence.
“If I’m going to spend my time entirely underground, I must have my go board,” he insisted. “My daughters would be utterly lost without it.”

Misato did her best to stand tall and be proper while Sakurai’s aides wove around her with stacks of binders and folders. “Sir,” she said, “don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“Absolutely not!” he cried. “The city is not safe, and I will not make myself an easy target for this Lorenz or Eisheth or anyone else! You thought you could steal that mountain from me, Katsuragi, but I will not be left here to die!”

Misato averted her gaze and sighed. Here she was, trying to give him advice to save the world, and he was preoccupied with saving his own ass instead. Still, there was one part in his statement she could latch on to. “If we can find and detain Lorenz, his followers will crumble, sir. Finding him should be this country’s number one security priority.”

“On that we agree, Colonel Katsuragi,” said the Prime Minister. “But what more do you want? You’ve already been in pursuit of him.”

“Under the authority and restrictions that membership in SDF comes with in a time of peace. I urge you, Prime Minister, to grant emergency powers in this time of crisis.”

Prime Minister Sakurai paled, and his expression soured considerably. “Out,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?” said Misato.

“Out!” he said, louder. “Everyone, out!”

Stunned, the half-dozen aides in the room shuffled out as quickly as they could, and Prime Minister Sakurai rose from his desk, pacing. He went to a window and poked at the blinds. They were shut, blocking out the sunlight, but he pulled at a slat, letting a touch of light through. “Do you know, Colonel, the caliber of bullet this glass is rated to handle?”

“I don’t, sir.”

“Neither do I, but I suspect it’s very high. Yet still, my advisors recommend that I keep the blinds shut, for even though we have security details keeping a watch on everything within two hundred meters, no one can guarantee my safety. I want to be safe, Katsuragi. The people want to be safe. That’s why I’m preparing this office’s belongings to go to Hachibuse Mountain. That’s an easy decision because it comes at no loss of liberty. The worst that will happen is people consider me a coward for abandoning the capital. That is a risk I’m willing to take. What I’m not willing to do is send this country to a state of panic with emergency measures. That much is right out. We are not at war, Katsuragi. Not yet.”

“With respect, Prime Minister, we have been at war from the day Eisheth set her gaze upon this world.”

The Prime Minister sighed. “Damn that monstrosity. Space is so vast and empty. You’d think there’d be enough room for five-eyed beasts from outer space to leave us alone.”

“I wish that were the case, sir, but as it is, her agents walk this earth freely. I don’t enjoy the thought of inciting fear, but Eisheth is already doing that. The SDF is legally an arm of the police. For the purposes of ensuring the security of this nation, you have the power to charge us with any appropriate mandate that does not abridge the basic rights of Japanese citizens. I am not asking to abridge any rights. I’m asking only to be able to pursue a threat to our security with the full force of my command, in conjunction with any local authorities.”
“Local authorities who may be in this country or abroad,” the Prime Minister corrected. “I will not authorize any action overseas without the written permission of appropriate counterparts in those nations.” Even this concession seemed to weigh on the Prime Minister, and he rubbed his eyes to get the weariness out of his body. “Beyond that, do what you must, Colonel Katsuragi, to neutralize the threat. I’ve not even gone to the mountain yet, and I’m already tired of sitting in hiding.”

With the Prime Minister’s assent, Misato would’ve agreed to anything he wished. Sure, he was being awfully skittish with this retreat to the mountain complex, but agreeing to his request, his demand, had bought her the power needed to track down Keel wherever he might be. Putting up with the Prime Minister for a few days would be well worth it, in her opinion.

For most of the afternoon, Misato oversaw the transference of the seat of government to the mountain. The screening of the documents, electronics, and personnel was laborious. If even one microscopic tracker entered the base, someone would know where the Eva was being housed. Eisheth would’ve liked nothing more than to zero in on Nozomi and the only place of real resistance to her might.

All day, Misato fielded requests for space from the Prime Minister’s staff and her own subordinates. Such were the benefits of sitting atop the chain of command. Other people got to do the grunt work. Misato had to actually use her head to solve problems and make decisions no one else would be accountable for. Heavens forbid she actually use her rank and strategic training to command forces in the field. Signing forms and stamping paperwork with her approval had to be 90% of her job.

“Careful,” said Hyūga, poking his head into her office. “If you stamp those forms any harder, you might break through the desk.”

Misato put her stamp away, sighing. “Aren’t you supposed to salute when you enter the presence of a superior officer?”

Seeing no one else around, Hyūga touched a finger to his forehead and made a small, casual salute. “I brought you something,” he said, revealing a sandwich wrapped up in plastic. “Since you didn’t have time for lunch.”

Misato simpered. “You’re a lifesaver, Makoto-kun.”

“That’s not all I’ve brought you.”

Raising an eyebrow, Misato eyed the closed door. “Oh really?” she said. “Is this a personal visit?”

Hyūga grinned. “Not that. I have some intel from Bluebird.”

From Rei. Giving her a codename made the hints and information she supplied to Misato no different from other sources of intelligence, and it meant Misato and Hyūga could talk about Rei’s findings even among people who weren’t entirely in the know.

Hyūga handed over a file folder for Misato to read over. “Bluebird’s discovered a group of the Chairman’s holdouts near Kakō. They’re using it as a short-range transmission base. The Chairman isn’t there, but there’s a chance some of his people may know where he’s gone.”

“Do we have people in place?” asked Misato. “It needs to be surgical; we need as many kept alive as possible. They may be just crazy enough to blow themselves up or melt themselves rather than be taken prisoner.”

“I’ve put nearby GSDF teams in position; they’re just waiting your approval.”

“Where?”

Hyūga produced another form, and Misato stamped it at once.

“Can you get me a flight?”

“Helicopter’s on the pad, waiting for you.”

Misato rose and kissed him on the cheek. “Hold the fort while I’m gone. I’m going to get some truth out of these bastards.”

Military helicopters aren’t known for their comforts, and to help keep their bearings and resist motion sickness, members of SDF are taught to watch the earth, so the brain can correlate its movements with those of the body. That suited Misato fine, for she could see the gradual changes in the landscape as she left Tōkyō-2 for her destination: Kakō, the crater, the place where Rei’s Black Moon had risen from the earth and left a great void for the ocean to claim.

From the air, the areas around Kakō still showed the scars of Third Impact. Where there were trees, they were young and fledgling. Smaller, rural roads were washed out in places, waiting for enough free workers to clear them. Given how things were progressing around the country, that could take the rest of the decade. Here was man, feebly trying to rebuild, yet before he could finish, Eisheth would come to wipe all his work away.

Not if Misato could help it.

The helicopter touched down near the northern face of Mount Hakone, for on the other side there was only water for miles to come. On this inhospitable terrain, there were few signs of civilization. That must’ve been what attracted the followers of Eisheth—the seclusion gave them freedom to associate and meet without fear.

By the time Misato arrived on the scene, the action had already wrapped up. Followers of Eisheth lay face-down on the mountainside, their hands bound behind their backs with plastic ties. Their base of operations had been a cave—sophisticated in its construction, with overhead lights powered by gasoline generators. They’d slept and eaten in this hideout for months, no doubt, and used it to plan their operations of terror. Blueprints for buildings told of their desire to eliminate hard targets, and whiteboards inside the caves showed drawings of explosive devices of all shapes and sizes—some small enough to conceal in a closed fist, others large enough to destroy a car.

For people so devoted to a better quality of human life, their capacity for violence couldn’t be underestimated.

The prisoners themselves were, as expected, uncooperative. They carried no identification and said nothing, looking on mute while SDF took their fingerprints and saliva. The code of silence and loyalty to Eisheth would prove unbreakable. Misato had seen it too many times. They would just melt themselves into LCL at the first sign of coercive methods.

“Major,” said Misato, approaching the local commander, “would you mind if I have an opportunity to interrogate a suspect?”

“You’re welcome to take a crack at one of them,” said the major, “but I must insist that we record the session. It’s as much to verify statements and collected intel as to protect the prisoners from undue harm, ma’am.”
“Not to worry,” said Misato. “I’m not planning undue harm to anyone’s body.”

As night came over Japan, a caravan of military vehicles transported the prisoners to Camp Takeyama, headquarters of the Eastern Army out of Yokosuka. The base had been but a small cog in the Japanese arsenal prior to Second Impact, but Yokosuka sat between the two ruined cities of old Tōkyō and the former Hakone. With impact craters on either side, one could only wonder how long it would be until Yokosuka sank into the sea as well.

Given the time of night, Misato didn’t take long to survey the décor. She barged right into an interrogation room and let the fluorescent lights sting her eyes. The locals quickly fetched her one of the malcontents—a kid, unshaven, with disheveled brown hair and blue eyes. If not for his stronger jaw, he could’ve been Shinji, based on age and appearance. Instead, he was Shinji’s antithesis, and the light of recognition sparked in his eyes as the guards sat him down before Misato. He slumped in the bare, angular metal chair with his wrists bound before him, and he eyed his own reflection in the one-way mirror.

Misato caught one of the guards as they were leaving. “Don’t I get some information?” she whispered. “Name? A profile? Favorite postage stamp?”

The guard shook his head. They didn’t know anything. For all they could say, this kid popped into existence from nothing, the creation of the same five-eyed god he served.

“My,” remarked Misato. “Is Eisheth getting her recruits from high school these days?”

The teenager said nothing.

“When I was in high school, I was played soccer during the day and tried to sneak boys into my room at night. I didn’t have any great cause to fight for. Things are different now. Just to walk around each day, you have to decide you want to be here. Maybe we all decided too fast.”

The teenager raised an eyebrow. “If even you doubt the worthiness of your cause, you’re doomed to fail, Colonel.”

*And if it only takes two lines to get you to open your mouth, you’re just as arrogant as you look.*

“You don’t have doubts?” asked Misato.

“Absolutely not.”

“So if someone said that it’s good to doubt once in a while, to think critically and objectively about what you’re doing and why, you’d say what?”

“That I *have* thought about who I choose to follow. I came back into this world on Lilith’s promise, and she hasn’t delivered. She is the false god, and only Eisheth can bring all people back to the sea.”

“Some violence is necessary to see that happen,” said Misato. “Not all people will go back to the ocean willingly.”

“It would be worse to do nothing,” said the boy. “That’s the only justification—the only one that matters, the only one we need.”

“Then that is what I think you should start looking at more closely, young man. People are dying out there thanks to what Keel Lorenz has stirred up. What does setting fires and shooting guns do to help bring Eisheth’s paradise to Earth? You can still be loyal to the goal of bringing all people back to the sea without supporting his brand of mayhem. That is a goal I…can grudgingly respect.” Misato balled her fists and shivered, but she pressed on. “What Lorenz is fostering is irreversible harm.
People can’t return to the sea once they’ve been dead for long. Help me find him. Help me stop him. This is in both our interests. The harm he’s doing is greater than the good.”

The boy held his head high, sneering. “Eisheth has chosen Lorenz as her voice on Earth. He acts with her blessing, and her will is unerring.”

Stubborn and devout. That’s what this kid was. He would not listen to reason; his belief in Keel and Eisheth were too strong. Children tended to be worse than adults in that way. Their beliefs tended to come about from indoctrination rather than reason, and as such, they would shrug off any persuasive argument.

Still, Misato wasn’t nearly done with the boy just yet. “Do you wish to enter Eisheth’s paradise? To hear her harmony in the sea?”

“Of course.”

“It’s the reason you fight, so that her paradise will be more comprehensive, more complete.”

“That’s right.”

“And if you couldn’t go there, what would you do?”

He scoffed. “You can’t harm me, Colonel. This body is only a shell. It’s malleable. I will turn to LCL and escape all the tortures you’d subject me to.”

“Why not do that right now?”

The boy narrowed his eyes, saying nothing.

“You’d be all alone,” Misato observed. “Left to the prison of your own memories and fears until Eisheth comes to liberate you. Am I right?”

“She will liberate us.”

Misato touched a knuckle to the one-way mirror and tapped. Thus far, this discussion had gone roughly as she’d expected. The followers of Eisheth detested individuality. It was the one thing they hated and feared. And if Misato couldn’t reason with them, she would use that fear instead.

On cue, two SDF guards brought in a tall, narrow metal tank. A square window on the front showed the contents: a deep orange liquid that went up to the top of the tank.

“What’s this?”

“This is a person,” said Misato. “One of your friends. A follower of Eisheth who wouldn’t talk and preferred to melt himself rather than be questioned. We gathered up his LCL with a vacuum cleaner and keep him here. I don’t think he’ll be reintegrating himself for some time. The metal of the tank is very sharp, very confining.”

“Is this supposed to scare me?”

Misato chuckled, tilting the tank to and fro to make it shake. “Why, yes, it is supposed to scare you. This is the future of your existence if you decide to escape us by reverting to the stuff Lilith made you from. You will be all alone, confined to a tank much like this one. Let’s say Eisheth does win; let’s say she comes to save you. How long will that take? Do you think you’ll last mentally, all alone in a prison like this one?”
“You think a few weeks of captivity is enough to make me betray what I believe in?”

Misato grinned, and the boy realized his mistake, scowling.

“I’m saying nothing more,” he insisted, turning his head away.

“Don’t speak then. Just listen. We want information. We’re going to talk you around in circles. We’ll probe at your mind, at the very things you consider true, and if you tire of that existence, then this tank is the thing you’ll have to look forward to. We can’t allow people like you to go back and forth between LCL and flesh and blood at will. If you decide to escape corporeal existence, this is all that awaits you.” Misato touched her finger to the window into the tank. “Do you know what I think of people who would do that? Who would choose to go back to this? They’re scum. All of you, you’re scum. You don’t even have the courage to die; you would choose to hang around, doing nothing with your lives. There are some people who would leave people like you in these tanks for all eternity, but that’s not a permanent solution.”

“And what is?” asked the boy.

“Each of these tanks has an emergency switch,” said Misato. “It releases a chemical into the LCL that interrupts any electrical impulses traveling through organic material. Without those complex interactions, the mind dies, and the soul quickly goes with it, unless you’re there to capture it and save it. Well, we have no interest in doing anything like that. Why don’t you have a look?”

The boy surged against his restraints, but the bolted-down chair kept him in place. “No! You can’t!”

But she did. Misato threw the switch on the side of the tank, and across the window seeped a black fluid. The once-clear and uniform LCL started clumping and settling out of the solution as bloody red masses.

“I thought you said you wanted to avoid bloodshed!” cried the boy. “You’re a monster! You’re everything we hate about this world!”

“I’m only doing the same as you,” said Misato coldly. “I’m willing to kill because I think it would be worse not to. You would use intimidation to frighten people into following Eisheth; why shouldn’t I do the same for my cause? Maybe you’ll realize now you’re no better than the rest of us. Killing for a cause is killing all the same. Whatever you believe, know this: we will get the truth out of you, boy. We will do it, and if you resist, if you try to escape, we will put you in a tank like this one. You’ll be all alone, and once you’ve gone mad from that existence, I will personally destroy your immortal soul.”

The boy looked on in horror, his mouth hanging agape.

“Now then,” Misato went on, her voice high pitched and sweet, “would you tell me where Keel Lorenz is?”

Within twenty minutes, Misato had the information she wanted. She needed only have it verified by the testimony of other prisoners. She delegated this task to the locals with specific instructions.

“Put a tank like that one in each room,” she said. “Put on a show, and make them think about the eternal lives they want to be leading.”

“But Colonel,” asked one of the officers, “is that real LCL from the ocean? Or does it not have any human souls in it?”
“Gentlemen, really. It’s a colloidal suspension with orange food coloring. You just add some more solute to the mix, and it all settles out. Don’t let them know that, though. If word gets out, no one will be frightened by it.”

“Ma’am,” said another officer, “is this really ethical? This is more than threatening someone with death; it’s worse than eternal damnation. This is the total destruction of a man’s soul. There are procedures, guidelines—”

Misato stared down the man, silencing him, and the question of the morality of what they were doing didn’t come up again. Sure, maybe they weren’t supposed to threaten prisoners with grievous, permanent bodily harm. There was no real threat while they were human beings anyway. As long as they didn’t retreat from the interrogators and turn themselves to goo, there was no issue, at least in Misato’s mind.

Regardless of the exact methods, the results were clear and unequivocal: Keel Lorenz had fled the country, just as Misato had predicted. His hideout was in his native homeland, the German state of Hesse.

And Misato would go there to deal with him.

In the dead of night, Misato returned to Tōkyō-2 with the intel and an outline for a tentative plan. She would take a squad of men with her to Germany and offer assistance to the local authorities, assistance they would be wise to take her up on given the advantages she could bring to bear. Who else had Rei’s knowledge at her disposal? Who else knew the extent of Keel’s crimes the way she did?

“Not everyone will see it that way,” Hyūga cautioned her when she returned. “We have enough problems here at home. How will it look to have Japanese forces running around the globe?”

“It’s a global problem we’re facing; the problem doesn’t end when you reach the seas around Japan,” argued Misato. “Eisheth is coming. Her forces will be here in a matter of weeks, and if someone like Keel Lorenz is around, he will mobilize people to fight alongside the invaders, not against them. It’s time to dig out the infection and destroy it. Lorenz’s thinking is a sickness, nothing more. I’m going to track him down, and I’d like it if you were there with me.”

Hyūga scoffed. “Not exactly what I had in mind for a date, but I suppose it’ll have to do. Let me go clean my rifle.”

Now that was exciting. The prospect of seeing Hyūga in safety glasses and with a sight to his eye was very attractive. It gave Misato something to look forward to on this trip.

But plans had to be made, and paperwork demanded signing. She’s only been awake for twelve hours, so despite the time of night, Misato guzzled down a can of coffee and went to it. She sifted through proposed travel arrangements, selected personally the members of her strike team, and detailed the arsenal of weapons they would take with them. Misato fully expected Keel to be armed to the teeth, so she followed a simple maxim: one only carried too much ammunition if it couldn’t be fired fast enough to be used in battle. One only took too many grenades if there wasn’t enough space on one’s belt to keep them at hand.

And though the mountain was quiet overnight, there was a steady stream of new reports from the war room—new details of intelligence from Keel’s followers, leads that the German authorities were pursuing in search of the madman, and so on. Thus, it was no surprise when a knock came to Misato’s office door. “Yes, come in!” she called out.

In walked Shinji, dressed in a fuzzy plaid pants and a short-sleeved white shirt. “Good evening, Misato-san.”
“Evening? Maybe morning. What are you doing up?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Misato shrugged. “Paperwork. It never goes away.”

Shinji nodded, peering over the desk, even as Misato pulled some of the forms away, given their sensitive nature. Shinji sighed instead, putting his hands in his pockets. “I’d settle for some paperwork right now. It’d make for a good distraction.”

Putting down her pen, Misato studied the boy before her. He was older, yes, and his face had lost some of its rounded, childish shape. She’d seen photos of Gendō and Yui when they were young, and Shinji’d started to resemble his father in countenance, though not in attitude. On the inside, he was still a deliberate, conscientious person, prone to worrying over things rather than attacking them recklessly. That was more like Asuka’s style.

Misato pointed an open hand to the chair across from her. “Have a seat,” she said, collecting her papers. “How are you holding up, Shinji-kun?”

“I’m okay,” he said. “I’ve walked all around the base a few times now. It’s quite a bit to traverse, so it’s good exercise. It keeps me from thinking about things too much.”

“What would you think about?”

“Being stuck here, sitting around all day, waiting for Eisheth to come.”

“You’re helping Nozomi,” said Misato. “She’s doing well, isn’t she?”

He nodded. “She is. She’s really taking to the obligation. She understands the responsibility. I’ve been teaching her what I can, and she has a good support system thanks to her family. She even gets visitors sometimes. I think she’ll do well. I just don’t feel like I’m doing enough. If I did more, I wouldn’t have to stay here every day.”

“You’re doing exactly what’s needed of you. Focus on Nozomi. It won’t be long now.”

“You think so?”

Misato nodded grimly.

“I see,” said Shinji, his gaze growing distant. “It all could end so soon. There were things I wanted to do before Eisheth’s children came. Now it feels like there’s not enough time.” He chuckled sardonically. “I can’t even marry Asuka. Girls can get married at sixteen; boys can’t get married until eighteen. Did you know that?”

“I could ask the PM to introduce a bill to the Diet,” offered Misato. “It really is discriminatory to have that kind of double standard.”

Shinji shook his head. “I wouldn’t have it done for just me. Asuka’s a little cynical on marriage anyway. It would cause more trouble than it’s worth.”

“It’s just a word,” said Misato. “What the two of you have wouldn’t change magically because of it. See your friends, Shinji-kun. Even if they can’t come by the mountain and submit to procedures, we can set up video conferences. We can do all in our power to keep you safe while giving you the ability to maintain contact. Human bonds—those are what will empower us to defeat Eisheth. They’re just as important as helping train Nozomi.”
“That feels selfish somehow, to try to find happiness for myself when doom is hurtling through space every second.”

“Then give other people hope, too. Go on the radio; go on television and the Internet. You’re fighting this fight with me, aren’t you? Your voice can make a difference.”

Shinji’s brow creased. “Would that really help? Or would that just make things worse? Have you seen the letters I get, Misato-san? Do you know the hate that is thrown at me every second of the day?”

She could imagine, and in deference to Shinji, she said nothing more on that matter. Long had she hoped that Shinji would speak up in support of the fight against Eisheth, but Shinji shied away from the public eye. It was hard enough for him to stand with her on stage as Rei appeared to lay down the truth for humanity. Shinji had done a great thing in choosing individuality versus the unfeeling collective, but he was still a child. Symbolically, he had led mankind from the ocean, but how much more could be asked of a boy still in the throes of puberty, still uncertain of what kind of person he was and what he would become?

That was the problem with some people—they expected Shinji to be heroic, to be infallible. They wanted him to act as a paragon of virtue and hope. Shinji may well have believed in such things, but he was sensitive to others’ criticism, too. Perhaps, for someone squarely in the public eye as he was, he had shown himself to be too sensitive, but as a young man still trying to find his place in the world, could he really be blamed?

Misato sighed. Blame had nothing to do with it. Eisheth was coming whether they liked it or not.

With Misato’s silence, Shinji calmed down, talking to himself. “I guess it would be good to see some friends. Hikari-san and I have spoken a little. We could invite Tōji by the base; I know she would like to see him, too. Has Ayanami been in contact with you, Misato-san?”

“She hasn’t been in touch with you?”

Shinji shook his head meekly. “I’d thought we were friends, and she says she watches over me, but she only does it from the shadows. I know she must be so busy, but—” He stopped, wincing. “No, I don’t know that. I don’t know what she does. She fights Eisheth, right? How? In what way? Can you explain it?”

“All she’s told me a lot of mumbo jumbo about the speed of light and quantum mechanics and so on. But that’s basically it, yes. She and Eisheth are constantly in conflict with each other. Without Rei to hold her back, Eisheth would’ve taken planet Earth a long time ago.” Misato leaned forward, lowering her voice. “I don’t think that’s what keeps her from speaking with you, Shinji-kun.”

“No?”

“Rei was very fond of your father, but I think in the end she realized how evil he was. The only person who proved himself worthy of her affections, of her loyalty, was you.”

Shinji nodded. “She didn’t used to show it very much, but I’ve seen it. Ayanami is wise. She thinks about thinks a lot more deeply than I do. She was quiet, but I enjoyed our quiet times together, and I think she did, too. That’s why I considered us friends.”

“I think what you shared together is very important to her, too. I think that’s why, even after your father brought her back again, she retained something. I think that’s why she loves you.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise, but they didn’t stay there for long. Looking serious, Shinji said,
“You think so, too.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“I’m not. I guess I just hoped it wasn’t so. Then I wouldn’t feel guilty about it.”

“Guilty about what? Following your heart? I don’t think Rei blames you for that. Honestly, it’s not much to worry about. I’d rather have the opportunity to have differences and problems with people, just for the joy of finding resolution and understanding. The differences between us make us strong. Don’t you think so, too? Isn’t that why we’re here?”

“It all sounds good in theory,” said Shinji, “but do people outside this mountain really believe in it? Are there enough of them who will stand and fight when Eisheth’s children arrive?”

Misato rose from her desk, circling around to crouch before Shinji and catch his eyes. “We just have to do our best to see that there are. Every single person will believe something different, Shinji-kun. In the same way, just as Asuka loves you in her own way, as Rei loves you in hers, I love you, too, Shinji-kun. The bonds between us all are battle-tested and not easily broken. Even if they aren’t exactly what we’d like them to be, they give us strength. Remember that.”

With those bold words, Misato kissed Shinji—just once, an innocent kiss on the cheek, as a mother would give to a son. Right then, Shinji was not an adult. Rather, he was a child looking for guidance, and Misato comforted him accordingly. This was the nudge she could give to put him on the path toward manhood, and when he found that path again, the kiss she’d give him then needn’t be so chaste.

But that time would have to be another night. “I think I can get to sleep now,” he said weakly. “Thanks for talking to me, Misato-san. Good luck.”

“Be safe, Shinji-kun.”

“You too.”

The door to her office shut, and Misato took her seat once more, returning to reports and forms. The journey she’d soon make to Germany was exactly for that sort of thing—for boys looking for guidance from the women in their lives, for children trying their hardest to grow and be adults. That kind of growth could never happen in the LCL sea.

But Misato felt a slight draft, and she knew right away she wasn’t alone. She liked to keep her office dark, but the glow in front of her surely didn’t come from any monitor or screen.

“Why did you say that?” asked Rei, her eyes impassive and cold.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?” Misato sat back, studying Rei like a specimen under a microscope. “Honestly, I don’t understand what you think it serves to keep such distance from Shinji-kun. It hasn’t protected him from Eisheth. If you hope not to intrude, that’s meaningless. Friends intrude on each other. If they didn’t, they would be strangers. If you hope not to mess up his life, you shouldn’t be afraid. Shinji-kun is happy, but you being there too will make him happier. Isn’t that what you want?”

“It is.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Rei averted her gaze, utterly silent.
“You’d best figure that out,” advised Misato. “The time will come that Shinji-kun will move to the fore. I know it’s coming. You won’t be able to avoid speaking with him forever. Is he your friend, Rei, or isn’t he?”

“He is. I want to be Ikari-kun’s friend.”

“You already are.”

Rei looked away, her gaze betraying great uncertainty. “We fight this war because of him. I’m afraid for what might happen to him—more than I fear what would happen to the rest of humanity. How can I say that? How can I tell him that?”

“It’s no sin to care more about your friends and loved ones than a faceless, nameless group of people. Shinji-kun knows that, too. Even without him, wouldn’t we be fighting this fight?”

“Yes. But I don’t know if I’d be willing to go as far.”

“How far?”

Rei’s eyes narrowed slightly, but she said nothing to answer that question. “Why did you tell Ikari-kun this now?” she asked again.

“Because you were doing nothing on your own. It’s exasperating, and it made me feel guilty every time I had to lie to Shinji-kun and tell him his search for you was fruitless. You weren’t going to do anything about it; you would’ve let Eisheth’s children arrive before you addressed the matter. So, like a nosy aunt from out of town, I’ve intervened. You’re welcome. Now, whatever happens, you won’t have the guilt of having said nothing to Shinji-kun before the coming of the end.”

Rei gave a slight nod, still preoccupied with what was on her mind. It was a gesture more of deference and respect than true agreement. To Misato, the matter was utterly simple, but Rei had a complex mind. Billions of years of existence could do that to a person, no doubt. In a lot of ways, the relationship between her and Shinji wasn’t as simple as Misato had painted it, but emphasizing the difficulties would do neither of them any good. As far as she was concerned, they were both people, and people resolve nothing without communication. While Rei kept avoiding Shinji, no communication could be had.

Were it not for Misato’s action, they would both be unhappy, suffering in silence. Left to their own devices, nothing good would’ve come from their brooding.

Sometimes, a firm, decisive hand was needed to deal with issues that others would not tackle. That was the role Misato filled—a role she’d taken on because no one else would.

The flight to Germany departed by mid-morning, but with the plane flying west, it was like time slowed down—or even stood still. Misato slept little on the way, and she considered this a blessing. Sleeping too much on long flights tended to give her severe jet lag. Napping in spurts, on the other hand, gave her a chance to reset her internal clock every so often, which lessened the shock. At least, that’s how Misato felt about it.

Others in the strike team passed the time as best they could. The transport plane was sparse and lacking in luxuries. Only thick, heavy combat gear helped keep the cold out, and the team sat among their own crates of weapons and ammunition. Some of the men played cards. Others read from dusty paperbacks or scribbled on number puzzles printed in magazines, ones used too often to pass the time, where the answers had already been penciled in and needed erasing. At least with a puzzle, one
could always assume the previous user had been wrong.

But after half a day in the air, the team’s destination loomed on the horizon. The mountainous terrain of southern Germany raced below, and Misato watched it fly by, interspersed with cloud cover. Blue sky with clouds over the quaint and beautiful German countryside. Really, it must’ve looked to anyone on the ground like a perfect day.

“Colonel!” One of the pilots peered out from the cockpit. “Message for you from Veitschöchheim.”

Misato unbuckled herself from her seat and adjusted her radio-equipped helmet, following the copilot to the front of the craft. She tightened the chin strap and gave the nod to the copilot to connect her. “Katsuragi here,” she said.

“It’s good to hear your voice, Misato,” said the man on the other end of the line. “Your German still gives you away. It’s the vowels; they’re too crisp, too clean.”

“If you like, we can discuss these matters in Japanese instead.”

The man laughed heartily. “No, I don’t think so. Learning languages is a skill for young, ambitious men. And women, of course, like you.”

“Are you saying you’re no longer young, General Guttenburg? I could’ve sworn you weren’t a day over forty.”

“You flatter me, truly.”

“I haven’t even begun to flatter. What brings this word from the Chief of Staff of the Federal Defence Force? We’re still at least half an hour from landing. Is Bavaria nice at this time of year?”

“Nice enough. I have some word for you from our end as we’ve been tracking down the terrorist and criminal Keel Lorenz. As we speak, the Federal Border Guard has dispatched their most able counter-terrorism unit, GSG-9, on a high-security mission to the Odenwald District of Hesse. The exact location of their mission is meant to be secret, but I have it on good authority that their target is hiding out near the district capital, Erbach. We thought you might be able to mobilize some satellite assets to start monitoring the area. Our coverage is a bit spotty, particularly when it pertains to German soil—concerns over domestic surveillance and all that—and the Americans have become increasingly paranoid about borrowing time from them.”

“I’ll put in a good word with the PM,” said Misato.

“Excellent. I knew it was best to ask that of you before giving the rest of the news.”

“Are you holding out on me, old man? Here I thought you wouldn’t keep anything from an old drinking partner.”

General Guttenburg sighed. “Misato, the Federal Border Guard insist on having full jurisdiction over this matter. You’re being informed solely as a courtesy, and two Air Force fighters will be escorting you the rest of the way to Veitschöchheim.”

“Why on earth would you do that, General? Do you think we’re likely to deviate from our course?”

“You’re famous for your unconventional tactical maneuvers. Is is only a precaution. When Lorenz is apprehended, we can share in the interrogation, and the federal government will be willing to see him tried for all applicable crimes against international law, as well as crimes internal to Japan. You have our word on that.”

“I hope they do. See you soon, Misato. Veitschöchheim out.”

Misato gestured to the copilot to cut the line. “I liked him better when he drank himself under the table on scotch. They used to sing drinking songs about him in Frankfurt. He’s become too responsible in his old age.”

She sighed, shaking her head. It was easy to blame Guttenburg, but at the same time, he’d proved quite useful. In asking for Japanese satellite coverage, he’d given Misato several details of the situation. Perhaps that was his intention—a show of good faith in Misato, despite the skepticism of his superiors in ordering a fighter escort. Perhaps it was even more than that. If something went awry on the ground, Misato had the advantage of already being in motion, already being in the air.

“Lieutenant,” she said, “figure out how far Erbach is past Veitschöchheim. I don’t want to be fending off German Air Force jets for more than a few minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Misato stepped back from the cockpit and turned aside. “Rei.”

The specter of Rei spoke from Misato’s back. “Colonel Katsuragi.”

“Can you monitor the situation in Erbach? It’ll take time to get a satellite into position.”

“If I observe the operation, I must permit Eisheth to do the same. If I report what happens to you, Eisheth will report the same to the Chairman. That does not give us an advantage, Colonel Katsuragi.”

“Before Second Impact, GSG-9 was one of the best counter-terrorism units in the world. Before Second Impact. There are precious few skilled soldiers still around. We are one of those groups, and if something goes wrong on the ground, I want to know about it and be able to assist—with the German government’s cooperation or not.”

“You have so little faith in them?” asked Rei.

“The slimy snake just keeps slithering away, into the dark where no one can find him until he strikes again. No, I’ll believe Lorenz has been dealt with when I’m looking at him down the barrel of a gun.”

Silence. Misato glanced back out of the corner of her eye, but Rei was gone.

Rei wasn’t the only one concerned about this course of action, however. Misato shared her plan with Hyūga, who had grave reservations of his own.

“If we deviate from the flight plan, it will cause an international incident,” he advised. “Eisheth is coming; this is a time the world should be unified in opposition to her.”

“Nobody’s looking for unification,” argued Misato. “Look at what happened yesterday. We find blueprints to the Russian and Chinese embassies in Lorenz’s hands, and they decide to blame us instead? They accuse us of planting evidence to try to paint ourselves in a better light? We hold an Eva; the rest of the world is unhappy about it, even though we’d go to every length to defend as much as we can. That kind of division is what Lorenz and Eisheth sowed. We have to stop them before it all gets out of hand.”
“I don’t disagree, but in opposition to Eisheth, we stand for all that is good about humanity, all that is good in this world. The cost of doing this will be high. It might be too high.”

“Then we’re the only ones who should pay it—us, and no one else. That is what leaders do, isn’t it?”

Hyūga nodded grimly, saying nothing more. It was in this tense silence—silence being relative with the ear protection needed to shut out the engine noise—that the strike team soared over Germany toward their destination. Misato ordered the men to check and recheck their weapons. Their ammunition and supplies would go with them by parachute, the same way they would go. The air base at Veitschöchheim loomed ever closer, and Misato grew anxious.

“Rei,” she said, “what’s the situation?”

Rei appeared on the bench, beside Misato, staring across the center aisle of the craft. “The Germans have accepted my help, but the battle doesn’t go well. Many civilians are in danger, caught between the German counter-terrorist force and the Chairman’s. They have rockets, grenades, and mines. They are heavily armed and well-prepared for this kind of assault.”

“We’re going in, then,” Misato decided, adjusting her headset. “Lieutenants, fly us past the base. Make straight for Erbach; circle back to land when we’ve been deployed.”

“What about the fighters, Colonel?” asked one of the pilots.

“Tell them we’re having problems with the control surfaces. They’ll buy that for a few minutes. If we can buy ten more after that, we’ll be in Hesse.”

“They won’t believe that for long,” warned Hyūga.

Misato nodded. “I know. Let’s hope it’s gets us far enough.”

With that, the strike team watched and waited. The countryside rolled past beneath them. The fighter jets pulled back as the pilots gave their fabricated explanations, and for a time, they were patient. Misato counted off the minutes on her watch. Every minute the fighters gave them allowed miles and miles to pass by. One minute past the air base. Two minutes, then three. Four minutes, then five.

“Colonel, the fighters request that we reduce speed while continuing to troubleshoot our control problems,” one of the pilots reported.

“Tell them the throttle’s stuck, too.”

“They’re bound to be wondering what does work on this plane.”

“Well, that’s a silly question. The radio works just fine.”

Even then, the German pilots weren’t going to believe their ears for very long. Five minutes out from Erbach, they grew impatient, and a stream of machine gun rounds zipped past the nose.

“Colonel, they’re firing warning shots!”

Misato left her seat, grabbing the handholds on the ceiling for support. “Put me on with them.”

“You’re on, Colonel.”

