

The Second Try

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Chapter I: The 12th

Shinji Ikari, Third Children and designated pilot of Evangelion Unit-01, had just reached a new sync-ratio record.

And as Rei Ayanami suspected, the former holder of this record, known as Asuka Langley Soryu, wasn't very pleased with this. So she didn't pay much attention to the rants of the Second Children, who made obviously ironical statements about the 'great, invincible Shinji' while holding herself; swaying in front of her locker.

Instead, Rei finished changing from the plugsuit the pilots were supposed to wear during their time in the entry plugs of the EVAs or the test plugs, into her casual school uniform. As soon as she was done, she went silently for the door of the female pilots' changing room, whispered "Sayonara" and left.

With the First Children gone, Asuka could finally release all the feelings that tensed up the last hours in a powerful...

...sigh.

She still had problems to play this charade in front of everyone, and it seemed to only grow harder. She wasn't sure if she would be able to keep it up much longer at all. Not while these thoughts disturbed her mind; thoughts of all the things that happened... or will happen soon.

Lost in her worries, she failed to notice someone entering the room, sneaking up to her and suddenly embracing her from behind; encircling her arms with his own.

She tensed up noticeably as she felt the touch, even though (or maybe just because) she knew exactly who the stranger was.

"Hey," the intruder whispered and gave her a small peck on the cheek. "You're alright? You're kinda..."

"Shinji, what the heck are you doing here?" she fizzed nervously, not turning around.

"Wha- what do you mean?" the surprised Third Children uttered dumbfounded, "I just wanted to see..."

"What if someone sees us like this?"

"Rei has already left and I doubt she has seen me," he assured, now more confident. "Besides, who would dare to enter the domain of the great Asuka Langley I..." He stopped, as they both tensed at his mistake. "...Soryu while she's changing."

"Baka, this is NERV we're talking about," she scolded. "You know they have security cams everywhere."

He raised an eyebrow at her somewhat exaggerated theory. "In the girls' locker room?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Asuka huffed in his embrace. "I bet these old perverts are ogling the screens every time we're getting dressed."

"I think you're getting paranoid," he chuckled a bit before leaning forward again. "But I admit they can be kinda persisting. So...?"

"So, to keep up our cover, I guess you give me no choice but to respond to this situation like I would have back then..." she declared calmly.

Shinji gulped as his eyes widened in fear. "You... you don't mean..."

Now Asuka turned her face around, showing a mischievous grin.

"YOU BAKA HENTAI!!" she screamed in rage.

The surprise of her sudden outburst send him backwards, what made him tripping over the bench and falling on the floor. However, Asuka didn't stop her assault.

"HOW DARE YOU??"

She kicked him, even though not too hard.

"SNEAKING INTO MY LOCKER ROOM!!!"

She pulled him up and pressed him against the wall.

"TRYING TO RAPE A HELPLESS LITTLE GIRL, HUH??"

She raised her fist to strike. Shinji flinched, shut his eyes and prepared for the blow...

...that didn't come.

After a few seconds, he dared to pry one eye open to find her grinning again.

"At least wait till we get home," she whispered, gave him a small kiss and left, as if nothing had happened.

Shinji slumped down the wall and sighed.

"Five years and she still manages to scare me like that..."

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After the latest sync-tests, most of the staff was already gone; the happy ones heading for home; the not so happy ones working elsewhere on their nightshift in the NERV HQ. Only two were still working on the results of the tests. Well, actually only one. Major Misato Katsuragi just watched, while Dr. Ritsuko Akagi did the work.

"So, anything new yet?" Misato asked bored, leaning against the wall as she sipped on a cup of coffee. Her face contorted into a grimace as long tepid liquid came in contact with the her tongue. A beer would have been *much* preferable now, but having witnessed Asuka's reaction to the day's results, she was somewhat reluctant to go home just yet.. She could only hope Shinji would survive long enough being alone with their hot-tempered roommate.

"Besides Shinji surpassing Asuka's ratio? No," Ritsuko answered plainly while looking through some printouts, "Nothing that would explain that boost recently."

"I don't understand why you're still making such a fuss about that anyway," Misato groaned rather childishly for a woman of her age and position. "I mean, something similar had happened while they were fighting the 6th."

The head of Project-E gave the Major a glare that seemed to say: 'I'm the one with the lab coat, you want to tell ME something?'

"That was something totally different," Ritsuko explained. "The fight had put them in a stress situation, and as far as we can tell, they synchronized with EVA-02 AND each other for a few seconds which caused that temporary boost of their sync-ratio. This time however, they had been separated in their respective EVAs and were under the usual test-conditions."

Misato still couldn't see the point. "So?"

Ritsuko sighed at the simple-minded Major. "So, it shouldn't have happened! And even if they managed to raise their ratios like that so suddenly, the immediate drop afterwards still wouldn't make sense. It's as though the synchronization had been suppressed at once."

Misato blinked in surprise. "Suppressed? By the pilots?"

That didn't seem to make much sense. Especially Asuka would never suppress something willingly she

was so proud of. Then again, that mood she had been in lately...

"Or the EVAs," Ritsuko added quietly, interrupting her friend's thoughts.

'Still hiding secrets from me, huh, Ritsuko?' the Major glanced to her old friend but decided to drop the conversation. Instead she took a look at the watch.

She panicked.

"Wah! It's that late already? Shit! I've got to get home!" she declared, threw her cup of coffee almost over the doctor's desk and made a rush towards the door.

"Oh?" the other woman remarked grinning. "I had thought Kaji would pick you up from here."

Misato stopped dead in her tracks. "How do you...?"

"Or do you want to dress up for your 'date'? I thought it wasn't serious?" Ritsuko continued to tease, seeing her old friend paling even more.

"Eh... No, it's not! The... the children, yeah. They... don't know yet. I've... forgotten to tell them..." she fumbled for a plausible excuse, praying that the blonde didn't know that they had heard Kaji's call on the answering machine.

"Oh?" Ritsuko apparently didn't even think of stopping the teasing. "Why don't you just phone them?"

Misato cursed silently. "Uhm... our phone is broken?" she tried.

"They have cell phones, you know?"

"I... eh..." she trailed off, obviously caught. "You know; I hate you, Ritsuko!" she muttered and went out.

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Rushing through the automatic door, she didn't pay much attention where she was going and thus almost ran straight into someone. A fuming redheaded someone, to be exact.

"Asuka, what are you still doing here?" she asked, somewhat annoyed to be stopped by this raging girl in front of her. She was late enough as it was.

" 'What am I doing here?' " Asuka repeated, growling impatiently. "I'm waiting for YOU to drive me home!"

"Why haven't you gone with Shinji?"

Wrong answer! The Second Children just gave her guardian a good ol' 'Glare of Death'; clenching her fists in fury.

'Ah, right, Shinji beat her – she doesn't like being beaten. Better not use the 'S-Word' for a while.' Misato thought, not knowing whether to be angry or to laugh at the behavior of the redhead. But remembering the time, she decided to do neither.

"Alright, alright, come on then," she commanded, motioning her ward to follow as she went towards the direction of which she hoped to find the garage where she had parked her car. "Let's get out of here."

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"We're home!" Misato said as they entered the apartment.

"Welcome home!" Shinji's voice greeted back from the living room.

It had been a quiet ride home. Misato hadn't wanted to risk an argument so she stayed silent, while Asuka merely muttered something under her breath now and then.

"Stupid Third..."

Misato rolled her eyes. Just like now...

EVA-02's pilot kicked her shoes off and rushed inside while her guardian advanced to her room to get changed.

Nothing too special, of course! Kaji shouldn't think that she wanted him back or something!

Which was of course not the case!

Not at all!

It didn't take long until the first shouting distracted the Major's denials, barely damped by the thin walls.

"HEY, BAKA! WHERE'S MY DINNER?"

"Huh? What do you mean, Asuka?"

" 'What do I mean?' HOW STUPID ARE YOU? ME – WANTS – FOOD! Did you think the great, invincible Shinji wouldn't need to do such lower work anymore after beating my synch record?"

"I... I'm sorry..."

"AHH, there he goes again!"

Misato rolled her eyes at the sounds of cursing and shuffling, but couldn't suppress a tiny smile either. As annoying as a pissed-off Asuka could be, it was good to hear that, despite this whole synch-rate issue, everything was back to normal again. She had almost feared the girl would suffer a relapse after today – and even though she had never thought she would admit that, but she actually preferred how things were now to those weeks.

Still, it was probably for the best to intervene before someone (or better said, Shinji) got seriously hurt, so she quickly chose a dress and changed into it before she went to stop the raging red storm.

"Listen..." she began as she opened the door to the kitchen, but trailed off immediately, a frown spreading over her face. Had they just smiled at each other?

"Aren't you done yet?" Asuka growled, standing next to Shinji and looking as if she was ready to strike, no matter what he would do.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "It takes some time to cook, you know?"

"ARE YOU SUGGESTING THAT I'M STUPID?"

'Nah, must have been my imagination...' Misato sighed, massaging her temples.

Asuka switched the target of her anger as soon as she noticed her guardian, giving her a disgusted look.

"Not only you're going out with Kaji, you're going like THAT?"

"Huh?" Misato looked at herself. She wasn't wearing anything too revealing; just a plain, dark blue dress. It was getting a bit tight, though. "Ha, you're just jealous that Kaji didn't ask you out," she figured and turned to her other roommate. "Shinji, what do you think?"

As he looked up from his cooking, she decided to tease him a little. Posing in front of him, she let her hands roam seductively over her voluptuous curves, even leaning a bit down to give him a good look on her cleavage. His face got bright red in an instant, quickly averted his sight and resumed his work. It

was just too much fun to tease him.

"I... I think you look fine, Misato," he stammered.

"Figures..." Asuka mumbled—if it was even possible—more peeved than before. "Hentai!"

By now, Shinji had finished his cooking and began filling the plates when the door bell rang.

"KAJI!" Asuka bolted up and stormed off towards the door.

"Wasn't she SO hungry just a minute ago?" Shinji and Misato sweat-dropped, before following their roommate.

"Hello, Kaji!" they heard the exuberant voice of the redhead.

"Ah, hello Asuka," the unshaved agent greeted the enthusiastic teen that was already clutching his arm.

"Hi Shinji. Hello Katsuragi." He showed his trademarked heart-breaker smile. "You're ready?"

"Oh, ye..."

"Say Kaji, do you really want to go with her?" Asuka cut the Major off. "I would be a much better company for you..."

"Eh, another time, okay, Asuka?" Kaji offered, trying his best to keep his smile.

"Promise?"

"We better get going," Misato interrupted, saving Kaji from this obviously awkward situation.

"Yeah, right. Just leave me alone with HIM..." the redhead grumbled, while Misato pushed Kaji back through the door.

"You two better behave. And don't do anything I would do!" she teased, waving good bye.

"Yuck! I wouldn't do anything like that with such a baka hentai even if he was the last man on earth!" Asuka grimaced, while Shinji seemed to ignore that comment.

"Whatever! Bye!"

As soon as the door closed, the Third and Second Children flung at each other, sharing a passionate, seemingly endless kiss. Without breaking off, they slowly retreated lurching to the living room and, after some careless steps, they finally tumbled on the hard floor; just missing the softer pillows. But neither of them cared right now anyway. When they finally broke it, none of them could remember if the fiery meeting of their lips had last minutes or hours, as they now lay still; tightly holding onto each other; panting heavily.

"I've... missed... you," Shinji gasped once enough air returned to his lungs to allow him to speak.

"I've missed... you, too," Asuka answered, still caressing the back of his neck. "We didn't have time for us since... well, THE kiss..."

He chuckled while she rolled her eyes at that particular memory.

"Well, you didn't seem too enthusiastic when I came for you today..." he tried his best to sound offended.

Asuka's only response was a light giggling.

But her smile faded soon, when she remembered what she had thought of before he had surprised her in the locker room.

It didn't go unnoticed to Shinji. "So, will you tell me now what's on your mind?" he asked concerned.

"Do I have to remind you again that I'm supposed to be the depressed one?"

"Baka," she called him quietly, averting his gaze. "You know exactly what's on my mind..."

Shinji sighed and nodded slowly. He leaned closer and gently pulled her face back to him, so their eyes could meet again. "Hey, you know I miss h..."

"It's not just that," she clasped him tightly, quickly cutting him off before he could finish that sentence. "I was... I was thinking about tomorrow. It will be our first since then. And it just has to be this one of all."

"Shh," he tried to soothe her. "It will be alright, just like last time."

"The heck it was!" she spat, pulling back a bit. "You barley came out alive." He could see some tears dwelling up in her eyes. "And now you're going to do it again, just like that."

"Asuka," he brushed a few strands of her unrestrained hair out of her face. "We have already talked about this. There is just this way. The only other idea they had come up with was to drop almost 1000 N2-Mines on it. Not to mention with minimal chances of success."

"I know, I know..." she leaned her head against his chest, just enjoying the steady rhythm of his heart. Yet even that didn't seem to be able to ease her mind this time. "But what if it doesn't work? What if you..."

He silenced her with another kiss. "Then we should make the best of the few hours we have left for ourselves."

These were the last words that were said for the next hours, while the two pilots shared their closeness and their kisses; forgetting EVAs and Angels; forgetting NERV and school; forgetting friends and foes, forgetting guardians and pets; forgetting the past and the future; forgetting meals, chilled long ago...

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"...nothing further. Approach carefully, observe its reaction and, if possible, lead it outside the urban area," Misato's voice droned through the comm.

Thinking of the sphere-like Angel waiting in the city, Shinji tried to relax in his seat as much as he could. But that was easier said than done. He had suffered so much by piloting the EVA and not just by the fierce attacks of the Angels. This thing had caused him pain in so many ways already. But as much as it had hurt to fail and to be hated despite only trying to do his best, to be ignored for anything that didn't involve this damned beast, not to be acknowledged by his father at all... that all seemed almost ridiculously insignificant now compared to the pain that...

'Not now,!' he chided himself. 'I've got to concentrate now!'

"Alright, alright, Misato. I think Shinji should go ahead!"

He smiled faintly as he heard Asuka's voice, dripping with sarcasm. Even though they didn't remember their exact conversations, they had managed to keep the essence of them, as far as he could tell. At least until now.

"You know; that's a job for the man with the highest sync ratio and all," she continued slightly menacing after a short pause.

'Shit! Forget to play my part!' he scolded himself.

"Eh... I don't think, Shinji should..."

"It's all right Misato!" he blurted, interrupting his guardian. "I'll do it!"

A collective "Huh?" went through the comm.

"I'll show you how to do this, Asuka!" he declared.

"Wha- What was that??" As to be expected, EVA-02's pilot didn't sound very delighted at the 180 degree-turn of the 'expected' result of her mocking.

"Ehm, Shinji..." the Major tried to interfere.

"Misato, haven't you said yourself: 'You are number one!'" he gave an assuring thumbs-up to the camera.

"But..."

"No buts!" he interrupted his commanding Officer maybe a bit too drastic. "As Asuka said: 'That's a job for the one with the highest ratio!' "

"Men!" Asuka muttered, "Unit-02, providing back-up!"

"Unit-00, providing back-up as well," Rei confirmed.

He couldn't help but grin as he imagined Misato's reaction at the Children's rebellion.

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"Are you there yet?" Shinji asked. EVA-01 hid behind a building, watching the zebra-like textured Angel around the corner.

"Not yet," Rei's plain response came over the comm.

"You know an EVA can't move that fast!" Asuka scolded. "Damn!"

'Ah, yes, her cable got stuck now...' he reminded himself.

The farther they advanced, the more nervous he got. He had to do it soon; otherwise he would endanger them as well. It was kind of strange; he could almost swear that he was more anxious than he remembered to be.

He suddenly noticed his hand clenching and unclenching.

'Looks like old habits are indeed hard to break,' he mentally slapped himself as he stopped the almost mechanical movement.

He took a deep breath.

'Now!'

He hurled his EVA around, took aim and shot at the sphere-shaped Angel...

...which vanished...

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Hearing Shinji's screams for help as his EVA was sucked into the shadow, Asuka had a hard fight to maintain her calm.

'Relax! He knows what he's doing,' she told herself, gritting her teeth as his last scream was abruptly disrupted with static. *'At least, I **hope** he knows what he's doing...'*

"Asuka! Rei! Rescue Unit-01! Hurry!" Misato's order finally came over the comm. The pilot of EVA-

02 rushed forward, watching the ground carefully.

"Asuka, watch out!" Ritsuko warned, but she had already leaped up as soon as she saw the ground blackening. She got a hold on the nearest building, using her axe and Prog Knife to climb up to its top. After she reached the currently safe roof, she turned to the direction where EVA-01 had stood just a few minutes ago.

'You better come back!' she thought as she watched the city sinking more and more into the shadow. *'Or I'll come in and drag you out!'*

"Asuka. Rei. Withdraw..."

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"Now it's just the two of us!" Shinji grinned at the white space in front of him.

Gripping the controls, he prepared to fight his way out. He forced the EVA's right fist forward, trying to hit the Angels surface, to grasp it and rip it apart.

But it just went through an empty space.

"What?" His eyes widened in surprise and a growing panic.

He brought up his AT-Field, hoping for any effect on the 12th.

Nothing.

"DAMN IT!" he cursed as he quickly switched to life-support mode. But having used so much energy, he knew he wouldn't even have 10 hours left.

"Damn it, mother, how did you do it? Come on!" he pleaded, as if that could get any reaction out of his unmoving Unit. "You've done it the last time! Do I really have to die before you can help me?"

As to be expected, he received no answer...

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Asuka resisted nervously tapping her plugsuit-clad feet. With the Angel "shadowing" a large part of the city, NERV had hastily shifted their combat staff and necessary equipment to a provisional post just outside of Tokyo-3, from where they would strike as soon as they analyzed situation and came up with a plan to defeat the enemy and, at least as far as the *currently* commanding officer was concerned, rescue Shinji. But once the command changed... The redhead barely swallowed a sigh.

She currently stood silently near Misato; leaning her back against the railing of the outlook platform. The Major was watching the city while discussing the current situation with Hyuga and Aoba, while Asuka did her best to resist the urge to grab some binoculars and watch over there, to the spot where Shinji had vanished as well. She knew she was actually supposed to mock him by now, but she just didn't feel like it. It had already taken long enough to make it obvious that his plan hadn't worked.

'And now he doesn't have much time left. Damn it, baka! I've told you it's too dangerous!'

"...supposed to set us under pressure," Misato finished, lowering her binoculars when she noticed the Second Children staring at her feet. "Asuka?"

"Hmm?" The redhead tensed as she was suddenly addressed, but didn't change her position.

"You're worried?" her guardian asked surprisingly serious.

Asuka, however, tried her best to snap back to her role. She couldn't let it slip again... "Worried? Ha! Why should I be? It was his own fault that he's trapped in there!"

"I haven't even mentioned Shinji..." she gave a tired smile, before frowning again. "Yes, it is his own fault, since he acted without permission. And I'll have a word with him as soon as he gets back..."

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Shinji looked at the watch as the last minutes passed by. He could barely keep his eyes open; his sight dimming due to the missing purification of the LCL. The persisting smell of blood filled his nose.

"So this is it, huh? I've really thought I could finish it off easily this time," he confessed. "And instead, I'm the one who is going to die. I'm sorry, Asuka, for not keeping my promise..."

That last thought grieved him even more.

Asuka...

They had lost so much recently; each other was all they had left to depend on. And now, he would take even that from her...

He glanced at the watch just as it reached the last zero.

Yet he smiled.

He could feel her again.

"Mother..." he whispered. "Are you helping me now?"

Despite not being able to see or hear her; he could feel her affirmation.

"Thank you..."

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"...dropping 992 N2-mines within 1/1000 second, while using the AT-Fields of the two remaining EVAs..."

"MAJOR!" Hyuga's excited voice interrupted Ritsuko's briefing. "Something's happening with the Angel!"

Everyone bolted up at the news, rushing to the monitors to get a view at the announced spectacle. What was displayed at the screens shocked most of the attendees.

Two hands, obviously EVA-01's, tore the now blackened sphere in two. Blood sprayed the surroundings like a crimson rainfall as the purple giant fought its way out of 12th, ripping it literally apart. As it landed crashing on the street, the EVA looked more like a bloody demon than a savior of mankind. The deep, horrid howls of the berserk Unit just confirmed this image, as it managed to send shivers through the spines of the whole NERV staff, even while being several miles away from the beast.

Only one failed to hide her smile.

'About time, baka!'

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"Shinji! Shinji? Shinji!" he heard Misato calling. He squinted his eyes to adjust to the change of

brightness as the plug was opened. He felt his guardian embracing him immediately.

"It's okay... Misato... I'm fine..." he said tired with half-closed eyes.

"Didn't you say you would have a word with him?" he could hear a female voice in an sarcastic tone behind the sobbing Major.

As he moved his head to the entrance, he saw Asuka smiling at him. Weakly, he managed to smile back, before he passed out.

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Slowly, he opened his eyes. He knew immediately that he was back in hospital when he saw the blank ceiling.

'It's really been a while...' he grimaced.

As he turned his head, he saw Rei sitting by his bed, reading a book while waiting. She soon noticed his awakening, but remained silent for several seconds

"You can rest for today," she announced eventually as she took her satchel from the floor and stood up.

"We will handle everything for you."

"Thank you, Ayanami. But I don't think that will be necessary."

"So?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he nodded approving.

"Well, that's good for you."

Shinji shivered involuntary at her familiar words, but it was unlikely that the blue-haired girl had noticed on her silent way out. As she left, his mood instantly brightened though; he actually hardly suppressed a laughter, as he saw Asuka jerking away from the opening door.

However, once Rei was out of sight, the redhead entered Shinji's room. Seeing him almost bursting out laughing, she began to growl.

"And what's so funny, Third?"

"You know you didn't have to do that," he answered chuckling.

"I was just maintaining my role," Asuka tried to explain, but she didn't sound very convincing.

At least not to Shinji. "You just can't help but to eavesdrop, can you?"

She glared at him as she came closer. For a while, she just stood there by his bed; hands on her hips. The unusual silence and her uninterpretable facial impression filled him with dread of what was about to come.

Without any warning, she slapped him.

"Ouch!"

"That was for making me worry!" she explained angrily.

Just as surprising, she then crawled onto the bed, leaned over to him and gave him a deep, desperate kiss.

"And that was for coming back alive," she whispered as they finally parted after many seconds.

"Hmph. You were afraid of cameras in the girls' locker room and then you're kissing me like that in a room that is monitored for sure," he teased, but she just pointed up. Following the direction of her finger, he saw the remains of the security-camera, hanging shattered from the ceiling.

"They will notice that, you know," he told her, chuckling.

"Not yet," she shrugged, smirking. "So, I guess it didn't work like you intended, huh?"

"Weeell, not exactly..." he flashed a wry grin, but it faded soon. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"Shh... It's okay now," she soothed him, while she gently ran her fingers through his hair. "Weren't you afraid in there?"

"A bit, yes. But deep inside, I knew mother wouldn't let me die," he admitted as he held her even tighter. "I'm actually more afraid of the next one..."

Chapter II: Survive

The only sound that had remained was the clashing of waves.

Only stars, the moon and a red streak filled his vision.

His senses slowly returned to him, just to present him a sight he didn't want to see. But he didn't even find himself able to blink.

So instead he turned his head, only to face what seemed to be the ocean; red like blood.

'Ayanami...'

But she wasn't even there anymore.

'So, just like she came into my life, she left...'

Slowly, Shinji sat up. It wasn't until now that he noticed someone besides him.

'Asuka!'

The memories came back to him; all at once; flooding his mind.

"Stay away from me!"

She will never let me near her.

"You couldn't possibly understand me!!"

She will never let me know.

"But, if I have to be with you, I'd rather die!"

She will never want to be with me!

"Help me... Help me! Help me!! Don't leave me alone! Don't abandon me! Don't kill me!"

"...No"

She will never help me!"

Without even knowing what he was doing, he had climbed on top of the redheaded girl and began to finish what he started in 'there'.

His mind was empty, his eyes a blank stare as his hands clamped tighter around her neck; his heart burning with rage of betrayal, anger and loss.

But then, he stopped. Something warm caressed his cheek. The gentle touch of her hand reached him in his trance. It was, as if a dream that had still haunted him in his state of half-awareness, was finally fading.

Now, he knew for sure that he truly was back in the real world; the world of real feelings; the world of pain and the world of happiness.

The dream was over.

Slowly, he became aware of what he almost had done as her fingers trailed down his face.

She had needed him to stop. She had needed him to help her from himself...

That realization hit him.

SHE had needed HIM!

Not only now, but before as well. No matter how much she declared that she wouldn't.

And it hadn't been only her.

'Misato needed my help after Kaji's death. Rei needed my friendship even after I found out about her

origins. And Asuka... even though she would've never admitted it, I knew she needed me after the 15th.'

He had collapsed by now. His tears trailed down his cheeks unhindered, dropping onto Asuka's face.

All this time he begged for help, always wanting others to take care of his problems, he had never realized that they had their own to deal with.

How could he expect their help if no one had been helping them?

If *he* hadn't been helping them?

"I feel sick..."

He didn't understand what she meant with those words; if she felt ill or if she was just disgusted with this situation or with him. Right now, it didn't matter at all.

He cried for what seemed like hours while Asuka just lay there; not moving in any way.

As his sobbing finally ceased, he consciously noticed the bandages that covered her right arm and her left eye for the first time, fading in the white sand and her pale skin, but a stark contrast to the red of her hair and her plugsuit. Images of EVA-02, pierced and mutilated by the MP-EVAs and their replicas of the Longinus Lance flashed in his mind of the moment when he had finally arrived to the battlefield, much too late, unable to do anything but watch those white beasts tearing it apart, *devouring* it, so that he had known with sickening certainty that Asuka too, yet another of the few people close to him, was...

'*But she's alive,*' he assured himself, shaking his head in his attempt to clear it.

"Could you get off me now?" Asuka asked in a tired voice, not looking at him.

He realized that he still sat on top of her and struggled to get up. For the first time, he let his gaze wander around his surroundings. The dawn had set in, but the color of the 'water' didn't change with the upcoming light. There were some poles that stood near the shore; Misato's cross hung on one of them. Had he put it there? He didn't remember. Ruins were all that was left of the once glorious city of Tokyo-3.

But what dwarfed it all was the giant head of Rei – Lilith? – now tilted to the side, staring into the sky with a grotesque, never-ending smile on her lips.

"So that's it, huh?"

Shinji flinched at the hoarse voice next to him. Asuka had sat up by now, following his gaze over the ocean. He couldn't tell if she was in pain, but the wounds she must have had under those bandages were likely more than just scratches. Wounds she had because he hadn't acted in time.

The guilt he felt at the sight of the desolate world around him was nothing against the sickening feeling in his guts being confronted with this living reminder.

"A-Asuka, I..." He clenched his fists, staring to the ground.

"Not... Not yet, Shinji." She slowly lifted herself up. "We... we'll talk later, okay? Other things should have more priority now. And this day had been long enough..."

He gaped at her, honestly surprised by her apparent strength and, maybe even more so, by her reaction. Shinji knew how much Asuka hated his excuses and after all he had and hadn't done, despise him even more. He would have expected her to snap at him with all energy that was left in her, going as far as to physically hurt him even if she would have to hurt herself more in the process. But the way she cut him off hadn't been hostile and she hadn't simply ignored him either. And that caress before...?

Shinji eventually nodded, but she probably didn't notice anymore as she had already turned and slowly walked towards the remains of Tokyo-3. One last time he returned his view to the horizon.

"Don't you want to come back?" he asked the sea.

As expected, he received no answer.

Slowly, he turned and began to follow Asuka.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

There wasn't much left of the city. Most of it was blown up with the exposure of the Geofront. The hole where the giant sphere had been was hard to miss.

Shinji followed Asuka close by. He knew she was heading for home, or at least, what they hoped was left of it. However, they weren't moving very fast as he noticed, watching her taking slow steps through the ruins, trying to find a path that wouldn't require climbing.

'Of course, she got seriously injured and she seems to be very tired as well. I... I should do something,' he knew as much. But despite knowing, despite his wish, he still couldn't find himself able to act, still afraid of her reaction if he did. *'After all that happened, after all I've realized, I still can't help her! Still the same coward...'*

She suddenly tripped, slumping a bit forward before she regained her balance.

He clenched his fists *'...No!'*

"A-Asuka?" he gained her attention, causing her to stop. "Y-you're alright? I-I mean, you've got pretty hurt, and... you know?"

She lifted her bandaged arm and clenched her hand slightly. "I'm not sure. It doesn't hurt as much as it should." She turned her head, looking at him with tired eyes. "I'll make it home. I guess I'll feel better after I get some rest."

He nodded, not really satisfied by her answer, but he just couldn't come up with enough confidence to risk an argument right now.

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The suburbs gave a slightly better impression. Most of the buildings still stood, but were badly damaged, while yet others had barely a scratch. Cars and debris was spread on the streets and sidewalks.

Luckily, their apartment building was one of the few in better shape. However, as they entered their apartment, they were greeted with a poor sight. Almost every glass was broken due to the shockwave and everything that wasn't heavy enough or nailed down lay scattered on the floor.

Asuka merely sighed after a glance at the mess and headed for her room.

"I don't know about you, but I need some sleep before I can do anything else."

He nodded. "Good night, Asuka."

A small smile crept on her lips. "It's not night anymore, baka," she said and closed the door to her room behind her, leaving Shinji to his thoughts.

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After cleaning his bed from the dirt, he tried to get some rest as well. But sleep wouldn't come to him

that easily. The events of the previous day were played in his mind all over again whenever he closed his eyes. The invasion; that he didn't care if he'd die anymore; Misato's death and her goodbye; the sight of Asuka's EVA-02, ripped apart by the white Mass Production-EVAs; the appearance of Rei; the events that had been the Third Impact...

When had it begun to go wrong? When he had to murder Kaworu, who had been the first to openly show affection towards him? When he learned about Rei's past, or when she sacrificed herself for him? When he almost lost Asuka after she lost herself because of the 15th Angel? When Misato closed herself up to continue Kaji's quest for the truth, or with his own loss of that father figure he had found in the charming man? When he had lost all hope to get any kind of understanding with his real father, when the obsessed man had forced him to almost kill his best friend? Or even before, when he had still been happy...?

Yes, there had been times when he was happy here. He had been accepted by others; found friends. It had been only a few months or even weeks ago that he had been admired by Toji for living with Misato, was questioned all over about NERV and the EVAs by Kensuke, or teased by both of them when he showed interest in Rei or Asuka; just like Misato liked to do since the day she had taken him to live with her. Not very long ago that he, despite some 'stressful' times, still enjoyed living with the cheerful, yet sloppy woman and Asuka, after she had moved in with them when they participated their synch-training. Not very long ago that he had listened to Kaji's advice. Not very long ago that...

But now that all just seemed to be faint memories from events that had happened several years ago, in a far away past.

Shinji cringed in his bed. It had been those feelings that had made him want to return, because he had thought he could feel like that again once everyone returned. But now, as it seemed that no one would follow him and Asuka; the thoughts of those joyful times, knowing that they would never come back, hurt him even more compared to the dark times that came afterwards.

"As long as you live, you can find the chance to achieve happiness anywhere." he remembered his mother's words.

But how was he supposed to find happiness when they were all alone?

He sighed. It was obvious that he wouldn't be able to find sleep; not when he couldn't find a way to avoid thinking of anything at all. He couldn't even listen to his S-DAT; not only that the batteries had been empty since yesterday; it had also been hit by one of the larger parts of debris that had broken free from the ceiling; shattered as seemingly everything of his previous life.

'Was it even yesterday? As far as I know, we could have been days, weeks or even years inside there...'

Finally, he decided to get up, though there wasn't very much he could do. The TV was broken and even if not, there wouldn't be anything broadcasted from now on anyway. If he tried to clean up the mess in the apartment, he would most likely make too much noise and wake Asuka. The cello was out of question as well, for both reasons.

Nonetheless, he would better try to find something to occupy his mind.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Am I... dead?"

"I don't want to be alone..."

'Why is he here...?'

"So, that's all I am to you after all?!"

"It makes me sick just to look at you!"

"Ikari, did you try to understand?"

"If I can't have you for me alone, I don't want you at all..."

"Asuka, help me! You're the only one who can!"

"Pathetic..."

"So everyone should just die..."

'Because of me?'

Asuka bolted up; breathing heavily as she awoke from her nightmare. The shirt she had been able to change into along with a pair of shorts after getting out of the plugsuit with some struggling, was now drenched in sweat. There was no way she could get back to sleep. Not with these thoughts haunting her dreams.

'Damn it!' she cursed to herself, bringing her good arm up and wiped her forehead as she tried to calm down. 'Is it too much to ask for some rest? Hasn't it been enough? I can't... I don't want this anymore...'

As her breathing calmed and the sweat dried, she noticed a well-known and very welcomed scent in the air, reaching her nose: the smell of cooking. She carefully got up, following the scent to the kitchen. It didn't surprise her to find Shinji there, but that he seemed to prepare every perishable food they had in the house did. It wasn't as much as one would expect for a three-person household, but definitely more than two people could eat without getting sick.

"I didn't know you had such an appetite," she commented with a faint smile.

"Huh?" He jerked slightly before turning to her, obviously surprised by her sudden entrance. "Asuka! Did I wake you?"

"No, not really," she said with a frown, the trace of amusement instantly vanished.

"W-well, h-how do you feel?" Shinji muttered sheepishly.

"As well as it can be expected under such circumstances I guess..." she sighed, but then quickly tried to shake her head free from thoughts that would lead to nothing but to a depression she couldn't use now.

"So, what are you doing here?" she changed the topic.

"Uh?" He glanced at the stove. "Cooking?"

She smirked weakly as she rolled her eyes. "I can see that, baka! But why?"

"Well, since we have no power for the freezer, this would have become rotten soon anyway and even faster if it's raw."

"Hm, seems you CAN think sometimes," she mocked playfully, trying her best to keep the mood up.

"Uhm, thanks?" he said somewhat unbelieving at her 'compliment'. But then his face grew serious.

"Asuka, about..."

Her frown quickly cut him off. "I've told you already, we'll talk about that later..."

"But- We... we have time to talk now..."

Asuka grimaced. She could tell that he was anxious to share whatever dwelled on his mind and she knew pretty well what that was. But time wasn't so much the issue.

'I just can't.' She had to admit to herself as looked at him as he waited for an answer. *'Not yet.'*

She wasn't sure why – or she just didn't want to be. A part of her wanted to talk, to confront him, to find out if... And yet, there was something that made her hesitate. Something that rather made her want to wait if this wouldn't solve itself eventually. And it would be hard enough not to fall back into destructive habits and prejudices to not let herself be distracted by such silly "something".

Whatever she did... there was no way she'd let herself end up being truly alone...

"No, we haven't.," she answered whispering, more to herself. "It would change too much..."

With nothing more than a confused look, he returned his attention to the stove.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

When he was finished, they ate some of the food. It wasn't much of a meal, but something told them that even (more or less) fresh ingredients like these could be a luxury soon. The rest was carefully packed, so that it would last as long as possible.

"So... What are we going to do now?" Shinji asked after a few moments of silence.

"Basic survival, I guess," Asuka shrugged, rather obviously hiding whatever worries dwelled on her mind behind a mask of profession. "We'll have to make sure that we'll have food, water, medical supplies. Electricity would be helpful as w..." She cut herself off when she saw the mourning look on his face. "What?"

"I... I don't think I can..." he whispered. He felt as if he would break down any second; his whole body quivered as his feelings threatened to overwhelm him again. "How should I? After... after... that! We're all alone! Everyone's gone... How..."

"Shinji!" she yelled angrily; cutting him off. She leaned over the table, causing him to look up to her. "Damn it, how stupid are you? Do you really want to keep mourning about something you can't make undone anyway? Do you really just want to starve and die eventually instead?"

"No..." he mumbled lowly.

"Then get a grip, will you?" After a few moments of silence and both calmed down again, she slumped back into her chair while letting out a deep sigh. "So, do you have any ideas?"

"Well... the... water is still running," Shinji muttered halfhearted. He knew she was right. But it didn't feel that way, having to make so many decisions, to push everything away so soon, when it seemed impossible to ever do so. "And... and it seems to be clear. But the rest of food we have left will sooner or later go bad..."

"Yeah, most likely we'll need to grow something by ourselves, but that'll take some time."

He nodded slowly. "There's dried food in the shelters, I think. Maybe for the case that the refugees would get trapped in there during an attack. I remember seeing the packages there."

"Huh?" She looked surprised. "When have you been in a shelter?"

"D-during the attack of 14th..." He avoided her gaze, ashamed of his decision back then to leave everyone behind.

"Yes, I remember..." she mumbled, her tone strangely hard to interpret. "Let's drop that topic, okay? It doesn't matter now."

Somewhat surprised by her reassurance, he looked back up.

"What?" she snapped after a few seconds, visibly uncomfortable by his stare.

"N-nothing..." he muttered and shook his head. "Uhm, for the medical supplies, Tokyo-3-hospital is nearby, maybe it's still intact..." he trailed off again.

"Oh, what is it now?" Asuka groaned. "The idea isn't that bad, not that I haven't thought of it myself."

"Toji's sister had been there, before she was transferred..."

He didn't look up, but her annoyed sigh was clearly audible. "You're still not over that, huh?"

"It's not that, I..." He sighed. "Do you think they'll come back?"

That question didn't really seem to surprise her, but she didn't answer right away as if she hadn't actually thought about it before. Of course, she too could only guess whether or not there was a possibility that they weren't or wouldn't remain alone. But if she had hope then, maybe, he could too.

"I don't know" she eventually muttered. "Maybe. But we can't rely on that. I think they would be back by now, if they want..." She suddenly shook her head, her frown growing and voice sharpening as she realized where this conversation was heading. "How often do I have to tell you: we'll talk about that later?!"

"I'm sorry..."

Her head bolted up, glaring at him. But then her face softened slowly and instead of the expected verbal assault, Shinji heard a light chuckling from his companion. Even though he didn't really understand at first, he soon got affected by her mood and joined in.

That moment, despite – or maybe just because – of the darkest of all situations, the sound of laughing filled those rooms for the first time in weeks...

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

They decided to go to the nearest shelter first, but when they got there, they found the entrance buried with debris. So they went on to check the hospital instead. It was mid-afternoon by then and sun burned as always, not caring that almost the entire population of its third planet had been wiped out. The hospital seemed to be in perfect shape, most likely because it was built far away from the inner city, to be out of range of an Angel attack.

As they entered, Asuka almost instantly brought her arm up, blocking Shinji's way.

"What...?" he started, but Asuka already answered with a question of her own.

"Don't you see that?"

"Huh?" Shinji wondered, looking around for something strange. He couldn't see anything unusual in the sparsely lit entrance, aside of the fact that it was completely deserted: The receptionist's counter, a few rows of chairs for waiting patients and visitors, a few plants, probably fake, for decoration... Then he realized. "The lights are on...?"

"They most likely have an emergency power-generator for black outs." She suddenly grabbed his shirt. "COME ON!" She dragged him over to the staircase and went down as deep as possible.

'At least she seems to be okay again,' Shinji thought regarding the redhead's speed as he and Asuka hurried through the basement's floor, looking at the labels of every door.

"Where is it?" she muttered more to herself.

"Where's what?" he asked anyway. He would have felt more useful if he could help searching.

But instead of giving him an answer, Asuka let out a triumphant yell. "A-HAA!" She finally stopped at

a steel door, labeled 'HIGH VOLTAGE! KEEP OUT!'.

"Open it!" she commanded, shoving him towards it to emphasize her order.

Shinji just gave her a perplexed look. "How?"

"Just kick it in! Jump against it! Geez, do I have to think of everything?"

He wanted to protest again, but stopped himself. She would win an argument anyway. And with her injuries, she actually had a good reason why she couldn't get through the massive door herself.

Not that he had any idea how he should be able to do such a seemingly impossible task. So he settled for the simplest thing first: he pulled the handle... and was surprised when the door actually opened.

"Well, so much for security..."

They were greeted by the humming sound of the generator. Asuka rushed in and surveyed the machine a few moments, then pulled some levers on the control panel at its side. The humming ceased; the lights flickered a bit before they went out. In other words: It was dark.

"Eh, AsukAAAAHHH!" Shinji shrieked in shock, when she suddenly switched on a flashlight just below her face. "That wasn't very funny..." he panted, clutching his chest while she just chuckled at his reaction.

"I'd say it was," she said innocently.

"Whatever you say," he muttered, before he returned his view to the machine in the dark. "Too bad it's so big."

"Huh? Oh, the generator. Yeah, but I expected something like this. We couldn't use it anyway. As I said; it's for emergencies and not meant to run 24/7."

"Then why did you bother to turn it off?" Shinji wondered.

"Who knows if we'll need the instruments here someday?" Asuka argued. "We shouldn't waste the fuel. I don't think there's much left in it anyway."

"So that's why you rushed like this?"

"Yeah, sorry about that..."

Silence.

"Shinji?" she called him, a trace of worry mixing into her voice when he still gave no sign of life after several seconds.

"Did... did I just hear the great Asuka Langley Soryu apologizing for something?"

She grimaced. "And if you don't hurry up, you may never hear it again!" she warned and left... with the flashlight... leaving him in the dark...

"H-hey, wait!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The upper floors were fairly lit from the daylight outside, so they could get a good look around even without power. The long corridors were partly even open to one side, so the patients were able to get some fresh air without having to go too far away from their rooms. Each room was labeled, so it wasn't much of a problem to find the one to the supply room where the medicine and other pharmacy were stored. However, unlike the generator room, this one was locked.

Shinji threw himself against the door for what must have been the sixth or seventh time.

"Ah, just leave it and let's go," Asuka groaned as she got bored by his futile attempts. "We don't need any medicine now. It's good enough to know that we can get it here when we need it."

"And what in case of an emergency?" He collided with the door again, which slightly gave in. "When we need to hurry and can't get in then?" After taking some steps backwards, he bolted forward and crashed through the door, finally, and Asuka already braced herself to witness him crashing against the racks. But he catch himself in time and tumbled back to the door, leaning panting against the frame.

"And... since we're already here, we... we should check your wounds."

She frowned at her bandages. "I don't know... It barely hurts, but..." she trailed off as she remembered just too well how she got them. The impact of each lance; the grip of each claw; the bite of each jaw...

"Asuka, please... It could get worse if we don't treat them properly," Shinji insisted – concerned, Asuka told herself, not pitiful.

After some seconds of silence, she nodded hesitantly. Shinji grabbed some new bandages and followed his companion to the next room, where she sat down on one of the beds.

"Should... I...?" he asked uneasily.

"No!" Asuka declared instantly. "I... I need to do this myself..."

Taking a deep breath, she began to undo the bonds, beginning at the hand. Her left one quivered as she carefully unrolled the bandage, not taking the risk to painfully rip a fresh wound open; her eyes were closed. It was bad enough to imagine the marks she would have to carry from now on, she didn't want to see them as well. She knew it was silly, but... No, it **was** silly! She would have to look sooner rather than later anyway. And yet she needed to force her free eye open to take a look at the expected injuries.

But there weren't any.

Quickly, she unwrapped the rest of her arm. Nothing.

"Not even a scar..." she whispered unbelieving.

"Huh?"

"My arm! It-it was sliced... I mean... how...?" She didn't finish the sentence; instead she grasped at the patch on her eye, eagerly ripping it off. The vision was blurred at first, but quickly blinking a few times, she soon could see as clearly as before. "How is it?"

"It looks..." he trailed off as he looked into her eyes. "...fine..."

Suddenly realizing what they were doing, they broke their gaze quickly.

"We better get going now," both stammered simultaneously.

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

They still had some daylight left, but the next shelter was too far away to make it there and back again.

"We might check the shops on the way and see what we could use," Asuka suggested as they went through the ruined streets towards their home.

"Huh? But I don't have any money."

Asuka halted and turned to face him. "Baka! Who do you want to pay?" She sighed. "This is anarchy, Shinji. There's nothing we can do about it."

Shinji looked around, taking in the wide, empty street as if it was the first time he noticed. "I still don't

think that it's right," he muttered.

"Better get used to it," Asuka suggested with a solemn voice. "This will most definitely not be the last time we need to 'borrow' something."

They entered the next grocery store they saw. Shelves had been overthrown; their contents combined on the floor into an icky mass of broken eggs, spilled juices, instant noodles and other indefinable ingredients.

"Uhargh! Gross!" the redhead complained as she took big steps through the mass to reach the other end of the hall.

"It was your idea... So, what should we get?"

"I don't know," she replied, scanning the rows. "Not much left in here..."

"We'll better get some instant meals and cans. Those won't go bad that soon."

"Great, take some beers as well and we would be living Misato's dream..." As soon as she said it, she bit her tongue. Turning around, she saw Shinji, his head cast down; lost in his thoughts. "Hey, I... I..."

"I know, you didn't mean it like that." He looked up, giving her a weak smile. "She really wouldn't mind this kind of 'diet' at all, huh?"

She returned the smile, but neither of them said much afterwards. They grabbed as much as they could carry and headed home.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Still have to clean this mess up..." Shinji mumbled as he entered the living room. When they had reached the apartment, the sun had already begun setting, casting shadows everywhere.

"You think that's worth it?" Asuka questioned, sipping on a still warm soda can that they had brought from the grocery store.

He turned around at her voice. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"We will have to grow our own food, remember? I doubt we could live by what we can raise on the balcony."

"So... you want to move out?" he figured.

"We'll have to, I guess..." she shrugged. "Unless you want to travel around all day."

"But where to go? Even the nearest farms are several miles away," he complained. He didn't like the thought of leaving the first place where he really felt at home. "And I wouldn't suggest moving too far away from a city; we'll never know if we need new supplies."

"Hmmm..." Asuka threw her head back, pondering awhile. "What about a market-garden?"

"Huh?" Shinji asked surprised. "You think you can live there?"

"Why not? It's not that unusual that – at least if it's a family business – the owners live there," the redhead explained. "Another plus would be that they usually have a greenhouse, so we would be independent from the climate."

"A greenhouse?" The dark-haired boy didn't think that was very convincing. "Uhm... Have you seen any unbroken glass today?"

"Geez, don't be so pessimistic!" she scolded.

He sighed in defeat. "Okay, okay! I'll search the phone book and a map..."

"That's the spirit! Go get it!"

"You could help, you know?"

"Phht!" She threw the now empty can simply over her shoulder. "Is it my fault you haven't cleaned this mess yet?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Finally!" Asuka declared exhausted. "And it just took us half of the day to get here!"

They had found only two market gardens in the area of Tokyo-3 and one of it was too close to the Geofront to possibly have survived the blast. The other one was about ten miles from their home at the other side of the city, and combined with the hot weather, it was quite a trip.

"Well, it looks okay..." Shinji surveyed the surroundings.

"Oh, don't try to sound too enthusiastic!" his companion said sarcastically. "Come on, let's check the garden!"

Said garden was – as far as they could tell – in a good condition and fairly big, regarding that it lay in a capitol like Neo Tokyo-3, even if only in the suburbs. The former owners had grown several kinds of vegetables, from tomatoes to cucumbers; from lettuce to onions; so they wouldn't have to worry about their chances of successful cultivation because of possible problems with the mold. Actually, it seemed enough that they would have supplies for quite a while. Either the business didn't go well lately or it was so good that they had needed to have so much resources. Either way, it meant that the chances were good that seeds were to be found somewhere as well. And indeed, one of the two sheds on the area stored all kinds of them; fortunately labeled, as neither of the two would have been able to tell what would come out of what. The other, smaller shed was empty; the reason might have been that a window had apparently been broken even before the Impact already. Either someone had broken in and stolen what was in there for whatever reason, or the gardeners had emptied it to prevent just that.

In the greenhouse, they found mostly sprouts of vegetables that would be planted outside once they would get big enough. Shinji even noticed a few rice-seedlings, though it was doubtful that they could have been grown here economically enough to make profit. The greenhouse itself had been shielded by the main building, and thus only one pane of glass was broken and three had scratches.

"Nothing that can't be repaired..." the redhead grinned, "...by you."

Shinji ignored the last part. "Asuka, can we go now?"

"GO? We just came here! After such a walk I may add!" she fumed. "And we haven't checked the house yet."

"But we still haven't been at the shelters. And I still think we should get that food. Better safe than sorry."

"I won't argue with that. But I think they left us something to get there much faster," she grinned again and pointed to the garage.

He paled. "You... you don't mean... I mean, we don't even know how to drive, and what's with all the debris on the street and all?!"

"You think it's harder to drive a car than to pilot an EVA?"

All he could do was to sigh. She had a point there, but he still felt uneasy about the thought. Taking groceries, medicine, probably even a house and now driving... all things he had learned all his life that he wasn't supposed to do. How was he supposed to just forget about that?

"Shinji!"

"What now?" he jerked.

"Looks like we don't have to worry about electricity," she said confidently while looking at something at the roof and he followed her gaze. On the tiles were large, gray squares mounted; divided into dozens of smaller ones. Long cracks split the glass on top of some them.

"Solar panels?" Shinji wondered. "But they seem to be broken..."

"Nah, not all of them," Asuka instantly brushed his pessimism off. "The rest should give us enough energy."

"You think so? What about nights and rainy days? We won't have power then."

"Baka, the energy will be saved until it's used. But you have a point. Solar panels are commonly used as addition to the regular power supply. We won't be able to waste it like before, I guess."

Finally, Shinji nodded in agreement. "Well, okay, that's one problem less..."

As it was shown later, this wasn't the only device the previous owners had installed to use natural recourses. A large tank to fetch and filter rainwater was embedded in the ground. Though it shouldn't be used as drinking water if not necessary; it would definitely help them to save a lot of their water stocks in case the public supply would stop eventually.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Since Asuka insisted on inspecting the house, there was no way to fight it. They had to break in, or better said: Shinji had to break in. Luckily for him, there was a window on the ground floor that was just leaned on. With a bit of scrambling, he managed to enter the kitchen and open the front door from inside to let Asuka in.

The house wasn't that big, so they could get a rather quick overview. A small hall led to the living room; obviously the biggest room of the house and from where everything led to the rest of it. To the right was the kitchen, to the left was a corridor, leading towards a bathroom, a storage room and two sleeping rooms, of which one looked like it hadn't been used for quite some time and was most likely for guests. Wooden stairs led up to the first floor, but the three rooms there were mostly empty and didn't seem to be used lately.

The sight of destruction was better than in their own residence, but that wasn't what gave Shinji an uneasy feeling. He still didn't like the idea of taking over the home of someone else. Not long ago, people had lived here that he didn't even know; doing their daily chores; never expecting anything to change. Their presence was still very vibrant to Shinji, their smell still lingering in the air.

Who knew if they would have allowed the two teenagers even to set a foot in their home, not to mention to live in there? He was relieved that none of the rooms appeared to have been that of a child. He really didn't know if he could have handled that sight without breaking down.

While Asuka was still busy inspecting the rooms, he waited for her on the sofa in the living room. As his eyes wandered around, from the table in front of him that was empty aside from a vase with a single flower in it; over the two paintings and the clock that decorated the walls; to the picture that stood on the TV. The later caught his interest. It seemed to be quite old; at least twenty years he guessed by the

quality. It was a family picture, obviously taken on a picnic on a sunny day in autumn. But what was really strange about it, the man and his wife seemed somehow.. similar...

'Now, if her hair was more purple and he had a ponytail... Nah...' He sighed. *'I guess, I'm just seeing things. Just because they're no longer...'*

"Do you need some more time to stare at other people's pictures or can we go now?" muttered a voice behind him, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"No," he mumbled and placed the picture back, "we can leave now..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Now that the redhead was finally pleased with the sight-seeing they moved on to the garage. As they opened the gate, they were greeted by a green pick-up, labeled with the logo of the family-company.

"You're sure you want to drive that?" he asked.

"Listen, if you want to move with all your stuff here by feet, feel free to do so. I will take this baby here."

"But we don't even have..." She held a bunch of keys in front of his nose. "...the keys... Where did you get those?"

She shrugged. "I've found them on a desk. Come on, get in or do I have to drag you?"

Sighing, he entered and placed himself on the passenger's seat. Meanwhile, Asuka started the engine and hit the gear.

"Ha, and you said that would be hard!" she mocked as the car sprung to life with a loud roar. As she stepped on accelerator, however, the vehicle only jerked forward a bit, the engine obviously stalled. "Not a word," she warned, glaring at him. Not that he would have dared.

She started again, this time handling the clutch and accelerator more carefully. Slowly, they began their drive towards the closest shelter before they would drive home. They didn't get much faster though. More than one time, Asuka forgot to change the gears or stepped too hard on one of the pedals.

"Verfluchter Mist!" she cursed. "Couldn't this have been an automatic?"

"I guess there is something else we need to survive," Shinji said after being silent the whole trip until now.

"And what would that be?" Asuka asked annoyed.

"Knowledge."

"Yeah, just rub it in!" she groaned.

"I didn't mean it like that," he quickly tried to appease her. "But... we'll *need* to know how to keep machines in shape, how to grow our food properly or how to treat major injuries and diseases. We'll need books or something to learn things like that..."

She looked at him curiously. "Hm, you could be ri..."

"ASUKA, LOOK OUT!"

She barley evaded a broken-down car...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Since they had to move sooner or later, they decided for sooner or more exactly: the next day. It didn't take long for Shinji to pack his things. First of all he didn't have much stuff to begin with and some of it, like his cello, had been destroyed during Third Impact. So all he took were some clothes and the sign that had fallen from his door. 'Shinji's lovely Suite'.

His eyes wandered to room of the one who had put it there; a welcome sign that was supposed to always remember him that he had found a home here. Misato had been the first one who made him feel welcome, to feel at home; what it would be like to live in a family. Of all the people he had known she might be the one he would miss most.

He moved on to pack all food and drinks that were left in the apartment. As he had anticipated, Asuka needed some more time to pack her stuff, but at last she came out of her room carrying four cardboard boxes. It was nothing compared to the amount of boxes she had when she moved in, but still much compared to his single carton.

"Hey, Shinji, could you get the rest?"

'I should have known...' he thought, glancing past her to see another five in her room.

Once they had loaded everything in the pick-up, they headed for their new residence. It was strange; even though they could come back here whenever they wanted, it felt like they would leave forever; the only place he had ever liked to call his home.

He didn't look back when they left.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Another day was over. They hadn't done much more than to move their belongings to the new place where they wanted to live and work from now on.

Shinji lay in his new bed. He still wasn't able to sleep very well, so he found himself staring at the ceiling.

Another unfamiliar ceiling.

Hopefully the last.

As to be expected, Asuka had chosen the larger bedroom, leaving him with the smaller one that had most likely been reserved for guests. Not that he really minded. The smell of the previous owners wasn't as prominent here. Also, it was still big enough for him and also had a window, unlike the small room he had to move into when Asuka had joined him and Misato in the apartment and had taken his old one.

He tried to free his mind of those memories of the past. Otherwise, he might wouldn't get any sleep at all that night again.

After they had unpacked their belongings, they had taken a closer look at the house; or better yet: at the furniture and junk, and what might be of use for them. Which was easier said than done; who could predict if they would need exactly that brush to save their lives one day? Though Shinji still felt more uneasy about having to sort out and throw away things that they had no use for, but might have had a special meaning to the righteous owners. He just couldn't ignore that it wasn't their own property they were dealing with now.

Maybe he would have a chance to escape these thoughts tomorrow. They had planned to try getting to Kofu then, the nearest city that still had an University. There, they hoped to find a library that would cater all their academic needs to gain the knowledge to survive on their own. It would be a long, though necessary trip and the sooner it lay behind them, the sooner he might be able to get some rest...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

They left in the next morning, rather late than early. Asuka had have similar problems to fall asleep as he had, with the result that both had overslept. It was a three hour ride, as the direct roads were blocked by abandoned and wrecked cars, vans and trucks. Due to this, and because it was Shinji's first time to drive, they slowly crept either in slalom around those obstacles, on the sideways of the roads or on paths through *seemingly* even land (the bumpy ride certainly not to the delight of a certain redhead).

It was almost noon when they arrived at a lookout point over Kofu.

"It's kinda strange," Shinji muttered, gazing over the high buildings, shining in the sun, "seeing this city so intact and unaffected, as if nothing ever happened..."

"Yeah," Asuka agreed, though she couldn't shake the feeling of emptiness that she had before, when they had watched Neo Tokyo-3 during the black out. "You know, there might even still be working electricity and running water. Maybe we should scratch Tokyo-3 and move here directly. We could save ourselves a lot of wor..."

"No..." he cut her surprisingly firmly off. "I... I don't want to leave... home anymore..."

Though she gave him a questioning glare, she didn't ask any further. She knew too well what he meant...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Since it was about lunchtime, their first stop was at a department store where they grabbed some foods that didn't need to be heated up, before they made their way to the Yamanashi University. To get there resulted to be a bigger problem than they had expected. Not only that one could easily get lost if he didn't know his way through the city's streets, but Kofu was also much more populated at the time of the Third Impact than Tokyo-3 was, where most civilians had been evacuated. Thus, there were so many car-wrecks that it was even harder to navigate through the streets than it had been on their way there (the more it angered them when they learned later on that they could have avoided all this by driving around the city, as the University lay more outside of it).

Once they finally reached their destination, it was thankfully not very hard to find the library on the large campus-area by using the installed maps. Luckily for them, the University's Faculty of Medicine and its library, which had been in the city of Tamaho before the Second Impact, had been transferred to the Kofu campus.

They went through the several floors of the building, grabbing every book of which they thought it might be of use eventually: medical, engineering, architecture... by the end, they had over a dozen baskets full of books, folders and similar material; enough to study for years. But sadly, they noticed that the library was too specialized for books about gardening- or 'do it yourself'-tips, which meant that they had to go back to the city again and find a public library or a bookstore.

The good thing about this was that it gave them the opportunity to fetch some supplies that they wouldn't (or at least only hardly) be able to get in the remains of Tokyo-3 anymore; not only food, but also tools and utensils that could be needed. Asuka even insisted to get some more clothes. The bad thing was that they lost a lot of time thanks to this additional trip.

It was already in the late afternoon that they finally left Kofu.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

They had barely left the town when Shinji suddenly hit the breaks so hard that they were thrown forward into the belts.

"Great, thanks to you I'm now even going to lose that little bit of food I got today!"

"Sorry," he excused slyly. "I guess I still have to learn how to accelerate and break more smoothly..."

Asuka shot a glare at him, but swallowed her agreement and looked around. "Why are we stopping here, anyway?"

"There's a wheat field," he stated, pointing to the left window.

"So...?"

"Well, I will need flour to bake and for noodles and such," Shinji explained. "And since I haven't noticed any seeds for crops at..."

"Yeah, yeah, I got you," she groaned. "So what are you waiting for? Hurry up and get some grains so we can finally go home."

"Uhm, you mean you're not going to help me?"

She didn't respond to this. Not that she needed to. Her glare was answer enough. Sighing, he opened the door and got out of the car.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It took at least fifteen minutes until Shinji returned with an armful of wheat. He seemed to be in quite a rush, as he quickly dumped the crops on the back of the pick-up and jumped back in. At the latest when he hit the gas and turned with screeching tires, Asuka got a bit anxious.

"Geez, what's the big deal?" she cursed at him while trying to keep the balance in her seat. He didn't appear to be frightened of anything, so it was doubtful that he had been running away from any kind of danger.

"I saw a farm over there," he told her enthusiastically.

The redhead rolled her eyes. That he could be so excited about such a triviality. "And? I thought you didn't want to move to a farm?"

"No, but there will be some animals," he explained as he sharply turned from the main street onto a rough sideway.

"Animals?" Asuka frowned, not just because of the sickening maneuver. "That's exactly why *I* wouldn't want to live on a farm..."

"Well, then how am *I* supposed to be able to get things like eggs or milk to cook with?"

"Milk? You want to move a cow?"

Shinji shrugged. "Maybe they have goats..."

"Goat-milk?" she grimaced. "Are you trying to poison me?"