There was a click of static. The aircraft rattled with turbulence, and Misato swayed on her feet, but the handholds above kept her steady as she worked her way toward the rear of the plane.
“This is Lieutenant Colonel Katsuragi,” she announced over the radio. “I’m given to understand your federal police forces are experiencing heavy resistance against Chairman Lorenz. We are on our way to provide assistance. This aircraft will return with you once we have been inserted.”

“Negative,” said one of the German pilots. “Our orders are to bring you to Veitschöchheim at once.”

“And if we refuse?”

“We will disable or destroy you if we must.”

Misato popped the release on one of the weapons crates, finding a set of long, slender, metallic tube. She took the tube and stood it upright, retrieving a pointed canister from the crate as well. This canister was the same diameter as the barrel.

“Our countries are friends,” she intoned. “We’re merely providing the assistance your government is too stubborn to accept. Do you think Keel Lorenz cares who comes after him, be they Japanese or German? We are all equally damned in his eyes.”

“We have our orders. This incursion into German airspace will no longer be tolerated. Stand down or be fired upon.”

Misato took the loaded weapon upon her shoulder and harnessed herself to the ceiling of the plane with a metal clip. She pressed a button on her helmet, cutting off the microphone. “Open the cargo doors!”

One of the men scrambled to the hydraulic controls, and Misato took position at the top of the ramp. Outside, the two fighter jets gave chase. A deafening wind blew into the plane, but Misato raised her voice over the din and lined up one of the jets in her sight.

“You stand down,” she cried, “or you will be fired upon. A shoulder-fired missile at firing on targets at a similar altitude can go three times further than its stated range. Back off to fifteen kilometers, or we will wipe you from the sky if even a hint of gunfire crosses our path.”

In silence, the two German fighters pulled back, one sliding left, the other right. Splitting up made it harder for Misato and the pilots to keep the fighters in view of the cargo ramp. Even the fifteen kilometers of spacing she’d bought would buy only a little time. Supersonic jets could cover that kind of distance in seconds, but if the threat of Misato returning fire made the Germans pause, then her ploy would be worth it, and she shouldn’t waste any more time.

“Everyone, line up!” she cried. “Get ready for drop!”

The aircraft shuddered, lurching to the starboard side. Bullets riddled the fourth engine, rendering it a smoking heap, and smoke trailed out the windows.

“We’re going now!” ordered Misato. “Launch the ammo, then let’s go!”

The men rolled crates of weapons and munitions out the back of the aircraft. After a few seconds, the crates’ automatic parachutes deployed, slowing their payloads’ descent. When the last of the cargo was launched, Misato issued one last check of the cabin and gave a nod to the squad leader.

“You heard her!” cried the sergeant. “Move out!”

The members of the strike team deployed one at a time, with the sergeant, Hyūga, and Misato bringing up the rear. The two men went ahead, and Misato stepped off the struggling cargo plane, into the cold air.
It was a strange sensation to fall—one Misato never grew truly accustomed to no matter how many times she did practice jumps. When she first left the plane, there was a momentary feeling of weightlessness, but the wind quickly pushed on her, whipping by faster and faster. The Earth rushed toward her from below, yet from that height, its movement could hardly be noticed at all.

Holding her body level with the Earth slowed her descent, and Misato looked up, trying to find the German jets. One trailed the cargo plane while the other circled on its strafing runs, but when the transport turned back for the air base, the two jets broke off their attack, falling into formation side-by-side. That was a small comfort, knowing that she and the rest of her men wouldn’t be shot out of the sky.

As the Earth loomed large beneath her, Misato pulled the cord on her parachute, and her harness yanked her upward with a painful jerk. With her descent slowed, Misato focused on the terrain below her. The Odenwald was a mountainous forest, with only sparse openings to land clear of foliage. Misato pulled and pushed on the strings of her parachute to steer clear of the woods, but the many of her men weren’t so lucky. Several came down in the trees, and the crates of munitions had crashed through the woods like bowling balls from God.

Misato touched down in a clearing, and not three steps later, she was already rattling off orders. “Get some brush to try to cushion the fall! If anyone has to be cut loose and can’t get a hold on the tree, we don’t want them breaking bones on the way down.”

“Getting down from a tree is the least of your problems, Colonel Katsuragi!”

A team of men in black combat fatigues closed around Misato’s forces, watching closely through their rifle sights.

“Throw your weapons aside and get on the ground, hands on your head,” ordered one of the Germans.

Boom, boom, boom. A series of explosions rippled through the valley. They were distant, but the vibrations on the ground could be felt readily, even through combat boots.

Misato held her hands in the air but stayed upright. “Is this really the time to be arresting us?”

“You’re as much intruders in this country as Lorenz’s followers are!”

“But the difference is that I want to be on your side.”

“You think you can brazenly parachute into our country, without permission, without consent, and join up with us like nothing’s wrong?”

“Yeah?” Misato narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have to be happy about it, but really, why waste energy trying to hold us when Keel Lorenz is the real threat.”

Boom, boom, boom. A plume of smoke rose over the town in the distance.

“You see?” said Misato. “Even now, they’re trying to destroy civilization, trying to take everything to nothingness. Do you really want to hold me and my people more than them?”

The German commander scowled, but he made a frustrated, short gesture to his men, and they lowered their weapons. “You work under our authority,” he said. “No funny business, Katsuragi.”

“None at all,” said Misato, winking. “Promise.”
Together, the Germans and the Japanese pushed through the forest toward the town of Erbach. Historic in its design, Erbach was a testament to the old Germany. It was like a snapshot from the nineteenth century: pure white building faces with steep, pointed roofs and cobblestone roads. In its time, Erbach must’ve been quite quaint, a mix of old style in a modern city, but that time had long since passed. As the combined forces approached, it became clear Erbach was in no great shape. Dilapidated buildings stood empty and unused, missing singles and with stains on their front faces. The cobblestone roads were rutted and irregular.

It was no surprise to Misato: the human population was a quarter of what it had been at its peak. There weren’t enough people around to maintain all these villages and towns or to keep even great cities standing. So much hope had been lost. So many souls still drifted in the sea, unwilling to come out. Left to their own devices—even with the hope Shinji had given them—they chose that mindless existence.

In town, GSG-9 made their base of operations at a restaurant overlooking a fountain park. Maps and radio sets were laid out over wrought iron tables, with white umbrellas to shade them from the sun. There, Misato and her men met with the group commander, a gruff, blue-eyed man with a blonde mustache named Schwarz.

“Help save this town from Lorenz, and I’ll be the first to recommend you and your men medals,” he told Misato. “Whether that comes before or after you’re shot for violating German sovereignty isn’t my decision.”

“I’ll worry about my last words before the firing squad after we get Lorenz,” said Misato. “What’s the situation?”

“Two streets up and across the canal, Lorenz and his followers have taken hold of a church,” said Schwarz, circling a square plot on his map in black pen. “The church has a clock tower, which they’re using as a sniper’s perch. Two of these bridges here have been trapped with mines; the third has been blown up so many times it’s impassable. In addition to the church, Lorenz’s people have used the adjacent tourist center and the old castle as points of cover. The church staff and the tourist center employees are all hostages. Our plan to liberate them is as follows: both the church and the tourist center lie next to the canal. We can insert divers upstream and have them scale the buildings from the water. In addition, we can set fire to the clock tower to eradicate enemy snipers and use that opening to approach from the cover of the nearby buildings on the far side.”

“You can’t do that,” said Misato. “As soon as you burn incendiaries on that clock tower, they should kill the hostages and start making their escape.”

“They won’t be escaping anywhere. There’s nowhere to go. If that sniper perch is still usable, we won’t be able to approach from any other vector. We only have so much diving gear. There’s no way we can get the right amount of manpower in place with just the aquatic approach.”

Misato pointed out the canal bridges. “Are there more crossings further back? If so, get some vehicles, barge in from this direction. Use this wall of the tourist center to find cover from the clock tower and keep them distracted. You should be able to approach with force from the opposite side.”

“It’s suicide,” said Schwarz. “I won’t put any of my men in that kind of jeopardy.”

“Then we’ll do it ourselves. Give us a vehicle, and we’ll give you the distraction you need.”

Schwarz pursed his lips, studying the map. “Fine. But if we start taking fire from the clock tower, we’re taking it out, distraction or not. Don’t screw up, Katsuragi.”
“Not in the habit of it.”

The Japanese SDF team loaded themselves into three armored vehicles. Since few of the men were comfortable driving left-hand drive vehicles, Misato herself took charge of the lead car, having spent significant time in Germany before. Misato and her men waited five blocks away from the church, guarding their vehicles until the time of operation came.

“Commanding officers shouldn’t put themselves in the line of fire,” complained Hyūga. “If Eisheth finds out you’re on the battlefield, she will waste no expense to get to you.”

Misato smirked. “I’m counting on that.”

His eyes going wider, Hyūga took a deep breath and adjusted his goggles. “This is going to be fun.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Misato adjusted the earpiece on her combat radio and pressed the large side button on her handset. “Delta Base, Delta Base this is…” A puzzled look came over her, and she released the transmit button, turning to Hyūga. “What’s a good call sign?”

He shrugged. “Violet?”

“That’s too obvious.”

“I thought you wanted to be obvious.”

Misato pursed her lips. “Point.” She depressed the transmit button once again. “This is Violet Six. Standing by for your signal.”

“Violet Six, the time is 1331 on my mark. You are go at time Tango…mark.”

Hyūga pressed a button on his watch, setting the time. “Tango is in two minutes. Let’s get the vehicles running.”

Misato nodded, and she piled took the driver’s seat, starting the engine. On her right, Hyūga looked down at the profound lack of a steering wheel, helpless.

“I can never get used to this,” he muttered.

“It has been a while since I drove on the right side of the road,” said Misato. “And I am pretty erratic on the road even in Japan.”

Hyūga gulped. “You think you’ll get us killed before Lorenz gets to us instead?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Ah well.” Hyūga checked his watch. “Sixty seconds.”

“Are you sure you want to be in the front seat? It’s safer in the back.”

“This is where I want to be.”

Misato smiled, saying nothing, and for one quiet minute, the two of them stared out the windshield of the transport. In that minute, pigeons crawled across the street, pecking at the dirt between the cobblestones. A bank of clouds rolled in front of the sun, casting the town in shade. But for their armor and weapons, no one would know a war was taking place on the streets of sleepy Erbach. There could be parts of the world where no one at all thought of Eisheth Zenunim and the threat she posed.
But that wasn’t this day. “It’s time,” said Hyūga.

Misato nodded. “Let the games begin.”

She pressed her foot to the gas, leading the convoy through the streets of Erbach. The grand castle museum loomed large, with a tower of its own and a collection of trees at its back. At the castle’s front was a small parking lot—an open area with direct line of sight to the tourist center and the church steeple.

Misato turned the corner into the parking area, and when the steeple came into view, she jammed on the accelerator, charging hard for the tourist center’s north wall.

BANG! The windshield shattered, and a bullet cut through the bottom of the vehicle. Misato swerved, turning her head away from the bits of glass, but she kept going forward, bringing the vehicle to a halt. The tourist center was bent into an L-shape, and the convoy took cover by the inside corner.

“Let’s go!” cried Misato, banging on the metal partition to the back compartment. “Move, people!”

Misato’s men poured out of the vehicles, scanning the windows of the tourist center and the adjoining town hall. As a precaution, they fired smoke grenades inside, straying into the sight of the church steeple only long enough to launch the grenades before ducking back to safety.

“Colonel Katsuragi!”

Misato spun, using the frame of the vehicle for cover, but she spotted in her sights Rei, who pointed to one of the open arches of the tourist center.

“Incoming!” cried Misato.

Keel’s followers used the pillars between a pair of arches for cover. Bullets peppered the brickwork arches, but the holdouts hid themselves well, and one of them rolled a small, round object under the armored vehicles.

“Grenade!” shouted a man.

The SDF team scrambled away, and—

KA-BANG! The explosion shredded one of the German vehicles, crumpling it and lighting it aflame. Smoke rose over the scene, and wounded men fell on the sidewalk. Most of the injuries were to their legs, as only the shrapnel at low angles could pass freely under the three vehicles. With the commotion in the Japanese ranks, Keel’s forces pressed the offensive, coming out from cover to move around the smoking cars. Misato’s men fought a retreat toward another archway, this one by the old castle. Keel’s men, on the other hand, were unwilling to go far under the cover of smoke, lacking the protection of their sniper above.

“What’s the matter?” taunted Misato, with a spray of rifle fire toward the tourist center building punctuating her displeasure. “Where’s your resolve? I thought you people would do anything to see mankind return to the sea!”

“Colonel, contact on our flank!”

A group of four ran to the back edges of the arch, and Misato did the same. Sure enough, there was someone down the road, watching them from a distance. Misato knew those bright blue eyes, which contrasted against the girl’s red hair.
“Asuka…?” she muttered. She blinked twice, shaking her head, but the image stuck. She couldn’t be here. “Eisheth,” Misato corrected herself. “Watch yourselves! They’re trying to come at us from both ends of the street!”

Hyūga touched the button on his radio. “Delta Base, Delta Base, this is Violet Five. Current position in jeopardy. Requesting assistance.”

“Violet Five, Delta Base. Oxcart is heading up the mountain.”

Hyūga grimaced, turning to Misato. “They don’t have anything. Schwarz is about to insert.”

“Well, we have plenty!” said Misato. “Take cover!”

A second force came from the road past the castle, headed by the invulnerable, ghostly Eisheth Zenunim. Behind them, more of Keel’s holdouts converged on the SDF’s position under the arch, but thankfully, a cry came out that promised relief.

“They’re coming up from the canal!”

Misato smirked. Now they knew they were in trouble. “Clear our flank!” she said, and with only a few men covering the front, the men brought heavy weapons to bear on the rear. Rockets and grenades hurtled down the street, forcing Eisheth’s followers to the alleys. With the enemy on the ropes, Misato’s men advanced, checking each nook and cranny of the road before moving on to the next. The undisciplined followers of Eisheth and Keel fought hard, never surrendering, and a few dared to light grenades and charge at Misato’s men rather than surrender. They painted the walls of nearby buildings in their own blood.

“Cut through here,” said Misato, pointing out a path. “We can get to the church this way.”

The SDF team swept through the alley, coming in sight of the white church. The tall steeple ran red with blood from a killed sniper, and the German forces moved to evacuate hostages from both the church and the tourist center. The rescue effort wasn’t without bloodshed: many of Keel’s men lay dead in the pews. A gunman slumped halfway into the central aisle, with his arms spread in mockery and imitation of Jesus, but there was more than the blood of the guilty among the pews. A pair of dead German soldiers in armor sat side-by-side near the church’s main door. A child, with curly blonde hair and bright blue eyes, stared into space, oblivious to the hole in her chest.

There was, sadly, no perfect operation in this business, but the carnage still sickened Misato. Shattered stained glass testified to the ruthlessness of the firefight, and that glass could never be repaired. It could only be replaced.

“Where’s Lorenz?” she demanded, trotting up and down the room. “I don’t see him.”

“He must be fleeing with the others,” said Schwarz, kicking the shoe of a dead gunman. “They managed to bail out before we could fully surround the building. We’ll sweep them up.”

Bang! A muffled gunshot reverberated through the church’s walls. The combined forces of Germany and Japan tensed up, but most looked about, trying to locate the source of the sound. Misato couldn’t place the noise—the resounding echoes confused her—but she spotted an open door, leading beneath the church.

“Basement!” she cried out.

A barrage of gunfire erupted beneath the church, and both Misato’s men and Schwarz’s gathered at the top of the stairs before charging in en masse. Misato and Hyūga joined them at the rear, and the
group descended into darkness. The basement was a wet, dark place, smelling of mold and rot. The men turned on their rifle flashlights to see by, knowing that these beacons could make them easy targets, too.

Relics, crates, and boxes filled the church basement, and among these priceless possessions, the followers of Eisheth and Keel Lorenz snuck about, firing indiscriminately toward the unprotected stairwell. Two German officers already in the basement scrambled for cover, exposed and outgunned.

The man in front of the strike force raised his hand, bringing the group to a halt. From his belt, he took out a cylindrical canister with thin metal handle. Misato covered her ears and shut her eyes tight, and—

KA-WHAM! Even though her eyelids, the light outside glowed.

The vibrations of the stun grenade faded, and the strike force barged into the basement in force. The followers of Eisheth, though dazed and blinded, fired wildly toward the stair. Bullets riddled the walls and carpet.

BANG!

And one struck Misato squarely in the chest.

“Misato!”

Hyūga caught her, keeping her from falling, and Misato forced herself to cough to get herself breathing again. Getting shot even with a ballistic vest was like taking a hard punch from a professional boxer. Hyūga lowered her to the floor, trying to find cover behind a dusty grand piano. He opened her combat vest, finding the smushed bullet lodged in the material above her breastbone.

“I told you commanding officers don’t need to put themselves in danger,” he said, tossing the spent round aside.

Misato smiled weakly. “Some things you just have to do yourself. Even if it makes you feel like you got hit in the heart with a baseball. Really, shouldn’t you be a bit more bashful about ripping my vest off so quickly?”

That drew a stifled chuckle from Hyūga, but with bullets zipping past, he kept a close hold on his rifle, kneeling over Misato to protect her. The firing grew sporadic, and at last, a call went through the darkened room.

“All clear!”

Wincing, Misato forced herself to her feet. “Is he here? Where’s Lorenz? Do we have him?”

All around the room, members of the strike team checked the faces of the dead, to no avail.

“He’s not here,” said Schwarz. “My men will sweep back out to check the perimeter around town. You stay here, Katsuragi, and get checked out. You may have a broken rib.”

“I’ve been hurt worse.”

Schwarz nodded grimly, saying nothing, and with a flick of his wrist ordered his men back to ground level of the church. Misato resented being told to stay put, but more than that, the situation baffled her. Keel was an old man; he couldn’t have escaped undetected, not on the street. These followers of
his—why would they stay in that basement just to be found and killed? Did they think they could hide out unnoticed?

Or had they gone there for a reason?

“Search this room,” said Misato. “Pick it apart. There must be something here, something they didn’t want us to find.”

The men opened up crates and examined relics, but the true prize wasn’t anything in the room.

“Colonel, here!”

The men crowded around a pair of parallel seams in the floor, with a bronze-colored handle at one end. Misato pulled on the handle, and a piece of floor came with it, revealing a tunnel underneath the church.

“It’s a trap door; they used it to escape.” Misato touched one of her men on the shoulder, getting his attention. “Alert Schwarz. Tell him the tunnel seems to run to the north; they may have escaped to another building or even out of the city. We’re in pursuit. Everyone else, you’re with me!”

By the lights of their rifles, the SDF ventured into the cramped, musky tunnel. The dozen men went single-file, as that was all that would fit. Misato kept an eye on her compass, trying to keep a good bearing, but counting steps and watching angles would only give her an educated guess of how far they were going and where they might end up. The men trotted at a steady pace, like cadets on their fitness trials, for what had to be the better part of two kilometers. Only then did they reach the end of the line.

“Colonel…” whispered one of the men in the lead, hovering under a trap door.

Misato gave an approving nod. Another SDF member inched the trap door open, and the first man rolled a flashbang grenade into the room above.

Crack!

“Go, go, go!”

The SDF barged into the room above, forcing two armed, dazed men to the ground amidst a collection of cooking pots and soiled dishes.

“Clear here!” reported one member, flashing his weapon light up a flight of stairs.

A car motor rumbled, turning over as it started.

“He’s outside!”

An old, boxy white car backed out from in front of the house, tires screeching as it spun around. Misato’s men raced out, bringing their weapons to bear.

“Fire!” cried Misato.

Bullets shattered the back windshield, and the driver slumped over the steering wheel, leaning on the horn.

With the shooting over, a man rose from the back seat. He extended his hands through the window, and two SDF members went to the passenger side rear door to get him out. They dragged him out by both arms and held him in front of the car, presenting him to Misato, who grinned with righteous
satisfaction. At long last, the criminal, the betrayer of all humanity, Keel Lorenz, stood before her in defeat. Grungy and scragglly he was, wearing a dirty, old gray coat and unshaven stubble. Nevertheless, he held his head high, watching Misato with a grin.

“So you’ve finally found me,” he said. “I’m impressed. I hoped to hide out here, in the old country, until Eisheth came to bring her liberation, but this will do fine, too. There’s too much work to do to go in hiding. I see that now. You will try me for the deeds I’ve done, and I will admit to them because they’re just. People will heed my words, and they will welcome Eisheth’s coming. The crimes I’ve committed will be forgiven; even the most idealistic among you will soon understand that death is better than this existence, and what death I’ve brought to others is but an expression of mercy.”

Hyūga huffed, eyeing Keel between the sights of his rifle. “You’re a damned fool, Lorenz. No one will listen to the ravings of a madman, least of all yours.”

A hopeful sentiment, but it was also one that could prove to be misguided. There were people who would listen to someone like Keel. Misato knew that well. The dead driver with a bullet hole through his head was one of them. The men who took children and parents in the church—people who still had the temerity to ask God for guidance and strength—spoke to that. And given a platform for his madness, Keel would speak his mind for even more to hear.

And Misato couldn’t allow that. Not one more soul could be exposed to Keel’s cynicism and Eisheth’s madness.

“You’re right,” said Misato. “This death I bring to you is mercy, too, but for mankind, not for you.”

Keel’s eyes went wide in fright, and he pulled against the SDF members who held him, but Misato put three bullets in his chest, splattering his blood on the white paint of the car.

The cancer of mankind died that day, and as Rei and Eisheth looked on, ever-silent with their steady gazes, Misato lowered her rifle and relaxed. The job was done, and she wasn’t sorry for it.

Unwilling to admit that Japanese forces had worked openly on German soil without their consent, General Guttenburg and Federal Defence Force claimed Misato had been invited to join them instead. It was a calculated move, designed to save face, but only the most politically naïve were fooled. Still, in the interest of good relations with the Japanese, the German government allowed Misato and her men to return home.

As for the murder of Keel Lorenz, that was wrapped up nicely. As far as anyone on the German side knew, he had been found with a gun in his hand, recently fired yet oddly clean of fingerprints, save for a pristine set of his own. It was improbable, yes, that in the heat of battle he wouldn’t have smudged them in some way, but this oddity went unquestioned. How that gun got there, and whether it was truly his, was the topic for a more in-depth investigation, which no one really wanted anyway.

Thus, Misato and her men escaped Germany with measured wishes of goodwill. They would never be allowed in the country again after the stunt she’d pulled, but it was a small price to pay. She rode home confident she had done the world a service. She might not be hailed as a hero, but she had done what was needed, even if no one else saw it that way.

Hyūga didn’t. For the twelve hours it took to return to Japan, Hyūga was conspicuously silent and aloof. He didn’t approve—that was Misato’s conclusion. He just stared out the window instead, watching the clouds below. Hyūga was no innocent child. He knew tough things might need to be
done. Perhaps what bothered him more was that Misato had been the one to do it. In a way, he used

to look up to her. That’d changed somewhat as they’d grown closer, but remnants of that feeling

 lingered between them.

Well, if Misato’s deed on the streets of Erbach had taken her off that small pedestal, perhaps it was

for the best. Misato was no saint. She knew that well, and Hyūga should quickly learn that, too.

The flight back to Japan even less restful than outbound one, and as the plane touched down on the

runway, Misato looked forward to sleeping in her own bed. What a surprise it was, then, that when

the cargo doors opened at the rear of the craft, someone was waiting for her.

“Colonel,” said the Prime Minister, stiff as ever in his Western-styled suit, “may I have a word?”

Misato saw no harm in that. It was unusual for Prime Minister Sakurai to be so hands-on. And

without his usual bodyguard entourage, no less. That he ventured from the mountain at all was,

perhaps, an encouraging sign. Maybe he was feeling safe enough to leave again. Maybe he was

developing a semblance of a spine.

The Prime Minister and Misato walked along the edge of the runway, with the PM in no hurry, it

seemed, to get down to business. Misato trailed behind him, silent, and at last, the Prime Minister

sighed. “I thought you might have something to say for yourself,” he muttered, “but I see now you’re

perfectly content with what you’ve done.”

“Sir?”

“What were you thinking? Going to Germany and spilling blood on their soil? Without their

permission?”

“Officially, sir—”

“Officially, there’s a law in Tōkyō-2 forbidding singing in public baths. Saying something is

‘officially’ so doesn’t mean anything in politics, Colonel.”

“With all due respect, sir, most people should be banned from singing in public baths.”

The Prime Minister scowled. “You have never respected me, have you? No, I know you haven’t.

You’ve always thought I was inadequate for this position, incapable of dealing with the

responsibility it entails.”

“Leaders do not hide, sir,” said Misato. “I respect that you’ve been concerned for your safety—we as

people descend from those who were wise enough to be afraid of danger—but leaders exist to inspire

and give hope. Running to the mountain to stay in the shadows didn’t do that.”

“I see. Well, you are not alone in that belief, Colonel. The House of Representatives has brought a

motion of no confidence against me, and I expect by this time tomorrow, it will have passed. They

believe I don’t have control over this country any longer. After the chaos that erupted in the capital,

and now with you gallivanting around the world at will, invading international borders at your

prerogative, they believe you can’t be reigned in, either.” He stared into the distance, into the glare of

the setting sun. “I think they are quite right.”

The Prime Minister left Misato there, by the side of the runway, and wandered toward the sunset

until it was quite dark. Misato let him be. As incompetent as she’d thought Sakurai, having the lower

house of the Diet throw out the Prime Minister now was worse. Sure, the government would

continue to function, at least for the ten days while a new Prime Minister could be chosen, but how

could anyone new integrate into the job when Eisheth’s coming was so close?
But the ouster of Prime Minister Sakurai was only the beginning. Come morning, the streets were awash with people—some protesting Sakurai’s removal, others charging that the political system itself was flawed, a relic of postwar occupation, totally inadequate to the times Japan faced. Others still pushed for their favorite candidates from the Diet, but in the splintered post-Instrumentality landscape, there were nearly as many candidates for the premiership as there were sitting members of the Diet itself.

Regardless of what the people wanted, the only thing the protesters could be unified in was their willingness to walk the streets. Misato watched them from her bedroom’s wide window as the days passed. How small the people were below her. Their clothes and their hair blended together into a sea of color, a moving wave punctuated by signs and banners. Why weren’t they safe? they asked. Why weren’t they protected by their government when Keel’s followers set the city ablaze?

Misato was helpless to answer them, and as far as the diet was concerned, she was anathema, a political kiss of death even to be seen in the same room with. She was the person they couldn’t control, whom they’d just as soon remove from her post if it weren’t for her notoriety, her fame.

“Anyone in your orbit may be bossed around by you,” said one member of the House of Councillors over the phone. “That’s an easy way to get passed over for the new PM’s cabinet.”

Misato had no love for the political realm, but to be completely shut out of it rankled her. The choosing of the new Prime Minister was too important to have no say in, and the resulting uncertainty in Japan’s future drew the interest of its neighbors, too. For every day the Japanese people marched in the streets, like misguided sailors to Eisheth’s siren cry, the Chinese and Russians grew anxious. At last, on day six of the legislative deadlock, with record crowds gathering by the barricades around National Square, the two foreign powers made their announcement.

“With continuing upheaval in Japan, we and our Chinese brethren have become increasingly concerned,” said one Russian admiral, speaking from the deck of an aircraft carrier. “Japan has been tasked by Lilith with an enormous responsibility—to safeguard all of Asia with its Evangelion when Eisheth Zenunim comes. But we can’t know when she’ll come, and every day, Japan descends further and further into political turmoil. Already, there is talk of rebellious former cabinet officials urging the House of Representatives to dissolve itself. People take to the streets and no longer work. It is a festering pool for sympathies toward Eisheth to foment, and we will not allow it. We can’t allow her to gain more of a foothold in Japan and threaten the security of the Eva. Japan has one week to gets its affairs in order. If not, Russia and China will take the Eva by force, to keep it out of enemy hands.”

Misato threw the remote at the television on seeing that press conference. “What a joke!” she cried. “They just want the Eva for themselves, and they’re willing to use any pretext to justify it.”

“Probably,” said Hyūga, “but I bet they really do feel exposed and vulnerable. After all, we have the Eva. They don’t. That said, I expect they’d just fight each other for it if they somehow managed to wrench it from us. They’ll do as much damage to each other as they’ll do to us if we don’t have a stable government by the end of the week.”

Misato’s expression darkened. Such petty feuding would weaken all three nations—Japan, Russia, and China. More than a group of misbegotten followers, bringing about strife between three major powers served Eisheth well. And while Japan had sat on the precipice for some time, none of it would’ve been possible without Misato’s reckless flight to Germany and her single-minded pursuit of Keel Lorenz. The rules she broke to get to him, the trust she violated—they combined to spell doom for the sitting premier. And why?

Because she’d never trusted him. She’d never believed in him. She never had faith in others, like the
Germans, to successfully apprehend Keel on their own.

She doubted others could stand up to Eisheth, for she held the same doubts about herself.

Such power Misato held, yet for so long she’d stayed in shadows while others lived. Shinji found comfort and companionship in Asuka. Rei explored the mysteries of the universe with powers unimaginable to human minds. Misato had brought Hyūga into her life, but was it truly as an equal partner in her effort? No.

And Kaji? He was gone. Her father was gone. And there were people out there who’d moved on from their regrets, but Misato had just run away to her work instead.

She moved closer to the television, sitting so near the screen that she could make out the individual pixels, but there was no comfort in seeing their true nature. “Makoto, this is my fault, isn’t it,” she said flatly.

Hyūga sighed, taking a dish rag to another bowl. “Who knows? Truth is complicated. Maybe, even if we’d done nothing, this kind of uncertainty was bound to come. But we can’t undo what’s been done. Keel Lorenz is dead, and we were the assassins that put him down. Now, all we can do is deal with the consequences.”

Actions have consequences, and the world keeps moving forward, with us or without us.

“If I go on trying to take the lead on this, I’m going to make mistakes,” said Misato. “You’ll tell me when I do, right?”

Hyūga looked up from the dishes, a serious look on his face. “As long as you’re not too proud or too stubborn to question yourself, yes.”

The man may have needed glasses, but he was far from blind.

A week passed with the two houses of the Diet unable to agree on a new Prime Minister. The House of Representatives held a series of runoff votes to select the new prime minister on their own, but neither the Chinese nor the Russians were willing to wait that long. “The Japanese government thus far has shown no ability to agree on a new leader,” said one Chinese general, “and even if they do make a selection, the new leader will be ineffective and unable to maintain order. We do not wish to occupy Japan, but we will not allow the Eva to be exposed to sympathizers of Eisheth.”

These words from the Chinese echoed through the war room, with a translator’s hasty interpretation dubbed over the original Mandarin. All over the monitors and screens, reports of Chinese and Russian naval movements came in, along with radar returns of increased air patrols.

Many hours Misato had spent in that room, into the wee hours of the night with coffee she could no longer taste. When her eyes could no longer see straight, she’d just listen instead.

At last, at dawn of the thirteenth day, the reports came in: Chinese and Russian naval forces had engaged a combined American and Japanese patrol. Two planes were destroyed, and an American destroyer was scuttled to keep it from the enemy. War had come, and mankind risked destroying itself before Eisheth ever set foot on Earth.

From the head of the war room table, Misato took up a black corded phone. She pressed a red button at the edge of the base, and a high-pitched tone played over the loudspeaker in the room.
“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Colonel,” she said, her voice echoing through the loudspeaker. “At this time, the Prime Minister, in his acting capacity while the Diet deliberates over his successor, has authorized SDF to take full, unrestricted action against our foes. It is with regret that I say our enemies aren’t the children of Eisheth—not today—but instead are our fellow human beings. We may be forced to take the lives of our brethren, lives that would be better served fighting against Eisheth instead. But we can’t change what others choose to do. We can only choose our own paths. Lilith has tasked us with being the keepers of the Evangelion, and that is what we will do. We will protect it, and we will keep it safe until such time as Eisheth Zenunim arrives on Earth. We will not yield, and we will not give up. I say this because I know you; I know all of you. I chose you because you were prepared for this task, and the time to fulfill that obligation is now. You have my trust, and I know all of you will serve well. As Sun Tzu once said, you are my beloved sons, and now, we walk into the deepest valley together.”

Misato put the phone on the base, and the slight hiss of the loudspeaker went out. Thus came the beginning of the end—not with a roar, but with a whisper.
A Polyp in a Cluster of Sea Stars

The room had white walls and a smooth, shiny, dark blue floor. It smelled of chemicals and disinfectant. Pumps whirred. Sensors beeped. Beds went down the length of the long room, a line on each side with a central walking aisle between them. Curtains gave each bed and its occupant a modicum of privacy, but that was all.

A man in green, short-sleeved scrubs stood at the doorway, nodding for the group of people who approached.

“Welcome,” he said, bowing slightly. “We’re very pleased to have you, Ikari-san.”

Shinji nodded in acknowledgment, peering past the nurse and into the room. At his sides, two SDF members stood guard in combat fatigues—an unusually varied sight in this sterile, pristine hospital ward.

And last but not least, Asuka brought up the rear. She ran two fingers through her hair, keeping her hands occupied, but her gaze was fixed on Shinji and his words with the head nurse.

“We have a few minutes for you to meet with each of the men,” said the head nurse. “I’ll be there to make sure no one is unduly stressed by the visit.”

“Stressed?” asked Shinji.

“It’s just a precaution. Though I think everyone will feel quite honored that you’ve come, it’s best to be careful. If someone gets overexcited, we may need to take a break and give them sedatives. You understand, of course.”

Shinji nodded again, and the nurse stepped aside to show the four of them into the room. Shinji started on the left, stepping out of the aisle so the curtain by the adjacent bed hid him from general view. A woman lay in this bed. Her hair was short and dark. She sat up slightly when Shinji approached, meeting his gaze with sharp brown eyes.

“Hello.” Shinji greeted her with a bow. “What’s your name?”

“Murakami,” said the woman. “Corporal, ASDF, at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you, Corporal.” He motioned to Asuka, who gave a short smile of her own. “This is my girlfriend. We’ve come all this way just to visit you.”

Corporal Murakami scoffed pleasantly. “Not just me, I hope. I don’t think I’ll be much entertainment. See, I could go chattering away for five minutes and forget you were even here. I’m not a very good host.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” said Shinji. “You’re doing just fine.”

“Am I?” the corporal said coyly. “How can I be a good host when I haven’t even been introduced to my guests?”

Abashed, Shinji chuckled nervously. “Sorry, most people know who we are. I didn’t even think about it.”

“I’m only kidding,” said the corporal with a friendly smile. “You really are just a kid, aren’t you?
Still, it’s a surprise to see someone like you around here. Word is you’re holed up with the Evangelion, wherever it’s being kept, and you’re not coming out until the Russians and Chinese stand down or they drag you out kicking and screaming.”

“Asuka and I have been in hiding, yes,” said Shinji, “but we come out now and then to visit with people.”

At that, Shinji was being intentionally liberal with the truth. This was the first time he and Asuka had left the mountain in weeks. In truth, Asuka had hardly missed the outside world. Misato had managed to have most of Asuka’s lab equipment and work moved into the mountain, which meant instead of catching a bus to work each day (or every few days, when she’d started sleeping at work instead), Asuka only had to go down a few levels to get to business. Strangely, it was Shinji who felt bottled up in the mountain. Though introverted by nature, Shinji had a strong desire to be involved in the effort against Eisheth. It was refreshing, on one level, for Asuka to see such life in him, but it still took some getting used to—for both of them. They weren’t pilots anymore. They couldn’t fight it out on the front lines. Asuka was a scientist; she could still work toward something on her own. Shinji didn’t have such a well-defined interest or area of expertise. He dabbled in music now and then, but that was all.