Shinji just sighed. There would be no chance to argue once she set her mind on stubbornness.

"Fine, no milk then..." he mused as he finally stopped the car in front of what seemed to be a barn. "But then don't complain if I can't bake you everything you want me to..." he added mumbling as he went out.

"You said something?"

"No, I..." he trailed off and suggested her to be quiet with his hand. "Do you hear that?"

Curiously frowning, she followed him out of the car. Actually, it was hard not to hear it: loud squeaking, bleating and neighing came from the larger buildings on the old-fashioned farm-area.

Shinji lost no time and rushed towards the nearest one, opened the door... and froze.

These animals were starving after several days without food; some of them had wounds, either from having tried to free themselves or even from a desperate attack of cannibalism by their own kind.

Shinji only absently noticed his hand clenching and unclenching slightly as he watched this disturbing scene in shock.

"We... we have to help them..."

It would be like this all over the world: animals, pets waiting for their owners to return, to feed and take care of them. But they would never come...

"Shinji, you can't go everywhere and take care of every living thing," Asuka spoke seriously behind him as if she had read his mind. "You can't save everyone..."

"I know..." He tensed. "I know too well..."

Without further arguing, he went to the gates, opened them one by one and unleashed those animals that were restrained. He didn't lead them out though, and there was no need for that either. They would find their way to freedom, where they at least had a chance to survive.

-x-x-x-x-x-

The chickens however were another story. One would think they would have grown weary and were easily exhausted after days of starvation. But apparently they had found enough nourishments from the ground of their wide chicken run by themselves, as they were remarkably agile when Shinji tried his best as "Chicken Hunter". For at least half an hour, he chased them eagerly through the corral while Asuka simply watched him, partly bemused, partly annoyed; leaning on the fence that surrounded it.

Finally one wasn't fast enough to slip through his fingers in the very last moment.

"Look," he triumphed, lifting the anxious and wildly struggling bird up in the air, "I've got one!"

"Shinji?" A small, amused smile crept on Asuka's face.

"Yes?"

"That's a rooster." She shook her head; slightly chuckling at his dumbfounded face as he lost his grip of the bird, which ran immediately to the opposite corner of the run. "What have planned about transporting them anyway? That is, without having them run and flap around on – or worse – *in* the car?"

"Uh... I... dunno...?"

Her shoulders slumped down and a sigh emitted from her. "I should have known that it'll up to me to do the thinking. Wait here, okay?"

He just nodded quietly before she went away.

It took about ten minutes until she returned, carrying two small cage-boxes and an obviously quite heavy sack that she dragged behind.

"Uhm... You need any help with that?" he asked sheepishly, but couldn't quite say whether the grimace

he got in response was supposed to be a "Yes, of course I need you stupid mule to do the hard work!" or a "No, I don't ever need your help with anything, you baka!"
So in the end, he did nothing.

"I can understand the cages, but what's in the sack for?" he continued when she unloaded herself in front of the fence.

"There's wheat in there," she answered casually. "And by the way, this is a much more effective way to get some than to pick an armful of straw from the fields..."

"So... what are we doing with that now?" he questioned, ignoring the offensive remark about his earlier actions.

Asuka gave him a disbelieving look. "Why do I have my doubts that males were supposed to be the great, tricky hunters when I look at you?" She shook her head. "We're setting up a trap of course!"

With that she put a heap of corns in one cage and placed it on the other side of the fence. This procedure was repeated with the other one. Afterwards, she told Shinji to lay trails of the crop towards the entrance of the cages.

It didn't take long until the first of the hungry birds literally picked up a trail and went straight into the box; unknowing that the door was slammed shut a second later and its lock bar was shut. The hen's loud protests about its temporary restricted living conditions weren't enough to scare a second one away from suffering the same fate.

"See?" Asuka triumphed, picking the cages up, ignoring the wild flapping the sudden movement evoked. "That's how you catch something that is too fast for you! Now grab the sack, so we can go home!"

"Yeah," he simply muttered, opened the gate and left the chicken-run; followed by half a dozen of birds that curiously explored their newfound freedom...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The sun was already setting when they finally left the farm and it didn't took long that they were engulfed by the darkness of the night. Of course, this didn't really help to navigate; even with the lights on.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Shinji questioned after a few hours of 'blind'-driving. "I think we should have gone left three turns before..."

"How should I know?" his red-haired co-driver snapped back. "You're the one who's supposed to be able to read the signs without problems!"

"Then why did you insist on driving to the right?"

"It was meant as a joke! Why is it my fault you're too stupid to get it?"

"A... a joke?? I..." He cut himself off, hit the brakes without warning and shut down the motor.

"What is it now?" Asuka groaned, but Shinji just closed his eyes and sighed.

"You know what, Asuka?" he muttered. "It was a long day and I'm... I'm way too tired for this, okay? I mean, it's late and; let's face it, we're lost and it's doubtful that we can find the way back at night..."

"So you're saying that you want to sleep here? In the car? Now?" She saw him slowly nodding in response.

"No way!" she spat. "We can sleep in the next house that comes our way! I'm not gonna sleep right next you, where you can live out your perverted dreams about me!"

He seemed to be shocked the moment she said it. Instead of his usual blushing and muttered denials, his eyes gained a mournful look, which he quickly turned away.

"We... we have seen the last building more than an hour ago," he mumbled. "If you... want to, I... I can sleep outside..."

"Oh geez, stop whining already!" she growled. "Fine, we'll sleep in here! But you better stay on your side! And don't get any stupid ideas!" she warned and readjusted her seat into a horizontal position.

"Good night, Asuka..." he said, before dimming the lights and doing the same.

"Whatever..."

To sleep was easier said than done. She definitely felt uneasy, lying next to him, only a few centimeters apart. Especially regarding how much was still unsaid between them. But it was still too early for that. Maybe it would even be better if it was left unsaid and they just lived on like now. It wasn't that bad like this, was it? And what if he would...

She stopped herself. Thoughts like that didn't really help in her attempt to sleep. Neither did the uncomfortable seat or the moonlight that came through the window.

At least it was warm.

At least, the nightmares of the nights before didn't return this time.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

They awoke with the dawn of the next morning, when the morning sun shone through the windows and the hens made themselves aware with an audible clucking.

It became obvious that they were closer to Neo Tokyo-3 than they had thought. After just five minutes of driving they encountered the first sign that showed the way and barely 20 minutes later they were already back at their new home. Unnecessary to say that Asuka wasn't very happy at this revelation.

They had quite a big breakfast that Shinji prepared (partly as excuse for having been responsible that she had to sleep in the car instead of a bed the previous night; partly to make up for the day before when they hadn't much to eat aside from a quick snack in between), before they unloaded the pick-up.

The books were simply dropped in the living room for later sorting; the supplies were stored in one of the empty rooms on the first floor, minus the food that needed to be (and fit) in the fridge or freezer. The wheat was placed to the other seeds in the shed outside; while the hens got the smaller one with the broken window. It wasn't much, but eventually it would be properly furnished and they would get a small chicken run; though for now they seemed happy just to get out of the rather narrow cages.

The rest of the day was mostly spent skimming through the books; sorting out which would be needed for what – or if they were needed at all.

The last thing they did was to assign the chores, vaguely at least. Asuka agreed to work on the technical and engineering or in other words: She would take care that everything would keep running and working as it should. Surprisingly, she even accepted to do the handwork that would come along with this.

It wasn't really necessary to say that Shinji was appointed as the one responsible for the housework as cleaning and cooking. The later might prove to become a greater challenge than it seemed on first sight,

as this now also included providing basic goods like bread or noodles once they would run out of supplies. But for once he had some confidence in that. Not without reason, he was the one who had planned ahead and got some crops for flour after all. He just hoped it would actually grow.

As for that part; the gardening, they decided that both would take care of it, as neither of them had ever done something like that and thus didn't know who was better suited for the job.

And with that, everything that needed to seemed to be covered for now.

They had a new home; they would have food and water; they would have the necessary knowledge. They had everything they needed to survive.

But there was something that was still unsettled...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji approached her in the living room as she gazed at the sunset through the window.

"Asuka, we've done everything we can do so far to make sure we survive. We have all time we need now." His hand twitched nervously and he lowered his gaze. "We need... we have to talk, finally."

She tensed noticeable at his words, but didn't turn around.

"I... I don't think so! We still have a lot of work to do if we want to survive!"

"But... we will always have a lot to do, won't we? Then we'll never talk..."

"So what?" she blurted. "Would it be that bad, if we just live on and drop..."

"Asuka!" he interrupted. "Please..."

After letting out a deep sigh, she nodded.

"Okay, then..." she almost whispered as she turned around.

Chapter III: The 13th

"I still cannot see the point of this activity," Rei stated, panting.

"Ha! Seems we have at least one thing in common, First!" Asuka didn't bother to look at her. Instead, she paid more attention to the strand of her sweat-soaked hair that had kept annoying her for a while now by constantly dropping in her view. She reached up to brush it away, but didn't take the time to secure it correctly to her headset. "I have much better things to do than wasting my time like this! Not to mention: with you two, of all beings! I can't believe there are people, who actually enjoy this." She failed to some extent in trying to cover her exhaustion, yet her voice didn't show the venom that usually came with her rants.

"Sorry," Shinji muttered. "It's not my fault that I won at 'rock-paper-scissors' for once."

"Yeah, right! I bet you cheated, so you could pull off this stupid idea of yours!"

Rei decided to ignore the argument of her co-pilots and focused on her current task. Which became harder and harder with each passing moment. She felt... she couldn't really place the feeling. It was as though she was ill, yet she was perfectly healthy before they started. Could it be because this was the first time she did this? She tried to clear her mind of the sensation by shaking her head. Soryu and Ikari didn't seem to notice, since she still scolded him for tricking her into this. Rei didn't understand why the redhead made such a fuss about it. When they had decided on whose idea of a joint activity was to be fulfilled by playing that game, it had seemed to her that the furious German had actually **let** him win. But she didn't say that out loud.

"Confess already, Shinji! You just wanted to drag us here!" Asuka droned on.

"B-but Misato had ordered us to do something together," Shinji whined. "That wasn't my idea."

Rei remained silent. It was odd that she wasn't ordered directly by Major Katsuragi or by any other superior officer. Instead she was informed by her fellow pilots during school that they would 'have to do something'. Rei didn't expect this 'something' to be this straining though.

Shinji seemed to notice this as well. "Are you alright, Ayanami? You look kinda exhausted."

"I am not used to this 'hiking'," Rei answered. Yet she couldn't help but feeling familiar with it.

They had been wandering for about two hours by now, taking a route that would lead them around the city. Now they were about to re-enter the borders to Neo Tokyo 3, but the strain of the trip (thanks to Asuka's rushing) as well as the blazing sun of the eternal summer had taken their toll on the Children. While Asuka and Shinji were both sweating and breathing a bit heavier, it was kind of surprising that Rei seemed to have the weakest endurance. Panting heavily, she was lurching behind. She didn't feel good at all.

"Well, too bad if you don't like it, First!" Asuka mocked as she turned around to face her companions. "Would you have preferred some other 'activity'?"

Rei blinked. She had never really thought about what she liked, especially not about what others would refer to as 'hobbies'.

No one had ever been interested.

"I would prefer swimming," the blue-haired pilot declared after a short pause.

"Well, we could go swimming another time," Shinji offered her cheerfully.

"No, we can't! Looks like a certain baka has forgotten that he cannot swim!" the Second Children

blurted.

Shinji flinched noticeable. "Ah... eh... yeah... sorry, Aya... AYANAMI!!"

It was the last thing she heard before everything went black.

"What is it?" Asuka asked as she turned to see Shinji lowering their fellow pilot carefully to the ground.

"I don't know..." He immediately went on to check her pulse. The unsteady rhythm didn't ease his mind a bit and neither did her unusual red face, which was a big contrast to her otherwise pale skin. Putting his hand on her forehead only confirmed his fears. "It's hot. Looks like she has a sunstroke."

"We'll carry her there. Come on, grab her right and I take her left!"

"Wait! We can't move her that much!" Shinji protested firmly as Asuka lowered herself to the unconscious Rei, lifting the albino's left arm over her shoulder.

"Look, Shinji, I'm not gonna argue with you now! It's not that far anymore. Heck, we made this whole trip to get there at last."

"Asuka!"

She sighed. "Sorry, I know that sounded selfish. But we can't cool her down or help her here anyway."

She had a point there; he had to admit that as he looked around. There weren't any trees close to them, whose shadows could have eased the heat, and neither was a nearby stream. So close to the fortress of men, nature was forced to fall back.

So, finally, he gave in. "Okay, let's hurry."

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

As Rei woke up, the first thing she noticed was something cold and wet on her forehead.

"Ah, it seems your friend regained consciousness, Mr. Ikari," she heard an old woman's voice.

The face of a dark brown-haired boy filled her blurry vision. "Hey Ayanami, how do you feel?"

"How do I feel...?" she whispered. "...Tired..."

Shinji smiled slightly. "We've called Misato; she will pick us up soon. You should try to get some rest until then."

She nodded as she slightly shifted her head to see that she was in a bright, tidy living room, but because of her blurred view she couldn't make out details. Behind Shinji she could vaguely see the silhouette of a woman with long gray hair, which was restrained in a ponytail. But before she could make out more, she drifted back to sleep again.

Shinji returned his attention to their host, seeing the old woman smiling at him. "Thanks again for your help, Mrs. Yamadera. I don't know what we would have done if you and your husband hadn't let us in."

Actually, he had been kind of surprised how eagerly they had been welcomed by the senior couple. After Mr. Yamadera had helped them to carry Rei into the house, they almost needed to fight his wife off as she kept offering them tea, cookies or other sweets.

"Oh, it's nothing. It got a bit lonely here after our children moved out. So we're glad whenever we have some guests. We don't even have a lot of customers these days. Our market-garden became more of a hobby than a business. The last customer we had was here weeks ago. And he just wanted some seeds for watermelons..." she trailed off, seeing the perplexed look of the boy. "Oh sorry, I guess I bore you with my tales."

"No," he shook his head negating. "I... I mean... Did this customer had a stubbly beard and a ponytail and was quite, uh, charming?"

"Huh? Yes, he was," she looked as though she tried to remember, before she grinned at her memory. "Koichi actually got somewhat jealous, even though he was very much like that himself when he was that age," she giggled. "So you know him?"

"Well, yes, kinda..." he chuckled. '*Now that's what I'd call coincidence...*'

"Hmm, these melons should have grown a lot since then. Have you seen them?"

"No, not yet. But I'm supposed to see them soon..."

Despite the questioning look of the old woman, he didn't explain further.

"Say, your other friend sure takes her time. Is she always that long in the bathroom?"

"Ah, she's even worse in the morning..." Shinji trailed off and averted her gaze; slightly blushing as he noticed that this could easily be misunderstood. "Um... well..."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," Mrs. Yamadera giggled again. It was easy to see that this phrase hadn't been the whole truth. "But since you've admitted that you even know her morning habits that would mean she IS actually close to you. Your girlfriend, perhaps?"

"Well... ye... I-I mean, no, I... we live together... Uh... eh... but not like that!" he blurted, nervous under the gaze of the gray-haired woman. '*Damn, she is almost like an older version of Misato.*'

"You're surely easy to tease, Mr. Ikari. But you better look after her. I guess your, what did you call her? Your guardian? I guess she will be here soon."

He nodded shyly. After checking on Rei's status a last time, he went looking for Asuka.

It shouldn't take him long to find her, since the house wasn't that big. And he knew it pretty well. As well as he knew her.

He wasn't stupid; he had easily been able to tell that she didn't insist on coming back here just to learn about the housekeepers.

He found her just where he had expected her to be. She was standing in the hall before a room, not moving at all, as if she was afraid of what she would find inside. He could understand very well why she was standing there; staring at the closed door.

That had been his room at first, before...

"Hello? Anybody home?" a familiar voice from the entrance startled both of them.

Misato's call snapped Asuka out of her trance and turned around to face him. He felt his heart break as he saw the unshed tears glimmering in her eyes. In that moment, he hated their decision more than ever before; he hated not being able to risk pulling her close, holding her. Trying to do the next best thing, he gently put his right hand on her shoulder, never losing the painful, yet reassuring eye-contact. With a forced but thankful smile, she placed her own hand over his, squeezing it lightly. A small nod answered his unspoken question.

"Yeah!" he called back to the entrance. "We're coming!"

Not moving.

Never losing the contact.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And you are sure that a young, lovely lady like you doesn't want any vegetables?"

"Eh, no, sorry, I..." Sweat-dropping, Misato did her best to reject the constant offers of the charming old man as polite as possible with a smile.

"Oh? Really? The lettuce and carrots have grown nicely this year. And you should just see my big, long..."

"KOICHI!"

"...cucumbers," he finished his sentence that had been interrupted by his wife. "What?"

Mrs. Yamadera bowed before Misato. "Please excuse my husband, Ms...?"

"Katsuragi."

"...Ms. Katsuragi! He is always like that with young, attractive women," she glared at him.

"Well, excuse me for trying to sell something..." he muttered.

Watching them quarrel, the Major couldn't help but feel reminded on someone else, yet couldn't lay a finger on it. "Eh, sorry, I didn't mean to cause an argument," she said, nervously laughing. "I just wanted to pick up the kids."

As if on cue, Shinji and Asuka came in sight.

"Hey there," she greeted them. "You're ready to go?"

Shinji shot a quick, but not unnoticed glance at his redheaded roommate, who nodded awkwardly passive. "Yeah. We just have to get Ayanami," he answered, pointing inside.

"Koichi, you'll help them!" Mrs. Yamadera commanded.

"Yeah, yeah..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"So, will you tell me now?" Misato asked as they drove home from NERV, after getting Rei to the infirmary. As if the trouble with the Children wasn't enough, she still had to attend to that meeting with the committee on the last Angel in an hour. So at least for now she wanted to have some fun.

"Tell you what?" came it instantly from the backseat.

"What were you guys doing out there?" Her voice pitched as she switched into teasing-mode. "You didn't go for a threesome in the bushes, did you?"

"MISATO!!" both teens shouted with deep red faces.

"How dare you thinking of me like that? As if I would lower myself to do something like... **that** with freaks like **them**..." Asuka added.

"B-besides, you've ordered us to spend some time together..." The way Shinji was staring at them, his shoes must be currently doing their interpretation of the well known work 'The Interesting Nothing'.

"...just the thought of it. Uargh..." Asuka continued.

"I did?" Misato blinked, ignoring the ongoing rants of the redhead. She couldn't really remember. Maybe she had been drunk again when she made that order?

"...I need a shower as soon as we get back..."

"W-well, yeah, actually it was back when we had the synchronization training..." Shinji mumbled.

"...Maybe that'll get these... disgusting images out of my head..."

Misato narrowed her eyes. "Oh, nice to see how eagerly you guys are fulfilling my orders..."

"...If it wasn't bad enough that she's always suspecting me having a thing for **him**, but also with **her**!..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"How long will the First Children be incapable of fulfilling her duty?" Commander Gendo Ikari waited for his daily report from his subordinate in front of his desk.

"Dr. Kanegawa recommended to have her under medical observation for at least one or two days," Ritsuko informed, shivering at his cold voice.

"She will be released by this evening," he ordered as calm as though he'd just ordered his lunch.

Ritsuko raised an eyebrow. Not that she really cared for the well-being of the First Children, but a sick pilot wouldn't do them any good. "Sir?"

"Is there a problem, Dr. Akagi?"

"No, Sir," she refrained from groaning. "I will inform the infirmary."

"Good. You will give her a 'checkup' in the coming days. I want that prototype finished as soon as possible."

"I don't see any complications with that. The work is progressing very fast. Though we have encountered some flaws..."

"That doesn't matter," he cut her sharply off.

"But..." She couldn't finish that sentence either; but she didn't even expect to. Gendo Ikari was a man who was only interested in success.

"What about the unnatural sync-ratio incident of the Second and Third Children?" he changed the topic.

"Do you have the results of the investigation by now?"

"No. The MAGI didn't come to a consistent explanation for this either. Maybe it was just coincidence after all."

Ritsuko could tell that he wasn't pleased with this outcome, neither was she. Her scientific mind demanded a more logical explanation than just dumb luck.

"Very well then, drop that matter," he finally declared. "If it's not reproducible, it's not of use for us anyway."

"Yes, Sir."

"Anything else?"

"The test for the S2 engine is scheduled for..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"As usual, Ayanami and Aida are absent." The teacher of class 2-A managed to bore half of his pupils already before he even began with his 'lessons'. Toji was definitive part of that half. He sat slack in his chair, feet on the desk, not showing any respect or manners towards the old man.

"Hey, Toji," Shinji whispered to his friend, while the teacher droned on. "Where's Kensuke?"

"In Neo Yokosuka, watching warships. It's said that the "Myoko" entered port."

"Suzuhara!"

The boy bolted up, startled, as the teacher called his name up. "Yes!"

Shinji took out his Laptop and began writing a message as soon as the boot process was finished.

/-Kensuke is in Neo Yokosuka. Now I'm sure it was today./

The reply didn't take long.

/-So, today it'll disappear/

/-Yes. And then the next will come/

Just at that moment, half a world away, all hell broke loose.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"What's the status?"

-X

"The MAGI will confirm..."

-X

"Vanished?"

-X

"It's gone!"

-X

"I'm finished!"

-X

"...is in panic."

-X

"..the cause?"

-X

"...only satellite footage..."

-X

"...thousands of people..."

-X

"...no explosion..."

-X

"...the S2-engine..."

-X

"...we will receive Unit-03..."

-X

"...how will we do the test?"

-X

"...appoint the Fourth..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"What do you mean, you forgot our lunch??" Asuka's loud voice disturbed the peace of the lunchtime,

drawing the attention of the whole class to the 'beast' and her usual 'prey'.

"We... I... was kinda busy, you know?" Shinji sank further under the table, hoping to avoid the impending wrath of the redhead. "I, well, I had no time to prepare something, you see?"

"And because **you** were fooling around, **I** have to miss my lunch?"

Toji couldn't watch it anymore. It was time to 'help' his friend – and finally be able to consume the various packed meals he had bought before in peace.

"You two having another marital quarrel?" *'That should do it...'*

As expected, it took a while for both of them under the blaring laughter of the other students before they simultaneously denied it. But...

'Barely blushing? They almost looked like they suppressed a laugh!? Could they actually...?' Toji's thoughts were disturbed by the grunting redhead, who turned around so fast that her long auburn hair hurled through the air, whipping Shinji's face.

'Nah, they would have to be totally drunk before they would start to like each other...'

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"We'll use the fourth pilot for Unit-03's tests in Matsushiro" Dr. Akagi declared to Major Katsuragi as she prepared the data for said EVA and its pilot.

"Huh? They found the Forth Children?"

"Yes, yesterday..."

Misato frowned. *'And again, I'm one of last to know...'*

"I haven't received the report of the Marduk Institute yet..." she muttered.

"The official documents will arrive tomorrow."

"Dr. Akagi, are you hiding something from me again?" she asked bluntly.

"No," was the simple reply.

It was not the answer she hoped for, but Misato guessed that she wouldn't get a better one. Not for now at least.

"Ah, all right. And who is the selected child?" She turned around and took a look at the screen where her old friend displayed the data. Her eyes widened as it showed the identity of the Fourth. "What? It's...?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Suzuhara!" Toji's path to freedom was blocked by the ever proper Hikari Horaki. "You're on duty this week. Do your work."

"What do you mean?" he whined, trying to escape his unpleasant tasks as he enviously watched the other students leave.

"This!" she held the printouts of the lessons in his face. "The teacher said you should deliver them."

Crippled, but not defeated he took them. "Someone else would be better suited for that," he repined.

"Ayanami was absent today."

"Ayanami and me... that wouldn't work. And going alone to a girl..."

Her face brightened at her chance... "I could..."

"Shinji!" he cut her off by calling the boy that was just about to leave. Hikari's smile faded in an instant. "You'll accompany me!"

"Oh no, he won't!"

"Aahh!" Toji shrieked in surprise when someone bolted through the door. "Asuka, I thought you were already gone!"

"Well, I'm not!" She grabbed the wailing Shinji at the collar of his shirt. "It's this baka's fault I had no lunch today and if he doesn't make me an appropriate dinner once we get home, I'll make sure that the idiot-trio will be the idiot-duo once again!"

"S-sorry, Toji..." Shinji managed to say, before he was dragged out of the classroom.

The jock stared at the door. "Man, how can a guy be that henpecked?" he muttered.

"AHEM!" His head turned around to face the class representative of 2-A again. "Will you bring her the printouts now?" she did her best to sound threatening.

"But I don't even know where she lives!" he protested.

Her face softened again and a slight blush was barely hidden by the freckles on her cheeks. "As... as I said, I could come with you..."

"So..." was all he said, before both felt silent for a moment.

'I can't believe I've actually asked him,' she thought, her eyes cast down. 'What is he waiting for? Please say yes! But what if he doesn't? He still hasn't answered. Is that a good sign? Or is he just thinking about how he could drop me best? What if Asuka is right and he is just a pervert and just waits for an opportunity to get in my pants? Well, that could be ni...ohh, what am I thinking?'

"Can't you bring them to her then?"

Startled by his blunt, unexpected answer, she snapped out of her thoughts. "No!" she almost yelled, before she regained control of herself. "I mean, you're the one officially on duty!"

"Oohh..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"We're home!" Shinji exclaimed as the apartment door closed behind him. Asuka already slipped out of her shoes, went in and looked around.

"Misato's not home, y..." Before she could finish, she already found herself in a tight, but enjoyable warm embrace from behind. "You're hopeless, you know that?" she smiled at him.

"Yes," he chuckled and softly kissed her neck. "Have I ever told you how cute you are in that school uniform?"

"Figures," she glared playfully at him. "Should have known that you're just a dirty hentai chasing after little schoolgirls." With a false look of hurt, she turned her face from him.

Only to find it almost immediately being gently brought back by his hand on her heating cheek. "No," he said as he placed his lips on hers, "just after one."

She finally turned in his embrace to face him completely, wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled

him closer; deepening the kiss they were sharing. She was already regretting that it couldn't last much longer.

"Baka," she whispered smiling. "Misato could be back any minute..." She startled. "...and we're being watched."

Shinji turned his head to follow her gaze, meeting the eyes of a penguin that watched them curiously before he went back to his fridge.

"Oh, don't mind him," he laughed, "pay him with some nice food and he won't tell anybody."

"But, still... Misato... she or someone else could..." Despite her words, she tightened her grip and laid her head on his shoulders, not wanting to let go of him.

He sighed. They had this discussion several times already, but still... "We... we could at least say that we have fallen in love with each other..."

"Oh, Shinji, we talked about this before. They wouldn't believe that we, of all people, could become a couple. At least not just like that, without any reason. They think we hate each other..." her voice trailed off, "Or at least that I hate you, thanks to my pride..."

He sensed Asuka's anxiety as she reminded herself of her old faults they had long forgotten about. Trying to soothe her, he held her as close as possible while he slowly stroke her back. "...And that I would never have the guts to get close to you. But you have to admit, it wasn't much different from 'just like that' when it actually happened."

She gave him a weak smile. "You call the Third Impact 'not much'?"

Shinji just shrugged with a wry grin. "Do you think our little plan with Toji and Hikari will work out?" he changed the subject.

"It better does! They already spoiled our plan with the hiking trip!"

"Well, at least that gave us the opportunity to have Rei open up a bit."

"Yeah, and that ended with her in hospital." She rolled her eyes.

"Hey, but finally we've been..." he stopped as he felt her tense. "You're alright?"

Even though it wasn't a very difficult question, it took her a while before she answered.

"Yes..." came at last a reply, far too weak for his taste. "It just felt so... I don't know how to say... empty there..."

He nodded affirming as his thoughts drifted back to their trip the last day, when he had wanted to hold her like this, easing the pain of the haunting past they had both felt there, just before...

"Misato!"

"HUH?!" Surprised, she broke the embrace rather forcefully, looking around in panic for the announced Major. "It wasn't my idea, Misato! That baka-hentai tried to... Where is she?"

"What?" He stood somewhat dumbfounded, before he realized their misunderstanding. "No, I meant: I just remembered that she won't be back soon."

After a moment of glaring, she grinned again. "Baka!" She flipped his forehead. "Don't scare me like that!" she said as she advanced once more with more than a hint of a lustful look in her eyes. "So we have more time for ourselves?"

"I'm afraid not," he sighed. "We have synch tests tonight..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Hello? Ayanami, you're home?" Toji waited for a reply from behind the door of his classmate's apartment... For about two seconds. "Obviously not..." he stated and turned to go. If it hadn't been for the hand that got a grip on the sleeve of his tracksuit.

"Hey, you haven't delivered the print outs yet!"

"But class rep," he whined to the brunette, pigtailed girl. "She won't see it in that overflowing mailbox! And I don't want to wait here for her!"

Trying to free himself from the firm grip of the seemingly fragile girl by twisting around, he slumped forcefully against the door. Creaking, it revealed the entrance to apartment 402.

"It's open?" Hikari blinked.

"B-but we can't just go in there!"

"Maybe she's home and didn't hear us?" she questioned. "Ayanami? We're coming in!"

Slowly, they took their steps in; awkward, as if a monster was lurking in the small apartment, waiting for a tasty jock-lunch and a class representative-dessert. What greeted them, however, was the sight of a dark, untidy room.

"My God!" Hikari gasped.

"This is a girl's room? Not very comfortable..." Toji shuffled to the unmade bed and threw the print outs carelessly on the pillow. "Now, let's get..." he trailed off as he turned to the dutiful girl; seeing her kneeling on the floor. "What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning up. I can't leave a room like this."

"Well, I'm not gonna help you! That's no job for a man!" he declared proud.

"SUZUHARA!" That got his attention. Maybe she could try this 'helpless/seductive-method' Asuka was using occasionally? "You wouldn't let a poor girl do all this work alone, would you?"

"I don't... but... I... Oh, man!" he sighed in defeat, while Hikari made a mental note that this method may be somewhat embarrassing, but definitely useful.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"You've changed a lot."

"Huh?" the jock asked somewhat uninterested, without even looking up from his work to gather the garbage on the floor.

"I mean, if somebody had told me few months ago that you can be a kind and caring person, I would have laughed at him," Hikari explained slightly blushing. That might not have been the whole truth, but it was the best she could think of. "I'm not sure what I would say now, after what happened to your sister and since you've become friends with Ikari..." She looked over to him, expecting an outburst in some way from Toji.

Yet, he stared untypical serious into nothingness. *'I shouldn't have mentioned his sister. Stupid me!'* she scolded herself, quickly averting her view again.

"Maybe I have..."

"Eh?" She blinked in surprise when he suddenly spoke up.

"Changed, I mean..." He showed her a small smile. "But you have as well."

"How...how so?"

"You've never been so..." he was cut off by the opening of the door by the rightful inhabitant of the apartment; startling Hikari, who hadn't even noticed how much she had tensed up. Rei went in as though she either hadn't seen or didn't care about the two intruders.

"Excuse us!" both said almost simultaneously what got them at least a questioning look from their blue-haired classmate.

The problem with questioning looks is: You don't know exactly **what** the question is. Especially when the one to give you said look is one Rei Ayanami.

"Eh... you see; we brought you the printouts..."

"...and the door was open..."

"...so we went in..."

"...and saw your room..."

"...and w... she decided to clean it up..."

"...but we didn't do anything else..." Both blushed. "...Ah, with your things, I mean..."

Rei found herself in a situation she only seldom was in: She didn't exactly know how to react towards the now blushing and stuttering cleaners. People had helped her, usually on duty, but this was the first time she could remember that someone did something... nice for her without being asked for.

"I am... grateful for your work," she finally said awkwardly and made a slight, formal bow.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Man, these EVA-pilots are surely strange," Toji commented as they made their way home.

Hikari nodded. "Yeah, while Asuka can be extremely... well, 'outgoing'," she could see him roll his eyes, "Ikari is almost the exact opposite. And Ayanami, well, she is..."

"...Freaky!"

"Suzuhara! You shouldn't talk like that behind the back of someone!"

"Sorry, sorry!" He raised his hands in defense. "You know, it wasn't even that bad," he said calmly, startling her... and even him a bit. Both stood silent on the sidewalk, while trying as best as they could to look at anything but each other. Strange, how awkward these silences can be when you are on a deserted street, while the sun is setting and with the constant chirping of the cicadas in the air, all alone with someone you...

"Eh... I... better get going. S-see you tomorrow," Toji finally stammered, before he stumbled backwards and went with a quick pace.

"S-sure..." Hikari whispered as she watched him vanishing behind the next corner.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And were might you two have been?" an impatient Dr Akagi asked the two teenagers, who just rushed

through the hallway.

"Are we too late? That's all the baka's fault!"

"How so? You were the one, who..."

Ritsuko shook her head in disbelief. Sometimes she wondered how pilots of the Evangelions, defeaters of Angels and saviors of mankind could argue about whose fault something had been, just like little children. Then again, she had to remind herself that they **were** still children.

"No, actually you're even too early," she interrupted them. "We were supposed to have another conference before your tests, but a certain Major hasn't shown up yet," she sighed. "Shinji, could you do me a favor and go looking for her?"

He nodded affirming and went off.

"So now that the baka's busy, what about me?" the redhead inquired.

"Well, since you're here already, we'll do some physical tests until Misato arrives," the doctor proposed.

Asuka's eyes narrowed. "You're kidding, right?"

"Have you ever seen me joking?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Meanwhile, Shinji made his way to the lounge, where he was sure to find Misato, even if he wouldn't have known it already. Whenever she wasn't where she was supposed to be, she would usually be there, getting herself something to drink and chatting with other personal that, unlike her, actually had a break from duty.

'Either that, or she's using the restrooms to get all the liquids out of her system again,' he chuckled. But this time, he knew definitively that she would be there, talking with Kaji.

Kaji...

His hand wandered almost unknowingly down to the envelope in his pocket. No, it was still too early for that...

He heard some sort of shuffling as he neared the lounge.

"Misato?" he called out as he entered, seeing them standing by the vending machines about two meters away from each other; Kaji sipping innocently on a drink. Shinji wasn't sure what they've done that they tried to hide it, and actually, he didn't want to know.

"Oh, hi, Shinji. I would have expected you earlier. When you have tests in the evening, you usually come right after school."

"Ah... I kinda... forgot..." he scratched his head.

"Hey, hey, no reason to be ashamed. If I were you, I wouldn't waste that little free time here anyway."

"Eh, Ritsuko said your conference is beginning..."

"Okay, thanks." With a short "See you later" towards Kaji, she left the two males alone.

"Hey, how about going out for a tea?" the older offered.

"Actually," Shinji smirked, "I prefer coffee."

"Eh?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Kaji," Shinji began, "you are not only working for NERV, are you?"

For a moment, the man at the other side of the bench outside of NERV-HQ looked like was going to choke. It didn't last long, however.

"You don't dread people you trust, huh?"

"Sorry."

"When even you know about it..." Kaji sighed. "Seems my secret part-time job isn't that secret anymore..."

"I don't know very much. Most is just speculation. But actually, I hope that some of it is true..."

"I see... Come, I'll show you something nice," the agent flashed Shinji his trademarked smile as he stood up. "That is, if you not afraid that I'll have to let you disappear for knowing too much..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Melons?" the young Ikari asked the obvious as he knelt down and reached for one of the oval, green striped plants.

Kaji's mouth formed a proud smile, while he watered his 'babies'. "Aren't they beautiful? It's my hobby."

"Don't worry, you're secret's safe with me," Shinji assured. "Both of them."

"Well, thanks. You know, to create or grow something is great. You can learn many things, like pleasure..."

"Yeah," his voice became monotonous, "but the more pleasure you have raising it, the more painful it is, when you lose it."

"You hate the pain?"

"In this case? Yes!" Shinji nodded, frowning.

"Oh? What happened so horrible to your plants that you grieve so much about it?"

Shinji looked at him, seemingly surprised. "Plants?"

"Or what have you raised?" Kaji shrugged.

"Oh, it... vanished..."

"Stolen, huh?"

"In a way..." Shinji nodded. "I think you water them a bit too much," he suddenly changed the topic, holding one of the melons near his ear and knocking on it.

"Pardon?"

"I could be wrong though. You should ask Asuka, she knows more about this than me... eh... I mean... never mind!" the boy apologized quickly and placed the fruit back.

Kaji just gave him a confused look. He didn't even notice that he didn't move the watering can anymore, soaking one single spot. It was new too him that the shy EVA-pilot was once a hobby-

gardener, but shouldn't he know if Asuka had knowledge about watering too? She would have listed it as often as possible to him, like her other positive features. And why would she tell Shinji?

The ringing of his phone disturbed his trail of thoughts and brought him back to reality.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Synch tests came and went, just like day and night. And sooner than later the students of the Children's school found themselves back at their classes. But just like the night was replaced by the dawn, even the most boring lesson was replaced by the lunch break.

This would be the time were friends gathered at places where they could regularly be found, be it inside the classroom or outside in the shadow of the trees, on the benches at the schoolyard, on the grass near the sports field, or even on the rooftop.

This was the time they would be eating and drinking the lunches they brought with them, be it self-made by them or their parents at home, bought in overpriced grocery stores, or, what was considered as worst, from the school cafeteria.

And this was also the time were the newest gossip made its way.

"EVA Unit-03?" Shinji asked visibly nervous. A bit too nervous for Kensuke's taste.

"You... you know something don't you?" he asked upset. He rushed up so fast that he lost the balance for a moment and almost regretted sitting on the other side of the railing if he wouldn't have gotten a hold on it in the last second. After the shock of almost falling down several meters from the roof eased, he grabbed Shinji's collar and shook his friend. "Come on, tell me!"

"Ah, my, I wonder what's Toji doing that long? He was called over twenty minutes ago..." his friend tried a sad attempt to change the topic.

"Don't try to fool me, Ikari! You know it's coming here!"

"Eh... no!"

"And that it'll be tested in Matsushiro!"

"I have no idea!"

"Tell me, they don't have a pilot yet, do they?"

"I don't know!"

"Could you ask Misato if they let me pilot it? Please, I want..."

Shinji's face suddenly became very serious. "Believe me, you wouldn't want to pilot this one..."

"Huh? Why?" Kensuke eyed the other boy biting his tongue.

"Eh... be... because it's... ah... pink, yeah, that's it!"

"So you even know its color? WOW!"

"Kensuke," he gripped his friend's shoulders and shoved him off, "just... just drop it, okay?"

"Oh, okay, okay..." he sighed in defeat and leaned over the railing. "You're right, Toji takes his time. Maybe he is with the class rep."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Ah, Shinji, haven't you seen the looks they gave each other the whole day?"

Shinji smiled slightly as he gazed down to the chatting, eating and laughing pupils on the schoolyard.

"So?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Hikari made her way back to class 2-A. It was getting late; the sun was already setting and most students were already gone for a while. Toji would still be there, being on duty; so she could check on him... that he did his work, of course.

Well, maybe not.

She thought back to when he had returned after being called to the principal's office. The blank face and monotone voice had worried, even scared her. The principal wouldn't tell her anything; he just said that it was beyond his authority. That didn't really ease her mind.

As she entered, she saw him sitting on his desk, eating this "food" he always bought from the shop.

"Suzuhara!" she called him.

"Eh?"

"You're on duty. You've got to write the daily report and straighten the desks." Hikari found herself saying in her typical role as class representative. *'Damn it, Hikari! You've made progress. Do you want to lose that again?'*

"I haven't had lunch yet. I'll do it afterwards."

'Come on! It's now or never,' she tried to encourage herself. "Suz...Toji, what... what happened during lunch? You seemed kind of... distraught afterwards..."

He visibly winced at the mention of the break. "I... I..." He forced a smile. "I managed to get a better medical treatment for my sister!"

"But- That's great!" Hikari cheered. "What did you do for that?"

"Nothing much," he mumbled. His smile dropped again and his eyes regained a distant look. "Just sold my soul..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Misato had packed and was ready to go. There was the case with her clothes, the bag with some snacks and the beer for her time off duty (which would hopefully be enough until she had time to find a shop), she had her gun for whatever reason, she even wore her cap, since she had to greet the American delegates with all formalities, which included the complete uniform... Wait, something was missing for completeness.

"Shinji, have you seen my jacket?" she called back to the apartment.

"Yeah, I've got it here!" He came a moment later around the corner, his schoolbag in one hand and the bright red uniform jacket in the other. Misato eyed him suspiciously as she took it from him.

"What were you doing with it?"

"Eh, I've cleaned it for your trip!" he replied rather nervous, gathering his shoes. "Say, where's Asuka?"

She let him drop the topic, not sure if she really wanted further explanations. "She's gone already. She's trying to avoid me."

"Still because of Kaji?"

That was surprising. Shinji was a nice kid, no question, but he never seemed good at understanding other people's feelings, especially when it came to affairs of the heart.

"Yeah, most likely."

But there was still something gnawing at her. She still hadn't told him about the pilot of Unit-03. Shinji may have shown at least little signs of growing fond of piloting; even after that incident with the 12th Angel, his synch ratio only dropped so much that he was barely beaten by Asuka again. Yet he wouldn't ever forget what pain the EVAs can cause. She wasn't sure if he would ever forgive them if something would happen to any of the pilots. Now another of his friends was put to that risk. And he wouldn't even know...

"Uh, by the way..." both started simultaneously. Lost in her thoughts, Misato hadn't even noticed that he had been just as silent as her.

"Go ahead..." she encouraged him.

"I... I just wanted to say: Watch out for yourself there. We... don't know if that EVA is all right, after what I heard that had happened to Unit-04..."

"Oh my, is there someone worried about me?" she smilingly teased him. "No need for that. Ritsuko is there too. And even if anything goes wrong... Well, our EVAs, pilots and staff are the best."

"I hope so..." he whispered; not sounding very convinced.

"Shinji, there's something I should tell you..." she finally began, still not sure how to say it. "You see; the pilot..."

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted her.

"I'll get it," he announced, leaving her mid-sentence

As soon as he opened the door, he was nearly overrun by the inwards-rushing Kensuke. The bespectacled boy came to a hold before her and made a deep bow.

"Major Katsuragi! I formerly request to become the pilot of Evangelion Unit-03!" he blurted, sounding as though he was actually serious.

Misato, however, answered just like everyone would answer to a request like that.

"Eh?"

"Come Kensuke, let's get to school! Bye Misato!" Shinji said, shoving his friend outside. "Haven't I told you to cut it out?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Now, let's have lunch!" Kensuke exclaimed, gathering his food as the bell finally freed class 2-A from the droning about the Second Impact of their teacher. But looking around, he noticed something unusual. "Eh? Where's Toji?"

"I don't know. Haven't seen him for a while," Shinji stated, still sitting at his desk.

"Toji's gone? Him without lunch? That's impossible!"

"Well, he's been acting a bit strange lately."

"Look who's talking..." Kensuke mumbled, eyeing his friend.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, nothing," he appeased.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Suzuhara."

The quiet voice distracted Toji from his trail of thoughts. He had gone for the roof where he had expected to be left alone; getting some time to think about everything and nothing, while he leaned over the railing and watched into the distance. But seemingly his wish was not to be fulfilled, as he took a quick look behind him.

"Ah, it's you Ayanami. If you're looking for Shinji, he's not here."

Yet, she didn't move. So if she wasn't there searching for the pilot of Unit-01, it would mean... "You know about me, don't you? Soryu seems to know, too."

"Yes."

"Shinji is the only one who doesn't know..."

"I believe you are wrong," Rei interrupted him. What startled the depressed jock, no question. The chance of getting interrupted by Rei Ayanami was as rare as the chance to be selected as... well, EVA-pilot.

He grinned wryly at his comparison.

"How so?"

"He is acting different lately. Soryu as well. Both have improved their social skills. Ikari is not as timid in the presence of other people. Soryu's aggressiveness has calmed down enough to accept the presence of people she had declared to hate, including myself. However, most of the time, they are trying to convince everyone that these changes are not existent. They also seem to possess a greater knowledge than before," the blue-haired girl told, or more precisely, reported him.

He gave her a frowning and at the same time questioning look. Of course, he noticed the slight changes in the behavior of the EVA-pilots as well, even though he wasn't sure about Asuka. Actually, in his opinion, all of the first three Children became more open towards others. Here he was, having an actual conversation with **the** Rei Ayanami.

But he didn't really understand her last sentence. "In which way can you tell how much they know?"

"I have observed them."

"You can see their amount of knowledge by watching them?"

"Yes."

"Who would have guessed..." He waited for the blue-haired albino girl to question what exactly he meant.

Then he remembered that it *was* the blue-haired albino girl standing there. "That you're watching Soryu as well, I mean. I would have thought that you only look after Shinji."

"I do not understand."

"You're worried about him," he stated what had been obvious to him for a while.

"So? Maybe I am."

"Yepp."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Hikari! Let's eat lunch!"

The loud voice distracted Hikari from her gaze through the window, where she had watched a conversation between two of her classmates on the rooftop. Especially the male one of them caught her eye and thoughts.

"Oh, Asuka, would you mind eating without me today? I... have to go somewhere," she told her waiting friend.

Asuka narrowed her eyes at that poor excuse. "Yeah, riiight..."

"Sorry, but..." Hikari trailed off, not really knowing what to say. She didn't notice the slight, yet traitorous blush that crept on her face.

"Oh, go already! I'll eat here! All alone!" Asuka played an ironic act of hurt, emphasizing especially the last part.

Even though she knew that it wasn't meant seriously, Hikari couldn't help but feeling somewhat guilty, leaving her best friend without any company. "You could join Ikari and Aida..."

"You're sure that you're alright? Some kind of fever, perhaps? Maybe you really should go and get some fresh air or something!"

"Okay," the pigtailed brunette giggled. "And, Asuka, could we walk home together today? I'd like to talk with you..."

"Sure, gives me a chance to get away from certain people."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Toji?" Just a few minutes after Rei left, he was again startled by a girl's voice. But as he turned, he couldn't help but smile at the freckled teen in front of him.

"Oh, hey, Hikari," he greeted her.

"Is everything alright?" She bit her tongue. Of course NOT was everything alright. "You... you're still worried about tomorrow, right?"

"Must be pretty obvious, huh?" Toji sighed. "When even Ayanami comes to cheer one up..."

Cheer him up? The small jealous side of her was eased when she learned that their talk was only 'professional'. It was then that she remembered the lunch packets she had nervously fumbled with in her hands until now. "Hey, have you eaten something already? We... I mean, I made a bit too much lunch. We could share some... That is if you want to!"

"Why not? Food never failed to raise my spirits." Smiling, he took the one of the presented bundles as they sat down to eat.

Neither of them noticed the smiling girl watching them from the window of class 2-A.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm sorry, Asuka," Hikari apologized to her friend. "You usually walk home with Ikari."

"Ah, don't worry, Hikari. I'm just with him because of the job and I have to see his stupid face at home already."

"Oh? I thought you two finally understood each other better..."

"Eh? What?" The redhead blurted rather nervously. "Must be your imagination!"

Hikari wasn't sure what to think of this reaction, but decided not to ask further. At least not now.

After a while of walking, they finally reached a place where they could talk without being disturbed. They sat down on a bench at this lookout point; while the sunset created an even more spectacular view over the majestic city of Neo Tokyo-3.

Sitting there a few moments in silence, Hikari tried to figure out how to talk with her friend about Toji, before Asuka would lose her patience and leave. She didn't expect her to be very happy about this anyway.

But while she was still searching for the right words to begin, Asuka raised her voice. "Hey, Hikari. There's something... you should know about Su..."

"If you want to tell me that he is the Fourth Children; I know that already." The class rep of 2-A almost laughed at the surprised and shocked expression of the Second Children.

"EH? How do you know??"

"Well, he... told me," Hikari shrugged.

"He did what??"

"What? Wasn't he allowed to? It's well known that you, Ikari and Ayanami are pilots, why shouldn't he tell?"

Asuka shook her head, obviously trying to regain her calm. "No, it's not that, it's just... well, unexpected..."

"Well, we..." Hikari could feel another blush approaching. "I think we have become a bit closer the last couple of days..."

"Oh boy!" The sarcasm in her voice was impossible to miss. "Don't tell me it's 'the big L' already?"

" 'The big...?' " Now Hikari blushed full force, eyes to the ground as she understood what Asuka meant.

"I... I don't know! B-but... I think it's nice to have someone you can open up to... or to be this one."

"Yeah," whispered a dreamy voice.

"Huh?"

"Eh, I meant: Yeah, yeah!" Asuka quickly added in a more sarcastic tone.

But this time she wouldn't get away that easily.

"Oh, come on, you've been thinking of someone you could share something like this with!"

"Ha! All this sweet-talk with your jock must have damaged your senses! You know exactly that I don't need anyone!" the redhead exclaimed pridefully, but lacking the usual determination.

At least, it wasn't enough to convince Hikari.

"Hmm, who could it be? If it was your Mr. Kaji, you would react differently. I bet it is Ikari after all! He seems to be nice enough..."

"What? He's the stupidest of all, that baka! He has no idea how to relate to others!"

"Oh, but..."

"Cut it out, already!"

"Okay, okay," Hikari giggled.

"Geez," Asuka huffed, crossing her arms. "What happened to the shy, little girl that already blushed bright red when such topics were barley scratched?"

"I guess she's just somewhat happy..."

"Hey, if you knew already and also obviously don't need to know anymore how to get all lovey-dovey with him; about what did you want to talk with me then?"

Hikari's smile faded as she remembered the reason why they were sitting there. "I was just curious... about the test tomorrow. And afterwards. He... he will be safe, won't he?"

"What? That's what this is all about?"

"Asuka, please..." She clenched her slightly trembling hands. "I'm serious..."

Asuka grunted audible. "Alright, alright, we'll play babysitter for him. Happy now?"

With a regained smile on her lips, Hikari nodded, honestly thankful about the promise of her friend. How should she have known that Asuka made a similar promise already a long while ago?

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"I have no time for that! Why can't you let me learn in peace now?"

"Hmph! Why can't you leave and let me alone with Kaji?"

"Now, now, stop bickering you two!" Kaji sighed, interfering in at least the fifth quarrel this evening. He almost wished he hadn't 'volunteered' to watch for the Children in the four days Katsuragi was gone. "I think I could need a bath. And please, could you try not to kill each other?"

-x-x-x

"Did you give it to them?" Asuka asked without looking up from the boring magazine she read. She lay in front of the running, yet ignored TV not far away from Shinji, who seemed to concentrate on the schoolbooks and his laptop on the table.

"I've put an anonymous warning in Misato's jacket. But I hadn't much time with Kaji. I'll talk with him tonight."

"You better do. That could be the last chance you see him."

"I don't understand it anyway," he sighed, finally looking at her. "You'll see him much more often than me."

"Oh," she let the magazine fall out of her hands, closed her eyes and rested her head on her now crossed arms, "you know pretty well that he'll just think it's some kind of love letter."

"No wonder, by the way you're around him!" Shinji muttered with narrowed eyes.

"What?" Asuka grinned. "Do I hear some jealousy?"

"Well, you've been with him for quite a while yesterday..." he stated with exaggerated hurt in his voice.

"Awww, poor Shinji!" she mocked. "I wonder how I could make it up to you."

Just as she said this, she could hear him standing up and soon felt him leaning towards her from behind, carefully not to wake up PenPen, who was sleeping at her side.

"I would prefer making out instead of making up," he whispered in her ear, sending shivers down her

spine. "To bad Kaji is here tonight. We could do something we haven't done since we're here."

"And we won't," she tried to sound determined, but without much success, feeling his breath tickling her back. "They would notice with the next physical checkup at the latest."

"Hmm, are you really the same Asuka that always wanted to stay in bed just a little bit longer?" His hands slowly found their way around her slim waist as the light kisses he placed on her neck made her gasp.

"You... ah... hentai!" She bit her lip, suppressing a too loud moan. "You should better use the time and think instead of how you can make up for the last 'first time'."

"What? You're still holding that against me?" Startled, he pulled back a bit, before he leaned in again. "Besides, I don't remember you complaining much afterwards."

"So what? That doesn't mean you don't owe me a better one! Oh, and stop that before we *can't* stop anymore!" She turned slightly and shoved him off, as much as she regretted it. "Kaji will be back any minute!"

"But..."

"No 'but's! Now get back to your computer and books and pretend to learn like a good boy, before Kaji comes back!" she instructed, pointing at the table.

"Yeah, yeah..." He shuffled his way back and slumped down, sighing.

"And stay there!" she reminded him forcefully, just as the door opened and revealing Kaji, now clad in a green bathrobe, toweling his hair.

"Ahh, that was a nice, hot bath," he stated before he noticed the tense atmosphere, which could mean only one thing. "Bickering again? Are you always like this when Katsuragi is gone?"

"Actually, it's *always* like this..." Shinji muttered.

"Ah, don't listen to him! I'm trying to be nicer to him for you, but I can't help it. He just keeps provoking me!"

"Sorry..."

"See? He's doing it again!"

Kaji sighed inwardly. "Yeah, I see. We better get some sleep. That's the best to do in such situations!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Kaji? Are you asleep?" Shinji's voice disturbed the silence in the now dark living room, where he and Kaji lay on their futons.

"No, not yet," the older answered.

"How much do you know about my father?"

"Huh? Now, that's a kind of surprising question. I thought..."

"Of his work, I mean," Shinji interrupted him. "And those behind him?"

Again in a few days, Kaji found himself surprised by the young Ikari. "You know about SEELE?"

"Huh? I didn't know what they are called. I just heard something about a committee sometimes."

Kaji nodded, though facing the other direction he wasn't able to tell if Shinji could see him. The

information about the committee wasn't as restricted as SEELE's, even if this information only said that it was part of the UN-administration that NERV was reporting to.

"Well, there isn't much difference actually. The committee consists of the highest ranking SEELE members and exists only to maintain the appearance that the UN has control over NERV."

"So you do know a lot about them?"

"Let's say, I know more than that it's healthy..." he told him, fearing that he already said way too much.

"Enough to help us?"

"Eh?" Kaji rolled over as he heard the boy standing up and going for his clothes. After some searching, he came back with an envelope in his hand.

"Take this with you," Shinji said as he presented it to him. "And keep it secret. Please, you may be the only one who can do this."

"What is this?" Kaji asked as he tried to read the letters written on the envelope in the moonlight: "To be opened after the 14th!"

Shinji meanwhile returned under the covers of his makeshift bed and closed his eyes again.

"Maybe the last hope for a future..." he mumbled.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Do you think the test has started yet?" Hikari fumbled nervously with her still unwrapped lunch-box.

"Oh, Hikari! That's at least the sixth time you're asking this!" Asuka became obviously annoyed, sitting at her desk and resting her head on her hand. Yet Hikari couldn't help but getting worried.

"I'm sorry..."

"Great, now you even sound like Shinji!"

"I'm sor...oh, I see what you mean." She would have giggled if she would have been in the right mood. But at least for a moment, a slight smile found its way onto her face. "It's just... Have you ever felt so much for someone that you're always worried whenever you don't know that he is safe?"

For a second, she thought seeing her glancing at Shinji's empty desk, but it vanished as quickly as it had come. "Quit being so lovesick about that jerk! You'll see: Sooner than I'd like to, he'll be another incompetent pilot I have to watch after, so that he doesn't hurt himself."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," Hikari said, but neither sounded nor looked like she really meant it. "I'm not very hungry," she sighed and presented her lunch to Asuka. "Do you want to eat this?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Hey, you're awaiting a call?"

"What?" Shinji looked up to the bespectacled boy next to him, startled by the sudden question.

"You've looked at your phone several times in the last half hour," Kensuke explained, before he grinned at his friend. "Hey, Shinji, could it be... a girl?"

"No," he sighed, rolling his eyes. "Actually, I hope it won't ring."

"I see. Got yourself a persisting fan?"

There was a slight smirk in his direction on Shinji's face that Kensuke couldn't quite place. Did he have some remains of his lunch on his face?

But as quickly as it had come, the smile was again replaced by a worrying look. "Persisting? Yeah, in some way. But definitely not a fan."

"Oh," Kensuke began knowingly, setting his glasses straight. "Since when does Asuka order you around via phone?"

"Eh? Why should Asuka do that?"

Shinji's honest surprise almost scared the blond boy. "What? Are you protecting her already? Geez, what is it with you two?"

"I-I have no idea what you mean!" the young pilot denied much too suspiciously.

"You two have been acting a bit strange lately," Kensuke prodded further. "Too... I don't know... friendly."

Shinji laughed nervously. "Y-you must be seeing things. Have you forgotten her 'greeting' yesterday? And you should have been there three days ago, when she was mad at me for forgetting her lunch."

Kensuke dismissed his friend's whimpering as lame excuse with a 'humph'. "You're not 'sympathizing with the devil', are you?"

Shinji blushed slightly, but not slightly enough to escape Kensuke's eyes. Yet, the shy EVA-pilot had not been able to stammer an obviously not completely truthful denial.

The cell phone rang.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"An accident at Matsushiro?" Shinji asked, just having been briefed about the situation, as he sat in the already deployed EVA Unit-01. "What... what about all the staff? Misato?"

"They could not make contact yet," Rei informed over the comm.

"But... what are we supposed to do? We can't fight an Angel on our own."

"Commander Ikari is taking direct command."

"Father? But..."

"Stop whining already!" Asuka's face popped up in the comm-screen. "We'll kick that Angel's ass with or without Misato!"

He frowned as he heard her ranting. He noticed rather easily that she was distressed as well, much more than she was supposed to be. She even said *we* instead of *I*.

'Either Misato hasn't got the message or it didn't make any change...'

And now, everything was about to repeat itself. The 13th Angel had taken over EVA-03.

The attempt to eject the entry plug would fail. The Commander would abandon Unit-03 and declare it as their target.

The other EVAs would be positioned apart from each other to form three defense lines near Nobeyama.

'The biggest 'mistake'!' He firmly gripped the controls. 'But not again!'

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"The target is approaching!" Hyuga's voice blared through the comm.

Then it came into Shinji's sight. It was just as he remembered; with the sun in its back, it looked more like a black demon from the deepest pits of hell than the holy messenger it was named after.

"But... that's an EVA. That's... the Angel?" he asked, not needing to play his nervousness. The knowledge of what depended on their success today was enough to make his heart flutter.

"Yes, that's the target."

He flinched at the cold voice of his father. He fought the urge to snap something back at him, remembering what that man had done last time. Luckily, Asuka's comment stopped his trail of thoughts.

"The EVA was taken over by the Angel?"

Shinji closed his eyes. It was time for a little change. "The pilot... Is he still inside?"

No answer.

"I... I have to help..." he mumbled. He stood up, threw his gun on the ground and made a run towards the 'first defense line'.

If the Commander was surprised, his voice didn't show much of it. "What are you doing?"

'Just changing history...'

-x-

This time, she was prepared.

This time, she wasn't distracted.

This time she stopped the unnatural fast blow with her own hands.

'This time, you won't get me that easily!'

-x-

Shinji wielded his EVA forward as fast as he could, while his father still tried to convince him to stop.

"Pilot Soryu's training makes her more qualified to react to unknown threats than you."

"That doesn't mean I can't help!" he shot back, forcing a pleading sound into it.

"Third Children!" The Commander's voice gained only a bit, but noticeable anger. "You were ordered to remain in position until we know of the Angel's abilities!"

"I've got to save the pilot of Unit-03!"

"The EVA and its pilot are lost. Any rescue attempt is futile and an unnecessary risk. The Angel is to be destroyed!"

"No!" Shinji declared as determined as he could. "I won't attack as long as the pilot is inside!"

-x-

"Since when does he have such self-confidence?" Fuyutsuki wondered, watching EVA-01 advancing on the giant screen like everyone else in the Central Dogma.

"In the worst of times," Gendo cursed. "His insubordination endangers Unit-01. If the Angel possesses this EVA as well, everything is lost." He shifted his attention to the technicians below. "Sever the connections between Unit-01 and its pilot!" He commanded. "Activate the dummy plug!"

"Sir," the young woman he identified as Lt. Ibuki, blurted, "there are still problems with the dummy

plug and without Dr. Akagi..."

"Anything is better than a pilot who doesn't follow orders!" Ikari cut her off.

"But, Sir!" she protested "He **is** engaging the Ang..."

"That doesn't matter! Do it!"

"Yes, sir..."

"Ikari..." the Sub-Commander warned to no avail.

-x-

EVA-01 halted abruptly. Darkness surrounded the Third Children, before a red light engulfed the plug. But instead of panicking, Shinji just grinned.

His normal sight returned in an instant.

EVA-01 moved on.

-x-

"Unit-01 is rejecting the dummy-plug! Connections to the pilot have been restored!"

-x-

"Thank you, mother!"

The purple mecha leaped up to encounter the Angel.

-x-

"What?" For a moment, the Commander lost his cold and professional attitude. "That's impossible!"

"Seems like the mother has chosen her favorite..." Fuyutsuki stated calmly.

"Yui? You chose the boy over your own flesh?" Gendo wondered, not even noticing the irony in this question.

-x-

"Hey, baka! Want to get in the spotlight again?"

As Shinji arrived, the two EVAs struggled against each other. Asuka needed both arms and one leg to keep the possessed Unit-03 restrained and herself on a safe distance from the slaving mouth of the Angel.

"Sorry! Can you pin..." He was cut off as the black EVA freed one of its extending arms from Unit-02's grip and got a hold of EVA-01's head. Growling in frustration, Shinji took the arm in both hands, trying to get free, but to no avail.

"Damn it!" Asuka cursed. "Hold still, will ya?!"

"Ayanami! We could..."

-x-

"...need some help here!"

Again, Rei found herself in a – for her – unknown situation.

She was in a turmoil.

This was not following the Commander's strategy. Unit-03 was lost. The Angel was to be destroyed.

But...

He is still inside. He will be injured. Killed.

But...

Stop the Angel when advancing. Defeat the Angel at all cost.

But...

Help Ikari and Soryu. Rescue the Fourth.

But...

The orders. The Commander's...

"Don't you trust your father's work?"

"How could I, with a father like that?"

Could it be true? Could it be that his decisions weren't always credible? Could he be... wrong?

"What..."

-x-

"...What am I supposed to do?"

The Commander knitted his brows ever so slightly. The situation slipped more and more out of his grasp. "Remain...!"

"Ikari!" Fuyutsuki scolded. "If we don't let her help them, we might lose more than one EVA!"

Gendo didn't answer. Fuyutsuki wasn't even sure whether he actually had listened to him or just pondered about his choices.

"Commander?" Rei asked again.

"Advance to assist the other pilots..." Ikari muttered displeased.

-x-

"Understood," she acknowledged the new order with more relief than she would have expected.

Dropping the rifle, she moved to engage the Angel.

-x-

A scream echoed through the air as Shinji bent the restraining arm in an awkward angle in his attempt to get free. As much as he cursed himself for possible hurting the pilot, this was the time to strike. Before he recovered, EVA-02 made a swift kick against the rogue Unit's legs, sending it face forward to the ground. It growled in frustration as it struggled against the two EVAs who immediately pinned it down as firm as possible.

"Ayanami!" Shinji called out to the just arriving blue EVA.

Rei moved as quickly as she could to get a hold on the halfway-ejected entry plug on the back of the squirming Unit-03. The gum-like slime surrounding it expanded as she pulled it forcefully, not willing to free the plug.

"I can't hold him much longer!"

"Stop... whining... Third!" Asuka berated him, despite sounding as though she had trouble holding the twitching body down herself.

Finally, the plug was slowly pulled out. EVA-00's shoulder released its Prog-Knife and with a swift stroke, the remaining goo was cut off.

The Fourth Children was freed.

"Great! Now to get him... safe?" Shinji's exclamation trailed down. The black giant body went limp.

"The thirteenth Angel is silent! Pattern blue vanished!" Aoba announced through the comm.

"Could it be...?"

'It was dependent of its pilot?'

Slowly, they backed away from the apparently dead Angel.

"We... defeated it..."

"Just like this..." Asuka wondered, before switching back to her usual attitude. "Hmph, I expected a more glorious victory. And worst of all, you two interfered..."

"Asuka, watch out!!"

"Wha..." She couldn't say more, as a powerful blow into her EVA's stomach knocked her out. The black arm reduced to its normal size as the Angel leaped up in a seemingly impossible angle; the eyes glimmering in a pure white; the mouth grinning with the contrasting red teeth.

"Blue pattern restored! EVA-02 down, pilot unconscious!"

'Tell me something I don't know!' Shinji gritted his teeth as he looked over to the fallen red Unit.

'Damn! She will not be very happy about this when she wakes up.'

Shinji watched in horror as the black EVA's arm that he had twisted before snapped back to its prior position. But, what looked even worse to him, thick veins appeared all over the body, stretching the armor plates everywhere and finally bursting the restraints of the EVA. Heavily grunting, the 13th glared directly at Unit-01.

"Ayanami, get the plug to safety!" he shouted as he pulled out his Prog Knife, preparing to fight.

He could only hope that she did what he said, since he had no time to watch her. The now fully awakened Angel leaped behind him in a split second and slammed the surprised EVA directly into the nearest mountain, causing it to lose the knife. Before Shinji could react, he felt something enclosing his neck. If it wasn't for the deadly situation, he might have laughed at how history repeated itself. Only that this time, he was ready to fight back.

Yet the grin on his face faded as he forced his eyes open. Instead of bending directly over him, the Angel stood way out of his reach, thanks to his expandable limbs. As much as he tried not to, Shinji began to panic when his lack of air became more and more evident.

-x-

"Cut the synchronization to 60 percent!" Fuyutsuki ordered the technicians, but was stopped by his superior.

"Wait!"

"But if this keeps up, the pilot will die!" he reminded the Commander.

"This is his best fight to date. I'm eager to see how well he can handle it."

"Even if that kills him?"

The former professor wasn't sure what scared him more: the Commander's orders or his ruthless grin.

-x-

Shinji tried to free himself from the Angel's death grip, but to no avail. All he could do now was to fumble around for something to help him; a rock or a big street sign or a telephone pole or his knife...

His knife!

As soon as he felt the haft, he reached out, stretching as far as he could to get a good grip on it and rammed it into the Angel's arm. Yet, despite the shrieks of pain, it didn't let go of its prey. Shinji pulled the blade deeper and farther through the 'flesh', racing against time before he would pass out. Then, at last, the grip around his neck broke and a horrid screech filled the air as the arm was severed off.

Shinji lost no time. Once he caught his breath, he stormed towards the Angel and, before it could respond, rammed the Prog Knife right into its throat. The neck of an EVA Unit was certainly thicker than its arms, but that fact didn't stop Shinji from trying just the same strategy again. The adrenaline pumping in his veins didn't let him think much of a more adequate way to kill this Angel. He ignored the constant punches from the remaining fist of the struggling Unit and kept pushing forward. About halfway through, a last squirm was made as the rest of the head fell victim to the gravity.

Shinji stared panting at the torso, before he finally relaxed in relief.

Too early!

"It's still alive??" he asked no one particular as the headless body began stumbling forward after standing still for only a few seconds. With one arm partly cut off, the head missing, cracked armor plates and thick veins all over, the humanoid figure looked more like a zombie from a cheap horror movie with its slow, uncoordinated movements.

'I can't believe it! Do I really have to rip it into countless pieces to kill it?' It was then that a glimpse of red in a now open area of the Unit's chest came in his vision. *'Of course! The core!'*

Luckily, without any coordination the Angel wasn't much of a threat anymore. A quick tackle caused the crippled giant to fall. Shinji ripped the remaining armor apart, exposing the Angel's/EVA's core. With only little resistance, he knifed it again and again and again.

He was somehow satisfied and horrified at the same time when the severed head gave a last scream in rage and agony as the red orb finally cracked and shattered into thousands of pieces. The following silence was only disturbed when the limp torso fell on the road.

At last, Unit-03 – the 13th Angel – was dead.

And this time Shinji Ikari smiled.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

With the sound of sirens and rushing medics booming in her head, Misato slowly opened her eyes.

"I'm still alive?" Despite the painkillers the medics obviously gave her, she felt the various bruises and scratches, and her left arm felt numb. She guessed that it was at least sprained, maybe even broken. It was then that she noticed someone kneeling down to the stretcher she was lying on. "Kaji?"

"You were lucky, Katsuragi," he said smiling, obviously judging by the destruction the rogue Unit had caused.

"What about Ritsuko?"

"Don't worry," Kaji assured her. "She's in a better shape than you."

"So?" She managed a smile, but then she remembered. "And EVA-03?"

"Destroyed as Angel by Unit-01."

To say she was shocked was an understatement. "I-I haven't told Shinji yet," she turned her gaze away from him.

"You don't need..."

She didn't listen though. "I need a comm!" Driven by guilt, she fought the pain, struggled to sit up and turned to the hectic technicians. "Get me a communication to EVA-01 at once."

"Katsuragi, listen..."

"Not now, Kaji!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Shinji felt as though he was waiting for the results of an important test. Rei had brought EVA-03's entry plug to a safe distance from the fight, but didn't return to the base in case she was needed. Due to this, the status of the pilot was still not checked yet.

"Shinji..." He smiled at the distracting voice.

"Misato, you're okay?"

"Shinji, I'm sorry. I ha..." she whispered.

"I know that it's Toji," he admitted.

"Shinji? How...?"

"Sorry Misato, but I need to hear this now..." he cut her off as he finally heard Maya's voice through the comm.

/"Report from the entry plug salvage crew: Survival of the pilot confirmed."

"He's unconscious. His left arm and leg..."/

Shinji held his breath. *'No! It can't be! We...'*

/"...seem to be broken, but otherwise..."/

He let the breath out and fell relaxed back into the seat.

"Shinji? Shinji?" Misato asked worried. "Can you read me? You're okay?"

A tired smile crept over his face. At least this time they had won the way they should have.

"Yes, Misato, I'm fine..."

At least one success...

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Sir, I must protest!"

To say Misato was angry was an understatement. She could barely keep herself halfway disciplined. She had left the infirmary, arm and bruises bandaged, and had rushed to Commander Ikari's pretentious big, yet dark office as soon as she had heard that Shinji was ordered there 'to face the consequences of his insubordination!'. "Having the Third Children suspended from duty for more than a week could prove fatal in case of another attack!"

"In case of an Angel attack, he will sortie, but only if it's truly necessary," the Commander replied coolly, the hands before his mouth and the sunglasses before his eyes masking his emotions as always.

Misato clenched her good fist. It wasn't fair at all. Orders or not, he successfully defeated the Angel and saved the life of his friend as well. And for that he was supposed to be punished? After he finally showed some confidence in piloting the EVA?

"Sir, I..."

"Major, do not question my decisions!" he cut her off. "The suspension is a result of his actions. He disobeyed orders several times in the past and I have left his punishment up to you, as you have been his commanding officer then. But this time it had been my direct orders and I will not let him get away with a scolding!"

"But..."

"Misato," the weak voice of the discussed one interrupted her. Shinji had remained silent until now. He had just kept standing there, glaring at his father, without flinching once while they were talking about his fate.

As if he had expected something like this.

"Drop it, okay? The *Commander* made his orders very clear," he continued as he turned around and went for the door.

Misato simply nodded, still glaring at the older Ikari, before she followed the younger.

"They will suspect something, Ikari!" Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki warned as both had left. "Such an illogical order doesn't fit you."

"I'm just adapting. I will not let him spoil the scenario."

The old man frowned. "Sometimes I'm asking myself if you're actually still going after the same scenario you and Yui convinced me in..."

Gendo did not answer.

He just grinned behind his clasped hands.

Chapter IV: Love

Silence.

That was just what he had tried to avoid.

But there they were; sitting in front of each other in the living room, not speaking a word.

Shinji was sure that she was growing more and more impatient, even though he didn't look at her. Instead, he just looked down at his trembling hands, while he hesitantly fumbled for the right words to begin. It was kind of ridiculous; he had been the one who wanted this, the one who finally wanted to share and ease his burden of the haunting events of the Third Impact. And hers as well.

"Well, if you don't want to talk after all, I guess I can go!" she muttered finally and rose in a quick motion from her chair.

Just as it was to be expected.

He sighed while the clenching of his fists came to an abrupt end.

"Asuka..." he whispered, but it was enough to stop her in her trails. "W-what was it like...?"

There it was. Such a simple question, yet he fought so hard for it.

Asuka took her time before she answered; without turning around to face him again.

"As if you wouldn't know..." was all she murmured.

"So... it was you...?"

"Yes, it was me..." Anger filled her voice with each word. "Of course it was me!" She whirled around; her eyes blazing with a fire that seemed unusual even for her.

"What is it, Third? Did you think even I wouldn't be so cruel to you? You thought *that* Asuka was just an illusion and the real one would help your wimpy ass, no matter what happened to her; not to mention, what you did to her?! Heck, what did you expect me to do? How... *why* should I've helped you? Where was **your** help, when I was mind-raped? Where was **your** help, when everyone abandoned me? Where was **your** help, when... when *I* abandoned me? Where... where was your help, when I found my happiness again, just to have it taken away from me once more?" She took a sob-filled breath.

"Where was your help, when I was ripped apart and eaten alive?"

"I know... I'm..."

"Don't give me that 'I'm sorry' now!"

"Heck, what did **you** expect **me** to do? Even if I'd tried to help you, you'd never let me! I... I..." Words escaped him as he saw the fire in her eyes extinguished by a cold stare.

"Strange..." she muttered callously. "You said it yourself, that I'd be just like you. And yet, even after *that*, you still don't understand me at all..."

Shinji flinched as he recognized the words. That had been one of the things that had lead to the final shattering of his hopes.

She had accused him that he couldn't possibly understand her; that it would be arrogant of him to even think he would be able to do so and to help her. He had countered that he wasn't able to if she wouldn't talk to him. But he had tried...

Did he?

Did she really need to tell him everything if he wanted to understand her? If he really had tried,

shouldn't he have been able to see what was troubling her, even without knowing every detail? After all, he had seen it...

"I think, I do..." he finally replied. "Your heart is as fragile as mine. But instead of hiding it from others and shut it away, you scared and drove everyone away before they could come near enough to touch it. But the truth is, you never really hated anything as you tried to convince everyone."

"And there you are wrong!" she spat again. "I **did** hate everything. I hated First for being favored by everyone. I hated Misato for taking Kaji away from me. I hated you for surpassing me. I hated NERV for abandoning me. I hated EVA for not accepting me anymore. I hated Mama, Papa... **everyone** for leaving me! But most of all, I hated myself for failing in everything that distinguished me; for being so weak. I hated myself for hating to be so dependent on the very thing I've worked so hard and lived for; I hated myself for... feeling... for..."

She looked up, glaring at him with trembling fists, before she dropped her gaze again.

"Have you any idea what it's like to hate what you're supposed to love and love what you're supposed to hate? It makes you sick!"

Shinji's eyes widened. ' "I feel sick..." '

"But I don't want to feel sick anymore! I don't want to have to hate myself anymore! But I just... can't!"

"You... don't have to..."

"SHUT UP!" she shouted, covering her ears. "Please... just... shut up! You know this yourself! Just like I told you! You don't like yourself either! You know how this is: If you hate yourself, you can't like anyone else. And if you can't like anybody else, how are you supposed to learn how to like yourself? It's... It's a vicious circle!"

Her breath was ragged by now. Shinji was actually scared by the almost maniacal look in her eyes.

"But maybe... maybe, if you would do that instead of me; if you would hate me, I wouldn't have to hate myself anymore. Or at least I could hate you back for a good reason! Come on Shinji! You've hated me in there, when you killed me! You can hate me here!"

The shocked boy didn't know what to do. Tears of helplessness started to form in his eyes. This was not going as he had expected, not at all. He had wanted to finally reach an understanding about what happened with them during the Third Impact. He wanted to sort out the things between them, so they could at least live together in peace, instead of more or less just exist next to each other, while avoiding such topics and keeping the load of their burdening secrets.

But if he wouldn't do anything now, everything would break apart. They would divert more and more from each other; just living for themselves and maybe even end up leaving each other.

Then they would truly be alone. And somehow he doubted that she really wanted that. Maybe this was why she had wanted to avoid this talk from the beginning; because she had feared such an outcome. He just couldn't let this come to pass. If there was a time to let his old attitude behind; to show that he would be there for her, it was now.

As determined as he could manage, he stood up.

"You are right, I never liked myself. I mean, my inactions crippled my best friend! I wasn't there for the people who needed me! I've killed the only one who ever told me... that I was loved! What I did to you was... inexcusable. Not to mention that all of humanity is gone because of me. I just wanted to die; to escape this world of pain..." He swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat, before he looked up to her.

"But I've realized something, Asuka. Even if you hate yourself, you can find happiness here; *real*

happiness. But for that you have to accept the others and the pain they may cause you. Maybe... if you'd let me... I..."

"I don't want you to help me!" she snapped, but cringed immediately afterwards. "I will always be alone."

"You don't have to! If you would... let me near to you. Otherwise, all you will do is to hurt yourself..." He took a step towards her, but she withdrew in return.

"Hate me, Shinji! You can't help me!"

"That... that's not true! Asuka, please! You... you were never afraid of anybody. I know I'm the last person someone should ask help from; anyone would do for that, and most certainly better."

"Shinji..." she breathed, continuing to retreat whenever he tried to come closer.

"I know that won't be easy, but..."

"Hate me, Shinji..." She stopped suddenly as she felt her route backwards blocked by the couch table. "Just hate me..."

"But we're the only ones left. We are all we have. We are the only ones to help each other."

"Don't come near me!" Asuka screamed almost hysterically as he, though hesitantly, reached out for her. But as she tried to push him away, she stumbled backwards against the table, taking the vase that stood there down with her.

For a few seconds Asuka lay there, in a puddle of the water that had been the content of the vase. It soaked parts of her clothing, but she didn't seem to care.

"Hate me, Shinji..." she muttered again, while slowly standing up, using the table as support. "Hate me... hate me..." She stood, but didn't look up to him.

Then, her rage took over.

"HATE ME!" In her fury, she gripped the table and slammed it aside.

"LEAVE ME!" The vase missed him only by inches and shattered on the wall behind him.

"KILL ME!"

She fell silent after that; not looking up; just standing there, panting heavily from her outburst.

"No..."

The moment he said it, her breathing stopped. She was completely still for a second, as if she would let his answer sink in.

A mere whisper. That's all what it had been; all that he would give.

Yet, it was more than enough to cut off the last remains of her reasonable thinking and to trigger a mere instinct and emotion-driven reaction.

Before he could react, she rushed forward; her quivering hands drew around his neck, followed by her arms, shifting them a bit to get a tight grip on his back to pull herself closer in this embrace.

Shinji wasn't sure what to do. As much as he wanted to comfort her, he had no idea how. He had never been able to sooth someone. Not to mention that this was Asuka; the same Asuka who had even yelled at him just for looking at her.

But as he glanced down, seeing her sobbing against his shoulder, he knew that this *wasn't* the same fierce and way too prideful Asuka he knew; neither was this the stoic, lifeless Asuka of the last weeks after her defensive walls had been shattered in one stroke by the attack of fifteenth Angel.

This was the fragile child that was yearning for comfort; finally freed after being locked away in the sub-consciousness for so long; only being able to show itself during her sleep, as he had seen that last night of their synchronization-training.

Hesitantly, he brought his arms up and put his hands gently on her back; returning the hug ever so lightly.

"Do you..." she sniffed, barely audible, "promise...?"

"Promise?"

"Not... to leave..."

Somewhat startled at this, he nodded, even though she couldn't see it. "I... I promise..."

He expected her to calm down, but instead she drew herself even closer.

"Damn it!" She sobbed. "Just... just look, what you've done! I'm crying again. I don't want to! I don't want to be so weak."

Weak? Was it that what she had feared? To appear weak, when she would show this side of her? But how should he tell her that she would always be much stronger than he could ever be, that it didn't matter to him, without sounding just like a weak, dishonest attempt to calm her.

"I-I think it needs a lot of strength to show your weakness..."

She gave a muffled laugh at this.

"You know, that sounds like absolute nonsense..." she muttered against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I... I'm just not very good in giving comfort."

She was silent for a moment and rested her head on his shoulder. "Maybe you're better than you think..."

"Huh? But..."

"Shh... Just... just... shh..."

So he stayed silent; doing nothing but holding her as he felt her last tears straining his shirt. 'Just' holding her? It seemed to be some kind of joke. Here he was: the meek, wimpy boy that wished everyone to death just so he couldn't be hurt anymore, was comforting the fiery, strong-willed girl that would rather have died than asking for help – and just by holding her...

He noticed that she had stopped crying for some time. The strange thing about it was that she still held onto him.

"Asuka?" he asked uncertainly.

No reply. The only action he noticed from her was the small, rhythmically movement of her body, which was caused by her breathing.

"Asuka?" he whispered again as he drew his head back a bit to take a look at her.

'*She's asleep?*' he wondered. A weak smile formed on his lips as he watched her face. She looked so innocent, so vulnerable. Hesitating at first, he slowly moved his hand to her cheek and gently wiped the wetness away.

A thought struck him suddenly. He wouldn't be able to stand there the whole night, holding her until she would wake up. Despite what she always said, he wasn't stupid; he knew that he wasn't strong enough to actually carry her to her room and he would just wake her up if he'd make a futile attempt to do so. Nervously, he looked around until his eyes came to rest on the couch. As this seemed to be the

best solution, he tightened his grip and carefully lifted her up from her feet as much as he could. The blush on his face grew stronger as her weight (and more so, the upper half of her body) rested now completely against him.

A bit clumsily swaying, he managed to heave her over to the couch without disturbing her sleep. Tenderly, he laid her down, using one of the folded rugs there as her pillow, the other one to cover her.

'She was right,' he thought, watching her sleeping face. *'Things will change after this. But hopefully for the better...'*

With that, he left her with her dreams...

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0

PAIN!

DEFEAT!

NO!

HOPELESS!

PAIN!

NO!

KILL!

KILL!

KILL!

Silence...

Dark...

Cold...

There was nothing but herself and the folding chair she sat on.

"Hello?" she called into the void. "Is anybody here?"

No answer...

"Am I... dead?"

"Dead?" a voice seemed to come out of nowhere. She didn't even wonder about it.

"Death..."

Die...

... with me!"

Scenes flashed out of nowhere: her father and stepmother talking about her; her mother talking to her doll; her mother wanting them to die together; her mother hanging from the ceiling... dead... and smiling...

"She looked so happy," Asuka recalled as the painful memories finally faded. "But I hated her face back then.

I don't want to die," she repeated her credo. "I don't want to let myself disappear. I don't like boys," she droned on, suddenly feeling free to let everything out that had dwelled on her soul for so long. "I don't like Papa and Mama. I don't like anybody. Nobody protects me. Nobody wants to be with me."

"What does she wish?"

"So, I live alone. But I don't want this..." She let her head drop as the feelings began to overwhelm her.

"It's too painful... I don't want to be alone... I don't want to be alone!"

"What does she want?"

"I don't want to be alone..." she repeated.

"She doesn't need to be alone anymore."

"But everyone left me..."

"She just has to reach out for them."

"Who...?"

A picture of a smiling, stubbly man with brown hair that was restrained in a ponytail appeared.

"Kaji? He never answered the phone anymore. Shinji said he was dead. He wanted to be with Misato anyway."

The man was replaced by a broadly grinning, purple-haired woman.

"Misato? She never really cared; it was all because of the job. After all, she just let me move in when I had to synchronize with her precious Shinji. She would never have been the friend I needed."

The picture of the woman disappeared and instead one of a brunette, pig-tailed girl in school-uniform appeared who seemed to happily greet her.

"Hikari? She's nice, but that's it. Sometimes, she actually gives me the feeling that she just wants to be polite, because she pities me. She can't comprehend what I'm doing; what I'm going through. The only ones who might be able to do that, are that damned First and..."

The picture faded again and was replaced by one of a brown-haired, teenage boy. He didn't smile. Instead, he faced something in front of him with a sad look in his eyes.

"Stupid Shinji! He doesn't give a damn about me! He has never been there for me when I needed him. He just wants everyone to be nice to him. He's always with his stupid friends. Always going to Misato. Always laughing with First! Always being the favorite of everyone! That's why he prefers everyone else over me..."

The darkness around her and his unmoving form was suddenly replaced by the environment of a hospital room. Her eyes widened in shock as she noticed that his sad, mournful look rested on the patient on the bed between them. Herself.

She couldn't recall this event; this wasn't her memory. What was this? This must have been in the time before she woke up in EVA-02...

'Why is he here...?' she wondered unbelieving. 'He... came to visit me...?'

Then, the freeze was gone. The machines started to work again, beeping and buzzing.

"Misato and Ayanami scare me," Shinji suddenly spoke up. "Help me. Help me, Asuka!"

As the only response he got was the movement of her breathing, he began to shake her; calling her name several times; pleading her to wake up, to open her eyes. Finally he collapsed, silently sobbing. "Help me... Help me... Call me an idiot, like you always do..."

Asuka didn't know what to think as she watched him shaking her other self's body, begging her to wake up. A part of her couldn't believe how much, how truthfully he pleaded for her to be with him. That he wanted to be with her.

Another part of her just wanted to scream that she had been right, that she was obviously just the very last on his list. That she was only his last resort, as everyone else didn't want to help him anymore.

That latter part of her only grew bigger at what happened next: With a last thrust, not only her comatose body was turned around, but also her hospital-gown flew open, exposing her breasts and most of her body. His eyes changed somehow, gaining a look that seemed full of madness and lust and yet eerily hollow; his breathing was deep and ragged. He never took his eyes off the lifeless body, even while going backwards to the door. But instead to leave, he turned the lock. His hand slowly went down to his trousers.

"What... what is he doing?" Her eyes went wide in surprise and disgust, before her expression changed into a mix of hurt and hatred. "So that's all I am to you after all?!"

He had lied! He didn't need her; all he wanted was this! He had always lied! Maybe even his whole meek, sheepish attitude was nothing but a lie!

She didn't want to see the end of this revolting scene and whirled around. Everything faded again.

All this time he had lied and fooled her.

It was always like this, wasn't it? Just when she started to trust someone, she was betrayed and left alone in the end.

She felt her anger increase more and more, the longer she thought about it. How could she have ever expected him to be different? Hadn't she always known that he was just a pervert?

There he was; most likely fantasizing about them right now. She couldn't take it anymore.

"It makes me sick just to look at you!" she spat with all the hatred she could muster.

"Because I am just like you...?"

What was that supposed to mean? Panic began to rise within her. Could he have looked into her mind, like she looked into his by accident? Could he have seen her most inner secrets of her past? Just like that Angel...

Or did he actually think he could possibly understand her? No one could! How *dare* he think he of all was able to, if... if she couldn't herself?

No! He couldn't! Someone who'd understand her wouldn't back away from her. Someone who'd understand her wouldn't care if she cursed him away when it was obvious that she didn't want to. Someone who'd understand her would be there for her, hold her.

Scenes were flashing again. Something about... kissing. The moment before they kissed! Why wasn't she surprised that he came back to this? Most likely, he had used that weak moment of her several times for his sick pleasure! Not this time...

"You don't understand anything!" she confronted him. "Don't come near me!"

"I do..."

Liar!

"No, you don't, you Idiot!"

Her swift kick made him cringe, but he didn't move.

"You think you can understand me?" she continued her assault. "You think you can help me? That's so arrogant of you! You will never understand!"

"How should I?" he suddenly interfered. "You never tell me anything! How could I understand you? It's impossible!"

"Ikari, did you try to understand?"

Another voice. The First's voice! And she of all people was on her side?
No! Most likely, he had told her the same lies and now they all met in this... train?
Asuka barely noticed the scene-changes any longer.

"I did..."

The boy's answer refocused her anger on him.

"Idiot!" she spat, placing herself directly in front of him; forcing him to look at her. "I know what you've done! Go on, do it again! I'll stand right here and watch you!"

Of course he wouldn't dare, when she was conscious and right in front of him. Just a wimpy coward, after all, that would run away from his problems; going for help... to everyone else.

"If I can't have you for me alone, I don't want you at all..." This came as surprise to herself. Had she wanted to be with him? She couldn't tell. Not anymore.

"Then, why can't you be nice to me?"

Asuka felt her anger rising again. That's what it always was like, wasn't it? Always "Be nice to me!" What about *her*?

Another change of the scenery. They were in the kitchen of their apartment. It somehow reminded her of some time after her mindrape, before she had run away.

"I want to help you somehow, and be with you forever!" Shinji said, walking around the chair she sat on.

There he went again. Why couldn't he just shut up and leave her alone? That wouldn't be as painful as his lies and useless attempts to fool her.

"Then don't do anything. Don't come near me. Because all you ever do is to hurt me."

"Asuka, help me!" he pleaded. "You're the only one, who can!"

"Liar." That was it. She couldn't hear this excuses and lies anymore. Willingly to settle this once and for all, she stood up; scaring him away, but she followed him around the kitchen table. "For you, anybody would do! You're scared of Misato and First! And of your father and mother as well!"

"Asuka..."

"You're just using me as an escape! 'Cause it's the easiest way not to get hurt!"

"Asuka, help me..."

"You never loved anybody!" She pushed him hard; causing him to fall, while his arm slammed against the coffeepot on the table, which released its content on the floor. "You're all you have! But you never even learned to love yourself!"

As he fell in the spilled liquid; cringing miserably on the floor; only one word came in her hate-filled mind. "Pathetic..."

"Help me... Anybody... Somebody, help me..." Only slowly, he stood up.

"Help me... help me... help me!" Without warning, he suddenly threw the table aside.

So he was beginning to get desperate?

"Don't leave me!" He took the chair and flung it around.

So he was beginning to panic?

"Don't abandon me!"

Too bad for him.

"Don't kill me!"

She barely noticed the chair crashing before her feet. She just stared coldly at his now silent and exhausted form.

"No..."

Now for sure, he would go to someone else. Go beg for help from someone else. Go fool someone else. Hurt someone else...

But he didn't...

Asuka was shocked as his hands suddenly flung around her neck; squeezing it with an unknown strength. She didn't even fight him as he lifted her sobbing from her feet.

What had she done? What could have caused so much pain in him, that he was willing to kill her in revenge? Why didn't he just go to someone else at her rejection?

What if... Could it be... that he hadn't lied? That he had wanted to be with her? That he had never intended to dump her, once she lost her purpose to him?

But that wasn't possible, was it? No one ever...

It was too late now anyway. She hadn't any strength left; darkness surrounded her. All she was able to, was to hear his faint voice, as though it was far away...

"So everyone should just die."

Everyone? Just because she hadn't believed him that he wanted to be with her; that he needed her? Because she had denied his cry for help? Because...

'Because of me?'

Voices were starting to fill her mind; so many voices! She didn't want to hear them. She couldn't let this happen. Not now! She still had to show... still needed to know...

But they were so many...

-x-x-x-x-x-

Waves.

Stars.

A red streak.

Couldn't breathe.

Killing her.

Like Shinji had.

Make sure... She hadn't meant it...

Air.

Tears... on her face. Someone...

...was crying. Close by. On her.

She could only see through one eye.

Shinji was crying on top of her.

What? Third Impact. Instrumentality.

Had she actually just shown him...?

"I feel sick..."

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0

Shinji had his own problems trying to fall asleep. For what seemed to be hours, he tossed himself from one side to the other, until he finally started to doze off – just to be bothered by a blow of air next to him.

'Oh great,' he mused, 'did I forget to close the window?'

As he wanted to get up and opened his eyes, his sight was disturbed by a few strands of his long, red hair that he absently brushed out of his face.

'Wait, I don't have long, red hair! That would mean...'

He turned his head slightly to the side, where he saw the cause of the previous blow.

'She must have been sleepwalking again,' he figured as he shifted his glance nervously between the ceiling and Asuka, who lay directly next to her roommate, her backside turned towards him. Slowly, he moved away from her, so he could go and sleep somewhere else. If she would wake up with him beside her, no matter what happened that evening, it wouldn't be a very pleasant waking for him.

But his movement was stopped and his eyes widened in surprise as a hand got hold of his left wrist, pulling his arm around her waist.

Was she awake after all? Could she actually have come because she had searched for his closeness? No, that couldn't be. Sure, they had just shared a relative tight embrace; she had poured her heart out in front of him, at least partly. But that had just been a spontaneous, intuitive reaction, hadn't it?

And now she didn't do anything else than just lying there, keeping a light, yet firm grip on his arm that held him close to her.

His breathing increased again; he felt his heart beating faster and faster against his chest. More than before he was reminded of the night before they defeated the 7th Angel, only that he now couldn't pull away so easily. Well, and that he faced her back this time.

But everything else; the faint warmth emitting from her body, the soft sounds of her breathing, her smell... It all was as intoxicating as it had been back then.

And yet again, only barely noticing it himself, he moved forward, his eyes closing slowly, his lips reaching out to her, until they made contact with the smooth skin of her shoulder.

"Don't push your luck, hentai."

He gasped; her whispered command taking him by surprise.

"I... I... didn't..." he stammered nervously. He wasn't sure if his shock resulted from her sudden warning or from the possibility that she had been awake the whole time and actually wanted to be close to him. Could that be?

"I... You just... smelled nice..." he confessed weakly.

"Baka..." she whispered.

Her hand still entrapping his arm around her.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

He wasn't really surprised when he found her gone the next morning. Judging by the sounds emitting from the bathroom, she was up and taking a shower. He rose up from the bed, got into a loose-fitting t-shirt and trousers and went to make breakfast. Just like every typical morning.

They didn't say a word about the events of the last day and lived on as if nothing had happened. Not that he really expected her to act otherwise. She had shown him her weak side and as it seemed, she still wanted to push that aside as far as possible.

Or at least, he thought so.

The more it startled him, that when it was time to go to sleep again, she took him by his wrist and led him to her room. When he managed to ask why, the only answer he got was a mumbled "My bed is bigger than yours."

He didn't ask further.

They didn't sleep as close as the night before, but her whole behavior towards this subject didn't really let him rest easily.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

The sleeping procedure repeated itself every night from then on. They would go to bed, they would sleep and they would wake up without saying a word about it, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She never gave any explanations and he didn't ask anymore, even though it troubled him for quite a while.

Eventually, it came to him, or at least what seemed to be the most likely answer. As strange as it seemed; during the day, may it have been because of the work they now had to do or because of something else, it was barely noticeable that they were the only people left on earth. Yet at night, when you lie alone in your bed, without anything to detract your mind, the loneliness would creep onto you, clutch onto your heart as powerful as possible.

But when they slept next to each other, even if just close enough to feel the presence of the other; the loneliness wasn't able to reach them that fast. Not as long as the other was there.

And there was something else to it.

It felt warm...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"I don't think it's that hard..."

"Oh yes, how could I forget? You are Shinji, the almighty! There's nothing too hard for you, nothing to stand in your way, nothing..."

Shinji faded Asuka's rants out. Why couldn't she just let him try something for once without getting into her "know-it-all"-mode. After all, he was doing this mostly for her.

It hadn't come as surprise when she had declared that she was sick of eating only vegetables, dried meat or instant noodles for weeks. She wanted some "real food" and, of course, expected him to get it for her. Since he didn't want to hunt and slaughter wild animals nor touch their hens, he had offered to go fishing, which resulted in rather mixed reactions. After a heated discussion, whether or not fish was "real food", he actually won with the argument that it would be either that or they would have to go to catch and eat insects soon.

So now, packed with some gathered equipment and an instruction book, Shinji made his way to a lake outside of Tokyo-3, followed by the clamoring Asuka. He wanted to avoid the Ashi Lakes, which were flooded by the now LCL-filled sea. Thus, he chose to try his luck at one quite a bit away from the city, placed in the picturesque landscape in which he had wandered around after his fight with the 4th Angel.

"...and don't expect me to clean it, you hear me?"

He stopped and let his shoulders drop in a silent sigh. "Asuka, why did you even come with me?"

"So you don't like my company?" she asked menacing, as she stepped closer to him.

"No... I-I mean... I..."

The redhead's cold stare cracked soon at his stammering and she erupted in laughter.

"You should have seen your face!" she chuckled as she took a few steps back again. "But I'm afraid, I have to burst your little bubble; I'm not here because I'd miss you when I'd be alone or something. It's just that I want to take the opportunity to go swimming once again." Winking, she flashed him a glimpse of a red and white strap on her shoulder under the T-shirt. "Besides school, I hadn't any chance to since that one time at the NERV swimming pool. Not to mention that the last weeks had been much too hot for my taste."

Shinji quickly averted his gaze in hope that she wouldn't notice how red his face had become. Her bikini; the memory of the scene at the pool and the mentioning of the heat reminded him mainly on one thing: thermal expansion...

A few minutes later, they arrived at the pond. Some of the trees that surrounded it had been bent sideways by the shockwave of the Third Impact; two had been uprooted completely. The water, however, glittered in the sunlight as if nothing had ever happened.

Soon enough, Shinji found a spot from where he wanted to try his luck. As he sat down and fumbled around to attach the pieces of the rod together, he heard a few rustling noises somewhere behind him.

'Asuka must be undressing...' His head went beet red again at the thought. Granted, she wasn't going to be naked, since she already wore the bikini under her clothes, but still...

'No "Don't peek!"? Maybe... No! ... But...'

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud splash. It was then that he noticed that he was currently trying to connect the first and the last part of the rod.

Meanwhile, his female companion made a few strokes and let herself drift backwards.

"Hey, baka, why don't you give your futile attempt to prove some semi-manliness up and come swimming a few rounds too? The water's just right!"

"I... I cannot swim..." he mumbled.

"What was that?"

"I said... that... I cannot swim!" he grumbled.

"You cannot what?" she shouted bewildered, stopping her backwards movement in surprise.

"If humans were made to swim, they'd have gills!"

"Oh, come on, even babies can do it! It's actually just a matter of will. You just need some moti..."

"Asuka, if you make so much noise and movements around here, there won't be any fish to bite for sure!"

"Great, now I'm your excuse for your incompetence! Fine! I'll be over there!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

-X-X-X-X-

Asuka watched her companion from the distance. Where did that idiot get such spine? Who would have known that it just needed something he was scared of for him to show some of it? But not with her! How did he dare to cut her off and send her away?! If he wanted to or not; by all of what was left of her pride, she would get him into the water now for sure, even if she had to swallow some of her dignity at another end! And after all, it would be for his own good. He just needed the right motivation...

She waited for quite a while and made some rounds, before she decided to pull off her plan. Swimming back to the place where he was fishing, she noticed that he had actually been successful. Even though the fish he was just looking at was laughable small, it would be enough to prove her wrong and rub it in her face. But he wouldn't dare to do that once she was finished with him. As soon as she was...

"Aaahhh!" Her scream and wild splashing surely caught his attention.

"What is it, Asuka?"

"I-I don't know! I..." Water flooded her mouth and cut her off as her head sank under the surface. Only after some hectic, uncoordinated strokes, she managed to get up again. "My-my legs. Must be... cramp..."

"That-that's not very funny, Asuka!" Shinji looked really frightened now. He had dropped the fishing rod and stood at the edge of the shore; his hand clenching and unclenching.

"I'm not..." Asuka coughed and spat some more water as she went under again. "I'm not joking!"

She barely held herself over the water by now. The last she saw was that he was knee-deep into the water. The time seemed to slow down for her as she sank again, watching the surface drifting further and further away. She wasn't sure if she should be worried or glad to know that it would be most likely for the last time...

But these thoughts were immediately interrupted, when something broke through the water, getting a grip on her wrist. She was pulled back to the air.

Shinji may paddled rather clumsily, splashing around with his arm and legs, but: she was safe.

Crawling onto the shore, he coughed up and spat a lot of water; seemingly more than she did herself.

Once he caught his breath a bit, he leant over to her apparently unconscious form, grabbing her lightly at shoulders.

"Asuka?" he asked hopefully, slightly shaking her. "ASUKA?"

Weakly grinning, she cracked her eyes open.

"See?" she taunted. "I knew I'd get you into the water. 'Invincible Shinji' just needs a damsel in distress to get off his ass."

"This... this was just a trick after all...?"

"Meh! Of course it was! Did you really think I'd need your help to get out of that shallow water?" she told him; maybe with more venom in her voice than intended. But just as she tried to get up; his grip at her shoulders increased painfully as he pushed her forcefully back on the ground. "Ah! What the...?" she screamed, but was silenced when she saw the look in his tearstained eyes; full of worry and hurt, but mostly of so much anger that it actually scared her.

"Asuka!" he hissed. "You can tease me, you can hit me, but don't... don't ever do that again!"

Asuka was awestruck. What had she done to cause this in him? She had just played a trick on him, and this time not even for his bad. She just had acted as if she was drowning... as if she would...

Her eyes widened as she understood what she had done to him. Yet she couldn't bring herself up to find the right words for an excuse. All she could do was to nod, so he would let her go.

On their way back home, neither spoke a word and even after they had arrived they remained eerily silent.

He didn't sleep next to her that night.

It was cold.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"I'm home."

A chill went down her spine at the hollow sound of his voice. That incident at the lake had been a few days ago, but the mood between them had barely changed yet. And it was really starting to bother Asuka.

He was avoiding her; refused to talk to her unless necessary or out of habit. And when he did, his repellent behavior gave little doubt who's son he was. And the nights were hardly better. That bed was just too big for her alone.

It was almost as though she was living with a ghost: You know someone is there, somewhere; an eerie presence walking through your home, but stays out of your grasp.

Well, it was going on long enough—she was going to settle this once and for all. So she took a deep breath and set up her softest smile, before she went to meet Shinji in the kitchen where he just put his new catch on the drainboard of the steel sink.

"Hi," she greeted in an overly honeyed tone.

But he didn't answer, didn't turn around to her – didn't acknowledge her presence at all. Asuka forced her eyes from twitching and kept the smile up.

"Hey, you got a bigger one this time!"

But again her attempts to show good will were met with a mere grunt as he washed his hands. "Yeah."

Her cutie-facade dropped with an angry sigh. Even in his worst times, he hadn't been so unresponsive, so... cold. In fact, he – they – had opened up in the last few weeks. After that one big talk, it had seemed surprisingly easy to talk freely about topics that neither would have dared to touch before. They had talked about their past, their lives; the time before and also the time since they've met each other, their parents... she had actually told him about her mother. Not about her death and who had found her lifeless body hanging from the ceiling. Not yet. They obviously still kept some secrets from each other—but it was enough to get a glimpse through a crack in the shells that they had built up around themselves. And that hadn't been achieved by profound talks and analysis, but something that had happened very rarely before: casual conversation.

And Asuka had to admit that she was starting to miss that.

Just because the idiot couldn't take a stupid joke...

Really, who was he to judge?! He had done much worse to her! Making her feel obsolete! Abandoning

her! That ugly thing in the hospital! Trying to kill her!

She really had good reasons to mope, but was she? No, she did her best to get along, because they needed to. Because it felt better that way...

But the anger she tried to focus on did little to let her forget about the guilt that was wrenching her stomach whenever she saw him.

If he would threaten to leave her alone in this empty world, she wasn't sure if she would ever be able to forgive him either...

"Listen," she spoke low, but firmly, crossing her arms under her chest. "I'm not going to say that I'm sorry for what I did..."

She could see him tensing, but otherwise, he didn't react.

"I did it to do you a favor. And, yes, also because I thought it'd be funny. I admit that I may didn't think it out well enough." She bit her lip, as if it was a last attempt to keep the upcoming words in. But they had to get out. "So... so I'm sorry that I hurt you..."

Asuka drew her arms closer around herself as she waited for an answer from his stiff form. Feeling the urge to tap her feet, she realized she was actually nervous to hear his reply. Could he really want them to drift apart like this?

"Come on," she tried once more. "Let's just forget about that little incident and get back on the way we were going. Okay?"

And finally, he turned around. He looked tired himself, Asuka noticed, but she couldn't tell whether he had shared her troubles to find sleep or if he was just as tired of this "act".

"You know," Shinji started and a very slight smile appeared on his lips, "If you wanted me to share your bed again, you could have just asked..."

She couldn't help but smile—an honest smile this time—not just at his not even shabby attempt at teasing, but also out of relief. "You wish, hentai," she said in mock anger and turned to leave with an exaggerated huff.

But just before she was out of the door, she quietly added, just loud enough for him to hear: "You better don't start snoring though."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Life was returning to normal. At least as normal as it was for the only two humans on earth.

Shinji went back to the lake now and then, and actually got a hang on catching the bigger fishes, so they had at least some variety in their meals. Asuka developed a somewhat surprising interest for the garden and even the animals. She had actually shooed him away sometimes with the argument that he might ruin the whole growing process. Not that there was any proof yet, who of them actually had a 'greener thumb' than the other, or if both would even end up starving on much too small harvests. That would still take a while to see...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Where was that idiot?

He had been out to go fishing for several hours by now. But that wasn't the problem.

The periods of sun and heat were often disturbed by heavy showers of rain. Lately they were growing worse; wind and thunder turned them often into a full-grown storm. But it was seldom as bad as that day.

The rain had started about an hour ago and grown worse and worse since then. It didn't show any signs of decreasing, quite the contrary. And he was still out there.

That idiot.

Asuka forced herself to get away from the window. What had she been looking for anyway? She had never waited for him, so why should she start with that now? And it wasn't like he would actually go through that rain; he had most likely taken cover somewhere and waited till it ceased. Besides, there was no way that anything could have happened. He had said that he wouldn't leave her.

She grimaced as she realized how silly that reason was. But still, there was no way that anything could...

But what if...?

No, it can't...

But...

"Argh! Damn it!"

With that she rushed to get her jacket and shoes on and ran out into the storm.

-x-x-x-x-

When she finally reached the lake, he was nowhere to be seen. She tried to ignore the tiny voice in her head, which kept on telling her that he might have went in too far for whatever reason and now lay drowned in the currently unsteady water. The voice eased a bit when she went around the shore without finding any signs of his fishing-utensils.

'But that wasn't much,' the voice continued. 'It may have been blown away by this wind.'

She wondered where these thoughts came from. But even more so she wondered how they could have so much power over her. Shivers went down her spine and they didn't necessarily come from the cold.

Maybe he had went for the city and found shelter there. That must be it. Must be...

-x-x-x-x-

She cursed as she stepped into another puddle. There were hundreds of them in these ruins, the whole ground was a sludgy mixture of dirt and debris. And the rain and growing darkness made it hard to see. If at least the city lights would still be working. Or better said: If only they would still stand.

Her head dropped as she let out a sigh. How on earth was she supposed to find that Baka in this huge, scattered area without even being able to see?

"SHINJI!!"

Where had this come from?

"SHIIN-JIII?"

Again. Damn, this was so embarrassing!

Why? There was no one to hear it...

Besides Shinji...

"DAMN IT, SHINJI! IT'S GETTING LATE! YOU'LL STILL HAVE TO MAKE MY DINNER!"

Better...

But still no answer...

"Damn it..." she cursed silently.

But still no answer...

-x-x-x-x-

She had searched for almost four hours. The storm had barley ceased and the night was drawing near.

She wouldn't find him in the combined darkness.

The rain had totally drenched her by now; the jacket hadn't been much of help to keep her clothes dry; her soaked hair clutched at her face. A few drops of water trailed down her cheeks as well. Only slowly, she made her way... no, she retreated home. She hated having to retreat.

She looked up as their house came into view. It looked almost peaceful with the cozy light, shining out the windows, so warm, so welcoming, so... like home...

Who knew if it could ever be again...?

'Wait a moment,' Asuka suddenly wondered, *'I didn't turn the lights on...'*

Without further thinking, she hurried to the house, tore the door open and almost collided with...

"Shi... Shinji?"

"My God, Asuka, where have you been? You're completely soaked!"

"Wha... Where were you?"

"Me? I was checking the glasshouse when the storm broke loose. I've wanted to wait till it eased to get over here. But when it didn't, I eventually ran over after about... Asuka, you really should get into some dry clothes, that can't be healthy!"

Asuka didn't move however. She kept her head down; the soaked, dripping hair covering most her face from his view. Both her fists clenched tightly and her voice was trembling with anger.

"I was out there, for four hours, searching for you, and you are here ALL THE TIME?!"

Her sudden leap forward startled Shinji and he flinched at the expected blow. The more he was stunned, when her arms flew around him, drawing him into a surprisingly tight embrace.

"You stupid idiot!" she muffled with a cracked voice into his shoulder. "If you do something stupid like that again, I'll personally kill you!"

"You... you were really worried about me?"

"I... I just... ah, shut up, Baka!" she huffed and pulled away from him. "I hope you have at least dinner ready! If it's good I may overlook the fact that you haven't searched for me..."

A pang of guilt hit him as she spoke that last sentence in a disappointed rather than menacing tone.

Still...

He couldn't help but smile...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"This is all your fault, you know?" Asuka greeted him hoarsely, trying to sit up in her bed as he entered her room, carrying a tablet with a bowl of hot soup.

"I'm..." He was cut off when the redhead gave him a warning glare. Or at least, she did what came closest to that, due to her current status. But her puffy eyes and red nose just didn't make her as menacing as she might intended to be.

He sighed. "Well, it *was* my fault that you went out in that storm and caught a cold..." he admitted as he placed the tablet on her lap, careful not to spill anything.

"It won't get better from your apologies! You don't need to blame yourself constantly. I can handle that for you very well!"

She giggled at her joke, but her laughs quickly changed into coughs; the sudden rocking movement sending drops of the soup over the edge of the dish onto the tray.

"You better eat, as long as there's still something in the bowl."

Asuka nodded, then took the spoon and shoved the soup directly in her mouth.

Her eyes widened in shock and pain as the insides of her mouth made contact with the unexpected temperature.

"AAAHHH! IT'S HOT! Damn it! Can't you cook without heat?"

"I'm so... Uh... It-it will help you to get better."

She responded to that with a smirk, but obviously decided not argue anymore. A smile formed on his face, while he watched her spooning the rest of the soup without further complains, though pursing her lips for a cooling blow every so often.

"Well, how are you feeling?" he asked, when she finished the last drop.

"Better. So, can I get out of the bed again?"

Shinji chuckled inwardly. She had asked him that constantly, ever since he had sent her with a lot of argumentation and reasoning to bed so she could recover. But Asuka wasn't a person who could just lie in bed for days without anything to do. And she most likely hadn't considered that he wouldn't be around her the whole time and not even spent the night next to her, when they agreed that they should do their best not to get him infected as well.

He took a step forward and gently placed a hand on her forehead.

"Your fever has gone down, but you still have some temperature. You should stay here for a while."

"Oh great," she smirked. "Know what? Since you're such a dutiful doctor, you'll be responsible for the main medical care from now on!"

"Wha-? You're just too lazy to learn all that theoretical stuff, aren't you? And what if *I* get sick?"

"No protest here! That was an order, Ikari!" she mocked.

"Oh, very well..." he sighed in defeat. "But as 'doctor', I'll tell you to stay in bed and get some sleep."

"Okay, okay..."

He was ready to leave the room as she snuggled back under the sheets, but something held him in place. Something he still had to settle.

"Asuka..."

"Hmm?"

"I... I still haven't thanked you that you went out there to look for me. That... that you actually cared for my well-being..."

"I..." She quickly turned her slightly blushing head to avert his gaze. "I just don't want to live here *all* alone. I-it would be too boring without any company. I... that... it had nothing to do with you in particular, understand?"

"Yeah," he said a bit disappointed. But he wouldn't let either of them back out. Not his time. Asuka's eyes widened as he suddenly got hold of her hand.

"But thanks anyway..." he concluded, leaning closer to her face.

It wasn't really a kiss. More like a small peck on the lips.

But this surprisingly bold move of him was more than enough to make her speechless for a moment, in which he slowly stood up, took the tray and went for the door.

"Baka," she managed to mutter at last, causing him to freeze in the doorframe. "You might've got yourself infected now..."

He smiled. "That... would've been worth it..." he assured as he went out and closed the door behind him.

"Baka..." Asuka whispered once more, closing her eyes to sleep. Still feeling his touch.

On the other side of the door, Shinji's quivering legs finally gave out and with a sigh of relief, he slumped down, leaning back against the wall. He panted for air after holding his breath without really noticing, while having acted as cool as he could. Yet, he smiled broadly.

"Well, she didn't hit me..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Well, FUCK YOU!"

Full of anger, she turned and would have stormed towards her room, if she wouldn't have been held back by her roommate.

"What? What is it, Asuka?" Shinji asked bewildered.

" 'What is it?'" she snapped at him, freeing her arm forcefully from his grasp. "You just said that you loved her! I-I thought, you..." she cut herself off, looking away again.

He sighed. So that was it. He should have known that this would cause problems some day. He should have told her this much earlier.

"You don't understand. I loved her, but not like that. Aya... Rei, she was... a clone... of my mother..."

"She... was your mother?!" Her eyes went wide as she realized what this seemed to implicate. "That's... that's sick!"

"No. Even if she was made from my mother, she... she was still her own person. She was just... I dunno... *like* my mother, if you know what I mean. I guess that's why I liked to be with her. I somehow felt... safe. And I wanted her to be... happy... But you know; I'm not very good at that..."

"I still think it's sick! Lusting after your mother..."

"I'm not! I said; it wasn't like that," he tried to defend himself. "I... Argh! I should have known that you wouldn't understand it! You would even misunderstand that with Kaworu! He..." Shinji stopped himself, regretting what he had let slip the very moment the words left his mouth.

"K-Kaworu?" As expected, her anger was temporally replaced with confusion. "H-he?! You-you were...?! A... a *boy*?"

"Ye... No... I mean... it's not like that! He... he was the last Angel..."

"The last...? So he had some kind of power that made everyone fall in love with him or what?"

"No..."

"Then, presuming, that you aren't naturally after your enemy or your own gender, how did he make you fall for him?"

"I didn't fall..." he began to protest, but the words escaped him. "He... he said that he loved me..."

"That's all? Someone comes along, says he loves you and you love him back for that? Is it that easy to gain your love?"

"I... I don't know..."

"Well, then... I... I..." she mumbled hesitantly, as though she was searching for the right words or fighting to get them out. But then she just glared back at him. "I can't believe it! But that was always your problem, wasn't it? You were never able to bring yourself up to tell someone how you feel, but always waiting for someone to show kindness to you. So you fall for those, no matter who or what it is, no matter how much truth is in their words! But... but what, if there is someone who loves you honestly, but isn't able to do the first step either? You would never see it, would you? I guess women's hearts are still too hard for you to understand..."

"Maybe... Maybe not..." he whispered as she slammed the door to her room shut behind her. "But I guess you're right..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Love...

What was love anyway?

People always said you would know that it's love, once you feel it. But in the end, they still had other people from which they could get advise or could compare to.

*But what if there weren't other people? Who could judge if you were in love or if you'd just experience a crush on someone; if you just **think** you are in love?*

Shinji could hear his bedmate nervously shifting around behind him, sometimes inhaling air, as if she wanted to speak up, but then stayed silent. She had been like that the last few days; anxious and speaking to him only in short, cut-off sentences, as if she was trying to say something and struggled to get it out.

"You..." she suddenly began, "you know that I love you, don't you?"

Whatever it was; if there was no one left, wasn't it up to them to decide? They could make their own definition if necessary. If he had the strongest feeling he could imagine to have for another person; one

that fills your heart with joy whenever you be with, see, or even just think of that person; when you miss the one already the moment the person leaves the room; when you would do everything to keep this one happy; was there anyone to tell him that he couldn't call it love?

He smiled. "I know. As sure as I love you too..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

One would think that once two people admit their love to each other, they would be happily spending the whole time with each other; enjoying every second of the other's company.

Yet, the following days, Asuka and Shinji seemed to live on as if nothing had happened; at least at first sight. But at a closer look, one would notice that they actually even did their best to avoid each other. Most of the time they would spend in their respective rooms, or Asuka would be in the garden while Shinji did some cleaning in the house, or he would go fishing, or she would go to the city for supplies, or...

During the little time they spent together, they would barely speak and if they did, it was only about casual things, avoiding the big topic at all costs. They would only exchange some shy glances that were quickly averted, as though it was a forbidden thing that you just can't resist to do.

Both knew that it was rather ridiculous; both knew already that the other felt the same way, so why this almost laughable behavior? What was it that they still feared?

The closeness?

They had been close to each other already for the last few months, mentally and at least sometimes also physically. Even though especially the latter one had never really been (intentionally) beyond that of friends. But wasn't to go further than that also a part of what they wanted?

Of being hurt again?

Both had shown and assured that they wouldn't hurt the other intentionally. Of course there was a not to be underestimated risk that it would happen *unintentionally* sooner or later. But wasn't it a small risk compared to what it was worth?

The new, unknown nature of this situation?

But didn't they want to explore it together?

"Damn it! This *is* ridiculous!" Asuka muttered, shoving her just emptied plate over the table.

"Huh? What is?" Shinji asked bewildered as he reached for it, so he could clean the dishes. But his hand was stopped, when she gently laid hers on it.

"This..." she said, entwining her fingers with his, "I meant this..."

Looking up into his eyes, she knew that he didn't really understand.

"Come with me..." She went for the living room, tugging Shinji behind, who was still unsure what she intended. There, she lead him towards the couch and sat down, pulling him down to do the same. She shifted around to face him and took his other hand as well.

"Shinji, what... what I said that night... I-I really meant it." She paused to look up to his eyes. "I love you."

"I... I know," he assured smiling, his cheeks slightly blushing. "I... I love you too."

"Then, why don't we act like people who are in love? Why are we even avoiding each other?"

"We... I..." he stammered, as if he never really thought about it before. Then he shook his head. "I don't know..."

"Then, why don't we...?" She didn't finish her question.

The time seemed to freeze in that moment, when her lips made contact with his.

Neither moved or made a noise. They just sat there, eyes closed, their hands intertwined; just enjoying the warmth of the other; the light, precious touch of their lips, as if it was their very first kiss.

No, this *was* their first kiss! The small peck Shinji had given her when she was ill showed his care and that he was thankful for hers, which she had shown before by searching for him; but it hadn't been like this.

And the kiss before...

Back then, she had hated that she wanted it; hated that she enjoyed it. That she had tried to convince her egocentric self that it wasn't meant to be a honest, longing kiss, just something to kill time and mock him by clamping his nose shut, hadn't helped either; quite the contrary. It was just so he wouldn't be able to like it, just as she couldn't allow herself to. The moment she had run to the bathroom, she had regretted it more than anything before; for one that she had been so weak to allow herself to kiss **him** of all people; on the other side that neither of them had done something to make it last, to make it a *real* kiss. She didn't know which feeling she had hated most.

But this time, there was no need to regret anything; they were free to enjoy, to love it. And so they did until the lack of air made itself aware, forcing them to part, slightly panting.

"**That** is something people should do when they're in love!" she exclaimed giddily.

He nodded, serenely smiling, before he let go of her hands and brought one of his quivering own up to tenderly cup her cheek. In a (at least for him) surprisingly bold move, he drew her lips back to his; daring to kiss her now with more passion than before.

Not that she minded. The urge to feel as much as possible of him rose to the point where she flung her arms around his neck, just as his found their way around her waist; pulling each other closer and closer into the kiss. She could feel an unknown longing emitting from him; a heat that was feared and welcomed the same time. For once, she let him leading the direction; he opened his mouth and hers followed, he... was that his tongue against hers? She was startled for a moment, but didn't stop; she let the stimulation overwhelm her instead, returning the newfound play of their tongues. But way too soon, they would have to part again.

"I see you're a fast learner," she complimented a bit dizzily. "May-maybe even a bit *too* fast. And while we're at it: where did you learn to kiss like that?"

His smile dropped suddenly and he averted her gaze as he went bright red. "Mi-Misato..."

"Mi... WHAT?"