So Shinji did the only thing he could—he played the role of reluctant celebrity. As a public figure, Shinji commanded great attention and, for the most part, respect. Sure, there were some crazies who hated him, but most people weren’t like that. And given the enthusiasm with which their offer was accepted, most of the volunteers in SDF appreciated what a gesture it was for Shinji to come visit the wounded. Asuka found the idea a bit unnerving; hospitals seldom sat well with her. The sterile, inert smell brought back bad memories that she preferred to forget. Still, Shinji met the idea with a sense of gravity and respect, the same respect he treated the ASDF corporal who lay in a hospital bed before him. Shinji was chatting with her well enough, and Asuka was glad for that. While the woman didn’t have any visible injuries—no missing limbs or anything like that—it was only a matter of time before it came up. Soldiers didn’t end up in a hospital unless they had to be there.

“So you were going to train to help maintain helicopters?” Shinji asked at one point.

The corporal laughed, unable to answer.

“What’s so funny?”

“It just seems strange,” said the corporal. “Here we are, just talking here in the hospital, and we haven’t even introduced ourselves to each other yet.”

Shinji blinked. “But we did. I mean, I didn’t, but you did.”

“I did? When?”

“You said your name was Murakami, with ASDF. You’re a corporal, aren’t you?”

The corporal was dismissive, disbelieving. “You must’ve read my file.”

Asuka touched a hand to Shinji’s shoulder and shook her head. She kept him back while the nurse stepped in to keep the corporal from getting confused. Short-term memory loss. That’s what it was. A blow to the head left few marks on the body as evidence of trauma, but that simple injury left the woman unable to create new memories from just a few minutes before. How horrifying it was to see a person like that—seemingly normal and unscathed, but she wasn’t all there. She might never be all there again.
That was the price of war, and thus far, war had not been kind to Japan. Asuka had seen little point in worrying over what exactly the Russians and Chinese were doing, but it was impossible not to hear something. The Americans were unwilling to stretch themselves thin, and their defense of the island nation was half-hearted at best. Better to save their resources for Eisheth’s arrival, and if the Chinese and Russians took the Eva, it would still be in the hands of men, of people who would fight Eisheth.

So it came as no surprise that the Russians broke through the Japanese-American naval perimeter and established a beachhead at Fukui, intent on marching for Tōkyō-2, but the Japanese nation would resist them. It would fight for every inch, and these people—the people in the hospital room with her and Shinji—had given their bodies and minds to do it.

Shinji took to the SDF members rather well. He spoke with them politely, always asking their names and what they did. If they wanted to talk about their injuries, he listened. If they wished to talk about anything else, he engaged them as best he could, but that didn’t make it easy. Watching Shinji speak with a woman wearing an eyepatch gave Asuka chills, and the unending spectrum of disfigurements and injuries took their toll on Shinji, too. As he went further down the row of beds, his polite smile faded with time. Each lost finger damped his spirit, and one man who could no longer speak or form words merely smiled at Shinji, knowing there was no other way they could communicate. How hard it must’ve been for him to find energy for each new face he met.

After they finished speaking with half the room, Shinji took the nurse aside. “Can we have a few minutes before we continue?”

“Of course,” said the nurse, and he showed Shinji, Asuka, and their guards to the hallway, where sickeningly white fluorescent light gave way to warm sunshine. Three great windows opened to a grassy landscape, interspersed with concrete walking paths. The hospital was serene and secluded, a place for these men and women who’d fought for Japan to recover in peace. Shinji stood by the window with the sun on his face and took a deep breath, shaking his head.

“How are you holding up?” asked Asuka.

“Better than I thought I would,” he said, “but it’s still difficult in there. It’s not that I haven’t seen things like that before.”

“Like Suzuhara.”

“Right. But you see people in there—some of them with hope, others despair. It makes you wonder if that hope is real or fake, if that despair can be changed by a single visit from someone like me. If we’d had people visiting us when we were pilots, would things have turned out differently?”

Asuka shrugged. “I can’t think of anyone I would’ve wanted to visit me. I talked to my father on the phone from time to time. That was fine. And when things got bad, I don’t think I would’ve wanted him to see that anyway. Really, it’s silly to worry about how things could’ve turned out. We’re here, and none of that’s going to change. I think all those people in there appreciate what you’re doing, and if they don’t, they’re not being harmed by it, either.”

Shinji stared out the window at that. “You might be right.”

He was pensive and deep in thought, weighing carefully the seriousness of his responsibility—to those wounded soldiers in the hospital, to the people of Japan, and to himself. There he was, a mere boy making visits with the fallen, as a politician or a celebrity would. Indeed, he was the ultimate celebrity, for there was no one more famous, more universally known. Up to that moment, Shinji had always run away from the spotlight.
“Well,” he said, balling a hand into a fist at his side, “I guess we shouldn’t leave the other half of the room waiting too long.”

But maybe, with those first few steps back to the ward, he was moving into the public eye as well. That act drew a twinge in Asuka, a noticeable swell of respect and admiration for the man Shinji was becoming.

Yet there was something else, too—some feeling she couldn’t put into words. All eyes were on Shinji after all. He set their agenda. It was he whom the wounded look toward for relief and comfort.

And it was to him the guards ran when he stumbled at the threshold.

He wasn’t the only one. The building shook and trembled. The windows rattled against their frames. Outside, the trees waved and rustled with the breeze.

Asuka put a hand to the glass, feeling the vibrations. It pushed against her touch and retreated again.

“What is it?” asked Shinji, rubbing his twisted ankle. “An earthquake?”

In the distance, a line of white smoke streamed across the sky—a trail that an airliner would leave. Or a fighter jet. Or a missile.

The death wail of a siren came through the glass. It cried over the trees as birds took flight and squirrels fled the clearings. One of the guards took out a satellite phone and started dialing. The news he got back wasn’t good.

“Ikari-san, Sōryū-san, we need to get you to safety. This area may no longer be safe.”

At once, the halls of the hospital started flooding with nurses, doctors, and other staff. Whatever had happened—a bomb drop, a missile strike, or something else—it was like the shoe of a cosmic toddler kicking over an anthill, and the hospital workers emerged in a collective response. Unlike ants, however, that response was anything but orderly and controlled. As Shinji, Asuka, and the two SDF guards made for the stairs, a wall of humanity stood in their way. Bulky metal beds clogged the corridors, and heart monitors beeped with unhealthy speed.

“Excuse me.” Shinji took one of the doctors by the sleeve as politely as he could. “What’s the problem up there? It doesn’t seem like anyone’s moving.”

“What do you think the problem is? The stairs are jammed with people, and the administrators are fighting to get on the elevators.”

“But what about the patients? Aren’t they more important?”

“In theory. But do you see anyone stepping aside to make room and get these beds through?”

Before Shinji could ask another question, the doctor shoved an arm through the crowd and fought his way forward. Shinji, Asuka, and their SDF escort wouldn’t be so lucky. Any single one of them might’ve been able to cut through the crowd, but all four of them? Not a chance. And they had to stay together. Those were Misato’s explicit orders.

“Ikari-san!” cried a guard.

Misato’s orders must not have meant very much, for Shinji crouched to the floor and scrambled
through a gap under a gurney.

The guards forced their way into the crowd. “Ikari-san? Ikari-san!” they cried, but Shinji was nowhere to be found. Asuka peered around the mass of bodies, trying to catch a glimpse of him. Shinji was getting taller every day, or so it seemed. How could he just vanish into a crowd like this? Was he that nimble, even still?

*I’m a scientist and an Eva pilot, not a gymnast. I’m not crawling on the floor. Shinji, what are you doing?*

Asuka followed in the trail of the guards, to no avail. When a new elevator car opened its doors, however, the whole of the crowd went quiet, for a single voice spoke over them.

“Excuse me,” said Shinji, blocking the path to the elevator doors. “I know many of you must be scared, but there are a few gurneys behind you that need to get through here. We’re evacuating to the hospital basement, right? I don’t think the people on carts will be able to get down there any other way.”

“Kid, you may have saved the world, but we work here,” cried a voice. “Get out of the way!”

“Who he is or what he did doesn’t matter!” Asuka shouted back. “He could be a street vendor in Kōbe selling octopus dumplings for all you should care. Is Shinji right, or is he wrong? Do you have some better plan to get the patients to safety or not?”

The crowd went quiet, humbled by Shinji and Asuka’s rebuke, and the way to the elevator parted for a pair of gurneys to go through. With the route clear, Asuka caught up with Shinji, and they—along with their two SDF guards—stood watch over the elevator, ensuring an orderly procession of wounded to the basement below.

“That was pretty clever,” Asuka told Shinji, giving him a sly nudge for good measure. “Sneaking along the ground where no one was looking to get to the front.”

Shinji shrugged. “I just saw where I had to go and I went.”

He talked about it so casually, like it was the natural thing to do. That’s how Shinji was, and more and more, he was overcoming his anxieties, standing up for what he saw was right and necessary.

The crowd thinned over a tense few minutes, for the stairwell quickly became passable for able-bodied staff and visitors, and when the hallway cleared, the guards insisted Shinji and Asuka get downstairs as soon as possible. Asuka took a long look out the window on the way out. Smoke rose in the distance, but how far it was and how much danger they were in she couldn’t say. What Shinji had done—breaking up a tense and anxious mob—would be sorely needed in the coming days. In times of crisis, it was all too easy for people to be swept away in fear, and the Russians and Chinese were only getting closer. A voice of reason, earnestness, and sanity would be the only defense against Eisheth’s insanity.

“Ikari-san?” said one of the guards, stopping by the doorway.

Shinji checked down the halls, making sure there were no more patients coming. When he was satisfied, he nodded to the guard. “Looks okay. Let’s go then.”

He would be the one giving orders and providing hope, and it was Asuka’s fate to walk in his shadow, always following as the sirens of coming doom wailed.
Between crates full of syringes, pill bottles, and needles, the patients and staff of the SDF hospital waited out the raid. Under the sickening greenish-yellow glow of fluorescent lights, they passed the time with idle chatter. A young boy rolled a coin on the ground, trying to predict how it would fall. Two MSDF enlisted men played rock-paper-scissors for dozens of rounds, neither of them keeping score. Most troubling of all were the labored breaths of the wounded. Many of the patients needed constant monitoring and care. The stress of the raid elevated their heart rates. Nurses passed around syringes of sedatives like candy, weaving through the crowd in improvised, chaotic routes. No one could say if they reached every last patient.

So much trouble they went to, yet the time of danger was quite short. After twenty minutes, the sirens stopped; the shrill beeping on the radio gave way to news reports, fraught with static yet calming all the same. While the staff moved the gurneys back to the elevators, the two guards who’d come with Shinji and Asuka directed them to the stairs.

“Colonel Katsuragi insists that you return to base immediately,” said one of the men, packing up a satellite phone.

There was no resisting SDF’s will, especially when Misato wielded it. The four of them left the way they’d come—in a nondescript silver sedan, protected by bulletproof glass and armor plates in the doors. It was a compromise between security and anonymity, and with the SDF escort changing into casual attire for the drive back, it was the best they could do. One could only hope no one would look in and see their sidearms. They were conspicuous but necessary, for nowhere in Japan could be considered truly safe anymore. The route back to Tōkyō-2 spoke to that. No shortage of SDF vehicles went up and down the road. Helicopters swarmed through the sky. Fire crews convened to extinguish the blaze at a burned out base, yet the smoke towered skyward in an unending trail.

Japan was wounded. Every missile that penetrated its defenses wounded the country and nation. Every foreign soldier who set foot on its soil sowed pestilence and death with his steps. Japan had been hit so hard with Second Impact, seeing its capital decimated. Third Impact had been even worse; between the flooding and the crater, the damage was great, and they’d had only two short years to recover. Now, the country was bleeding again.

The city showed those wounds as much as the countryside. The oncoming armies made their march toward Tōkyō-2 each day, and in large part, the civilian population had fled. Tōkyō-2 had a missile defense system and constant air patrols, but it was a standing target, and no one wanted to be around if the Russians and Chinese broke through to raze it. The streets were largely deserted. Only a few brave souls dared stay behind. Maya and her followers were some of them. They promised to give refuge and support to those who had no place left to go. They vowed to defend the city if the invaders came, even if they had only sticks and rocks to wield against them.

If they really hoped to be beacons of light against the darkness, they’d better start sharpening their sticks.

By then, National Square was one of the few places left in Tōkyō-2 with any real activity. A staunch perimeter defended the plaza, with turret emplacements and a winding pattern of concrete barricades. Once past the gate, a heavy presence of guards stood watch at the entrance to the Defense Ministry. Shinji and Asuka submitted themselves to searches and scans, as required before their entry and transport back to Hachibuse Mountain. How long that tram would keep running no one could say. If the enemy closed in on the capital, no doubt Misato would order the tram tunnel collapsed to prevent its use, but still, the question would remain: what could a tunnel straight to the Defense Ministry be used for? What could it mean? Even if the Russians and Chinese came all that way without knowing where the Eva was held, they would rightly be curious.
And that possibility grew ever closer each second. Highlighting the urgency, Misato met with Shinji and Asuka on their return to the mountain, and the base commander looked none too pleased.

“There are a couple analysts who are relearning the finer points of communication right now,” she said. “I’m sorry about the scare, Shinji-kun, Asuka. If I’d had even an inkling of an attack that far inland, I wouldn’t have sent you out there.”

“It was a good thing to do,” said Shinji. “I’m glad to have met those people, even if it was a little dangerous.”

Misato’s apologetic simper turned grim. Silence was the only comfort she could offer then, for she could do no more. As powerful and influential Misato had proved, there were things even she couldn’t do—or wouldn’t do. Thus far, Japanese men and women had fought to protect their country. They’d died defending it, but only because Japan was too principled to use all the weapons at its disposal.

Asuka remembered well the day she’d realized that. It was the day the Chinese navy landed on Japanese soil. Word of the oncoming army spurred on an evacuation of the capital and the cities closest to the beachhead, but Asuka had been confident the war would end quickly. After all, they had the most powerful weapon ever wielded on their side.

But for some reason, the briefings she received on the military situation focused entirely on conventional warfare instead.

“It’s unfortunate the Americans lost their nerve,” Misato had said that day. “That likely pushed the timetable for the invasion up at least three or four weeks.”

She’d stood beside a projector screen with a laser pointer in hand. In the audience, taking in these analyses and reports, sat a council of three: Asuka, the former pilot, teen genius, and scientist; Shinji, the boy who brought mankind back from the sea; and Nozomi, the Sixth Child.

“In preparation for the assault, MSDF concentrated on defending possible landing sites for the Sino-Russian force. Heavy defense of the coast from the mouth of Himekawa River and north of it discouraged the enemy from attempting more than a bluff landing there. Had they been able to break the defenses, they would’ve had a straight, easy path to Tōkyō-2. Instead, the enemy have made their landing near Sakai, in Fukui Prefecture. While it’s regrettable invaders have set foot on Japanese soil, as far as defending the capital we’ve been able to hold out thanks to the terrain. The mountains between here and Fukui are a formidable impediment to overland travel. There are three highways in particular that we’ve been defending.”

Misato pressed a button on her laser pointer, and the image changed. It wasn’t a map, however. It was Misato in a tank top and low-cut yellow shorts, sporting a pair of rectangular, black-rimmed glasses as she lay down suggestively on a bed.

“Doesn’t look like that highway is being defended at all,” said Nozomi.

Caught off guard, Misato clicked repeatedly on her pointer, finally arriving at a diagram of the beachhead area and Tōkyō-2, with three paths between them highlighted in yellow. “Makoto-kun seems to gotten his personal image stash mixed up with my work again.”

“Again?” echoed Asuka. “This has happened before?”

Unamused, Misato nodded sheepishly. “Let’s just say I ended up with a few generals’ numbers after
the last time. Moving on.” She circled the first of the three highlighted paths with her laser pointer. Route 158 runs directly from Tōkyō-2 to Fukui along the Azusa River. Route 19 and the Chūō Expressway both run south toward Nagoya, on either side of a string of mountains that ends at Mount Ena. So far, we’ve done what we can to impede any progress along these routes—collapsing tunnels, damaging the roads, and causing landslides to make the way impassable, but any good army has a corps of engineers at its disposal to build bridges where they’ve been destroyed, to make roads where there are none. Still, we will fight as long as we can. When Eisheth gets here, any war between people should stop—or if it doesn’t, we’ll have bigger problems than Chinese tanks running down our streets.”

“Why not fix this right now?” said Asuka. “Put Nozomi in the Eva. Teach those Chinese and Russian bastards who’s boss.”

“That’s not on the table yet,” said Misato.

“Why not? Nozomi doesn’t have a problem with it, do you, Nozomi?”

Nozomi leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms with a thoughtful, serious expression. “I can’t say I’m thrilled with the idea of using the Eva against people, but I’m pretty sure if I have to stay in this mountain for much longer without doing anything I’ll lose my mind. If this is what we have to do to defend ourselves, then there’s not much choice, is there? Hopefully they’d see that an Eva isn’t something you can take down just by shooting at it.”

“True as that may be,” said Misato, “we will not be using the Eva in Japan’s defense at this time.”

Shinji leaned forward in his seat, puzzled. “Why not?”

“That’s better explained by someone else. Rei?”

In the dark room, lit only by the image on the projector screen, the slight glow when Rei appeared in the room was hard to miss. She stood behind Nozomi, Shinji, and Asuka, and she made her statement as bluntly as she’d come.

“I won’t allow the Eva to be used against humans,” she said.

Asuka shuddered, averting her gaze. The image of Rei was otherworldly and ethereal. If you looked hard enough, you could see through her to the other side. It was like having the dead come back to chat with them—creepy and nerve-wracking. If Asuka could’ve jumped out of her seat to put some distance between them, she would’ve.

“That’s all very noble,” said Nozomi, “but what purpose does it serve to fight and let good people on both sides die in the meantime? Doesn’t that just weaken us for whenever Eisheth gets here?”

Misato nodded. “You’re right to say there’s a risk, but if we use the Eva against our fellow man, we risk being seen as oppressors. Rei gave us, the Americans, and the Germans each our own Eva to use for the benefit of mankind. We are stewards of her will, and our responsibility is to that trust.”

“That’s ridiculous!” cried Asuka, rising from her seat. “You can’t be on board with this, Misato. This isn’t your style.”

“Rei’s consent is required for any use of an Eva—we agreed to do that, so if Eisheth’s forces get hold of one, they wouldn’t be able to use it. This is the consequence of that precaution. Do I necessarily agree with Rei’s opinion here? Not entirely, but I understand it and respect it. I’m not going to worry so much about what other people do; the defense of Japan is something we can work towards with the best of our abilities either way.”
That surely didn’t sit well with Asuka. Maybe it was noble, maybe it was principled, but it was also asinine! What were they supposed to do—let the Russians and Chinese roam freely over most of Japan, over everything outside a tight defensive perimeter around the capital? All because they couldn’t or wouldn’t use the Eva against their foes?

But Shinji was more measured about the matter. “If Ayanami and Misato-san say it’s worth it,” said Shinji, “then that’s what we should do. Only by fighting for what we believe in can we resist Eisheth with all our will.”

Rei’s eyes went a little wider, but she said nothing, and the matter was settled for a time. Maybe the others forgot it, but Asuka made sure she didn’t. As far as she was concerned, she was the voice of reason, screaming into the darkness, but no one would uncover their ears and listen.

Still, with the use of Eva off-limits, the four them resolved to do what they could within the bounds of those restrictions. Misato ordered roads ripped up and bridges burned to keep the advancing army at bay. Nozomi trained day-in and day-out for the time of Eisheth’s appearing, or if Rei happened to find sense and changed her mind. Shinji visited with the wounded, giving moral support since he could pilot no more. And Asuka?

Asuka was a scientist—she had been even before she’d become a pilot. And as such, she put her intellect—the mind of a prodigy—to use. Misato had cleared an entire level of the mountain for research and development, something that could keep Asuka busy even as her own lab on the surface was no longer safe for her. There, she and her mother Kyōko used their knowledge of LCL and metaphysical biology to advance the war effort. LCL was the original stuff of life, after all. It was malleable, and with a human being’s force of will, it could be shaped into any tissue—into bone and skin, arteries and tendons. It could be used to heal wounds that would otherwise be impossible to treat.

The results were promising. With a small number of SDF casualties funneled to the mountain as test subjects, Asuka and Kyōko developed bandages and salves to close up wounds or rapidly heal surgical incisions. That day, after coming back from the field hospital, Asuka walked in through an observation, overlooking an ongoing procedure. Two doctors treated a lieutenant bearing a long, stitched-up gash on her torso.

“All right, Lieutenant,” said one of the doctors, talking through a surgical mask. “Just lie back and think of how you’d look in a mirror. Think of yourself nice and whole. Just focus on that image of yourself, and the LCL will do the rest.”

The other doctor placed a sopping bandage around the lieutenant’s waist, white material that was soaked through with LCL, tinting it red. The lieutenant lay back on a hospital bed and closed her eyes, her brow creasing as she concentrated. Sure enough, the white sutures dissolved, and the inflammation around the wound dissipated. The doctors took the bandage off and wiped away the LCL, showing only smooth, unblemished skin where the incision had once been.

“Quite inspiring, isn’t it?” asked Kyōko, who stood on the far end of the observation room. “What do you think of the fruits of our work?”

Asuka grimaced. “We slave away in the dark while people down there get all the credit? For what, applying a bandage? A trained monkey could do that.”

“You don’t enjoy just being a part of a good effort? You don’t enjoy watching?”
“You do?”

Grinning, Kyōko turned away slightly, watching the operation below as she reminisced. “There was one time; a girlfriend of mine managed to get the number of a visiting soccer player from overseas. We were very close, and she offered to let me watch as consolation for my lack of a love life at the time.”

“I really didn’t need to know that, Mama.”

“It can be quite educational, Asuka—seeing how other people act, I mean. You might learn something.”

“Mama, the women I know in my life are you, First, and Misato. Under no circumstances do I need to see you in the bedroom. First is halfway between life and death and isn’t even human, and Misato likes to call her men Father sometimes. No thanks.”

Kyōko shrugged. “Your loss. I take that to mean you and Shinji-kun are getting on well enough?”

“Well enough.”

“How was your trip this morning?”

“We almost got ourselves killed visiting a hospital. It’s the way things are these days.”

“Still, I imagine Shinji-kun made quite an impression on the wounded. He has a knack for that, even when he’s not trying to do so.”

Asuka narrowed her eyes. Kyōko was watching her from just over the rims of her glasses, the stare of a scientist studying a specimen, and Asuka felt microscopic under it by comparison. “Spit it out. What are you trying to say?”

“You’re restless, Asuka. You’ve been restless for some time. As a child, you were always an overachiever. You had people’s attention, and they never looked away from you. Now, you’re fading into the background, doing thankless work while others are more visible, driving the course of mankind.”

“So I should go out there and be a celebrity? Is that what you think I want?”

Kyōko pursed her lips. “Not quite. Tell me something: before all this happened—this business with Eisheth Zenunim—how hard were you working? How much time did you spend at home?”

“I worked all the time. You have to live somehow. Security for people like us isn’t cheap, you know.”

“You were important to your own family, to Shinji-kun. And as long as he was listlessly wandering about trying to find something to do with his life, you were the successful one, the smart one, the one bringing home money to pay the bills.”

“I don’t remember you saying anything about this before.”

“Oh, I reasoned you would grow out of it sooner rather than later, but things are different now. I see you brooding to yourself, going almost passive at times. You’re letting the world go on around you. But just because what we do may not go unrecognized doesn’t mean it’s unimportant.”

“I know that.”
Kyōko shook her head briefly, chiding herself in silence. “You’re right. I know you know that. Still, I felt I should say something. I know things are going to get worse before they get better. You’ve had a trying day, Asuka. Make sure you spend some time with your boyfriend tonight. I’m closing the lab at 1800 sharp. No objections this time.”

Rolling her eyes, Asuka donned her labcoat and put her hands in her pockets. “Yes, Mama.”

“All right, let’s get to work, yeah?”

And so mother and daughter went to their lab tables, with beakers and test tubes holding all manner of bubbling concoctions, but in the light of the glassware, Asuka glimpsed her own reflection—that of a girl in the uncertain transition between youth and adulthood. Her mother was right about one thing: there were other people making the decisions about what humanity would do and where it would head. Misato was one of those people. Rei, for sure. Shinji, too, because people respected him and would listen to him, even though he’d never sought that respect or influence. Compared to them, Asuka was a relative nobody. Her intellect meant nothing. She’d come from the sea after Shinji, as so many others had, and for that, she could claim to be no wiser than them. How could she be? She was just a girl, one playing dress-up to be a scientist with her safety goggles and white lab coat, neither of which truly fit her, for she was still an adolescent, a child—and one used to exerting her will, at that.

“Mama,” she said, her voice quiet and uncertain, “why do you think Shinji would let me…” She shuddered even to put words to her actions. “You know.”

“I can’t know for sure,” said Kyōko thoughtfully, “but let me tell you a story.”

“Another one of your sexual misadventures?”

Kyōko chuckled. “A different kind of story. Honestly, it’s something I’ve been expecting you to ask for some time. Maybe it’s just what’s been on my mind instead. Asuka, why do you think I stayed with your father?”

“Because of me?”

“In large part, yes. He was a philandering cad, yet he always made me believe—made me think—that once he was done with whatever piece of sweet young tail he was chasing, he would come back to me. He was very good at that, and even when I dared to think it was a lie, I had to consider what would happen if I left him. I’d want you to come with me, of course, but I loved my work, too, and I knew I couldn’t take care of you well and do that. And you loved your father. For all his selfishness and unrestrained libido, he genuinely cared about you, I think. How rare is it that children want to follow in their parents’ footsteps? I think your skill in science really made him proud, made him feel like there would always be something the two of you could relate with. So even when people do the wrong thing, that doesn’t make them bad or evil. It makes them flawed. That’s no stunning revelation. That’s reality.”

With that, Kyōko put her eyes to her microscope. If she were waiting for Asuka to ask something else, she didn’t show it, and that was fine by Asuka. She had enough to think about as it was. Perhaps she had grown jealous, grown resentful, of Shinji’s status. He was a symbol of humanity’s resilience, deserved or not, justly or not. Nothing Asuka did would change that or elevate herself to the same level.

And that did matter to her. It had mattered to her. Since the day she’d boasted about her piloting skills on the deck of an aircraft carrier, it’d mattered to her.
Just realizing that gave Asuka pause. She loosened the band on her safety goggles, letting them dangle around her neck. “Mama?”

“Hm?”

“I think I’ll take the rest of the day off.”

“Probably for the best. I usually find it hard to concentrate after spending half the day on other activities.”

That wasn’t exactly what Asuka had been through, but the basic sentiment was the same. Asuka hung up her labcoat and goggles and headed out of the lab. She made for the base elevators and headed down, further into the cold earth, where she and Shinji lived, using rock and metal to protect them from harm. If she’d used and abused Shinji over the past two years, she wanted to hear it from his lips, for only then could she truly believe it, and only then could she rightfully damn herself for it.

Since Eisheth rained the primordial blood of life on Earth, Asuka and Shinji had made their home in Misato’s mountain base. It was a tolerable existence. After a while, you got used to not seeing the sun. The meals were surprisingly varied, for the military had long since confronted the problem of repetitive, boring food, but in the long run, it made no difference. Asuka could stand the cycle of simulated pork to fish to chicken to beef to pork again only so well. After a while, the food lost all taste to her. It may as well have been inert protein slush.

The amenities on the base weren’t much better, either. There was a workout area, of course. Many of Misato’s men liked to keep physically fit, above and beyond the requirements of their duties, but Asuka suspected they simply had nothing else better to do. Though Misato had worldwide communications access in her war room, the rest of the base had to make do with five channels of pixellated satellite reception. The mountain was a functional installation, yes, but it wasn’t much more than that. It was enough to make even Shinji—who could excel at passing the time without much to do—more than a little stir-crazy. At times, he would wander the halls of the mountain at night. During the day, he’d read books from the base library, and from time to time, he would tell her about these stories. One day, he told her of an old professor who led a friend to death over a woman they both loved. The next, he conjured up a fantasy of an American engineer sent back to the Middle Ages to pretend he was a wizard. All throughout these stories, Asuka could only smile and nod and ask the occasional innocent question.

But after a short time, Shinji had exhausted the base’s small selection. That was when Misato started planning these trips off the base. It was good to get away, but to visit soldiers? To talk with the wounded? Asuka couldn’t see the good in it; such deeds were constant reminders of the senselessness of Eisheth’s war and the mortality of men. But Shinji seemed to enjoy it, and for that reason, he’d started spending more and more time in the base’s radio room. Even if he couldn’t leave the safety of the mountain except on rare occasion, he could make an impact with the troops just by talking with them over a satellite link.

It was there, at a console amid panels upon panels of lights and buttons, that Asuka found Shinji that afternoon. He had a bulky headset on and chatted with a group of SDF infantry under a command tent in the field. Asuka put on a headset of her own, but she left the microphone up, away from her mouth. She pulled up a rolling chair and sat beside Shinji, touching him lightly on the arm. His eyes flickered away from the screen briefly, meeting her own, and a small smile came to his face.

“Is something happening, sir?” asked one of the infantrymen on the monitor.
Shinji’s attention snapped back to the screen. “Oh, no, not at all. It’s just my girlfriend came by. Asuka, come over here, in front of the camera. Say hello to the SDF members.”

But Asuka shook her head. “That’s all right,” she said. “The soldiers only want to talk to you anyway. I just wanted you to know I was here for when you finish.”

“Sorry,” said Shinji, addressing the infantrymen. “She gets funny about this sort of thing. To tell the truth, I don’t know what to say sometimes, either. It seems like everything we have to worry about pales in comparison to what all of you are doing for us.”

“You’re doing a fine job, sir,” said a woman in battle fatigues on the other end of the line. “And what you’re doing is just as important. If you can stop the alien, I think we’ll all be very glad to have nothing to fight for any longer. Until then, we’re honored to buy time until she can be stopped, until you and the Colonel can stop her.”

Shinji smiled wryly. “With respect, Captain, I’m the one who’s supposed to be giving you and your people support.”

The captain scoffed. “Nonsense, sir. Brothers-in-arms give each other support. No one has it easy right now. We all know that. Knowing how hard everyone else in the Force is working reminds us that we have an obligation—not just to ourselves but to the people who rely on us—and we’re prepared for that obligation. We’ve been preparing for it, day after day. We won’t let you down, sir, and I know you won’t let us down, either.”

“I appreciate that,” said Shinji.

“And we appreciate you taking the time to speak with us, sir,” said one of the men, who stood at attention in a line behind his captain.

Shinji nodded. “How are you all holding up?”

“Two casualties yesterday,” said the captain. “Russian bombing run took them out, but we got the bomber.”

“That’s grim news, but at least it sounds like you’re holding your own out there.”

“We’ll hold our own down to the last man if that’s what it takes. This is our country, after all. Even the Americans knew it would be bloody and difficult to invade our soil. That’s why they sent the A-bomb instead of their own sons. Now we’ll just have to teach that lesson to our enemies first-hand.”

A bold sentiment, but Asuka knew it to be folly. After the nuke that fell on Old Tōkyō, after Third Impact had decimated Hakone, the islands of Japan weren’t nearly as crowded as the once had been. Any idea that they could arm women and children with shovels and hoes to hold every last inch was folly at best. Japan could make a valiant stand, but it wouldn’t last.

Boom! The image on the screen jittered, and the SDF infantry went for their weapons. “Looks like someone’s come back to learn that lesson. I’m sorry, Ikari-san, but we’ll have to cut this short.”

“Of course. Good luck, Cap—”

The screen went black. There was a crackle of static, and then silence.

Shinji sat back in his seat and sighed, staring at the dark monitor. “I guess that’s just the way things are,” he said at last, mulling over the words like a wine aficionado tasting an unfamiliar Merlot. “All we can do from here is our own part.”
“No point in worrying over anything else, yeah,” said Asuka.

He nodded at that, finding peace with the idea, and his expression grew more relaxed. Without a doubt, Shinji was still the kind of boy who worried over details and went out of his way to be considerate of people, but he’d grown quite a bit since he emerged from the sea. Instead of bouncing between blind obedience and passive-aggressive retaliation, he thought critically about whom he would follow and why, and he did so with conviction and security. He was confident enough in himself and in the cause of humanity that he could engage other people and give them encouragement.

In all these ways, Shinji had been going up the path to adulthood while Asuka was standing still, her head buried too far in a microscope to see what was going on around her.

“What’s wrong?” asked Shinji.

“Wrong?” Asuka sat up and smoothed out her blouse, composing herself. “Nothing, nothing. I was just thinking you’re pretty good when you’re talking to soldiers. You seem to relate to them. They believe in what they’re doing, and so do you.”

He pursed his lips, thinking on the idea. “You’re right. I guess I feel like we were those people once, fighting impossible battles. We survived, but it was hard. I’ve always thought if we had more support—if we could’ve supported each other—then maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad.”

“You know, you’re starting to sound like a wise old man instead of a kid.”

“I don’t think—”

“I mean it. Grow a goatee, and you’ll be halfway there.”

Shinji chuckled, shaking his head. “People shouldn’t look to me for wisdom, just encouragement—nothing more.”

“What makes you think that? Did you forget you’re the guy who brought mankind out of the sea?”

“That didn’t happen because I tried to go about things that way. It just happened. I did what I felt was good. I can’t explain it any other way. I don’t know how to, and believe me, I’ve tried to understand it. Misato-san thinks I should be doing more.”

“What does she want you to do—make yourself pretty and go on television to address the free world?”

“Something like that.”

Well, that was a daft idea. Some people are naturally photogenic and take the camera as if it were a childhood friend, but Shinji wasn’t one of them. When people watched him, he felt their stares, like they were judging him, like they demanded his apologies just from a few silent gazes, and he would shy away from them in a heartbeat.

But then, perhaps that was exactly what Shinji needed—to confront what he was afraid of, what gave him pause. When he took his own initiative, he could be quite a force to deal with. How long had he stubbornly looked for Rei, even when Asuka thought the search fruitless and misguided? It animated him. It kept him going even when he could no longer volunteer in the kitchens or hold a job on his own without worrying about his safety.

Still, Shinji wasn’t bold enough to stand in the spotlight, despite the good it might do to keep the
people inspired, to keep the world squarely opposed to Eisheth. Shinji wasn’t that kind of person, not yet, but Asuka could guide him toward that path. Where Shinji would press on quietly, Asuka had the spark and determination to make something happen out of nothing. In that, they complemented each other, and she would be remiss not to take advantage of that.

“You know, Shinji, you may not feel like you deserve it, but people do look up to you as an example,” Asuka pointed out. “And if you think they’re wrong to do so, you’re even more aggressively humble and self-effacing than I thought. Misato’s right; you can take advantage of that attention people will give you. You can use it—leverage it—to keep people going despite this invasion, this war. As someone with that kind of influence over people, why wouldn’t you use that?”

“It seems crazy not to, doesn’t it,” he said quietly, “but I’m no example to follow. I wanted everything to burn, and I only changed my mind when I saw how empty that world would be. That makes me the worst person to be inspiring people. If I had been numb enough, I would’ve kept things the way Ayanami made them, desolate and without meaning.”

“That doesn’t make you the worst person to speak to people. That makes you the best person because you understand what it means, what that alien is trying to do.”

Shinji’s brow creased as he thought, and he stared into the space past the static-filled screen on the wall. He’d have to mull it over, no doubt, and if Asuka pushed any harder, he could get stubborn, sullen, and resistant instead, but this was something they could do together. Shinji could speak his mind honestly and freely, but only if Asuka found opportunities for him to do so.

Shinji cared deeply for others’ opinions of him—the letters he’d meticulously kept, even from people who hated him, were proof of that. If challenged on what he believed in, he might soften his rhetoric to try to find common ground and understanding. That was the last thing mankind needed, however. Until Shinji could be firmer with his stance, Asuka thought it a bad idea to put Shinji in a confrontational setting—an interview, a debate, or anything like that. But with some minor requisitions made through Misato, Asuka arranged for a camera and microphone to be delivered to their quarters. He would make a recorded statement over the Internet for all the world to hear.