"It... it was just before she... before she died. She called it an 'adult's kiss'. She... gave me this kind of kiss and said that we... would... do the rest, when I'd come back. We both knew that she wouldn't live that long. Thinking back, I'm not sure if she wanted to tell me that I was old enough to make the right decision, or if she wanted to show me that there are people who love me after all. But back then it just confused me even more and made the moment of her death much more painful to me..."

The first pang of jealousy she had initially felt was quickly subsided by honest compassion for the boy who was grieving about the death of their former guardian. The usually cheerful, yet somewhat sloppy woman had meant a lot to her as well. Even if they had their conflicts, Misato had always at least tried to be a friend. But to Shinji, she had been even more. She had been the first to show care for him, the

first he had opened up to. She had been the first that was... almost like a mother.

Asuka brought her hand up to gently caress his cheek. Like that, she could lift his watering eyes up to lock with hers again. So she could do something else that people do for someone they love.

"It's okay," she said with a reassuring smile.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

On first sight, it seemed as if their life didn't change much as it went on. Their daily chores were done as always; learning, eating, working; there was no obvious change in that during the following weeks and months.

But at a closer look one would see the differences. And it wasn't just the occasional kissing or other physical contact (which still wasn't as frequent as it had most likely been with other couples—especially in their situation). But after they managed to openly admit their feelings, it was as though a weight was lifted from their shoulders; one they hadn't even known had been there.

If it hadn't been for the fact that they were the only people on earth, they could live the life of a more or less typical teenage couple that explored that thing called love for their first time.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Sweat trailed down his forehead. His breath was ragged. Once again he looked at the gorgeous redhead in front of him, waiting for him to make his move. His mind was racing.

How had it come to this? Why had he agreed to this? Well, most likely because a part of him actually wanted to do it. But still, this was so soon...

"Eh... anemia...?"

"Almost!"

"Ap-lastic anemia...?"

"Well, I'll let that pass," Asuka said, making a check next to that question on her list.

They made these tests now and then to see if their studying was actually worth its effort. It would be quite useless if they had to go search in their books every time they needed a certain information.

Shinji's tests in his medical studies, as today's, were even more important to this, in case he had to use his knowledge in a critical moment. Of course, neither of them expected him to become a doctor in a few months; that he would be able to learn this huge variety of information in such little time, where others studied over several years, usually even while specializing to one partition.

Instead, he would focus on those issues that they were more likely to be confronted with. He also made himself pretty clear that he wouldn't do anything that required anesthetization or surgery if it could be avoided, as it was much too risky in his opinion.

"Okay, next question: What measurements are to be taken in case of a sunstroke?"

"Eh..."

"Oh come on, that's an easy one. Even I know that!"

He gulped. Of course, she learned some as well, just like he did with her assignments, in case the one wouldn't be able to fulfill his chores due to illness or other reasons. But it was still embarrassing that the answer seemed to escape him.

"I... ehm..." he stammered as he stepped closer and nervously leaned over to her, "I... love you...?"

"Nice answer," she said and smiling looked up to him, but then stopped his relived advance to kiss her by bringing her hand between them, "But not the right one!"

"Ohh, but... eh... it was..."

Why had he agreed to this...?

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Something that had quickly become an regular thing since they moved in were the evenings they'd spend watching TV. Of course, there wasn't anything being broadcasted anymore, but at least one of the Yamaderas had been quite a collector of video tapes and DVDs.

What at first had just been another way to kill time had by now become a nice opportunity for some cuddling. Especially if they watched a romantic movie like that evening.

It was one of those rather mediocre western flicks that always worked after the same scheme: He meets her; they fall in love; some problem threatens their relationship (usually some kind of misunderstanding involving a rival), but in the end, they get each other anyway.

Right now, "He" walked "Her" home after a date. Back at her apartment, she asked him if he wanted to come in for a coffee and he agreed. They went in, they started kissing... and undressing... and...

Shinji quickly averted his gaze from the screen, brightly blushing. Asuka giggled and gave him a little nudge as she noticed his reaction.

"Baka, that movie is rated PG-13. You don't really get to see anything. See? It's already over."

He felt her leaning back against his shoulder, sighing. He knew it was rather silly that he still reacted like this, especially regarding his experience with—usually unintentional—intimate encounters with Rei, Misato and particularly with Asuka. But those had increased his nervousness about such situations rather than lessened it. And now, having the object of his desire in his arms didn't help much to ease it. Even being "officially" together now for a while, he still didn't even dare to touch her anywhere "inappropriate". But he wouldn't be able to run from it forever; if their relationship kept going on as now... sooner or later, they would go further...

"You know, Shinji? It's kinda sad that we can't do something like that..."

...but *that* soon??

"Eh... uh... I-if y-y-you w-want to... I mean... well... w-we *could*... technically..."

"Hmm? What are you stammering about?"

"W-well, it's a-a bit sudden, you know? I mean, we didn't do much more than kissing, but i-if you want to do... eh... 'more' already..."

"Baka-hentai!" she scolded, blushing herself as she understood what he was implying. "I wasn't talking about this disgusting stuff!"

"Oh..." He sounded a bit disappointed. "So you never thought about... 'it'?"

"Eh... I..." Asuka stammered, her face now matching the color of her hair. Of course she had thought about it; more than one time she had found it hard not to let her hormones take control, telling her to go further with every kiss and every touch. But she couldn't let it happen yet.

Or could she...?

"Ehm, what I wanted to say was that it's sad that we can't go out for a dinner or to the cinema or a festival or something. You know? Normal things like that..."

He nodded, gratefully letting her change the embarrassing topic.

'*Something normal?*' he reflected, when she returned her attention back to the screen.

A broad smile found its way on his lips as an idea was formed in his mind.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Asuka lay restlessly in her bed. The latest events on that evening; the sore feelings in her stomach that they had caused, didn't let her come to sleep.

They always had some quarrels; admitting their love to each other hadn't changed that very much. But she couldn't remember an argument that had been as bad as the one that evening.

What had started it? She didn't even remember that. Just that it had been his fault. And that it ended with both yelling at each other.

And now she had to be alone again; cold and alone with feelings of regret and guilt. Why couldn't he just say he's sorry as always and they would...

Asuka frowned on that thought.

Why couldn't *she* just say she's sorry? That stupid pride, it was still there after all. Hadn't she promised herself not to let it gain upper hand again? And now look at what it might cost her.

Fear crept into the mix of feelings; fear that this might ruin everything between them, that he might... even leave her...

The thought of being all alone frightened her enough to bolt up. As much as she dreaded a lasting repetition of the days after that lake incident months ago, not to be as close as they were anymore was better as long as he would at least be there.

No. She would go and apologize. Even if it was his fault. Then again, had it been at all? He had said something and she retorted... or rather snapped back? However, it had gone downwards from there.

Slowly, she crawled out of the from her sleepless tossing disheveled bed and went to the door of her room. A deep breath; then she opened it... to hear a similar noise from the other end of the corridor. Even through the darkness of the night, Shinji's eyes locked with hers as they stepped closer to each other.

"I just..." they said at once; not leaving the simultaneous opening of the doors as the only reminiscence of their synch-training.

"- Go ahead! -

- No, you! -

- Okay, I... -"

They both stopped, as this seemingly didn't work, and fumbled for the right words (that wouldn't be

used by the other the exact same moment). Seconds passed in which they wouldn't do anything besides looking at the other, opening their mouth and closing it again, until, eventually, they gave up. And instead locked their lips in a kiss that was saying enough.

Apparently, she still wouldn't lose her problems with apologizing today. But maybe it was just like what she always told him.

Maybe she just didn't need to...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji smiled to himself as he made his way home through the ruins of the destroyed city. Most preparations were done for the big day. Or should it be "normal" day?

The rest, he would have to finish somehow shortly before, when Asuka was out. After all, it was supposed to be a – hopefully pleasant – surprise.

Suddenly, he was blinded by something on the ground; shining in the sunlight.

Despite his first intention to shrug it off as a shard of glass, he took a closer look at the object.

As he picked it up and carefully cleaned it from the dust, his previous smile grew even wider.

Maybe there would be an even bigger day after all.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Asuka slowly awoke to a new morning. As she cracked her eyes open, she couldn't help but smile, seeing Shinji still sleeping next to her. He looked too cute with his ruffled hair, his faint snoring, his... hand on her breast? She blushed as she was suddenly aware of the light pressure.

Sleeping in one bed almost naturally caused some "incidents" like this. All of them had been accompanied by heavy blushing, stuttered excuses and, before they had declared their feelings to each other, a lot of cursing and painful slapping that Shinji received.

Instinctively, Asuka got hold of his hand to take it away, before he would wake up. But then she halted.

'To be honest, it doesn't feel all that bad.'

Her eyes quickly wandered to his shifting head.

'And shouldn't this be another normal thing between people in love?'

His mouth opened and closed a few times as if he was tasting the morning.

'But we are always like this, aren't we? When we cuddle or kiss, his hands never move away from my hips or my back and I'm not much bolder myself. I mean, I even watch out that there isn't too much contact between our chests. And even after all this time, whenever we accidentally touch the other somewhere intimate, we both still blush and break apart immediately...'

He stirred.

'Maybe we could...'

Though the moment he began to open his eyes, she hastily took his hand off of her.

'Obviously not...'

"Good Morning," he greeted her with a smile that she weakly returned.

"Morning." She leaned down and kissed him, trying to forget her thoughts.

"You know what?" She grinned as she ran her hand over his cheek, brushing against some faint stubble.

"I think you need to start shaving."

"Eh?" He mirrored her previous movement. "Well, I wanted to go to the city anyway. I guess I could look for a razor then."

She frowned at his announcement. "You've been going to the city quite often lately. What are you doing there anyway?"

He just smiled as he sat up. "You'll see once everything's ready..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"A... date?"

"Yeah! So, are you coming?"

"No! What are you thinking? You can't expect a girl to go with you on a date the second you ask her!"

"Oh... I..." His face dropped visibly disappointed; the shy, hopeful smile that had been there since he approached her disappeared in an instant.

"You have to give her at least the time to dress up," Asuka quickly added smiling; leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek.

No matter what happened, it was still fun to tease him a bit now and then. And if the result of that was to see him smile even brighter than before, the better it was.

Even though she had no idea what he had planned; it surely was what he had worked on the whole time when he went out the last days. What he had worked on for her.

Did he really expect her to throw all his efforts into the trash? As if she hadn't showed enough that she changed at least that much. That silly, little baka...

"I'll be right back," she told him with a wink and hurried into her room.

-X-X-X-X-

The "right back" turned out to be about one hour. And actually, he didn't see much difference than that she changed into her favorite yellow dress. Not that it mattered to him. She looked as beautiful as always.

During the car ride, Asuka was excited like a small child that went to the fair; no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

Finally, they arrived at their first stop. Half of the building that seemed to have been a cinema was crushed by a large piece of the debris from its neighbor. But besides this destruction, it had been the only one that Shinji could find with at least one hall still intact, even though they had to climb over several scattered boulders to get there (which was commented by a slightly annoyed Asuka, whether he'd taken her to date or an adventure-tour). Another plus was that the projector that he had managed to power up (after a bit of altering) with some car-batteries, was a newer, digital model that was able to play DVDs. That didn't only give Shinji the possibility to bring a romantic movie that they had at home, but he also didn't have to go there and change the reels several times. Like this, they were able to enjoy the movie without any disturbances.

Not that they got much of the film, as they were busier with "other activities". Shinji couldn't help but feel reminded of the couple he had watched in a cinema many months before, even though they weren't

nearly as wild as those two. Yet he remembered how much he had wished to have someone too; someone to be close to like that.

As it seemed, some wishes would be granted after all...

-x-x-x-x-

"I think I'll recommend this restaurant. The food is great!"

Shinji smiled sheepishly. "You don't mind that I only heated it here? It would be much better if I had the time to prepare it here freshly..."

"Oh, come on," Asuka half-groaned, half-pleaded; waiving her filled fork around, "this is the best you've made in a long time!"

"Thanks..." he mumbled, but not without a hint of pride at the compliment.

Since he didn't eat very much, he couldn't really judge himself. He was too busy just watching her. The dim candlelight seemed to make her even more beautiful as she was sitting there opposite to him; her sparkling eyes reflecting the small flame whenever she looked up to him while bringing the fork up to her lovely lips...

The restaurant had been their next stop. It was still in a good shape, without any visible damage to the building. Only the interior had been slightly damaged when he had found it, but it hadn't been a problem to find a table and two chairs for them. As he hadn't wanted to leave her sitting alone here while he was cooking, he had prepared their meals at home and just used the gas stove to heat it.

"And what are you staring at?"

Her sudden call snapped him back to reality.

"Eh... I was just thinking how beautiful you are in this light," he confessed honestly.

"So you think I'm ugly when there's more light to see properly?" Asuka mock-pouted.

"Of course not!" he blurted. His shoulders dropped down in shame. "Am I still that bad with these compliments?"

"No, but it seems you'll never learn to realize when I'm just messing with you," the redhead giggled, a faint blush actually still visible at closer look. "And after all, you have good reason to compliment me. I wouldn't dress up like that if I'd went to a date with someone I don't like."

"Yeah, I remember. That time you went out with that guy Hikari had set you up with, you had this high-necked green dress."

"What? Are you saying that I usually run around like a slut?"

"Eh... No! I-I just meant it was, eh... unusual..." Shinji tried not to panic. "You just seem to prefer more... uhm... loose-fitting clothes, like, well, like that yellow dress." He pointed at the garment she was wearing. "I mean, you really seem to like that one, don't you?"

"Yeah. It had been a present for my birthday..." she trailed off and her eyes gained a distant look. "...from Kaji..."

Shinji gulped. This wasn't the direction he had wanted to lead this conversation to.

"Hey, it's... it's okay. I understand. He already meant very much to me; he had been more of a father to me than my own. But to you... I mean, you knew him much longer and you had quite a crush on..."

"No!" He was firmly cut off. "He... he was much more than a crush..."

"Huh?" A sudden shock of fear and disappointment hit him. Did she mean...? She couldn't... could she?

"So, after all, I'm just his subs..."

"No!" she quickly blurted. "No. It wasn't the same as it is with us. It was..." She sighed, fumbling for the right words.

"After my mother died, I was practically raised by NERV. Despite living with them, my father never really cared much about me, and my stepmother was 'almost afraid of me', as she said it. So I was mostly in custody by someone from NERV; sent from one guardian to another. But those were the same; only when I got good grades or even more so when I was good in training, I got praise. Even Misato wasn't much better..."

"Misato?"

"Yes, don't you remember? She had been my guardian awhile once before. Looking back, I'd say she most likely still had her own problems dwelling on her mind, but I guess it were those differences between her behavior then and when I came here that made me think she preferred you." Shinji nodded understanding, but didn't interrupt her.

"Anyway, what I wanted to say was: On one side no one treated me like a child, but on the other didn't really accept me as an adult.

And then Kaji appeared. He was different than the others; he didn't look down on me, neither did he try to avoid me. For the first time, I had the feeling that I could simply let myself go.

"And... well... there was something else..." Asuka continued with a small, sad smile. "Despite his constant flirts, he never tried anything serious with any girl he met. Rumors said that his previous girlfriend had abandoned him not too long ago and only a 'real woman' like her would be able to get him. So if he would have chosen me, I would have been recognized as an adult, just what I've always wanted. I know it sounds somewhat silly, but I also really liked him and never expected to meet anyone better suited for that *job* anyway... well, it was the closed thing to love I had felt for a long time..."

A gentle pressure at her hand made her look up again. She couldn't help but mirror his smile that was so full of understanding. It was almost hard to believe that she had accused him to be unable to ever understand her. Now it seemed he had always been the only one able to comprehend what was going on within her mind. Who knows what would have been if she had seen it then already?

"Hey," he broke the silence after several moments, "would you like to dance?"

-x-x-x-x-

Soft sounds emitted from the portable CD-player, providing the slow rhythm in which the two teenagers moved close to each other over the dance floor.

Asuka had her eyes closed, resting her head on his shoulder; their cheeks brushing against each other with every movement. She didn't feel the ground of the restaurant anymore. It was as though they were dancing on clouds and only the sky and its stars were above them. Nothing else besides themselves.

Apparently she made it quite obvious how comfortable she felt, as he brought his lips close to her ear.

"What happened to the girl who always said she wouldn't need things like this?" he whispered.

"Oh, I never said I'd *need* this," she declared flatly, grinning at his panicked gasp caused by this. "But it's a bonus I wouldn't want to miss for anything..."

He relaxed immediately, but in exchange she tensed up herself as she began to wonder.

"Seriously, to think that this might have never happened... That I'd might have never been able to feel this way..." She actually shivered at that. "Have you ever thought about it? That the only reason we're so close to each other might be because we're the only ones left? That those feelings for each other

might have never become so strong if we wouldn't live and be together the whole time? That we might have chosen someone else eventually, if we had the choice?"

The answer came almost instantly. "No..."

Her smile reappeared weakly when she placed her head back against him. "Good..."

The music began to fade after a while.

Neither of them noticed...

-x-x-x-x-

It was hard to tell, but it was most likely already past midnight when they arrived back at their home. But sooner or later even a day like this had to end.

"Thank you for this evening, Shinji. This... I think, it was the most romantic thing that anyone has ever done for me..."

"It... it was noth..." He couldn't finish the sentence as she quickly shut his mouth with hers.

It had been the truth, this had been the most romantic evening she could think of. She couldn't tell if it had already started with their synch-training, or if he really had learned to understand her that much during the last months, but he always seemed to know what she liked, even if she herself did not. They were as close as they could get...

Were they?

No... There was still something between them. It was obvious by the hesitant touches as these now.

Shame. Shyness. A last barrier that might have cracked but was still far from shattering. A last barrier that still needed to be broken until they could finally be truly together.

And now seemed to be a perfect opportunity.

"Hey, Shinji," Asuka cooed. "Do you... Would you like a coffee?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" He blinked in confusion. "Isn't it a bit late for coff...?" A gasp escaped his throat and he even lost his hold on her and stumbled back in shock as he remembered where he had heard that before.

"Y-y-you... mean...? I-I... mean, you... I mean... it comes a bit sudden, you know? W-well, I... we... I mean, w-we haven't even... eh... 'f-fooled around' before, or something..."

"I-I know," Asuka admitted blushing, the butterflies in her own stomach calling more and more friends over to flap wildly around. "But that's exactly the point! What kind of relationship can we have if we're even afraid of touching each other in the 'wrong' places?" Gently, she laid one hand on his cheek and looked in his dark blue eyes; not only to emphasize that she truly meant what she was saying, but also to prove to herself that she would never regret what she was going to do.

"Shinji, I love you! And I want to express that in every form I'd like to do. And I want you to do the same. But if we go on like now, we might never reach that point. That's why I want this. We could tear down these last barricades with one stroke..."

"Y-you're sure?" he whispered again.

Her answer was a small, shy nod, without breaking their eye contact. Her hands found a hold on his shoulders, while he, a bit hesitantly, put his on her hips, pulling her closer. Their lips met in a kiss; not a very passionate one, but more a soft, honest kiss in which they showed their love and care to each other; also a bit of fear of what they were going to do, yet much more so the reassurance that both wanted to do this with all their hearts. Repeating this gentle kiss again and again, they slowly retreated

towards Asuka's room.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sun filled the room when Asuka woke up with a broad smile on her face. It vanished slightly as she noticed that Shinji wasn't there. But the scent that was in the air told her that he was already in the kitchen, fixing breakfast.

After stretching her tired limbs, she stood up and got herself a wide shirt from the closet. Brushing some hair out of her face, she pondered for a second to get her neural connector-hair clips. But then she remembered that she actually hadn't even seen them for a while. Lately, she had used either ribbons to restrain her mane or she simply left it open, as she did now.

Quietly, she went for the kitchen. She had been right; there he was, busy at the stove. As his back was facing her, she soundlessly tiptoed over to him.

He was startled for a second when he suddenly felt her arms around his chest, drawing herself as close as possible to his back, but he relaxed immediately.

"Morning, lover," Asuka hushed, planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Morning, Asuka. I must admit I didn't expect you to get up so early. I had wanted to surprise you with a breakfast in bed."

"Mmm, doesn't matter," she assured, snuggling her head against his shoulder. "It's comfy here as well."

He chuckled a bit. "Well, I'm almost finished; just have to percolate the coffee..."

"Coffee?" She eyed him. "Gotten hooked on the taste?" she teased.

"Well... I... could get used to it..."

"I see..." she grinned. "So my baka-hentai enjoyed himself, huh?"

"I... eh..."

"Hey," she called softly, drawing his face around and kissing him tenderly, "You're not the only one."

Smiling, he turned completely and put his arms around her. But as he leaned in to kiss her, he was stopped by her stern face.

"But don't expect this to become some kind of weekly routine!" she warned. Yet the strict expression cracked as quickly as it came at the sight of his shocked look. Grinning, she leaned over to him and whispered in his ear: "...more of a daily one..."

His eyes grew wide at this. "Wha...? Eh...Now?"

"Relax!" Asuka giggled. "It was just a joke," she assured and leaned sighing back onto him "Still... it was... I don't even know how to describe it. Great? Wonderful? Amazing? I'm not sure if that fits it right..."

"So, what happened to 'disgusting'?"

She grimaced. "I don't know. I guess I didn't like the thought of people doing 'it' just because of it. You know, just the act, without more behind it and that they just did it to compensate that fact. And," she blushed slightly, "well, maybe it was because I couldn't judge it subjectively. But I guess it doesn't matter anymore anyway..."

"Not really..."

Their lips met again; the kiss growing more passionate every second it lasted.

It didn't take long that the "joke" was forgotten...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The scenery had barely changed since the last time they had been there. The sea still had an eerie red color. The visible half of the white head that had belonged to that giant Rei didn't seem to be affected by time at all; at least not from the distance. And there were still the corpses of two of those disturbing Mass Production-EVAs standing like a crossed mock of the Christian symbol. One of the poles, next to the one with Misato's cross, had fallen down and had been drawn up again by Shinji.

Asuka watched him kneeling in front of them, before she turned her gaze frowning towards and across the sea. He had wanted some time alone, so she sat somewhat miserably several meters behind him in the sand. Whether it was because of the windy, grey weather of that day or because of this place; she would be glad when they would go home again. Even though she could understand that he had wanted to come here, she didn't have to like it.

The sudden touch on her shoulder startled her, snapping her out of her trance.

"Hey," Shinji called softly as he sat down behind his love and put his arms around her. "Don't you want to go? Speak to them?"

"No..." she shook her head, "I can't..."

"Well, you don't have to," he tried to be confident, but there was a hint of disappointment in his voice.

Asuka let out a deep sigh. "This... This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Her guilt obviously surprised him. "What is?"

"That we're alone!" she blurted the obvious. "That no one else can come back!"

She thought often about the reasons why only the two of them had returned, but she had either ignored or denied the conclusion that had come out of it. Though she hadn't even realized herself how heavy this rested on her conscience until now that she was confronted with this sight again – and with it the memories of that day.

Shinji, however, was apparently oblivious to the obvious. "What gives you that idea?"

"Don't you remember? 'If I can't have you for me alone, I don't want you at all!' But... at least a part of me *had* wanted you..." The last part came out as a mere whisper. "So what if this was a stupid misinterpretation of... *her*? You know? 'If I want you, I need to have you for me alone!' But I didn't mean it! Not like this!"

"That... that's not true, Asuka," Shinji tried to calm her and was surprisingly successful by drawing her closer into the comforting embrace. But the sadness in his voice told her that he, too, still hadn't lost his burden that faithful day laid upon his shoulders. "I don't know why no one else came back, but it's not your fault. Mother, Rei, they've told me that everyone could return if they had the will to do so. It's not your fault if they prefer the false happiness in there..."

"You're sure?" She turned her head to see him smiling generously at her.

"Why don't you ask them yourself?"

-X-X-X-X-X-

"Eh... hello...?"

Asuka frowned as she got no answer from the sea.

"Oh, this must be the stupidest thing I've ever done," she mumbled, scolding herself. But then she took a deep breath and returned her view to the red ocean.

"I'm not quite sure what to say...I know I was never very good with you people.

Still... I... I actually miss many of you. I miss Misato's cheery nature or to joke with her about boys; sometimes even her way of waking everyone in the neighborhood.

I miss Hikari and to talk with her. When we were together, I could actually feel just like a normal girl; chatting and having fun with a friend. And there happened so much in the last months that I would have needed to share with you.

I even miss Shinji's stupid friends, as they were at least good punching balls; and even F- Ayanami, as she was... well... *there!*

Kaji, I don't know if you're in there. But I want to thank you that you always coped with me, no matter how bothering I was. You have been the first I could call at least a friend, if not more...

Mama... I'm... I'm sorry that I didn't believe that you cared for me. I understand now that you always were – and still are – there for me, even if I couldn't see or hear you; that you always wanted my best, that you wanted me to be safe and happy. I just want you... and everyone else who might care, to know... even though the life here is hard and straining... I'm... I am happy. I found someone who

actually wants to be with me; who even loves me. I don't remember when I was as happy as now."

A silent tear came into touch with her up-curving lips. "Well, I guess that's all I can think of now."

As she ended her last sentence, she looked up again, smiling. She felt freed somehow; as if at least a part of her burden that she had carried much too long, was finally lifted from her shoulders; just like the clouds that made place for the sun.

-x-x-x-x-x-

When she returned to Shinji, Asuka wordlessly sat down and cuddled against him. Smiling, she rested her head against his chest as she could feel his arms wrapping around her; gently stroking her back. They sat awhile like that; not speaking a word, just enjoying their closeness.

"Asuka, I was wondering..." Shinji broke the silence eventually.

"Hmm?"

"If this wouldn't have happened, do you think... would... would you have married me one day?"

Startled, she jerked up.

"Wha-what?" Now, *that* had come as surprise. But he seemed strangely serious. What was he thinking?

"I... I don't know. I mean, if this wouldn't have happened, who knows if we'd even been able to get together like this. But if we would... if we would have had the chance... I... don't know... I'm not quite the housewife type.. and I never really wanted to end up like that... but..."

Blushing, she turned her gaze away from him. She had never really thought about it. Marrying – that had always seemed to be such an archaic, pointless ritual. But now she suddenly found herself picturing how she'd look like in a white dress, with him at her side; their friends watching as they exchanged their vows to be each other's for the rest of their lives, cheering them on as they sealed their promise with a kiss.

A pleasant shiver ran down her spine as she wondered what it'd be like to have him as her husband. To be his wife...

"...maybe... yes..."

She gasped in surprise and turned to face him again as he gently took her hand and slipped something

on her finger.

"I've found it when I was in the ruins lately, in the remains of what must have been a jewelry shop," Shinji explained. "I was thinking of giving it to you already on our date, but I couldn't bring myself to do it then already. I know, it's not exactly your size and it's slightly damaged, but still... May-maybe we'll get our chance..."

Asuka was speechless. It was right, the ring was a bit too wide for her finger and a piece of the red gem was broken, but that didn't matter to her. Sure, it was just a symbol for something that could have been... or did he mean that he, even after what must have been almost a year by now, had still hope that people will return? That they would be able to live a normal life eventually?

"You're hopeless, you know?" she smiled.

"Eh? I thought I just proved some hope...?"

"No," she giggled and pulled him into a tight embrace. "I meant you're a hopeless romantic..."

"Oh... Well, you haven't seen anything yet..."

A bit startled, she looked up to him, but it didn't seem like he was to say any more...

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Asuka smiled to herself as she opened the door to be greeted by the morning sun. The last weeks had been pure bliss. She never expected that people could be so close to someone else – without being a combined puddle of mud – as she was now with Shinji. After they had set their differences and fears aside, and lately taken the last great step in their relationship, there was nothing left to stand between them; no barrier of hate, sorrow or shame was left to hold them apart, be it mental or physical.

Asuka's grin grew even wider at that last thought. Yes, they've definitely become bolder with each time since the night after their date. And she had to admit that she really enjoyed their "explorations". But what was more important, she felt free. Free of everything that could trouble her mind; free of every possible dark region that could dwell on her soul. She didn't remember ever being able to live so untroubled around someone else; if at all.

Getting a handful corn from their storage, she went over to the chicken run. After she dispersed it, she watched the two hens hungrily picking it up, while she leant on the self-made fence with a dreamy expression on her face.

Yeah, those two were lucky. They had always been able just to live as carefree like that; just eat, sleep... and lay an egg now and then.

She chuckled at that somewhat silly comparison.

As she went to check the greenhouse, she suddenly noticed that another 'barricade' was gone. Shinji had separated a part of the greenhouse with a few big wooden planks a while ago; strictly advising her not to look behind it, as it was something he would need for a surprise. But it was gone now, that area completely empty.

Almost. Something still lay in a corner under the table. Curiously, Asuka kneeled down to get a closer look.

A rose? Now, what could he grow those for?

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Come on, Shinji; tell me, where are we going?"

"You'll see." Even though she could not see it, she could almost *hear* him smiling.

"See? With this blindfold?" She grinned and leaned on his shoulder, startling him a bit. "Say, is my little baka-hentai planning something kinky with his favorite lover?"

"Wha...? Eh... well, you'll see when we're there."

She just wanted to complain again, but that moment Shinji stopped the car. That would mean she could risk a glance...

"No peeking!" he protested immediately as he obviously noticed her fingers moving towards the scarf over her eyes.

"Okay, okay," Asuka playfully grunted.

She heard Shinji exiting and a moment later her door was opened. He gently took her hand and led her out. Her feet made contact with an unstable, soft ground.

Sand? The sound of waves, clashing against the shore?

"Where are...?"

"Shh..." He pressed a finger against her lips. "Just one moment..."

He went back to the car, leaving her wondering. What had he planned? She wouldn't have minded a little "workout" at the beach, but his earlier reaction seemed to contradict with that.

Before she could finish her thoughts, he was back. His hand slid through her hair, rearranging the loose strands and attaching them to something in a familiar way.

"So you don't know where they are, huh?" she said, grinning as she recognized the well-known clicking sounds of her A10-clips.

"Well, I needed to... modify them a bit."

Modify?

Surprised, she reached up to find some kind of thin, silky fabric meeting her searching fingers.

"What...?" She couldn't find the necessary air to continue when Shinji removed the blindfold and she opened her eyes. They were indeed at the beach, though at a part where the giant head of Rei or the dismembered remains of the MP-EVAs were not to be seen. Even the occasional debris had seemingly been removed. Instead, there was a kind of arch; roses intertwined with it. The setting sun on the horizon painted the whole scenery in red and orange light.

"Well, I-I thought, we'd need something we could use as... an altar or something," Shinji said, obviously noticing her questioning looks. But his appearance didn't ease her surprise, quite the contrary. As casual it had been, that white shirt and black trousers, which had been his school uniform, might have been the most formal clothes he had now.

"Altar...? Wha...?"

"I-I know, it's not actually real... Just something symbolic... But... I mean, in the end it's as real as we want it."

She still couldn't manage to speak. Her mind was racing. Never before had she felt so sure that she knew what was going on, yet so uncertain. As there was no answer from her, he continued.

"I-it might seem a bit early. But, well, as we'll be together anyway... and since you're said, you'd want to... I thought: Why should we wait?"

Her eyes wandered to the ring on her finger. There was no doubt anymore. Despite all discipline, she felt her eyes wetting again. With a shaking hand before her mouth, as if to keep her air, she only partly followed his gaze across the sea.

"I've chosen this place, because everyone we knew and loved is here; the whole world can witness us..." He turned back to her with a shy smile on his lips, reaching for her with a trembling hand.

"So...?"

"Baka," she blurted with a shaky smile as she couldn't hold on anymore; her voice cracking. "What-what have I told you about dressing up? I mean, just look at me: I'm standing here with this old top and shorts..." She stopped her mindless ramblings as he placed a finger on her lips and took her hand in his free one.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It doesn't matter. Whatever you wear, you're the most beautiful being I could ever imagine." With that, as she smiled up to him, he gently tugged her over to self-made arch and held her hands close to his chest; never losing the contact to her eyes.

"Asuka," Shinji began after taking a deep breath, "When I first met you, I didn't know what to think of this beautiful, yet hot-tempered girl in front of me. You weren't like anyone I've ever met before; I didn't know how to handle that. I was used to it that people didn't like me very much, but no one ever, well... yelled at me for being as I've always been. Though during our synch-training, I more or less got used to it and I actually started to like living with the fiery redhead that moved in with us, even if she often gave me quite a hard time with the teasing. After all, it's not very fair if one literally rubs her good looks right under your nose one second, and yells at you for staring at her in the next." He flashed a weak grin, before regaining whatever was left of his strength to go on.

"It would be a lie if I'd say that I wasn't attracted to your looks, but much more so, I've always admired your strength, your courage, that it seemed you were able to face everything that was in your way. But there also were times when I was able to see underneath the surface; that there was indeed something under that hard shell. I think that's why I fell for you intentionally: On one side there was the fragile child that evoked the wish to protect her from all the pain of the world, on the other, there was the strong, fiery girl that could give me the guidance I needed.

You were my anchor; my constant that I could always trust on in my worst and my best times. And for that, I love you.

That's why I, Shinji Ikari, want to take you, Asuka Langley Soryu, to be my wife; to live with you forever at your side."

"You... you're mean, you know that?" she tried to scold him, but her voice as well as her facial expression betrayed her. "You had all the time you needed to prepare that speech and I have to think about one in a few seconds."

"You don't..."

"Shinji," she cut him off, smiling. "At first, I only saw you as another wimpy boy that was just lusting after my body. The good thing was, you were wimpy enough to tease you with that," she giggled.

"However, with the time, I've found myself actually starting to like that meek, shy boy – if only his constant excuses hadn't been so damn annoying." Both chuckled at that, but Asuka's face grew serious again.

"But you've been my competitor; and eventually you became an actual threat to everything that impersonated me. How could I like or even love someone like that? How could I expect someone who seemed to be just as weak as myself to be there for me? Deep down, I might already have, but that

didn't stop me from doing and saying things of which I wish I never had, as they just caused pain to both of us. Yet, despite what I did, you may retreated and wanted to give up on me, but in the end, you didn't. You always came back.

Maybe that's why I didn't believe you. Usually everyone left me alone after a while. But, even when I almost begged you to leave me when we talked about the Impact the first time, you didn't. You showed me that you would do everything for me; that you would help me in need; that you would even hold me.

It was then that I knew for sure that I could finally allow myself to love you. And so I did and will do for as long as I can think of.

And because of that, I, Asuka Langley Soryu, want you, Shinji Ikari, to be my husband."

"Then I pronounce us..." Shinji began, visible reflecting the happiness she felt in her on his face.

"...to be husband..." Asuka continued; their lips slowly moving closer.

"...and wife."

...closer...

"You may now..."

...closer...

"...kiss..."

...closer...

"...the bride."

...Touch.

They never remembered how long they stood there; kissing while the sun gave its last light for that day, leaving only the stars and the sea to watch the two beings that shared the most precious thing in this world.

Their love...

Chapter V: The 14th

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Toji saw was an unknown, white ceiling. Faintly he could hear fractions of discussion outside of the room.

"...only have five minutes," someone said, followed by an agreement from a younger voice.

The door opened and revealed a brunette girl, still clad in a green and white school uniform. She went directly, though with respectful speed, to the chair next to him.

He blinked a few times with his still tired eyes, even though he quickly had a good idea of who the newcomer was.

"Hikari?" he asked hoarsely, seemingly startling the visitor a bit.

"Suz... Toji," the pigtailed girl corrected herself, unable to fight the faint blush on her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I wasn't aware that you were awake already. Are... are you okay?"

"Yeah." He smiled weakly. "I guess I'm still alive."

"Well, you... you have slept for one day..."

"One day, huh? I feel like I could sleep for another one or two..." Toji mumbled before he returned his attention back to her. "And why are you...?"

"Oh, I'm just here because of my duties as class representative, nothing else," she answered sheepishly, a big innocent smile on her face.

Toji mirrored her grin knowingly. "Yeah, I know..."

"Yes, I guess so..." Hikari whispered.

A short moment, filled with a silence of uncertainty, passed between them. Slowly, their smiles faded as their minds wandered back to the recent events.

"Do you know what happened?" Toji eventually asked. "To the EVA, I mean?"

"Ikari destroyed it..."

"Shinji...?" he wondered, smirking weakly as he stared back to the ceiling. "Sometimes it's hard to believe how much of a fighter our shy, timid friend is. If I had seen him in the EVA before I met him in school, I'm not sure if I would have even dared to hit him back then..."

Hikari nodded in agreement, even though he couldn't see it. "But if you hadn't done that, you two might never have become friends..."

"Yeah," he concurred. "I guess sometimes something good can come out of even the biggest mistake..."

Toji fell silent again. For the first time, his gaze traveled down his body. He took a wondering look at his treated wounds, especially the cast on his arm and his leg that hung in a sling that held it up and immobilized it. "So... what happened to me?"

"From what I've heard, he and the others got you out before they attacked. I don't know exactly what happened, but it seems they weren't fast enough..." Hikari fell silent, noticing that she sounded as though she would blame the pilots for everything. But she was much too glad that nothing worse had happened to actually feel like that.

"Your leg and arm are broken," she eventually continued. "They say you'll most likely have to stay here for a few weeks."

"Weeks?" he asked with a hint of panic in his voice. The thought alone of being confined to the bed for any longer than a few days caused his stomach to twist. He was the type of person that needed to get out if he wanted to keep his sanity.

Hikari, however, seemed to find his fearful expression quite amusing. "It's not like your limbs are gone forever," she giggled. "In just four to six weeks you'll be fine and free to go wherever you want."

Toji groaned from sheer despair, but he felt too tired to argue any longer. He let out a sigh and returned his view once more to the girl next to him. "So... if I don't get out of here soon... could you do me a favor?"

"Of course..."

"Could you tell my sister that I'm alright?"

"Sure..." Hikari promised, nodding. But when their eyes met, any further words seemed to escape them. Neither moved nor even dared to blink for uncounted seconds, in fear that this moment would disappear all too soon.

"I... I'm afraid I have to go now," the girl eventually broke the silence. "I was already lucky that they allowed me to visit you at all."

She had already risen from the chair and was halfway to the door when Toji called out once more. "H... Hikari?"

"Hmm?" she asked, but didn't turn around.

"Thanks... for being here..."

"Sure..."

With that, she left quietly, hoping that he wouldn't notice the blush on her cheeks.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"No, Kensuke..." Shinji sighed into the phone, "No, I don't know why they chose Toji instead of you... What? ... They won't let you visit him? Oh... no, no, I-I don't think I can do anything for you there... Horaki can visit him? But isn't that because of her duties as class rep? ... Yeah, you're probably right, that's a bit much just for that... No, I don't know if Asuka had anything to do with that..."

He threw a glance from the hallway into the living room. His redheaded companion lay on the floor, curiously looking up to him at the mention of her name. Not that she really seemed to be paying attention to that family movie or whatever it was being displayed on the TV.

Shinji rolled his eyes as Kensuke continued on the other side of the phone. "A-ask her?" he shrieked in his best impression of 'nervous/scared Shinji'. "I... I don't know... She... she's been quite touchy lately... Hey, why don't you ask her yourself? I could hand her the pho... Kensuke? Hello? Kensuke?"

Chuckling lightly, he ended the connection and placed the phone back onto its receiver. "I guess he'll never learn..." he muttered as he reentered the living room.

"I still can't believe I lost again!" the redhead mumbled out of the blue.

Again...

"Asuka, we're alone." Shinji yawned. "Misato left while you were taking a shower."

"So what?"

He gave her a curious look. It had been a while since he had seen her grumpy like this, at least without just acting it. "You're not saying that you still take something like that so personally, are you?"

"And what if I do?" she grumbled and rolled on her side, turning away from him.

"Oh, Asuka..." He chuckled at her behavior. For someone who had always thought of herself as mature, she sure had kept some childish attitudes even after actually going through adulthood. At least that's what he hoped it was...

Carefully, he lay down behind her, drawing her into a loose embrace. She stiffened, but though it was obvious that she wanted to continue her sulking rather than to cuddle and relax now, he knew that she usually wasn't able to keep that attitude up for very long.

"It's just..." The anger in her voice was already fading. "I was knocked out that easily! Again! I never even got the chance to fight properly. There I was, thinking I could redeem myself and I... I..."

"It caught all of us by surprise," he assured her, running his hands soothing over her arms. "There was nothing you could have done. I'm sure you would have showed him who's boss otherwise..."

Finally, a small snigger cracked through her mask of anger. She shifted around to face him and brought her arms around his shoulders. She pouted, now playfully. "I hate it when you do that, you know?"

"Yeah..."

She shook her head, slowly bringing it closer to his. "That's the wrong line," she whispered. "You have to say 'I'm sorry'."

"Oh?" He grinned, leaning forward to meet her halfway, already feeling her breath on his face. "I'm sorry."

"Better..." She closed her eyes, just before their lips...

"I'm home!"

Both bolted up at the loud, cheerful call of the young voice; not in shock or fear, but in surprise and in a hope beyond reason. But no one was to be seen...

Asuka noticeably tensed when Shinji laid his hand on her shoulder. As she slowly turned around, he looked into her eyes, and saw that the glimpse of hope that had glowed in them just a few seconds ago had been replaced by an utter sadness.

"It was just the TV..." she muttered in a flat tone. No trace of emotion could be found in her voice.

"Yes..." He swallowed the lump of sadness in his throat as he pulled her back in his arms. "Just the TV..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It wasn't the first battlefield she had seen, and yet the sight of the giant human-like corpse still managed to send a shiver down her spine.

The cleanup process had already begun, but it would still take a while to remove all of the EVA/Angel's bloody remains. Heavy cranes and trucks were busy transporting the body away from the area. NERV personnel were all over the place, blocking the region from curious eyes. But none of them would have dared to stop her in her current mood, even if they wouldn't have recognized the Major.

"You're okay already?"

Ritsuko's rhetorical question didn't even startle Misato. Of course she was not 'okay'. Her injuries were

clearly visible - especially by the sling around her arm - and they would remain that way for a few weeks. It wasn't as though her old friend looked that much better, with the bandage around her head.

"It's alright as long as I can do my job. I can't take a break during this emergency situation." She sighed angrily. "I would have come even sooner if a certain Commander hadn't made the stupidest order of his career."

"I've heard about Shinji," the doctor commented. "And though his punishment may not seem reasonable at first, I think Commander Ikari had a point..."

"You're always on the side of that bastard, aren't you? What is this, a new game I haven't heard of yet? 'Let's see who can hurt Shinji the most' ? I..." A sudden pain in the injured arm stopped her in her tracks when she moved it too abruptly in her rage.

"Calm down already!" Ritsuko countered sternly, but remained her calm. "You're talking as if he had been arrested or expelled from NERV completely!"

Misato sighed. "Sorry. It's just... he doesn't deserve it. He hasn't done anything wrong! It might have been much worse if he hadn't tried to save his friend. He's risking his life for us again and again and now that he finally shows a bit confidence in piloting the EVA, he isn't allowed to do it."

"I don't think he would care that much about missing a few tests..." Ritsuko chuckled.

"Well... maybe not..." Misato allowed herself an amused smile. "I guess you're right. But I still hope the next Angel doesn't show up during the next few weeks..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji bolted upright in his bed. His heart was racing and he found himself coated in sweat, but reality already began to set in again.

Another nightmare...

It had been years since he last had one, but they came almost constantly lately, always mocking him with his loss, always telling him that all he was doing was for nothing. And always that monster that just wouldn't let him go.

With a loud sigh, he fell backwards on the bed again and shut his eyes, but he was still too upset to fall sleep again. He groaned, bothered by this situation, he tossed himself to the other side, only to roll back not even a minute later. Wearily, his view wandered around in the dark room until it fell on the luminescent letters of the digital clock.

4:36... And with his occupied mind and dry throat, there was no way he would get his sleep any time soon. But at least he could do something against the thirst.

Shinji shivered a bit when his sweat-soaked skin came into contact with the night's chilling air as he stood up and went to the kitchen. He refrained from switching on the lights, not wanting to disturb the sleep of the penguin in his private refrigerator, and silently got himself a drink from the other fridge.

But after he had quickly drunk it down and tossed the empty can into the bin, he didn't really feel all that refreshed, and far from better. It had been just another useless attempt to change something.

With lowered head, he shuffled back to his room. But as he passed the door to Asuka's room, a soft whimper stopped him dead in his tracks.

A sad sigh escaped his lips. There was barely anything he hated more than this sound; it always reminded him how helpless he really was. But he couldn't blame her for crying. He often found his own

pillow wet from his tears as well.

For a while he just stood there in the hallway, finding himself unable either to get in her room to soothe her or to walk away and leave her alone with the pain.

Finally, after assuring himself that Misato wasn't anywhere near, he hesitantly stepped towards Asuka's room and opened the door, carefully and quietly. For an instant, he smiled at the chaos in her room. As long as it didn't concern her looks, she had always been the sloppiest of them; not even maturing had helped much there.

But the smile vanished as quickly as it had come when he saw her weeping form cringing on the bed.

With small, quiet steps, he went over to her, carefully avoiding the mess on the ground. She didn't notice him in her restless sleep as he sat down next to her.

He wanted to whisper soothing words in her ear; anything to calm her, but all he could think of would have been even more hurtful lies. All he could do was to lay his arm around her and share her pain. And so they wept silently together until he had to get back to his own room, before the morning came to bring another day of repression and charades.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"She really said that?"

Hikari nodded, a big grin on her face at the sight of his stunned expression. "Her exact words were, 'That silly idiot of a big brother can be glad that nothing worse happened to him, otherwise I would have killed him myself!' "

"That ungrateful little..." Toji mumbled, but Hikari just smiled, mildly shaking her head at the boy in the bed next to her.

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly that she didn't mean it that way. She was scared when she heard that you risked your life just so she would get a better treatment. And regarding the progress she made, I'm sure she's very thankful for what you did for her."

The boy's face visibly lightened at her words. "So, how is the little brat?"

"Oh, she's doing fine. I wouldn't be surprised if she starts walking sooner than you do."

"I don't think so!" he exclaimed proudly and grinned back at her.

"Huh? What makes you so sure?"

"Because," he began softly, as he placed the hand of his good arm on hers and looked deep into her eyes in a way that sent shivers over her skin and brought a warmth to her face, "she doesn't have the same motivati..."

He was harshly interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Before any of them could answer, it was thrown open by a red whirlwind, which dragged another person with it.

"I seriously hope we didn't interrupt anything..." a visibly disgusted Asuka grunted.

Though 'innocent', Hikari and Toji's faces went beet red immediately.

Fortunately for them, the boy who entered with Asuka intervened before the silence could become really awkward. "H-hi, Toji," he mumbled. "Hello, class rep..."

"Hey, Shinji!" The jock thankfully accepted the diversion of the topic. "How're you doing?"

"Eh... Good..." Shinji said, obviously taken by surprise by the rather mundane question. "But I-I actually came here to ask you that..."

"Me? Ah, I'm fine. You know... just lying in bed, eating, hanging around," he joked, pointing to the leg which dangled in its sling.

"...Playing doctor with your girlfriend..." Asuka teasingly added to his list.

While another rush of embarrassment silenced Hikari before she could speak up, Toji just rolled his eyes this time.

"And what brings you here, Mrs. Lucifer? Missing me already?"

"Yeah, sure..." the redhead snorted. "I'm just here because Misato didn't want her little Shinji going out alone," she added in a tone of mock indulgence, ruffling Shinji's hair like that of a toddler.

"Asuka!" he protested, blushing slightly in embarrassment. "That's not what she said..."

"Whatever!" she huffed, and returned her attention to the invalid. "But since we're here now to grace you with our presence, how about a little 'thanks' for saving your sorry ass?"

Toji just looked disapprovingly at, or rather through her.

"Thanks, *Shinji*..." he eventually said, without changing his expression.

Asuka seemed to be about to snap at him, but Hikari's elbow was faster.

"Ouch!" he screamed out, rubbing the bandaged spot at his ribs where she had hit him. "What was that for?"

But before she could answer this quite unnecessary question with more than a stern glare, Shinji decided to intervene once more. "Asuka's right, you know? She and Rei helped a lot to save you."

"A-hem..." Asuka drew his attention back to her, where he was greeted with a warning glare.

"Eh... of course Asuka was an even bigger help..." he quickly added.

"A-hem!" This time it was accompanied by a light slap against the back of his head.

"I... eh..." Shinji's shoulders dropped as he sighed in defeat. "I mean, Rei and I helped her, of course..."

"A-HEM!"

"N-not that she would have needed any help..."

"Sorry, Shinji." Toji grinned. "But I don't feel like thanking your wife just because she henpecked you."

"A-hem!"

His eyes warily wandered to his left, from where the last sound came, and encountered Hikari's disapproving glare.

"Eh... I..." Letting out a groan, he looked up to the ceiling, pouting almost childishly as he quietly mumbled a "thanks for saving me..."

"Who's henpecked now?" Shinji muttered, his voice barely audible.

But inwardly, he was smiling gladly at the luck of his friend. He had wanted to visit him at least once and it was a good thing he'd done it before...

...before the sirens suddenly started to blare all over the city.

And while Asuka and Shinji unnoticed exchanged a knowing look, everyone else in Tokyo-3 just knew:

The next Angel was about to attack any moment.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Misato hurried through the corridors of the Headquarters only a few minutes after the alarm went off. The announcement to all personnel 'to take their battle stations and to prepare for surface to air combat' had been repeated for the third time by now, but the sheer size of the Headquarters made the route longer than necessary. She fumbled for her phone with her good hand, finally managing to extract it from her pocket, and established a connection to the command center. "Katsuragi here. What's the status?"

"Major!" Hyuga's voice blared through the phone. "The Angel was spotted at Komagatake and it's doubtful that their defensive line can hold it off very long! This thing moves through our forces as if they weren't even there!"

They couldn't even slow it down? That would mean they had even less time to prepare the counter.

"Okay, prepare the EVAs for launch! I saw Shinji and Asuka hurrying towards the changing rooms! What about Rei? Is she ready by...?"

"Major," a cold voice cut her off.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Only the First and Second Children will engage the Angel. Unit-01 will sortie with the dummy plug."

"WHAT?"

-X-

Despite the chaos around them, there was a shocked silence as the technical officers looked up at the seat of their Commander.

"Pilot Ikari is still suspended from his duty..."

"Sir, with all due respect, this is not the time to enforce disciplinary measures!" Misato's voice echoed through the open comm, daring to say out loud what everyone was thinking.

But Ikari seemed unfazed. "I will not repeat myself, Major!"

There was a short pause that tightened the atmosphere, until Misato replied with a weak

"Understood..."

Ritsuko, who happened to be standing near the bridge technicians, felt someone tugging at her lab coat.

"But, Sempai, the dummy plug didn't even work last time," Maya whispered. "How can he risk everything on an unreliable system like that?"

"I know you were never very fond of the idea of the dummy plug." Ritsuko smiled wearily at her protégé for a second, but it dropped as soon as she looked back again to the man sitting above them.

"But for him, it's more personal. Once the dummy plug works, he won't need to rely on Shinji any longer. It's no secret that he isn't very... fond of his son, and the last incident already gave him an opportunity to widen the gap between them. I do not doubt that as soon as Shinji has lost his usefulness, the Commander will do everything to get the boy away from him..."

"You almost make it sound as if he was afraid of his son," Maya commented, not even noticing the doctor's thoughtful frown.

'It's just what he always does,' Ritsuko reminded herself. 'Maybe it's true. Maybe he's actually the most

frightened person in this room...'

A loud explosion suddenly shook them, reminding everyone of the deadly threat above them.

"First to eighteenth layers are damaged!"

"It destroyed eighteen layers of special armor so easily...?" Makoto uttered in shock and awe at the display of the destructive power of the incoming Angel.

"We won't be able to send the EVAs to the surface in time!" Misato exclaimed the moment she stepped through the door to the bridge. "Position Units 00 and 02..." She threw a quick glare up to the commander, "...inside the Geofront to protect the Headquarters! Have them attack the target as soon as it enters the Geofront!"

-x-

Just a few seconds later, the two EVAs awaited the 14th's arrival near the headquarters; armed with a standard rifle, but dozens of further weaponry like rocket launchers and prog-spears at their disposal. Asuka still remembered how she emptied one gun after another at the slowly hovering Angel. It had been like shooting with a water gun against a rock.

She knew better now.

But the fact that firepower alone wouldn't help against this enemy didn't mean it wouldn't be helpful at all.

Then, there it was. A last explosion caused the whole Geofront to tremble as the Angel of Might started its descent towards its goal. But while Rei immediately started firing in an attempt to stop the intruder from progressing any further, EVA-02 did not move at all.

"Asuka!" Misato's stern voice called through the comm in confusion. "What are you waiting for? Take it out now!"

She didn't answer.

Instead, she calmly watched her enemy, which didn't seem to be bothered by all the firepower directed on it at all. She remembered its sight all too well; the huge green and white body with seemingly puny and harmless limbs, the bright red orb in the chest, and the skull-like face that looked like it was grotesquely grinning; all this seemed to hide the deadly powers that waited inside of it to be unleashed.

But then, just before it touched the ground...

"Cover me!"

Before anyone could react, Asuka had dropped her weapon and made a sprint towards the Angel. She knew that Rei, being an experienced pilot, wouldn't think twice and move to the side, forcing the 14th to concentrate on two different targets.

'I'll bring you down no matter what!'

But the Angel of Might didn't care about the stings of bullets, nor did it seem to fear the quickly approaching red menace.

'I won't let Shinji fight you again!'

Its arms, which had stuck out like useless stubs at its shoulders, now unfolded into what looked like long, paper-thin ribbons.

'I won't lose him too!'

And with an inhuman speed the arms flew in her direction, cutting razor-like everything that would

stand in their way into shreds...

...but missed.

"I WON'T LOSE!"

In the flash of a moment, Asuka didn't care any longer about holding back. She didn't care if the whole command went wild, seeing a synch-ratio that had been rivaled by her only once, in another time.

In a swift movement, she evaded the deadly blade-like weapons and leaped at her attacker. The ground shook as the Angel was pushed into the earth by the impact and weight of Unit-02.

The surprise effect of her attack didn't last long. Just as Asuka prepared to strike at her opponent, the EVA was thrown back by the familiar orange flashing of the Angel's AT-Field. Tumbling backwards, she barely managed to stop her Unit from falling.

The Angel didn't give her much time to recover.

"Asuka! Watch out! Behind you!"

She didn't really need Misato's warning; it would have been too late anyway. The still outstretched arms of the Angel were drawn back in a matter of milliseconds, missing her only by inches. If she hadn't moved in the last second, the EVA would have been slit in half. But this maneuver couldn't save her Umbilical cable. Asuka cursed as the timer of the internal batteries started while the energy-providing cable crashed onto the ground, electricity sparkling at its cut ends.

There was no way she could harm the Angel as long as it produced such a strong AT-Field. The energy barriers clashed against each other as the combatants tried to overwhelm the opponent, neither of them willing to surrender.

Asuka gritted her teeth in concentration. There was no way she could lose! Her enemy might be strong, but not invincible! And even if it was with the very last bit of energy her EVA had left, she would bring this monster down!

"Unit-02, stay back!" Rei's voice warned suddenly.

"Wha...?" She didn't ask further, as she saw EVA-00 aiming with a heavy rocket launcher in their direction. As soon as she jumped out of the way, Rei lost no time and fired.

The AT-Field, weakened by the two Units and especially due to the close range battle of powers with EVA-02, allowed the missile to go through without any visible problems, seemingly hitting the red core directly.

"D-did we get it?" Asuka wondered aloud, trying to see something through the smoke that the explosion had caused.

But the answer came sooner than she hoped. The two arms shot through the smoke again, but passing her...

"Ayanami, watch...!"

Too late. Before Rei could evade, one of the blade-like limbs cut off the arm that was holding the weapon right at the shoulder, while the other pierced through the head of her EVA as if it was paper.

A horrifying scream of pain and agony echoed through the comm.

-x-

"REI!"

Most people in the command center might have been surprised hearing Gendo Ikari that emotional. If

they would have paid attention to it that is, but they were much too distracted by the ongoing battle.

Rei had been supposed to stay in the back, just weakening the AT-Field and providing cover fire. And even with her 'substitutes' ready any moment, there seemed to be some reason for him to worry about her more than about all others whenever she was in critical danger.

The only person who noticed the short, unusual outburst of the Commander looked up to the command deck above the EVA cage from the platform leading to the remaining Unit. With every passing second, Shinji had to fight harder not to snap at the technicians who followed the order not to let him to the Unit even as they tried to start the dummy plug directly – without much success.

The more he heard through the speakers of the comm, the more he felt the stings against his heart. It had been hard enough to stay in his role when he had been stopped as he arrived there after changing into his plugsuit, but now he was on the verge of forcing his way to the entry plug.

What was his father thinking? Did humiliating his son mean so much to him that he risked everyone's life for it? Or... could he actually want it to happen like last time? Was it that what he wanted to achieve?

The fear of this possibility gripped his heart. That was enough.

"FATHER!"

-x-

Asuka watched the timer again. Only 30 seconds left and EVA-00 was out. But she still would beat the Angel. She had to. Otherwise...

Again, she had only time to react by instinct to dodge, as its arms slashed out once more.

But just as she thought she had escaped the deadly blades, they lost their rigor and instead of cutting through her, they rolled back, wrapping around the EVA's wrists. With an incredible strength, the green monster lifted the red Unit up, holding the arms apart in an unyielding grip.

-x-

"Energy-spike detected! The Angel's preparing to fire again!"

-x-

Asuka tried not to panic as she saw the flickering of light in the Angel's eyes and mouth. She struggled to get her arms free with all her might, but to no avail; the grip was just too strong. But she wouldn't lose. She concentrated all energy she had left into her AT-Field...

-x-

"She's draining her power much too quickly! She won't be able to block such firepower for long!"

-x-

"I won't lose! My mother protects me! Don't you, Mama?"

-x-

The concentrated power flashed.

-x-

"Cut the connections!"

-x-

"I WON'T...!"

Darkness...

"no..."

-x-

A mighty explosion rocked the Geofront.

A giant head went flying, having taken a direct hit from the enormous blast.

A huge red body, now limp, fell crashing to the ground.

And a young pilot cursed that she had failed again – and this time not only herself.

-x-

"EVA-02 is silent! The Angel is approaching!" The warning echoed through the whole headquarters, also reaching the EVA cages.

"Dummy Plug still not accepted by Unit-01!"

Beneath his cold exterior, Gendo was trembling in anger. He should have sent Rei out with EVA-01. Even if some would have been displeased with the idea to have her using Shinji's Unit when her own was perfectly fine and the Third Children available; few would have dared to question his decision to give her the superior model.

Why didn't the dummy plug work? Akagi had assured that there was nothing wrong with the plugs themselves. The test runs with EVA-00 had been without complications.

Could it be true? Could it be...?

'Yui?'

"FATHER!"

Slowly, he turned to the boy standing on the umbilical bridge in the EVA cages below him.

"This doesn't work, can't you see? Let me pilot, before it's too late!"

"Why?" Gendo asked, typically calm.

For once, his son looked up to him without showing any fear. The boy actually managed a slight grin as their eyes met.

"Because I'm the pilot of Evangelion Unit-01!"

And for once, as he faced the purple giant again, the Commander's features softened for a short moment.

'You always got what you wanted, didn't you?'

-x-

Misato watched in horror as the Angel passed the beaten and harmless Evangelions, ignoring them completely as it went for its actual goal that lay right beneath them. The hastily started attack with conventional weapons, nothing more than a frantic act of their will to survive, had no visible effect on the creature.

The monster's huge mass was all that filled the holographic screen just before the image was replaced by static. The ground shook more violently than any earthquake the Major had witnessed as the Angel fired its beam again, shattering steel and stone of the outer shielding layers of the headquarters.

A final explosion killed all their remaining hopes.

"Direct hit on the third basement!"

"Oh no!" Misato exclaimed in panic at Makoto's report, knowing too well what this meant. "The main shaft was fully exposed!"

They had lost. Everything they had done so far, everything to prevent this moment, had been rendered useless. Now all that was left for them to do was to wait for their end.