These preparations Asuka pursued with fervor and abandon. When the news media protested having no presence or ability to ask Shinji questions in real time, Asuka’s words for them left no shred of doubt left. “Shinji decides how he wants to address all of mankind; you don’t get a say,” she told one TV news editor over the phone. “If he wants an audience, only then will any reporters get within ten steps of him. Contrary to popular belief in your line of work, the world does not revolve around you.”

Of course, Asuka had yet to give Shinji a full say in the matter either, preferring to put the preparations together and then deal with the consequences if he said no. For his part, Shinji let Asuka slowly redecorate their quarters into a studio. She hung a dark blue curtain over a back wall and hung up a set of lights to stamp out any shadows around the camera. It was a nice change of pace from the stony, unadorned decor, but Shinji had watched these preparations uneasily with each passing day. “Don’t you think this is a bit much?” he asked her once.

“Maybe,” said Asuka as she adjusted the cable from the camera to their computer. “But there’s no sense in doing something without going all the way through with it. If this is something you don’t want to do, just say so.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I think it’s fine. It’s something I probably should’ve done sooner. If I don’t like it, that’s okay, but it’s good to try things at least once, right?”

For Shinji, that was practically an expression of adventurousness. Still, the choice had to be his own,
and for that reason, Asuka left the camera and backdrop set up for whenever Shinji decided to use it. It was an offer Shinji mulled over for a time, seeming to wait for the right moment to make his voice heard. Did he want his voice felt and remembered? Or did he hope that he could speak when the world was already abuzz, so that if he made a fool of himself, he’d be forgotten quickly? Not even Asuka could say.

The days passed. Asuka’s trials of the LCL bandage had started to show promise with more severe wounds, allowing a soldier with a missing finger regrow it over the course of three days. But to her dismay, there were always more and more test subjects sent to the mountain. The war was going badly, and by the end of the week, word started to spread. It began as worried chatter in the mess hall: the Chinese were starting to break through the mountains. If the tunnels broke through, there would be little chance of stopping them or the Russians on their way to Tōkyō-2. But despite the scarcity of reliable information, some liked to make light of the threat.

“If it were the Russians, I might be worried,” Misato had said, “but the Chinese are just as likely to find themselves in Brazil first. They’ll sooner find themselves in front of Christ the Redeemer than this base, mark my words.”

“No points if they bring us postcards from Rio before knocking down our front door,” Hyūga had quipped.

Light as the two of them had been, the increasing presence of armed patrols on the base betrayed the seriousness of the situation. Still, Asuka had her own work to do—if anything, the news portended more wounded who would need her work to save life and limb. It was a night when Asuka took a lab notebook with her to bed as she tried to work out a pesky problem of chemical equilibrium. Had she not started chewing on the end of her pen in thought, she might have missed the red light of the camera as it started recording the main room. Shinji sat on a stool with a plain white shirt and a stray strand of hair falling over his forehead, but he paid that detail no mind. He just looked straight ahead, at the camera, and said what came to him as best he could.

“Hello,” he said stiffly, and he twitched in surprise at the sound of his own voice. “Um, good evening. But it might not be evening when you watch this. My name is—” He winced. “You know who I am. Or do you? Is that lens cap still on?”

Asuka put down her notebook and watched through the half-open door to the main room. Shinji hastily undid the lens cap and sat down again, looking jittery and anxious. But the false start seemed to do him some good, for when his gaze settled on the camera once more, he spoke more fluidly. After all, he couldn’t possibly embarrass himself anymore.

“Hello,” he said. “You know who I am. Right now, our nation is under siege, and our countrymen are dying to defend it every minute of every day. There are people out there who ask why we should be fighting our fellow man when Eisheth is coming. They ask if Colonel Katsuragi is fit to control the Eva, and even if she is, is it worth fighting over?" Shinji paused. “Is it worth fighting over? Well, yes, but I don’t want to talk about that. I think talking about that makes things more complicated than they really are. This isn’t even really about fighting Eisheth, either, for even the people who’ve set foot on Japanese soil agree Eisheth must be fought. They just disagree on how best to do it or who should be in charge of it. So this isn’t about Eisheth. This is about…” He frowned. “What is this about? Trust? Faith in people? Maybe it’s one of those. Eisheth doesn’t believe in trust, and I think, for a long time, I didn’t either. I wanted to, but I didn’t, and I lashed out against my father, against the people I wanted to care for me and love me. That’s what we’re doing now, isn’t it? We don’t trust each other, so we fight. We have to overcome that. How do we overcome that without letting everyone turn to liquid again? That’s the hard part, isn’t it. Let me see….”
For the better part of an hour, Shinji followed a meandering train of thought in front of the camera, saying what he felt and what came to mind, no matter how convoluted or puzzled he came across. He was just a boy, after all. He was neither scholar nor theologian, so issues of great moral weight were genuine riddles to him. In part, that struck Asuka as part of Shinji’s appeal. He approached these dilemmas honestly, without pre-formed biases or undue conclusions. And while she couldn’t know how the people of the world would react to Shinji’s wandering thoughts—even if she ultimately edited it to trim out his confused pauses—she felt the act of making this video and disseminating it would be enough. At last, Shinji was willing to step into the spotlight that the world had kept lit for him since mankind left the sea. It was when he was needed, in time of crisis, but the time had come, and Asuka couldn’t have been prouder of him.

Yet as she glanced back at her notepad, with equations scribbled down in smudged ink, a slight sadness took hold in her heart, too. Shinji was changing, yet she was standing still. Though her effort had played a part in Shinji taking this step, no one but the two of them would ever know it. Whether man triumphed over Eisheth or not, Shinji would leave a mark on the world. What legacy would Asuka leave behind? Her guidance for Shinji? That was something, but it wasn’t enough.

It’s the fate of most people to be forgotten, to be relegated to the lost annals of history. If one’s name appears in a document, a birth record, or something else, eventually that name will lose all meaning. Whether it take fifty or five hundred years, the contribution that person made to society will be like a grain of sand on an endless beach. No one will be able to tell it apart from another. There are only a precious small number of people in every generation who stick out from their peers, who make their names be remembered for more than a tiny speck of time out of the thousands of years of human civilization.

Asuka was one of those people, and she knew it. As a pilot of Eva, her name would appear in encyclopedias and history books for decades at least, so long as mankind survived Eisheth’s onslaught, but compared to Shinji, she would be only a minor footnote in the chronicle of Eva, Third Impact, and what came after.

In fact, thanks to her urging, Shinji was making even more of a name for himself. Shinji’s message to the world generated intense publicity and interest. Chinese state television called Shinji’s statement a “well-intentioned but biased appeal to men worldwide,” saying he was “too colored by patriotic and personal motivations to see how Japan and Katsuragi have failed to act in planet Earth’s best interests.” At home, his statement was better received. One line in particular stood out from the rest, as a rallying cry for Japan and all the people of Earth who loved their individuality:

“When I chose to walk out of the sea, I knew it would come with pain, that people could hurt each other because of it. That is the price we pay to be able to laugh with people, to cry with them, to lie with them in love. Those are things we can never do in the sea. Eisheth is coming to take all that away from us. I won’t allow it. Colonel Katsuragi won’t allow it, nor will the pilot we’ve spend months training for this task. We are prepared, we are ready, and we won’t let the Eisheth’s brand of paranoia and fear slow us down. I trust in Colonel Katsuragi and the pilot, just as I trust in the people of Japan to defend this land. I’m counting on you. I know you won’t fail.”

Whether this stirring confidence was real or merely a brave front Asuka couldn’t say. When Shinji had finally turned off the camera, he’d slumped on the stool, drained and exhausted. Let there be no doubt: it could take just as much strength of will to stand before millions, espousing confidence and fortitude, as it would to sit in the Eva’s entry plug, feeling its every battle wound. Nevertheless, thanks to Shinji’s sacrifice, he’d endeared himself to the people of Japan, to those who would stand up against Eisheth.
And Asuka felt her footnote in history shrink further.

In truth, her thoughts on the matter were muddled and unclear. She didn’t particularly like the idea of being famous for its own sake. People like that disgusted her, for they seemed to delight in being the focus of attention without having done anything to earn it. Maybe they had money; maybe they were exceptionally pretty.

But that’s always how things had been. Kyōko had been quick to point that out one afternoon in the lab.

“I knew a girl once, back at Gehirn,” she’d said. “Very pretty girl, though working in a lab she had plenty of opportunities to hide it. I met her degree advisor once at a party and realized that he was absolutely smitten with her: she was more than just a student or a protegé, more like a surrogate daughter or something else. She was quite the charming woman. She seemed to have everyone wrapped around her little finger. I thought for sure she was gunning for a position of power in the organization. She had that kind of ambition about her, that single-minded drive. I wasn’t the only one to think so, either. So you see, Asuka, people get what they don’t deserve all the time. Perception of being deserving—of being important—is enough.”

That seemed dangerously cynical, but it was probably true, at least in Asuka’s judgment. “Whatever happened to that woman?” she asked her mother.

“Oh, she was brilliant enough to back up her ambitions, though they were toward an end no one really expected. Last I heard, Yui was coasting out of the solar system as some monument to humanity.”

If only Shinji’s mother had known that aliens would come back to planet Earth before she could ever meet them, before she could testify to mankind’s existence in the form of a petrified, immortal Eva holding her soul. She might’ve appreciated the irony. She’d hoped to show the universe that humanity had existed, at least for a short time, but the universe knew all too well. And most people wouldn’t know her name either, despite the magnitude of what she’d set out to do.

All in all, these thoughts left Asuka believing she could be unique, in a way. There was something she wanted out of life: to be the best at what she chose to do, to be recognized for it, to make a name for herself. Isn’t that what she’d set out to do from birth? Why else be the overachieving child, graduating from university well before her time? It wasn’t for the challenge. Even organic chemistry had hardly tested her. Why else volunteer to pilot Eva? Because it was something few other people could do?

Well, that time was over. Her chance to pilot Eva had passed. Shinji and Misato had visibility. What did she have?

She had her mother back in her life again. She had Shinji to lie beside her at night. Those things made her happy, but they left her only partly fulfilled. Her dissatisfaction kept her awake in the dark, and the only way she could get Shinji to sleep was to pretend she’d nodded off in his arms.

But that was a lie.

She was drifting listlessly through life, and she was wide awake to see herself going nowhere.

Thanks to Asuka’s sleeplessness, she was awake and alert when the war between Japan and its enemies came to their doorstep.
BANG! The mountain shook and rumbled. A lamp on the endtable tilted precariously, but Asuka caught it by the shaft before it could fall.

“The hell was that?” she muttered.

“An earthquake?” Shinji rolled over in bed, trying to get comfortable again. “Hopefully nothing.”

“I doubt that. How often do you hear something like the hand of God slamming down on Earth that you really end up realizing it was nothing?” Asuka rose. “I’m going to take a look.”

“You think that’s a good idea?”

“You have a better one?” She stalked to the thick metal door that guarded their quarters and jammed the release button, opening the way to the corridor, and right away she was met with a pair of men wielding rifles and wearing kevlar helmets.

“Who the hell are you?” she said.

“Your personal security, Sōryū-san,” said one of the men—a short, dark-complexioned fellow who seemed a bit too young and thin for his combat fatigues. “Sergeant Ishikawa, at your service.”

“Are you sure that rifle isn’t too heavy for you?” said Asuka.

“I do just fine with it, thanks,” Ishikawa said dryly. “My men and I are here to ensure your safety. For that reason, we advise you not to leave your quarters at this time.”

“On whose orders?”

“Colonel Katsuragi’s.”

“Why? Is there some kind of threat?”

“I’m standing my post; I really can’t speak to the current status of any threat, if it should exist. I’m not saying it does.”

BANG! The overhead lights flickered and rattled, and both SDF members tightened their grips on their weapons.

“Sure looks like it exists to me,” said Asuka. “What is the last thing you heard, then?”

Sergeant Ishikawa made a pained expression, but when Shinji poked his head out from behind Asuka, the SDF member relented. “The Chinese have given up trying to cross through the mountain passes. The Russians have brought in troops from the air. The Defense Ministry tunnel has been caved in to prevent access, but this is still a mountain base, and bases have entry points. They can be sealed as strongly as you might like, with doors as thick as I am tall, but even those doors can be breached with the enough ordinance.”

“How much is enough?” asked Asuka.

“A small nuclear warhead, or several non-nuclear ones.”

BANG!

“Right now,” said Ishikawa, “I’m going with N2 weapons. The Russians are smart. The don’t want to make the whole mountain a radioactive wasteland. If they did, they wouldn’t get what they want.”
The Eva. They wanted the Eva for themselves, and they would stop at nothing—even this all-out war—to get it, as much as it might weaken humanity to do so.

But they weren’t the only ones being stubborn and intransigent. There was someone else who’d refused to listen to all reason, and it was thanks only to her foolish idealism that they hadn’t swatted down the Russians and Chinese in the first place.

The problem was Rei—Rei and her refusal to use the Eva. Asuka had to change that.

She headed back inside, into the glare of fluorescent lights that Shinji had lit behind her. Shinji himself started filling a kettle with water, but he spotted her as she headed for the wall-mounted phone. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Getting this mess straightened out,” said Asuka, who dialed with punctuated button-presses.

“Hachibuse Internal Security.”

“Yes, hello? I need to speak to Colonel Katsuragi. I think you know who this number belongs to.”

Click.

Asuka scowled, and she glared at the earpiece in anger. “Really? They just hang up on me? Being the girlfriend of the boy who saved the world needs better perks.”

There was a faint sound on the other end of the line. “I don’t know what you think happened, but I’m actually here,” said Misato.

Turning red, Asuka put the phone back to her ear. “Your staff need to actually tell people when they do something, instead of just doing it.”

“I view it as being more efficient.”

“It’s not efficient if it’s confusing.”

“True. Are you calling to give me a lesson on management? If you haven’t noticed, we’re a bit busy here. I take it you met your escort?”

“Yeah, this is about that. Is it true? The Russians are blasting at the outside of the mountain with N2 weapons?”

“That seems to be the case, yes. Air SDF really dropped the damn ball on this one. They got caught out of position watching the Chinese front and left us too exposed. Or maybe we were just too undermanned from the start.”

“Of course we were undermanned. We had an Eva and never bothered to use it.”

There was a pause, and Asuka could practically feel Misato’s pained stare through the phone’s cord. “That had nothing to do with being unprepared; Rei made a choice, a choice with good intentions.”

“That doesn’t seem to be working too well for us right now. Misato, you’ve got to talk First out of this stupidity! Her principles don’t mean a damn thing if we’re all dead, and I doubt the Russians want to break down our door just to give us vodka and play cards. She has to see reason soon, or none of this will matter. Don’t you understand that?”

“I do. And I think she does, too…but perhaps her judgment isn’t as impartial as I thought it was. Or, it could be she’s trying too hard to make it that way. Is Shinji-kun with you?”
“Nah, he hangs out with other women at two-thirty in the morning. I just see him when I go to sleep and wake up.”

“Cute. Bring him to me, and take Nozomi with you. If we’re going to convince Rei that we need a change in strategy, no matter the cost, we’ll need both of them—Shinji-kun to convince her and Nozomi to pilot.”

“So I’m to play courier for you?”

“Give yourself some credit, Asuka. You’re the one pushing for this. You deserve the privilege of seeing it through. I’ll give the order to Ishikawa. See you soon.”

Inside of ten minutes, Sergeant Ishikawa and his men and rounded up the other civilians on the block: Asuka’s mother Kyōko and the Horaki family. The periodic bang-bang-bang tapered off and ceased, and all agreed that was either a good sign or a very, very bad one.

“Let’s not wait around to find out, yeah?” said Sergeant Ishikawa. “Let’s get going.”

Ishikawa’s squad consisted of eight men, and they escorted the civilians as a pack led and trailed by groups of four. Ishikawa himself took position in the second row on the right, just in front of Shinji. Kyōko and Horaki were in the third row from the back, and the Horaki sisters walked a single column, with Nozomi between Kodama and Hikari.

“So I’m really going to pilot Eva,” Nozomi thought aloud. “I guess I didn’t think it’d be like this, needing an armed escort just to get to the plug.”

“It’s never exactly the way you think it’ll be,” said Shinji, “but you’ll be fine. The weapons they have—even N2 weapons—can’t really touch you if you’re prepared for them.”

“And even if they do,” said Kyōko, “you’ll survive more likely than not. You’ll have good people in control to dial down the synch rate if you start feeling pain.”

Horaki peered his head around the group, trying to get a clear line of sight on the leader. “Sergeant, anything you can tell us about what’s going on out there?”

“I thought a condition of your stay here was you wouldn’t seek comment on SDF issues,” said Ishikawa.

“I’m not looking for comment; I’m looking for something that might help my daughter be prepared to fight whatever is out there.”

Ishikawa pursed his lips. “I don’t know much, but I suspect she’ll be dealing with a lot of air support. Anything they have on the ground will have been dropped, so if she can take the tanks and armored vehicles out, that heavy armor is not likely to come back anytime soon. Would make things a lot easier for our people outside.”

The group made their way to one of the base elevators, and Ishikawa pressed the down button while his men fanned out to encircle the group and provide a layer of protection.

WHURP! WHURP! A klaxon sounded, and emergency lights cast the corridor in a red glow. The light on the elevator panel went out, and a mechanical whirring sound could be heard in the shaft… and then ceased.

“The base is on alert,” said Ishikawa. “Elevators shut down to avoid giving intruders access. We’ll have to take the long way. Let’s go!”
The “long way” was an access stairwell down to Level 11. The base had two separate elevator and stair systems—one connecting the surface down through Level 11, and another connecting Level 11 to the rest of the base, all the way down to Level 28. Most of the base personnel’s quarters were located in Levels 6-11, while essential functions like power generation, water filtration, and the like were in the lower levels to protect them through increased security and barriers to access. To get to Misato’s command and control on Level 27, the group would have to navigate the stairs to Level 11, cross the whole of the Level to reach the second stair, and then make their way down.

The trek down to Level 11 was slower than anyone would’ve liked, for the stairway was narrow, and the Horaki girls couldn’t maintain a brisk pace without fumbling into each other, perhaps out of nervousness or something else.

“I’d rather run hurdles in gym class than this,” Hikari confessed. “I’m constantly afraid I’m going to fall over and tumble.”

“It’s all right; just keep your feet,” said Asuka. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

But there was plenty to worry about, for in the distance above them, the sounds of battle could be heard. Distant shots stirred Shinji and Nozomi to cover their ears and crouch down reflexively, and the hurried shouts of soldiers, though unintelligible, contributed to an air of chaos and confusion.

“That’s all right, just keep it easy,” said Ishikawa. “Slow and steady. We’ll be down there in no time.”

Ishikawa’s reassuring words had less effect than the gunfire above them, which gradually quickened the group’s pace. Even the unflappable Kodama seemed pressed when the group reached Level 11, taking a moment at the bottom of the stair to look up in concern.

“No time to linger,” said Ishikawa. “Come along.”

The squad’s movements on Level 11 were more deliberate; the four men at the rear backpedaled, facing behind the group, to maintain constant coverage. Teams of SDF members scrambled around the level, with Ishikawa pointing them back to the stair that the group had just emerged from, and not long after, the sound of gunfire came after them. The beige walls with gray metal doors made all the corridors seem the same, and Asuka had started to lose track of where they were going. Though she walked this path every day on the way to her lab, the slow pace and her focus on the battle happening around them distracted her.

“Here we are,” said Ishikawa, leading the group to the second stair. The door by a pair of SDF members, and Ishikawa nodded to them before touching his key card to the reader next to the handle. As his men went ahead to secure the stair, Ishikawa stayed behind to see the civilians got through safely.

POP-POP-POP! Three shots rang out, and a pair of Russian soldiers retreated back behind the far corner of the corridor. One of the SDF members slumped and fell against the door, shutting it with his weight. The lock reengaged, and the light on the card reader turned back to red.

“Get him off that door!” cried Ishikawa. “Check his vitals.”

Asuka, Shinji, and the rest of the civilians crouched down as best they could, but there was no cover to be had, save for behind the bodies of their protectors.

One of the men put his ear to the mouth of the wounded SDF member. “No breathing.” He touched the wounded man’s neck with two fingers. “No pulse.”
POP-POP! The Russians started to gather in greater numbers around the corner, but they were still unwilling to press. Sergeant Ishikawa went to his belt and pulled the pin on a grenade. “Fire in the hole!” With a mighty toss, he banked the grenade off the back wall of the corridor, out of sight, and friend and foe alike covered their ears for the coming explosion.

BANG! Shrapnel peppered the corridor walls, and smoke started to waft through the air. Two SDF members shoved their dead comrade aside, and Ishikawa tapped his key card against the reader once more. The light went green, and the door opened. “All right, go, go! Suzuki, plant a charge on the reader; I don’t want to be followed. Understood?”

“Yes, Sergeant!” said one of the men.

Shinji, Asuka, and Kodama went first, emerging into the crowded stairwell. Asuka looked back to see the others come after them.

POP-POP-POP!

“Nozomi, move!” Hikari shoved her younger sister through the doorway, right into Asuka’s arms, and the girls tumbled into the guard railing. Horaki grabbed Hikari in a bear hug and carried her through the door.

“Down, down, let’s go!” said Ishikawa.

The group scrambled down to Level 12, with Horaki nearly carrying his middle daughter. A charge above them destroyed the key card panel, denying the Russians access to the stair—at least, not until they blew the door off its hinges.

“Hey, I need help here!” cried Horaki. “I think she’s been hit!” He held out a palm covered in blood, and sure enough, a splotch of blood had seeped into Hikari’s yellow pajama top. The wound was on her left side, near her lower rib cage. Hikari herself didn’t seem to realize it. She reached for the stairwell railing and tried to pull herself up.

“I’m fine,” she insisted weakly, the color already coming out of her cheeks. “I’m just fine—”

Her legs buckled and gave out, and Sergeant Ishikawa and her father caught her on the way down.

“Don’t try to move,” said Sergeant Ishikawa. He smiled reassuringly at Hikari as he started to dress the wound. “That’s the same thing I told my little brother when he broke his leg playing soccer last fall. It’s like trying to ride a bike on a flat tire. It just doesn’t go so well, but we’ll get you patched up here. You’ll see.”

Thud-thud. Bullets dented the Level 11 door, just half a flight of stairs above them.

“All right, we’ll have to improvise something here.” Ishikawa looked to Hikari’s father. “Can you take her by the arms and shoulders? And Ikari-san, can you take her by the ankles? We’ll have to try to keep her as steady as we can while making our way to the infirmary.”

That would prove no easy task. The infirmary lay on level 27, next to the cage. A pilot like Nozomi was expected to have her Eva brought back into the mountain and then extracted from her entry plug and treated as close as possible to that point. It was convenient for Eva-related missions that Misato and her people had anticipated, but in that moment, with an enemy army bearing down on them, the infirmary was just short of being the most distant location on the base.

And Asuka couldn’t even stay by Hikari’s side to keep her calm as they descended the stair deeper into the base. With Shinji and Horaki carrying the wounded girl, there was little room in the stairwell
even for a meaningful gesture. Instead, Asuka walked at the front with Shinji and Kyōko, and Asuka turned to her mother for support as she watched her friend wince and groan with each stair they passed.

The going was slow, for Shinji and Horaki were too careful not to move Hikari too violently, but to Asuka’s relief, there was time. Ishikawa’s gambit to slow down the Russian advance had paid off, at least to keep the invaders off their tail. Still, Ishikawa knew well that carrying Hikari along like that had reduced them to a crawl.

“I’ve called ahead for medics,” he said, looking to Shinji and Horaki. “Just hold on a little longer, gentlemen. We’ll put down and hold tight where it’s safe.”

Hikari’s breathing shallowed, and her eyes started to stare dully at the ceiling, with a glassy, inanimate shine.

“Focus, little sister,” said Kodama. “You need to stay with us; look at me. Look at Nozomi. Are you with us?”

Hikari turned her head, meeting Kodama’s gaze, and nodded.

“Ishikawa pursed his lips. “All right, we’re stopping here,” he said, tapping his card at a proximity reader. The group passed through a thick metal door painted with white numbers—20—and were met by a single medic with a stretcher. The man caught sight of Hikari and stared in disbelief.

“Oh hell,” he said.

His reaction wasn’t unfounded; Hikari’s yellow shirt was sopping with blood. On both her front and her back, the dark, irregular splotch on her clothing dripped and seeped, expanding with each passing second. The wound lay just between a pair of lower ribs on her left side.

“That’s got to be the spleen,” said the medic. “It’s pouring out like a fountain.”

Shinji and Horaki lay the girl down on the stretcher.

“Where’s your partner?” asked Ishikawa. “You can’t carry a girl on a stretcher by yourself.”

“Nozomi. She said she’s cold.”

“The medic looked to Horaki and nodded. “All right, on three. One, two…three!”

The two men raised Hikari off the floor, with the medic taking the lead. He held the poles that ran through the stretcher over his head, trying to keep Hikari level. Ishikawa tapped his card at the gray, rectangular reader on the right of the door and nodded at one of his men to go ahead.

POP-POP! The group retreated, and Ishikawa slammed the door in front of them, holding the enemy
at bay.

“Carrying her slowed us down too much,” he said. “That stair’s overrun. Suzuki, ask around on the radio. See if there’s still a secure way down to Level 27.”

One of Ishikawa’s men trotted aside to fiddle with his radio, but Ishikawa wasn’t finished.

“We can’t assume there is a safe route out of here, though,” the sergeant went on. “We’ll have to get away from this stair. This is a good place to be stranded, though. Armory’s on this level. Taniguchi, let’s get some firepower. If they come for us or we have to go through them, it can’t hurt to have a few surprises in store. In the meantime, let’s get the wounded to a safer place.”

Relative safety was an advanced materials laboratory. Asuka was distantly familiar with the work, having shot the breeze with a few of these researchers over lunch now and then. There were large, black armored boxes that served as ballistics chambers, and dented slabs of a rough, black, sparkly material showed damage from bullets large and small. Supposedly, these could form the basis for new armor technology, both for personal use as well as vehicles. Perhaps with a nice coat of paint it would help protect the Eva when even the AT-field failed.

Beyond that, the laboratory was fairly similar to Asuka’s, with black, glossy lab benches and metal stools with uneven legs. Ishikawa, Shinji, and Kodama helped clear one of the benches of microscopes, vials, test tubes, and lab notebooks. Horaki and the medic set Hikari down on the cleared surface.

“You have to be careful,” said Asuka. “These tables can have all kinds of substances on them that no one cleaned up.”

At that, Hikari started to giggle.

“You really need to stay still,” the medic warned. “Don’t strain yourself.”

“But you should see Asuka’s and Ikari-kun’s faces,” she said. “I know what she’s talking about, and it’s not chemicals or organic compounds. Well, not the kind you’re supposed to find in a laboratory, at least. It’s all right; Tōji and I have been in some unusual places, too.”

“You have?” echoed Horaki. “Where?”

“Father, this not the time,” Kodama insisted, coming between him and Hikari.

Horaki looked to his other two daughters. “Does anyone else have anything they want to tell me?”

“You’re a father and a reporter,” Nozomi remarked. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“With all due respect, your family has a bigger problem right now,” said the medic, who kept two fingers on Hikari’s wrist while checking his watch to get a pulse. “Her heart’s beating fast; with all this blood loss, it’s not unexpected, but it tells us we don’t have a lot of time. This girl needs to get her spleen taken out of her, get sown back up, and get some blood, fast.”

One of Ishikawa’s men came in from the hallway, radio in hand. “Sorry, Sergeant. No go. The Russians control all three staircases. The lower levels have been sealed to preserve command and control.”

“It just gets better and better,” said Ishikawa. He looked to the medic. “We’re not getting to Level 27—not right away, at least. Can’t you rig something up? I know you’ve got needles and thread in that kit.”
“Even if I can do some battlefield medicine here and operate on her, she would still be a sitting duck. You can’t run around a warzone with stitches holding half your chest together.”

“As far as those Russians are concerned, this level is full of waste disposal and doesn’t need to be bothered with,” Kyōko pointed out. “I’ve known too many theorists who worried about what was to come five steps ahead when they hadn’t even solved the problem in front of them yet. Save the girl’s life now; worry about whether she’ll make it through this battle later!”

“You’re half right, Doctor Sōryū,” said Sergeant Ishikawa. “The Russians may not be on top of us now, but they will be. It’s not good practice to leave whole areas uncleared of enemy personnel, and they know that. They’ll come for this level eventually. If they’re thorough and don’t want to be surprised by a flanking maneuver, they’ll clear this area first, even though they have direct access to Colonel Katsuragi and the control on Level 28.” He looked to the medic. “You’re her doctor now. Patch her up.”

“Without real instruments, that’s little short of a death sentence,” the medic warned. “Short of magic, I can’t promise you I can save this girl. Cutting into her in this situation could be just as bad as the wound she’s sporting.”

He was quite right about that; Asuka felt it in her bones. Without modern medicine to come to Hikari’s rescue, she would die, and Asuka would be at her side, helpless to do anything. After all, Asuka was a scientist, not a physician. None of her expertise could help save Hikari. But perhaps Asuka’s work could.

“Mama,” she said, “we have the technology. We can put Hikari back together.”

Kyōko surveyed the instruments of the lab, fingering a pair of pliers. “I don’t think this alone will be enough to build a bionic woman.”

“I mean our work! The LCL bandages—you can heal any kind of wound with them. They regrow lost limbs. Why not seal a bullet wound or repair a damaged spleen?”

“Where are these bandages?” asked Sergeant Ishikawa.

Asuka winced. “Back on Level 16.”

Sergeant Ishikawa chuckled sardonically. “Of course it is. Certainly it’s nowhere safe.”

As quickly as they could, the group of civilians and their SDF protectors worked to barricade themselves in the materials laboratory. The SDF planted grenades and plastic explosives inside the door control panels, hiding them from plain view. Horaki and Kodama wheeled a large metal vacuum chamber—some kind of electron microscope, it seemed—in front of one of the entrances. Kyōko and Nozomi turned over a spare lab table to hide behind for cover.

“I always used to think these lab tables were far too thick and unwieldy,” Kyōko mused. “Now, I’m really hoping I’m right.”

Nozomi nodded. “I just wish I had my pad right now.”

“You’d draw this?”

“If this is the last thing we do, or the last time Hikari…” Nozomi trailed off, staring at her older sister.
“If I had the chance, yeah. I’d try to capture this, so people know what happened and how I saw it. So no one forgets.”

But without Nozomi’s sketches to capture that scene, they could all be forgotten. They could all die there, with no one to speak to their lives.

Asuka had no time to worry about that, however. She and Shinji waited with a radio handset at the ready as Sergeant Ishikawa and his men ventured back upstairs, leaving the group in the hands of just a few scattered patrols that circled the lab. If the sergeant encountered a problem while looking for the LCL bandage, or if one of the guards outside noticed Russians on their way in, word would come in over the radio, Asuka would have to take the message and act on it. Nothing else mattered.

But what if Ishikawa and his men couldn’t get past the Russians in the stair? What if the invaders had already torched Asuka’s lab to scorch the earth behind them, lest they be defeated?

Asuka could do nothing about those possibilities, however—not from an uneven metal stool in an abandoned weapons lab. At times, she’d felt helpless as a scientist, subject to the whims and fancies of nature. Failure and frustration were inevitable in her profession, as inevitable as the dust that collected on those shiny black lab tables, marring their perfect sheen. A scientist can’t force nature to do as she bids, of course. Hikari was dying, and nothing Asuka could say or do would stem the flow of blood from a damaged spleen.

Yet Asuka couldn’t just sit there with her thumb on the radio’s transmit button doing nothing. Hikari had been too good a friend for that. Knowing her work might save Hikari wasn’t enough. Even if Hikari were saved, they all might die there, with nothing but the inhuman coldness of bullets, microscopes, screwdrivers, and wrenches to keep them company. No, Asuka’s mind was made up. She would act to save herself, to save them all, though she was powerless on her own. She would act the way someone with all the power in the world had refused.

“Shinji,” she said, “I need to speak with her.”

From his stool beside her, watching the medic tend to Hikari, Shinji looked at Asuka out of the corner of his eye. “Who?”

“That’s a good question. Who is she? The First Child, Ayanami Rei? The Second Angel, Lilith, mother of all life on this world?” Asuka turned the radio around in her hand, coming to grips with neither her judgment of Rei nor the feel of the cold, black plastic on her fingers. “She won’t say it, but she thinks herself a god, doesn’t she? She thinks she has power, but she won’t sully herself to use it. We fight this war like her pawns, marching onward one step at a time. We’re getting close to the end of the board, Shinji. Either she rewards us and we become queens, or a horde of Russian rooks, knights, and bishops will cut us down first.”

Shinji shook his head helplessly. “Asuka, you know as well as anyone. I looked for her for months. Ayanami may watch over us, but she’s too busy to listen to any one person.”

Asuka caught his eyes and stared him down. “You really think that? Don’t you remember? When she told us she wouldn’t let us use Eva against the enemy, against other human beings, you were there. You said you trusted in her, so that made it okay. Did you see the way she reacted? Did you see the way she looked back at you? I remember. She listens to you, Shinji. She always has. That’s how I know she’s listening right now, and I won’t be satisfied until she shows her ghastly white face! She’s the one standing between us and safety. She’s the one who won’t do anything while Hikari bleeds to death!”

“Asuka, it’s fine,” Hikari offered weakly, trying to put on a smile, but the gesture looked unnatural
and strained, for as Hikari lay on the cleared lab table and turned her head, she cringed in pain, unable to hold the smile against her discomfort. Still, she persisted. “Ayanami-san has her reasons, I’m sure. I don’t question them.”

“I do,” Asuka said curtly, and she turned her eyes to the ceiling. “First! Come off your throne and speak to us lowly mortals!”

Shinji winced in embarrassment. “Asuka, please—” His gaze went past her, and his mouth hung open, leaving him speechless. Kodama and Horaki followed Shinji’s eyes and backed up a step, cautious and wary.

“She’s behind you,” Nozomi explained to Asuka. “I don’t know why everyone’s so surprised. Wasn’t it obvious she would come? I wouldn’t take being called out like that lightly.”

Asuka peered over her shoulder, and sure enough, Rei was there, standing before the ballistics firing chamber. Her ephemeral glow reflected off the rough, dark surfaces of the prototype armor material, spreading the faint light throughout the room.

“Why do you call for me?” asked Rei.

“Because we need you,” said Asuka. “Because Shinji needs you. We could all die here, and you’re standing on principle! Shinji, tell her!”

With both Asuka and Rei watching his response, Shinji seemed to shrink under their gazes. “Of course I’m afraid,” he said quietly, “but Ayanami won’t let us die here. I believe that.”

Sighing, Asuka rubbed her temple with two fingers. “Maybe she will, but how much worse does it have to get? Do we need to have a plague of locusts before she lifts a finger to do something?”


“It’s in Jewish scripture, too,” said Horaki. “Shared writings.”

Kodama turned aside slightly, talking to Horaki alone. “Father, this is what you comment on? Not… ‘marmots’?”

“It seems reasonable to keep a sense of humor about things in these kinds of situations. I think marmots would be pretty reasonable. They’re pesky, vicious creatures. Sounds plaguelike to me.”

Asuka opened her mouth to stop this crazy line of thinking, but the radio in her hand crackled to life. Sergeant Ishikawa’s voice was clear and to the point. “Ginger, Ginger, this is Platinum Six. Do you read?”

“Go ahead, Six,” Asuka sent back over the handset.

“We have the package, but—” Pop-pop! “It’s going to be a fight to return to the nest. We’ll be coming in hot. Copy, Ginger?”

“Copy,” said Asuka. “Over and out or something.” She put down the radio handset. “Military jargon is way too overblown. Well, we’ve got something to do.” She looked to Rei. “Don’t suppose you want to help with that.”

Rei’s eyelids narrowed almost imperceptibly, but she said nothing. Asuka was glad for that, at least.
Rei always did seem to know, as a rule, when to keep her mouth shut.

In the distance, the sounds of battle came through the walls. Distant gunfire could be heard, and if Asuka didn’t know better, she would’ve mistaken it for a child blowing bubbles with chewing gum. SDF members called and hollered to one another outside. “Lock that door down!” one man said. “Don’t give them any cover!” And so on. Hikari’s medic checked the slide on his sidearm, taking a deep breath.

“There they are!” cried a man. “Go, go!”

POP-POP. POP-POP-POP. Ka-BANG! The lab shook, and a beaker tumbled and fell to the floor, shattering. The able-bodied civilians—Asuka, Shinji, Horaki, Nozomi, Kodama, and Kyōko—crouched down behind upended tables and cabinets for cover.

“There’s get the girl on the floor here,” said the medic, “before the bullets start flying.”

Obligingly, Horaki took one end of the stretcher as the medic took the other, and the two men lifted Hikari off the lab table in unison, lowering her to the dusty tile floor.

Thud-thud, thud-thud! There was a beating sound on the laboratory door, and Asuka crawled to the red release button by the entrance, pressing it with her palm. The metal door retracted, and Sergeant Ishikawa and the rest of his men scampered inside, but there was something off about their number.

“What happened?” asked Shinji. “Weren’t there seven of you that left?”

Ishikawa met his gaze with a long, hard look. “Didn’t make it,” the sergeant said simply.

Asuka stared at him in surprise, gaping, but Ishikawa paid her no mind. He simply pressed the red release button for the door, shutting it behind them, and he placed a bundle of white, sealed packs. To the untrained eye, they might’ve looked like artificial cold packs, save for the black dotted line that ran near one of the short sides. Asuka searched and scoured the drawers of the lab, finding a utility knife that she used to slice the pack open. She fetched a pair of latex gloves from an open box, with them, she retrieved a translucent bandage drenched in LCL.

“That’s insane!” cried the medic. “You can’t get all that fluid in her wound. Do you know what that’ll do to her?”

“It’ll save her,” said Asuka, who knelt down by Hikari to apply the bandage. “That fluid is going to turn to flesh and bone and whatever else she needs, as long as she has to will to make it so. Hikari has that in spades. You didn’t see her as our class rep—she managed people with an iron fist! No one dared question her. Isn’t that right, Hikari?”

Hikari looked up to her with an amused, if weak, smile. “I wasn’t really like that, was I?”

“You were.” Asuka snuck a glance at Kodama. “Maybe you get it from your older sister here.”

At that, even the stoic Kodama showed a concerned smile, trying to reassure Hikari.

“Just concentrate,” Asuka told Hikari. “Picture yourself whole, and if you think hard enough, that’s how you’ll be.” She looked to her mother. “That’s how the doctors say it, right?”

“Some of those quacks read from a telephone book just to be boring enough to sound like white noise,” said Kyōko. “On the bright side, I know the phone number of every okonomiyaki restaurant in the city, though.”
Asuka glared at her mother, but Hikari was quick to intervene.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’ve done this before.”

With silent footsteps, Rei came up beside Asuka, and Hikari’s eyes followed the ghostly figure.

“Then let’s do this already,” said Asuka. “Close your eyes and focus. You’ve got a lot to live for. Your sisters, your father, Suzuhara—your whole life is ahead of you.”

Pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop…. Dull sounds of gunfire rang through the halls outside. Ishikawa and his men tensed up, and with hand gestures, he ordered his remaining men to positions near the doors.

“Well, if we manage to get through this alive, your whole life will be ahead of you,” Asuka glanced at Rei sidelong, but the former First Child was grim and silent, watching only Hikari.

With a battle unfolding all around her, Asuka pressed the bandage to Hikari’s chest and side, maintaining steady pressure. The medic kept checking Hikari’s breathing and pulse to look for changes. Horaki, Kodama, Nozomi, Shinji, and Kyōko stayed behind cover, for the fight grew closer and closer. The lab shook and rattled, and bullets ricocheted off the metal doors.

“What are they doing here, anyway?” asked Nozomi, who held one hand over an ear to keep the noise out.

Ishikawa fingered a radio transmitter with an extended antenna and an exposed switch. “They followed us,” he said. “Couldn’t get out clean. Guess they figured we were after something important. They were right, weren’t they?” He frowned, turning his ear to the wall. “Oh, I think I hear Russians.” He flipped the switch on the transmitter, and a thundering blast rocked the lab.

“You still hear Russians now, Sergeant?” asked Horaki, shouting over the din.

“Don’t think so!”

Nozomi worked her jaw in vain, hoping to clear her ears. “You could’ve blown the door out like that. Isn’t that just a little insane?”

“Not possible. It would take a lot more firepower than any man can carry to break down one of these doors.”

A flash! Sparks showered the floor, and one of Ishikawa’s men jumped back from one of the doorways. A bright white line started to form in the metal as a dazzling flame cut through.

“So,” said Kyōko, “how many men does it take to carry a blowtorch?”

Ishikawa grimaced. “That’s not firepower. I was talking about explosives. That doesn’t count.”

“Counts the same however they get in and murder us,” said Nozomi. “Can we talk less about how they get in and think about how to stop it?”

Ishikawa flipped the switches on his detonator repeatedly. “No charges left. Let’s take up some defensive positions; when they open up the gap they’ll probably try to throw a stun grenade in here—if they care to try to take any of us alive. Let’s give them a more lethal present—like a fragmentation grenade—and go from there.”

Kodama took a steel tray and held it over her chest for makeshift protection. “Sounds like bloodshed,” she said. “I don’t think all of us without armor or weapons for protection would fare
well with that.”

Asuka motioned to Kyōko. “Mama, take over here.”

“Why?”

“Just hold the bandage there. If I’m not focused on Hikari, I shouldn’t be doing it.”

Puzzled, Kyōko came around Hikari’s head and crouched behind the overturned lab table. She took two gloves from the box and applied pressure to Hikari’s wound while Asuka rose, standing straight and tall even as bullets might come flying any second.

“Asuka, please, won’t you get down?” asked Shinji. “It’s dangerous out there.”

“I know that. I know that as much as anyone, and so does she.” Asuka stared Rei down. “You have the power to stop this. I’m asking you to use it. I don’t know what you’re afraid of, but now is the time, damn you! If there were any time to wave your hand and make the Earth bend to your will, it’s now! You held the whole planet in suspended animation for three decades, and you’re standing here telling us you won’t lift a finger?”

“My actions have consequences,” said Rei, unmoved. “Everything I do comes at a cost—a cost Eisheth will exact when and where she chooses.”

“That price doesn’t matter if we’re dead!”

There was a hoarse coughing; Hikari sat up, hacking and wheezing. Kyōko pulled the bandage away, and beneath a thin film of liquid, Hikari’s bare skin was clean and intact. Only the mixture of spilled blood and LCL remained as evidence of her wound, but still, Hikari went woozy, and the medic caught her to ease her back down.

“She still needs blood,” said the medic as he injected her with some clear drug. “We’ve got to get her to the infirmary, or she will be in serious trouble, no matter what magic healing she’s done!”

And that was an impossibility. Already, the Russians’ blowtorch had cut a straight vertical line from chest height down to the floor. They were starting their second, horizontal cut, trying to make a rectangular hole large enough for a man to crouch and pass through. If salvation didn’t come soon, there would be nothing left to save.

Once again, Asuka turned her attentions to Rei. “I don’t know why you’re hesitating,” Asuka went on. “You went to all this trouble to give humanity a fighting chance. You didn’t have to do that. You didn’t have to come to Shinji—or to me, or to any of us. You decided we would stand back up and fight for our individuality, so back us up! Stop that army, or let Nozomi get to the Eva, so she can stop them herself!”

“Eva should not be used against humans,” Rei maintained. “I won’t compromise principle because it is easier to do so. I stand for all humanity. I stand for everyone—the people in this room and the people outside equally. Not any one person. All people.”

Asuka scoffed. “Are you that cold now? Now that you’ve realized you’re an alien, impossible to touch, the people you knew once don’t matter to you anymore? No, don’t pretend you’re like that to me. You can try to make yourself look like a dead fish, but you’re not that. You care.”

Rei stared back at her, eyes wide and watchful, but she was utterly silent. Sparks trickled into the room from the flames of the blowtorch as they met the metal door. The Russians finished the second of three cuts, with only one longer, vertical cut left to break through. Yet in Rei’s eyes, Asuka
couldn’t see those sparks. There were only those unnaturally red irises, like the color of blood. Only when Shinji rose to stand by Asuka, to mediate between Asuka and Rei, did those red eyes flicker and waver.

And then Asuka understood.

“You care too much,” she said, as much a realization as it was a statement of fact. “You’re not holding back because of principle or ideals. You doubt yourself, don’t you? You think you might do too much, so you do nothing instead. Well, I’ve been there. I’ve thought I couldn’t trust myself, that I might just screw up and fail. It doesn’t do anyone any good. You have to trust in yourself and the people around you, or you’ll just be paralyzed. You’ll sit alone, captive to your own thoughts, going in circles until something helps break you out. Well, First, I’m breaking you out. Do something now, or the only humanity you’ll be saving is one without us in it. You understand me?”

Rei’s gaze fell as she thought about what Asuka had said. She seemed to take it seriously, and as frustrating as it was to have their salvation in the hands of someone who’d deluded and deceived herself so, Asuka refused to press her. Rei would have to make that decision now. Either Asuka’s words would get through to her, or they wouldn’t, but Asuka had hope. They were more similar than she’d ever considered. Like Asuka, Rei had made a mistake in judgment, unable to see how her actions and choices were affecting others. As Asuka had neglected Shinji to work long hours in the hopes of personal accomplishment, Rei had tried to make herself too perfect, too impartial, and in doing so, she’d forgotten what was truly important:

The bonds between people, which are not impartial, not fair, but nevertheless shape people’s experiences and decisions. What decision Rei would make there only she could say.

And Asuka left her to make that choice. Taking Shinji in hand, she sat down with her back to a set of cabinets, and Shinji sat beside her. “You know,” said Asuka, “I’m sorry. I took for granted you would be there. Working made me feel important, but if you had gone, none of it would’ve mattered. I didn’t even realize it, but I should’ve.”

“You never did anything wrong,” said Shinji, puzzled. “At least, I never felt like you did.”

“Because you were being too damn nice about it. That’s why I want to live through this, you know? To have the chance to fix what I did wrong.”

Shinji looked to Rei, and he squeezed Asuka’s hand reassuringly. “I have faith. We won’t die here. Ayanami won’t allow it.”

But the ghostly girl with red eyes kept staring into space, troubled. “There will be a price to pay,” she said. “I don’t want any of you to have to pay it. I will take up the cost, whatever she exacts, myself. The people that aren’t Japanese, people who doubt Colonel Katsuragi or the Japanese people, may choose to fight against us, to fight alongside Eisheth. I’m afraid of these things, but there’s something else I fear more.”

Asuka prodded Shinji to answer. “What is that?” he asked.

Rei blinked, and though Asuka couldn’t be sure, she thought she saw a pair of tears fall from Rei’s eyes. Ghostly and ephemeral they were, though, and if they hit the ground, they made no sound and left no trace behind.

“That if you die here, I won’t have the will to fight her at all,” Rei finished.

The steel door began to glow white hot near the base, and the shower of sparks shortened and
lessened as the blowtorch’s flame neared the floor.

“Positions!” said Sergeant Ishikawa.

The men readied themselves, training rifles on the rectangular cutout that would soon open. The medic put his body between Hikari and the breach and held a pistol sidearm with both hands. Horaki, Kodama, and Nozomi clung to one another, and Shinji and Asuka did the same. Shinji’s certainty gave Asuka strength—the strength not to fear, to trust in Rei, foreign and strange though she could be.

Clang! The metal rectangle fell, glowing hot at its edges, and a pair of grenades bounced inside, clinking as they hit the floor. Asuka and Shinji embraced, trying to shield each other from the blast and—

Ka-PAM! The shockwave rippled through Asuka’s air, but that initial burst of pressure was all she felt, and the room settled into stillness and silence. Only then did Asuka dare open her eyes—

To see a jagged piece of shrapnel hovering between her eyes.

“Shit!” she blurted out, and she pushed herself back against the cabinets to put distance between her head and the blast, but the piece of shrapnel floated there, spinning slowly but suspended in mid-air.

And in the center of the room stood Rei, her gaze unwavering and sure.

“There will be no more death today,” she said. “I have decided it. Whatever it may cost tomorrow, I have decided it.”

Pieces of shrapnel and grenade casings fell to the ground harmlessly with a small clatter. Horaki even dared to pick up a piece and examine it between his fingers in curiosity.

A team of Russian soldiers burst into the room through the gap, guns up and at the ready. Who can say what they thought as they charged inside. Did they expect decimation, only to find the inhabitants alive and intact?

No one can know, for Rei gave them no chance to express their surprise. As they began to train their rifles on her, on the civilians, and on Ishikawa’s men, Rei’s stare pierced them, and in a flash of light spanning all colors of the rainbow, the Russian soldiers exploded, bursting into pure, primitive LCL. Their remains splashed on the floor of the laboratory, inert and harmless, and their clothes fell around them.

“Those who try to do violence here I reduce to LCL,” said Rei. “They can choose to stand and walk again, but they will do no one harm.”

The ghostly figure walked forward, passing through the metal of the door like it was nothing but air. Kyōko was the first to rise and follow her, and she opened the sliding door with a single press of her hand to the release button. Shinji, Asuka, and the Horaki clan came after, with Ishikawa’s men in flanking, protective positions. Sure enough, all the hallway was littered with empty uniforms—Russian and Japanese alike—and puddles of LCL. All that was left was the ghostly girl who walked the walls, dissolving all those who dared raise a weapon against her. This she did to protect those who were dear to her, knowing what terrible cost the enemy might exact in reprisal.

‘I have unlocked the Eva for Colonel Katsuragi to use as she will.’ Though Rei kept walking through the halls with her back to them, she didn’t turn around to speak. Her voice—her thoughts—reverberated in Asuka’s mind, almost like a silent speech. ‘Go to Eva, and show the enemy your power and might.’
With Rei’s blessing, the group left the materials laboratory to continue their original trek down the mountain. Sure enough, Rei had done much to see to their safety, for the evidence was strewn all through the corridors and stairs. Empty uniforms and puddles made the going to Level 27 treacherous, but Hikari’s father and the medic were deliberate, keeping Hikari level on the plastic stretcher as they brought her to the infirmary. The doctors hooked Hikari up to a bag of blood, but while Horaki and Kodama could stay at the middle sister’s side, the rest of the group had different destinations: Nozomi to the cage, Shinji and Asuka to the control room. They walked the same path for a time, in silent trepidation, until the group reached a fork in the mountain’s corridors, where they stopped to part ways.

“So this is it,” said Nozomi, pensive and measured. “Can’t say this is how I imagined going out there to pilot for the first time. Isn’t it supposed to be momentous? It doesn’t feel that way. More like I should be back in bed at this time of night. Doesn’t seem smart to go out there tired, does it?”

“You’ll be fine,” Shinji assured her. “You just need to go out there and be indestructible. Bullets and shells can’t touch you. All you have to do is show the Russians—and Eisheth—that we’re not holding back anymore.”

Nozomi scoffed. “So it’s all about symbolism. Does that really work, or are people just going to look at us and say, ‘What the hell are you doing?’ ”

“Probably a little of both,” said Asuka. “Now go on, for the world, and for your sister.”

Pursing her lips, Nozomi gave a respectful nod to both Shinji and Asuka, and she headed into the locker room to change. Shinji and Asuka kept on going for the control room.

“You know,” Asuka said to him, “a girl notices when her boyfriend doesn’t say, ‘I love you,’ especially when it’s right before they go through life-threatening peril.”

Shinji looked stricken. “I didn’t—it’s not that—I just didn’t think we would die! I was trying to be brave!”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t say anything to admit the seriousness of the situation!” Asuka chided him. “Besides, I know you can be brave.”

“You didn’t say anything, either,” he remarked.

Asuka pursed her lips. “Yeah. Guess I didn’t want to get mushy in front of her.”

“Ayanami isn’t here now.”

“Are you sure?” Asuka tilted her head forward and back at their SDF escort. “What about all these guards, hm?”

“I don’t care about that.”

And neither did Asuka, quite frankly. She took Shinji’s hand into her own as they walked, indifferent to anyone who might be watching them. It was a strange relationship they had. Shinji, passive though he could be at times, cared just as much about proving himself worthy to people as she did. He just went about things quietly, hoping to be noticed, where Asuka would constantly seek attention. In that way, they were more similar than either could’ve realized when they’d first met. Asuka took solace from that, but the hardest part of their relationship was fighting that impulse, resisting the need to prove oneself worthy of attention, admiration, or love.
Perhaps for the first time, Asuka saw how she could live in the world without chasing those needs any longer. She had helped save Hikari—and maybe all of Tōkyō-2 as well—but how many people would know that? Outside of Shinji and Hikari’s family? Not many people indeed, and that was okay. That was all right by her, for her words had accomplished much, and she’d do what she’d done again even if no one but her could know what came of her deeds. The ends were worthwhile, no matter who might praise her for achieving them.

Thus, when Shinji and Asuka entered the control room, surrounded by technicians and computer panels, Asuka didn’t mind stepping back to let Shinji and Misato do their work. After all, they had trained with Nozomi, preparing her for her task as a pilot. Asuka had had work of her own to perform, and she’d done it well. It was time to trust others to do the same.

From her chair at the base of the control room, Misato sat with her legs crossed. She fingered a headset on her right ear, pressing it slightly. “Well, Nozomi, are you ready?”

One of the screens flickered to Nozomi’s image. The girl’s plugsuit had a high, Chinese-style collar, armored black shoulder adornments, and an overall dark-green hue. “Probably not, but let’s give this a shot.”

Misato looked to Shinji, handing him a headset of his own. “It’s your call.”

With a gulp, Shinji donned the headset and looked to Nozomi on the screen. “Launch,” he said.

Another screen changed to an exterior view of the mountain, and up came Eva Unit-14, green and black with its outward-angled shoulder pylons in the faintest glimmers of dawn. No sooner than Nozomi and the Eva had breached the surface did flashes of artillery lit up the darkness.

“Look out!” cried Shinji.

The Eva braced itself, and the incoming shells exploded harmlessly against its AT-field. Nozomi and Unit-14 hardly buckled an inch in response.

“Okay, that’s not too shabby,” mused Nozomi. “Now what?”

“Go out there,” said Misato. “If they won’t run from you, destroy their ability to make war and to hold this land that isn’t theirs. Show them this mountain and the city around it will never be theirs, and the Eva they covet so much is nothing they’ll get their hands on.”

Nozomi huffed. “You guys really believe in all this stuff, don’t you? In every action being profound and meaningful? Well, I’m gonna go shrug off some bullets and throw some abandoned vehicles around for fun. I guess we’ll see how meaningful that is.”

With that, Unit-14 leapt and skidded down the mountain. Small caliber bullets impacted and dissolved against its AT-field, lighting it up in an intermittent, rainbow-colored glow. So majestic and marvelous was the sight that the whole control room watched in awe. Against conventional firepower, the Eva was all but untouchable, and Asuka couldn’t help but admire the sight and think back on the times when she’d been a pilot, as Nozomi was. The beginning was grand and full of victory, but the experience only grew more difficult over time. Some said the AT-field was the light of the soul; Asuka only hoped Nozomi’s light would shine long enough and bright enough to withstand the coming darkness.

And make no mistake, Eisheth Zenunim was coming, and she would arrive soon. Asuka saw the evidence herself when Hyūga came to Misato’s chair, bearing a folder full of intelligence.

“What is that?” asked Shinji, peering over along with Asuka.
“Space telescope imaging,” Hyūga explained. “This was taken a few hours ago.”

The lead photo told the whole story: a pointed, glowing blob—artificial in shape and size—loomed large in a background full of faint stars, but larger still was the edge of some object that took up most of the right half of the photo. It was a planet’s atmosphere, with orange gas and bands of white clouds, but most distinctive of all was the great red storm that raged there.

“And so come Eisheth’s children,” said Misato bitterly, closing the folder, “riding an Angel past Jupiter, and to planet Earth beyond.” She set her eyes on the large monitors at the front of the control room, where Nozomi crushed a tank underfoot as Russian soldiers ran for their lives. “We may have beat an enemy back today, but we are both weakened for it, and the time soon comes when we’ll have to stand together instead.”

“There’s nothing to be done about lives and materiel already lost,” noted Hyūga.

“We’ll do the best we can,” said Shinji. “We’ll fight because it’s right, and even if we fail, if Eisheth takes us all back to the sea, then every last person will know how hard we fought to be individuals.”

Asuka squeezed Shinji’s hand once again, for with his hope came comfort and warmth—warmth enough to feel alive, even as Eisheth’s children came for mankind from the icy reaches of space.
A Noble Piece of Work

To the soft yellow light of a lamp, a girl lay in bed and drew. Her bent knees supported her notebook, and two pillows cushioned her neck and back against the headboard. Her pencil moved effortlessly over the pages, gliding with gentle and precise strokes, but these motions were all habit to her, automatic and thoughtless. She left her eyes unfocused, not even paying attention to her sketches. It was a technique she’d read about in a few art books: free drawing. It was meant to free a mind low on inspiration from whatever might block creativity, but so far, Nozomi wasn’t sure it worked.

Was Nozomi’s creativity stifled? In truth, she didn’t know how exactly she felt. She knew how her body felt: her eyes stung, and her muscles ached. At times, she found her hands idly roaming her body, moving over scab-covered cuts and tender bruises. Each one was a reminder that she was alive. The dead feel no pain, after all.

Then again, perhaps she should ask Rei if that really were the case.

More than a reminder of life, those wounds were evidence of what she had been doing with it: piloting Eva to serve as the bulwark of mankind’s defense against Eisheth. Since that dark day when the Russian and Chinese armies had broken into the mountain, four weeks had passed. They could’ve just as easily been four years as far as Nozomi was concerned. Every day was a lifetime in her eyes, and yet, as the clock on her endtable read 02:31, she couldn’t bear to turn out the light and sleep. Gods only knew what images might come to her in the dark if she turned off that light.

Nozomi turned her full attention to the sketchpad, finally letting herself appreciate the drawing as a whole, and sure enough, it was something familiar to her: a large, disc-shaped object with three long spikes on its edge, each protruding parallel to the disc’s central axis. In her absent-minded, fatigued state, she’d shaded in areas near these spikes like currents in the wind, emphasizing that the disc was moving—or rather, spinning—quite rapidly.

From each spike, a current of energy formed beneath the creature, coalescing into a ball, and where that ball met the Earth, the ground itself was ripped and scored, like a teacher dragging her fingernails along a chalkboard. It had made a sound just like that, too—a horrible wail of a sound, a cry that lingered in Nozomi’s mind, just beneath her hearing, no matter where she went. The more she stared at the drawing, the more she thought she could hear it again.

And in an instant, she grabbed at the piece of paper, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it at the other side of the room. When she heard pensive, measured footsteps outside her room, she knew she’d made a mistake.

Sure enough, her older sister, Hikari, poked her head in the door. “Still awake?” she asked.

Nozomi nodded. Wasn’t that obvious?

“Can’t sleep? Or don’t want to?”

Those were better questions, but the answers were complicated. Nozomi was rather sure she could sleep if she put her mind to it, but the rest wouldn’t be any good, so there was little point. Hikari wouldn’t understand that, so Nozomi just shrugged.

“Do you want me to stay?” asked Hikari. “I could…well, I could read to you, like we used to do.”

Nozomi’s eyes fluttered off her drawing pad, and looked at Hikari with a bemused expression.
“That’s weird. I don’t remember being six years old again.”

“I read to you when you were seven, too!”

At that, Nozomi could only stifle a weak laugh. Hikari had that tendency to ignore the thrust of an argument if it suited her to do so. It likely wasn’t intentional on her part, but when she took a position, she held to it, often long past the point of reason if it meant enough to her.

But really, there was no point in troubling Hikari over this. “You’re the one who should be resting,” said Nozomi.

“Why? Because I was shot?” Hikari rubbed at her side and, to her own surprised, winced at the sensation, but she put on a brave face for Nozomi. “I’m fine now. Really.”

“I mean because of your visitor tomorrow. How long has it been since you’ve seen each other?”

Hikari blushed. “A couple weeks.”

“So get some rest; you’ll need it.”

“And you don’t?”

Nozomi shrugged. “I’m getting by.”

Hikari narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing Nozomi, but whatever suspicions she held, she didn’t act on them. “Well, good night,” she said. “Sleep, Nozomi.”

With only a nod, Nozomi bade her older sister good night. Hikari inched the door to the bedroom shut, and Nozomi was alone again. It was for the best, really. Nozomi was too often out fighting the good fight, away from home—or whatever those unadorned accommodations in the mountain could be called. She was disconnected from the goings-on of the mountain. Tōji could’ve visited Hikari every other day, and Nozomi never would’ve known it. The call of being an Eva pilot was demanding, and only she could answer it.

RING-RING-RING! Beside her bed and under the glow of the lamp lay a black phone. As it rang, a red light blinked incessantly, as if the shrill ringing weren’t enough to get her attention. Nozomi reached across the endtable, and she spread her fingers to work the soreness and pain out of her hand. She picked up the handset and put it to her ear. “Am I needed?”

“Yes,” said the technician on the other end.

Nozomi looked to her writing pad, blank and featureless but for the unseen indentations from her pencil, from drawings she’d discarded and thrown away. Like those sketches of Angels that wouldn’t leave her dreams, Nozomi would have to make herself a blank slate, indifferent to the heaviness in her eyelids or the aches and pains of her joints, so that a work of art could be made with her.

A work to save the world.

“I’m on my way,” she said, and she hung up the phone.

In spotted pajama pants and a thin blue shirt, Nozomi put on a pair of slippers and treaded through the corridors of the mountain. After many weeks of living on the base, she knew her path too well.
Over the last month, the damage the Russians and the Chinese had done in their invasion had been identified and cordoned off for safety, but most of it was still in a state of disrepair. Whenever Nozomi switched elevators at Level 11, she purposefully went around the perimeter of the level to walk by the staircases. There was one spot on the floor, faintly discolored from the rest, that she thought could be Hikari’s blood, but it just as easily could’ve been any other soldier’s. There was no way to know. And in theory, that place was the same as many others in the mountain, all built to specifications and standards. Nevertheless, Nozomi had visited that place many times. She’d sketched it in her drawing pad, recapturing the scene of SDF riflemen trying to protect them, of Shinji, Asuka, and her mother all pushing to get through the doorway.

Thankfully, no other battles had been fought within the mountain since that day. The children of Eisheth Zenunim were many, but they hadn’t yet dared to attack Japan. Eisheth had given up being daring and ambitious in the opening week of the campaign. The Zenunim arrived on their Angel-ship to rip and tear through human armies, but that was just the first wave. Over the following days, nine more Angels descended upon planet Earth, and Eisheth brought them down upon her first target: Germany. The combined forced of Angels and Eisheth’s children obliterated the German Eva and its base.

Brimming with confidence from this victory, Eisheth came after the Americans next, but Misato was prepared. She’d dispatched Nozomi and Unit-14 to the scene. Nozomi and the Americans’ dummy plug Eva took down two Angels, and while Unit-15’s main base in Colorado was destroyed, Eisheth seemed to think better of committing all her firepower in one place again.

After that, Eisheth had started waging a truly global campaign. Rather than challenge the might of Eva, she seemed content to steadily dissolve the free people of Earth. Hordes of Eisheth’s children would rise from the ocean, swarming a city or village without warning or mercy. Their white, pasty bodies, with slithering tentacles and suction cups on stalks, inspired great fear and panic in the civilians, and their bony, five-eyed masks completely obscured their faces, obliterating all indications of emotion. They were nothing short of implacable, and many remote areas had fallen to them in days. Every last man, woman, and child would be impaled by those tentacles and dissolved into LCL thanks to the anti-AT fields the Zenunim wielded.

When mankind had the temerity to resist Eisheth in force, that was when the Angels would come out of hiding. They obliterated tanks and airplanes; anything that might hinder or halt the Zenunim’s advance was fair game. When those Angels came out to support Eisheth’s children, that was when Nozomi would get a call, as she had received that day.

The rest of the journey to the pilots’ locker room went by quickly in the second elevator. As soon as she saw the lockers, Nozomi kicked off her slippers and started stripping down. There was never anyone else around and no one to hide her modesty from. Why bother waiting until she was in front of the locker? Why bother setting up a curtain to protect her privacy?

She stuffed her belongings in the locker, tossing them in one after another. A balled-up wad of clothes landed gently at the bottom. Nozomi piled the slippers on top of them. All that was left in her hands was her drawing pad, and that gave her pause. She opened the locker door and caught her reflection in the mirror there. Her hair was disheveled and unkempt. Her eyes looked a bit sunken. No doubt one of the base doctors would complain to her that she needed to get more rest, drink more water, and so on. She could add those suggestions to a long list of priorities.

Lastly, she looked over her body. She was no image of a womanly figure by any stretch of the imagination: flatter rather than busty, straighter in the hips than curved. These features didn’t bother her; she was who she was. What she eyed more critically were the ribs that showed through her skin and the cheekbones that looked ever more pronounced and defined. Nozomi flipped through her
sketchbook, and inside were almost a dozen drawings of her, almost identical in pose to the girl in the mirror. They were all her, laid bare, and they confirmed her suspicions: she was losing weight, too. She would have to draw that later—after she returned, when there was time to do so.

Nozomi laid the writing pad gently on the top shelf of the locker. Below hung her plugsuit, half-slipping off a hanger. She yanked it free, and the hanger tumbled below, but it was still within the locker, and Nozomi closed the door with her foot. After many opportunities to practice getting into the plugsuit, she was all too familiar with putting it on. Indeed, it’d felt tight at first, despite the supposed reliability of the auto-fitting mechanism. Of late, it’d felt more worn-in and comfortable, and Nozomi regarded this change with mixed feelings, but like her responsibilities, it was something she accepted. At that point, what really could be done about it? She certainly wouldn’t ask for a new and fresh-feeling replacement. There was no point.

Once dressed, Nozomi made for the cage, and her body went on autopilot. She walked following those well-established and memorized routes. When the entry plug was opened for her, she clambered in to take her seat. No sooner than she was seated, the communications window on her left opened.

“Ready for action?” asked Misato.

Nozomi narrowed her eyes. The woman on the other end of the line looked conspicuously underdressed. Wearing little more than white tank-top and gym shorts, Misato seemed to be calling Nozomi from the comfort of the colonel’s private quarters.

“You’re still in bed,” said Nozomi. “That means we have a long way to go.”

“Got it in one,” said Misato sheepishly. “It’s just a crime to be up this early when the action is likely several hours away.”

“Where’s the target?”

“Hanoi. Hope you like beef noodle soup!”

Nozomi sighed, rubbing at her eyes. “Food is the last thing on my mind right now.”

“It’s not too late to get out of the plug,” said Misato. “We can get you something to snack on for the trip over.”

Why bother? The plane that would ferry her and the Eva to Vietnam was noisy and uncomfortable. The Eva’s entry plug, on the other hand, was insulated from outside noise, and the pilot’s chair was far easier to sleep in than anything on a plane.

“I’ll get breakfast over there, I think,” said Nozomi. “Which Angels are we facing?”

“Just the Eighth. Eisheth’s getting aggressive. I’m hoping we can capitalize.”

“I’ll do my best to kill it in a timely manner and not scratch up the paint. A couple of the maintenance people were complaining about that the other day, if you can believe it.”

Misato rolled her eyes. “People will complain about the most trivial things. If I were you, I might take a few boulders in my hands and rub them like billiard balls. See what maintenance think about that!”

A small smile came to Nozomi’s face. No doubt the guys refinishing the paint job would have a frantic day trying to get everything in order if she did that.
“I’m glad you can still smile,” said Misato. “It’s tough for a pilot to do that, as much as they see. Stay strong, Nozomi. I’ll see you on the battlefield.”

Nozomi nodded, and the window closed. The entry plug began to fill with LCL, and Nozomi held her breath. It was better that way; trying to suck down a mixture of air and LCL tended to convince the body it was drowning. Getting it over all at once was better, though no less terrifying in those few instants.

Instead of a combat launch, Nozomi and the Eva were slowly raised to the surface, where dozens of SDF members hooked the Eva’s body parts up to cables. A pair of military helicopters carried this heavy load over hill and stone to the nearby airport, where a more permanent solution had been devised. Like the Boeing 747s used to ferry the Space Shuttle across America, a converted cargo plane could lug the massive weight of an Evangelion where its legs couldn’t take it. A student of modern engineering might’ve found this process mind-blowing and innovative, but for Nozomi, it was merely a set of processes she had no control over or say in. She was there in the Eva while workers secured her to the cargo plane, but there was nothing she could do to help them.

The trip over was numbing and dull, and Nozomi allowed herself to sleep in spurts, each long enough to get some rest, but not long enough to let her dreams carry her away. To keep from being overwhelmed by the isolation of sitting in the plug, Nozomi left the communication’s line open. In half-intelligible fragments, she heard about the situation she’d soon face.

“…Hanoi falls, the rest of Indochina goes with it. The Chinese can’t hold much of anything near the coast…”

“…The Russians can’t help, not with the Sixth and Seventh Angels circling Moscow. They’ll cede the whole of Siberia before they abandon their capital to those monsters.”

“I’d cede the whole of Siberia, too. Do you think even the Zenunim would like the weather there? It’s harsh.”

When Nozomi couldn’t sleep, she stared out with the Eva’s eyes. At first, this sight wasn’t so interesting. The ocean at night was calm and featureless, and even its unsettling red hue blended into the darkness. Only when the sun came up behind the plane did that bloody color become distinctive again. Still, Nozomi kept looking to the horizon for land, for some sign, any sign, that the trip might be over. When she could see nothing, she closed her eyes again, but only for a moment. Every time she did so, the mask of Eisheth Zenunim came to mind, and the giant stared back at her with all five of its beady black eyes. With that terrible image incessantly watching her, it was little wonder she didn’t sleep. Instead, she just kept looking to the ocean in a daze, listening to that chatter on the radio that went back and forth between intelligibility and incoherence.

“…three hundred killed in action, up to three thousand already dissolved by the Zenunim…”

“…no sign of retreat or reinforcements. The Angel is all alone…”

“Nozomi-chan?”

What was that?

“Nozomi-chan, are you with us?”

She jolted from her seat in the entry plug, nearly falling out. “What? What was that?”

To her right was an open communications window, through which she saw the speaker: a boy in a white, buttoned-down shirt. With brown hair and dark blue eyes, he was the image of ordinary.
Indeed, the headset he wore around his ear was loosely perched there, like it didn’t belong, and he had to hold it firmly to keep it in place.

“How are you feeling?” asked Shinji.

Wiping at her eyes, Nozomi shrugged. “Like I know a little too well what it means to be watched all the time by an evil overlord.”

“Hopefully the journey to Mount Doom will be over soon enough,” he tried to reassure her.

“That would be a lot more reassuring if that didn’t mean I might lose a finger in the process.”

Shinji winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right, Ikari. I’m pretty sure I’m in a better position than Frodo was. He could only go invisible; I have this whole thing.”

Nozomi yawned. “I’ll be fine. How long until we’re there?”

“Two minutes. We’re doing an air insertion.”

An air insertion. Those never went well. It meant there wasn’t time to land the plane and unhook the Eva. Perhaps the airport was gone, or the Angel out there would cut them to ribbons before any Vietnamese soldiers could start freeing Unit-14. Either way, Nozomi didn’t like the prospects, but there was little choice.