The cross hanging from her neck suddenly felt much heavier. It was strange that in this moment, the thought burning most bright in her mind was that she now would never succeed...

But before the smoke could clear, a giant purple figure leaped out through the crater, crashing against the Angel with its body, tackling it to the ground.

"EVA-01? Who...?" Misato asked, gazing in amazement and relief at the revived screen, even though she instinctively already knew the answer. "Shinji, watch out! This thing is even tougher than it looks!"

"I know, Misato!"

-x-

"I know that too well..." Shinji added under his breath as he prepared for another jump against the Angel, before it could get up again.

He couldn't allow it any chance to recover. This was a fight of sheer power. And this time, being equipped with an Umbilical cable and thus without being restricted by a time-limit, he actually had good chances to win – as long he didn't give his opponent the ability to counter.

Punch after punch hit the distracted Angel, which didn't even seem to try to evade them. A sudden flash told Shinji why. He jumped off his enemy as quickly as he could, before its beam-weapon could hit him with full force. Though he didn't lose his arm this time, thanks to his fast maneuver, it had cost him the advantage he had hoped for. By now the green giant had used the time to get up again and he didn't even seem harmed at all; ready to fight back with all its might.

And the timer started its countdown.

Silently cursing, Shinji ejected the now useless remnants of the Umbilical cable, allowing the EVA to move more freely. He still had more time than in his first fight against the 14th Angel, but he had no more time for mistakes.

Fully extending his AT-Field, he ran as fast as he could towards the Angel, which was already preparing to strike again with its arms. There was a short flash of light as the AT-Fields clashed, but Unit-01's sheer speed gave it a power that was enough to send the 14th backwards. In a swift motion, Shinji managed to get a hold of both of the bladelike limbs that fluttered aimlessly after his flying enemy. He screamed in rage as he pulled at them with all the might his Evangelion could provide, and was answered by a cry of pain as he actually managed to rip one of the arms off.

Shinji wasted no time in letting go of the limp arm in the EVA's hand and advanced once more. EVA-01's fist directly hit the Angel's morbid face. But instead of preparing for another punch, Shinji grabbed it tightly while pressing the green giant back on the earth by pushing his feet into its abdomen.

The seemingly helpless Angel squealed as its opponent tried to succeed where he had been stopped once. Shinji didn't care anymore about holding back; he just wanted to kill this thing that had caused so much pain and destruction once and now yet again. In this rage, he pulled at the mask-like face, wishing only to rip it off before doing the same to the rest of the monster. And the timer still showed more than a minute before his energy ran out.

The tendons and flesh that connected the skull with the body stretched, growing thinner and thinner with each meter, until...

The EVA suddenly tumbled backwards as it finally snapped off, much to Shinji's shock and relief. With an almost sick satisfaction, he crushed the remains in his hand before returning his attention to the body to do the same with the rest.

But the madman's grin was replaced by a look of fear as the supposedly dead Angel stood up again. There, where the face had been was already a new, just slightly deformed replacement. With a growl, the monstrosity stiffened the stub that was the puny remnant of its arm, and a new limb shot out with tremendous speed. It looked like nothing had happened.

"It regenerates this quickly?" Shinji shrieked in disbelief, but before he could react, the regrown arm wrapped around the EVA's head. He tried to pull away and grab the restraining limb, but to no avail; the Angel's grip was too strong. It was a futile fight not to panic as his Unit was – seemingly with ease – lifted up and thrown through the air.

Shinji grunted in pain as his EVA was slammed hard onto the ground again and again; his mental connection to the machine making him feel every rock and tree that was split and crushed under 'his' back. Frantically, he tried to grab something to hold on to, but roots and rubble were nothing that could withstand the Angel's power.

Then everything went black.

The sounds faded to a distant echo.

All he could feel were the tremors of the hits, partly reduced in the shielded, LCL-filled entry plug.

The timer showed only zeros.

Shinji could only guess what was going on outside by the already reduced g-forces and the loud impact when his EVA was thrown up again and landed crashing against the pyramid-form of the headquarters.

The panic that rose in him from the depths of his primal survival instincts made him clutch the controls in his hands, pulling them futilely against better knowledge, as if it would only need enough of this movement to refill his gigantic weapon with energy to fight the monster that audibly exposed the EVA's core and pounded against it with its deadly arms.

But eventually, Shinji slowed down and finally stopped. Tears of despair glimmered through his squeezed-shut eyes as bitter logic regained the upper hand over the last straws of hope.

Why? Why couldn't he kill it just like that? Why did it have to happen like this?

Was destiny meant to repeat itself after all...?

A faint sound, like a heartbeat, resounded in the entry-plug.

And Shinji smiled sadly as he felt his body dissolve into the LCL.

"Hello, mother..."

-x-

And while the berserk monster slashed out at its opponent to kill it and to devour its remains, annexing a power that went beyond anything it possessed; while a young woman vomited and her colleagues just stared in shock; while two conspirators pondered about the consequences of this beginning and while another man just seemed to water his patch of melons in the distance, a teenage girl wept silently for a loss she couldn't even see, but could only feel in her heart.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Kaji sighed as he slumped onto the seat in front of his desk. Katsuragi always complained about all the paperwork she had to sort out, but only few people could have imagined the amount of reports, files, and papers a spy had to go through and answer – and even more when he works for more than one side. It was just that they usually avoided doing it until it flooded their workplace.

Still, he wasn't sure why he even bothered anymore. He knew that his 'part time job' had been discovered – or more precisely, would no longer be tolerated, as he doubted that Ikari hadn't known about it until now. Maybe the Commander had already known from the very beginning. And now that more and more events didn't seem to go according to his plans, his patience would grow thinner and thinner.

Maybe it was just a matter of weeks, or even days...

Kaji's eyes wandered to the computer screen, where a small status-screen showed the slow progress of encrypting and transferring the data he had managed to gather until now. He was so close by now, so close to uncovering the whole truth. Only a few months more and he might have been able to prove everything he found out. But now it seemed it would be up to Katsuragi to find the remaining pieces of the puzzle.

He smiled sadly at the thought of the purple-haired beauty. It seemed like yesterday that they met in that bar, both still so full of naive hopes and dreams.

'What was its name again?' he wondered.

As he let his view roam again over the scattered papers, lost in his thoughts of the past, Kaji suddenly noticed an envelope lying, half-hidden beneath the documents on top of his desk. It must have slipped between the other papers.

/To be opened after the 14th!/'

Several seconds passed as he stared curiously at the closed cover. But eventually, he shrugged sadly and threw it aside.

"Nothing I wouldn't know already..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

Rei stood alone on the abandoned umbilical bridge. The main crew was long at home by now and most lights had been shut off to save energy. But the human eye was made to adapt to the darkness to an adequate degree and Rei had no problem seeing the bandaged skull of the Evangelion Unit in front of her.

She was not sure why she had come here. Her presence would not cause a change in the situation and she was not skilled in this field of science to help Dr Akagi and her staff.

So what was the reason for her to break her daily routine?

Did she want to see the situation for herself? That was doubtful; there was no reason to question the information from her superior officers.

She was confused.

And yet, as she stared into the green eyes of the Evangelion, she became aware that it was this

confusion that had originally brought her here. She had come to seek answers to the questions that dwelled in her.

But the giant would not answer.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Hikari looked over from her desk to the visibly moping pupil who was packing her books and papers in her bag.

It was almost two weeks since the last attack, and almost two weeks since her classmate had entered this depressed state. At first, Hikari had dismissed Asuka's mood as an aftermath of the battle. It wasn't the first time for the redhead to be down for a couple of days and sometimes - at least seeming so at first - much worse. And since she had been occupied with... other things herself, she might hadn't paid as much attention as she should have.

But now it became more and more apparent that it wasn't just a temporary thing, which meant that she felt the need to do something about it. Driven by duty, and a bit of guilt that she might had neglected their friendship lately, Hikari stood up.

"Asuka?"

"What?" the addressed redhead grumbled, not even looking up as she tucked the history book into her black schoolbag.

"I was wondering... eh... if we could go home together..."

Asuka didn't answer immediately; she just stared blankly in front of her.

"I... I'd rather go home by myself today..." she mumbled eventually, before she slowly rose from her chair and turned away from the class representative.

But Hikari didn't want to let her chance to talk slip. She took a quick step towards her friend and laid her hand gently but firmly on the redhead's shoulder.

"Asuka, what is it? You seem so gloomy lately."

The other girl didn't turn around. Instead, she just tried to pry her shoulder free from her friend's hand. "I don't know what you mean!"

"Oh come on, you can't fool me! Something's wrong with you."

"I just had a bad day, alright?"

"A bad week – or rather, two – is more like it." As she said this, Hikari noticed that Asuka's gaze was fixed on an empty desk near the windows. A small gasp escaped her as she realized whose desk it was. "Is... is it because of Shinji? He hasn't been in school since the last Angel attack... Did something..."

"He beat me again, fine!?" Asuka suddenly snapped. "He made me look like the worst pilot ever and stole the grace that belonged to me!!" But Hikari noticed that there was something else behind this rage, and it shone through more and more with every word. Her last sentences were rather coming in sobs than the forceful yell she had started with. "Now... now go already! Visit your stupid 'boyfriend' in the hospital or something!"

And though Hikari blushed at the comparison, it was doubtful that her friend even noticed anymore, as the redhead had already hurried away from her.

"Asuka..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Where am I?

"Inside of EVA..."

EVA?

Yes. I remember now. I couldn't stop it.

I failed again...

"You did your best."

Then what use is this? Why did we return here? If we can't make a difference, it wasn't worth the price.

Not that anything would have been worth that price...

"Even small things can change destiny. The power of the human spirit can bend anything to his will if he has the strength to do so."

Change destiny? Was that really why we were sent back?

It seems to me that all this was just a cruel joke of destiny. 'Send them back! Wipe out everything they worked for, everything they loved. Just so that they always have to repeat their darkest hours and they'll never be free of EVA.'

"EVA captured you?"

Yes.

"But it's up to you to decide if you want to be free."

...

It is?

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Ah! Watch out for the tree!"

Startled by the sudden yell of the boy in the wheelchair, Hikari snapped out of her thoughts and stopped immediately. Had she pushed just a few centimeters further, Toji's casted leg would have made painful contact with the branch of a tree that stood at the side of the path.

"You know, I didn't mind the idea of getting out of the room and taking a round in the hospital park. But I'd prefer to get back in one piece," Toji mildly complained.

"Sorry..." Hikari mumbled, pulling the wheelchair back a bit to turn to the left and avoid the branch.

They continued their way through the little green area on the hospital grounds. But even though they were pretty much alone, Hikari couldn't bring herself to focus on the boy, no matter how much she had looked forward to such a situation.

Toji seemed to notice that her mind was elsewhere too, as he suddenly spoke up. "What are you thinking about?"

"Huh?" she was brought out of her trance. "I... nothing..."

But he hardly sounded convinced. "Yeah, right! You're trying to fool someone who knows you for

almost five years. You're not someone who runs around absently for nothing. So what is it?"

Hikari sighed. Being read like that was something she wasn't used to. But she *would* surely get used to it. "It's... Asuka..." she admitted.

"You're thinking about Asuka?" Toji wondered, but his baffled expression quickly turned into a broad grin. "You're thinking about Asuka like this...?"

"You'd better not have that idiotic hentai-grin on your face, Suzuhara!" Hikari warned sharply.

"Sorry, sorry!" he laughed. "So what's with the red... eh... Asuka?"

"I don't know," the girl muttered. "That's the problem. She's been so distant since the last fight, and it's only grown worse and worse since then. I'm not sure, but I... I think it's because of Ikari..."

"Shinji?" Toji wondered aloud. "He's still not back in school?"

"No..." she whispered.

Toji tensed noticeably. "You... you don't think something bad has happened to him? Or that he's even..."

"I hope not," she quickly stopped him before he could say it out loud. "But... it would explain a few things..."

"He can't be dead!" Toji almost shouted, an obvious anger in his voice. "They would have said something! They would have given him one hell of a funeral! At least, that's what he would deserve, if..." He shook his head free of these negative thoughts, before they could overwhelm him. "He's probably just in some secret training or something. The last Angel just showed them that they need to work harder. Something like that..."

The class rep nodded, weakly smiling at her friend's optimism.

"I'd just like to know..." she sighed. "But Asuka won't tell me, and I seriously doubt that it would be any different with Ayanami or someone else from NERV."

They continued their way quietly for a while, which seemed a bit unusual for both of them. It wasn't the first time that there was an uneasy silence between them, but for once it wasn't because of embarrassment.

But eventually, Toji turned his head around.

"Well, there's still..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Kensuke?"

The bespectacled boy looked up from his desk, where he just sat, the head resting on his hand as he looked wistfully out the window. The lunch in front of him was barely touched.

"What is it class rep?" he asked the girl standing there.

Kensuke looked like he had lost a bit of his drive since the day he finally had been allowed to visit Toji. Hikari didn't know what exactly had happened between them, but after seeing his friend in hospital, learning that it could have easily ended up much worse, Kensuke seemed to have finally realized the dangers in piloting an EVA. But of course, letting a long aspired dream just go was never easy. If at least his best friends were there to cheer him up, but it would still take weeks until Toji would be fully recovered and Shinji...

Hikari looked at the boy with some pity. Even though his depression, if one could call it that, was not

nearly as serious as Asuka's; he gave a dismal sight. Fortunately, it was most likely nothing that couldn't be cured with a little distraction, and maybe the assignment she had for him was just the right thing to get his spirit back.

"You know, Asuka seems a bit off lately..." she began, trying to sound casual.

He didn't really give in, but at least the mentioning of the redhead brought him out of his depressed state. "And...?"

Seeing the wary look in his eyes, she decided to stop pretending and got straight to the point.

"You'll have to find out what is wrong with her!" she ordered simply.

"What?" Kensuke shrieked in disbelief. "Why should I?"

"Because you are the one who is best suited for the job," Hikari explained. "It must have had something to do with that last Angel and Ikari's disappearance. Aren't you interested in that at all?"

"Of course I am. But why does that make me 'the one who is best suited for the job'?"

"Well, everyone knows that you like this hacking and spying-stuff, so you could find out something..."

"Actually, I prefer military-'stuff'..." he interrupted, but Hikari didn't really care and continued.

"...And since she doesn't want to talk to me because of T... I mean, *and* Toji being in hospital and Ikari being who-knows-where, you are the closest thing to a friend to her now."

"A friend? She wouldn't even know me if I wouldn't hang out with Shinji. Not that that would necessarily be a bad thing..." the boy muttered, rubbing his cheek as he could still feel the bruises the 'devil' had caused him.

"Kensuke!" Hikari growled angry, but Kensuke didn't seem to be intimidated this time.

"What? You might be the class rep, but this is out of your responsibility. You can't order me to do something like that."

"But..." The brunette started to become anxious. If he wouldn't help her, then who...?

"I will talk to her," a calm voice suddenly interrupted, startling both of them.

"Ayanami?" Hikari wondered aloud as she stared somewhat unbelieving at her blue-haired classmate.

"Y-you want to help her? I thought you two don't get along very well."

Rei didn't answer immediately. Unlike herself, she averted her gaze slightly and a light frown was visible on her forehead.

"I... am curious... about Soryu's feelings," she eventually tried to vocalize her thoughts. "She seems to be in this state of depression since Ikari's disappearance..."

"Ikari?" Kensuke interfered, suddenly sparked by curiosity. "Do you know something about Shinji's whereabouts?"

"I'm not authorized to talk about that." She turned her head to look at him. "But as long as you are not afraid of being confronted with the possible consequences, I believe your... 'hacking and spying-stuff' might provide the answers if you seek them so desperately."

With that, she turned and left the class room.

"I said I prefer military..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Anything new?" Misato asked for what seemed to be the hundredth time in the last weeks.

"We're working on it..." was the reply she received as always.

Yes, they were working, that much Misato could see. The room that was used when they weren't in the command center or in the EVA cage, directly working on Unit-01, was filled with the small group of technicians, led by Ritsuko and Maya; all typing, simulating, or searching for information on their MAGI-terminals. Every time she went there it seemed like no one had moved at all.

She hated that view. It wasn't that she envied them, working under these conditions, but it made her feel useless. All she could do to help was to bring her friend a coffee now and then.

"Regretting again that you didn't attend the bio-informatics lecture?" Ritsuko's sudden question brought her back to reality.

Misato groaned. "You know that wouldn't have helped much... I would have failed anyway..." she grumbled silently. "So, how're you feeling?"

"Could use some sleep. Coffee doesn't keep you awake forever." The doctor stopped her typing and rubbed her neck tiredly, before turning her chair around to the Major and finally receiving the presented cup. "What about you?"

"I wish I could say 'I feel fine', though I have to admit that it at least feels much better without the sling..." Misato muttered and moved her left arm a bit. It had only been a few hours since the last check by Dr. Kanegawa, where that last reminder of the 13th Angel had been removed.

Almost absently, she put her hands in the small pockets of her jacket, something she hadn't been able to do for so long. She was all the more surprised when her left hand, so long unused, came into contact with a piece of crumpled paper. It was probably just some old receipt or shopping-list she had forgotten to get rid off, but her curiosity won quickly.

As she unfolded the paper, it just seemed to be some kind of note. But soon, she began to frown as she read the lines.

*/I hope you read this before the synch-test of the Fourth Children with EVA-03. An Angel is in control of the Evangelion! **Don't** activate the EVA until everything is confirmed to be safe! Stay away from it!*

A Friend/

"What is it?"

Misato didn't even look back to answer the doctor.

"Nothing – I've... just got to go..." she muttered hastily and rushed to the exit.

Ritsuko eyed her suspiciously as she left. "Nothing, huh?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Asuka had hurried out of class as soon as the last bell announced the end of the school day. She couldn't stay there any longer than necessary, not with all those questioning eyes upon her, and especially not since Hikari had started to become suspicious. Asuka had no idea how long it would take before she broke under the mental pressure and let everything slip by accident if this would go on any longer.

She had made half of her way home in record time, but unknown to her someone had slowly managed to catch up.

"Soryu?"

Despite her initial shock, Asuka didn't stop or slowed her pace when she heard the clam voice behind her.

"What do you want?" The reply wasn't nearly as forceful as it was most likely meant to be. An outsider wouldn't even have noticed that it had been two different people who had spoken.

"I was asked to talk to you."

"Then *what* do you want to talk about?" This time there was a bit more power behind the retort.

"I was questioning myself..." Rei trailed off, as if she was unsure of how to put her thoughts into words. This was even less typical for her - it was rare enough for her to start a conversation, but when she did, she always knew exactly what to say. "What... do you feel about Ikari's situation?"

The Second Children suddenly stopped. She stood silent for a while, then hurried forward again. "Since when do you care about what others think? Afraid that someone could be interested in your precious Shinji?"

"That was not my question," Rei replied calmly and slowly went after her. "I just want to know how I am supposed to feel."

Again, Asuka stopped. This time however, she turned her head enough to look at her uninvited companion. "What... what the hell are you talking about?"

"These... feelings... I do not understand them... how to react to them... because I cannot recall having experienced anything like this before. Is the way you are acting the proper one in this situation?" Rei fell silent, waiting for an answer. But the only reply Asuka gave her was the confused expression on her face. "Ikari once told me that I should smile in a situation when I feel glad. But what am I supposed to do now, that a person dear to me is gone?"

"You..." Asuka suddenly looked at her almost in shock, but quickly turned away again. "How should I know?!"

"I see," the blue-haired girl whispered, before nodding slightly. "I will not disturb you any further." With that, Rei turned and went down the street in the opposite direction, not even noticing the redhead looking at her departing figure.

"Cry when you feel sad. Laugh when you're happy..." Asuka muttered and resumed her view to the way before her. "Who am I to ask for a promise that I can't keep myself?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Misato lost no time in making her way home. She wanted to silence the nagging feeling inside her as quickly as possible, hoping that her suspicions would not be confirmed. There were enough secrets at NERV; she didn't really need or want them at home.

As she entered her apartment, she was greeted with silence.

"I'm home!"

Nothing. Wasn't Asuka supposed to be home now?

Then again, she had neither seen nor heard very much of her second charge in the last weeks. So she shrugged it off and went straight to Shinji's room, where she hoped to find the reason that made it worth violating even more traffic rules than usual just to get home as fast as she could.

The room was just as he had left it. And he always left it perfectly clean, something she didn't know whether to admire or be worried about. The only difference was the fine layer of dust covering the furniture.

But she wasn't here to feel reminded of him and worry that the room might stay like this; neither was she here to feel guilty that she hadn't taken the responsibility from him to keep the apartment clean, even after his disappearance. She stepped over to his desk and opened the drawer. It wasn't long before she found the thing she searched for between his schoolbooks.

Once she took out the crumpled piece of paper and compared it to the opened notebook, there was no doubt anymore.

But instead of calming her, that revelation just raised even more questions in her mind. Maybe it had just been a good guess; he had learned, somehow, of the identity of the Fourth Children and just hadn't wanted his friend's life endangered. But what if not? How could he have known?

Sadly, the only one who had the answers had taken them with him into the EVA.

'*Unless...*' Her view went out of the door to the hallway.

Maybe he actually had entrusted his secret to someone. She could ask his friends; maybe they knew something about it. Maybe it hadn't even been his idea and he had been urged or even forced to do it, which meant there was an even wider field of potential people who hid this from her. And in that case, it was possible that she wouldn't even have to search very far, if a particular redhead already knew the answers she sought.

Sure, it didn't seem very likely that Asuka would do anything to avoid a fight against an Angel, but without knowing the facts, there was no way to guess the possible reasons behind everything. And Misato was now eager enough to find out the answers to this riddle that she would even go after the most unlikely hints, one after the other.

But as Misato stood in front of the redhead's door, her hand stopped in midair just as she was about to knock. A faint sound, almost like a whimper, came from the room. Quietly, she opened the door.

"Asuka...?" The cowering form on the bed suddenly jerked away when Misato made her presence known. "Are you... are you crying?"

"Of course not!"

"You've been better at lying before," Misato reminded; the wet streaks on the child's cheeks were clearly visible after all, even in the dark room. "So what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" Asuka tried to snarl, bawling away as her guardian came closer, but her cracking voice failed her. "What do I care if b-baka Shinji got a synch-rate I'll never be able to reach!"

"Oh, so you're just down because of his synch-rate?" Misato mused almost teasingly while sitting next to the girl on the bed.

"What... what else should it be?" Asuka mumbled so softly that it was barely audible.

Misato sighed, but inwardly, she resolved to use this chance. "Then I guess, you wouldn't mind explaining this?" she asked as she unfolded the crumpled piece of paper and presented it to the redhead.

Asuka's eyes widened for a second as she stared at the note. Then she didn't seem to care to hide her grief anymore; the tears flowed freely across her cheeks.

"That... that baka..." she muttered, her mouth turning into a cracked smile. "I've told him not to write it by hand..."

Misato eyed the sobbing redhead for a second. This seemed so unlike the usually proud and fiery Second Children; it was almost painful to watch. A hint of guilt crept into her conscience, evoking the wish to just leave it at that and go, but she remained calm. "So you do know something about it..." she eventually confronted her charge with what she had figured.

Asuka just nodded weakly, but obviously couldn't bring herself to look her guardian in the eyes.

"Then what...?"

"I can't tell you!" the sniffling child cut her off and tried to dry the tears with her hands. "It... it was his decision as well. I can't tell you. Not... not until he's back."

Misato's first thought was to protest openly, but she managed to swallow the inappropriate remark in regard of the situation. But as much as she wished she could deny it, the thought brought up another fear within her. "You know, the chances aren't very high," she said softly. "He might..."

"No!" Asuka suddenly snapped at her. "He will come back! He came back before!"
The tears returned as she sank back to her bed. "He... has to..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

It was almost 2:00 AM, but one room in the Aida household was still illuminated.

Kensuke let out a yawn and rubbed his tired eyes. The light of the monitor seemed almost too bright for his tastes by now.

Why did he even bother to do this? It was definitely not for Asuka, not for Hikari, not even for Toji. Sure, Shinji was his friend, and he couldn't deny that he was curious as well about what happened to the EVA-pilot he had admired for so long. But with the recent events Kensuke wasn't sure if his goal to become a pilot seemed as aspiring as he had thought. Even though he had witnessed Shinji's pain in the second Angel fight, he had always tried to overlook the danger as long as he would have a chance to pilot such a Mecha.

So why did he even try to break into one of the most secure computer systems without even knowing how?

/Connection to MAGI-Terminal X-53 denied!/

Groaning, he clicked the message away for the twentieth time and finally started the shutdown procedure for his computer.

'Who started this "Kensuke is a geek, so he's good with computers"-rumor anyway...?'

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The next morning, Asuka stayed in bed a bit longer as usual. The alarm clock had chimed at the same time as always, but she just hit the sleep-mode button in her daze. She didn't feel like facing anyone today, not after she had let slip so much just yesterday.

And especially not Misato. Her guardian had refrained from asking more questions the last evening, but Asuka was sure that she wouldn't let it go with that. As soon as they met, she could more than likely expect several awkward questions that would be quite embarrassing to answer.

It wasn't unusual for them not to meet in the morning when the Major had time to sleep longer before she had to work. So maybe, it was possible that she wouldn't even notice if Asuka stayed silently in her

room instead of going to school.

But just as the alarm started to ring for the fifth time and Asuka was about to throw it against the wall, a more natural urge forced her to get up after all.

Once she had finished her 'business', she decided that she could just as well stay up and get something against the growing hunger. Not that she had much appetite, but she knew well enough that she couldn't fight the needs of her stomach forever. And if she was quick enough, she could be back to her room before Misato even noticed.

When she entered the kitchen, she saw PenPen staring hungrily at his empty bowl. Letting out a small sigh, she went to the fridge and took out some ingredients for her breakfast and a can of tuna for the starving penguin.

After feeding the bird, silently cursing about the loud noise of the can opener, she put two slices of bread in the toaster and began to fill the tank of the coffee machine with water.

"Make one for me too."

"Couldn't you have said...?" She stopped herself and almost dropped the water can in surprise as she became aware that she had been caught.

"Something's wrong?" Misato asked casually as she sat down at the table, still clad in the skimpy top and shorts that served as her nightgown.

"Eh... no..." Asuka meekly said.

While waiting for the coffee to brew, barely noticing that she was biting her lower lip slightly, the redhead threw a few anxious glances to her guardian, who had started to read the newspaper.

"No beer today?" she eventually asked, trying to sound just as casual as Misato appeared to be. *'As if nothing happened at all yesterday...'*

"I'd like to, but I drank the last can yesterday."

They fell silent again. Both knew that there was no more beer left because Misato had forgotten that Shinji had not been able to go shopping as usual.

For several minutes there was only the dripping sound of the coffee machine and the occasional rustling of the newspaper.

After a while this - at least for Asuka - uneasy silence finally ended when the machine notified that it finished the process and shut itself down.

Misato dropped a casual "thanks" when Asuka put one of the just-filled cups in front of her, while the redhead sat down on the other side of the table and sipped on hers. A slight grin was on the Major's lips as she put the cup down again after taking a small sip from it.

"So... you two are in love, huh?"

Not really surprised by this 'sudden' question, Asuka nodded hesitantly.

"Something serious?"

The redhead allowed herself a slight smile. "I guess you could say so..."

"For how long?"

Her smile grew a bit wider. "A while..."

"And *how* serious?" Misato raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

"Quite..." Asuka said grinning.

"*That* quite?"

"Maybe..."

She couldn't help but chuckle at the now completely dumbfounded expression of her guardian. But as much as she wanted to cherish this feeling of casual familiarity as long as possible, she knew too well that it wouldn't last very long.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm home!" Kensuke called into the hallway as he came from school, though he didn't really expect an answer. He was usually alone when he came home at this time of the day.

He was all the more surprised when a slurred voice greeted him back. "Welcome home, Kens'ke..."

As he followed the voice to the living room he found his father clumsily standing up and swaying towards him. Kensuke absently noticed various empty bottles lying around, and the heavy stench of alcohol in the dimmed room.

"Are you drunk again?" he asked rather rhetorically and stepped a bit disgusted away from the alcohol-breath of his father. Though he never drank regularly, maybe once in two or three months, he tended to lose control of it when he did.

"Oh son, one day you'll praise the feeling of callousness it can cause, after you come home into your empty house after a stressful day and all you can do is to wait for your only son who is also the only remaining member of your family." Suddenly the taller man embraced his son rather forcefully. "I'm sorry! I didn't... I love you, my Kensuke..."

"I know, dad..." Kensuke just rolled his eyes at this all too familiar procedure since the sudden death of his mother years ago. He couldn't really remember her; it was completely normal for him to grow up with just his father, who tried his best to cover both parts. So, as much as he wanted to, it was hard for Kensuke to empathize with the man who still mourned her death that much, especially when he lost the control of his alcohol consumption now and then.

Kensuke reached out to support the drunken man. "Come on, I'll get you to bed..."

"Nonsense! I'm still wide awake!" his father protested, before almost tumbling to the floor.

"Yeah right... Now come. You'll have work tomorrow."

"Meh! We don't have that much to do, as long as they're busy gettin' that kid out of that EVA..."

Kensuke's eyes widened. For a moment he stared blankly at his father.

He hadn't really wanted to use and risk this 'source' anymore, especially since it became apparent that his quest to become a pilot was futile after all.

'Oh... but— just one more time...' he thought, shaking his head. *'But this doesn't mean I'm now more into spying.'*

Taking a deep breath, as if convincing himself to let his curiosity win once again, he opened his mouth.

"What kid...?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"He's trapped."

Hikari blinked in confusion at Kensuke's overly-short explanation as to why he had wanted to talk with her. "Who?"

"Shinji, of course," Kensuke sighed as he leaned further over his desk and continued to explain in a conspiratorial whisper. "He's somehow trapped inside his EVA and they don't know if they'll ever get him out."

The class-representative gasped in shock. "He- he might never come back?"

Kensuke shook his head. "They're not even sure if he's still alive..."

"My God..." Her view went to the redhead who sat a few rows further away at her desk and absently played with the buttons of her laptop's keyboard. "You mean, that's why she's been acting like this lately?"

"Phht, sure..." Kensuke snarled dismissively. "I bet she was just beaten by that Angel and now she's licking the wounds of her overconfident ego."

"I don't know... I'm not sure if she would be so touchy about the lone mentioning of Shinji then."

"You mean she isn't touchy otherwise?"

"Not like this," Hikari muttered sadly as she watched her friend. "It's like she lost the part of her that kept her stable."

"And that part was Shinji? You sound as if she had a thing for him," Kensuke pondered unbelieving. "To be honest, I prefer her unbalanced than 'stable' on the dark side."

Hikari rolled her eyes. '*Boys...*' She sighed inwardly. It was still a hard fight to keep Toji from talking badly about her friend, but trying to show all skeptics how to see the real Asuka behind the fiery exterior was just as futile as to explain them the most basic rules of a romance – even more so, when she wasn't sure that she could see the real Asuka herself.

"Well... Thanks anyway..."

"Ah... It was nothing..." he said exaggeratedly boastful and playfully waved her off.

Hikari smiled; it seemed like she had at least managed to raise the spirits of one of her friends. But now she had a more serious problem to handle, and she had heard enough about it to act. She would confront her friend with her newfound knowledge, and she wouldn't be shaken off that easily this time.

"Asuka!"

The only reply that the addressed girl gave was the slight movement of her eyes towards her classmate.

"Can we go home together today? I'd really like talk to you; it's... important."

Asuka didn't answer immediately. To Hikari's surprise, she was actually trying to force a smile, before she gave up and returned her gaze to the screen before her. "Sure..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"So what do you want, Hikari?" Asuka muttered halfheartedly, keeping her view locked on the city before her.

Just a few weeks ago, they had been sitting at the same spot, at the same time – and yet the situation was now so different that she felt sicker with each second the sun set.

"Why didn't you tell me?" the girl next to her accused. "Aren't these things that *have* to be shared with your best friend?"

Hikari's harsh tone startled Asuka enough to finally look at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Your feelings for Shinji! And don't even try to deny it! I could have guessed before, but since his disappearance it has become quite obvious."

Asuka's eyes widened at the sudden revelation and she stiffened for a second, but then her shoulders sagged in a sigh and a weak smile softened her features. "Either Suzuhara is rubbing off on you or I've never really witnessed you in the dreaded 'class-rep-mode'..." she muttered, chuckling. "I guess I'm not such a good actress as I wish I was..."

The brunette girl giggled a bit, though it wasn't obvious if it was because of the first or latter part of Asuka's statement. "Well, you did your best, I can assure you. When you guys were arguing, I wondered several times whether you were going to kiss or kill him any second," she said with a smile that suddenly dropped again. "I'm just a bit disappointed. I would have assumed you would trust me enough to tell me. That's what friends are for, aren't they?"

"Oh, Hikari, if only you knew," Asuka sighed as she let her gaze wander over the buildings that were bathed in the orange light of the setting sun. "But... this isn't as simple as a crush on some handsome movie star..."

"So... is it 'the big L' already?" Hikari asked, grinning, and just hardly resisted to nudge her friend teasingly.

"The big...?" The redhead blinked in confusion as she snapped out of her thoughts, but then a sheepish grin crept on her lips. "Yeah, I guess you could say so..."

"As-Asuka?!" Hikari stammered, perplexed. That was definitely not the answer she had expected. "Y... you're serious?"

The smile didn't leave Asuka's face as she placed her hands on her friend's shoulder and looked deep into her eyes. "Yes, Hikari, I am serious! I love Shinji Ikari!" she said with all the honesty she could put in her voice, and it felt as if a heavy burden was finally lifted from her. "And I'm sorry if I let you think otherwise, but I do trust you! And... as my friend... I trust you that you will keep this to yourself!"

"But..."

"Don't tell anyone about it! Not any of our classmates. Not your sisters. And especially not Toji. Please..."

Hikari just answered with a kind smile as she eventually gave in and nodded in agreement.

"That's what friends are for, right?"

Asuka couldn't bring out any words, anything appropriate seemed to escape her mind. All she could do was return the nod and the hug she was drawn into.

Hikari may not have been able to ease all her pains. But Asuka now knew that her friend would be there for her.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

It's time.

I can feel them calling me.

I have to go.

"You know, you don't have to."

...

Maybe not...

But I want to.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Asuka watched the last preparations on Unit-01 from a gangway above the restrained EVA. It was doubtful that anyone would have noticed her there unless they really paid attention, which didn't seem very likely seeing how busy everyone was. She, on the other hand, had a perfect view of the events unfolding beneath her. That, however, didn't ease the nervousness she felt inside at all.

So it was not surprising that she jerked a bit as someone suddenly stepped next to her.

"You do not have to worry. Dr Akagi, Lieutenant Ibuki and their staff are well suited for this task."

Despite her initial shock of having been caught by the blue-haired pilot, Asuka quickly regained her uncaring façade and turned her attention back to the EVA cage below with an annoyed look. "Who says I'm here to check if that idiot will be alright? I... just don't have anything better to do right now."

Rei didn't reply. Not that this was unexpected, but her calmness always tended to create an uncomfortable silence. She just closed the distance between them with a few steps and followed Asuka's gaze down with her eyes.

"He will return," Rei stated simply, but in an almost warm, reassuring tone.

Maybe it was because of that, maybe because she was too distracted or because of her nervousness or maybe just because she didn't feel like fighting right now, Asuka didn't argue with her co-pilot.

"I know..." was all she whispered.

A sudden tumult coming from the command center returned their attention to the happenings a few stages below. Asuka couldn't deny the rush of panic, making her fists clench in fear around the railing as the hatch of the entry plug suddenly opened and LCL started to pour out. She didn't know if she was still breathing or if her heart was still beating in the seemingly endless seconds that followed, while the only sound seemed to be that of the trickling of the liquid's last drops.

But all her fears vanished in an instant to be replaced by utmost relief and happiness when she made out a hand getting a hold of the side of the hatch. She barely registered Misato's run for the platform leading to the plug; her eyes rested on the form of the boy, who used the rest of his strength to crawl out of the cylindrical cockpit and eventually collapsed in the Major's arms.

Asuka could barely stop herself from hurrying down; to be near him again after a month of separation, but she suddenly became aware again of the blue-haired pilot only a few steps beside her. So she held her position firmly without even turning around.

"Didn't he tell you to do something in such an occasion?" Asuka asked, trying to sound as unaffected by the happenings as possible.

Rei just stared blankly at her for a second. But then, as if from out of nowhere, her facial features seemed to brighten up in joy and a warm smile curled up her lips.

"You know," Asuka began, even though she could see this unusual display of emotions only from the

corner of her eye, "if you'd keep doing that, one could actually mistake you for a human being..."

Even though the choice of words wasn't the friendliest, there was no malice in her voice. In fact, behind its sarcasm, it was one of the greatest compliments Rei had ever received – especially by someone like the Second. And she had to admit – it felt good...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The first thing Shinji felt as he slowly regained consciousness was a soft, slight salty feeling on his lips. Not unexpectedly, the first he saw was a certain redhead, obviously surprised when he had started to return the kiss. As she, somewhat perplexed, broke the contact, he noticed that she had obviously been crying.

He smiled at her as she sat there on top of him. "And *you* were always afraid that *I* would take advantage of you," he broke the silence.

Blushing, Asuka snapped out of her trance, but she still seemed to fight for words; opening and closing her mouth several times, she looked as though she had forgotten how to speak. Then suddenly, she slapped him.

"Ouch!" he whined, rubbing his reddened cheek. "You gave me that 'For making you worry'-lecture already, remember?"

"Well, it obviously wasn't enough! So I'll have to give it to you as often as necessary!"

With the slyest grin he could manage, he sat up and put his arms around her. "Well, I don't mind," he assured, leaning closer. "As long as I also get the 'For coming back'-one..."

Asuka didn't even try to hesitate very long; she cupped his face in her hands and met his lips in a long awaited, passionate kiss and soon Shinji found himself lying on his back again.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Shinji's eyes grew wide as they darted towards the door.

"Uh... Mi... Misato!" he stuttered, trying to get the surprisingly calm redhead off him. "It... it's not what it looks like!"

But the caressing hand on his cheek silenced him.

"Shh..." Asuka hushed and didn't even care to stop another tear of joy that dropped on his face. "It's okay. She... she knows..."

Shinji's gaze shifted between the two women, just like his thoughts shifted from one possibility to another. "What...? She...? How much...?"

"Not as much as I'd like to know, I'm afraid..." the Major scolded, slightly smirking as she went towards his bed. But it didn't take long for her professional appearance to crack completely, and she flung her arms around the little part of his upper body that Asuka was willing to share. "I'm glad that you came back to us, Shinji," she said once more as she stood up again and straitened her jacket. "I guess I'd better give you two some time to yourselves now. But remember: I want some explanations when we're back at home!"

With a last, kind glance to the couple, she left the room as silently as she had entered it.

"So... what does she know...?" Shinji asked after a moment of silence.

"Just that we're together..."

"And... how?" he asked carefully, trying not to sound as if he would accuse her for any fault.

Asuka lifted her upper body off him. "She got curious because you, baka, didn't give her an *anonymous* warning like I told you to!" she scolded, glaring at him and poking at his chest with her finger.

"But I did..."

"You wrote it by hand! I may not be able to see the difference between every Kanji but even I could recognize your scribbles if I wanted to!"

"Oh..." Shinji muttered. "I'm..."

"Yeah, I know..." she softly interrupted somewhat sadly as she let herself fall back onto him.

The uneasy silence that followed threatened to overwhelm them again.

"It's... it's been my fault anyway..." Asuka eventually admitted, before it got any worse. "I tried to maintain my old attitude, but... I... I just couldn't. It was hard enough to keep it up when she was taken from us, but the thought of losing both of you..."

"But... you knew that I would come back..."

"The hell I knew!" Asuka snapped at him, but then brought her face even closer next to his, their cheeks touching. "For the last month, I've kept worrying if what we're doing is right. We agreed that we would try to change the future so that everyone had the chance to survive. But the truth is, we never really thought of the consequences of our interventions. Who knows if we can really change everything for the better? Who knows if it doesn't even end up much worse when we keep doing this? Who knows if... if..." Her grip became tighter as she trailed off. "I just don't want to see another life of someone close to me sacrificed in this war. Never again..."

Shinji closed his eyes with a sigh and ran his fingers soothingly through her hair.

"It doesn't matter that much if she knows," he said eventually when he noticed that she had calmed down in his arms. "You know, I did some thinking as well. And to be honest, I think it might have been a step in the right direction. We will have to change 'who we are' to everyone at some time. We never thought of that; we had been part of the problem just as much as the way the things had gone, and if we continue to act exactly as we did, it could very well end up just as it did back then.

When I stood there, so close to my EVA, and heard how this Angel hurt the both of you, I... I just couldn't hold back any longer. And I don't regret it. Because if I hadn't done it, if I had just stayed in my role, who knows if my father would have come to his senses in time to let me go when I still had a chance to beat it..."

"So... Are you saying that we should stop acting after all? But... what about...?"

He quickly shook his head. "We shouldn't rush it. If we keep it slow, so that everyone could adapt... maybe they won't notice anything too strange..."

"Well, it's too late to keep things from Misato, I'm afraid. And... and I guess we owe her at least some explanations." A grin suddenly replaced her previous empty expression as she trailed her finger seductively along his chest. "At least we don't have to hold back at home any longer..."

His chuckle rocked both of their bodies, but he didn't reply in any way other than to draw her a bit closer. They stayed silent like this for a few more minutes, before it was time to leave the comforting peace of their own little world and to face reality once again.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Said reality hit them soon enough in the form of Misato. She didn't give them much time to prepare once they got home; as soon as she had got into something more comfortable than her uniform, she called them to the kitchen. A certain piece of paper already greeted them on the table when they sat down, but neither of them said a word.

"Well, I hope this will be a good story," Misato broke the silence before it could actually settle in. "I had to postpone a... eh... meeting for this."

"Yeah, I can guess what kind of 'meeting'..." Asuka snarled.

Misato silenced her with a warning glare. "So, mind explaining this to me now?" she asked firmly and pointed to the piece of paper that lay between them on the table. "Assuming that you didn't take a *very* good guess, how did you know that the previous Angel would take over Unit-03?"

Shinji looked to his side for Asuka's reassurance, which he found in a small nod.

"I knew it, because I..." He felt Asuka's hand softly squeezing his, "...*we*... have witnessed this all once before..."

"How?" Misato asked with a strange calmness. "Have you somehow got visionary powers? Some kind of déjà vu?"

"It was more like time travel," the redhead interjected.

"Time travel?" Misato repeated slowly. "But... how can that be possible?"

"We... we don't know actually," Shinji muttered, shaking his head. "All I can say is that we came back about two or three months ago, after surviving on our own for several years..."

"Surviving?" The Major was visibly shocked. "Why 'surviving'? What happened?"

"Third Impact!" Asuka simply stated with a low voice. "The two of us were the only ones who were left."

"Third...?" Misato's eyes widened. "So... we failed?"

Shinji slowly shook his head. "I-I'm not sure if it would be wise for us to let you know every detail. But... let's just say that it wasn't an Angel that caused it."

"What? Then who was responsible?"

"I can't..."

"Shinji!" Misato cut him off with more anger in her voice than intended.

But the boy surprised her by not backing away; instead, he looked up with a stern face. "As I said, I don't think it would be wise for you to know everything. We... we're trying to avert the Impact this time, but there are too many people who could work against us." With a weak grin, he nodded at the paper. "And as you can tell, it's hard enough for us already to keep everything secret."

"So you don't think I could help you?" she protested.

"Maybe," Asuka interfered with a warning glare, "but you could create even more problems for us. The more people know anything critical, the higher is the risk that anyone lets something slip to someone who shouldn't know..."

"So you don't trust me...?" Misato whispered with a hint of disappointment.

"I... I wouldn't call it that..." Shinji tried to appease her. "It's just that... there's too much to risk..."

"Well, then..." Misato trailed off, obviously not very pleased by his explanation. "How... how long have you been there?" she asked eventually, changing the topic somewhat unwillingly.

"We don't know exactly. The first few months, or even years, we were so occupied with other things that we didn't even bother about keeping track of dates. So we can only guess that it was about one and a half or two years before we started to count again. After that it was almost four more years."

"Why..." She halted to take a breath. "Why didn't you tell me anything?" Misato's frustration was clearly audible in her voice.

"How should we have known if you would have believed us?" Shinji tried his best to keep his calm.

Asuka's patience, on the other hand, seemed to run lower every second. "We already said that the risk was too high!" she spat more venomously than seemed necessary. "What would have happened if we had told you or anyone else that we somehow traveled through time without any proof? We would have been declared 'mentally unstable' in no time, been at least removed from our duty at NERV and with that from our only chance to make a difference. Most likely we would have also been separated or even locked away..."

"Asuka..." Shinji tried to calm her, but only to little avail.

Misato just sighed at the redhead's outburst and sagged back in her chair. "I guess you have a point there. This whole story is just so... I don't know... it really sounds a bit like a bizarre fantasy. I mean, you're telling me that you two lived alone in a devastated world for several years, where you eventually opened up to each other and fell in love and then came back for no apparent reason..." She had rested her forehead on her hand, deep in thought, and sighed once more. After a short moment of silence, she shook her head. "If it wasn't for the note..." she mumbled and looked back up to them. "You know, it's really not very easy to believe, but I..."

She was forcefully interrupted as Asuka suddenly slammed her palms on the table, bolting up in rage. "FINE! Believe what you want!"

"Asuka!"

Shinji reached out for her to hold her back, but she had already run out of the kitchen. Sadness and shame filled him as this event painfully reminded him that he wasn't able to do anything for her at all.

"What is it with her?" Misato asked from behind him, but he couldn't bring himself to turn around and face her.

He couldn't do anything, standing motionless in the door, not knowing how to explain something as delicate as this.

"You don't... you can't understand what it's like – how painful it is to assume... just to think that it hadn't been real... that it never happened," he eventually breathed with a low voice, his fists firmly clenched at his sides as all the once-joyful memories were repeated in his mind. "Not... not after we were forced to leave all that mattered to us behind."

"What do you mean?" Misato sounded obviously confused. "What could have been that important in that world that you can't find now? I mean, it's not like you..." She trailed off with an audible gasp.

"You...? I mean you – didn't...? You couldn't have...?"

"Yes, Misato..." Shinji cut her off softly, "we... we had a child..."

Chapter VI: Bear

It was still quite early, but the sun stood already high enough to fill the sleeping-room with morning light. Shinji was awake for several minutes, yet he had no intention to get up. He enjoyed this moment way too much.

Just looking at her as she slept there in his arms. Her soft hair that was shining in its bright red in the early sunrays. The slight heaving of her chest in the rhythm of her breathing. The faint, barely audible sound of her snoring. Her fingers that lay loosely on his shoulders, absently trailing around. Her sweet, intoxicating scent that wasn't rivaled by anything he could think of. That almost cute little bit of drool in the corner of her slightly opened mouth that he wouldn't even dare to wipe away in fear it could wake her from her peaceful sleep. He could stay like this for hours without ever getting tired of it.

But as much as he cherished the peaceful moment, there were too many disturbances he couldn't prevent – like the all-morning crow, blaring loudly from the chicken's coop.

"Nnn... Damn it, one day I'll kill that stupid rooster..." a slowly awakening Asuka grumbled.

"Well, he's actually a little late," Shinji said chuckling, before he leaned towards her. "Good morning, Mrs Ikari."

Asuka's lips met his in a short kiss. "Morning, Mr Soryu," she replied, now weakly smiling.

Shinji chuckled quietly. It had been a few months since their 'wedding' and, official or not, they never doubted in their marriage, even though daily routines had long settled in again.

"Well, I'll better go and check on them," he said, slowly getting up and walking to the wardrobe to get some clothes. He knew, if they'd stay much longer in bed, they wouldn't be able to leave it for quite a while. "Do you want some eggs for breakfast?" he asked over his shoulder.

Her answer didn't come immediately and for a moment he thought, she had fallen asleep again. However, as he turned around, she snapped out of her thoughts.

"Oh, no breakfast for me..." she muttered sleepily.

"Again?"

She shrugged, sitting up. "I'm... just not very hungry."

"Well, if you say so..." Shinji stared curiously at her for a moment, as he tried to remember the last time when they had eaten together. It wasn't unusual for them to skip a meal when they had too much to do or were low on rations. But because she wasn't hungry?

A knowing grin spread on his face, as a thought hit him. Leaning over to her, he gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "You know, you'll always look beautiful to me. And you really don't need to lose a single ounce," he told her in a gentle tone.

He obviously hit a nerve, as she jerked up wide-eyed in surprise. "N-no, it's not like that! I'm really not hungry!"

Shinji chuckled at the almost frantic denial of his wife. "Okay, okay. But remember: Just because we've been lucky so far with our garden doesn't mean we'll never have hard times with only little food on our table. So there's no need for an extra diet in times when we have enough resources."

"Well, see it as saving supplies for those hard times then!" Asuka snapped rather forcefully, emphasizing that she didn't want to talk about this topic any longer. "Speaking of supplies, we're out of soap, and almost out of toilet paper and sunscreen. And there's not much gas left in the car either."

"Again?" he groaned while he pulled his T-shirt over his head, starting to dress himself. "Oh well, I'll go after breakfast. While I'm at it I can take the garbage to the dump as well. There're three bags full already, and they're starting to smell."

Asuka nodded slowly. "Be careful."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Wild animals had slowly begun to reclaim the territory humans had forced them out of by building their cities of steel and stone in the once untouched nature. The shattered ruins of Tokyo-3 didn't provide much food though, so most activity was concentrated near the dumping grounds. So far they hadn't encountered actually aggressive beasts, but that might have been just a question of time.

Their garden hadn't been a favored target yet, and to make sure that stay that way they had get rid of their alluring garbage as early as possible. But Shinji was sure they wouldn't be able to hold them back much longer. They already lost three lettuce-heads and several carrots to some rodents before they managed to scare them off. And of course, there was their new rooster-friend that had suddenly shown up and always came back, no matter how often he was shooed away. Thanks to him, they not only had now their own 'wake-up service' with arguable reliability, they also now had to check the eggs each time unless they wanted to find 'a little surprise' when eating them.

The stench that filled the air didn't leave much doubt that he was reaching his destination. Passing the wrecked gates, Shinji stopped the car in front of the giant heap of garbage. As usual when he came here, he couldn't help but shaking his head, realizing that this hadn't even been the city's main dump, so the to-be-recycled and burnable trash hadn't end up here.

Spying through the windows, he made sure that nothing big was moving outside, but aside from a slight rustling that was getting away from his position, everything was quite. Usually, the loud motor of the pick-up was enough to scare most animals away and it seemed it was the same this day.

Carefully, he opened the door, glancing around once more before finally stepping out. It wouldn't take long to get rid off the garbage bags, as it didn't really matter where on the heap he would throw them. The first two quickly joined the ones from previous trips.

But as he wanted to take the third bag from the loading space, it seemed unnaturally heavy. A fierce hiss quickly presented him the reason: A fat rat had dug its claws into the plastic, not willing to let go of his prey.

"Hey, get off!" Shinji shouted, shaking the bag wildly. The vermin kept a tight grip, but its own weight was too much for the plastic; the claws ripped it open, spilling the contents over the car. The scared animal hurried away after falling uncomfortably on its back, leaving a silently cursing Shinji behind.

He didn't have much choice but to get the mess at least off the car. Gritting his teeth to suppress the revulsion of touching it with bare hands, he started to throw the garbage from the truck. He was almost done when he noticed a small package between the rotten remains of their food. It seemed like it had been stuffed deep inside the bag and wrapped tightly into a bundle of old newspaper or magazine-pages that obviously had been scratched open, either by the rat or by the friction against the other trash. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't even have noticed it, and that was exactly what stirred his interest: The one who put it in the garbage had tried to hide it.

Curiously, he ripped the rest of the newspaper off and opened the dirty package. It took him a second to realize what it was that he saw inside. But when he did, his breath was stuck in his throat. Slowly he slumped down, keeping his gaze fixed on the small, white object in his hands.

He couldn't tell how long he kept sitting there.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm... I'm home."

The weakly muttered greeting, finally, after several hours of his absence, caused Asuka to rush to meet its source in the hallway. Irritated and concerned after the unusual long waiting time, she didn't bother with politeness in her answer.

"Where have you been the whole time? I was about to go searching for you!" She grimaced, sniffing in his direction and recoiled in disgust. "And you stink! Have you been at the dump the whole time?"

For some reason, he didn't show much reaction. He just kept his head down as if he couldn't muster himself to look in her eyes. "I'm sorry," he said awkwardly flat. "I... needed to think for a while..."

"Think? About...?" Asuka trailed off as she saw the small, white shape tightly gripped in his hand. She felt a mix of fear and anger dwelling up in her stomach. In a fraction of a second, all her hopes were crushed. All her troubles to keep it secret and to act like always, all her worries – everything ruined. "I knew I shouldn't have done the test here..." she muttered disgusted as she averted her eyes from him. How could she have been so careless?

Shinji didn't react to her confessing statement and just continued. "At- at first I wasn't sure why you didn't say anything. If you wanted to surprise me or... or just didn't know how to tell me..." He paused, but Asuka couldn't find herself to reply.

'Why haven't I thrown it somewhere in the ruins?' she thought, her whole body trembling, while she just let his words hit her. 'He'd never have found it there. Now – he'll never understand. Not this. He can't...'

"You... you never wanted me to know, did you?" Shinji concluded. "That's why you barely ate something lately... You wanted... you wanted to- to kill..."

"SO WHAT?!" she cut him abruptly off, no longer able to suppress the tension inside her. "I don't want this... this thing! It ruins everything that we achieved! Everything that we have!"

"Asuka..." He stared at her with fear and horror. "I... I can't believe that you're talking like that. What are you doing – if... if you keep doing this, you're not only risking the child's life, but yours as well!"

"See? It already stands between us!" Asuka shrieked, blind rage taking over her mind. She didn't even try to listen to him anymore. It didn't matter how he said it. Everything was over now.

"If that's really what you think, you might actually be right," he muttered sadly. "But then, I don't think it's by the child's fault..."

Everything..

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

He couldn't even remember the last time he had slept in 'his' room. It felt so small and yet so empty.

For the rest of the day, they hadn't spoken to each other. Their fight had been the worst they had for a while. Actually, it had been the *first* they had for a while. And then it had an intensity he never expected to witness again.

It didn't look like he would be able to sleep anytime soon anyway. Their life had become so calm, the impact of the day's news seemed even bigger on his mind – if that was actually possible. The thought of

having a child had never occurred to him and maybe that was what had made him blind to the signals: That she sometimes spend longer than usual in the bathroom; that she often seemed tired, even if they hadn't worked too hard; mood swings that would have put the old Asuka to shame; the slightly swollen belly – though that was still so little, that it was barely noticeable if you didn't look out for it.

And even now, after having the confirmation, it still seemed so unreal.

Just as sleep finally seemed to overwhelm him, the sudden opening of the door drove it away once more. He pondered whether to look up or just pretend to be asleep.

After a moment of silence, she finally spoke. "Shinji? Come back to bed."

However, he didn't give a sign of life, even though she obviously knew he was still awake.

"Damnit, don't make me beg..." she muttered barely audible. He could tell she was desperate, but he tried not to care about that. "I... I need to know that you're still here when I wake up..."

Finally, he showed a reaction, lifting the sheets and gesturing her to come to him. "After all, *I* need to know that *you're* still here when I wake up," he explained tired, still not looking at her.

Reluctantly, Asuka took his invitation and stepped over to the bed, climbing in next to him. The uneasy atmosphere was hardly lifted though.

"When was the last time we slept like this?" she asked, sighing. "With the tension of a fight still so heavy in the air?"

"I don't know..."

"It's not too late yet, is it? You... you still...?"

"I don't know..." he lied. Her behavior had hurt him, though wasn't sure if it was her mistrust or what she tried to do that hurt most. But he still loved her.

"It's a curse..." she suddenly whispered flatly, more to herself than to him.

"What?"

"It has to be. Maybe there's a god after all and this is his punishment for me for slaying his messengers."

Shinji felt a well-known lump of guilt forming inside him. "Why... why do you think like that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Asuka countered, more forcefully again. "Whenever I think I've finally found my happiness, something happens to take it away from me again. Mama's death when I finally had something to prove myself to her! The EVA series destroying Unit-02 just when I learned she was in there, watching over me! And now this, separating me from the first one who loved me in years!"

"Asuka..."

"Yeah, right, it's my own fault, I know!" she droned, her voice cracking ever so slightly. "But shouldn't you be on my side rather than on that of some *thing* you don't even know?"

"It- it's not like that. But what you're doing..."

"Did I even have to ask if you'd try an abortion?" she inquired carefully, trying not to stir his anger even more, just when they were trying to make up. She had little success.

He exhaled sharply, giving that as his only answer. Even if he knew how – would he'd even be able to do that?

"See, that's why I didn't tell you: You wouldn't have wanted to help..."

"How... how could it happen anyway?" he interrupted her abruptly, desperately wanting to change the course the conversation was heading. "I thought you're on the pill?"

"I am! Do you really think I would be that careless?" Asuka grumbled. "I have no idea how it's possible. I mean, it's not a 100-percent protection either. And who knows if they still work properly when they're that old..."

Shinji couldn't believe his ears. "You took expired medicaments?"

"Well, unless you can make some new I didn't have much choice!" she scoffed back.

"But you're sure tests...?"

He didn't see her nod, but there had been little reasons to doubt her. "I did two different ones actually. Hid them separately, so you've probably thrown it away."

"And... how long since...?"

"It's been about a week since I've missed the second period in a row," she admitted. "I didn't even noticed at first. Morning sickness wasn't so bad that I thought much about it; I just blamed our somewhat unbalanced diet for it. When it started to become too obvious though, I..." She sighed bitterly. "I don't know. I guess, I just tried ignored it; didn't want to accept it. But the fear kept nagging on my mind, so I eventually got the tests from that pharmacy in Gora when I made a supply-trip there a week or two ago. And even then I couldn't really convince myself to take it. I hid it here for several more days, always telling myself: 'Just do it already! Then you'll see that you're worrying for nothing!' " She stopped her rambling with a short, sarcastic laugh. "But of course I was right after all..."

He noticed her shifting around, most likely looking at him. "How can you stay so calm about all this?" she now took the part as questioner. "I expected you to freak out when you'd find out – or what comes close to 'freak out' to your definitions."

Shinji pondered about that for a short while. But the only answer he could think of was the same that he found often in the last few hours. "I... I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Not yet. When I realized what the test meant, thousands of thoughts and emotions hit me and I doubt I've sorted all of them out already. Maybe I want to prove myself as a better father than mine had been. Maybe I just want to know what it's like. I... don't know..." he concluded quietly. "The only thing I *do* know is that I can't just ignore it... and even less help you with what your doing..."

No response or new question followed after that. After several moments of silence, he wondered if she actually was still awake, until he heard a soft breathing from her. He shifted a little to look at her, confirming his guess. But his eyes didn't rest on her closed ones for long, as he slowly reached out for her.

"Don't." His hand stopped abruptly at her soft voice, mere inches away from her belly. "Please don't..." Silently, he rolled back to his side.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Pregnancy log

Estimated week: probably between 10-13

I thought it might be a good idea to start this, as it will be my task to watch over Asuka's pregnancy and this log will hopefully be of assistance to analyze any possible problems or complication, especially when the time comes and my mind is too occupied with the actual events to remember every probably significant detail. Not that my mind wasn't occupied now already. The thought of becoming a

father so soon triggered so many emotions that it will take days or even weeks to sort them out. I guess it is similar for Asuka. Or at least I hope it is. I don't know what to do if she continues on with this destructive path; I really fear for the child's as well as her own health. She says that it wasn't like she's not eating at all (granted, I've seen her eating an apple one day) and that she only wanted to keep her "diet" until she could be sure "that it's gone". She seems so cold about it. I'm not sure if she even realizes that it's a living being, even less that it's her own child.

How it could happen, I'm still not sure. Maybe the pill was really expired and we were lucky that 'only' this had happened. On the other hand, we also lost track of time more than once already, so maybe she just had forgotten it and doesn't want to admit it – she's still Asuka after all. Or maybe we actually fell in the one or something percent where it doesn't work. After all, we've beaten worse odds already. Of course that had been in another time.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji awoke startled by a loud clanking sound from the hall. In shock and his half-aware state between dream and reality, he thought at first that some burglar might have broken in. When he realized that there was nobody left on the planet who could have done that, his next thought was that a wild animal somehow managed to get in.

But when he wanted to check on Asuka, he didn't find her sleeping peacefully next to him. As he noticed that the bed was empty, his fear faded a bit just to be replaced by another. What was she doing at a time like this? It didn't sound like she had gone to the bathroom.

He pondered for a second if it was worth risking another argument, but eventually his curiosity won. Silently, he stood up. When he opened the door he heard the sounds even better and, tiptoeing, he followed them towards the kitchen. A faint light emitted from the open door, flickering a bit, as something moved in front its source. He only leaned against the frame and spied inside.

Asuka sat there in front of the opened fridge, which was also the only source of light in the dark room. There were some apples and an open can of meat that she must have gotten from their storage room, as well as two tomatoes, a cucumber and a few slices of bread around her on the floor and she had a just-made sandwich in her hand. She held it up before her face, and from what he could tell, was just staring at it.

Suddenly, something that sounded like an angry sob rocked her body and she took a large bite. She gulped the whole thing down in less than a minute, like a wanderer in the desert would consume long-missed water.

He could hear her quick breathing even near the door, but he still couldn't tell if she sounded more angry or miserable.

"Damn you..." he heard her cursing, barely audible. "Damn you..."

As she picked up an apple, Shinji silently went back to their sleeping room.

The contented smile never left his face.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: between 11-14

Asuka is still refusing to eat properly and it's really starting to both anger and scare me.

I recently learned in my studies that the needs of the fetus are currently so marginal that her attempts are pretty much useless anyway, unless she really wants to take it with her in death. But of course, she didn't even listen. She's gotten so stubborn, it's almost even worse than it had been when we met. When we fought about it again this morning, I was very tempted to tell her that I know what she was doing at night. But the way she currently is, she might have reacted by forcing herself even more to suppress her desire to eat completely.

Still, though I was glad at first that she ate at least something, her nightly meals are hardly more than a drop in the bucket, giving us just a little more time. I just hope I can use it before it's too late. Even if not for her; eventually the child's needs will be bigger, and if this goes on like now much longer I don't see much hope for either of them

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"Come on, Asuka, this is getting really childish."

"So what?" she snapped at him, pushing the full plate away from her once more. "It's not my fault if you can't understand that I won't eat this!"

"Please..."

"No!"

Shinji let his head sink; tired, but not quite in defeat yet. He had enough. Even though he knew he couldn't physically harm her on purpose, he would have to force her out of her stubbornness. He had to. Otherwise he would let his new family down, like both of their fathers before him.

"Why did you lie?" he said quietly.

"What?"

"When it became apparent that we'd be the only ones left, I was glad that at least you were here with me. Not because I was with somebody, but because I was with you. And I believed you, when you said that you would feel the same way about me. But that was just a lie, wasn't it? It never mattered to you that it was me. You just didn't want to be alone; anybody would..."

A forceful slap, strong enough to make him tumble backwards, stopped his accusations. He stood still however, though he couldn't muster to look at her trembling figure.

"How... how dare you...?" she said with a cracking voice, forcing her still outstretched hand back down.

It hurt. The stinging cheek, he could barely feel, but his words had hurt him just as much as he knew they would hurt her. Only a few weeks ago, he would never have thought that it could come to this, but after all his desperate attempts to persuade her with love and care failed, it seemed that to hurt her was the only way to reach her. He couldn't back down now.

"If you really love me, why are you trying to take away what I love more than anything else?"

She cast her eye to the ground, away from him; her voice was filled with the pain from betrayal. "So you already love it mo..."

"I'm talking about you!" he almost screamed. "Can't you see that it will kill you if you go on like this?"

She didn't answer, kept her gaze away from him, but her mouth was shaking open and close, trying desperately to find words to counter. But such words just didn't exist.

"Didn't you say you never wanted to give up life again?" he went on.

That was it; the final straw. He sighed inwardly, the guilt hardly bearable, as he saw her reaching unconsciously to her left wrist with a trembling hand. "I- I did... didn't want... I..."

"So, do you really want to leave me here by myself..." he eventually continued and pushed the plate to her once more, "...or are you going to eat something?"

She glared at the meal with an expression, he could not interpret. Just when he thought she would gather her remaining pride and go, she slumped down on the chair and took her fork in her shaky hand. "This isn't fair..."

"No," he concurred, shaking his head. "No, it's not..."

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Hello," he greeted no one in particular, but everyone who could hear him, which might have been nobody or the whole humanity. That was hard to tell, when all he could see besides the giant white head that still kept its everlasting smile, was the red ocean. Shinji just hoped that somehow those he wanted to reach could listen. "It's... it's been a while since we were last here," he continued, glancing to Asuka who sat passively several meters away from him.

"I have some... big news, I guess. We – Asuka, she... she's pregnant." He sighed, casting his eyes down on the sand he was kneeling in. "This should be a happy moment, shouldn't it? 'A child: The greatest proof of the love between two people.' But Asuka doesn't seem to think that way. I'm not sure what exactly she sees in it. She fears it for some reason; enough that she tried to starve it.

"She asked me once why I didn't 'freak out' when I learned about it. And I've asked myself the same question several times. I can't say that I'm not afraid, quite the contrary. But whenever I thought about it I could never fear the child, I always feared *for* it. I have no idea how I'm supposed to be a good father. I have even less experience than most parents-to-be did, who asked themselves that question before me. And in times of doubt, there's no one to ask for advice, no one to assure me that I do everything right." He shook his head. "Us, bringing a new life into this devastated world seems so incredibly irresponsible. But now that it happened – I'm not sure why, but I can't fear it.

"Asuka though... I finally got her to eat, but it's a new fight each time. I'm just glad that this was the only way she thought of to..." He ended the sentence, choking on words like 'kill' or 'get rid of'. "Who knows what could have happened if she had tried to take some kind of drugs? Or if she had tried to hurt the child – and the with that most likely herself as well – physically?"

"But that's only a weak trade-off. It has been only a few weeks, but I already feel so worn out. How am I supposed to fight for several more months? Or even years, if she'll never accept it? I... I just don't know if I can make it." With a false feeling of hope, he looked over the ocean. "I think I would need your help now more than ever. Someone to convince her. Or give me some advice. At least some reassuring words..."

But the only answer the sea would give was the clashing of waves.

That moment, Shinji felt incredibly tired. Each clash added a weight to his shoulders. "Help me," he begged quietly, as his knees gave out and he slumped forward in the sand. "Please..."

His shaky fingers dug aimlessly into the sand, the grains rinsing between them, as he forced his hands closed. Panting, he held his head down, waiting for anyone or anything to tell him what to do, until two feet stopped next to him.

His wife looked down to him; pity and disgust fighting each other in her eyes. "Come on," she said coolly. "Let's get home."

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People often thought of the night as the time for horrors; scared by the unknown that might lurking in the darkness. But not everything looked better in the morning light.

Feathers were wildly scattered around, dried blood was sprayed on them and on the ground. Here and there were small heaps of flesh that had been ripped out during the fight by the large fangs.

Although she had witnessed worse massacres first hand, or maybe just because of that horrible memory, Asuka shuddered at the gruesome sight.

The night before, they had been woken by a loud crashing and wild noises from the chicken house. Armed with the next best 'weapons', which happened to be a rake and a shovel, they had run to prevent the worst, but they were already too late. When they had arrived, one of the hens was already dead, the rooster struggling futile for a few seconds more in the muzzle of the beast. In the dark, it had almost seem like a wolf, but Asuka guessed that it was actually just a wild dog, driven mad by hunger. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to scare it away so easily, leaving one of its prey behind.

"We... we'll have to see it from the positive side, I guess," Shinji mumbled, snapping her out of her thoughts. "We won't be waken up much too early anymore. Uhm... For a while..." He shot a glance to her slightly swollen belly. "Or... well... we won't have to do these checks anymore..." he hastily continued, not giving her any time to start an argument, and lay the egg he had held against the light aside.

But she didn't really feel like arguing now anyway. Despite his attempts to take it as a matter of fact, Asuka knew that he wasn't taking the incident very well.

Though a few scratches on his arm were the only physical injuries they had to suffer this time, it had shown more than ever that they needed a stronger defense than a weak fence that had even been knocked down in some places.

"And... we'll have something different to eat for once..."

That took her by surprise. "You want to eat...?"

"Well, you – I mean we could use a change. And it-it would be a waste I guess, if we wouldn't..."

His hollow voice pretty much matched her feelings. Of course, having chicken for dinner was a neat change after all the canned food, fish and what they'd managed to grow, but the thought of eating something you lived with for more than a year silenced her appetite, no matter how silly it seemed to be emotionally attached to a stupid fowl..

Angrily, she shook her head. It *was* just a stupid fowl and it *was* silly to reject this opportunity. The hormones must be messing with her again.

"Still, won't we have an egg-shortage or something?" she asked eventually to get her mind away from that topic. "Not that I'd mind..."

"I don't think so. We still have a good reserve that should be enough for a week or two," Shinji explained, shifting an egg before the light. "And it seems they left us a few little presents..." he concluded, laying it carefully to a second heap.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"What took you so long?" Asuka greeted him, as he returned to the hospital room.

"Sorry, I got the generator running as fast as I could," Shinji explained and pointed to the examination couch. "Why didn't you lay down already?"

The redhead grumbled something he couldn't understand, but complied anyway. Meanwhile, he was checking the instruments, trying to recall what he learned about their functionality. After he pressed a few buttons and the device hummed into life, he picked a belt and moved to pull it around Asuka's abdomen.

"Could you raise...? Thanks."

"What is that for?" she inquired as he fastened it around her, but he didn't answer. She hissed suddenly as he started to pour the transmission-gel on her stomach. "Shit!"

"Sorry, I forgot it. Is it too cold?"

"I'm not a sissy, I can take it. But you could have warned me!"

"Sorry," he repeated half-groaning, and picked up, what he figured was the transducer for the doppler. It didn't even take long to find...

"What's that sound?"

Shinji smiled brightly, listening to the fast throbbing that filled the room. "That's the heartbeat..."

"The...?" she began, a bit of wonder in her voice. "Isn't that a bit fast for a heartbeat?"

"No," he shook his head, glancing on the display. "155 beats per minute; that should be pretty normal."

"Hm, whatever," Asuka huffed and turned her head away from him. "Just hurry up with this."

Nodding, he secured the device in place with the belt, before he took the probe for the actual ultrasound. Asuka suppressed another hiss as he poured a bit more of the gel on her. "Okay, let's take a look."

"Whatever. Just hurry up already!"

Shinji sighed, then took a deep breath. With the heartbeats of his child echoing in the room, he felt his own quicken as he started to move the transducer. In just a few moments he would see it for the very first time. And despite her words, he noticed from the corner of his eyes that Asuka was shifting her view curiously to the screen as well.

The ultrasound-device was a classical two-dimensional model, and at first there just seemed to be nothing but noise, a wild mixture of black, white and blue. After a while he started to wonder if he was actually able to find something so small with his untrained eyes, but finally he could make out the first shapes. The prominent head came first into his view. Then the disproportional small body followed. And with that the four tiny limbs, still not fully developed, but already making little movements in the fluids that surrounded it. That was his child; their child.

"Shinji...?"

He hadn't realized until now that he had been staring at the monitor for at least a minute, not even noticing the tears of joy dwelling up in his eyes, nor the wide smile on his face. As he turned to Asuka, he couldn't even find the words to describe his feelings.

For some reason, she did her best not to meet his gaze and quickly averted her head to the side, but not quick enough that he didn't notice the glittering in her eyes.

"Can we go home now?" she asked softly. "I'm... I'm a bit hungry..."

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Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: 14-15 (now pretty much sure)

I often read and heard that it would be a crucial event to see your child for the first time on ultrasound. I must admit, I never really understood why. Every fetus looks more or less like the other – know one, know them all, that's how I had expect it to be

But it's one thing to know about it, really to see this small life – it was overwhelming. I knew what I could expect, I knew what it would most likely look like. And yet, I could hardly concentrate to check if everything was alright, instead of just staring in wonder at each little movement

I wonder what father thought, when he saw me for the first time. Did he feel the same vast happiness as I did today? Did he even see an ultrasound of me? It might sound strange, but somehow I think he did. Maybe not as intense, but it seems hard to believe, almost absurd to me right now, that there could be any parent-to-be who feels absolutely nothing in that moment, not even him

Fortunately, it seems like Asuka felt very much the same way as I did; otherwise I couldn't explain the sudden awakening of her mother instincts. Well, at least she's finally eating properly without much arguing. Of course she says it's just because she's sick of my nagging. But we both know that she just doesn't want to admit her fault that easily. Either way, I don't really care, as long as she does her best to take care of the two of them from now on.

And (to get at least a bit professional in this entry), the change fortunately didn't come too late. From what I can tell, the child's development wasn't dramatically affected by Asuka's "diet", but who knows how much longer it would have been that way...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Why did I have to come along?" Asuka whined. "It's much too early for this stuff anyway!"

Shinji sighed silently. "I just thought you would like to help choosing the stuff for the baby. We still have nothing; no toys, no clothes, no furniture..."

"Yes, I know! But it's still months till then! We don't even know the gender yet," she told him, shuffling behind. "And why should I care anyway?" she quickly added.

Too quickly in Shinji's opinion. Another sigh escaped him, as he rubbed his tired eyes. No matter what she said, he could see that she was actually quite eager to explore every single piece in the whole baby store. He just wished she would stop pretending that she didn't care at all; these unnecessary quarrels wore him out to no end.

"I know it's still a while," he said. "But we probably have to go more than once anyway, why not starting now? We don't have anymore work that we have to finish today, so..."

"Alright, alright," she interrupted him. "While we're here, I might as well look for some maternity clothes. Even my loosest and widest pants are getting too tight."

He chuckled softly to himself. If it hadn't been already, her pregnancy began to become quite obvious. But he was wise enough not to start about that topic on his own.

As Shinji looked around, he couldn't help but feel amazed and also a little overwhelmed at the size of the store. He had known that it was specialized for pregnancy and baby supply, but he didn't expect to find more of all that than he could have ever imagined. There was an area with furniture; cribs, changing tables, high-chairs, playpens. Several kinds of buggies and strollers. Lots of clothes for mother and child. Tons of toys in all shape and size. An incredible variation of bottles and (by now

expired) milk formula. And diapers as far as he could see.

He shook his head free from this unnecessary exaggeration. It would definitely be harder to choose from this range of goods than he thought, but he also knew he should be happy to have this much to choose from.

"Well, where should we...?" He trailed off as he noticed that he was no longer followed. "Asuka?"

He saw her then, standing motionless in the aisle, staring unblinkingly at the rack in front of her. Shinji already opened his mouth to ask, but as he followed her fixed gaze, it became unnecessary.

The row was filled with various dolls, which were smiling happily as they stared back at them with their lifeless eyes.

"Come," he said softly, tugging her gently away. "Why don't we look if we can find some nice clothes for you?"

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Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: 15-16

The pregnancy is going on without noticeable problems since Asuka's (still not official) change, but Asuka herself... I guess I really shouldn't have taken her with me and maybe she was right about it being too early as well. I should have known that this could happen. After her "encounter", she hardly spoke a word for the rest of the day and her newfound enthusiasm seemed gone for a while.

Of course it's not the dolls that pain her, but the memory they bring with them. I wouldn't be surprised if it was this fear that was a major factor for Asuka's former behavior, whether she realized it or not. We managed to sort out most of our problems from before Third Impact, but that doesn't mean we got rid of them completely. Being replaced by some replica had been a primal fear for her since her mother lost her mind.

But a baby is not a doll, it's a human being, an individual person that cannot simply replace another one.

I think Asuka has realized that by now. I just hope she won't forget it again.

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Whenever Asuka saw the self-made incubator, she felt the strange urge to look at the eggs; for some reason not wanting to miss the crucial event. If Shinji wasn't in sight, she always gave in to that urge, sometimes staring for several long minutes at the unmoving shells.

But as she passed by it that afternoon, Asuka noticed that they weren't that unmoving anymore. Wide eyed, she dropped the bucket and shovel she had been working with in the garden and crouched down in front of it to get a better sight. She knew it was silly, but her heart raced in anticipation of what was about to happen.

Glancing around, she bit her lip not to scream out for Shinji to come and watch, or she would reveal her embarrassing little secret. Though this secret wasn't even as bad as her other one.

Her hand wandered to her widening abdomen, where her child was growing.

'Damn that Shinji! Why did he have to make that ultrasound? Why did he have to show it to me?'

Of course she knew why he did. He knew exactly that it would become too hard for her to hate it any

longer when it had a 'face'. Up to then she had been able to pretend that it was some parasite, a tumor, something unwanted that was growing inside her. But now, she didn't even found herself able to call it a 'thing' anymore.

"What are you doing?"

She tensed in shock, the sudden sound of Shinji's voice startling her. Sheepishly, she looked up to him as he stepped next to her.

"Uhm, they... they're hatching..." she pointed out mumbling, immediately trying to hide the blush for being caught.

"Oh? They are?" he asked excited, leaning over her shoulder to get a look.

The first chick had already breached through the shell, the beak poking out while trying to free the rest. The two others worked hard to break through the cracks they've created.

Asuka felt quite uneasy, now that he was watching the birth over her shoulder, but she couldn't find herself to stand up and go and her mind couldn't come up with a good excuse either. The fact that he didn't even ask was actually the worst about it.

They stayed like that, not saying a word, until the silence was broken by the chirping of the three newborns.

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Asuka was bored. The day's work was long finished, the pregnancy wasn't causing any troubles right now (which would have been at least some distraction), and Shinji..

She rolled her head to the side, where he sat in the armchair, absorbed in some book. She pondered about it for a moment, then decided it was better than nothing, heaved herself from the couch and stepped over to him.

"What's that?" she asked, but already snatched the book away from him before he could answer. " 'Common and Foreign Baby Names' ?"

"Well, yeah, we never thought about a name yet..." he replied sheepishly, once his initial surprise wore off.

Asuka shifted her view between him and the book. "A name?"

"Yes. I mean it's not *that* long anymore..."

"Still a couple of months."

"Okay, okay," he admitted. "I'd just wanted to think about it. Or do you already have any ideas?"

"Not really..." she mumbled. "And why should I?"

For a second, she could have sworn that he rolled his eyes, but she didn't ask.

She sighed, scratching the back of her neck in thought. "Well, we could just name it after someone close to us. You know, if it's a girl, 'Kyoko' or 'Yui'. Or maybe 'Misato', 'Hikari' or... or 'Rei', if you insist," Asuka listed. "'Ryoji', if it's a boy. Definitely not 'Toji' or 'Kensuke'!" she concluded, bursting the last sentence out with a warning glare.

"No," he said calmly, shaking his head. "I never even want to think of him or her as a replacement for any of them. It wouldn't be fair to the child to load such a burden on its shoulders."

Asuka sighed heavily and shrugged. He had a good point, a very good one. Sooner or later they'd slip something like 'Little Misato is drinking her juice just like the other did with her beer!' and over time they might give the child the feeling it had to be just like his or her namesake.

But right now, she was out of ideas and that was starting to get on her nerves. Name-guessing wasn't really what she had in mind to kill her boredom. "Then make a better proposal if you want a name already. If you're really expecting me to waste my time with this: I don't want to bother thinking of a certain name before we even know the gender for sure anyway. Making two lists is double the amount to bicker about."

"Since when do you mind to bicker about something?" he muttered under his breath, but she still heard it.

"What was that?" she asked warningly.

"Eh... I just... How about a name that's suited for both genders?"

"Both genders? I don't think I can help with that. In Germany, a name had to be obviously male or female." She shook her head, groaning. "Can't we just let it be for now? We still have a lot of time to think about it anyway."

"Well, there actually is one I like," Shinji quietly proposed. "How... how about 'Aki'?"

" 'Aki'? 'Aki Ikari'? Doesn't sound very good," Asuka commented flatly. Then a small smile flickered quickly over her lips. " 'Aki Soryu' is much better..."

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"What is it?"

Asuka didn't answer him immediately, as she slowly raised from the patch she had been working in. The sensation had surprised her enough that it took her a bit to realize what it was.

"I felt it."

And with that, an overwhelming wave of happiness rushed over her. A wide smile spread over her face as she softly touched her abdomen where the fluttering had come from.

Occupied in her own small world, she only noticed from the corner of her eye that he stood up, dropping the cutter and stepped closer to her. "You felt...?"

"Here!" Without hesitation, she grabbed his hand with both of hers, laying it on her stomach and held it there. "Can you feel it too?" she asked excited.

Shinji seemed puzzled for a moment, but then he smiled as wide as she did, even though she wasn't sure if he really noticed the slight pressure.

"It's moving!" she exclaimed brightly, keeping his hand in place. "There! There it was again! Did you...?"

She cut herself off as she looked into his face, that was mirroring the happiness in her own. But strangely he kept his gaze fixed on her eyes instead of focusing on her stomach, where the unborn had make itself aware; looking like he was seeing the most enchanting thing in the world.

"What- what is it?" she eventually asked bemused, her smile falling a little.

His however, broadened even more as he leaned forward until their faces were only inches apart. "Got ya!"

At first, Asuka didn't understand. But then the red shot into her cheeks as she stared at him in shock. "That... I... This doesn't mean I changed my mind about this thing!" she tried to deny the excitement she had displayed so obviously just seconds ago, but to little avail.

His smile changed into a knowing smirk, as he put his arms around her. "Come on, Asuka. You've been playing this act for the last few weeks now. Do you really think I wouldn't notice?"

"You know, that's something I really hate about having someone who knows me so well," she muttered, falling into his embrace. "So, did you feel it?"

Shinji shook his head. "It's probably a bit too early for that anyway. But don't worry," he told her with a grin. "If Aki is anything like you, I'm going to feel the kicking soon enough."

"Hey!" But he already broke away from her and evaded the due nudge.

Of course he hadn't really anything to fear. Because that moment, they were both laughing together openly for the first time in several weeks.

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Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: 22-23

Well, we're nearing the end of the second trimester. I've read it's supposed to be the "easiest", but seeing that most of Asuka's diet, our constant fighting, and then her slow but definite change of mind all happened mostly during this one, I can hardly imagine the third trimester to be much worse. But of course the books were rather referring to the mother's condition.

Speaking of the condition; we did another check-up today. So far there still don't seem to be any complications; mother and child are doing fine. I'm starting to think Aki really wants to make a surprise about his or her gender. Somehow there's always a leg blocking the sight to the 'critical region' whenever we're doing an ultrasound or the picture is just too blurry for me to make a guess.

Asuka is quite sure that it'll be a girl – "woman's intuition", as she says. I'm a little tempted to counter with "man's intuition", but aside from that she would just laugh at me, I actually have no idea. I don't really mind if it's going to be a girl or a boy. I have no experience at raising a child at all, so it doesn't matter if I have to learn how to play dressing up or how to teach sports. If it's going to be a girl following Asuka's footsteps, I'll probably end up doing both anyway.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Oh God, Shinji!" Asuka moaned in delight. "You're really the best I ever had!"

"Wasn't I also the only one you ever had?"

"Yes, but – ooohh – now I remember why I fell in love with you!"

Shinji was taken aback. "I thought you loved me long before that first time..."

"Ah, you know how I mean it. Uhh, don't- don't ever stop!"

"Maybe we should change positions a little?" he asked concerned, slowing down a bit. "I don't think the baby is harmed this way, but – isn't it a bit uncomfortable?"

She shook her head as wild as she could in her current posture. "It feels much too good to be

uncomfortable!"

"But..."

"I swear if you're not going to continue, I'll... I'll... Ah, just take care of the other foot now too."

She could hear Shinji sighing, but he complied anyway. It had been him who offered to give her feet a massage, when she had complained about how much they bothered her again, but he obviously hadn't expected that she'd take that offer right on the spot. Now she was lying face down, with her upper body bent over the kitchen table, her knees resting on her chair. Shinji sat on the floor, his hands working to ease her feet. It might not have been the most comfortable position for this, but she still felt like slowly drifting to heaven.

After what could have been minutes or hours, however, he called her back.

"Hey, Asuka...?"

She cracked her eyes open. "Hmm?"

"I... I've been thinking about the future..." he said, somewhat distant.

"The future?" The way he had said it, he seemed strangely serious suddenly.

"I mean... it is quite likely that we won't live as long as our child. And then... we- we would leave it all alone..."

Asuka sighed, guessing where this would lead. "If you're suggesting to repopulate the world, let me get through this pregnancy first, 'kay?'"

Shinji had almost stopped the massage by now, only stroking her foot absently with his thumb. "I was more talking about... well, if... if we're going to have more children... we would have a problem if we would let them 'repopulating the world'..."

Asuka's face became serious. "Incest..."

Of course, she had thought of this possibility as well, but always immediately pushed it back in her mind as something she could deal with when she had to. They couldn't even be sure that this child would be healthy, or if they would ever have more than this one. And even if they would eventually have a girl and a boy, it would still be years until they would be old enough that their hormones would give their parents trouble.

The question of moral wasn't even the biggest problem with it. After all, morals died in the Third Impact and it was up to Shinji and her which of them they wanted to keep. Of course it would be more than awkward for them to see their children being lovers, but the more serious issue with incest were the hereditary defects. Genes would degenerate, creating a high risk of causing the children to be disabled; mentally, physically or both. Such children would never be able to survive on their own in such a hostile world.

"Well, yeah..." he muttered. "I-I was thinking; if I would concentrate my studies on artificial insemination and such. Maybe if we find good sperm-samples, we might actually be able to build up a working society after all."

"Aside from the big 'maybe' and 'might' in there, do you really think you could do that?"

"I have quite a few years until then. I hope enough to learn everything I need to know for that."

"I don't know... It's hard enough as it is. We're working so much just to survive, and it will be even more once we have to take care of the baby – and if I learned something out of the books, it's that you'll never be prepared enough for everything that comes with it. I don't really see us 'building up a society'"

if we can barely manage to keep three people alive." She sighed, closing her eyes. "Let's think about that when the time comes, okay?"

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

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Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: 29-30

We had a false alarm today. And I can't express how relieved I am that it was just that. A baby might have a chance of survival at this stage – but under the condition that it would get full medical treatment, and as much as I want to, I seriously doubt I could provide that.

I think the birthing curses we started to do two weeks ago made Asuka a bit of a hypochondriac and she mistook the symptoms because of that. Strangely enough, she's only like that when it might affect the child. When it comes to other pregnancy discomforts, she either just loudly complains about them or keeps them to herself until I ask her if she's alright, but she is never anxious about them. But then again, she's Asuka...

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Shinji?" Asuka called him. She stood half-dressed in front of the wardrobe's mirror, the clothes, she intended to wear that day in her hand. "Do you think I'm too fat?"

At first, he just blinked at her question. He had still been fighting the sleep, but now he was wide awake. "I thought that was just a cliché..." he muttered under his breath, as he forced himself to sit up.

"What?"

"Eh... N-nothing," he quickly added. Standing up from the bed, he went over to her, embracing her from behind. "Of course I don't think you're fat. Why should I?"

"Really? I don't know," Asuka said, sounding a bit sad. "It's just..." She didn't finish the sentence.

"I love you," he assured, guessing what she feared – for whatever reason. "And your good looks have never been the most important reason for that. Though they were a neat bonus, of course..."

"Hentai..." She glared at him with a smirk.

He chuckled shortly, kissing her cheek while gently running his hand over her belly. "In barely a month you will give birth to our child. Do you really expected me to love you any less now just because of this little side effect? On the contrary, I think I love you now more than I ever did."

"Oh, now you're really getting cheesy," Asuka noticed in a warning tone.

"Sorry," he muttered, sighing. As if it wasn't hard enough to satisfy the 'normal' Asuka, telling one with constant mood changes what she wants to hear seemed like an impossible task. How could he have ever thought there wouldn't be much difference? "But cheesy or not, I still don't think your beauty has diminished at all."

That was the truth, not even exaggerated. She seemed to be glowing a bit more every day, the closer the due date came.

However, Asuka just shrugged at the compliment. "Well, that's nice and all, but I still think these pants

don't fit me anymore. Damn, and it was one of my favorites." She turned, raising a brow. "So would you stop with this stupid, sappy stuff and give me the red dungarees now?"

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Pregnancy Log

Estimated week: 38-39

Another "probably last" check-up today, and aside from the feeling I have that Aki might be a little smaller than the average, there are still seem to be no critical problems. But though this could actually ease the birth a little, it doesn't really calm me. The closer the estimated day comes, the more afraid I get of the possibilities. There's so much that could go wrong. I don't even know how I should handle the birth. Usually, there would be a whole team – doctor, nurse, midwife – that can take care of the child, while others, including the father, can be there for the mother. But I will have to make sure by myself that both are okay, before, during and even more so after the birth.

However, that isn't what scares me most. All the time I have studied about regular births, but I didn't think about the special, problematic situation we're in. Be it Asuka's youth, that it'll be her first, the lack of educated personal, or mostly my incapability to react properly in a critical situation. The necessity for a C-section isn't that rare, and I don't see how I should do that. For example, the mother being as young as Asuka, she might not reach a necessary dilation, or the umbilical cord wrapping around Aki's neck, or if s/he's just lying wrong, or...The more I learn, the more I fear I didn't learn enough. And look at this thing. It was supposed to be a log of the data I'd might need, but how am I supposed to filter out any crucial information between all my ramblings and thoughts? I don't know how I'm supposed to do this...

-Hey, Baka! Thought I didn't know about your little diary? Well, I do now. You fell asleep next to it, after studying – again – until 2 o'clock in the morning.

Anyway, stop worrying so damn much. I'm fine. And I'm sure – no, I know Aki is fine too. You really should stop to be so pessimistic. We have come so far, mastered so many obstacles in our lives. We will live through this as well. All three of us.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

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Asuka shortly winced in surprise as a loud thunder rolled again, before she resumed her view out of the window, where her drenched husband was busy securing the garden from the storm. He had insisted to do it alone, but that didn't mean she liked it – and if it wasn't for her current state, she wouldn't have taken it.

She shuddered, brushing over her wide belly. "I just hope you're not thinking of something about 'born in a stormy night'."

Sighing, she pried herself away from the window and went back to the bed. It took her a bit, but eventually she managed to sit down on it, leaning against the headboard. She didn't even bother trying to sleep now. Again, her hand went down where their child was growing.

Shinji had said it could be any time now. And with each passing day, they became more anxious and full of anticipation. Maybe in just a few hours, there would be this new little life that they had to take care of.

They were prepared as good as they were able to; the child's room was waiting for its new inhabitant,

rompers and other clothes in various sizes in the wardrobe, dozens of diapers ready for use, and lots of toys that wanted to be played with. The only thing missing was the baby.

"Aki..." the soon-to-be mother whispered, her gaze like her thoughts focused on the being inside her. "I know, we didn't really had a good start." She stopped, giving a bitter snort.

"Okay, that's a big understatement," she added muttering. "I... I was afraid, I guess. Afraid of that thing inside me. That it would take Shinji away from me. That it would... hurt me. But that was before I knew that it was you."

"That sounds silly, doesn't it?" she mused. "Well, it probably is."

"I'm sorry," she continued eventually after a short break. "I know, that is hardly enough to excuse how I acted then, but... but I'm afraid that is all I can do right now. But I'll do my best to make it up to you once you're here. Once I can hold you in my arms. Once I can show you how much you really mean to me." She smiled a little, feeling a light kick from her daughter, not sure whether she wanted to interpret it as a 'Damn right!' or a 'Now shut up with that nonsense and let me sleep!'

But the smile dropped as fast as it came and her face got serious again. "I guess I'll never be the best mother ever, as you would deserve it. But I promise, I'll make it up to you." A slight grin played around her lips once more. "Just be a little easy on me, okay?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Asuka, what are you doing?"

"Repairing the fence, if you can't see..."

Shinji rolled his eyes. Sure enough he could see that she was hammering the nails to fixate a replacement for a broken plank – and her ninth-month-belly *of course* not getting in the way at all. "Why don't you just let me do it?" he asked gently, placing his hands on her shoulders. "You should go back in and..."

"Rest? No way! I've rested more than enough the last weeks. And you already have a lot to do to fix everything." She nodded to the mess that was their garden now, where he had been busy with the cleanup efforts until he had heard her working. "That storm had been the worst we had for a while. So how about just being grateful that your generous wife is helping you?"

"Asuka, you need your rest," he tried once more. "Believe me, you will be busy enough once Aki is here."

"So will you. And I'm tired of sitting and lying around, just waiting. So either you let me handle this, or I'll go up and check if the solar panels and the roof are okay."

His shoulders sagged in defeat. It was obvious that she wouldn't let herself being persuaded without a big fight that he didn't want to risk. "And it hasn't even been two hours that you were complaining about your back," he muttered under his breath as he turned to leave.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," he sighed. "Just don't overdo it, okay?"

But his last words were already drowned in the loud blows of the hammer. Sighing once more he started to go back to his work, until..

"Ouch!"

Her scream and the sound of the hammer falling down, caused him to turn on his heel. "What is it? Did you hit yourself?"

He could have slapped himself for that stupid question the instant as he saw her leaning forward against the fence, holding her stomach.

"No, idiot!" she hissed, grimacing. "Jus-just because you would..." Instead of finishing the sentence, she inhaled sharply, obviously trying to subside the pain. Panting, she looked him in the eyes. "It's time," she stated whispering.

-x-

It's time.

Never before had these words a bigger impact on Shinji Ikari. Thunderstruck, he gaped at her for a while, until his higher brain functions finally snapped back into action.

After a short, definite answer at his question if she was sure after just one contraction, he rushed inside, got the car keys, hurried back out to lead her to the pick-up and help her in – in less than thirty seconds.

It wasn't until he tried to insert the key that he noticed how much his hands shook.

'Okay, Shinji, calm down!' he reminded himself and took a deep breath. 'We have more than enough time. And it's probably just another false alarm anyway.'

As his hands slightly stopping to tremble, he inserted the key, started the engine and drove off. His nervousness was still not gone entirely though, which soon became apparent in his way of driving through the empty streets.

"Watch out!" Asuka screamed as he almost lost control over the vehicle and nearly crashed against one of the broken-down cars on the sidewalk.

"Sorry..."

"Don't tell me you're sorry, watch out that you don't get us killed! Why do we need to go there anyway? People got their children at home even when there was still qualified personnel at the hospitals!"

"I-I thought it was better in case I need the instruments."

"Couldn't you have gotten them home?!"

"Not everything. I need to make another check on the ultrasound to see if everything is alright; if Aki's in the right position and such."

"Can't you just feel that?"

"Theoretically yes, but I would have had to learn and practice it, and..."

"Then why didn't you?!"

"...And I don't think I could tell as precise anyway. Besides, I don't see why it's so bad. We should have more than enough time to get there. It'll most likely take several more hours until the birth."

"Hours?! I'm going to have these – AH! – the... these stupid contractions for several more HOURS?!"

"Well..." he started, but looking over into her glaring eyes he quickly trailed off, trying to think of something to avoid the probably most honest answer. "W-well, not if it's just another false..."

"IT'S NOT A FALSE ALARM!" Asuka yelled at him, before he could finish his sentence. Obviously it hadn't been a good way to change the topic after all.

Shinji let out a small sigh. "But... but how can you be so sure after only one – or two now – contractions?"

"Who said it was the first one?"

"They already started and you didn't tell me?" Now it was Shinji's turn to get louder. "You even wanted to continue working?!"

"GET YOUR EYES ON THE STREET!" she reminded him fiercely as they barely managed to avoid a large fragment of a ruined building that blocked a large part of the street. "You just thought yourself that it was just another false alarm, and so did I. But now..." The aggression faded out of her. "It-it's different. I can feel it."

Shinji's hands clutched around the steering wheel as he released a sharp breath. "O-okay then... did you check how close they are?" He could sense her shaking her head and glanced to the watch he had been wearing lately, mostly just for this purpose. "Uh, let's see, the last one was about a minute ago. Just tell me when the next comes, okay?"

"Oh, you can be *damn* sure I'll let you know some way!"

He didn't want to heat the atmosphere between them any more than it already was in this situation with a wrong answer, so he was quite relieved that the hospital came in sight that moment. Since he didn't have to bother about it, he parked the car just in front of the entrance. As always lately, it took a while to get Asuka out and even longer to help her to the room where they had done the ultrasounds. But eventually she lay on the examination couch, her breathing already deepened by now.

"Okay, it's been about four minutes now," Shinji said, failing at his attempt not to show any sign of nervousness as he pulled the watch off his arm and laid it on her open palm, closing her hand around it with both of his. "I don't think it'll take that long that I miss the next one, but just in case..."

"What?" she started already when he quickly kissed her forehead and stood up. "W-where are you going now!?"

"I'll be right back," he assured, already almost at the door. "I just have to start the generator."

"So you're leaving me alone NOW!?"

The angry, but mostly scared look in her eyes reminded him why he had feared this moment so much. Other's were supposed to take care of these things now, not him. He should only take care of her.

"I'll be right back," he promised once more and ran as fast as his feet carried him out of the room and down to the basement.

-x-x-

Even though it had been probably only one or two minutes maximum, it seemed to her like an eternity until he finally returned, rubbing his arm.

"What happened?"

"Took a turn to fast and crashed against the wall," Shinji muttered grimacing.

She tried to laugh at him, but in that moment another contraction hit her; the pain turning her grin into a grimace for the seemingly endless seconds it lasted. So instead, she poured as much sarcasm as she could muster in her voice. "Oh, poor Shinji is in so much horrible, horrible pain. How am I supposed to ever be able to relate to that?"

"Sorry," he said, his panting calming down slowly. "I tried to be as fast as I could."

"Well, not fast enough!" she yelled and nodded her head down to her legs, where a fluid trickled down into a small puddle on the floor.

"Shit."

"No, it's not, idiot! Don't tell me I have to trust someone to help me giving birth to my child who can't even tell the difference between shit and amniotic fluids?"

Shinji seemed to ignore her taunt, but that didn't stop him from looking like he wasn't quite sure what to do next. "Eh, that... just now – how long was it?"

"I dunno; five, maybe six minutes I guess. Is that still important now? She's coming either way."

"Five or six...? Already?" he muttered as if he didn't listen to her any further. "How long exactly did you have these contractions already?"

"Does it matter?!" she cursed at him, showing him clearly that she didn't want to elaborate this any further. His accusations were the last thing she needed now.

He obviously got the hint and didn't reply, but the look he gave her hit Asuka more than anything he could have said.

The check up had long become a routine procedure. At first it had been more than awkward for both of them to have Shinji checking on her most intimate parts – something she never liked much with professional gynecologists either – even though they had been lovers for quite a while. By now it wasn't really a problem for her anymore, especially not in that moment when there was much more on her mind. She didn't even pay much attention as he quickly went through the tests; just catching that he was relieved that Aki was obviously in the right position, head first.

But the loud gasp that escaped him when he wanted to check the dilation startled her. "T-that's more than seven – almost eight centimeters already!"

"Well, seems like she's in quite a hurry to meet her parents..." Asuka commented with a weak grin.

Though like herself, Shinji didn't really seem very amused by the joke. She could tell that this progress made him incredibly nervous, but did he think it was any different to her? The prospect of giving birth probably anytime now was more thrilling and terrifying at the same time than anything ever before..

"AAAHH!"

...And the contractions rather strengthened the latter. "D-damn! Can't you give me a painkiller? That – whatever it was called!"

"An epidural? I- I don't know Asuka, do you feel that's necessary? It would propose a lot of additional risks, even if I could get it right, which is already more than questionable."

"You endure this pain and then talk again about taking risks!" she cursed him loudly. "To hell with your fear of anesthetics!"

"And what if I give you a too high dosage? You wouldn't be able to push properly when your lower body is completely numb! Or what if I accidentally hurt your spine?"

"Then give me something else!"

Her eyes, that had been shut in pain, opened wide as she felt his warm hand getting hold of hers.

"I'm afraid that's all I can give you right now," Shinji told her, an attempt of a reassuring smile on his lips, that she tried to return as his thumb flickered over the ring he had given her that day at the beach.

But it quickly drowned again in the pain inside of her.

She could hear him wincing as she squeezed his hand on reflex. "A-Asuka, you need to remember the breathing-techniques we practiced. That's supposed to ease the pain a bit."

"Stupid breathing! All we had for reference were some stupid movies!" she cursed, but complied anyway – and indeed, the pain subsided slowly, though she rather blamed it on the ending of the contraction.

Shinji's look was full of worry and guilt. "I could look if I find a birthing ball or something. I didn't do much research on water birth, but there was a tube here. We- we could try anyway! Damn, I knew I should have-"

"No!" Almost unconsciously, she had squeezed his hand harder. As much as she would like to deny it, she was scared to no end. She didn't want him to leave and she didn't dare to move a bit.

"I'm... I can take it! It's not that bad, actually," she said assuring, but her watering eyes spoke the truth long before the next contraction came and the inevitable scourge of pain shot through her. "Shit! And I thought being massacred by the EVAs had been bad!"

"Asuka," he said calmly; his free hand that was caressing her hair having a much welcomed soothing effect on her. "I-I know this isn't easy for you, but even though you're already pretty far, it's still probably going to take quite a while. Shouldn't we get you at least a bit more comfortable?"

Asuka bit her lip; her mind racing whether to listen to her reason or her fears. But as she looked in his concerned eyes, she shook her head with a weak smile. "I have everything here to be comfortable."

-x-x-

In hindsight, neither of them would remember whether the time seemed to race or crawl slowly over the following hours. When he didn't check on her condition, Shinji tried his best to cheer Asuka on, telling her how good she was doing and to remind her of the breathing techniques as well as to distract her with almost silly attempts of conversation; like the idea to acquire some of the neighbor grounds to their own to expand the garden, or how long it had been since they've went to the beach, he even talked about the weather. As much as she honored his attempts, Asuka barely listened to him. The contractions came a little faster and stayed a little longer with each time – it seemed like a wonder that Shinji's hand didn't brake under the pressure she passed on to him.

There was one topic that wasn't really touched the whole time though, despite becoming more evident in both of their minds with each minute: Anytime now, they would be parents. Of course, they had known for months that it would happen, they had seen it, they had felt it – but now, it would really happen, now it would become real. And despite all the preparations, books and even videos in the last months, they still had no idea what they were really supposed to do; how they could actually take care of a child.

Asuka was much too occupied to be worried though. The more time passed, the more she wished she had taken Shinji's offers before; every second she doubted more that she could take any longer to lie writhing and sweating on that couch, barely able to feel anything else but pain. She had even considered to ask him for an attempt at a C-section, but she already knew that he would just do his usual lame excusing that he didn't feel able to do any kind of surgery. But she didn't care about that anymore, she just wanted this to be over.

The more so she welcomed the feeling that eventually washed through her, and it didn't even matter if it was just a figment of her clouded mind. It *had* to be the right time.

"Shinji? I'm... I'm starting to push now!"

"Uhm, o-okay..." he stammered surprised at her announcement and reluctantly stood up. "Wait! Just let

me check how far..."

"I don't give a damn!" she cursed at him. "I'm going to push now!" And along with the next contraction, she applied as much pressure as she could muster downwards. "AAAAAHHH-shit! Okay, okay, it's too early after all..."

"No! No..." declined Shinji, who had assumed his position at the couch's end by now. "It-it's alright! K-keep going!"

"But... but it hurts..." she said through clenched teeth. "E-even more..."

"I... uhm..." When he was fumbling for words, contemplating whether to be honest or not, was seldom a good sign. "It-it's alright, really."

"Yeah, sure..."

He breathed heavily. "Whether you believe me or not, it doesn't matter. There's no return now." As he looked up into her eyes, there was a determined look in his that he rarely showed. "You can do this, Asuka, I know you can!"

But his encouraging words were quickly forgotten. She did her best, working harder than ever before to push along the agonizing contractions, but her strength was wearing out more and more. The long, wearing hours of being in labor had cost her more than she had expected.

Shinji was too much absorbed by the happenings to be a big help either and that hurt her most, even though she had known that it would be like this. He should just be there for her now, holding her hand and soothing her or give encouraging words. Though he was right at her side, she couldn't remember the last time she had felt so alone like she did now.

Driven by sheer willpower, she fought on; bringing up everything she had to give birth to her child; her mind only focused on that thought. Her child. Her family. And once this was over, they would live on happily ever after.

But deep inside, she knew that that was just a silly illusion. The overwhelming pain made it more and more apparent to her that something would be missing in that picture of a perfect world.

"Shinji...?" she called him, merely whispering. "Promise me... that... you'll take good care of her..."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, obviously only listening partly to what she was saying; looking up to her only for a second, before focusing on his task again.

"It hurts, Shinji... it hurts so much," she said in such a weak tone that it did catch his attention this time. "I don't think this is right... I-I think I'm..."

"Don't talk like that! Please... it will be alright, believe me!" he tried to comfort her, but he was too frantic himself for it to be very effective. "The... the head is almost out! Just a little further!"

Tears streamed out her eyes as she summoned every bit of energy left in her to push a last time, when another wave of pain shot through her body. But then, she weakly smiled...

...as a loud crying filled the room.

"Asuka! It's a girl!" she heard him exclaiming in almost hysterical joy. "It's really a girl!"

As she looked at her little family through half-closed eyes, she couldn't see anything but the blurred form of her husband and her livid daughter in his arms. And yet, she felt an unbelievable happiness inside.

'Of course. That must be what it's really like to die...'

"Asuka?" His voice carried a hint of worry now, but she could only barley see him turning to her anymore. "What...?"

"Take... care..."

"Asuka? ASUKA?"

Shinji's frightened screams of her name and the lively cries of the little being she had just given birth to were the last things she heard as she closed her eyes.

Her smile never left her face.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji didn't know how long he stood beside the bed with the silent form, just watching her. At first his mind had been too occupied to really comprehend what had happened, but now the tears wouldn't stop.

Carefully he reached out for her hand. It felt so soft, so vulnerable in his. She looked so peaceful in her sleep. Just like her mother always did.

Her mother..

Shinji's smile faded as he turned away from the crib to the bed next to it, where he had placed Asuka after it happened. The same fingers that just caressed the warm hand of their newborn daughter now closed around his wife's.

He wanted to be angry at her. It wasn't fair. Didn't she know that it was already hard enough for him? How could she just leave him to take care of everything?

But he couldn't be angry. Not now and the way he felt now, never again.

After wiping his tears away, he leaned down, just wanting to kiss her one last time..

"Nnn..."

...before her eyes fluttered open.

"Sh-Shinji...?"

"Yes," he laughed softly. "Who else would dare wake you up like this?"

"Wake?" she asked wearily. "But... I-I'm not...?"

Shinji shook his head. "No. But you sure managed to scare me, when you passed out. I guess the pain was a bit too much for you after all. And that combined with the blood loss..."

"I just passed out...?" she mused, her voice too tired to show any sign of embarrassment. But then suddenly bolted up. "Where's...?"

"Shh," Shinji calmed her and led her to lie down again. "She's asleep." He pointed to the crib besides him.

"Is she...?"

He nodded, anticipating her question. "As I guessed, she's a little small for her age, but otherwise, she's perfectly fine as far as I can tell. You were the one who got me worried. You know, you gave me quite some trouble, having to see if both of you are okay without neglecting the other."

Asuka didn't really seem to care much about feeling guilty now, keeping her gaze fixed on the small bed. "Can I... hold her?"

"I don't know," Shinji muttered hesitatingly, feeling torn between mother and child. "It took me a while till I got her to sleep..."

"Shinji, please..."

He sighed, but nodded anyway. He had no chance to deny her anything when she asked him in this tone, and especially not that time.

Even though he was careful when he lifted his daughter out of her bed, he didn't succeed in letting her sleep. Surprisingly, she didn't start to cry again, maybe still too exhausted to make more than a low whimpering.

Asuka had set up in the bed, resting her back at the pillow against the headboard. With trembling hands, she received their child from him; nestling the infant in her arms. For some reason, the newborn didn't seem to be bothered by the interruption of her sleep at all, as two pairs of tired, but sparkling blue eyes looked at each other. A bright smile was returned by a shaky one. Asuka failed to hold back the tears of joy any longer, caressing her daughter's cheek carefully with her finger.

"Hello, my little Aki," she said, her voice cracking under the overwhelming feelings. "Welcome to our world..."

Chapter VII: The 15th

It was still an unusual sight in her eyes. Asuka and Shinji clinging onto each other. Asuka and Shinji kissing. Asuka and Shinji going together into her room at night. Asuka sitting on Shinji's lap during breakfast while they were touching the other more often than the food.

"To think that they've used to bicker like a married couple, and now that they *are*, they're all over each other like newfound lovers..." Misato mumbled into her half-drained morning beer. It was still clearly enough to remind her two charges that they weren't alone as they apparently had forgotten.

Reluctantly, Asuka pried her lips off of Shinji's. "Well, being a hormone-driven teenager again sure helps," she declared.

"Misato, you have to understand," Shinji helped her. "It took us quite a while to get through that barrier. But I was all the more glad when we could look at or touch each other no matter where without having to feel ashamed," he explained and glanced at the redhead in his arms, smirking. "Or having to fear for my life..."

"Hey!" Asuka protested playfully and shifted on his lap to give him a light bonk on the head. "Always the same hentai," she said, turning her face away from him, pouting.

Instead of the familiar apologizing, he just chuckled as if to concur and moved his mouth close to her ear, though speaking loud enough for Misato to hear. "Remember the time when we used to run around completely naked the whole day?"

Asuka instantly blushed furiously, her sly grin matching his as she giggled like – well, like an embarrassed schoolgirl.

Misato shook her head. To see her two charges in a way maturing several years over night, but on the outside still looking just like the two teenagers she had come to know so well in the last few months – and then again acting more like normal teenagers than they ever had before. If – yes, if it wasn't for that overshadowing sadness in their eyes that would return whenever these moments faded. This was still all so complicated.

Continuing to watch them from behind her can of Yebisu, her mind drifted back to that evening several days ago when this chaos in her mind really started to whirl.

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"Don't you want to go after her?"

Shinji shook his head, sadly smiling as he turned around and stepped back to the table. "You know Asuka. Over time she was able to get over her past, but it's still hard for her to share what is troubling her in the present. Too much pressure would just cause her to block us out, saying she's fine." He sighed as he slumped back on the chair, his voice filling with remorse. "Aki's loss was already hard enough to cope with. I guess me vanishing in the EVA was just too much for her."

"Aki, hm?" she repeated the name softly, a careful smile on her lips. "It's a little hard to picture the two of you as parents."

"It was a little surprise for us as well. But I think we became accustomed rather quickly. And Aki surely helped us with that as well."

"How so?"

"Well, she went quite easy on us. She was so lively, always so full of energy, maybe even more than her mother if that's possible. Sure, there were some moments where she didn't feel well, and if she really wanted to she could get cranky and demanding. We could hardly spoil her, but in a way we gave her the whole world." He chuckled at that; a hollow laugh that soon turned into a sobbed breath. "But... but most of the time she... she just smiled and laughed. She had... she had such a beautiful laugh." He interrupted himself, desperate for the need to calm down. Taking a deep breath, he wiped the tear that was threatening to run down his cheek away. "Sorry."

"No, it-it's okay," she said, but she knew that it didn't even sound halfway as assuring as she wanted. It was not okay. She might have never got to know Aki, and up to a few minutes the lone thought of the sheer possibility of her existence wouldn't have crossed her mind. But this boy, her father, had grown close to Misato. Sure, he had some harsh low points before. But seeing him mourning the loss of his child was absolutely devastating.

"Asuka..." he eventually continued, "Asuka was the best mother a child could wish for. Of course I loved Aki with all my heart, but there was a bond between those two that not even I could fully comprehend. It was a hard fight for Asuka to accept that she was going to have a child. The more she... well, 'cherished her victory' afterwards. But the more it's hurting her now."

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'It's hurting her... But even if she hates to do it, as Shinji said, she surely does her best to hide it,' Misato mused, back in the present. *'If I wouldn't know, I probably wouldn't be able to see it. If the aftermath of the 14th hadn't happened, would I have ever noticed?'* A guilty thought suddenly hit her. *'Could it be that I have missed their pain already before? Given their past...'*

She looked down, ashamed at her realization. *'No. I **did** notice. I guess it was just more convenient to go on without showing it. Not having to face the confrontations.'* Her stern view returned to the playful couple that seemed busy with a tickling match. *'Is it that what you are doing now?'*

"Ah, shit! We're late!"

Asuka's yell snapped Misato out of her thoughts, startling her enough that she almost spilled her beer.

"I have to make myself ready to get to NERV as well," she announced, slowly rising from her chair in contrast to the "children" who had hectically jumped off theirs, grabbing their satchels and running for the exit. "I can drop you off on the way."

The two halted midway to the door. "Well..."

"No protest!" She warned, walking towards them. "Been there already or not, it would get suspicious if you'd always come too late to school."

"Can I at least drive?" Asuka whined, earning a disapproving glare from Misato. "Hey, you know I can!"

"My Alpine is no pick-up!"

The argument went on as usual while last preparations were made and shoes put on. While the subjects have changed a little, it was almost as every other normal day before. As if Misato had never learned about Third Impact, time-travel or a girl named Aki.

Just as the door closed shut behind them, the telephone began to ring. Since no one was there to pick it up after the third sound, the answering machine kicked in...

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Outside the city, in a small, lone phone booth, Kaji hung up the receiver. He had said what he had to say. It would have to be sufficient.

"My last assignment," he muttered, as he stared at the document in his hand. A wide smirk spread on his face. "Just as predicted."

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Hikari couldn't believe it. The declared love of her life had been back for more than a week and not only Asuka still hadn't made any move on him, she didn't even seem to think about it.

"Huh?" was the only answer she got when she asked about it as the two of them went through the city on their way home.

"Cooking you know? He's always making your lunches, why don't you make a special one for him for a change? 'The way to a man's heart is through his stomach', they say."

She could already hear the complaints that Shinji wasn't like Toji the food-annihilator and so on, but none of that came.

"If you say so..."

That was the last straw for the class rep. "Oh, come on, Asuka! If you love someone you have to tell him!"

Asuka's smirking glance that was directed at her quickly reminded Hikari of the flaw in her argument.

"Well, that's different," she defended herself blushing. "We're not constantly at the brink of death... At least not like you... Not anymore at least..."

Asuka's grin, however, didn't falter and Hikari knew better than to try making up further excuses that would fall on deaf ears. After a while though, the curiosity started nagging on her again.

"Seriously, when are you going to tell him?"

"Eventually..."

The brunette was about to groan in frustration, but held it in as she realized that they were passing a toy store. "Ah, I almost forgot! I wanted to look for a present for Nozomi's birthday next week! Would you mind to wait a moment for me?"

Asuka huffed as her gaze wandered over the large window where various toys were presented in several rows. "Who would want such childish things?"

"Well, my little sister for example. Who happens to be a... Asuka?"

Hikari trailed off as she noticed that the redhead was no longer regarding the expositions with disgust, but rather looked like she had seen a ghost.

She was staring at a plain rag doll with fuzzy red hair that was sitting in the display. Hikari heard her unconsciously muttering something, but couldn't really make it out. 'Ki...ko?'

Wasn't her mother's name something like that? She had seen it once on some school papers. Keiko...? No, Kyoko was it. But no, why would she call her mother's name at the sight of a doll? Maybe it was the doll's or the brand's name?

"Everything alright?" Hikari asked concerned, causing Asuka to snap out of her trance.

"Y-yeah. Just hurry up!"

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'Just what had gotten into him to do such thing?' That was the question that kept repeating in Misato's head as she was led to the isolation wards by the two agents that had already confiscated her gun and ID. To them, she tried to appear calm and professional, but inside she was in turmoil.

'He knows where this will get him. Ikari can't pretend not to see any longer and with SEELE already on his trails, it's only a question of who will get him first. That idiot!'

But it wasn't just her worry for him that troubled her. Once again her thoughts went back on her time-traveling charges, but unlike before it was much less compassionate. *'Why didn't they tell me? Why didn't they tell **him**?' She inwardly shook her head, feeling a bit guilty for accusing them without knowing the whole picture. 'Maybe that means everything will be alright with him. Or maybe... he **is** an idiot after all...'*

"Thanks again for your cooperation," one of her guards said as she entered the cell that would hold her as long as "the matter needed to be solved".

Then, darkness surrounded her.

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Shinji silently walked next to Asuka, glancing over to her every so often in attempt to read her face. It was rather unusual to hear only the tapping of their plugsuit-clad feet echoing in the empty halls as they went through the corridors of the NERV Headquarters on their way to their next test.

They didn't have to hide their relationship at home anymore and they made good use of that situation. But even though he had more or less officially moved into her room, they still had only these rare moments truly alone where they could freely talk about anything. However, Asuka didn't seem to be in a very talkative mood since she returned from school today.

"You know, Hikari made some strange remarks lately," he tried to lighten the atmosphere, watching her reaction from the corner of his eye.

If her flushing face hadn't been enough, her low voice dripping with guilt betrayed her of knowing exactly what he meant. "She... she did?"

"Yeah. Asking me if there's someone I like; saying that I probably wouldn't have to look that far to find someone..." He glanced over to her, not only secretly enjoying being on the other side of the teasing for once, but also that he successfully distracted her from whatever she had been brooding over. "And I doubt she was talking about herself, the way she's clinging onto Toji recently. Any idea who she wants to hook me up with, Asuka?"

"Why can't that silly girl keep quiet as she promised to?" the redhead grumbled angrily, only indirectly answering.

Shinji chuckled at that. But eventually he turned to her again more serious. "Asuka, remember that it was mostly your idea to keep it secret. And for good reason, as you quickly convinced me. But... Misato and now Hikari too..."

"It was while you were gone. I've tried to keep her away for almost the whole month, but she continued to bug me about you and – eventually, I just blurted it out. I- I just had to tell her." She sighed. "Hikari just knows that I love you. She has no idea about *that*. I mean, she obviously doesn't even know that we're actually together. And with the way she's acting I'm not even sure if she really understood that it's

not just some teenage crush."

"Well, she still **is** a rather normal teenager after all. It's hard see beyond one's own nose."

"So you're not angry?"

"There's not much we can do about that now," Shinji said shrugging in hope that it would hide the twinge of disappointment he indeed felt, not so much because she told her friend, but that she didn't tell him afterwards.. "Maybe it would even ease some things for us if we would indeed let her hook us up."

"Well, that might..."

"Shinji!" someone suddenly yelled behind them, cutting their conversation short. "Hey Shinji! Wait up!"

The boy in question turned around to see the newcomer waving wildly as he ran towards them. "Toji?"

The jock came to a halt; slightly panting from his sprint. "Oh, good thing I met you here. I think I'm kinda lost."

"Well, that's nothing new," Asuka scoffed, having instantly switched back in character. "But what the hell are you doing here?"

However, Toji obviously ignored her completely. "You know, I've been here only once before, when they did that synch-test, and then that doctor chick showed me around, so... can you tell me where I find the changing rooms?"

"Sure, you take this corridor back to the elevator, two levels up, then to the right and just keep straight on, you'll see it then," Shinji explained to him. "But Asuka's right, what are you doing here?"

Toji shrugged. "Well, they said now that I'm fit again, I'm officially back on duty. Though until I get a new EVA, they just want to do some tests now and then."

Shinji could hardly believe his ears. "But... After all that happened to you, you're still doing this?"

The Fourth Children felt visibly uneasy, despite his feeble attempt not to show it. "Sure, being inside an Angel wasn't the best experience of my life," he admitted. "But I'm a man who sticks to his word."