The plane came out of the clouds, flying low over the Vietnamese capital, and Nozomi got her first view of the situation with her own eyes—or rather, the Eva’s. The city itself was nestled among a thick canopy of trees and greenery; truly, mankind liked to carve its existence out of the wilderness, and only the work of many generations had built cities and roads and bridges. Most of the buildings were short, with only a few scattered skyscrapers punctuating the skyline. The roofs were colorful and varied: light blue, red, and green, without order or rhythm but appealing nonetheless. Nozomi would have to draw it when she returned.

But the city itself was just a place—a place for commerce and diplomacy, government and private enterprise. That day, it was a battlefield. Tanks lined up in the streets and fired toward the river, their shells creating silent puffs of dirt and smoke by the shore. Airplanes dropped bombs on an invading horde. Beneath the canopy of trees marched the children of Eisheth Zenunim, faceless and without fear. The great weapons of the People’s Army sliced and blasted through the Zenunim’s lines, but they kept on approaching anyway, uncaring about the numbers they lost. Those only slightly wounded just reformed from LCL uninjured, and to keep mankind’s weapons from dealing too much irreparable damage, the Zenunim relied upon a protector to cover their invasion: an Angel.

Nozomi saw it below, for it slithered over the Earth, leaving a swath of damaged trees and upturned ground behind it. It had a worm’s body, divided in sections, each spinning independently of the others. How could they be connected? Nozomi couldn’t say. It was eyeless and blind, but it didn’t need eyes to find its prey. It had two sets of whip-like appendages, half attached to its rotating sections, half mounted around its insatiable mouth. It snatched low-flying fighters from the sky and devoured them whole. It whipped and smashed armored vehicles, slicing them clean in two.

“Thirty seconds to drop,” said Shinji.

Nozomi gripped the controls of the Eva, but in that moment, a wave of fatigue came over her. Her eyelids drooped, and she let out a long breath. Better to get all that exhaustion out then, before she had to go to battle. That was the idea, at least, and it sounded good to her, in her mind. She couldn’t be blamed for being tired, could she? How many of these trips had she taken, hours and hours away
from home? Five? Eight? Twelve? They couldn’t be counted anymore. All she could count were the Angels she’d seen killed, four in all. Each one that fell meant there was at least one less trip she needed to take. She could hold out that long. She would hold out that long. Then, when Eisheth was gone, she could sleep.

“Drop!”

When that unmistakable sense of weightlessness hit Nozomi, her eyes snapped open, and she grabbed onto the controls like a vice. There it was—the familiar feeling of adrenaline rushing through her veins. It beat back her fatigue, made her breathing natural and unhindered, and took the sting out of her eyes. She felt what the Eva felt, with the wind whipping past. She spread the Eva’s arms out like an expert skydiver and guided Unit-14 to her target.

But the Angel was savvy to her. Its tendrils swatted and slapped at the sky, and with the Eva’s great weight keeping it falling like a rock, Nozomi could do only so much to turn and dodge.

“Nozomi-chan, thruster rockets!” cried Shinji.

She pressed a thumb button on the controls, and the thrusters lit, shooting her past a pair of tendrils that would’ve grabbed her and taken her down. With limited fuel, Nozomi went easy on her rockets, firing them only when those tendrils moved to threaten her, but they were bizarre, unpredictable things. They seemed to grow as long as the Angel willed them to be. They had pointed, oblong tips that opened up like claws or pincers when they got close to her, but with clever use of her rockets, she darted and bobbed through the increasingly tangled mess of tendrils. She turned the Eva’s body upright and came down feet-first just above the creature’s mouth.

WHAM! The Eva’s feet slammed into the Angel, driving the worm half into the ground. Rebounding, Nozomi hopped away just as quickly, sticking a landing on the ground. From the Eva’s left shoulder pylon, she drew a massive, serrated prog knife and charged. She slashed and cut her way through a maze of tendrils and lunged at the creature with her knife point leading the way.

TEW! A shower of multicolored light erupted from the tip of the knife, and a wall of shimmering hexagons blocked Nozomi’s path. The Angel’s AT field held, and Nozomi lost momentum, stuck there with her attack that had failed, and a stationary target couldn’t have been easier for those hungry tendrils. The tendrils’ oblong heads pointed at her, like eyeless hunters that nevertheless stared at their prey.

“Get out of there!” said Shinji. “Run!”

He didn’t need to tell her twice. Nozomi bolted, trying to put distance between her and the Angel, but a single tendril wrapped around the Eva’s ankle. Caught like a bird in a snare, Nozomi wiggled and squirmed, but the Angel carried her off the ground, robbing her of traction and leverage. It grabbed hold of the Eva’s limbs, one by one, and when it was confident in its grasp, it began to pull on those limbs, as a man would tear apart his dinner.

“Agh!” Nozomi struggled and strained. She clenched the Eva’s muscles to resist the pull. She felt the strain in her shoulders, her elbows, her knees. They were right in front of her, undamaged, yet she felt them being bent at unnatural angles.

“Four joints beginning to fail,” said a technician in the background. “She can’t take much more of this!”

In the communication’s window, Shinji grimaced, but a peculiar light came on in his eyes. “Nozomi-chan,” he said, “are you afraid? Are you angry?”
“I’m not sure I really have time to be angry at an alien monster right now!” she answered. “I’d much rather just kill the thing than call it names. How is being angry going to help me?”

“It will. Trust me. Think of it like so: this thing is going to kill you. This thing is going to take all your friends away, your family. It’s going to wipe out mankind as we know it, and it’s going to start with you. Do you understand me?”

She did. She did all too well. Why else would she have agreed to be the pilot in the first place? There was danger. There was a threat, and that threat was facing her. It had dragged her out of bed too many times, and even when there was no danger, the memories of fighting these things had invaded her mind like a disease, one that couldn’t be suppressed or cured. But what she felt for the Angel wasn’t the rage that Shinji meant to inspire in her. She was too deadened to that, too tired for that. And with the Angel sapping her strength every second in their deadly struggle, there was only one thing she could do.

She stared at it.

She stared down the symmetrical maw of the beast, the mouth that was flanked by a dozen of those grasping tendrils. She let her eyes lose focus and glaze over as artillery shells and missiles exploded harmlessly on the Angel’s AT-field. Indeed, she felt no hate for her assailant. Perhaps it was intelligent and even understood what it was doing, but she didn’t care either way. She convinced herself she was indifferent to the Angel’s existence, that it was insignificant, that it shouldn’t be bothering her so. It was like an ant to her, and when a person is bothered by an ant, there can be only one instinctive reaction:

To squash it.

TI-OWW! Nozomi’s eyes burned with fire! A great light shone on the Angel and bored into it, blasting through the AT-field. Some thing cut through the Angel’s maw, and it blew open a massive hole in the Angel’s throat, exposing daylight on the other side. The Angel shuddered and howled in a death wail. Its tendrils went slack, and Nozomi fell to the ground with a thud.

“Get up!” cried Shinji. “You need to finish it!”

Finish it? When had she started?

She commanded the Eva to climb back to its feet, and she spread the Eva’s fingers, working the soreness out of the muscles and joints. She could still fight, and that was all she needed to do.

The Angel, though wounded, shot and flung its tendrils with a frenzy, but Nozomi dashed clear through them, going straight at her foe. It had to be somewhere—the secret to killing this thing. As it flailed, she saw her target: the Angel’s core, hidden on its underside as it slithered, but it had become exposed. She cocked her fist back and punched through the Angel’s AT-field, shattering it and the core it protected in a massive blow. The Angel flew back, tumbling end over end, and each bounce shook the Earth like a shift of tectonic plates.

Nozomi kept her fists high, awaiting some sudden retaliation. Her breathing was fast, and her eyes darted back and forth as she looked for her foe, but after a few moments, a technician’s voice resonated through the entry plug.

“Pattern White has faded below detection threshold. Estimate with 99.99% confidence: all clear.”

A lone technician’s guess wasn’t enough for Nozomi, not even to one part in ten thousand. She approached the fallen angel, finding it lying on its side. The tendrils were limp and unmoving.
Nozomi even kicked the corpse for good measure, but there was no response from the beast.

“Good job, Nozomi-chan,” said Shinji. “Congratulations.”

Nozomi took the Eva around to the back of the Angel’s head, and she peered through the wound that had so conveniently gutted the creature. “What on earth could’ve done that?” she mused.

“You did. It looks like the Eva’s eyes can shoot some kind of beams. Maybe it’s some kind of AT field thing.”

Nozomi let out a hysterical, delirious laugh. “Eye beams? I have goddamn eye beams and you didn’t tell me?”

Wincing, Shinji looked away. “It’s not exactly what I was expecting. I thought you might unlock something to swipe at the Angel from a distance and penetrate the AT field. But, it doesn’t surprise me. The Eva’s full power doesn’t tend to come out until you’re in a certain state of mind.”

Well, Nozomi was there. No doubt about that. She let out a weary breath, and the manic rush of adrenaline faded. Her aches and pains returned to her in a growing sensory din. Even as the technicians lowered her synch rate to the Eva, a phantom sensation of the Eva’s trauma lingered. Her shoulders felt as if they’d been pulled out of their sockets and just as quickly forced back in.

“We’re sending you the location of the rendezvous point now,” said Shinji. “The Vietnamese will take care of the Zenunim as best they can. Good job today, Nozomi-chan. Only four more to go.”

Four more to go. Nozomi could think of nothing more tiring, more dreadful, but it was what needed to be done, and she had done well; Shinji had been right to say that. Each Angel she killed meant she was one step closer to getting their nightmarish bodies and geometries out of her mind.

She set out for the rendezvous point to catch her ride back to Japan. The journey wasn’t a quiet and uneventful walk, however. Even as she left, Vietnamese shells and bombs peppered the landscape in smoke and debris. Each explosion ripped through Zenunim invaders, giving the citizens of Hanoi a chance to preserve their individuality. There was still a fight to be had, but Nozomi couldn’t help them. Against Angels, she was a worthy and effective hero. Against man-sized foes, she was a clumsy beast. So she tuned out those blasts, thinking of them as background music that was lulling her to sleep. As she headed for the rendezvous, she let her mind drift and wander. She needed to stay awake, but that didn’t mean she had to think about what she’d done. The more she shut down, the less she felt, and the better she was able to keep the pain and tiredness out. She knew where she needed to go; the pointed blue diamond on the horizon, put there by a technician back home, would guide her to the plane. The display always kept her on track, and as long as she watched it, she could let her mind drift, and drift, and drift—

“Nozomi-chan, STOP!”

She jerked awake. “What?” she called back.

“Look where you’re going!”

“I’m looking at the waypoint; it’s right in front of me!”

“I mean down!”

Nozomi shut her eyes tightly, trying to fight back the stinging sensation, and she looked down. Not two strides in front of her—two long strides for the Eva—was a road. A caravan moved on that road, flanked by the People’s Army. Military humvees carried not soldiers but civilian refugees, people of
all kinds, so they could find safety and escape Eisheth’s onslaught.

And if Nozomi had kept walking carelessly, she would’ve hit that road in stride, stomping all over them.

Nozomi took a deep breath, trying to force her eyes wide and open. “I’ll find a way around. Sorry.”

“You’re not all right, are you,” said Shinji, watching her worry and concern.

For that, Nozomi had no answer. She was who she was, and in the state she was, and as long as she piloted Eva, what could be done about it?

The trip home was surprisingly silent and uneventful. Nozomi was shut out of the control room radio loop, which surprised her at first, but she soon settled into a trance-like state, awake yet hardly conscious. It made the time pass well enough without subjecting her to the horrors of what might find her in her sleep. It wasn’t until the Eva was back on Japanese soil that she recovered a modicum of awareness, enough to pilot the beast back to Hachibuse Mountain and to subject it to restraint in the cage.

When the LCL drained from the entry plug and Nozomi was freed, she found a party waiting for her on the walkway: a set of four nurses with a rolling gurney. Misato presided over the affair.

“Please come with us,” she said. “We need to get you checked out, Nozomi.”

Nozomi didn’t mind it. The gurney was uncomfortable and lumpy, but it would do. She could stare at the ceilings and watch the lights go by with hardly a care in the world.

The nurses took Nozomi to the infirmary. They shined lights in her eyes. They hit her knees with small rubber hammers. They took blood and urine, and while Nozomi didn’t mind this battery of tests, Misato seemed irritated by it.

“I don’t think her kidneys are at issue here,” said the colonel. “Can we get to what this is really all about?”

Away went the tongue depressors and syringes. The medical staff sequestered Nozomi in a dark room and stuck electrodes to her scalp. The wires were like a webbing, holding her in place.

“How do you feel?” asked Misato.

“Not great,” admitted Nozomi.

“What happened out there?”

“With what?”

“The Vietnamese caravan. The one you almost smashed to bits under your foot.”

Nozomi shook her head. “Couldn’t have been my foot. The Eva’s foot.”

“The Eva’s foot, then.”

“It’s best not to get confused about that,” Nozomi went on. “I feel what the Eva’s foot feels, but it’s not my foot. It’s not my foot.”
“I’m well aware—”

“The Eva itself doesn’t feel anything, though, so I don’t feel what it feels.”

Misato gaped, looking to the nurses in confusion. “I’m afraid I don’t follow,” she admitted.

“The Eva feels, but it doesn’t feel.” Nozomi rubbed one hand over her arm. “It feels like this, but it doesn’t feel like…” She forced an exaggerated smile to her lips, straining against the weariness in her face. “It doesn’t feel like that. There’s a word for that, isn’t there? There used to be a word for that…”

“There is,” Misato said grimly. “Tell me about the caravan.”

“I just told you.”

“I mean, tell me why. Did you lose it in the canopy?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Did you think you would just step over it?”

“No, I’m pretty sure I was going to step on it.”

“Then why?”

“I didn’t see it.”

“Why?”

“I was looking at the waypoint.”

“Are you tired, Nozomi?”

“That’s a stupid question. You people know how much I sleep.”

“Why didn’t you see the caravan?”

“I just told you!”

“Are you tired?”

“Extremely! I’ve never been more tired in my life!”

“Why didn’t you see the caravan?”

“I don’t know! Stop asking me that!”

“Do you think you can still be an Eva pilot?”

Nozomi shuddered, and she met Misato’s gaze. “What does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Piloting is hard. You can ask Shinji-kun and Asuka all about it. It’s the toughest thing I can imagine a human being going through, and that’s just for an adult. You’re a child. A child being asked to do an adult’s work, to take on adult responsibility.” Misato gestured to the monitors, which held all manner of arcane readouts and scans. “These sensors will probably tell us in excruciating detail how your mind is no longer functioning the way it should. I don’t need any of them to know that. I can tell just by talking with you. You’re not well, Nozomi. Do you think you
“Can still pilot Eva this way?”

Nozomi stared at Misato, and then past her. Eyes drifting to the floor, her mouth stayed open as she tried to find the words. What was Misato asking? Ability had nothing to do with it. She could still synch with the Eva. She could still pilot it. She’d just beaten an Angel and destroyed it, making sure it would never be a threat again. So how could Misato even ask that question?

“It needs to be done,” Nozomi said at last. “So I do it.”

Misato pursed her lips. “It does need to be done,” she said, “but only by someone who is at her fullest.”

“What does that mean? Do you think I’m crazy? If so, get a therapist. I don’t mind that.”

“Be serious,” said Misato. “If there are any therapists within a thousand kilometers of here, they’re definitely too insane to be of any help. You just need sleep, Nozomi—time to get this stress and strain off your back. I’ll ask the doctors if they can get you something to help you get some rest.”

“Don’t!”

The force behind that outburst surprised even Nozomi, who stared in shock, as if the voice had come from someone else.

“Why not?” asked Misato.

For that, Nozomi had no good answer. She did need the rest, after all. She’d spent too many fruitless nights struggling over her sketchbook, unable to put together a sensible image that wasn’t distorted in perspective or technically poor. But Misato couldn’t know what came to Nozomi in her dreams. She was nothing more than a human being; she would be powerless to try to change that, so there was no point in telling her. What Misato did have the power to do was to force Nozomi to take medications and sleep, if the doctors on base advised her to.

So Nozomi said nothing. As a nurse injected her with a syringe of clear fluid, Nozomi hoped in vain that her sleep would be dreamless—or at best, that she would forget whatever images might come to her.

But that was truly a futile wish.

No sooner than her eyes closed did Nozomi find herself in a different place: the pilots’ locker room. It was dimly lit; a single overhead light cut through the darkness, and even then it was irregular and intermittent. In this conception of reality, someone must’ve slacked off at tightening a bolt somewhere, for the light overhead, mounted on a long string from the high ceiling, tended to wobble and revolve at the slightest disturbance. And contrary to the laws of physics, once that light began to sway, nothing could bring it to a stop. The result: a constantly shifting sense of light and shadow, bringing with it disquiet and uncertainty.

Not that Nozomi expected her dreams to be roses and daffodils, but the scenery could’ve stood to be less dreary.

Then again, Nozomi had to question whether these dreams were really hers at all, for when she opened the door to her locker, she turned the mirror to herself—and to a figure in the darkness behind her, lit only sporadically by the overhead light. The figure had Hikari’s look and face, but that appearance was nothing more than a lie. Hikari could never look as stone-faced and sinister as the
Hikari always had some twinge of worry on her brow if she were unsettled, or a happy smile when she was carefree. Even when she was putting on airs as a class representative or a responsible big sister, she could never be so overbearing in her gaze.

No, the only being who would bother invading Nozomi’s dreams was Eisheth Zenunim herself, and Nozomi regarded her with callous indifference. She had no intention of baring her body to that creature, so she settled for staring at the intruder in her mind instead. “What do you want?” she asked curtly.

“You’re unwell, Horaki Nozomi,” said the impostor, the image of Hikari that wasn’t Hikari at all. “Do you know that?”

Nozomi rolled her eyes. “I do actually. I’ve been feeling pretty crappy, as a matter of fact.” She nodded at the plugsuit in the locker. “The uniform’s getting more comfortable, but it’s still a little tight in the rear. Leaves a bit of a friction burn, but a little moisturizer fixes that. So that’s all you are to me, you know? An irritated spot on my ass.”

Eisheth stared at her. “You have no such spot.”

“And you have no sense of figures of speech, but it’s okay. I don’t hold that against you. I’d hate to be accused of despising you for something petty like that. Forcibly dissolving people like they’re nothing more than LCL balloons? That I do hold against you.”

The overhead light creaked as the suspending cable rubbed against its mounting. The beam left Eisheth, and she disappeared in darkness, which put Nozomi on edge. Knowing her, she could reappear anywhere, and at any time—usually a time and place most calculated to unsettle her prey. Nozomi turned the locker door to follow the path of the sweeping light, to no avail.

“You’re on edge,” said Eisheth, invisible to Nozomi’s eyes. “You watch for threats even from the safety of your mind. It’s very human of you—to be afraid.”

“Yeah, well, you know how evolution goes. If twenty thousand years ago, two monkeys were walking the African savanna and spotted a lion, and one of them ran and the other didn’t, well, we might just be descended from the monkey who decided to run.”

The beam of light swept along the row of lockers behind Nozomi, and for a few moments, Eisheth was lit up again. The light continued to precess, blanketing Eisheth in light and then shrouding her in shadow, each phase lasting a few seconds as she spoke.

“It’s a necessity for you, yes, because your flesh is weak. All Lilin are weak. Even my children are weak, but my strength sustains them. The bodies of Lilin take damage and fail. Katsuragi Misato knows this. Lilith knows this. They use Eva to fight because they know this, but they can’t bring themselves to trust what they can’t talk to, what they think isn’t alive. That’s why they use you. Eva have no weaknesses on their own; you are Eva’s weakness, Horaki Nozomi. You tire. You feel pain. You can fail. Your flesh will fail you. It’s already started to. Look for yourself.”

Puzzled, Nozomi turned the mirror away from Eisheth and to herself. The girl in the reflection was no more than a withered shell of a person: her hair had thinned, showing a reddened, irritated scalp; her lips were cracked and shriveled; and her eyes seemed altogether too big for her shrunken and bony face. Her hands were skeletal, and her skin seemed to sag around the bones.

Wham! Nozomi slammed the locker shut. “That’s not me!” she cried. “I’m still healthy; I’m still alive!”
“No, Horaki Nozomi. You’re killing yourself. You will kill yourself or someone else piloting Eva. My children—and the others’—are too many. If not your body, then your mind will slowly break instead. It is breaking, isn’t it?”

Nozomi spun around, but Eisheth wasn’t there. Though the overhead light swept across the darkness, Nozomi couldn’t see her, and the creature’s voice—its imitation of Hikari—echoed through the whole room. Locating her by ear was impossible.

“Come with me to the sea,” said Eisheth. “Your flesh will never fail you there.”

“Don’t even pretend to think you can convince me to give up and join you!” Nozomi shouted at the darkness.

No answer. There were footsteps, but Nozomi couldn’t hope to locate them. Was Eisheth walking just behind the light, sticking to shadow in the place where she could always hide herself? Nozomi wasn’t sure, but she put her back to the wall of lockers behind her. All else being equal, it seemed unlikely Eisheth would pop out of one of those metal cages to surprise her.

“If you can’t be persuaded,” Eisheth said at last, “then you’ll be broken, and I will break you. I will not let the poison of reckless individuality taint paradise.”

The footsteps ceased, and the lights came on full brightness in the locker room. Nozomi’s eyes stung from the sudden change in light level, and she rubbed at them gingerly. With only one eye open, she checked down both ends of the row of lockers, but Eisheth was nowhere to be found. Instead, a voiceless, penetrating thought entered her mind, one too stubborn to be shut out.

‘The only choice you have is how many others I must break to get to you.’

Nozomi turned, and the five-eyed giant’s gaze transfixed her. Gone was the illusion of Hikari. The muscular, ill-proportioned giant stared her down instead. It was smaller than a giant really ought to be—man-sized rather than building-sized. But the image was no less striking. The bony mask on its face had markings directly etched into its structure, and the giant’s five beady eyes focused on Nozomi, convergent in their gazes.

The giant approached her, and Nozomi’s legs felt as heavy as lead. The white, pasty body of the creature rippled. It was inviting her.

It wanted to merge with her.

And all Nozomi could do was stare at those five eyes, uncertain which to look at and which to avoid, until the mask enveloped all her view.

That mask stayed in her mind, and she captured it well in her drawing pad. Every slit for an eye, every irregular, bubble-like feature near the top, and even the five-sided shape that connected all the eyes. In her waking moments, Nozomi couldn’t help but stare back at that sketch, as if she could somehow glare at Eisheth and force the giant into submission.

But this stubborn defiance seldom turned out well. For one, it’s hard to win a staring contest with a pencil sketch. More than that, Nozomi had the nagging feeling that, whenever she looked away from the sketch and back again, the eyes were pointed in different directions than she remembered.
“Is something wrong?”

And that tended to distract her from reality.

In a spacious, well-furnished office sat Nozomi, cradling her drawing pad with her knees. Across from her was the occupant of this office, who labored over myriad reports, graphs, and figures, which were scattered over the fine, hand-crafted cherry desk.

“When I was studying with my tutor, before I came to Tōkyō-3, I liked to organize things,” said Shinji. “It helped relieve boredom, and I kept telling myself that I would be saving time for later, to do something I enjoyed. I didn’t have any idea what that would be, but the organizing became habit.” Shinji gestured to the piles and piles of papers on his desk. “But now, I’m constantly surprised by what new data and intelligence is shared with me. I think I’m on my fourth time trying to get everything sorted.”

Nozomi stared.

“I’m sorry, I thought—” He smiled sheepishly, chiding himself. “I thought the mess could be distracting.”

Nozomi shook her head. “Only thing doing any distracting is Five Eyes,” she said, and she turned the pad around to show Shinji the sketch.

Leaning forward, Shinji peered at the drawing. “Ah, that’s—that’s very accurate,” he remarked. “You do, uh, a good job capturing your subjects. Keep it up?”

“Right now, I think I’m doing too well.” Nozomi flipped pad over and thumbed through sketches until she found a blank page. “It’s nice to be able to capture real life, but I get the feeling the time I spend on my own probably shouldn’t be wasted dwelling on reality.”

“Don’t feel bad. I used to have dreams like yours. They were hard to shake.”

“What were they about?” asked Nozomi.

“Anything. Everything. Sometimes, Ayanami would be there. Sometimes Asuka, or Misato-san. They were conversations I really didn’t want to have, but I needed them.”

Nozomi looked back to her sketchbook. “Don’t think I need any of this right now. Did they ever go away?”

Shinji shook his head.

“So you just have to live with them,” Nozomi concluded. “There’s no getting away.”

Shinji opened his mouth for a moment, but then he frowned, and he sat back in his chair, thinking intently. That was one of the things Nozomi liked about Shinji: he took most matters seriously, treating them with thoughtfulness and respect. That was his public persona, at least. Privately, he could show well enough that he was still just a kid, only two years her senior. One time, at dinner with Shinji and Asuka, Nozomi caught Shinji switching rice bowls when Asuka wasn’t looking—a sneaky retaliation for Asuka stealing food from his plate a few moments before. But when it came to issue of real gravity, Shinji put on a different face: the one that was always polite, always apologizing, and always dedicated to fulfilling his obligations.

For those reasons (and her own general boredom with life on the base), Nozomi made a point to visit Shinji in his office for an hour or two each day when she wasn’t out on a mission. According to the
meticulous reports Shinji filed with Misato, their usual topics of conversation included news of the war, analysis of the most recent mission, and other practical matters.

That’s what the reports said, anyway. Officially. Shinji was no master tactician, though, and the prospect of whole countries and continents being overrun by Eisheth’s children didn’t make for good casual conversation. More often than not, the topic turned to coping with the stress of being an Eva pilot. In that, Shinji had plenty of experience living with that stress from day to day, as well as what it meant to succumb to it. No doubt that was why his brow had creased so as he pondered Nozomi’s remark. He knew too well that his words could shape her outlook for days to come.

“There is one way,” he said at last. “You can put those thoughts and memories out of mind. It’s good to have something to take your mind off things when the missions are over. I don’t think I had anything nearly as crucial to me as that drawing pad of yours is to you.”

“What did you have?” asked Nozomi.

Shinji sighed. “Schoolwork? I guess there is some value in having a different kind of work to distract you. There were other things, of course. Asuka, Misato-san, and I were living together at the time, so we would spend the evenings watching TV while working. One time, Asuka and I were home alone, and we—”

A look of horror crossed his face, and he scrambled to collect himself.

“So that was your first time,” Nozomi concluded.

“Well, yes, but—I mean, no! Not that!”

Nozomi raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway,” he went on, “there were other things to do back then. I used to play the cello in my spare time. I’d been practicing ever since I was quite young. I don’t think I had any great talent for it—I still don’t—but it helped me think about something other than what was on my mind, so for that, I think it was good for me. I’m sure it’s nothing compared to what you’re able to do with your artwork, though.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Nozomi shrugged. “The nice thing about music is that you can play a piece over that you know well and not have to think about it. I guess I could draw something I’ve drawn before, but what’s got me blocked is that I don’t feel inspired. I can’t imagine anything new, anything exciting to put down on my pad. All this…” She held up her pad. “Most of it is just stuff that’s around me that I don’t feel anything for.”

“It’s life on this base,” said Shinji. “It’s suffocating. In that sense, you have it harder than I did. I still went to school. I saw friends there—Tōji and Kensuke. I think things only got really bad when they had to leave the city for their safety.”

“I remember that. Hikari was just devastated; we lost a lot. I saved a couple of my sketchbooks, but that’s all.”

Shinji nodded. “That’s what we need to do for you.”

“Do what, go rescue art from our apartment? We got most of what was ours when SDF moved us out.”

“I mean we should do things. You and me and Asuka—that would be a start, but maybe we can get a few visitors to the base. Friends of yours from your neighborhood or your school. Tōji’s been by a few times, to see your sister.”
Nozomi huffed to herself, shaking her head with a slight, but knowing smile. “And she practically walks on air when she’s around him. Those visits have definitely done something for her mood. But Hikari was always good at making friends. Everybody likes her, even when she’s in her full class-rep mode. She cares about people.”

“You care about people, too, or you wouldn’t be a pilot.”

“That’s not the same. I mean she likes to hear about every little thing a person did since the last time she saw them, even if that was just a day ago, just a few hours ago. I tried that for a little while, but when people ask you in return and all you can say is that you were slaving over a sketchbook, trying to figure out the fine detail necessary to draw a stream of ants as they take apart an apple core and bring the pieces back to the nest, people tend to look at you a little funny. Humanity as a whole? Civilization? I think that’s all great. We make our mark on the world, on the universe itself, and that’s good. But I don’t get along well with most people.”

“I like to think you and I get along well enough.”

Nozomi rolled her eyes, amused. “You’re not most people. I thought you’d have figured that out by now.”

“You might be right,” Shinji conceded. He pulled out a file folder from his desk. “That said, I know there are other kids your age that you spend time with, aren’t there?”

“I think we’ve established that looking at my file while you’re talking to me is cheating,” said Nozomi. “Unless I get a file on you, too.”

“Asuka tells me I play by the rules too much,” he said in a good-natured tone. “Let me see here. Yes, that’s right, you were in Art Club, weren’t you? Didn’t you have some friends there?”

One would think so, but Nozomi found the reality of Art Club a touch more complicated. Even considering her usual preference to work alone, Nozomi had been surprised by the club’s tendency to splinter into solo projects. Despite the club leader’s best efforts to hold school exhibitions or sell reproductions of the club’s work, trying to get any kind of collective effort together was like stripping the bristles from a brush, one bristle at a time.

“Well, it’s not healthy to isolate yourself,” said Shinji. “Trust me: I know that pretty well.”

“I’ve got my family. I’ll be fine.”

“Who in your family did you talk to when you were so exhausted that you couldn’t sleep, couldn’t draw, and couldn’t tell the difference between Vietnamese forest and two military vehicles?”

Nozomi looked at him sidelong. “Have you been taking lessons from the Colonel for that line?”

“No.” He pursed his lips, thinking better of himself. “Well, maybe a little. And I could be wrong. I’m often wrong. When I was asked to be a pilot, I did it to please my father. I told you that, right? I kept pushing myself in the hope, however dim it was, that Father would recognize what I’d done for him. In some ways, I’m still waiting for him to come back and say those words, but I know he might not. It’s his choice.

“But you and I are different, and I’m glad for that. Really, I am. You don’t pilot for any one person the way I did. That’s a good thing.”

“I don’t know if that’s really any better or worse,” said Nozomi. “Like you said, we’re just different people.”
Shinji sat back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. Resting his elbows on the armrests, he tented his hands and tapped his forefingers together as he considered what she’d said.

“You might be right,” he said finally. “You might be right after all.”

Nozomi knew Shinji wouldn’t leave that matter alone, but she didn’t put much thought into what he might have planned. Since the death of the Eighth Angel outside Hanoi, Eisheth had become even more cautious, attacking targets quickly and retreating before an airlift could deliver Nozomi to her destination. While this gave Nozomi something of a reprieve, she couldn’t really take advantage of the downtime to rest. Her naps were short and unsatisfying. She stared at her sketchbook for hours, and even when she could muster the will to put a few lines down on the pages, she found herself questioning the proportions, the arrangement of the lines, their thickness, and so on. It was like her brain had lost the ability to see a human face as a whole, instead focusing on all of the individual pieces. So Nozomi was reduced to flipping through pages of her old sketches, trying to recapture what was missing.

It was one such day, as she lay in bed looking over her old art, that the wall-mounted phone rang. To her surprise, Nozomi welcomed the distraction. In the Eva, she had a sense of purpose and direction. She didn’t have to be creative. She just had to get the job done.

“Am I needed?” she asked as she picked up.

“Not where you think,” said Shinji. “Meet me at the security station on Level 2. You have a visitor.”

“Who?”

“You’ll see.”

Nozomi narrowed her eyes. “You orchestrated this, didn’t you.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re a terrible liar, Ikari.”

“I can live with that if you meet me on Level 2.”

Well, when he put it like that, how could she refuse? So once again, Nozomi put on her shoes to trample about the corridors of the mountain base, sketchbook in hand. While Shinji’s involvement didn’t surprise her, Nozomi did have to strain to think who he might’ve asked to visit her. There weren’t any obvious candidates, but someone who’d watched her might draw some erroneous conclusions. After all, before Nozomi had been chosen, Misato had had some surveillance on her, as well as a thorough background investigation—not that middle school girls tended to have a lot of background if they hadn’t committed crimes. So the question remained: who in Nozomi’s life had Shinji chosen?

But the answer to that question wasn’t forthcoming, and Nozomi had other obstacles to worry about. The way up to the surface was somewhat tricky. The Russians had done great damage to the upper levels of the mountain as they’d broken through the defenses with their N2 weapons. Level 1 was all but annihilated, and the elevators didn’t work above Level 3. Nozomi took the stairs to the security station, passing walls with burn marks and bullet indentations.

“There you are,” said Shinji. “Come inside.”
Inside Nozomi went, eyeing a large bank of monitors with a tangled bundle of cables running from them to the wall. The room had once been office space, but with the destruction of Level 1, the security station had to be hastily reassembled. Clearly it was still a little rough around the edges, but they had all the essentials working. There were cameras watching the elevators, sensitive corridors around the Eva’s cage, and even the civilians’ mess hall as they feasted on pre-packaged rations.

“What am I looking for?” asked Nozomi.

“Here.” Shinji pointed out a corner monitor, which showed a single room with a large mirror taking up most of the wall. A boy paced in the room, appearing to chat with one of the guards. “Corporal, can you put on audio for this room?” asked Shinji.

One of the security people obliged, and the sound came on.

“You know, I’ve never been impressed with SDF uniforms,” said the boy. “They seem to me like cheap imitations of American military uniforms. We’re Japanese, aren’t we? Shouldn’t we have something unique for ourselves? You know the first thing I’d do? Get you out of those green uniforms. Don’t you think they’re hideous? I’d go for something brown, personally. Dark brown and dignified. That’s unique.”

Nozomi would’ve known that voice anywhere. It chattered away like a machine gun, and each word carried with it the same piercing quality to it: confident and all-knowing. Such an attitude could only come from her Art Club leader, Sasaki.

Nozomi turned to Shinji, incredulous. “You brought him here?”

“It took some effort to track him down,” Shinji explained. “There were records of his family being taken to the South Tōkyō-2 refugee camp, but it turned out they’d actually moved on to Suwa instead. If not for that, I would’ve had him here a day or two ago.”

That much didn’t surprise Nozomi; there were camps all over the countryside as people abandoned the city in fear. Tōkyō-2 had been Eisheth’s prime target for some time, and while she’d shied away from attacking Nozomi and the city head-on, popular sentiment was that it was only a matter of time until the Zenunim came crawling through the city streets. Those who had the means to do so got out of town and took up residence with family in remote villages. For the rest of the city’s inhabitants, there were some loosely organized refugee camps set up nearby. The conditions, by all accounts, were not spectacular, however, and just thinking that some of her classmates could be staying in such places gave Nozomi a sinking feeling.

“Why did you bring him here?” she asked Shinji. “We’re not particularly close.”

“You’ve been having trouble with your art. I thought having another artist around might help.”

Nozomi shook her head. “He does ancient, archaic stuff. Fan painting and calligraphy. Not saying there’s anything wrong with that, but we do totally different things.”

“Ah, is that so.” Shinji frowned, rubbing his temple in thought. “I’m sorry. I may have made a mistake then. Well, we can show Sasaki-kun back home. That’s not too much trouble. I’ll just go apologize to him for bringing him here on my mistake.”

Nozomi looked to the monitor, where Sasaki paced about some more, scrutinizing the metal chair and the table construction. He was, without a doubt, someone who could find something smart-sounding to say about anything, especially things he knew nothing about. But he did know some things about art, and it wasn’t entirely true that he would be unhelpful to her. Sasaki liked going to
the younger artists in the club and giving them tips, something Nozomi had found irritating, but she was stuck, wasn’t she? This was no time to be stubborn.

“Corporal, will you walk with me to the interview room?” asked Shinji.