"Since when are you a man?" Asuka interjected taunting.

"Very funny," Toji sneered. "Anyway, two levels up, you said? Well then, I'll see ya once I'm finished."

Giving a wave with his hand, he turned and left his renewed co-pilots behind.

Asuka waited until he was reduced to a small form at the end of the corridor. "You think they're really going to let him pilot again?"

"I seriously doubt it," Shinji said, shaking his head as he confirmed her apparent suspicion. "As far as we know, the only EVAs that are being built are the series they want to use against us. I don't think they'll give one of those to him and have it under my father's control."

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Ritsuko just returned to the control room from a cigarette-break as the next 'subjects' arrived on the gangway down in the test chamber. The children weren't much bigger than a finger from this point of view, but the different colored plugsuits would have made it easy enough to distinguish them if they were even further away. While Shinji and Asuka instinctively went to their plugs, Toji moved only hesitatingly, obviously lost.

Grimacing, Ritsuko went over to the instruments and opened the comm channel. "We've tested Rei a little earlier already, so you're using her test plug, Toji."

Apparently seeing the need to point it out for him, the red figure aimed her arm towards it.

"Which pattern should we load for him, Sempai?" Maya inquired, her fingers ready to type the commands.

"Keep the one of Unit-00. It has the weakest bond to the pilot, so it would be the best candidate for him if it will be necessary some time."

While the children entered their plugs down in the chamber, Makoto kept looking around behind him.

"Something wrong?" Ritsuko asked.

"Didn't Commander Fuyutsuki say he wanted to oversee the tests today?"

"He knows that it's scheduled for now," the doctor said slightly annoyed. "And it's not like his attendance is needed. He just wanted to see how the boys would do in their first test after being out of action for so long."

A quiet gasp suddenly escaped Maya. "The comm channel didn't close on its own."

"Again? Good thing we didn't talk about Misato's various 'positions' this time," Ritsuko muttered lowly. "Guess that last optimization didn't work out as good as..."

"Ehm, Dr Akagi?" Shinji's voice suddenly interrupted them.

Ritsuko sighed as he sounded overly nervous again, which usually meant that it would take a while until he calmed enough for useful results. "What is it, Shinji?"

It took him a while to answer, as if he felt uneasy about whatever was on his mind. "Is... is Misato there?"

The doctor blinked before looking at Maya, then Makoto, silently passing the question on. But both shrugged or shook their head, coming to the same answer as she did. "Uh, no, I haven't seen her today. Is something wrong?"

"No, I- I just wanted to ask her something..." he said obviously disappointed, making it a not very convincing excuse.

"Does she have to hold his hand for the tests nowadays?" Ritsuko muttered just loud enough that it wouldn't be heard over the channels either way, but got a low chuckle by the attendant crew. She silenced them, clearing her throat. "Okay everyone! Could we begin now? I have the feeling it's going to be a long day."

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"His phone is off!" Asuka cursed, putting hers away again while they ran towards the nearest station, where they hoped to get a train that would get them home in time. "Damn it, if you wouldn't have ruined the test, Akagi wouldn't have had to restart it **twice**!"

"Sorry, it's kinda hard to focus on 'concentrating' when someone who's close to you is in danger!" Shinji shot back, heavily panting from their run. He decided against mentioning that he had the feeling that it hadn't been only him "ruining the test" from the way Dr Akagi had sounded the second time.

They both had exchanged a concerned glance over the comm-window when they had overheard the conversation during the test that Commander Fuyutsuki was missing. After Shinji had asked about Misato's absence, all doubts whether the next dreaded day had arrived were blown away.

The Sub-Commander not there. Misato not there. It fit to what he heard afterward about what happened. It *was* today.

They managed to jump in the train in the very last second, granting them the opportunity to make it home in record time. Out of breath, they entered the apartment, greeted by a distorted male voice.

"... *Ritsuko too.*" Neither had to say a word; they both knew the other realized the same as they looked at each other in shock. Not losing another second, they hurried to the kitchen. "*Katsuragi, the truth is with you. Don't hesitate. Move ahead. Should I see you again, I'll say what I couldn't eight years ago. Ciao.*"

The tape of the answering machine stopped clicking, but the tears of the heartbroken woman, that lay hunched over the table in front of it, continued to flow.

"Misato..."

She jerked up at Shinji's low call, apparently not having noticed them coming in until now. Her tear-stained face quivered, changing from shock to cold fury. "You... you knew this, didn't you?!" she demanded to know, her voice dripping with accusation.

Shinji could hardly hold back the sobs himself. Knowing what had happened was painful enough, but seeing his guardian like this was even worse. "I... I'm sorry, Misato, I..."

"You knew and you didn't tell...?!"

"I... I tried to..." he stammered, backing away also from a not less hysterical Asuka.

"Didn't you give him the letter?!" the redhead questioned unbelieving.

"Of course I did! Maybe he didn't read it or thought it was just some kind of joke, I don't..."

"No, he didn't," Misato interrupted him quietly as understanding settled in, but she was visibly fighting for her calm. "It just didn't tell him anything new. He knew very well that this time would eventually come, as did I. Otherwise, he wouldn't have bothered with that message. He knew that this would be his last job. That idiot and his stupid quest for truth!"

"The message...?" Shinji suddenly furrowed his brow. "Wait a moment, something..." He didn't finish voicing his thoughts; instead walked over to the answering machine and replayed the message. Misato whimpered slightly, hearing Ryoji's last words to her once more, but Shinji's lips turned into a weak smile when the tape stopped. "He didn't ask to water his melons..."

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"*The customer you called cannot be reached.*"

"Still nothing," Asuka groaned as she hung up her mobile phone.

"You know him," Shinji tried to calm her. "He can take care of..." He was cut off by Asuka's glare that reminded him instantly that Kaji had **not** been able to take care of himself last time.

"He might know what he's doing, but we still don't even know if he's really alright," she berated him. "What if he just forgot to mention his melons? Where you at the patch already? Maybe we accidentally stomped on it during the last fight, so that he had no reason to ask us to water them."

Shinji was about to counter that she had been the one who had a whole month to check for that, but he held himself back. Sensitive as she had become lately, it wouldn't be a good idea to mention the very reason – his fault, not to forget – that had affected her that much. That, and he didn't really want to make a scene in a public place like the train station.

"Either way it would be too dangerous for him to answer his phone, so we won't know for sure until he

contacts us," he eventually said. "And I doubt that would be anytime soon."

"I know," she sighed sadly. "I know."

Instinctively, his arm went around her shoulder to draw her closer. But just as she settled against him, something caught his eye that let him snap away from her.

"What is it?" she grumbled understandably angered.

"Rei is over there," he explained, pointing with his head to a platform a little away from theirs, where the familiar mop of blue hair stood out of the crowd.

"Do you think she saw us?"

"I'm not sure. She seems to be reading something," he said, craning his neck. "Do you think we should go to her?"

"No."

The dejected tone of her answer got his attention back on Asuka's downcast face. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head, taking a deep breath. "Never mind. I just remembered..."

Their conversation was cut short as the train arrived, drowning their voices out.

On the other side, across the station, Rei Ayanami returned her attention to her literature.

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"I still don't see what's wrong about that..."

"I didn't say wrong, it's just..."

The ringing telephone cut Asuka's argument off, and rarely before was Shinji so glad for this diversion from the heating discussion between his two roommates over their dinner. It wasn't the silence he wished for, but at least it gave him a good reason to excuse himself from the table before either side got the idea to use him against the other.

"I'll get it," he announced quickly and stood up, not caring if Asuka or Misato would even noticed as they already resumed their conversation whether a pet like PenPen should eat at the table.

Shinji shook his head as he reached for the receiver. They probably used such silly topics to avoid certain others, but still... "Hello?"

"Uhm... hello? Can... speak... with Asuka?" a female voice asked in broken Japanese. Shinji tensed, recognizing it already before the speaker revealed herself. "Here her Mother..."

"E-einen Augenblick, bitte."

Gasping, Asuka turned to him instantly when she heard him speak German. They had expected this call for some time now, and he had even caught her practicing for this talk. But in the end such things always come as a surprise.

Hesitantly she stood up and went over to him, taking the phone, too fixated on it to even notice him silently wishing her good luck.

"Hallo... M-Mama..."

Shinji watched her as she spoke, listening carefully as he tried to understand what she said with the little knowledge of German he learned in the last years.

"What, am I not allowed to call you that?" she joked, growing more confident as the ice was slowly breaking. "Yeah, maybe it's a little... really, never? Well... quite a lot happened since the last time we talked and – no, that's not a reproach, I could have called as well. It's just... I- I wanted to say sorry, okay? I've never been very easy on you, even though you tried to be nice to me. And it's not that I didn't like you, it was just... well, because you're not my real mother. That wasn't fair to you, I know, but I hope you can understand... Hello? You're still there?" She blinked twice, waiting for a response. Then she rolled her eyes. "Yes, of course it's really me! Ye- who?... Oh yes, that's him... He's okay I guess," she said, winking at him.

Shinji smiled back. Now that his emotional support wasn't needed any longer, he stopped listening and let Asuka continue the now casual talk in private. He didn't look at the clock, but it was quite a while until he heard her finishing.

"Ja... ja, werd ich. Du auch. Mach's gut."

A tired sigh accompanied the beep of the hang up button and Shinji was quickly behind her. He wrapped his arms around her as she gratefully accepted his offer to rest against his body.

"That was quite a long call," he whispered, causing her to chuckle slightly, but it was short-lived. "Are you feeling better now?"

"A bit." She sighed once more. "But to come to terms with her was one thing. Compared to what's awaiting us soon, it was nothing..."

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"Almost another 5 points down again? That's even worse than the 3.7 from yesterday!"

Misato bit her tongue hearing Ritsuko's comment about the current readings of Asuka's harmonics test. She knew that there was a lot troubling her charge, but she couldn't just say "Hey, let's cut her some slack. After all, she went through a hell that led to the destruction of the world, recently lost her child, then for some time her lover as well, now probably another close person, and is about to face that aforementioned hell once again." But she still felt the need to defend Asuka's score somehow.

Eventually, she settled for an excuse that had worked for herself several times in the past. And as far as she knew, there could even be some truth in it. "Well, she's currently having her period."

"The synchro ratio is not affected by external bodily disorders," the doctor blocked her argument almost before she could finish it. Also the look the blonde was giving her made it obvious that she had been caught. "And it's not like her results are that terrible. She actually recovered some of the serious drop that followed her defeat by the last Angel."

'Yeah right. Because she was defeated.' Misato rolled her eyes mentally. *'If only you knew...'*

"But it's still far below her average score, actually not much above the one when she started her training. And that even though it was just a little while ago that she had the highest ever recorded," Ritsuko continued sighing. "It raised a little again, and now in the last three tests it took the path down once more. It's fluctuating way too much lately, in a much bigger range than Shinji's ever did. If she can't sort out whatever is on her mind..."

"You... you were serious about that?" a startled Maya interjected.

"We can't use a pilot who's mind is elsewhere during a fight."

"Oh, come on Rits," Misato argued, not liking the way the discussion was heading at all. While she didn't know for sure what the two women were referring to, it wasn't hard to put two and two together.

"This is Asuka we're talking about. She lives for the EVA and the fight against the Angels, not for some synch-test. You saw how well she was doing against that last one. It wasn't her fault that it overpowered her."

"Yes, but I also saw that she ignored orders to attack it with long range weapons before. She could've at least weakened it," Ritsuko reminded. "And as I said it's not that bad – yet. I'm not saying we should replace her right away. But just in case, I think it would be for the best if we'd see how well the Fourth would do with Unit-02."

Misato groaned. "Somehow I doubt that will raise Asuka's mood."

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"You're doing WHAT?"

Misato sighed inwardly at the predicted outburst of the redhead. She wasn't even sure if there was much of an act in Asuka's reaction when they briefed the four pilots that had only been waiting for their results, before they could leave.

"Relax," the Major tried vainly to calm the furious pilot. "Ritsuko just wants to see if Toji would actually be able to use one of the remaining EVAs, just in case..."

"Just in case someone needs to be replaced..." Asuka finished bitterly.

Seeing her not with the common fiery-, but such a frustrated anger made Misato's stomach wrench in guilt, even more so after glancing to Shinji who seemed to fight not to go over to his lover to stand by her.

"He will only replace one of you main pilots in case you are not able to fight. We are not considering a permanent change," Ritsuko lied without hesitation, but given Asuka's reaction, Misato was sure something similar had already happened to her before to know the truth well enough.

But for now, none of them had a choice other than to accept the doctor's instructions.

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"Are you feeling alright, Toji?" Misato's voice reached him as the plug was inserted. "After all it's your first 'real' time... well, since..."

"Yeah," he just mumbled, trying to sound relaxed enough, even though it wasn't quite the truth. Well, it wasn't quite a lie either, but it was – strange.

He wasn't nervous about sitting in an EVA again after what happened with Unit-03. He didn't remember much of that incident actually. And after being in those test tubes so often, there wasn't much difference (and with that not much to be anxious about) between those and the real thing from the point of view of the one inside.

But there was still... something. Something about it being Asuka's EVA. He couldn't quite place it, but somehow it didn't *feel* fitting for that brash, arrogant girl he got to know on that aircraft carrier. For some reason, he rather felt reminded of the small, comfy room of his little sister.

Maybe Hikari wasn't completely wrong about her after all.

"Okay, we got all we needed," said the voice of the doctor eventually, carrying a trace of disappointment along with it. "You can come out again."

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It was a natural reaction for people to be startled when they would instantly look into her eyes as soon as the elevator's doors opened. She was aware that it was unusual to stand right in front of the exit, despite not having an aversion against this type of transport and the resulting wish to get out of it as quick as possible. But it was practical enough for her not to change this habit.

So she just stepped once again to the side to permit the Second entrance. As the elevator continued its way through the levels of the Headquarters, she found herself strangely unable to focus on her thoughts. Normally, she could easily ignore persons that were accompanying her ride, but this time she felt the presence of the unusual quiet girl in her back growing as though she was physically reaching for her.

It could prove to be a severe disadvantage for NERV if they would lose a valuable and experienced pilot, but there had also been something else when Dr. Akagi had spoke, hidden by the obvious lie of not replacing Asuka.

That feeling. Was it pity? It was empathy at least.

Rei was unsure about the expectations that were put in this emotion. Wasn't she supposed to ease the sorrow of the pitied one? The Second had never been someone who was very willing to accept assistance and Rei didn't know if she was actually willing to offer it. A beneficial advice was all she could...

"You know," the unexpected voice of the redhead interrupted her thoughts, "Someone once told me I have to open my heart, otherwise the EVA wouldn't move."

Rei didn't answer, her experience telling her that more information would follow a sentence in this kind of tone. But she did wonder how similar that was to the advice she had been about to give.

"I thought... no, I know I did," Asuka continued as suspected. "And I'm sure it won't go as far as to stop moving. But it's hard sometime to keep an open heart."

"Why are you telling me this?" Rei inquired.

"Do you open your heart?"

Asuka's direct question brought an uneasy silence between them for several long seconds as Rei's mind raced for an understanding of her words – or rather what they implied. "What... do you mean...?"

"To make it move."

An unnamed relief washed through Rei, but it didn't last long. "I mustn't."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Asuka stared at the tub as the water gushed in, but as absent as her mind drifted ever so often, there was no guarantee she would notice it overflowing in time.

She didn't hate herself anymore. But she was anything but happy with herself. Why was she doing this? She remembered her downward spiral still far too well. So why was she taking that path yet again?

Everyone seemed to notice. No wonder, her synchro rates must have gone through the floor. Even Toji had given her a look full of pity when he got out of *her* EVA. And Shinji of course...

He had already made some feeble attempts to talk to her and it was just a question of time until he got more pressuring. It wasn't like she didn't want to talk to him, but every time there was something that held her back at the very last moment. And she knew well enough what that was.

Fear. That same ugly thing that she had felt the last time like this in those first months of her pregnancy. The only thing that still managed to get between them.

"Staring at the bathtub like that probably doesn't mean anything good."

Instinctively, Asuka jerked away from the voice as she snapped out of her self-absorbed trance. "Ever heard of knocking?! I'm naked in here, Baka!"

"Nothing I haven't seen before," Shinji replied with a sly grin.

Her arms fell hesitatingly back to her sides from trying to cover her, but she still avoided his gaze in embarrassment. Not because of her state, but because he was right and she hadn't thrown a nearly similar fit for real in reaction to such situation for years.

"So what do you want," she asked still a little peeved, though her confidence slowly returned as she placed her hands on her hips. "Just wanting to get a look at this luscious, though scandalously underage body again?"

"Well, I don't mind that either."

"Old Hentai..."

"Oh, as long as I'm in a scandalously underage body as well, I don't think I really have to fear of being arrested for pedophilia," he said chuckling.

"Maybe," Asuka chimed in, "But that doesn't change the fact that someone who is in a way over twenty years old is attracted to a fourteen year old body. And that's – just – wrong!" she said while stepping closer, poking him against the chest with the last exaggerated words – before she wrapped her arms around him. "Be glad that I'm such an old hentai myself."

She leaned in for a kiss, but found herself surprisingly stopped by his hand. "Asuka," he began with a more serious voice, smiling in apology, "I actually just wanted to talk."

"And that couldn't wait for bed?" she whined, snuggling closer against him in hope to get him into the mood.

But he actually got a hold of her upper arms and pushed her gently to a safe distance, which could only mean he was being serious.

"You know it won't be much longer. One, maybe two days if I remember right," he said, trying to look into her eyes, but she quickly averted them. That was really not the topic she wanted to talk about now. "There's not much more time and I...I can't hold back much longer to wait for you to do it on your own. They're starting to worry already. That test with Toji was proof enough for that. From what I heard it's not as bad as last time, but that doesn't matter much to them; it just looks 'worse than before' without the comparison we can draw." He sighed, softly cupping her cheek. "I wouldn't even need to hear about all that to see that you're nervous. I bet that's also why you were staring holes into the water just now. So why don't you...?"

"NOT NOW!" Realizing that it had come out more fierce than she had intended, she mellowed back. "Please, not now..."

"But..." A sigh announced his defeat, wrapping his arms around her concluded it. "Okay. First that bath, maybe then you'll feel ready to..."

"Are you saying you want to bath with me?" Asuka interrupted him again, twisting his words before he could say what she didn't want to hear. She knew anyway. And she knew he was right. But she just couldn't bring herself to face them. She could deceive herself as long as he wouldn't remember her.

"Uhm... I didn't..."

"Bathing in the same water baka Shinji is using?" she asked with a smile she knew he wouldn't be able to resist. "Yeah, I think I'd like to do that."

-X-X-X-X-

Shinji lay on their bed, passively waiting for Asuka to change into her pyjamas. Not that their shared bath hadn't been an enjoyable pastime, but it hadn't felt as relaxing as it should have to him and, as far as he had been able to tell by her stiffness, neither to her. He just felt ashamed of his inability to help her, just because it was against her will. Apparently, the past years hadn't changed anything in that regard.

She had avoided him yet again and he couldn't bring himself to force it out of her. Why? He knew it would just make everything worse if she didn't talk to him, and he was quite sure that she knew as well. And now it lingered over them heavier than ever before.

"Shinji," she suddenly cut his thoughts off with a rather timid voice, not turning around to him while she finished buttoning up her top. "Just promise me one thing: When it comes, don't try anything stupid. Don't try to break free and help me against orders. I know you well enough to know that you'd want to, but please don't."

"But..." He barely even noticed that he jumped from the bed.

"You know it would be too suspicious." Done with changing, she turned around, shrugging with an obvious false smile on her face. "And, hey, who knows? Maybe it'll just use the same memories against me as the last time. I've accepted those by now after all."

"Asuka, you don't seriously believe..." he pleaded, but was cut off yet again, as she raised her hand close to his mouth.

Asuka tried her best to put on a confident smile, but her eyes betrayed her. Maybe the reasons why she didn't want to admit her fears weren't the same as those she had all those years ago, but doing it to keep him (and properly herself as well) from worrying too much was hardly any better.

"Shinji, I have to do this by myself and you know that," she said calmly. "You already disobeyed them so many times in your 'career'; another insubordination of this extent and they might keep you locked up in those cells and only get you out to fight. And we can't just let Rei take the blow. Or do you think he would let me get the lance?" It was more of a rhetorical question and before he could answer, she did by shaking her head. "You faced your Angels, now I have to face mine – alone."

Reaching for the light, she ended the discussion by bathing the room in darkness, before she slipped next to him under the cover of their shared bed. He knew her well enough to know that she would not accept any more arguments now and pretend to be asleep if she must. Especially when both knew she was right – mostly.

He probably would have to let her face it on her own. But there was no way he would let her do it alone.

-X-X-X-X-

An unexpected knock on her door ripped Misato out of her just-found sleep. Groaning, she rolled over on her futon to take a look at the clock, just to realize that it was much too early to be awakened without good reason. Crawling from under the blankets, she heaved herself up to slouch over to whoever better had indeed a damn good reason.

"Shinji...?" she asked mumbling, recognizing the shadow at the other side of the door as she slid it

open.

"I'm sorry if I woke you, I couldn't sleep very well," he instantly apologized.

"It's ah-awahit," she yawned her acceptance, though it was more out of politeness than anything else. "W-what is it?"

"Misato, I... can I ask you for something?"

"Sure."

His head quickly turned to Asuka's room, as if checking that she hadn't come out of it. "Please, Asuka mustn't know this. She... wouldn't agree. But... when the next Angel comes..."

"If you want me to unfreeze your EVA to help her, I'm afraid I can't do much for you," she quickly reminded, the sleep – much to her dismay – slowly wearing off. "That's all in your father's hand."

His shoulders sagged in a sigh. "Yeah, I kinda expected that. But since that doesn't work, could you try to get us a secure line? You know, so I could speak with her without anyone noticing or it being recorded?"

Taken aback by that unexpected request, it took Misato a few seconds until she found herself able to answer. "I-I could try, but I'm no technician. I can't really promise you anything. And I seriously don't know how we could filter Asuka's answers to you out of the regular communications."

Seeing his crestfallen face in the faint moonlight, she wished she could have told him something else. But Shinji reluctantly nodded anyway. "Please try. It would already help a lot if I can at least talk to her freely if it gets too bad."

Misato frowned at him. *'Just what are we going to face?'* Slowly though, she nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'll see what I can do", Misato repeated muttering to herself as she typed furiously on the console. "Me and my big mouth."

Working under pressure often tended to let her work twice as efficient, but just having a couple of minutes for something she wasn't overly suited for was still a little much. As if it wouldn't be bad enough to miss lunch today. But the time when most of the bridge crew was in the cafeteria seemed to be the best choice to go through with the plan, as she would only have to persuade the overworking Maya (who was always the one opting to stay behind) that she should get something warm to eat for once. It had still taken much too long to convince the Lieutenant that she could handle the bridge herself for twenty minutes.

'Ritsuko could have probably done this in a couple of seconds, and better at that. Hell, even Ka...' Her fingers came to an abrupt halt as her heart dropped at that thought. But she angrily pushed it away. *'Don't think like that. They said he's alright. At least they hope so...'*

"Major?"

Startled, Misato quickly saved and closed the window. Did that girl inhale her food or was she really just so obsessed with her work?

"What are you doing there?" Maya asked with innocent curiosity.

"Eh, I was just... wanting to play a bit Solitaire," Misato "admitted" sheepishly as she jumped out of the

chair, what immediately got her the expected look of pity at the presumed lack of knowledge of the superior.

But she had managed to finish what she wanted to do. At least she hoped so.

After all, she didn't get the time to recheck anything as the blaring alarms announced the arrival of the 15th Angel.

-x-x-x-x-

The bridge was filled again within few minutes as everyone assumed their respective battle station.

"First, Second and Third Children are in their EVAs," Makoto reported while Misato's eyes were fixated at the blinking spot that was all they had of the Angel for now. "Fourth Children is on the way, but is not expected to be here within the next 15 minutes."

'Not that it really matters,' the Major thought absently, but her mind was rather on the unknown enemy. Even more than usual she wondered what it could have in its sleeve to make Shinji so worried about Asuka that he wanted a secret communication line.

"Visual confirmation of the Angel," Shigeru announced in the same moment as the screen changed into a shot from a satellite in orbit, quickly updating with a closer look of the glowing bird-like form. With these "wings" it was the most "angelic" appearance so far, but Misato was willing to bet that, if they could get a better picture, this impression would quickly falter. However, the long-haired tech already confirmed that this was at maximum zoom.

And that it wasn't moving at all.

"Does that mean it's waiting for a good chance to come down?" she mused loud. "Or does it going to attack us from up there?"

"Won't be easy for us to reach it," Makoto commented.

"Either way, we can't do anything as long as it's out of our firing range. EVAs can't defeat an enemy in orbit." She cursed silently. What had she done last time to beat it? The only logical measure they had against such opponent was the positron rifle, but was it the best? Could she have had a better idea that she now just couldn't get because she was wasting her brain with thoughts like that? Something apparently had happened to Asuka, but because she fired or because she shielded? If only she knew so she could make other decisions this time so Shinji's plan wouldn't even be necessary. But what if the only choice was to let Rei take her place? That wouldn't be fair to her.

Why couldn't they just have told her?

"Major?"

Makoto's quiet call let her flinch. She had to pull herself together and give orders, otherwise she could just as well retire from this position. After all, she had sent these children to their possible deaths several times before. That she now knew that something will happen for sure this time shouldn't cloud her judgment... right?

"How's..." she calmly began, but was suddenly interrupted by an opening comm-channel.

"Come on, Misato! Just let me get at that Angel already!" Asuka impatiently demanded.

"Asuka, I don't..."

"Misato," Shinji chimed into the discussion as well. "I... I think it might really be best for her to do it."

The Major sighed, painfully aware of the eyes of the commanders' in her back. Getting strategic advice

by her subordinates was heavily undermining her competence, but they really should know best in this situation. And she never really cared much for her military rank anyway.

She raised her thumb to Shinji who smiling shut the comm-window down, Asuka following his example. "Very well, Unit-02 start! Prepare for long distance firing! Rei will provide back-up!"

"You know, it will not really help her if she's going to mess this up," Ritsuko commented.

"Maybe," Misato admitted, "but let's hope her problems will be over if she won't."

-x-x-x-x-

The waiting had been bad enough when she was full of adrenaline and eagerness, with just a hint of fear of the then unknown abilities of the Angel nagging in the back of her mind. But the knowledge of what was about to come was even worse.

Asuka's efforts to calm herself down and ignore the nervousness were in vain, but she tried nonetheless. She didn't even watch the small light that was the Angel and the crosshairs that constantly failed to target the out-of-range enemy. Her eyes were closed under the visor as she listened to her ragged breathing that sounded loudly over the deep, always present hum inside the Entry Plug. It was strange that no one had complained about her pulse and other vital signals so far. Her heart felt like a jackhammer in her chest. She almost wished it would finally begin so she would be over with it.

A thought she regretted all too soon.

-x-

One could have thought it was a mere beam of light that hit EVA-02 as it wasn't inflicting any visible damage, but even without the blaring alerts, Misato didn't need a lot of imagination that it was hardly the case, coming from an Angel.

"A directional weapon?" she asked anyway.

Makoto however quickly confirmed her assumption. "No, no thermal energy reaction detected!"

"Abnormal patterns in the psycho graph!" Maya suddenly interjected. "Mental contamination will start soon!"

"An Angel's psychic Attack?" Ritsuko questioned, apparently more to herself. "Can they understand the mind of human beings?"

'*Psychic?*' Misato gritted her teeth as she helplessly looked back at the display where the EVA was spasming under the assault. An assault they had no means against. '*Asuka...*'

-x-

She screamed, screamed at the burning pressure that surrounded her, drilled into her. Despite the pain, she somehow managed to resist the reflex to pull the trigger and forced herself to let the rifle fall before she would cause more damage than preventing it. As selfish and cruel it seemed, a part of her regretted that she hadn't let someone else take her place.

How could she have forgotten this pain?

The pain as her defenses were slashed open as though they were not even there. The pain as the most inner depths of her soul were ripped out and exposed. The pain as her mind was defiled by that god-damned being they called an Angel.

"Mama!"

Please!

"Help me... "

Mama?

"Please..."

Where are you?

-x-

It was dark.

There was nothing.

Nothing but a sound.

Of a crying child.

'What? Is it really just like last time?' she wondered as the form of a girl materialized, standing with her back to her. 'There I am. I'm crying. But why? I put that long behind me...'

But then a cold fear gripped her heart as she noticed that the girl's hair wasn't red like hers, but rather a dark brown like...

Before she could decide if she rather wanted to let her curiosity win over her fears or run away from the unavoidable, the girl suddenly ceased her crying and slowly turned around. "Why did you leave me alone?"

-x-

"NOOOOOOO!"

The scream was painful in Misato's ears, but that was nothing against the sickening feeling in her stomach. Something must have gone wrong. There was no way they could have planned to have her hurting like this.

"Asuka, retreat!" she ordered, but got no reply.

"No response!" Shigeru affirmed.

"Maybe she's already too lost in her mind to hear us any longer."

That hypothesis got Ritsuko a silencing glare by the Major. Such thoughts were the last she needed now.

"What about Rei?" she called, listening into the chatter of reports that the pilot got before she was allowed to fire.

"...and gravity, .03!"

"Pressure in the chamber is at maximum!"

"Release the final safety lock!" Makoto was the last to make an announcement. "All personnel prepare for firing!"

Not a second later, the powerful blast of Unit-00's positron rifle shot into the sky, perfectly aimed at the Angel – only to be split in several straying beams as it hit the blocking AT-Field.

"No effect!" Shigeru confirmed. "There's not enough energy to break through the AT-Field from this distance!"

"But the output is at maximum! We can't get more power!"

Misato cursed silently under her breath. If their only long-range weapon wasn't enough, there was

nothing they could do to help Asuka anytime soon. She could only hope that Shinji had understood her signal. If he couldn't reach her...

-x-

She found herself back, back near the garden, near their home. But she could barely recognize it anymore. Several broken planks lay scattered on the ground, or were bent inwards by the force that must have hit it, leaving a gaping hole in the fence.

Climbing through, the sight before her only grew worse. The soil was dug up and bare, giving no sign of the plants and vegetables that had filled the vast space. The greenhouse was just as empty, tables and boxes thrown to the floor, several of the glass panes broken. Clashing behind her in the wind, the door to the chicken house hung only at the lower hinge, giving the view to feathers and blood. It looked as if wild animals had made their way through, destroying unhindered everything in their path.

The wind blew into her face. Something was carried into her direction, rolling over the ground and eventually stopped at her feet. She stepped back in horror as she realized that it was the head of a doll with bright red hair. All she wanted to do was to keep her eyes shut, not being able to bear the horrible sight around her any longer. But she couldn't, as much as she feared what would come next. Not even a scream escaped her in shock when her eyes followed the way back that the head had taken.

The body lay barely three meters away, tattered and bloody. Deep scratches covered it and it almost looked like a leg was missing. There she lay, the remains of the doll still in her arms...

"No..."

...smiling...

"No!"

...dead...

"NO!"

"You left me..."

"NOOOOO!"

The scene vanished as she broke down, but she wasn't left alone. The small body was still there.

"You know something like this would have happened either way. Eventually I would have gotten hurt badly. Or I would have gotten sick with something Papa couldn't cure. In the end it would have been like that."

Asuka couldn't bear to look up to the form of her daughter. She cowered whimpering as it slowly stepped closer. "This is not real. This is not real," she whispered to herself in a mantra.

"What? Do you think you could have protected me? You know that's not true."

"This is not real. Aki never died. This is not real."

"How do you know? Maybe you're just in another time dimension while mine still exists."

Asuka wildly shook her head, not wanting to hear this anymore. "This isn't real."

"You're such a hypocrite. Saying you're sad because you lost me?" the appearance spoke, cruelty mocking. "You never wanted me from begin with! You tried to kill me by yourself!"

Asuka tried to hold her ears, but it did nothing to block out the horrible accusation, torturing her heart even more as she knew of the truth behind it. "This... this isn't..." Her voice was drowned in sobs.

"But maybe you really didn't want to leave me. Maybe you wanted to see it first hand. Maybe you wanted to hold me..." The child was now just in front of her, with each word leaning forward a bit more.

"This isn't real."

"...when I gave..."

"This..."

"...my very last..."

"...isn't..."

"...breath..."

"...REAL!"

-x-

"Now opening barriers 16 through..."

"We lost all communication with Unit-02!" Hyuga interrupted the report distressed.

"What?" Ritsuko asked, her surprise matching his. "Is the Angel blocking her from us?"

"Unkown!"

Misato ignored the uproar around her, keeping her eyes fixed to the screen. *'Here's your chance. You better use it well.'*

-x-

"Asuka?" There was another voice reaching her, a quiet one, but she heard it somehow. "Asuka?"

"Sh-Shinji?"

"Hang on, Asuka! Father has just ordered Rei to get the Lance! It's almost over!"

"Shinji? It- it hurts so much Aki, she..."

"Asuka, remember what you told me! What it shows you is nothing but your fears!"

"But... Aki... I... she must hate me..."

"Asuka, you've always been a great mother. She loved you way too much to ever hate you. The only thing she hated was to see you sad."

"She...?"

"Remember how happy she always was. Remember her smile!"

"Re... remember?"

-x-

And she remembered. How could she have ever forgotten it? Aki's wide smile was the first picture that washed over her. And as though a dam had broke, it flooded her mind: The first time she caressed her; Aki's first steps; the weight and warmth of her small body as she held her; the way she often was sleeping in her bed with her clothes still on and her feet having kicked off the blanket; her innocent look when she was caught doing something bad; her first words and all those that followed...

"Nah' "

"Whas dat?"

"Don' wanna!"

"Mongey!"

"Look, did all by mysef!"

"Now Mama can always be with me!"

"Love you."

"Mama!"

"Mama?"

The voices silenced at once. Asuka's eyes snapped open, but she couldn't look up, too afraid that her hopes were fooling her.

"Don't be sad, Mama..."

"Aki?" she asked softly, raising her head ever so slowly. As she looked into the sparkling blue eyes in front of her, there was no doubt. This was the Aki she knew; this was her daughter. Abruptly, she threw her arms around the small girl, pulling her into a tight embrace. It seemed so long, much too long that she could hold her like this.

"I'm sorry," Asuka sobbed freely, not caring about the tears. Her hands carefully stroked the small back, trying to feel every inch of it. "I'm so sorry."

"What for?"

"That- that I wasn't able take you with me! That I left you behind!"

"Did you want to go?"

Asuka shook her head wildly.

"Then it's not your fault, is it?"

At her daughter's words, Asuka's heart suddenly felt a thousand times lighter. But it didn't make her feel better, knowing what was about to come.

"It's... I... I just miss you so much..." she confessed, tightening her hold, unwilling to let go again.

Aki backed away slightly and looked at her questioningly. "Why?"

"Be-because you're not there with me. Because we're not together anymore."

The brunette child blinked, obviously not understanding. "But we're together now," she said and her smile reappeared. "Doesn't that mean I'm there with you?"

Asuka's eyes widened at that realization. She managed a shaky smile as she looked up to her daughter. "Yeah. Y-you're right. You'll be with me where ever I'll go." She sniffed and reached up to caress Aki's cheek. "You've always been such a smart girl. You got that from me. Just don't let your father know that."

The child's pure giggle echoed in the vast emptiness as her shape started to fade.

"I love you, Mama."

A last tear trailed down Asuka's face as she, smiling sadly, reached out for the vanishing form of her daughter. "I love you too."

Then, Aki was gone. The pain in her heart was not as bad as she had expected it to be when she would have to say goodbye, but it still hurt.

Suddenly feeling a hand on her shoulder, she startled turned her head. A red-haired woman was smiling down to her, nodding approvingly. Before she, too, disappeared like everything around her as the 15th Angel was speared by the Lance of Longinus.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Asuka pulled her knees a little closer to her chest as she watched her red EVA being lowered through the gate in the ground. She felt a kind of melancholy dwelling inside her, but she didn't have to fight the tears in vain as she once had. It wasn't the angry sadness of having been helpless and defeated in more than one way that she had felt then, it was a whirling mix of loss and acceptance that, while appearing calm outside, only needed a small drop to burst the emotional dam.

And even without turning around, she could hear that "drop" stepping closer with plugsuit-clad feet and the rustling of the "quarantine"-barrier tape as it climbed over it. When Shinji finally sat down behind her and drew his arms around her, she relaxed a little, being soothed by his warmth, but for now didn't let out more than a tired sigh.

"Who knows how much could have gone differently if you had done that last time...?" she whispered musing.

"I guess that's a question I asked myself quite often lately..."

"Yeah, I know," she agreed, "But for me, this was a most crucial turning point. I was confused, scared, angry, hurt like I was never hurt before – when you came to see me, a part of me screamed to accept it, at least that once, to let you ease that pain, if just a bit. But I didn't. I don't know anymore if or how much I would have fought it, if you would have tried anyway. But you didn't. And when you turned around and left, I just felt... empty."

"How do you feel now?"

"I don't know. It hurt. At first it hurt even more than last time. I'd never thought that could have been possible. But then..." A small smile played on her lips, "She was there..."

"Asuka," Shinji sighed. "That was just..." He couldn't finish the sentence as she straightened against him, facing him with all the determination she could muster.

"She was there, Shinji!" She assured, not only him, but also herself. It may not have been the truth, but the last thing she wanted to think about now was that it had been just a figment of her imagination. "I held her in my arms! I could feel her..." A sob broke her off, as she slumped back in his arms in exhaustion. "And then I had to let go of her again..."

Whether Shinji couldn't think of a lame attempt to soothe her or kept quiet on purpose, she couldn't say, but she was grateful for it. That he was there for her was the only thing that mattered right now.

"I... I just don't know if I can take this much longer. It hurts so much. As if her loss isn't horrible enough, I'm not even allowed to mourn her openly. No! Instead I have to act like I'm just fine and nothing ever happened! I – I..." She hadn't even realized that she had started to scream, until he tightened the embrace to calm her. "I'm so tired of this. I'm tired of hiding my pain. That was something I never wanted to do again. But now I have no choice."

"I guess I have to get used to it that I can only see her in my mind and memories," she eventually continued lowly. "I know, in that way she's always with me. But that – it's hardly a substitute for actually seeing her each day, watching her growing up, having new experiences I could never imagine. And memories are such fragile things. Over time they slip away and you only remember bits and pieces of something you never wanted to forget."

"You know... sharing memories with others can help to keep those bits and pieces."

"But... am I not doing that right...?"

"Not with me," he explained. "I don't think you can get everything off your heart that you want or need to by telling someone who already feels just the same. Maybe that's why you couldn't talk to me before."

"Maybe..."

He kissed the back of her head. "Come," he said, slowly getting on his feet again, "Let's get home. Maybe we'll both be ready then..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Her colleagues at NERV would probably have trouble to believe that their Major, who was an eyewitness of the Second Impact, faced so many Angels, jumped on a walking nuclear reactor close to its explosion without hesitation and had admittedly not the safest style of driving, had to take a deep breath before she could muster the strength to open a room in her own apartment. And that feeling didn't get much better as she saw the figure that sat cowering on the bed.

"Shinji said you wanted to talk," Misato explained as she stepped closer and eventually sat down next to the silent girl. When several seconds passed without a reaction, she continued. "I don't have much experience with such talks. Ritsuko isn't one to share emotional problems and aside from her... well, I've never had that many friends aside from her. But if you want to tell me something, I'll listen."

Asuka closed her eyes, but still didn't answer. Misato grew quite uneasy with that silence. It was true, she didn't have very much experience with this; if anything she was used to consume comfort, not giving it. But if she could, she wanted to help this girl.

'No. "*Young woman*"', she reminded herself.

She didn't want to put her charge under too much pressure though. Shinji had said it would help her as it had helped him that one evening, but if Asuka didn't want to talk, then...

"You... you know about Aki, right?" the low voice ended all thoughts to leave early. Nodding, Misato encouraged her to go on. "She... I... I'm not sure where to start..."

"How about at the start?"

Asuka returned her smile even if only slightly, but she didn't give in to begin at *that* start. "You know, after her birth, when I held her for first time, I thought I could never let go of her. That I would always be there for her, taking care of that beautiful little life in my arms. Of course that was silly. And I made plenty of mistakes. But... I always had the chance to make up for them. But... but not this time..."

Sobs racked her body as she continued. "Some... sometimes I think it would have been easier if she... if she would have... died. At least then I would have known. There would be something left of her. Even if for some reason her body would have been lost, there would have been so much she would have left behind. But now... now there's nothing but Shinji and my memories. She just never existed." As the tears fell freely, Asuka buried her face in her arms again. "And... and she never will..."

Hesitatingly, Misato reached out, pulling her left arm loosely around Asuka's shoulder. She was able to make decisions in combat situations in a matter of milliseconds, but now she just didn't know what she could do or say to comfort the redhead. "Well... you never know. Maybe... maybe if you time it right..."

She could slap herself for that silly attempt already before Asuka shook her head. "Even if we knew the

exact time down to the milliseconds, even if by an incredible wonder we could match that time perfectly, even if we got the very same spermatozoon and ovum together, she would never be the same person. There could be others, but it will never be her again..."

"What was she like?" Misato suddenly asked before the silence could fall over them again.

"Huh?"

"I may not have the chance to meet her, but that doesn't mean I couldn't get to know her," she explained smiling. "She would no longer exist only in Shinji and your memory, but in mine as well. And maybe sometime we can tell others too. She would exist then, in the mind and hearts of many people. Wouldn't you like that?"

It took Asuka a little thought, but eventually she nodded. "But... I thought Shinji..."

"He told me some things, yes. But I'm sure you can help a lot to fill that picture."

"Picture?" She chuckled lightly at that. "She always liked to draw pictures. I guess all children like to do that, but we really had tons of papers flying around with equally many variations of us as stick figures."

"Quite the little artist, hm?"

"She got a lot from me, maybe more than was good for her. She could be pretty headstrong sometimes. Always wanted to dress herself since before she was three and as you can guess not with the best results. Often clothes that were much too big for her. And we eventually had given up trying to make her wear socks and shoes unless we'd be going into the ruins where there were too many things she could hurt her feet with by stepping in."

"Sounds like she got you wrapped around her little finger all too well."

"Oh, you don't even know the half of it," Asuka laughed. "I thank God that she never realized or at least never used the full power she had over us. It was hardly possible to deny her anything and all she had to do for it was to smile." Her voice grew a bit quieter as her eyes got more distant again. "She had a smile that could melt even the coldest heart."

"And that was worth...?"

"Everything," Asuka finished before Misato could herself. "To think never to see it again..." She shook her head. "Sorry. I-I'm not even sure if you can understand this."

Noticing her tensing, Misato knew she surprised her as she pulled her closer. "No, maybe I can't really understand. I'm not a mother and who knows if I ever will be, so I can't comprehend what it's like to have a child and even less what it's like to lose it." A sad smile played around her lips as she looked into Asuka's wondering eyes. "But I can imagine what it would be like to lose one of you. And that thought is already painful enough for me."

It was now time for Asuka to startle the Major, suddenly flinging herself at the woman. Misato returned the hug without hesitation. It was true, these children had become the closest she ever had to ones of her own. Just that they weren't really children anymore. But even adults sometimes needed the comfort of a parental figure. She knew that well enough herself.

She hadn't cared much about the time, so she couldn't tell how long she held Asuka in silence until the redhead suddenly jerked up.

"Sh," she quieted Misato before she could ask what's wrong, enthusiastic pricking up her ears. "Can you hear that?"

Copying her charge, Misato listened to the noise that she had missed at first, but quickly asked herself how she had. The sound of Shinji's cello filled the apartment in a way that she had never heard before. The speed and lightness didn't seem to fit the instrument, but somehow he managed to keep these notes in a harmonic melody.

"What is that?" Misato wondered.

However, Asuka just smiled brightly. "A happy song."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And you're sure he'd like that?"

"Well, I don't know Ikari's personal taste, but it's quite popular. But it's not that easy to make, at least not for a beginner. As far as I know, you haven't cooked very often before, have you?"

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Asuka assured with apparent amusement. "After all, I'm the great Asuka Langley Soryu! I already have as much talent now as others would have after years of experience!"

"Uhm... if you say so..." Hikari was still a little surprised by the sudden change about the redhead's opinion on the matter. Though she surely didn't mind the newfound enthusiasm of her friend. "But if you want me to help anyway..."

"Then I'll..." Asuka trailed off and her face dropped. Following her gaze, Hikari noticed that a certain toy store had come into view. Her friend's steps slowed down as they neared it, until she came to a complete stop.

"Asuka?"

"Could you wait for a moment?" she asked flatly.

"Uhm, sure, but..." But before Hikari could finish, Asuka was already inside.

It took only a few minutes until she returned, now cradling a red-haired doll in her arms, the one she once had been staring at.

"Oh, it's so cute!" Hikari chimed. "But I thought you didn't like these 'childish things'?"

Asuka's lips curled to a serene smile. "Well, this one's special," she said, stroking the doll's head.

Much to their surprise, the head followed her hand as it reached the side. Apparently some of the seams that held it attached were loose, holding only about half of the head on the body.

"Now that's cheap workmanship!" the brunette accused. "You should get your money back or have it exchanged!"

But strange enough, it seemed just to increase Asuka's delight as her smile widened as though she just hit the jackpot.

"No, I'll take care of that myself," she exclaimed happily.

Hikari quickly shut her mouth as she noticed she was gaping at her friend. What was so special about a doll that she was rather willing to repair it herself rather than getting a new one? Even if it should somehow remind her of her mother as she had thought at first. Unless it *was* her mother's, but how should her mother's doll have ended up here?

"Is it some rare collector's item?" Asuka had never seemed in need of money, but it was the only solution she could come up with.

"In a way... yes..." the redhead answered mumbling, not leaving her eyes from the toy. "The only one of its kind."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

/"But... Aki... I... she must hate me..."

"Asuka, you've always been a great mother. She loved you way too much to ever hate you. The only thing she hated was to see you sad."/

"An unexpected conversation, to say the least," Fuyutsuki commented while the recording continued to play in the background.

His companion however didn't show the surprise that even he surely felt. Gendo also took his time to speak up, so Kozo wasn't sure whether the Commander heard him at all or just ignored him, rather concentrating on the dialog between the pilots.

"Do you think this could endanger the scenario?" Ikari asked, surprising his loyal subordinate with an unusual, even if only faint trace of uncertainty in his voice. Just having altered the plans in his interest by "losing" the Longinus Lance, it was of course not very desirable to have someone else interfering to them yet again.

"Under other circumstances I would have said she was hallucinating under the Angel's influence and he played along with a wild, but apparently correct guess. But that someone attempted to hide this communication from us sets the situation in a quite different light."

Again he received no answer, but this time he doubted that his words had fallen on deaf ears. The younger man's eyes were unreadable behind the glasses that reflected the bright light of the display in the otherwise dark office, but Kozo could picture the anger in them anyway. A mystery he wasn't involved with and did not know about, a probably sabotaging one at that, was not something Gendo Ikari was used to and even less liked.

"What are we going to do about this?" the Sub-Commander anticipated. "It could still be some kind of coincidence. Especially as there is no reasonable explanation behind their words. The reports of the last throughout physical examination are less than a month old and the Second proved to still be a virgin then. Recent tests didn't show any changes in the hormonal balance or other signs of a pregnancy either. Neither was she ever seen with a child or an animal that she could have 'adopted'. It is not possible that she is or ever had been a 'mother'."

"No," Ikari concurred murmuring, but Fuyutsuki heard nonetheless. "Not yet at least."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We are not going to do anything for now," Gendo declared louder, instead of repeating what he had been thinking. "But we should keep an eye on them. Whatever the meaning of this is, if they are trying to interfere with our plans, we will interfere with theirs."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

He winced slightly at the pain that shot through his body, and he instinctively reached to the bandage on the left side of his chest.

"Careful, that rib is fractured," the man he only knew as "Doc" reminded him. "Bulletproof vests might keep you from dying, but not from being injured. Especially not such lightweight ones as yours."

He chuckled roughly, ignoring that the pain increased with each heave of his chest as he sat up from the bed. "If I had known that I'm only worth such a beginner I probably would have used a better one. I already thought I was done for when I couldn't reach my 'emergency gun', but the blood packs and my little act were obviously enough to fool him."

"Didn't try to make sure to finish his task?" Doc asked, glaring disapprovingly at the cigarette he was pulling out of a package from the clothes next to him and placed between his lips.

"Didn't even check on me," he said shrugging and lit the tobacco, ignoring Doc's silent denunciation of smoking in this desolate, yet still sterile environment. "Must have been so proud of his shooting skills that he didn't believe I could have survived. If it wouldn't have made things so easy for me, I'd almost feel hurt that they'd send such a guy."

"Are you sure they didn't let you off on purpose? It's not like them to make such mistakes."

"These goons aren't the JSSDF. You know how this works: Hire someone, who hires someone, who hires someone. Secretiveness has its advances, but some lack of quality in these channels is a common flaw that comes with ensuring it. And if that means I don't have to think of how to get rid of a body and getting a fake 'mission accomplished'-message passed through I sure won't complain."

"You know, you just could have avoided that mess altogether."

"To be honest," he began to confess while starting to put his shirt on, "I was about to accept the inevitable. I had learned the truths I had been searching for myself, so I had no reason not to. But then I realized that there were many others who also fight for it, wanting my help more than I thought. It wouldn't be fair to disappoint them. Especially when they give you yet another mystery to solve."

"I was actually talking about going a little deeper in the underground and try not to cross their path again."

"Too much hassle that eventually proves useless. This way is much more preferable," he laughed, loosely pulling the tie around his neck. "The greatest value for a spy is to get everywhere and not being seen. As a ghost, that shouldn't be much of a problem."

Chapter VIII: Raise

It was still dark in these early hours. Mist crept over the lands into the valleys of the Hakone region, embracing the ruins of the once proud city of Tokyo-3. No sound was heard, no bird sang its song yet, not even the ever-present cicadas were awake. Every being in and near the single inhabited house was still asleep.

At least until a – by now quite familiar – cry disturbed the morning's peace.

"Mmm... Shinji..." a tired voice murmured. "Shinji!"

"Wha-wha'is...?" a no less tired voice answered. "Jus' five minutes, 'kay...?"

Since her prior light nudging with the foot didn't bring the desired result, Asuka decided to kick him a bit harder. "It's your turn..."

Shinji sighed as he slowly sat up, his eyes still closed. "How come it's always my turn...?"

"Cause you're the best father and husband in this world who would do anything for his family."

He grinned wearily. Her words would have probably been more encouraging if he wasn't the *only* father and husband in this world – and if she wouldn't have used that praise so often already that it was nothing more than a sleepy mumble by now. "She's most likely hungry anyway, so you won't get back to sleep either."

Just chuckling at the low growl that he got in response, he slowly stood up. He didn't feel like arguing over something he didn't really mind – not *that* much at least. Sure, he too would like to stay a little longer in the warm, comfortable bed and he was praying for the night that he could finally sleep through again. But Asuka was right with one thing: He would do anything for his family.

Before he knew it, he was already in front of the door with that familiar heart-shaped sign. On the day they had returned from the hospital, he had crossed his name out and replaced it with the one of the new inhabitant of the room. It had been a little more than two months since then.

He could still remember how long the trip back had been. Asuka had refused to let go of her child the whole day, no matter how often he told her that it would be much safer to use the baby seat. If Asuka had fought that day in her usual manner, he might have been able to persuade her. But he hadn't stood a chance against the still tired yet serene smile that she had worn the whole time, so he eventually had given in when she softly asked him to just drive extra carefully.

To satisfy another demand that he would never be able to deny, he opened the door and entered "*Aki's Lovely Suite*".

Quickly, he stepped over to the crib where his small daughter cried for attention. He gently picked the wailing girl up, rocking her lightly. She had gotten noticeably bigger in that little time already, but she still seemed so fragile. It wasn't as bad as it had been at first though, when he had feared to hurt her with every wrong touch.

His fingers ran soothingly through the small patch of brown hair as he inhaled the sweet scent of baby powder that surrounded her – most of the time at least.

"Shh," Shinji cooed as he turned to leave the room. "We'll get you some food, hm?"

He didn't know if it was his warmth and his soothing or if she actually realized that her demands were about to get fulfilled, but her crying softened into a low whimper.

When they entered the bedroom, Asuka had already made herself comfortable in a sitting position with

the pillow at her back against the bed's headboard, just as he had almost expected. They only exchanged a knowing smile when he carefully handed their baby over to his wife's waiting arms, before he returned to the bed himself.

Asuka also whispered some soothing words as she shifted Aki in her hold and pulled the top of her pajamas up. As he watched her drawing Aki's mouth to her breast and started to feed the infant, carefully holding her and caressing the back of the little head; he couldn't help but stare at the two most important beings in his life, mirroring the contented smile of his wife as he eventually lost himself in that sight.

"And what are you staring at?" Asuka's question wasn't in a very menacing tone, but it finally snapped him out of his trance. Indeed she never lost that smile. "You're not jealous of your own daughter, are you?"

He chuckled lightly and shook his head. For someone always calling him a hentai, she sure had a dirty mind to think of something like that even in a situation like this.

"No," he told her. "But seeing you two like this always reminds me how much I love you..."

"Baka," she hushed, before meeting his lips in a quick kiss. "If I wouldn't like it so much, I'd hit you for being so sappy."

Again he chuckled before his tone got a little serious. "I'm just glad that breastfeeding her actually works, and so well so far. But I'm still not sure if it'll be enough until she can eat solid food."

"So what do you want to do? Go searching for a cow after all?"

"Well, a goat would be easier to move..."

"Goat milk? Are you trying to poison my child?" she smirked. Noticing that Aki had stopped sucking, she put her child up to her shoulder, lightly patting the small back. "Besides, you haven't complained so far, have you?" Asuka asked the baby, accompanied by an approving burp from her daughter.

"Oh, it's not fair when the two of you team up against me," Shinji tried to complain, though he couldn't help but chuckle. He had been concerned about the whole issue of breastfeeding, not just whether or not Asuka's young body was capable of producing enough milk to sate Aki or if the baby would accept it properly, but also because he had learned that it could be painful for the mother.

Of course, Asuka had instantly dismissed that. She admitted that it "felt a bit weird", but she had quickly added how the ability to actually *feel* herself providing her child with nourishment was much more intense than any possible discomfort. In that way, he actually **did** feel a little jealousy.

But even if he couldn't share such an intimate connection with his daughter, he would be doing everything in his power to show Aki his care.

"Now that we're awake already," he eventually began, his view going out of the window at the fleeting darkness of the early morning, "shall we get going?"

Asuka nodded, smiling, not looking up as she gently stroked the hair of her child that had already fallen asleep in her arms again.

-x-x-x-x-

"Well, it's been a while..."

"And the last time wasn't quite the best..."

"But we managed to sort things out and now..."

"We'd like to introduce someone to you."

With those words, Asuka presented the bundle in her arms towards the vast sea that sparkled in the rays of the early sun, brushing a wrinkle of the blanket from the child's cheek. "This is our daughter. World: This is..." She flashed her husband a wry grin.

"This is Aki Ikari!"

-x-x-x-x-

"Do you still feel uncomfortable without artificial lights?"

Asuka wasn't sure what he meant at first. But as she looked ahead at the dark silhouettes of what was once Neo Tokyo-3, the memory of the discussion returned, even though at that time the city hadn't been in ruins and there hadn't been Rei's giant disembodied head in the distance. In fact, she had been right there with them.

The grassy hill outside the city's borders had seemed inviting to end their trip and time flew by as they had merely sat there, enjoying the view and the closeness to each other in the shadows of the trees behind them. Eventually, the sun had set and one by one the countless stars had appeared on the darkening sky. Aki was already fast asleep in her mother's arms as the night fell, but her parents still didn't feel like going home already, trying to keep this romantic setting as long as possible. The heat of the summer day was fading very slowly, so Asuka didn't worry yet that it would get too cold for the little one anytime soon.

"I guess I got used to it to some extent. But there **are** no humans there anymore, so my point stands," Asuka answered her husband's question dryly, leaning her head against his shoulder. But as she glanced up, a little smile appeared on her lips. "You we're also right though. The sky is much more beautiful like this."

It was hard not to feel that way. Even with the red streak crossing them, the stars shone brightly, untouched by anything that had transpired on this little planet. But even against such an overwhelming display of vastness, Asuka didn't feel intimidated or small. She rather felt welcomed as a part of them.

"Rei might have been even more of a philosopher than I – and maybe even herself – thought back then."

This time it was Shinji who was taken by surprise. "Huh?"

"You remember what she said about humans surviving by mastering fire to escape the darkness? She apparently just meant that the human advantage of science, which allowed us to evolve to what we've become, was born out of fear. But I wonder if it can't also refer to something inside the human heart instead. That without that fire, that light within us, we'd end up consumed by the dark loneliness."

A low sigh let her look down to the bundle in her arms and she smiled as she saw and felt Aki trying to snuggle closer against her mother's warm bosom in her sleep. "I have my brightest light right here. And I'll protect her from the darkness just as she does for me. I'm sure, as long as we have each other, there's nothing that could hurt us."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Ouch! Aki! Aki, stop that please!" Asuka winced as the straining pain returned once again. "Ah! Aki, you're hurting Mama!"

However, the giddy baby in her arms couldn't understand the meaning of her pleading tone. Carefully, Asuka tried to entangle the strand of loose hair from her daughter's grip with one hand, but the close angle and the fear to drop her child accidentally when changing her hold of Aki left her only her fingertips to work with. And for someone so small, her little daughter was quite strong. With big eyes, Aki looked up to her mother as she tried to put the captured hair into her smiling mouth.

Eventually, Asuka gave up. "Shinji!"

"What is..." he called back from the floor, but trailed off as he entered Aki's room and saw his wife's predicament. "She's pulling your hair again?" he asked the obvious, already stepping over to help.

"Ah?" Aki looked at him with bewilderment as he held her and entangled the red strands from her small hand. Before she could start to cry at the loss of her "toy", Shinji carefully took her from Asuka's arms and held her close.

"Just what does she always want with my hair?" Asuka asked exhausted, though the question wasn't directed at anyone in particular.

"Well, she sure likes it," Shinji concurred anyway, placing Aki cautiously into her bed. "It smells good after all, and it's sooo bright red." He exaggerated the last words, tickling his baby-girl, who responded with a wild kicking and wide laugh on her face.

"Don't upset her so much," Asuka muttered, not really looking at him as she twirled her hair between her fingers. "It's time for her nap, that's why I wanted to lay her into her bed."

"Okay, okay," he now whispered as her pulled the blankets over his daughter and gave her a kiss on the small forehead. "Sweet dreams, Aki."

The girl whimpered a bit as he went out of her sight, but he forced himself to ignore it. He turned to Asuka and came closer, but she stopped him before he could wrap his arms around her. "Shinji?" she asked lowly. "Could you get the hair scissors?"

"Huh? We did the haircuts just a few days ago," he wondered.

Asuka sighed deeply. "I know. I... I think it might be better if I lose a bit more."

"Eh? You mean...?"

"Well, it would be more practical. I mean, how often did I already forget to pull my hair back, especially when she's crying at night?" She turned to him, somehow managing a weak smile. "And it's not like you love me just because of my long, flowing hair, do you?"

He still stared at her, apparently wondering if she was sure about this, but after a second he returned her smile and nodded slowly.

"Okay then. Get yourself ready, I'll be with you in a moment."

-x-x-x-x-

Asuka was watching herself, sitting on a small chair in front of the bathroom's mirror. She couldn't deny the sentimentality she felt at that sight of her, knowing that another aspect of her life was about to end. She tensed as she saw Shinji approaching behind her, picking a pair of scissors from their haircutting utensils.

"So, how...?"

"Not- not too much," she cut him off, harsher than intended. Immediately, her shoulder sagged again. "Just so much, that she... well, that she won't be able to reach them that easily. I-I don't know... the shoulders?" She sighed in defeat. "Maybe a little above...?"