“No, wait!” Nozomi interjected. “That’s all right. I’m sure we can work on a few things.”

“Are you sure?”

Nozomi nodded.

“In that case, Corporal, will you escort Nozomi-chan to the interview room instead?”

A pair of SDF members led Nozomi down the hall, giving Nozomi all too much time to think about what she would say to this boy. If she outright asked for his help, she might never hear the end of his suggestions and ideas. Then again, she might not need to ask at all. Shinji had talked to Sasaki already, so in all likelihood, the damage was already done. There was nothing left to do but let the SDF guards open the door to the interview room, where Sasaki was drumming his fingers on the back of a chair.

“Oh, there you are, Horaki,” he said, nodding. “You know, you look a bit thin.”

“Nice to see you, too, Sasaki,” she said dryly. “Are you done talking this soldier’s ear off?”

Sasaki sized up the SDF guard in the room. In truth, Sasaki didn’t look half as unusual as he acted or spoke. He was taller than Nozomi, but only by a few centimeters. He had brown hair, rather light in color, more like Hikari’s than Shinji’s. What stood out about him was his eyes—amber in hue, like the sap from an ancient tree.

With a final squint, Sasaki finished eyeing the guard. “I don’t think I’m finished,” he said. “The guard clearly still has both his ears. Can’t you see that?”

Nozomi sighed, shaking her head. If he kept trying to be clever like that, she would get a massive headache, and she was too tired to deal with that.

“You want me to do what?”

“Give me a tour. I’m a guest here, right?”

“So am I.”

“You’re less of a guest than me.”

The boy always had to have the last word. “All right,” said Nozomi. “Come on. But you’re not going to see anything super classified, you know.”

“You mean the girl who’s the Eva pilot can’t pull a few strings?”

Nozomi sighed again, but thankfully, Sasaki seemed to know better than to push any harder. Of all the people Shinji could ask, he had to go and find Sasaki. Well, there was a reason Sasaki was the leader of the Art Club. He had a persistent, invasive personality. He was extremely aggressive about recruiting, particularly in mooching members from the Calligraphy Club. “Why limit your horizons to just calligraphy?” he’d argued once. “You can do that in our Art Club and more, so why not join
As if the idea that someone might only want to do calligraphy was utterly alien to him.

Still, as much as Nozomi found his personality off-putting, she tried mightily to keep things in perspective. For someone who’d taken on the responsibility of keeping the club afloat, Sasaki was very well-suited to the task. He was tireless in his pursuits, and as such, Nozomi reminded herself that people like Sasaki could do good things in the world, things that she herself would never be inclined to do. That the two of them didn’t get along so well was less a comment on his personal flaws as a natural result of their incompatible personalities.

“So, Horaki, do you have one of those skintight suits with you? I would’ve liked to see one of those.”

As Nozomi gritted her teeth in horror, the thought occurred to her that she might well be justified in seeing more flaws in him after all.

“I always thought Ikari-san’s was the best,” Sasaki went on. “The two-tone look is just more visually interesting. Didn’t you think so, too?”

At that, Nozomi relaxed. Perhaps that was Sasaki’s one redeeming quality: while he could be brash and insensitive towards people, there were certain lines he knew better than to cross. To him, Nozomi was another artist, like he was. That she was a girl as well was mere happenstance to him, no more remarkable than or worthy of scrutiny than any of her male peers.

And thus far, despite Sasaki’s rather presumptuous insistence that she give him a tour, Nozomi had found the boy’s company a passable distraction. He nitpicked and criticized anything and everything in his sight: from the color of the lights and how it might affect mood to the geometry of the walkways and corridors and whether it conformed to his particular visual aesthetics. Nozomi didn’t see the point in criticizing details he was powerless to change, but Sasaki disagreed.

“I know I can’t just tell SDF they need to warm up the color of their lights,” he said. “But I can look around and see how it makes people look sadder just to be under it. I mean, look at you, Horaki. You not the most happy-go-lucky person in the world, but you look way, way sadder under this light than you would at school, or in the sun.”

Nozomi stopped in her tracks, her mouth agape. Horaki kept walking for a couple steps before he even noticed.

“What?” he asked.

“You think I look sad?”

“A little, yeah. Nothing I’d really worry about. It’s just the lights, though. I’m pretty sure of that.”

*I’m not,* thought Nozomi.

“You know, you didn’t answer my question,” he said. “You’ve gotta tell me about your suit. It’s green, right? Like the Eva?”

Nozomi blinked. How had the conversation turned back to that so quickly? “Green and black,” she replied, catching up. “There’s a little white trim, too, but you can’t see it. That’s all in the restricted area. Well, more restricted than these first few levels, anyway.”

“That’s too bad,” he mused. “You must have a sketch of it, though, right?”
His eyes went to the sketchbook that was tucked under Nozomi’s arm, but she shied away.

“You were always sketching things in club,” he said wistfully. “Miike’s missed you a lot. She said your creativity inspired her. I didn’t see why. With me still around, she could get all the creativity she wanted by osmosis, plus my words of wisdom from Sōtatsu! ‘Paint a character of something you strive toward for the day, once in the morning and once at night. If you improve your technique, then you’re one step closer to your goal.’ Tell me, who but Sōtatsu could’ve come up with something so brilliant?”

Nozomi was pretty sure that seventeenth century artist hadn’t come up with it, either. It was Sasaki’s habit to come up with off-the-wall ideas and techniques and attribute them to Sōtatsu to make them seem legitimate or wise.

“Are you saying you couldn’t have come up with it?” she countered.

“Well, perhaps I could’ve, but Sōtatsu thought of it first.”

Perhaps it was the only way he could be modest. Whatever the reason, Nozomi wasn’t interested in deciphering it, or in puzzling out Sasaki’s way of trying to help her. “Look,” she said. “I know Ikari told you I’m having trouble with my work. Why don’t you go ahead and tell me what bright idea ‘Sōtatsu’ had for this kind of problem? Do you think yourself so great and knowledgeable? Do you think you can solve me like some project or puzzle you know the answer to with total certainty? Get real, Sasaki. You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Sasaki frowned like a stern father figure chiding his daughter. “Come on, Horaki. I would never give out advice about artist’s block like there’s only one good way to get around it. Everyone’s different. We all have our own ways of doing things, of making art. I mean, look at you and your sketchbook. You do things with pencil and paper that I didn’t even think were possible. It’s like the real, living world can be captured and put on those pages when you’re the one who’s doing it. It’s amazing.”

That was hardly the reaction she’d expected. She’d ripped into him, and here he was acting calm, even complimenting her. The boy made no sense, and Nozomi fell back on the only reaction she could muster. “You come off insincere when you try to flatter people,” she said.

“It’s not empty flattery if it’s true. I’m not saying I can’t do something just as spectacular with my painting—”

“Of course.”

“…but I am saying that I won’t pretend to know what will inspire you. I don’t know what that is. Still, I know some things you can try. They might help; they might not. I can’t guarantee anything.”

Nozomi pursed her lips, considering the offer. Sasaki was right to downplay his help. Painting and drawing had some common principles, but a painter had to consider dry, practical things like what kind of paint he used, or what material he painted on. Someone like Nozomi, who preferred to sketch and draw, had similar issues with pencils, but in practice, the decisions they made required completely separate knowledge to make.

But though she’d already rejected his help out of hand, he’d persisted. And not without reason. Looking at a canvass and not being able to see a painting come to life on it was a horrible, empty feeling. Sasaki had gone through such a block before, and Nozomi was feeling the same way about her sketchbook. As often as she’d used it to remember important moments of her life, there was so much she preferred to forget now. Each battle with an Angel took a little more from her.
And she was tired of that. She needed to build herself back up, and though Sasaki was a flawed person and a flawed artist, she wasn’t too proud to hear him out.

“All right,” she said. “I’m listening.”

Sasaki didn’t disappoint. For the rest of their time together that day, Sasaki rattled off all manner of unusual tricks for breaking through an artist’s creative block—from drugs-induced meditations to fasting to non-stop exercise meant to work the body and mind to exhaustion, so that all the intellectual cruft that had accumulated with time could be cleared away.

Sasaki couldn’t say too long, though. As evening neared, a pair of SDF members found Nozomi and Sasaki on Level 10, wandering aimlessly as they talked about pencil diameters and art exhibits crafted from trash on Mount Everest. If nothing else, Sasaki was knowledgeable about the art world, more tuned into it than Nozomi was, and she could appreciate that insight from him. Sasaki, too, seemed to enjoy her tales of piloting Eva and her sketches of the Angels. They were, in his words, “a harsh dose of reality,” which he thought Nozomi excelled at capturing.

“But I hope you’re able to lose yourself in something else,” he went on. “I really do, Horaki. You’re too good an artist not to find something like that. You’ll be fine. But on the off-chance you need more insight from yours truly, I gave Ikari-san my contact information, as long as the phones to the camp stay working.”

“Nozomi rolled her eyes, but this time she managed a smile to go with it. “I’m sure you’ll try, Sasaki.”

He smirked, and with that, he went with the SDF guards to the elevator and back up the mountain. When he was gone, Nozomi took out one of her pencils and flipped to a blank page on her sketchpad. If nothing else, she could render that sly smile faithfully, and for once, she viewed his overbearing confidence not with disdain, but with a tinge of warmth instead.

Based on Sasaki’s advice, Nozomi tried a new approach to her artwork. So often, she’d prioritized faithful recreations of what she’d seen in life, but Sasaki had pointed out something quite sensible: “An artist has the freedom to embellish what he sees,” Sasaki had explained. “Maybe the things you’ve seen lately aren’t that inspiring, but you can make them that way. You can make the skies brighter, you know? You can put smiles on people’s faces when there’d only been worry. You can paint a picture of humanity beating these aliens, even though it hasn’t come true yet, because with those images, people might be inspired to strive toward that goal.”

Of course, there was no guarantee that any one work of art could lift people up so high, but Nozomi was willing to give it a chance. She could draw something for other people, with an audience in mind, just as she’d done for Shinji once.

With that idea in mind, Nozomi found a small breakthrough, enough to get her drawing something new and interesting. She chose the city of Hanoi as her subject, but instead of the damaged city that was the site of a battle, she decided to draw it pristine and intact. It was the way that city should’ve been, with all its colorful undulating roofs, with traders and merchants haggling in the streets, with office workers making their way home on bicycles and scooters. It was a big project, for the city had
stretched out below her eyes—below the Eva’s eyes—for miles and miles, but she worked on it diligently, one street at a time, whenever she had the chance to sit down and draw.

“It’s good to see you sketching again,” Asuka said one day. “You seem more like yourself lately.”

Nozomi nodded, but her eyes stayed on the sketchbook. There were some features of the river that she wanted to finish, and there was no telling when she would be interrupted. Out of the blue, Misato had called her, Asuka, and Shinji to the conference room. Nozomi expected some kind of tactical assessment, but to that point, Misato was running late, leaving the three of them to amuse themselves.

Shinji peered at Nozomi’s drawing. “It’s very good,” he said. “I’m glad Sasaki-kun was able to give you some help.”

A sly look came to Asuka’s eye. “Oh, it had to do with that boy, did it?”

“Please,” said Nozomi, dismissive. “The last thing you want to do with him is give him credit. If you tell him about this, he’ll start claiming he’s a co-artist on the piece, or that he should be.”

“You’re just being stubborn,” said Asuka. “It’s no crime to say that he helped you out. I’ve been there before.”

Nozomi frowned. Really, that wasn’t it. Had Sasaki helped her? Sure, a little bit. That didn’t mean he needed to be encouraged, or that Shinji should invite him to the base again for future collaborations. She’d gotten over the hump. If she had problems in the future with her art, then maybe she would give Sasaki a call.

That said, it might be nice to have him visit just to get him away from that refugee camp for a while.

The door to the conference room opened, and with a briefcase in hand, Misato made for the projector without breaking stride. “Good morning,” she said. “Sorry I’m late; was trying to mediate a meeting between our brass and the Chinese. Regrettably, we don’t want to use the Eva to help them, and they don’t want our help anyway.” She sighed. “Stubbornness will be the end of humanity, I tell you. Anyway, let me show you what’s going on.”

Misato set a laptop beside the projector. Hyūga wasn’t far behind, and he took care of the display cables and power while Misato got started.

“In just a second, Makoto-kun will have a map of locations Eisheth has attacked in recent days. We think we’ve discovered a basic pattern to her attacks, and we’re hoping to thwart it with some preemptive positioning.”

Asuka leaned forward. “You’re going to deploy Nozomi somewhere, even before an attack is in progress? It’s risky. She could end up way out of the way of where Eisheth’s going.”

“That is a risk,” Misato admitted, “but we have little choice, I think.”

The projector lit up, and an image faded into view. As Misato had said, it was a map, with numerous cities on the mainland highlighted in red. Mostly, they were Chinese and Russian towns, and an extensive legend pointed out the strategic significance of each city: military, transportation, industry, agriculture, or something else. In that, Eisheth seemed to be an equal-opportunity offender, and Nozomi couldn’t discern a strong pattern to the attacks.

“I know, you don’t see much; it’s just a whole bunch of red on a map,” said Misato. “I didn’t realize it either until I looked at the bigger picture. Makoto-kun, if you would?”
The image zoomed out gradually, and sure enough, the pattern became clear. Eisheth’s attacks had been concentrated mostly on coastal areas, with a strong grouping near the Asian coast around Japan. Further away from the home islands, Eisheth’s attacks had focused on progressively larger and more important cities: capitals and other seats of government, like Hanoi. At those longer distances, only one or two cities had been attacked per country, not enough to cripple whole nations, but enough to keep them distracted with their own problems.

“She’s isolating us,” said Nozomi. “She’s left Japan untouched so far; now, she’s attacked everyone around us, putting all the other countries on the defensive, so when she comes for us, everyone else will be too afraid for themselves to give us support.”

Misato winked. “Got it in one. You just figured out in one minute what took a room full of generals and their adjutants weeks to realize. Of course, it’s always easier to find a pattern when you know it must be there. Now that we know, we can try to counter it. Eisheth has focused the bulk of her efforts on the Russians and the Chinese, knowing they would be less inclined to accept our assistance. There are two major powers left in our cozy corner of East Asia: the North and South Koreans. Now, no one I know is terribly confident Kim the Younger will welcome a Japanese-controlled Eva into his country, but the South Koreans are more amenable to the idea, and so far, they’ve not taken a lot of heat from Eisheth. That, we think, is about to change. Makoto-kun?!”

Hyūga rose, and the image on the projector screen changed to some kind of false-color map. The lands of East Asia were dark, but the oceans ran red with density gradients and currents.

“This map tells us the concentration of LCL by volume in seawater,” he said. “While the Zenunim have the uncanny ability to reconstitute themselves from LCL, they still need enough LCL to put together an army. Essentially, their ability to travel through the ocean is limited by how fast they can move LCL in high enough concentrations. There’s a distinct hot spot of LCL near Seoul, much denser than the surrounding ocean. We think it’s clear that Eisheth is planning an invasion of the Korean Peninsula. As we speak, the South Koreans are improvising facilities to house Unit-14 and make repairs, if it turns out necessary to keep you there for a prolonged campaign.”

“Let’s not worry about the long term,” said Misato. “We’ll see what happens if we can get there before Eisheth gets wind of this and launches her attack. We’ll fly the Eva out as soon as a plane can be made ready. Shinji-kun, I won’t be asking anything new of you, but Asuka, I might ask you to take turns in the control room with Shinji-kun to make sure we always have a pilot on the line ready to guide Nozomi in battle.”

“No, not worried!” said Asuka. “Even if it’s just support, it’s good to have a piece of the action for a change.”

Nozomi turned her eyes back to her sketchpad with a yawn. How easy it was for Asuka to get excited. Nozomi saw only an unfinished drawing that she would have to leave behind.

As she’d done so many times before, Nozomi went about transforming herself from solitary middle-school artist to Eva pilot. She stripped off her clothes and donned the plugsuit and left her sketchpad in her locker for safe keeping. She took her position in the entry plug and waited listlessly while technicians hitched her up for flight. She coasted over a bloody red ocean, with only intermittent whitecaps giving features to the flat, glassy sea. At least it was daylight; that helped her stay awake. She watched the clouds race across the horizon, going places she could hardly dream of.

Perhaps it would be good to spend time in South Korea, to see a new place and meet new people. Life in the mountain could be very repetitive, and the lack of natural sunlight might be affecting her
mind—as if sleep deprivation and stress weren’t doing that already. Maybe all she needed to wake up was some kimchi soup; surely there was plenty of that where she was going.

WHAM!

The plane rocked and lurched, and Nozomi tumbled out of the pilot’s seat. “Hey, hey!” she cried. “Can anyone hear me? Something just happened out here!”

A communications window opened to the left of the pilot’s chair, but the contents were fraught with static. Shinji’s concerned face flickered in and out of view. “What’s happened?” asked Shinji, his voice distorted and warbling.

“I don’t know!”

“Colonel,” came another crackling voice, a technician’s, “signals detected near Unit-14’s position. I’m reading…Pattern Red? Pattern White? Pattern Green?”

“Make up your mind!” cried Misato. “Which is it?”

Did it matter, really, any which way? Whatever the blood type of the creature, Nozomi knew what her foe must be. She took the controls of the Eva, and ahead of her, over the water, she first glimpsed the enemy: an airborne Angel. Shaped like a delta wing, it was covered in eyes—human-like eyes. Where it flew, it left a trail of pink energy that lingered, thin and solid and reflective, like a ribbon. The Angel maneuvered elegantly, like a stunt pilot at an airshow, with the trailing energy ribbon as a decoration.

But that ribbon was far from harmless. The Angel came about, turned its wingspan perpendicular to the ground, and made straight for Nozomi’s plane.

CRUNCH! Nozomi craned the Eva’s head upward, trying to see, but she couldn’t make out much. There were smoke and debris trailing beneath her, and the craft started losing altitude.

“Thrusters!” cried Shinji.

Yes, yes, she knew where the thrusters were. Hadn’t they been over this? But when she jammed the button to light them up—

“No, wait!” cried a technician. “The flight restraints haven’t released yet!”

Nozomi tumbled and spun, rotating end over end. A piece of aircraft hull, attached to Nozomi by cables, threw off her center of gravity. For the first time, she saw the damage to the airplane as the sky spun past her: cut clean in two, the plane was a flaming hulk that fell to the ocean.

The thruster rockets sputtered out, and Nozomi clawed at the tethering cables, but they were small, light, and elusive. They slipped out of the Eva’s hands, and she fell. LCL sloshed about the entry plug, and it was all she could do to hang on to the controls.

SPLASH!

They said LCL would cushion her against sudden movements, but there was only so much that could be done when a creature the size of a building landed suddenly from several thousand feet up. The red ocean water was no more hospitable than a bed of solid rock, and Nozomi’s body hurtled out of the pilot’s chair, striking the entry plug wall with a dull thud.

“Nozomi-chan!” Shinji’s voice was tense and pleading, despite distortions and static. “Nozomi-chan,
are you with us?”

Nozomi blinked, and she put a hand to the back of her head, cradling a bump from the impact. “I’m not dead yet,” she said flatly. “Maybe tomorrow, but not today.”

“Get back to the controls! The Angel is coming!”

She climbed back into the pilot’s seat. Her eyes wouldn’t come to complete focus, and she blinked repeatedly to try to clear them. Her plugsuit’s gloves were stained with traces of blood, but the LCL all around her slowly ate at the blood drops, dissolving them.

*That would make a really nice sketch*, thought Nozomi.

But there was no time for that. She shook her head to push back the fog in her mind, the throbbing pain in her head, and the aches and pains that made themselves known throughout her body. She looked out with the Eva’s eyes. She was sinking. The Eva was sinking, thanks in part to the piece of aircraft hull that was still attached to her back. She took the cables in hand and guided them to the Eva’s mouth. She might not have been able to break them with her hands, but jaws that could rip flesh from a whale were more than up to the task. The Eva’s teeth snapped the cables, and the section of hull floated away, and Nozomi’s gaze followed it.

“Nozomi-chan!”

Nozomi shut her eyes tight, shaking off her disorientation. “Sorry. I think I need to get out of here, right? Before I sink to the bottom of the ocean?”

“Might be a good idea,” said Shinji.

“Where’s the Angel?”

“Circling overhead.”

Then she would have to come out and attack all at once. To do that, Nozomi drew the Eva’s prog knife and lit the booster thrusters. A stream of bubbles came out from below, but the push of the rockets was real. Good thing Misato had had the foresight to anticipate an underwater battle. Nozomi had to wonder just what else they were insane enough to prepare for. Zero-G combat in Earth orbit? Hand-to-hand battles in the photosphere of the sun? Maneuvers in the lava of an active volcano?

Amusing as those thoughts were, the imminent battle took Nozomi’s attention again. Through the red ocean rose Nozomi and Unit-14. The view above grew brighter with each passing meter of water, and Nozomi raised the prog knife overhead. The tip of the blade cut through the ocean surface, and Nozomi flew with it. She zoomed toward the many-eyed flying Angel, turning the whole of the Eva into a rocket-propelled spear.

WHAM! She smashed into a pink energy ribbon, a supernatural, narrow barrier that somehow hovered in midair until it faded away. Nozomi’s rockets shot her away, out of control and tumbling, but some auxiliary thrusters on her hands and ankles helped her steady herself.

“That is just not fair!” she muttered. “This is blatantly against the laws of physics!”

Shinji sighed sympathetically. “Tell that to them.”

She would, with the tip of that knife if she had to. Nozomi flew after the airborne Angel, but the creature was speedy and elusive. It turned at right angles on a dime, and its energy ribbons put constant obstacles in Nozomi’s path.
“Goldenrod, Goldenrod, this is Violet Six,” said Misato. “You are authorized to fire. Fire, fire, fire!”

A pair of fighter jets zipped overhead. They came around, leaving white contrails from their wingtips, and deployed two missiles bound for the Angel.

KA-PAM, PAM! Two fireballs erupted, but they were blocked and held at bay thanks to the Angel’s AT-field. The explosions did little damage (if any at all), but they served a vital purpose: a distraction, something to make the Angel hold still while Nozomi closed in.

SCREECH!

She caught the Angel unaware and drove her knife into it’s body with all the force her rockets would muster. She cut one of its hundred eyes in half, and all the others stared at her, their glares angry and penetrating.

But then they looked away from her, to the water, and Nozomi’s heart went cold. She followed the hundred eyes’ gazes to a frothing, restless red ocean.

There was something in the water.

And like Nozomi had done, it wanted to come out.

It was an eyeless, slithering creature, like some kind of water-borne snake. It came at Nozomi with an open mouth, but it had no tongue or throat. Its maw was pure darkness that would extinguish all it swallowed. It leapt from the ocean, jaws wide, and snapped at Unit-14, catching the Eva by the leg. Nozomi pushed the rockets to full power, but that jaw clamped shut and dragged her downward, to the ocean, once again.

SPLASH!

“Structural damage to left knee,” said a technician. “Lateral collateral ligament torn, medial collateral ligament sprained. Cruciate ligaments—”

“You don’t need to tell me!” cried Nozomi through gritted teeth. “I know!”

“Nozomi-chan, fire the foot thrusters,” Shinji instructed. “They might make the Angel release you!”

A jet of air bubbles and rocket exhaust blasted into the Angel’s maw. It cried out with a reverberating wail and let go of the Eva’s leg. It hung limp and weak beneath Nozomi, but she managed enough control of it to break through to the surface again.

“And to think, I haven’t had so much time to swim in years,” she muttered.

“Fourteen, this is Goldenrod,” came a stern, gruff voice over the radio. “You have another hostile Cross approaching, bearing Two-Seven-Zero.”

Nozomi looked to the west, and with the glare of the afternoon sun over it came a third Angel: a four-legged creature with a small central body. Its feet were large and disc-like, and it walked upon water with only a moderate splash on each step.

“Great,” said Nozomi. “What’s that going to do to me?”

The walking Angel’s central body glowed brightly, and a cone-shamed field of energy shot at Nozomi. She crossed her arms, bracing herself as a blast of heat assaulted her. The energy field evaporated the sea water behind her and raised a fog of hot steam.
Three Angels. Three Angels at once, all hoping to rip Unit-14 to shreds. It was profoundly unfair. Shinji had never had to deal with anything so lopsided as this. The odds weren’t just against her; they were nigh-on insurmountable.

“Nozomi.” In the comm window on her left, Misato came into view next to Shinji, looking dour and stern. “The Eva’s at a disadvantage fighting over water, and against three Angels, I have no choice but to order a retreat. We’ll muster every resource we have to protect you and the Eva on your way back to safety. Goldenrod Flight will try to keep you covered; we’ve asked South Korean ships to try to lend aid. Maybe this was Eisheth’s plan all along: force us to be proactive and ambush us in a position of weakness. Who knows. All I know is right now, this is the only play we have left.”

So she would run away. She would run for her life and leave the fighting to others—to those brave SDF pilots up there, who had missiles that could hardly scratch Angels; to South Korean sailors whose ships would be snapped in two like toothpicks at the slightest touch. And that was okay, wasn’t it? How much more could be expected of her? How much more could they ask her to do? To move to Korea and leave family behind? To fight at all hours of the day and night, to exhaustion and paranoia? To feel pains that weren’t her own, to see impossible creatures that had no business existing, and whose haunting cries stuck in her mind?

You will kill yourself or someone else piloting Eva. If not your body, then your mind will slowly break instead. It is breaking, isn’t it?

Nozomi shook her head violently, trying to keep the thoughts and memories out.

You tire. You feel pain. You can fail. Your flesh will fail you. It’s already started to.

And she saw the proof of that in the entry plug. Her blood seeped from her head wound, making strangely beautiful swirls and patterns in the LCL.

She shut her eyes tight. The giant’s words and thoughts had to be resisted. She couldn’t let that false Hikari’s stare ensnare her. “My thoughts are mine,” she insisted. “My thoughts are mine; my thoughts are mine.”

“Nozomi?”

But what were her thoughts? Were they reasonable? Were they coherent? Wasn’t she stuck in a mental fog, as thick and unending as the steam that surrounded her? She’d given so much to be the Eva pilot, and why? She’d never had enthusiasm for the task. She did it because she thought it was right, because they needed someone to do it, and if no one did, then all humanity would be lost.

It was her burden to bear.

It couldn’t be trusted to anyone else.

And if she relinquished that burden, nothing good would come of mankind.

She looked up, through the steam and fog. Fighter jets banked and turned in three pairs. They lobbed bullets and missiles at the Angels, knowing well that these measures would prove futile. They did it for Nozomi. They did it because Misato ordered them to, but they were vulnerable. The airborne Angel flew rings around them, and a jet fighter scraped its wing tip against the deadly energy ribbon. The aquatic, featureless Angel dove deep and came up with its jaw gnashing, trying to catch a plane to crush it whole. The walking Angel followed a fighter and its wingman, and its heat beam melted an oncoming missile before it could do any harm.

How could Misato ask her to leave? How could she condemn these men and women to die? It ran
completely counter to what Nozomi had been trained to do. It was what Eisheth wanted—for her to admit the weakness of humanity, and of flesh itself.

And there was no way she would consider giving in to that fiend. Nozomi lit the thruster rockets on her back and under her feet. Never mind that they were low on fuel; she would have to make do with what she had.

“Nozomi, what are you doing?” Misato demanded. “I’ve given you a direct order.”

“Do I look like I’m in some kind of military?” asked Nozomi. “I’m not retreating. I’m not going to be the one who walked away while these people up here were sent to die.”

“Planes don’t mean a damn thing to the enemy we’re fighting. You think Eisheth wants to take out a few jet fighters? There’s only one main target here, Nozomi, and that’s—”

Nozomi jammed a button on the controls, and the comm window flickered out. She had a job to do. Misato was only distracting her.

WHOOSH! The airborne Angel zipped by, and its energy ribbon cut into the water, suspended without floating or sinking. The ribbon emanated from the Angel’s pointed tip of a head, and thus it used it as a weapon in deadly charges. How could Nozomi attack that thing with any force?

The water beneath her frothed and bubbled, and Nozomi found her answer: perhaps she shouldn’t be the one attacking at all.

She pushed the thrusters to full power, staying low not to expose herself to the energy ribbon. The frothing water followed, and the silhouette of the aquatic Angel grew brighter and brighter. That was good, but she needed to get the airborne Angel’s attention, too.

“Okay,” she said to herself, “take this!”

She hurled the prog knife at the airborne Angel and watched it clink harmlessly off the Angel’s AT-field. The jet fighters fled for the horizon, but the Angel turned, locking its hundred eyes on Unit-14. Misato was right about one thing: the Eva was Eisheth’s real target, and Nozomi was going to use that.

With a sudden burst, the Angel made a beeline for Nozomi, who stood her ground, hovering with thrusters that began to sputter and fail.

“Just hold on,” she muttered, her head bobbing up and down with the Eva’s altitude. “Hold on!”

The airborne Angel banked, and the tip of its nose glowed with a brilliant white hue. Below, the aquatic Angel erupted from the ocean, jaws open to devour Nozomi whole.

But that was exactly what she’d been looking for. Like a gymnast, she flipped end over end and fled. The aquatic Angel gnashed its maw in frustration, just in time to catch the pink energy ribbon instead. The ribbon cut through its AT-field like a cleaver, bisecting the snake-like creature in one go. The two halves fell to the ocean, and the last Nozomi saw of that Angel was its pasty white innards, which were uniform and featureless as much as the outside was, save for one red circular anomaly—the Angel’s core, cleanly bisected.

One down.

KA-WHEE! Nozomi’s skin went aflame in pain. Caught in the withering gaze of the walking Angel, Nozomi fell to the water under the penetrating effects of the Angel’s heat beam. The Eva’s armor felt
like a massive branding iron that never cooled and never relented, and it was all Nozomi could do to use the ocean as protection, letting the Angel vaporize gallons upon gallons of seawater instead.

As long as that walker could blast her with heat from afar, she could do nothing to it. The only solution was to get close enough that she couldn’t be ignored.

On the last remnants of her thruster fuel, Nozomi swam toward the walker, and with one last burst, she leapt atop one of its wide, disc-like feet. The walker’s head glowed with heat and fire, but it dared not attack her and hurt itself in the process.

“That’s right!” cried Nozomi. “Not willing to shoot off your own foot to get me, are you? Are you?”

The Angel lifted its foot off the water, and like a stallion sensing an untrained farmhand circling near it, the Angel kicked violently. Nozomi hurtled through the air, her thrusters weak and ineffective. She was no more than a clay pigeon for the Angel to shoot out of the sky.

KA-WHEE!

And shoot her it did. It bathed her in that oppressive heat, and Nozomi bit down on her lip until she drew blood just to bear it. Even when the heat beam relented, Nozomi was far from safe. The airborne Angel swooped in, and though Nozomi twisted and contorted the Eva’s body to avoid it, she could hardly move fast enough.

“Ahh!” Her right arm went numb, and there was the persistent feeling that someone or something had just ripped the bones right from her shoulder socket. It wasn’t real, of course. She knew that mentally, but her body didn’t know the difference. How could it?

For the third time, Nozomi fell to the water, and this time, there was no getting back up. The thrusters were depleted. On one lame leg and a severed arm, there was no chance of maintaining control in flight anyway. Her sense of the Eva’s body dulled—perhaps Misato had ordered it, but she couldn’t say. The pull went down to a persistent, throbbing ache, and she let those sensations wash over her. There would be no more Angels where she was going. There would be no more haunting visions of them that took up every waking moment, no more visits by a thing that looked like Hikari but clearly wasn’t. She’d given everything she’d been asked for.

And at last, as the red ocean waters went dark around the Eva, as increasing pressure pushed on her from all sides, Nozomi closed her eyes willingly, knowing she could sleep without dreaming for the first time in too long.

There is, of course, a fundamental problem with seeking relief from life’s experience by welcoming death—one typically can’t enjoy that relief, or at the very lease, one can’t know that such enjoyment would come at all. In some circumstances, the unpleasantness that comes in life may be enough to justify this deed, but certainly, a person in chronic pain could never expect to feel release from that pain in death.

So when Nozomi did find herself enjoying the peace and quiet of a dreamless slumber, she knew she wasn’t dead. She couldn’t be. She was keenly aware she was alive and asleep, lucid despite her body’s stillness. She was in a dark place, more a spirit than a human being. Was this Limbo—a state between life and death, heaven and hell—that she would wait in until salvation came for her? Or did she stand on the bank of a dark river, straddling the line between the underworld and Earth? Such were the teachings of Shinto, and Nozomi had to imagine its dark underworld, called Yomi, would be similar to the pitch black place she found herself in.
But there was something else in that place—a sound, a beating. It was the pulse of life, the beating of her heart within her, and if she should wish to return to the world, she should embrace it, shouldn’t she? She should make the beating vibrant and strong, yet Nozomi hesitated. Though she’d made this choice before—when she emerged from the ocean, as so many others had done—this time the situation was different. The last she remembered, she’d been sinking into the red ocean. Surely the pressure had started crushing the Eva, and her entry plug along with it. Gods only knew what had become of her body.

Did it matter?

The question gave her pause.

Did it matter if she’d been crippled or maimed? Was that enough to shut the beating sound out, to make her push away the pulse of life that called to her?

No, it wasn’t. As much as she hated the feeling of fatigue taking hold in every cubic centimeter of her body, of sweat and oils on her face that just wouldn’t come clean, of phantom pains and jolts and belonged to the Eva’s body and not her own, the pulse of life called to her, a constant reminder her burdens, her responsibility.

And so, she listened to the sound. She made it grow louder and louder, and it took on a different tenor. The low drumbeat was joined by other sounds: a high-pitched beeping in the same rhythm, the sound of a heart monitor. From the darkness, sensation came to Nozomi’s limbs. No longer was she a formless spirit. She was a human being, with fingers and toes, lips and a nose.

Her eyes opened, and it was light.

She lay under a clear, cylindrical barrier, which held her inside a tube. The backing of the tube was a hospital bed, and she was clothed in a flimsy medical gown. The light stung her eyes, and her fingertips tingled with numbness. She pressed her hands to the cylinder, feeling only a dull, inert sensation. She couldn’t even tell if it were cold or hot.

“Don’t press too hard,” said a voice. “You might jeopardize the pressure seal.”

The voice rang in her ears, making her wince. Above Nozomi loomed a woman, whose features were distorted by the curve of the plastic barrier, but Nozomi would’ve known that uniform, those ribbons, and the two cherry blossoms for her rank insignia anywhere.

“You’re alive,” said Misato. “Surprised?”

Nozomi shut her eyes as she struggled to sit up. “A little bit,” she admitted. “How did you get to me?”

Misato held on to a chair, swaying with the room as it tilted. Nozomi couldn’t see what was outside, but she could feel her weight shifting in the tube. “Sorry,” said Misato. “You’re on a South Korean ship; we had to do a little underwater rescue.”

That explained the drab decor—the gray walls with exposed rivets and hand-turned locks for hatches.

“The two surviving Angels headed for land after you sank,” said Misato. “They seemed content to leave you for dead. Foolish, in my opinion, but it may be they had no real way to attack you once you went to sufficient depth. In that, you might actually be lucky after all.”

“The Eva survived?” asked Nozomi.
“If you can find the Titanic on the ocean floor, it’s not much more difficult to rescue an Eva,” Misato said with a chipper smile. “Those entry plugs are designed to take quite a beating. They’re shielded well enough to come down from orbit and survive.” She paused. “Well, it’d survive the fall, but the landing might be another matter. Still, pretty impressive, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Nozomi.

Misato’s expression hardened, turning icy and cold in a heartbeat. “But you didn’t know that, so what the hell were you thinking trying to take on three Angels at once?”

“What you asked me to do when you said I should be a pilot,” said Nozomi with a shrug.

“I asked you to retreat.”

Nozomi shook her head. “You asked me to watch people throw their lives away and die. How does that make any sense? The pilots of those planes are armed with nothing better than pebbles, and they’re throwing them at brick walls hoping to make a scratch!”

THUD! Misato slapped the wall of the hyperbaric chamber. “That’s their job!” she roared. “When they have no missiles, they’ll use bullets. When they have no bullets, they’ll use sticks and knives. When they have none of those, I expect them to spit on our enemy until Eisheth herself is defeated! Why? Because that’s what’s in their power to do! Those pilots—all the men and women serving Japan right now—may be the metaphorical equivalent of gnats compared to Angels and Eva, but that’s what they signed up to do, and they’ll do it to their last dying breath. And I don’t hesitate to ask that of them. Do you know why?”

“Because you don’t care what it takes; it has to be done,” said Nozomi coldly.

Misato’s mouth hung agape; she looked at Nozomi with profound sadness, even pity. “No,” she said earnestly. “We fight because, if we can attract even a fraction of Eisheth’s attention, it’s attention that isn’t focused on you. That is our job, Nozomi: to fight for you, to die for you, if we must. The Eva is too important. You are too important.”

“I know that. You’ve told me the Eva is important since the moment you recruited me. It’s the key to defeating Eisheth, the weapon too precious to trust to a soulless clone.”

Misato’s expression softened. “It is all those things,” she said, “and I know you must feel the great weight of that burden on your shoulders, but it’s our honor and privilege to fight at your side, whatever way we can. Don’t deprive me, or the soldiers who fight under me, of that honor just because we pursue it at great risk to ourselves. We’re in this together, Nozomi—all of us, all humanity—and no one fights Eisheth alone. Not even you. When people forget that basic truth, we’re all weakened for it.”

Misato placed a printed photograph on top of the chamber, where Nozomi could see but not touch. In the image was the Eva’s armored head and face, mostly intact but damaged. One of its eyes was awash with blood leaking into the space around iris. The beast looked wounded, and its other eye was only half-open from the pain. Nozomi could survive the great pressures of the ocean floor thanks to the entry plug, but the Eva’s was practically naked against those depths. Missing an arm and virtually crushed, it was a wonder the Eva had stayed alive with Nozomi falling out of consciousness.

“You’ll have plenty of time to learn that lesson,” said Misato. “Eisheth got what she wanted. Japan’s Eva is out of commission, at least for now.”
Nozomi looked away from the photo, bitter and cynical. “So all of Asia falls behind us,” she said. “We’re helpless now.”

At that, Misato let slip a cocky smirk. “We’re not beaten yet. We may have our backs to the edge of the ring, with no place to go, but we haven’t been forced out.”

But they were on the defensive; that much was certain. Once Nozomi had been taken down, the Angels and the Zenunim had moved on the Seoul, neutralizing any military resistance and liquefying the civilians.

With the majority of resistance in South Korea neutralized, Eisheth would start looking toward her next, and last, target: Japan. Not only was the Eva crippled, but Nozomi was in no great shape either. Once the South Korean ship docked at the Port of Kokura, Nozomi was taken by helicopter back to Hachibuse Mountain, but she was to stay under medical supervision until cleared. In a sense, she’d traded one prison for another. While she’d lay in her hyperbaric chamber, at least she could see the walls of her cage. Confined to a hospital bed in the mountain infirmary was worse, for she could see all the activity as little more than an observer.

And she saw much. Every day in the infirmary there was a new face, someone she hadn’t seen before. The head doctor would introduce herself to the newcomers and give them a tour. “We’re adding two hundred beds in preparation for casualties, as well as three MRI machines and quarantine facilities in case of biological or chemical attack,” she would say. “We’re striving to make this base the foremost SDF medical facility in the region, but that starts with the people, like you.”

The spiel was so well-rehearsed that Nozomi knew to stop listening to the head doctor at that point, for she would soon walk out of earshot.

The only breaks in the boredom were thanks to visitors. Hikari spent a great deal of time with her, in a reversal from what Nozomi had done when Hikari was still recovering from her gunshot wound. As expected, Hikari’s protective, sheltering instinct couldn’t be suppressed. “Katsuragi-san is right,” she’d said once. “It was reckless of you to try to fight under those conditions. You have to protect yourself, Nozomi. You can’t put everything of yourself into being the pilot. Do you remember when Asuka came to live with us for a while?”

Nozomi had nodded.

“She was so exhausted. It wasn’t that she needed to sleep or anything like that. She was exhausted up here.” Hikari had tapped her temple with two fingers. “You could see it a little in her eyes, and I see it in you, too.”

“I’m not going to strip naked and lie down in an empty bathtub, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

That had kept Hikari quiet for the rest of that day.

Kodama had been more supportive. “You took on responsibility and embraced it,” she’d said. “I’m proud of you, little sister, whatever else happens. It takes a person of strong conviction to make such choices. I’m glad you can make them yourself.”

She’d even allowed a slight smile to come across her face—a rarity for Kodama, who always seemed serious. Yet Nozomi couldn’t take full solace in Kodama’s praise. Kodama was in many ways the opposite of Hikari: devoted to cold logic and rationality, to self-sacrifice, in contrast to Hikari’s more sentimental nature. Kodama had praised Nozomi for the choice she’d made because it appealed to Kodama’s sense of personal responsibility, but would an objective person say she’d done what was right? Or had she taken on too much of the burden all on her own?
She’d asked that question to another of her visitors: her father. The dogged reporter had thought on the matter for a time before answering.

“You know, all I can think of now is a sports story,” he’d said at last. “Can you believe it? As much as I tried to get out of there, that’s what comes to mind.”

That didn’t bother Nozomi. To her, sports and politics were merely two different things, and neither was inherently superior to the other, despite her father’s aspirations. “Go ahead and tell me,” she said.

Nodding, Horaki began. “I remember, maybe three years ago, I was covering a baseball game at Kōshien. It was a scoreless game through fourteen innings. One of the teams had gone through four pitchers and was hoping for a continuation the next day, which would give them a chance to rest—the tournament had a rule that after fifteen innings tied, the game would be stopped, so it was a sensible strategy. The other team, however, had used several pitchers in the previous game, so they had little choice but to keep the starter out there all game. Fourteen innings he threw, over two hundred pitches! Even as he was visibly faltering, the manager didn’t dare remove him. He’d kept the other team scoreless for so long, how could you?

“I remember the look on that boy. He was absolutely fearless. Even in the bottom of the fourteenth, when the other team had men on second and third with one out, he was just so determined. You could see it on his face; he decided, on that mound, in no uncertain terms, he wouldn’t let either of the next two batters put the ball in play. He would strike them out and end the inning without even a hint of a threat.

“The first batter fought hard. The pitcher got him down two strikes early, but the batter kept fouling off and fouling off pitches until the count ran full. I remember keeping a tally on my notebook: eighteen pitches in all. The pitcher finally struck him out on a changeup in the dirt. It was his best pitch; no one had even put it in play all afternoon.

“The last batter gave him a different fight. He was looking for the changeup. He belted one down the left field line, but it sailed just outside the foul pole and into the stands, a long strike. A high fastball zipped by for strike two. All the pitcher had to do was get one more strike, and the inning would be over; his team would escape. No one else could help him there. He was in the best position to keep his team alive. There might as well have been no one else on the field but him, the catcher, and the batter. The fielders didn’t matter. The runners didn’t matter.

“So he went to his best weapon, the changeup, and he threw it low, where the batter couldn’t possibly get a good swing on it. He was right. The batter swung right over it, but he threw it too low. It was in the dirt, and it skipped away from the catcher. The batter came to cover the plate, but the throw was too late. The runner scored. The batter reached base, despite striking out, and the pitcher’s team lost.

“Was he wrong to go for the strikeout? I’ve read some statistics. Every time a batter hits the ball, there’s a strong chance he’ll reach, almost thirty percent or more. It was too much of a risk, I guess, to let them put the bat on the ball.”

But all in all, the pitcher was right, wasn’t he? Why take the risk of giving the batter a pitch to hit when he could strike the batter out instead and not leave the outcome to chance? It was the better choice to try to make that pitch. He just didn’t do it right.

“Sometimes,” Horaki went on, “you have to realize that you’re imperfect when you try to gauge your own limitations. It’s not just about doing what you set out to do. You have to be honest with yourself in saying you can do it at all.”
A point well made. Perhaps Nozomi had overestimated what her body and mind could take, but in her mind, she’d lacked any other choice. She wasn’t like the pitcher, who had a whole team of fielders, or other pitchers, that he could’ve relied on. No one else could pilot an Eva.

With no conclusion to put her mind at ease, Nozomi spent the rest of her time in the infirmary sketching and listening to half-intelligible conversations or the rhythm of her heartbeat on the EKG. Running around in circles, trying to think of what she should or shouldn’t have done, would get her nowhere, and there was no point in answering that question when the Eva was too wounded to be piloted again for days, maybe weeks.

To Nozomi’s surprise, the advice that would snap her out of this mental malaise was yet to come. She had one more visitor, one she didn’t expect, who came to her on the second day of her stay in the infirmary. It was the boy with amber eyes and a knowing smirk, the Art Club leader, Sasaki.

“Who let you in?” asked Nozomi. “Ikari?”

Sasaki shrugged, and he took the chair next to Nozomi’s bed, turned it sideways, and sat parallel to her, watching her from the corner of his eye. “I guess you could say that. I expected to hear that you’d had a breakthrough with your work thanks to me, not that you were laid out in a hospital bed after some disaster.”

Rolling her eyes, Nozomi turned toward the other side of the bed, sketchbook in hand. “Yeah, well, the world doesn’t revolve around you. I’ve been a little busy; haven’t really had time to try anything new.”

“That’s not what Ikari-san said.”

She glared. “So you did talk to him.”

“Of course I did. He’s the only one who can say straight up what’s going on with you. You definitely don’t. Horaki, why do you think I recruited you to the Art Club?”

“Because you need at least five students to stay an official club?”

“No!” He looked around, surprised by the loudness of his own voice. “Well, maybe a little, but forget that. Even if we had fifteen or twenty people in club, I would’ve gone after you. You’re a lone wolf, you know. You do your own thing. I get that you want to do things that way, but do you realize how wasteful that is?”

“What I do with my art is my business.”

“But there are people who can learn from you! Everyone in the club learns from you. You rattle off insights into perspective and shading like it’s all obvious. Chidori’s been quietly sticking to your side just hoping to learn something from you by proximity. Haven’t you noticed that?”

Nozomi couldn’t say she had. The Chidori girl was quiet and shy, so it could be that she wanted something from Nozomi but was too timid to say it out loud. Still, Nozomi would’ve noticed if that girl had been hovering near her during club, right? Or had she been too absorbed in her sketches to pay attention?

“You didn’t, did you?” Sasaki went on. “I thought so. You know, Sōtatsu always had a collaborator —”

“Oh, here we go,” groaned Nozomi.
“…a collaborator in Kōetsu. They created the Rinpa school together. They achieved great things that neither one of them could’ve accomplished on his own.”

“So you’re saying I should have a partner, that I can’t do art well enough by myself.”

“It couldn’t hurt!”

“And that partner should be who? You?”

“Why not?”

Nozomi scoffed. Really, the gall of that kid. He was utterly clueless to how he came off, wasn’t he? Well, Nozomi would do him the courtesy of explaining things to him, in no uncertain terms.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she said. “I like your work, Sasaki, but I wouldn’t work with you. My art means something to me. It’s a personal endeavor. It helps me become a better person. Your art, Sasaki, is an avenue for you to be a better person than everyone around you. Tell me: why the hell would I want to learn to be like that?”

He opened his mouth to argue, but Nozomi’s watchful eyes silenced him, and he sat fuming in the flimsy metal chair, with only the beeping of the EKG to break the silence between them. His expression was unreadable. He seemed angry, but he didn’t dare look back at her. At last, the tension left his body, he closed his eyes, and said,

“Why do you think I want to learn from you, Horaki?”

It was a weary, tired question, one that begged her not to answer aloud.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m not the one who should be your collaborator, your partner, but if you keep striking out on your own, you’ll be alone for the rest of your life, and that’s sad. Maybe doing art for yourself is good enough for you. I can’t imagine what it would be like if I couldn’t share what I do. I see what you do with your sketches, Horaki. You keep them to yourself. You hardly ever show them to people unless asked. What you can do is too beautiful to be kept hidden, away from sight. You could be using them to meet other artists or impress people you care about, but you don’t. You stay alone. But maybe you like things better that way. I don’t know.”

With that, he rose, and he let out a deep breath, collecting himself.

“Take care of yourself. Whatever you want to do, just take care of yourself.”

And he walked out the infirmary door.

Puzzled, Nozomi looked to her sketchbook, flipping idly through the pages. There were so many drawings there, and she’d shown only a fraction of them to anyone else. They were akin to her private thoughts and memories, and as much significance she attached to them, no one else would see those drawings the same way. In many ways, art was her personal compulsion, something she’d refused to share with others. Sasaki was quite right about that.

Moreover, she’d done the same with being an Eva pilot. She’d taken up the mantle of being the Sixth Child, knowing there would be no others, that she had to do it on her own.

Why did she refuse to admit Sasaki’s advice had helped her draw?

Why did she ignore Misato’s orders, knowing that the fighter pilots could help her escape to safety?
As a single, solitary human being, Nozomi had run into the very limits of herself: of her body’s ability to withstand stress, of her mind’s capacity for creativity. Eisheth was right in that sense. A human being could succumb to pressure so easily, breaking down in the face of adversity.

But humans have always been social creatures, and they’d come to dominate planet Earth as much for their ingenuity as their capacity for cooperation. An jet airliner is the work of many men. A city is built by generations. No one person, even if he lived forever, could accomplish those feats alone.

It was as Nozomi pondered these thoughts that her last visitor came to her bedside. This time, it was Captain Hyūga, who was quiet of step and held a clipboard.

“Pardon me for intruding,” he said, “but there’s a situation.”

Nozomi huffed. “I don’t think there’s any piloting to do; the Eva’s only what, halfway pieced together from becoming spaghetti?”

“Eisheth has a force of her children and Angels heading for the home islands. You can spend your time during the coming battle here, or you can come with me and make a difference. Your call.”

That wasn’t a difficult choice. Nozomi detached the sensors on her chest and sat upright. “What about the doctors?” she asked. “Am I cleared to leave?”

At that, Hyūga suppressed a grin. “Do you think they would dare oppose the Colonel if she asked?”

After a brief stop for clothes, Nozomi and Hyūga headed to the control room, but the way down was crawling with SDF personnel. Clerks raced up and down the stairs with papers and messages. Chefs and kitchen staff traded knives and aprons for fire protection suits and extinguishers, patrolling the halls for damage control. Armed parties circled each level in groups of four. These ramped up preparations told Nozomi enough: the target was Tōkyō-2. With all of Japan’s neighbors wounded from Eisheth’s attacks, the five-eyed giant was going for the kill in one shot.

“So, tell me this doesn’t mean what I think it means,” said Nozomi, eyeing a group of SDF members with riot shields.

“I’m afraid it does,” said Hyūga. “Eisheth is throwing a party, and all of Tōkyō-2 is invited. Unfortunately, our gift for the host has been damaged in transit.”

“And it’s too late to make another.”

“Yes, but not too late to borrow one.” Hyūga swiped his key card at the entrance to the control room, and when the reinforced steel door slid open, he let Nozomi lead the way. The screens of the front three monitoring stations tracked a military aircraft—a cargo plane—that carried an Eva on its back. It wasn’t Unit-14; this Eva had a different color scheme: predominantly blue, with orange and silver decorations, particularly on its fins.

From her chair in the center of the control room, Misato watched Hyūga and Nozomi out of the corner of her eye. “You two are just in time,” she said. “Unit-15 is making a grand entrance. Wouldn’t you agree, Major Freeman?”

“Yes, I would, Colonel Katsuragi,” said a man beside Misato. He was dressed in some unsightly military fatigues, decorated with a bizarre, pixel-like pattern of greens and browns.

“Did you just come out of some low-resolution video game?” mused Nozomi.
The major chuckled softly, gesturing at his uniform. “It sure isn’t meant to be easy on the eyes.”

“Major Freeman will serve as our liaison to the Americans and Unit-15’s control team,” Misato explained. “Eisheth’s bringing the fight to us, so we make our stand here, at Tōkyō-2. She’s not just going after the city and the mountain to cripple our counter-offensive. We think Eisheth’s goal is Unit-14. She wants to finish what she started over the Pacific, and we can’t let that happen. It’s all or nothing now.”

“So, what do you want me to do?” asked Nozomi. “Pilot Unit-15?”

Major Freeman shook his head. “There’s no time for that, I’m afraid. We’re not even sure you would be able to sync with Unit-15, certainly not at a battle-capable level right away.”

“We could reconfigure the core,” Misato insisted.

“And put the fate of planet Earth in the hands of a single little girl?” Freeman looked to Nozomi apologetically. “No offense, but the rigors of combat have broken grown men. There’s a reason we’re trying to protect Unit-14 right now, isn’t there? That’s what my superiors are concerned about.”

Nozomi shrugged. “So we’re trusting the fate of planet Earth to a mindless clone instead. That’s reassuring.”

“We’ve gone to great lengths to train the Eva and the dummy plug to react predictably to certain interface stimuli,” said Major Freeman. “We want to win this war. You’ve fought the two Angels that are coming. You know how they operate. Give us the benefit of your experiences with them. I’ll relay any weaknesses or tactics you identify, and we’ll have Unit-15 do the rest.”

So that’s why they needed her: to be a glorified encyclopedia with two ears and a mouth, so they didn’t have to bother searching through databases or flipping pages to find the information they needed. Well, that was fine. Without the Eva to pilot, what else would she do? All she had left were words. She was nearly as helpless as those tank operators and fighter pilots. Without the Eva, she was just a girl in a world much bigger than her.

Throughout the next half-hour, preparations for the attack commenced in earnest. Unit-15 landed at an airstrip outside the city and began to patrol the perimeter of town. Tanks rolled through city streets. Missile launcher trucks took positions at major intersections, and jet aircraft swarmed overhead.

All this Nozomi saw on the extensive setup of monitors in the control room, but the limited angles and constantly-shifting viewpoints made it clear how little Nozomi was actually seeing. She had windows into the real world, but the frames had a tendency to get in the way.

“It’s hard to get used to, isn’t it.” That came from Shinji, who took a seat beside Nozomi and Misato. “You’re used to being in the pilot’s seat and seeing everything. From here, you can do only so much.”

“So it’s just guessing,” said Nozomi. “You don’t have all the information, so you have to try to figure out what you’re not seeing.”

Shinji shook his head. “I don’t see it that way. There’s no seeing what only the pilot sees. I’ve been trying, on Misato-san’s advice, to see what the pilot doesn’t see. Then I can be useful. Then I can make a contribution that doesn’t make me unneeded.”

“How could you ever be unneeded? You were a pilot. You know what you’ve done for people.”
“Two years ago,” he said. “That was all two years ago. What am I doing now?”

A rhetorical question, and the point was well made. Even someone like Shinji couldn’t afford to rest on his laurels. It was the story of humanity, wasn’t it? That yesterday’s warriors had to step aside for younger, more able men and women to fight instead? Even if this position for Nozomi were temporary, she benefited from the change of perspective.

And needed to reap those benefits quickly; the battle for Tōkyō-2 was soon to begin.

It started with the airborne Angel, the mammoth delta wing creature with its devastating energy ribbon trail. Its only weakness? The core that sat just behind the angled nose, a slightly raised bump that resembled a cockpit or a bird’s head. It would be impossible to reach directly with that ribbon in the way.

Predictably, the Japanese SDF fired on the Angel with missiles, but the Angel spun its turning, twisting ribbon around like a shield, deflecting most incoming fire. The Angel used its own body as a weapon, overtaking jet fighters and plowing through them like a pair of scissors through a horde a paper cranes.

“Well?” asked Major Freeman. “Surely you came up with some way to attack that Angel.”

“It’s flying around two hundred meters in the air,” said Nozomi. “Do you have an Eva-sized cannon? You could launch it like a circus performer. Otherwise, I don’t see what else you can do unless it comes down.”

“And until then?” asked the major.

“Wait for the walker.”

The walker Angel wasn’t far behind. Slow and deliberate, it stomped into the city, smashing tanks, vehicles, and buildings underfoot with its wide, disc-shaped pads. When the SDF fired upon the walker, it just lifted one of its feet up to shield itself, deflecting all fire harmlessly.

“When I was fighting them, I tried to go after the walker,” said Nozomi. “If you can get its beam attack to hit the flying Angel, maybe it’ll be stunned long enough to kill it.”

Major Freeman got on a headset and started translating Nozomi’s idea for the American operators on the other end of the line. How they could think to direct the beast’s anger in a specific way or at a particular target Nozomi couldn’t say. It struck her as no different than trying to pin a red cape on someone when there’s a frustrated bull nearby.

On cue, Unit-15 charged into the city, making for the walker. It used buildings as stepping stones, gaining elevation, and it leapt in attack, bound for the Angel’s central body.

WHAM! But it slammed into one of those wide, disc-like feet instead.

KA-WHEE! A heat beam cut through the skyline, melting buildings and asphalt, but the Eva scampered away. It climbed on the exterior of a tower and leapt again, this time landing on a thin, fragile knee joint of the Angel.

KA-WHEE, KA-WHEE! Sporadic shots cut through the city, but Unit-15 was faster. It skipped and jumped from the Angel’s body to the street and back again, constantly evading danger.

“Show us the line,” said Misato to her technicians. “It’s no good being a living target if we can’t use this to bring the other Angel down.”
Three technicians worked feverishly at their consoles and constructed a three-dimensional, shimmering representation of the flying Angel, the walker, and Unit-15. The model was very fluid, and whenever the Eva jumped or ran, the image was a little slow to keep up.

“Get Unit-15 to dance around the northwest leg,” said Misato. “Then we have a chance.”

Major Freeman relayed this information in English to his superiors. The Eva circled the walker, jumped high, and—

KA-WHEE!

The heat beam swatted it out of the sky, as well as the flying Angel behind it.

“Good shot!” cried Misato, pumping a fist.

But while the airborne Angel faltered, the walker wasn’t fazed. It ambled to a gap in the skyscrapers, and a bright light shone from its body.

KA-TCSH! The monitors went to static, and the mountain shuddered.

“No communications, Colonel,” reported one of the technicians. “All antennas report no signal.”

Misato pounded a fist on her armrest. “Of course not. We’ve just had our eyes gouged out. All right, let’s break out the emergency protocols. Set up the mobile command post. Major, take a handheld. We’ll get Nozomi and Shinji-kun to safety. I’ll send a team to get you to the mobile command. If we have any other insights into the Angels’ tactics, or if we can reestablish communications from here, we’ll contact you.”

“You’re not going to be able to do a damn thing,” said Freeman. “You’re blind down here.”

“He’s right,” said Nozomi, rising. “Either Ikari or I should go, too.”

“Outside? In the open?” Misato shook her head. “I can’t do that. I won’t allow it. That could be a death sentence.”

“So what? If there’s even a chance what either of us knows might help us beat Eisheth back, we need to do it. It should be me. You can always pilot the Eva with a dummy plug if you absolutely have to. Ikari is irreplaceable, and I know more about how these Angels fight.” She stepped up to Misato, looking the colonel straight in the eye. “I’m not piloting now, so it’s my turn to put myself at risk, even though I may not be able to do anything. I’d need the help from your people to protect me. It’d be a chance for them to find some honor in this. Isn’t that what you want for them?”

Stumped, Misato looked to Shinji for support, but he shrugged.

“She can be stubborn when she wants to be, too,” he said.

With a sigh, Misato nodded then, motioning to some guards. “Fine,” she said. “Go out there and hold this city. Hold it to protect every last man, woman, and child within it; to defend all the places they call home—”

“And all the beer in our fridge that you haven’t had a chance to drink yet,” said Hyūga.

“Right!” She blinked. “Hey!”

“Don’t get carried away,” Hyūga reminded her. “Whatever happens to Tōkyō-2, it won’t come easily.” He looked to Nozomi and Major Freeman. “Both of you, please come with me. We’ll
establish the mobile command.”

The destination was a vehicle bay on third level of the mountain base. A modified personnel carrier, with visible antennas and seat-mounted monitors, formed the basis of the mobile command. Two other armored vehicles, full of SDF riflemen, would protect Hyūga, Freeman, and Nozomi.

“Oh boy,” said the leader of the security contingent, the wiry and sardonic Sergeant Ishikawa. “It must be my lucky day again.”

“Oh boy,” said the leader of the security contingent, the wiry and sardonic Sergeant Ishikawa. “It must be my lucky day again.”

“Why do you say that, Sergeant?” asked Hyūga.

Ishikawa shrugged. “Maybe it’s just being around here that makes my life interesting.”

Three vehicles left the mountain on a side road, with Hyūga’s mobile command vehicle in the middle of the pack. In the front row of the command vehicle was the driver and an Eva control technician. Two SDF riflemen took up the middle bench, with Hyūga, Nozomi, and Freeman in the back. Hyūga handed out radio headsets to each of them.

“Reestablishing uplink with the Americans, Captain,” said the control technician.

“Very good,” said Hyūga.

The monitors in the mobile command vehicle flickered to life with various text commands and diagnostic information. It was nothing Nozomi understood, however, so she cast her gaze out the window instead. Most of the vehicle infrastructure obscured her view, and at best, she saw a pink energy ribbon streaking across the sky, or an invisible heat beam rippling through the air with optical distortion as it melted through steel and earth. How terrifying it was to see only part of the battle, never knowing if a stray attack might destroy them any second.

Nozomi expected to see chaos and mayhem outside, but what she didn’t expect was the dissonant serenity of it all, the soundlessness of what was happening outside the vehicle, drowned out by the roar of the engine revving.

And most dissonant of all was the image of Hikari standing on the side of the road. She watched Nozomi with the coldest of gazes, a look that foretold death and punishment if she could exact it.

Eisheth was watching.

“Captain,” said the driver, “I think we have a problem.”

Nozomi’s eyes went forward, and she saw what the driver was afraid of. The flying Angel loomed in the distance, and it turned an edge to the ground, going for the kill.

“Evasive maneuvers!” cried Hyūga.

“This is a humvee, sir; it doesn’t come with evasive maneuvers!”

“No, then turn the wheel to the right and hit the gas as hard as you can!”

The vehicle swerved off the road, skidding downhill. Nozomi’s body flew against her seat belt and against Hyūga’s beside her. The vehicle spun, losing traction, yet the oncoming Angel stayed steady in the distance, coming into view whenever the windshield turned to the north. The energy ribbon tore up the earth, cutting down trees and kicking up rocks and soil. The pink glow of its deadly ribbon grew, until—
There was a blur of gray metal and fire and—

PAM! A fireball erupted, with two white trails of smoke coming out of the Angel’s side. The flying Angel lost its balance, tilting over and slamming into the ground, and Nozomi watched the Angel slide past to the vehicle’s left. A shower of dirt and debris bombarded the vehicle’s windows, but the tires held, keeping it upright.

“What was that?” cried Nozomi. “What just happened?”

“I think that was a plane,” said Hyūga.

They had nothing to touch the Angel; bullets did nothing, same as missiles. But a plane might be enough to change things. Even if it couldn’t do damage, it might just make a difference.

But it was a life that was gone. Snuffed out to try to stop Eisheth, and for what? For Nozomi to survive until the Angel made another pass? It was senseless. And if you looked out the windshield at the scene outside, at the clouds in the sky or the uprooted trees, you might just think it was a disaster that had passed, that life would go on in spite of it, but it wasn’t so. The true disaster had yet to come. The flames of the destroyed plane attested to that. The broken energy ribbon from the airborne Angel would do more damage, wreak more havoc, before this day was done.

*Broken?*

Nozomi’s eyes turned to the energy ribbon. Yes, it was broken, intermittent. There was a conspicuous gap before it tilted and followed the path of the Angel to Nozomi’s left.

The ribbon was the Angel’s defense and offense. Without it, the core was easily seen and accessible. The impact of the plane had stunned the Angel, enough to break its concentration and break down its ribbon.

And that was the key to defeating it.

“I need to talk to someone!” said Nozomi, pulling on Hyūga’s uniform. “I know how to beat it!”

“Are we online?” Hyūga shouted to the forward cabin.

The monitors of the vehicle flickered to video, with footage of Unit-15 doing a fatal dance around the walker in the midst of the city streets.

“If you can hit it hard enough, you can stop that wake it creates,” said Nozomi. “The Eva can finish it off then.”

Hyūga smirked. “There should be plenty of men out there waiting to give that Angel a few body blows. Corporal, get us to safe distance.” He touched his hand to his headset radio. “Capital Fire Support, this is Violet Five. I have some firing instructions for you…”

At the same time, Major Freeman got on the line with his superiors, relaying Nozomi’s instructions to the American forces, and when he was finished, he gave Hyūga a nod.

“Execute on my mark,” said Hyūga. “Three, two, one, mark!”

Boom! A heavy artillery piece fired in the distance. The flying Angel, once sent to the ground, reared up like a snake and put the flat of its belly to the shell, blocking the damage with its AT-field. That was the Angel’s weakness: it could defend itself with the AT-field or propagate its dangerous offense with its ribbon, but it couldn’t do both at the same time.
Boom, boom, boom! A barrage of fire converged on the Angel, bombarding it from all directions. It turned and spun, unsure where best to defend itself, and that was the key to bringing it down.

The ground rumbled with an Eva’s footsteps, and Unit-15 charged at the Angel, lowering its shoulder to break through the AT-field and smashing the cockpit-like core. With a shrill shriek, the Angel fell to the ground, sliding down the mountain, its thousand eyes turning directionless with their gazes.

But any rejoicing over this victory was put on hold when a white-hot glow in the distance began to dwarf the light of the sun.

“We need fire!” cried Hyūga into his radio. “Fire on the last Angel; disrupt its shot!”

A rippling wave of heat cut across the ground, turning rock into soft lava and magma instead. Trees combusted and went ablaze, and water turned into a haze of steam. The heat beams turned and swept over the city wildly as the Eva and Angel fought on the southeastern side of Tōkyō-2.

The driver of the mobile control vehicle turned the wheel all the way to the left and began the climb back up the mountain to the road. Even on safe ground, the residual heat from the Angel’s beam made the interior of the vehicle uncomfortable. Nozomi dabbed at the sweat on her brow, and if she were suffering, so was the vehicle. The engine strained, whining painfully, and—

POP! The vehicle lurched, and pieces of molten rubber were strewn over the landscape.

“The tires are melting,” observed Hyūga. “It’s too hot out there.”

Nozomi went for a door handle and stuck a foot outside, but Hyūga caught her before she could touch the ground.

“I wouldn’t,” he warned. He took the cover off a notepad and hurled it outside. “Go to the roof,” he instructed.

Easily said. Nozomi was a thin, nimble girl, but the outer surfaces of the vehicle offered little in terms of handholds, and the metal was quickly heating up like the ground outside, too. The roof was uncomfortably warm to the touch, leaving her skin tingling climbed atop it. Little wonder the tires had given out first. Expanding air made them so vulnerable, and without tires, the wheels began to sink into the ground. The vehicle shifted in place, but Hyūga and Freeman came up, too, trying to find space around the array of antennas on the roof.

“Oh great,” said Freeman, flicking a nail at one of the antenna leads. “This is quintessential Japanese engineering, isn’t it. Relentlessly efficient; there’s not a square inch of this rooftop that’s not being used. Never thought you might need to take refuge on the roof of this car, did you? Didn’t plan for that contingency, did you?”

“We try to save space where we can,” said Hyūga. “I know this might be a foreign concept to a American and his waistline.”

Freeman glared, but he said nothing more.

“Do we still have radio contact?” Hyūga called down to the cabin.

“Yes, sir!” said the controller.

“Get us a helicopter for evac, now! Or we’re going to be like a metal crouton in a boiling rock soup.”
“Why don’t we just get one of the other security vehicles to drive us out?” asked Nozomi.

“They’re all going to have the same problem,” said Hyūga. “The ground is too hot and too soft to get any kind of traction. If the tires don’t give out, they’ll spin out instead as the ground turns to slush.”

And any four-wheeled vehicle would have that problem. The earth was fundamentally impassible in this state, and there was little any of them could do about it. Every human being needed to put something in contact in the ground to get moving: a foot or a hand or something else.

That wasn’t unique to human beings, either. Nozomi looked to the north and west, where Unit-15 kept on circling the walking Angel. It wasn’t always successful in this endeavor; more than one wide-angle heat beam caught the Eva at point-blank range, and it was all the dummy plug could do to manifest the Eva’s AT-field and hold the heat at bay. Still, the damage in the city was stark, as the heat beams would just go around the Eva and melt everything in their path instead: buildings, cars, streets….

Including the very streets the Angel walked upon.

“Major Freeman, can you get the Eva to hang out near the Angel’s feet?” asked Nozomi.

“That seems more than a bit dangerous,” said Freeman. “One wrong step, and those feet will crush Unit-15 like a bug.”

“I’m hoping to give the Angel the same problems we’re having,” said Nozomi, who gestured to the unstable, soupy ground around them.

At that, Freeman understood, and he relayed the information to his command unit. More of the vehicle’s complement took refuge on the roof and the hood, just in time for the thumping of helicopter rotors to be heard in the distance.

“All right,” said Freeman, “let’s see what this tactic of yours can do.”

The ground rumbled, shaking with each step of the walker Angel. Unit-15 darted up and down, jumping from one disc-like foot to another. The Angel’s footing began to falter, and as its heat beams began to soften the ground, bits of molten rock stuck to its feet as it walked, like soft tar from a newly-paved road.

“We’re getting blasted by that heat ray,” said Freeman, who listened carefully to the information coming in from his headset. “Armor’s failing; skin and muscle are taking damage. How did you deal with it, Horaki-san?”

Standing atop the roof of the stranded control vehicle, Nozomi stared into the distance, toward the battle of Angel and Eva. The Angel’s heat beams spawned streams of fire from the underbrush wherever it looked, but despite the vicious, searing heat of the Angel’s attack, the Evangelion pressed on. There was nothing else to do, after all.

“You just have to take it,” said Nozomi, wiping a hot piece of ash from her skin. “The Eva has to keep going, even if it hurts.”

Freeman nodded knowingly, and he put the microphone of his headset away.

The heat beams ablated Unit-15’s armor, blasting it away in bits and pieces, but the Eva let out a horrendous yell, climbing up the Angel’s immobile legs. It reached the central body and found a gap in the Angel’s firing arc, opening the enemy to a relentless pounding. The Angel tried desperately to dislodge Unit-15, moving its central body around, but with its legs stuck in the hot, soft ground, there
was no chance.

All it took was one colossal punch, and the Angel shuddered and fell. Hyūga and Freeman took their headsets off, admiring the view. A helicopter approached from the distance, promising the stranded group salvation, but truly, salvation had already come: the Angels in Asia were defeated, and only two remained elsewhere in the world. While the innumerable Zenunim loomed, for one day, the people of Japan could relax and rejoice. It was a victory borne of cooperation: between America and Japan, between military forces and Eva.

That, Nozomi realized, was mankind’s strength. Alone, human beings were weak and frail, but they were seldom truly alone. When one man’s physical strength fails, another can pick up the load. Every man is a piece of the continent of humanity, after all, according to Donne.

And Nozomi resolved to capture that solidarity, to depict it in her work as a reminder to herself. Never again would she take on a burden and challenge alone, for she was surrounded by people who could support her: her sisters, Kodama and Hikari; her father; Shinji and Asuka; Misato and Hyūga; Sasaki; and more. She drew each of them, one at a time, standing together outside the gate to the base with the countless support staff of the mountain, the soldiers and pilots who’d fought along side them, and anyone else she could find a name and a face to go with. They all mattered to this fight, every single one of them.

Without their support, she would be nothing, and mankind would have no reason to resist Eisheth, to refuse joining her and her children in the sea.

But for at least one more day, the city of Tōkyō-2 stood strong, a bastion against Eisheth’s nihilistic gaze.

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