He just nodded.

Asuka closed her eyes as he began his work. She didn't want to see it. It was hard enough to hear the constant clipping of the scissors as they lifted the familiar weight off her. It had taken her years to grow and take care of it, and she had always been proud of the healthy strands, basking in the compliments for her hair already before she had come to Japan where it stood out even more thanks to its natural bright red color. And now it was just a matter of minutes until Shinji made the final snip.

"Okay, I think I'm finished," he announced.

She took two deep breaths, unsure if she really *wanted* to see the result, but then, hesitatingly, she opened her eyes again.

He had actually done a quite decent work. Her hair now stopped shortly above her shoulders in several fine strands, a little shorter to the sides. But it somehow felt strange to believe that the person looking back at her from the mirror was actually herself. Almost absently, she trailed her hand through the remains of her red mane.

"I'm looking old..." she stated wearily.

"No," Shinji said, reassuringly smiling as he leaned down to her. "You look like a mother..."

And for some reason, getting rid of all that messy hair suddenly didn't seem all that bad anymore.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Oh, not again!" Shinji whined, holding his daughter away from him as he sprinted with her to the bathroom. If her "Uh-Oh"-face wasn't enough to tell him what she just did, the stench surely was.

Asuka was just busy loading the washing machine for the second time that day, as they stormed in, going straight for the changing table.

"Again?" she instantly asked, just as worn out as him. "That's the third time since this morning!"

"I know," Shinji grumbled, already pulling Aki's romper off. "If it goes on like this, we'll have to go and get more diapers today after all."

"I'm rather wondering where to put all the used ones! We can't waste gas with daily trips to the dumpster."

"Maybe we should use cloth ones?"

Asuka pointed at the heaps of clothing at her feet. "And have even more laundry?" She made the mistake of walking over to them just as Shinji took off the diaper. "Ooh," she clenched her eyes shut, trying to wave the stench away, while Aki was just giggling at the funny faces her parents made.

"Could it be that something's wrong with her digestion?"

"I'm afraid not," he shook his head, wiping his child clean after throwing the full diaper into the "contamination unit" as they tended to call the lidded trash can by now. Meanwhile, Aki just waved her fingers at her grossed out parents while baby powder was applied.

"But she's also barfing a lot," Asuka pointed out, looking back at the heap of clothes where Aki's dinner from yesterday was easily to be seen on her favorite shirt.

"Maybe we're just giving her too... HEY!" Shinji protested as he was shoved aside by his wife.

"Let me handle this," she announced, grabbing a fresh diaper from the stack.

"But she's always whining when you do it! You put them on too tight!"

And indeed, Aki's face turned into a slight frown as her mother pulled the sticky straps taut. Asuka however stayed true to her firm stance.

"No, I'm putting them on just right! You put them on too lightly! It might take her a little while longer to get comfortable in them, but at least it won't leak afterwards, which would be much worse for all of us!" Asuka explained while redressing her daughter, who, true to her mother's words, was already forgetting the uncomfortable tightness when she was picked up from the table. Scooped up in the cozy arms of her Mama, she quickly returned to her energetic self...

For about ten seconds.

"AGAIN?" her parents whined in unison.

Sighing, Asuka began to unbutton the jumper once more. "Remind me, how long till we can try potty training?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm home!" Shinji called into the house as he slipped off his boots and put the bucket with the underwhelming results of his fishing-trip to the side. Aki's loud crying hung in the air, so when he got no answer, he thought that Asuka just hadn't heard him.

That this interpretation was far from correct became apparent when his wife stormed into the hallway, rocking their baby daughter at her shoulder. A look into Asuka's puffy red eyes just heightened the impression that something was terribly wrong.

"Shinji!" she sobbed on the border of being hysterical. "I already wanted to go searching for you! I-I think she's sick! I – she – "

Shinji didn't lose time and quickly closed the space between them, placing one soothing hand around his upset wife who instantly buried her face against his shoulder, the other on his agonizing child's back. Feeling Asuka calming slightly, he took Aki carefully from her, feeling for the baby's temperature, but finding no signs of a fever.

"She- she's been crying the whole time," Asuka told him sniffing. "But there's nothing in her diaper and she's not sleepy and she's not hungry either. And no matter how much I carry her around, she won't calm down."

"Have you tried her pacifier?" Shinji tried to keep rational, wiping the wetness of tears and saliva from Aki's chin.

Asuka shook her head. "She's been drooling so much, I feared that it might give her trouble breathing. But she doesn't seem to have swallowed something either."

He nodded in acknowledgment as he gently pushed a probing finger into his daughter's mouth, which she instantly clamped down on. Her jaws weren't strong enough to hurt him, but her reaction was just another indication for his assumption. "She probably just wants something to chew on."

"Chew?"

Shinji tried his best assuring smile at her flabbergasted expression. "I think she's teething," he explained. "They don't seem to be out already, but I guess that can be any day now. We should have a teether somewhere; that might ease..." He trailed off as he noticed that Asuka didn't share his

enthusiasm, but slid exhausted down the wall. A quivering hand went up to her forehead.

"T-teething?" she breathed before sobs rocked her body as tears formed streaks on her face.

Worried, Shinji got onto his knees himself, careful to keep Aki balanced in his arms who was also watching her mother with troubled eyes. "Asuka..."

But she just flinched away. "I-I thought... and then she just..." She shook her head. "I should have known. I should have known, but it didn't even come to my mind. What... what kind of mother am I?"

"Asuka, don't say such things. You're not a bad mother just because you can't instantly read every sign she gives you."

"B-but this is not giving her a wrong toy or... or trying to feed her if she just wants to cuddle. I should have known this!"

"Shh," he tried to calm her, pulling his finger free and lay his hand on her cheek, drying the tears of the sniffing woman. "How long did you sleep last night?"

"W-what?" Asuka sniffed, obviously puzzled about the seemingly unfitting question.

"I've noticed that you're often lying awake as if you were still waiting for her to start crying any moment," Shinji explained, shifting his position to gently rock Aki on his right knee who already seemed like she was about to start wailing again.

"I... I don't know," Asuka eventually admitted. "I'm... I keep fearing that she could need me any time. Every little sound keeps me awake in anticipation of more to come." She sighed with an angry frown; a sign for Shinji that she was chiding herself. "I guess I'm often just imagining things..."

"There you have it," he concurred. "You're just tired. I think Aki's sleeping much better by now than you did the last few weeks."

"Ah!"

The sound let both look down to their baby who also was reaching for Asuka with a concerned look in her bright blue eyes.

"See?" Shinji asked smiling as his wife closed the space between the two girls' hands. "She doesn't like to see her great mother sad either."

That finally got a small laugh out of Asuka. Shinji gave her a short kiss before he continued whispering, "Get some rest. I'll take care of her for the rest of today."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

One last time, Shinji checked the contents of the pots on the stove before he was satisfied enough and turned to leave the kitchen. As he entered the living room, he saw the two women of his life facing each other.

Asuka lay on her stomach, head resting on her left arm, as she stared into their daughter's sparkling eyes. Aki was on her small hands and knees bobbing giddily up and down as she watched her mother from her "training mat". They had spread the fluffy blanket there on the floor where they could keep an eye on the child while she could make her attempts to crawl on a softer ground than the carpet.

Between mother and daughter, however, weren't the usual toys that currently lay scattered on the blanket behind the baby girl, but a piece of paper and a box of crayons, a blue one in Aki's tiny fist – on

the way to her mouth.

"Oh no no no, that's not to eat!" Asuka quickly interjected, cupping Aki's hand with her own and brought it down to the paper, leading it over the surface so the wax formed a circle. "There, you put that on the paper and draw nice colored lines."

"Ah!" Aki's eyes went wide, her free hand clapping against the floor in excitement at that new amazing discovery, smiling broadly as she looked up to her talented mother who could produce such wonders.

Shinji, however, was watching that scene from a much more concerned point of view. "Eh..."

"Oh hey," Asuka turned her head as she noticed him, "Dinner ready?"

"Yeah, but... Asuka, I... eh..."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

He sighed, the flat tone of her voice warning him of the inevitable. "Ah, nothing..."

"What, baka?" she pressured more aggressively, but not as menacing so as not to scare Aki, who was further curiously examining the crayon in her hand.

"Well... don't you think it's a little early for her to draw pictures?"

Asuka just rolled her eyes. "Of course she can't draw a second Mona Lisa, but I'm sure she likes seeing that she can create something, even if it's just a bunch of wild lines."

"Yeah, but I'm afraid not only on paper but also on walls, the carpet, her clothes... and of course her mouth," he concluded, pointing at their daughter who was already trying to taste the wax again.

Startled, Asuka spun back around, grasping the small hand once more. "Oh, Aki, no! I told you that's not to eat!" she pleadingly repeated the earlier lecture, but given the baby's wondering look, with the same sorry result. Asuka sighed in defeat.

"Well then, if you're that hungry, we better get going," she mumbled to her child, picking Aki up while rising. "Papa has dinner ready after all."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

She had fought many fierce battles, fought against monstrous enemies, fought on the brink of death for the sake of nothing less than the entire human race (and her ego). But none of those fights had taken as much toll on her willpower, had brought her so close to admitting defeat as the times she was faced with these ultimate weapons: The bright blue eyes of her daughter.

"Don't look at me like that," Asuka pleaded quietly, rocking Aki on her arms as she carried her towards the crib in the already darkened room. "You know it's time for you to sleep."

"Eh?"

Asuka sighed tiredly, but at the same time couldn't help but smile as Aki cocked her head to the side, cuddling closer in an attempt to gain more sympathy. Motherly instinct or otherwise, she somehow was pretty sure her little one just feigned ignorance, actually knowing quite well that it was about time to call it a day.

Her little one... she was already not quite as little as she used to be actually. Asuka had always rolled her eyes at parents lamenting about their children growing up so fast, but now that she was facing the rapid changes herself, she had a bit more understanding for such statements. Aki had already outgrown

three rompers and the pink piece she donned now was also starting to strain. The fine layer of brown hair had become rather thick and comparably long, a good inch hanging freely down her neck.

And it wasn't just in terms of size. She was crawling around the house and garden so fast now that Asuka almost felt old, having to keep up with the energetic girl whenever Aki took too much interest in all too yummy-looking small objects, open doors that led to the outside world, or in stairs and other miraculous heights.

They finally got her to eat solid food a while ago – as much as actually goes into her mouth that is. It wasn't that she didn't like it, quite the contrary. The first time Shinji had tried to feed her, she had waved her arms in joy at the first taste so much that she accidentally hit the bowl on the table of her highchair at such an angle that it somersaulted into the air, spilling its contents over his shirt before it landed in his face.

Asuka still had to chuckle at the memory of him covered in the mashed carrots – he surely didn't. Nonetheless, feeding was still the better option. It's not like she couldn't hold a spoon and certainly not that she was unable to shove something into her mouth with her hands, though coordination was still certainly lacking. But most importantly, she'd often forget the contents of her hands or would purposely start to play with it, so feeding her was much less time consuming than having to clean the entire kitchen (as well as the little girl herself).

It was only a question of time though that the little rascal in her arms would learn that as well.

But Asuka didn't feel the twinge of sadness that usually came along with some parent's concerns about changes. No, she felt elated, proud whenever she saw Aki making new discoveries, learning new facts about the huge world around her, gaining new abilities. After all, it was her daughter, her little child. To see her blossom was the biggest accomplishment that Asuka ever got.

The red-haired mother hadn't realized until then that she was humming a lullaby for the now yawning girl, who finally ceased her resistance and accepted that it was bedtime. Aki didn't fight at all when her mother carefully laid her down in her bed and after another sung verse of the song, her eyes fell shut. Asuka smiled at the peaceful sight, caressing the brown locks of her daughter once more.

"Gute Nacht, mein Schatz." A last kiss on the forehead of her baby, then she went to go and let her sleep as usual. But this time she didn't get far.

"Nah!"

Asuka instantly whirled around. "What?" With only two big steps, she stood back at the bed where a very awake Aki was giggling at the sight of her. "Did you just say...?"

"Nah!"

Wide-eyed, she picked her daughter up again, a proud grin slowly formed on her mouth that still stood open from surprise.

"Shinji!" she yelled. "SHINJI!"

It took him only a few seconds to come bolting into the room with a panicked look on his face. He must have mistaken the urgency in her call as an emergency, which was also evident in his voice. "Wha-what is it?" he panted.

Feeling guilty, however, was the last thing on Asuka's mind. "She said her first word!" she exclaimed beaming, not even thinking of apologizing for scaring him.

Shinji sighed in relief. "Ah, that's all? I already thought..." he trailed off as her words finally reached his higher brain functions. "Wait, what?!"

"I wished her a good night and she tried to repeat," Asuka explained, not taking her eyes off the giggling girl in her arms who obviously enjoyed the extra attention she was getting tonight.

Shinji however scratched his head, looking rather disbelieving. "You're probably just interpreting a bit too much into the sounds she made. She always mumbled a bit, hasn't she? It's a little early for her to speak."

"Do you hear that?" Asuka didn't bother to answer him directly and just addressed Aki. "Your Papa doesn't believe that you can talk already. But we'll show him, right?"

"Uh?" the child cooed.

"Can you say 'Mama'?"

"Asuka," Shinji interjected half-sighing.

She still ignored him however. "Come on, say 'Mama'," she plead.

"Ah?"

""Ma-ma'."

"Asuka, it's no use to force..."

"Amam!"

The room fell instantly silent aside from the innocent laugh of the ten months old as these syllables left Aki's mouth.

"See?" Asuka beamed.

"That's... certainly... uh... surprising," Shinji admitted, but for once, his wife ignored him instead of gloating in the fact of being right.

"Can you say 'Papa'?" she urged the child she was rocking her arms further on, bursting with pride of her smart daughter. "'Pa – pa' "

She wasn't disappointed. "Baga!"

The two almost-adults looked at each other with mirrored surprise, but while Asuka's turned into amusement, Shinji's rather became – fearful? "She didn't really just say what I think she said, did she...?"

Asuka was too busy laughing to answer though. But that ebbed away to a weak smile as she felt the little body against her, and she noticed her arms tightening a bit more around Aki, cuddling closer.

Another "first" gone...

Okay, so maybe there was a certain twinge after all...

But just a really, really small one.

Really.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Two weeks..."

Not quite understanding the meaning of the words he muttered to himself as he sat hunched over his

desk, Asuka's curiosity demanded to know more.

"Huh?"

Shinji jerked slightly, apparently not having noticed her in the doorway until she had made herself aware. "Oh, hi. Done for today?"

"Yeah, I hope so," Asuka yawned. "She's fast asleep and I feel like I'll follow her soon."

The sun hadn't even totally set, but she felt more tired than after an endless training session. Why hadn't anyone told her that taking care of a small baby could be so straining?

"Why don't you go to bed then?" Shinji predictably offered. "I'll be with you as soon as I'm finished here."

She shook her head. "Take as much time as you need, I probably won't notice anymore when you come in anyway," she muttered feeling her eyelids becoming heavier again. "Just... what did you mean by 'two weeks'?"

"Oh that..." A little smile spread on Shinji's face. "In two weeks it will be one year."

"One year since...?" Asuka repeated expectantly until she realized. Her drowsiness was instantly pushed aside by excitement, if only for a moment. "You mean... it's Aki's birthday? You kept track of it?"

"Yeah. Did you never see it?" he asked, holding up a makeshift calendar that, at least for now, seemed to consist of only one huge month. "It's been 351 days now."

"Time went by so fast. I always thought that's just something old people think when they have nothing better to do but to age. But I guess it doesn't stop for us either," Asuka mused, smiling faintly. "So it's two more weeks, huh? Let's see, what do we need for the party? Presents of course and a cake, oh, and decorations; do we still have balloons?"

"Party?" Shinji cut her off. "Do you think all that will be necessary? She's still too small to have any fond memories of it later anyway."

"So what? It'll be fun! And as good parents, it is of course our duty to take photos of her first birthday, wearing a cute hat and her whole face smeared full of cake to torture her with in a few years."

Shinji chuckled at that. "I guess I better search for the video camera too then."

Asuka chimed in to his laughter, ruffling his hair. "Oh, I love it when you're evil."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"God, you really start to look like Kensuke with that thing," Asuka groaned, before she had to evade being hit by the camera as her addressed husband turned around without taking it down from his eye.

"What? I missed recording her first crawling because I hadn't thought of it and I missed recording her first words because I didn't believe that they actually *were* her first words. I'm not going to miss her first steps too."

Asuka rolled her eyes while shaking her head as she let herself fall back against the back of the couch. Next to her, Shinji instantly focused the lens back on their daughter who had heaved herself up to look over the table, bobbing slightly up and down as she stared transfixed at her favorite ball on it, like a lioness watching its prey. A small and much too giddy lioness. Asuka considered just giving her the red and yellow-striped toy, but she had learned that it would ruin most of the fun for Aki and she would get

bored with it soon after receiving it that way. At worst, she'd even start to cry for having her "game" ruined.

It was true that she was due to start walking. She had actually taken a few wobbly steps already when holding tightly onto the furniture or her parents' hands, but so far never freely on her own. It was just a question of time though.

So, Shinji had started to follow their child's activities with the camera he got awhile ago the whole day long. A part of Asuka found that rather cute, but even that part got slowly overshadowed by the one who found it incredibly silly. And there was also a small part that started to feel neglected...

"Just give it up already. You're doing this for almost three days now," she complained. "She apparently has no intention to become a movie star."

"I doubt that," Shinji murmured without even looking at her. "She's *your* daughter after all."

"WHAT WAS THAT?"

He almost dropped the camera, maybe not even having been aware that he had said it out loud. Asuka already loomed over him, putting her best efforts into her most intimidating grimace and it didn't fail her, as fear and confusion were written on his face.

"Are you saying that I'm egocentric?!" she accused him as he backed farther away.

"W-well... no... I-I..." He reached the end of the couch and slid off as long as he still could.

But she kept pursuing him. "That I always have to stand in the spotlight?!"

"H-Honey, I..." he weakly tried to appease her, and Asuka had to watch out not to crack a smile. They only used such terms of endearment if they acted overly sappy for fun or if they (he) tried to calm the other.

"That I want to be glorified by every breathing being on the planet?!"

She pretty much had him pinned against the wall by now, even though he still tried to back up farther as she glared directly into his eyes. "N-no, of course not..."

"No?" she suddenly shrunk away, placing more than enough disappointment in her voice. Now she couldn't hide her grin anymore as she didn't leave him any route to escape. "I thought you would know at least that much of me by now."

With a sigh, he slumped down as he finally realized the prank, and she couldn't help but giggle.

"After all this time, you're still..." she trailed off as she turned around and found her path blocked.

Aki just smiled at her baffled face. "Mamam?"

The prior amusement was mixed with an endless amount of pride and Asuka's renewed grin was no longer from a silly little joke. The whole thing hadn't taken longer than a few seconds; the small girl couldn't have crawled over, and even less, stand up without help in that time.

A sigh came from behind her. "And I missed it again."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Aki laughed loudly, obviously enjoying to walk over the funny ground, holding onto both of her parents' hands. Her eyes were fixed on her feet that dug into the grains of sand each time she made a

wobbly step. Either she was completely unaware of her surroundings or, what was also quite likely, she didn't care, not knowing about the horrific sight or even the abnormality of the crucified EVAs or the giant head in the distance.

"That she's not even bothered by the smell..." Asuka wondered out loud.

"Well, it's her first time at the beach," Shinji reasoned. "The first time she isn't carried and sleeping most of the time, at least. So it's just another new thing yet to discover for you, isn't it?"

He met Aki's grinning face at that last sentence, the girl, even though it was unlikely that she understood much of the discussion, able to tell by the change of his tone that he was talking to her. She pulled her hand free from her mother's pointing to something before her.

"Mama wawa!" she exclaimed giddily.

"Mama what?" Asuka asked her, but only got her answer in the girl also prying free from her father's hold and starting to sprint.

Then, to her horror, Asuka understood. With her very limited vocabulary, Aki had more than once used the word "Mama" as a synonym for something red. Her heart almost stopped as she saw her daughter running laughingly towards the LCL-sea.

"No Aki, wait!"

Instinctively, she leaped forward to catch her child before she could come in contact with the fluid, before she would become... like them...

But she suddenly found herself held back. Staring at Shinji in shock and disbelief, she tried to break free, to save...

"Let her," he said, unbelievably calm, as if nothing was wrong. "It's shallow enough around here."

"But..." She finally escaped his hold, but saw that it was already too late, Aki ran splashing around, obviously amazed at the "Mama-water". Nothing had happened.

Asuka's shoulders sagged in relief, but she also felt incredibly silly for her unreasonable panic attack. Of course nothing happened. They had been in contact with LCL thousands of times without instantly being reduced to it as well. But since all of that happened... Neither of them had ever touched it since they had escaped the sea.

Naturally, it still made her feel sick to think of what it truly was in which her daughter was running so carefree, but of course, Aki couldn't know it.

She had never envied her daughter's ignorance so much.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Aki, don't dawdle, please!"

The one and a half year old looked up at her father's call, quickening the pace of her wobbly steps to catch up with him. She smiled brightly, clutching her new possession in the form of a coloring book with both of her arms.

Shinji tried to return that smile, but it was rather forced. He would feel better if he could carry his daughter. Not only would that be much faster, but also much safer for a small girl that was still a bit uneasy on her legs, especially in these surroundings. But his load from their "shopping" trip was

already straining his capacities to their max.

He could understand that it was exciting for her to come here, but the ruins of Tokyo-3 were a much too dangerous place to fool around for his liking. But if they'd keep her just in the house and garden, the more she would get curious about the outside world and would do who-knew-what to see it.

A *little* curiosity was hardly a crime, at least not for a child her age. But he wished it wouldn't include crawling in every hole that was in danger of collapsing, spying around every corner and climbing on every pile of scattered concrete, just to see what new and exciting things might await her there.

That already was enough for him to worry about each of her steps. He would have rather driven the truck right in front of the store, but the area was one of the most affected, the debris of the once majestic buildings making it almost impassable for anything but a 4 wheel drive or something thin enough to pass the small corridor of what had remained of the broad street.

And the unstable surroundings weren't even the biggest danger.

"Papa?" Her curious voice made Shinji stop again. She looked up to him with wide blue eyes and pointed to something with her small left hand. "Doggy?"

His combat-trained senses instantly sharpened. Following the direction with his eyes, he stepped defensively in front of his daughter, slowly lowering the three full shopping bags to the ground. He wasn't quite sure what it was that lay still behind a pile of rubble with only its orange-brown fur showing, but it lurked in their path and he wouldn't risk a surprise attack from it.

"Stay here," he hushed to Aki. "I'll be right back."

Grabbing a rusty steel rod that had once been part of a building's netting mesh, he carefully stepped forward, praying it would be something harmless that would be running away at the mere sight of him. Making a loud sound might have the same effect and safe the thrill, but it could just as well make something less harmless aware of them in the first place and he preferred to have the moment of surprise on his side in that case.

As he climbed over the pile, weapon raised above his head with both arms to strike with full power at any time, he cursed as he accidentally kicked a stone off that clanked several times on its way down. Fortunately, whatever it was must have been either deaf or fast asleep or...

... dead.

As he reached the top of the hill, ready to strike, he noticed that there was no more need for that. What must have been a stray cat lay ripped open in a puddle of blood.

Fresh blood.

It wasn't so much the gory sight that sent chills down his bones, but rather the fact that this must have been done very recently. Whatever did this had probably been disturbed – and most likely by the two of them. Which meant it was still nearby.

He instantly turned around to look for Aki. There was a moment of panicked shock, when he only saw her new book at the place where he left her, but felt quickly relieved when he recognized her form trying to climb on a big piece of a shattered quoin. He was behind her in a matter of seconds, eliciting a startled shriek as he lifted her off the concrete until she realized it was him.

"Didn't I tell you to stay there?" Shinji tried his best to form his concern into sternness, but under her innocent look it didn't take long to melt that mask away. With a sigh, he pulled her close, a weary smile on his face. "You're really a little monkey, aren't you?"

"Mongy!" Aki concurred cheerfully, giggling against him.

"Come on. We better see that we get back." He shifted her so he could hold her with one arm, slouched down to pick up her book and gave it to her, then grabbed the bags with his free hand. He wasn't sure how, but apparently even at their max, his capacities still managed a little extra weight as long as it came in form of a little brown-haired girl.

-X-X-X-X-

"We're home!"

"ome!" Aki chimed into his greeting as they entered, quick tapping indicating that she ran past her father.

"Welcome home!" Asuka shouted back from the bathroom, where she quickly dried her hands off and came out. The exhaustion the last few hours of work had caused her was quickly forgotten as she was immediately greeted by a 90cm tall rocket that aimed for her.

"Mama!"

Beaming, Asuka didn't hesitate to bend down and let her daughter run into her open arms. "Hey, hallo mein Schätzchen," she welcomed Aki as she picked the lively girl up. "Did you have fun?"

Aki nodded eagerly, then presented the book she was holding. "Loo'!"

"Ooh, what do you have there?" Asuka asked overly curious.

"Co'owin boo'!"

"A coloring book?" she again asked feigning utmost fascination, continuing to play her role as unknowing parent. "Did you 'convince' Papa again to get you something?"

She glanced smirking over to her husband who was busy unpacking the shopping bags. He quickly averted his view, playfully pouting at the hidden scolding. "It's not my fault that she's irresistible when she wants to be. She got that from you."

That she had never been someone to easily blush at compliments didn't mean that Asuka didn't know to cherish them, even if they came off as casual as then. Smiling broadly, she brought her attention back to the girl in her arms. "So why don't we go out on the porch and color a few pages?"

"Yah!" Aki squealed happily, but when her mother took a few steps towards the door leading to the garden, she started to tense. "Wai'!"

"Huh? What is it?" Asuka asked, knowing fully well what was still missing.

"No c'ayo'!"

"Oh yes, we need crayons for that! I totally forgot! Good thing you're such a smart girl!" she praised her daughter, ruffling her hair to elicit a giggle. "You know what? You go on and pick the pictures you want to color now and I'll go and get the crayons after a short talk with Papa, okay?"

"kay," Aki nodded and as soon as she was put down on her feet toddled outside after struggling with the "heavy" door, but the "big girl" she was, she managed to shove it open. Still wearing the proud smile, Asuka managed to break away from that display and went over to Shinji who was still busy sorting the goods.

"So, how was the trip?"

Shinji sighed, not looking up from his task. "You know how I feel when we take her to the city."

"So you rather spoil her to make up for it?"

"I'm not spoiling her..."

"Riiight, that's why she gets something every time you two are out," she teased. But her grin fell as her attempts hit him like a breeze of air that hits a rock. "Oh, come on, it was you who said she would need to get out more often and there hadn't been a major incident yet."

"Yet..." Shinji repeated silently.

Asuka groaned. "Okay, what's really bothering you?"

"Hm?"

"When you're spacing out so much that you won't even look up while talking with me, it usually means that something big is troubling you."

Now he *did* look up, blinking in surprise.

"What? Shouldn't a good wife know her husband's habits?" she questioned indignantly, though it had actually just been a good guess, as a blind man would have seen that something was wrong with him. "I bet you would do that hand-clenching-thing too, if they wouldn't be in use right now."

"That's something I do when I'm nervous about a decision," he retorted flatly.

"Eh... so what is it you're thinking about?" she quickly changed the topic.

"I was thinking that..." He paused for a second to take a breath. "Maybe we should strengthen the fence."

"Why? It seems in good shape."

"I've seen another one. Still fresh."

Now her shoulders sagged just as his, immediately understanding his words. The atmosphere suddenly became tense. "Did Aki see...?"

He quickly shook his head. "Don't think so; I blocked her view with my body as we went past it."

Asuka sighed angrily, holding herself as an involuntary shiver ran down her spine. "That would be the sixth in the last few weeks: Two rabbits, a cat, the baby monkey, even a dog, and now..."

"Another cat," Shinji finished. "At least I think so, guessing by the remains. Maybe it's that pack of wild dogs passing through again. They didn't stay long last year, but..."

"But you're right. We might should upgrade our defenses."

Shinji suddenly shook his head. "It still doesn't make sense. Killing but leaving the prey behind... Isn't that an unusual behavior for an animal?"

Asuka smirked weakly. "Why should humans be the only ones with a mental sickness?" She took a deep breath then, trying to force the potential danger out of her head, not wanting it lingering on her mind when she played with her daughter. "Well, we can continue this later. I better not let Aki alone too long."

As if she had summoned it, a loud squeal erupted outside.

The shock froze the concerned parents in place for a second before they bolted to the door to the veranda. The coloring book lay open on the table, but Aki wasn't sitting on the bench in front of it. She was nowhere to be seen at all.

"Aki?"

The panic that was dwelling within Asuka rose with every second she frantically scanned the area for a sign of her little child, without result. Her heart leaped when she heard Aki's clear laugh, strangely

seeming to come somewhere from above.

There! The branches of the tree near their fence were moving despite the lack of wind! Asuka ran the short distance at a speed that exceeded her best times during her training, fueled by the fear for her daughter that let her forget about Shinji or questions as to how Aki could have gotten up there on her own.

The answer to that was rather easy: She hadn't done it on her own.

"Mama!" the girl greeted her cheerfully. "Mongey!"

Aki was laughing giddily, unaware of what was actually happening to her as two of her screeching new playmates tried to heave her up, holding the child suspended in the air at her upper arms in their attempt to climb. They must have somehow used some of the branches that reached over the fence to get in. A third macaque yelled fiercely at Asuka, but she heeded it no mind, not even when it broke off a stick and threw it at her. She barely even noticed it hitting her forehead.

"AKI!" She jumped, trying to catch her baby, but her fingers only brushed against the little feet. Instantly, she tried once more, but not only failed again, yet also missed the landing and stumbling, she fell to the ground.

Cold steel seemed to crush against her heart as she struggled to her feet, watching the animals screaming and mocking her as they were about to continue their flight – along with her daughter.

Asuka had never felt so helpless in her entire life.

It couldn't be. It couldn't be that she couldn't do anything

But just as she contemplated her chances of climbing after them up the slick tree, a shovel came into her view.

Shinji had used the diversion his wife had provided to get close without being noticed, managing a perfect swipe at one of the monkeys that were holding Aki, causing it to lose its grip. Aki's weight was too much for the second, and she slid out of its grasp. Moving purely on reflex Asuka lurched forward and somehow managed to catch her still laughing girl, instantly pulling her into a tight hug, tears of relief breaking free.

"Aki," she sobbed, stroking the brown hair. Something she almost feared for a few agonizing seconds she would never be able to do again. "Oh God, Aki."

Never before had she felt so powerless. Never before, not even while looking straight into Death's eyes, had she felt such fear.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Shinji swinging the shovel around, threatening the monkeys away and in the back of her mind, an old mock-name surfaced. The "Invincible Shinji". Doing everything she wanted but couldn't. Taking the fame and glory that should have belonged to her.

But her ego didn't have a say in this today. Not when he had saved her baby.

The toddler's laughing had ceased in her mother's arms, finally realizing that it hadn't just been a fun game.

"Mama no cwy," Aki said sadly, backing slightly away from Asuka's hold and reaching with her small hand for her mother's cheek in an attempt to imitate the soothing patterns she had received herself often before.

"It's okay. It's okay, Schätzchen," Asuka assured her child, her voice still as shaky as her heartbeat while her breathing slowly calmed again. She looked around for her husband. "Shinji? Let's start with

that fence right now."

He just nodded, already aiming for the tool shed. "I'll start with cutting that tree down."

She returned the nod thankfully.

Never before had she felt so powerless. Never before had she felt such fear. And whatever it took, she would make sure that she'd never feel this way again.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sticking the shovel in the soil, Asuka leaned on it as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. The heat and the work were bad enough on their own, but together, they were certainly taking their toll on her and she needed a break, even if just for a few seconds.

Of course she also used it to look, as every so often, over to the veranda. It had always been normal for her and Shinji to keep Aki at least within sight if neither of them were able to take care of her. And even though she didn't want the toddler to feel like being under constant surveillance, the incident with the monkeys a few months ago had only made her more wary.

The bigger was her shock when she didn't see her brown-haired girl bouncing her ball as she had done just a minute ago anymore. Fortunately her panic attack only lasted a second as the very same ball landed in the dirt right in front of her feet.

"Wanna pway!" Aki stood before her, pouting.

"Nein, Schätchen, I told you I have to work. I can't play with you." Asuka smiled a tired smile. She could very well understand that her two years old was bored with her mother working and her Papa gone fishing. These, along with the wish to have some time alone with her husband now and then, were the times she wished she could just hire a babysitter once in a while.

Aki huffed angrily, though she looked much too cute like that to be threatening. "Wanna pway!" she repeated.

Asuka's shoulders drooped and she glanced over to the rest of the line she was digging up in the soil. As much as she'd prefer to play with her daughter, her conscience was nagging her not to give in to the Pleasure Principle. Time for a compromise.

"Look, I'll finish this line, plant the seedlings and make sure the birdies won't eat them. Then, I will play with you, okay?" She would have to forget the two additional lines she had wanted to do if she'd want to get anything done at all.

"Lon'?" Aki asked concerned that she'd have to wait endlessly for her Mama.

Asuka sighed. "I don't know; if I hurry up I might be able to do it in thirty minutes."

Aki just blinked though. "Tha' lon'?"

"It's not too long," Asuka tried to assure. But she knew well enough that it would be an eternity for a child of her age. Bending down, she picked the ball up and gave it back to her daughter. "And the sooner I can get back to work, the faster I'll be finished."

The girl seemed to accept that, as she nodded and walked back towards the veranda.

However, Asuka hadn't progressed much when Aki already returned.

"No, Aki, thirty minutes aren't o..." she trailed off with the reminder to the impatient child she had

expected to be in order, when she saw that Aki no longer held her ball, but a small plastic shovel in her hand.

"Ah he'p!"

"You... you want to help me?" Asuka inquired surprised.

"He'p!" Aki confirmed nodding. "Then pway soo'!"

Asuka couldn't help but laugh. There was no doubt that the help would be – literally – rather small, given the close to non-existent manpower of the helper and the unsuited tool.

She would have been a fool not to accept it.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The mattress squeaked loudly as a body fell onto it and a feminine sigh emitted utmost tiredness.

It had been one of the harder days. Aki had been quite "uncooperative" when it was time for her bath again. The result of the ever-repeating battle of wills was once more a clean child, but also a flooded bathroom and two worn-out parents. As soon as Asuka lay in her bed, her eyes fell shut and waited for sleep to embrace her.

However, it was someone else who did that. Apparently Shinji had a better idea than to sleep. And the way he was doing it, she would easily be convinced, the tiredness already starting to wear off.

"Wha- what are you doing?" she half-moaned as he continued kissing all the way up her neck, while his hands began to roam.

"Oh, I thought that's pretty obvious," Shinji whispered seductively into her ear. It took all of her concentration not to give in right then as his hot breath tickled her.

"We... we can't," she muttered. Though wrath upon him if he should dare to stop for real!

"Yes, we can," he proclaimed, either playing along or unwilling to silence his needs for her that easily this time. "Aki is fast asleep and the times she's waking up in the middle of the night are long over."

Asuka gasped as he started to nibble on her earlobe. Enough with playing hard to get. They had way too few nights of desire and passion since Aki was born and the last one was way too long ago. "Oh, you're making the earth tremble already!"

Shinji stopped abruptly. "I'm afraid that's not me."

They both looked up, and indeed, everything that wasn't heavy or secured enough to the floor and walls was shaking and shattering.

"Oh no..." Asuka groaned as she let her head fall back onto the pillow.

Earthquakes have always been rather common in Japan and the Impacts hadn't helped much in that matter. But while she had witnessed enough by now to put such a weak one off as mild annoyance, there was one little fellow who rarely experienced a quake, even less while being aware of it.

So it was only a matter of seconds that the door was timidly pushed open.

"Mama! Papa! Everythin's shakin!"

Putting a – as she hoped – calming smile on her lips, Asuka sat up to look at her daughter who was clinging scared onto the door frame. "Yes, Schätzchen. That's an earthquake," she tried to explain.

"Ear'quick?" Aki asked shyly.

"Yes," Shinji chimed in. "But this one isn't bad. It will be over pretty soon."

Aki still didn't look very convinced, as she glanced back and forth between her parents, shifting nervously on her legs.

"Can I sweep here?" she eventually pleaded with big eyes.

Asuka quickly exchanged a knowing smile with her husband. They both had expected that question from the very moment the slight tremors started.

"Sure," Asuka said with a hint of a sigh, pulling the blanket back. "Hop in," she added, emphasizing the invitation with a gesture of her head.

Already before she ended that short sentence, the two years old trampled quickly over to the bed and climbed in between the warm bodies of her parents, who also lay down again.

"Gut' Nacht, mein Schatz," Asuka whispered as the three of them snuggled together.

"Nach', Mama... Papa..." Aki mumbled, already drifting back to sleep. Soon enough, her chest was heaving in a steady rhythm.

As Asuka looked up from her to Shinji, she couldn't hold back the low chuckle, finding him in a similar condition.

The trembling had long ended already. And so had another night full of desire and passion...

-x-x-x-x-

"Shh..."

The soft sound was the first thing Asuka heard when she woke up the next morning.

"Hmm?" she groaned, not completely awake to understand Shinji's instruction to stay quiet. Blinking, she saw him gesturing to the big bulge under the sheets on his chest.

"She's still asleep..." he whispered.

Rubbing the rest sleep out of her eyes, she recognized Aki peacefully slumbering on top of him. "How long have you been awake...?" she whispered back.

"Dunno... thirty minutes, an hour perhaps..."

"And you're still in..." She cut herself off as she finally noticed that he seemed somewhat helpless.

"What's wrong?"

He gestured again at their daughter. "She's *still asleep*," he repeated with a sigh, returning his view to the ceiling. "And as much as I love her, it's getting quite uncomfortable after a while."

The girl always got easily cranky when woken up, and at worst wouldn't speak a word to the one that had ripped her from her slumber the whole day, so it was not much surprise that he didn't want to risk that. But it's not like he had to, as long as he was careful, did he? "Why don't you just lay her next to you?"

"I tried," he explained, demonstratively placing his hands on Aki's sides to carefully pull her up. But the response came quickly in form of a sleepy, disapproving groan, and the little hands grasping tightly onto his shirt.

Asuka had to cover her mouth to suppress the laugh, causing her husband to sigh once more.

"I don't even know why she likes to sleep like this," he muttered, softly stroking Aki's back. "My chest

can't be *that* comfy, can it?"

"Well, your heartbeat is very soothing," Asuka said, still grinning as she moved a bit closer. "I know from experience..."

He groaned silently, his cheeks coloring ever so slightly. He didn't attempt to fight the inevitable kiss though.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of breakfast," she hushed before she slipped out of the bed, stretching her limbs demonstratively. "But I guess first I'll take a looong refreshing shower before."

Her laughing drowned out his groans as she hurried out the room.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"...und wenn sie nicht gestoben sind, dann leben sie noch heute..."

His curiosity raised by the unknown words, Shinji looked around the corner into the room just as Asuka closed the book, gazing dreamily at their daughter who seemed to have fallen asleep in her bed already awhile before the story had come to its end. This picture probably would have stayed this way for quite some time, if he hadn't accidentally shuffled against the carpet, causing Asuka to notice him, snapping out of her trance.

"Oh, hey," she whispered, carefully standing up so the chair wouldn't creak.

"Hey," he greeted back just as quietly, meeting her halfway in the room to share a loose hug and a fleeting kiss. "Did she give you much trouble? I heard you two from the back of the garden."

"Ah, she just got a little cranky about having to brush her teeth, but that was quickly forgotten when I threatened not to read her a goodnight story today."

"You can be really mean, you know?"

"Yeah," she admitted, her sly grin mirroring his. "But it works as long as she doesn't realize that I'd never even want to give this up."

"What did you read anyway?" Shinji finally wanted his curiosity satisfied. "It sounded German."

"Well, probably because it was," Asuka said matter-of-factly, pointing to the book. "It's a German collection of fairy tales."

"And that was...?"

"Dornröschen," she answered, but seeing his puzzled look, quickly continued, "'Sleeping Beauty'. That's her favorite," she muttered, nuzzling against Shinji's chest who followed her gaze to Aki.

"No wonder. She's one herself." And looking down where his wife seemed about to doze off, giving only an agreeing hum in reply, he got the impression that Aki might not be the only one for long. However, that still wasn't quite what he wanted to know. "But why are you reading something in German? She can't really understand it, can she?"

He could feel Asuka's sigh blowing against him. "She hasn't really complained. It *is* a part of my heritage – and so hers as well. Isn't it understandable that I want to teach her some of it too?"

"Yes, but... isn't it a bit early? I know she's smart, but she barely speaks Japanese properly."

"I thought it would be best for children to learn a second language early on?" Her head suddenly jerked

up, her eyes almost panicking. "I-I'm not forcing her to anything, I'm just reading. I'm not putting her under too much pressure, am I? I really... I really don't want..."

"Shh," he quickly calmed her, drawing her close to him. He could really slap himself for implying something like that after what Asuka had told him how she had suffered under the constant pressure to learn as much and as fast as possible when she was small. "No, you don't. And you're right I guess; other bilingual children probably get to hear even more and earlier. So maybe we should even speak some more German for her to catch up."

"We?" she asked with a mix of disbelief and amusement, matching the look on her face as she raised it once more. "Since when do *you* speak German?"

Shinji didn't ask twice to play along, pouting slightly. "I *do* know some German words."

Asuka, now broadly grinning, slowly pulled herself closer and closer to his face with her arms around his neck. "Yeah? And that would be...?"

"Well, I know 'Baumkuchen'," he began and almost had to stop already as they both fought to keep their laughter quiet at the memory of their first Angel-fight together. "I know 'Guten Morgen' and 'Gute Nacht', I know that 'Schatz' or 'Schätzchen' means something like 'honey' or 'darling' as you call Aki that quite often, I know..." his eyes wandered shortly to the sleeping form on the bed, "...a lot of swearwords that I shouldn't repeat with her in the room..." Another small giggle was suppressed as quickly as possible, fading instantly as the couple looked into each other's eyes again. "And I know another one..."

"Yeah?" she questioned expectantly.

"Yeah," he replied, feeling her breath on his lips already. "Ich leibe Sie."

The upcoming kiss... was instantly aborted as Asuka failed to stifle another chuckle.

"What?" Shinji asked perplexed.

"No-nothing," she shook her head, gasping for air. It wasn't very convincing. "You just have a... cute accent..."

"I got it wrong, didn't I?" Shinji groaned disgruntled.

"Not that much," Asuka said apologizing, catching herself again.

Resting her forehead against his, she brought her lips in the position they were before. "Ich liebe dich," she breathed, finally kissing him softly.

"I guess I still have a lot to learn if I want to keep up with the two of you," he muttered as their lips continued to tease each other.

"You can always ask..."

"How about now...?"

"Okay," she whispered huskily, glancing quickly over to the still unaware child. "But not here..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"..af de See,
shimmen af de See,
Köpfen in das Wassa,

Schänzen in die Löh!"

Asuka smiled to herself as she watched Aki eagerly sitting on her child's seat in the back of the car, curiously taking in the new surroundings outside while she sang. Eventually, the redheaded mother managed to break away from the heartwarming display and sighed happily as she leaned onto her husband's shoulder.

She had never really noticed how much the past four years of work had strained her, but when Shinji had come up with the idea, the prospect of a vacation, even if just for a few days, seemed like an invitation from heaven. The animals were taken care of, provided with enough food and water to be all fine for that short period, and in case of mother nature interfering with their trip, it was a less than an hour's drive home.

"We're almost there," Shinji reminded her. "You might want to wait to relax till you're in a hot spring."

Asuka mock-groaned, but fortunately he was right. It took only two more minutes until the car stopped right in front of the hotel they'd be staying in for the next two days. The excited redhead hardly could wait, so the luggage was quickly unloaded and shoved into the next best room big enough for the three of them.

Just ten minutes later, after quickly shedding her clothes, a deep moan escaped Asuka as her body slowly submerged into the hot water of the hotel's outdoor spring, all the little and big cramps and knots in her muscles instantly seeming to fade. A splashing sound let her open her previously closed eyes again to see that Shinji had followed her. It had taken him a little longer as he had to help Aki undress as well.

The girl, however, hadn't done as her parents yet, she looked wearily at the steaming pond.

Asuka held her arms out to her. "Come in, the water's great."

Aki glanced back and forth between her parents and the heat-emitting water. Eventually, she decided to trust her mother and reluctantly stepped forward.

She shrieked as soon as her feet touched the surface and instantly jumped back a few steps.

"Hot!" she whined.

Asuka nodded sympathetically. "Schätzchen, it's supposed to be that way. It's not that bad."

But Aki shook her head wildly, tears threatening to come any moment. "Hoooooot!"

"Maybe it's really a bit too much for her," Shinji diagnosed as he leaned over to his wife. "Children are more sensitive after all."

Asuka still looked at her hesitant daughter with growing sadness. She really wanted to enjoy the refreshing springs, to lean back and relax for the weekend. But it would hardly be a family vacation if Aki wouldn't join them and only sit at the side.

Quietly, Asuka climbed out of the pool and went over to her child. "It's okay," she told Aki as she picked her up to soothe her. "You don't have to go in if you don't want to."

"You mad at me?" Aki mumbled apologizing as she was carried towards the hotel.

Asuka sighed, stroking the brown hair. "No, I'm not mad at you," she told her truthfully. But while she couldn't feel angry at her daughter, it was hard to hide her disappointment. "It's just that I was looking forward to our vacation."

"So you sad?"

Asuka bit her lip before a 'yes' slipped out and made Aki feel even more guilty. "I-I'm sure we can think of something else that we all can..." She trailed off as Aki pushed against her, signaling that she wanted to be put down and Asuka complied before the struggling girl slipped out of her arms and fell.

As soon as Aki's feet touched the ground, she ran back to the pond, past her equally baffled father who had followed them. She stared hesitatingly at the water for a moment, before she carefully brought her right foot in again. She winced noticeably at the contact and Asuka already wanted to tell her that she didn't have to do this, but she bravely went farther in.

"Not so bad on dis side!" she proclaimed as she sat down on a stone in the water, obviously lying, as her chest was heaving heavily in attempt to get cool air in to compensate the heat outside.

Smiling thankfully, Asuka quickly returned into the hot bath as well, kneeling in front of her daughter. "You're really okay like that?"

Aki hesitated, but, seeming a little surprised herself, nodded eventually as her body accommodated to the temperature.

"Thank you," Asuka whispered and kissed her on the forehead. "You know what? I'm going to teach you a new game for that." She leered at her husband who just joined them. "It's called 'Dunk Papa'."

Shinji gulped.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Aki! Time to..." Shinji trailed off, flabbergasted as he entered his daughter's room.

It certainly wasn't the mess that startled him; Aki had always come after her mother in this regard, so seeing blocks, stuffed animals, coloring books and crayons scattered around the room was no surprise.

Not even that the child he had (carefully) tried to wake had apparently long ended her sleep on her own scared him.

No, the sight was much worse.

"Dwessed mysef!" the more than awake girl exclaimed, standing on her bed where she proudly presented her outfit.

"Yeah... I can... see that..." Shinji mumbled with a nervous smile. The initial shock fading, he thought wildly how to avoid hurting his daughter's feelings while telling her that the combination of an oversized yellow T-shirt (its head hole so wide that the shirt barely remained on her shoulders) and equally baggy brown pants was anything but suitable. "You've done that... eh... very good. But don't you think something else would fit better?"

Aki smelled the rat however and clutched her shirt with both hands, shaking her head wildly. "No," she said defiantly.

But Shinji was not willing to give up so easily. Stepping over to the wardrobe, he opened the door and quickly skimmed through the clothes to find something more fitting.

"Here, how about that little blue skirt?" he asked half-pleading, half-demanding as he pulled the said item out. "That along with the top with those cute bunnies, hm? You always liked that one."

"No!" Aki yelled pouting. "Dwessed mysef!"

"And that's great, but..." he tried to argue once more, though was interrupted when Asuka came in to

see what the yelling was about.

"Something wrong?"

"Mama!" Aki's face brightened again at the sight of her mother and outstretched her arms. "Look, did all by myself!"

"Awww!" Asuka squealed, hurrying over to her child and pulled Aki close to her, picking her up while Shinji just groaned quietly. "My big girl dressed herself for the first time!"

"Asuka..." Shinji whined, but only got a hush as answer that was harsh yet quiet enough that the proud, giggling girl in her arms wouldn't hear.

"You know, that deserves one special Omelet à la Soryu for breakfast. Big little girls need extra nourishments," she announced instead, lowering a beaming Aki to the ground, patting her lightly on her back as she rose again. "So let's hurry up, before someone else gets it."

Eagerly nodding, Aki brushed past them, storming off to the kitchen.

"Asuka..." Shinji tried again, sighing.

"One fried egg won't kill her," she replied before he could ask, still facing away from him to stare in the direction her daughter vanished.

"You know that's not what I meant. We should be on the same side, not taking each other's authority."

Groaning slightly, Asuka bent down to pick up the dirty clothes from the previous day that were scattered on the floor. "I know. But she's doing this to impress us," she explained. Standing up, she finally turned around to shove the used clothes in his arms while taking the still neatly folded ones from him to put them back. "And there aren't much more 'first times' to look forward to, so we should be proud of all these little things she wants us to praise."

"It's not like I'm not proud that she's getting more independent," he admitted, though he wasn't even so sure that there was no trace of a certain twinge of sadness in that fact. "But it's not enough to know how to do it, but also how to do it right."

"Oh come on," Asuka groaned, closing the wardrobe. "Does it matter how she looks? There's no one who would point their accusing fingers at us 'bad parents' even if she would prefer to run around in rags."

"But those loose clothes are much too dangerous for her!" he protested. "She could get tangled up, stumble and fall much too easily!"

"Aw, poor Shinji," Asuka mocked, caressing his cheek "comfortingly". "If she stumbles, she probably remembers the concerns of her smart Papa and choose something more fitting next time." Kissing the other side of his face, she made her way over to the door. "Now get that stuff in the washing machine and come to breakfast." She winked. "Don't want someone else to eat it, do you?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"I'm home!"

Normally, Shinji would have chuckled, hearing Aki's energetic call. For some reason, she had found great fun in announcing her presence, doing so whenever she had a chance to. That meant not only when she returned from a trip, but also when she just went inside from the garden; he even heard her

once as she merely went to her room.

As cute as that was, today it made him curse. It was much too early!

Looking frantically for a way out, he quickly grabbed the stack of papers and shoved it into the next best drawer of the kitchen cupboards, before he hurried to intercept his two women. Sure enough, Aki launched into his arms as soon as he came around the corner.

"Hey, welcome home," he greeted her back with a short hug. "How was the playground?"

"Wet," Asuka answered for her daughter, shuffling after her. "If you haven't noticed, it's raining outside."

"Oh?" He blinked, looking out to the window to see it indeed pouring outside, and Aki's shirt surely felt rather damp as well. But the girl broke the embrace, already on the move again as she ran past him.

"I didn't notice, I was – you know – busy," he told his equally drenched wife as he rose. "And you are a bit – you know – early."

Asuka groaned, a few drops escaping her short hair as she shook her head in disbelief. "You're still not finished? That shouldn't have taken more than a few minutes!"

"That's easier said than done," he whispered back. "It's hard to make a choice..."

"You've got to be kidding me! All you have to watch out for is not to leave a too big space somewhere in between and if possible not the newest..."

"What's that?!" a call from the kitchen cut her off, causing both of them to flinch.

Asuka gave him a "There you have it"-look, before they went to meet Aki, hoping that she hadn't noticed. She was, however, already at the very drawer he had used to hide his "crime" in. Apparently a bit too fast, as the lower half of the stack was sticking out.

Shinji wanted to tell her that she should ignore it, but, interrupted by an elbow of the peeved redhead next to him, was unable to stop his girl from pulling the papers out.

"My pictures!" she exclaimed, visibly confused.

A look Shinji hated most, second only to one. And he was sure he would see that dreaded look of hurt any moment if he couldn't come up with a good story.

Hope for help from his wife was already crushed before he could voice it. "I'm going to get towels and fresh clothes," she announced, already leaving him to handle his mess on his own.

Aki was still staring at him with wide expectant eyes, clutching her "masterpieces" to her chest.

He sighed.

"Come here, Aki," he asked her, dropping to a chair, helping her onto his lap. Once she was seated and his arms closed around her, he continued. "Look around you, what do you see?"

Aki glanced around for a while, her eyes darting everywhere. "The kitchen," she eventually answered honestly and he couldn't help but smile at that.

"Yes, but what's on the walls, and the fridge, and the cupboards?"

This time the answer came a little faster. "My pictures?"

"Yes, your pictures," Shinji sighed again, letting his eyes wander as well over all the crude drawings, most of them representing their little family or other important sceneries of her short life. Honestly, he would call none of these a piece of art worthy of exhibition.

But it had been his daughter who had drawn them, presenting them with pride and joy. How could he have not put them up? Asuka often complained that he gave in too easily, that because of that the rooms were so full with pictures that they might as well be wallpaper. Of course, she often "forgot" in such cases that many of them had been put there by herself.

Nonetheless, it had long become too much. They finally had to draw the line. But neither of them wanted to be the "bad guy" to tell Aki that they no longer wanted her pictures. So they had decided to secretly make room for new works now and then, taking an old picture off here and there; not too many, not too recent works that would catch the little one's attention. It had worked quite a while.

Until now.

His right arm tightened around the small body of his daughter, his left hand brushing through her still wet shoulder-length hair. How to tell her this without hurting her feelings?

"You... you see, you're so productive that we're running out of space for your pictures. So... so we have to take some of them down."

"Don't you like them anymore?"

Shinji winced at that voice. "No! No, that's not it. But we couldn't put up any new of your... beautiful drawings. Do you understand that?"

Aki scratched her head. "I think so..." she mumbled. "So what are we going to do with the old ones?"

Shinji bit his tongue. He could hardly say "put them in the trash", could he?

"H-how about a big box for them?" he offered. "Aki's big picture box"? Would that be an idea?"

A wide smile spread on the child's face as she nodded.

"Why don't we go upstairs and search for one then?" he continued eagerly, utmost relieved. The things he had to do to see her smile.

But before Aki could reply, a fluffy towel suddenly dropped over her head, eliciting a squeal.

"Not so fast!" Asuka stopped them, flashing Shinji a smirk as she started to rub the drenched girl's hair.

"Don't want to catch a cold, do you?"

"Nooo!" Aki protested giggling, before her mother ceased to dry her off.

"Then we should get you out of these clothes first," Asuka explained as she picked her up from Shinji's lap, setting her back on her feet.

Aki continued to dry her hair as she was led by her mother out of the kitchen. But just before they left the room, she pried herself from her mother's hand and turned around to Shinji. "And Papa," she said, raising the towel a bit from her beaming face. "Don't worry. Since you like them so much, I'll do my best to draw many new pictures as fast as possible for the ones that have to go!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And I can really pick whatever I want?" Aki asked for the thousandth time as she energetically led her father through the city.

"Well, that's what I promised, didn't I?" Shinji replied with a sigh. He already regretted having chosen such words to appease his conscience. She had taken the thing with the pictures much better than expected, but he still had felt guilty for having lied to her all the time. And it could work as an early present for her upcoming third birthday. Still... he should have been more specific in terms of its nature.

"As long as it's something reasonable," he tried to remind her.

The broad grin his daughter flashed him was anything but reassuring though. She obviously had something special in mind, but he didn't even dare to think what she would choose. And even less how he was supposed to explain it to Asuka. The bigger was his sigh of relief when after several minutes of being pulled through the ruins, he noticed that they stood in front of the toy store they had frequented together once in a while.

Aki was already about to climb into the broken display window, before he caught her in his arms.

"Careful!" he warned his ever so hasty child, lifting her up. "You'll cut yourself on the glass if you don't watch out!" the overly concerned father explained, as he helped her over the sharp and pointy remains of the window and set her into an area without any shards.

Shinji smiled proudly as he watched the big eyes of his daughter searching for the object of her desire, even more so as they started to sparkle as they found it. But that warm feeling instantly chilled as he saw what Aki had chosen when she reached for it.

"I want that one!" she proclaimed happily as she cradled it in her arms.

"Of all things... *that* one...?"

-x-x-x-x-

"I'm home!"

Asuka's smile at hearing her daughter's voice changed into a full laugh when Shinji added: "Me too."

The more it surprised her to see his sullen face as she went to greet them. Aki, however, beamed brighter than ever, even more so when she spotted her mother.

And then, everything seemed to freeze.

Asuka's eyes widened in fear, a fear she thought she had long forgotten, as she saw what her daughter held up so happily.

"Look, Mama!"

A doll.

"It looks like you, Mama!"

A little rag doll with fuzzy red hair.

"Now Mama can always be with me!"

"NO!"

In a blind fury, she grabbed the toy out of the small hands and threw it away with all her might. It crashed against the wall, causing an already loose seam around its neck to burst.

For a moment everything was silent but her own panting.

That was until a small whimper brought her back to reality. As she whirled around her heart was gripped by a terrible feeling of guilt, when she saw Aki looking at her in disbelief and hurt.

"Wh... Ma...?" Her sobs even cut her words off. With watering eyes she looked to the now broken thing that had been the reason for her happiness just a few moments ago; then she looked back to her mother. It wasn't hard to guess what she wanted to ask, her eyes saying more than enough.

Why had she done this? How could she, her mother, hurt her feelings like this?

Asuka, however, had no answer. And Aki's low wail grew louder into a heart-wrenching crying.

"Aki..."

But as Asuka stepped hesitatingly forward to reach out for her daughter, the little girl flinched away from her.

"Aki, I..."

But Aki spun around and ran crying to her room.

Asuka wanted to hold her back, to say something, that she was sorry, that she hadn't want to hurt her, but when she opened her mouth her voice failed.

'What have I done...?' She fought back her own tears. How could she have scared her own daughter away...?

"I'm sorry..." Shinji, who had been silent the whole time, muttered as he picked up the doll's remains. "I tried to persuade her to pick something else. I knew that you might react... touchy on that. But she – she wanted it so much. She looked so happy, I just couldn't..."

He suddenly fell silent again as Asuka shook her head and hesitantly reached for the doll's body in his hand and its head in his other.

"I'm the one who has to apologize," she mumbled, carefully taking the separated parts. "It's about time that I bury my demons. Especially if they're starting to hurt my daughter as well..."

-x-x-x-x-

Asuka took a deep breath, before knocking softly against the door to Aki's room. Not really expecting an answer, she slowly opened it and stepped in.

Pain of guilt again gripped her heart, seeing her daughter's small form flinching at her presence, lying curled on her bed, facing away from her.

"Aki?" she called her softly, but the hurt child's only response was to cower even more.

Asuka sighed sadly. She knew that she wouldn't be able to reach her in this state. Quietly, she walked over to the bed and sat down on its side. Aki's only reaction was a low whimper between the silent sobs.

"Aki, I... I'm sorry for what happened out there. It wasn't your fault, I was just... I don't know... scared for a moment. It was just a reflex from a bad memory. But that's over now, I promise."

She glanced over to her daughter for any sign of response to her excuse, but Aki either didn't quite understand or she was being her mother's child, too stubborn to give in that easily. And maybe Asuka didn't deserve to be let off just like that anyway.

But that's why she paid with two stings in her fingers while she was doing the stitching. "I can understand if you don't want to speak with me again for hurting your feelings like that. But... here's someone you might want to talk to."

When she placed the doll right in front of her eyes, Aki's tautness immediately vanished. Hesitatingly the girl reached out for the small redhead, then instantly wrapped her arms around it. She sat up, mouth agape as she finally looked at her mother again, any grudge forgotten.

"But... head...?" she wondered between her sniffing.

"I fixed it," Asuka told her smiling, stroking her daughter's hair.

Aki's quivering lips were the only warning she got, before the small body rocketed into hers. Asuka

pulled her arms around her child, holding Aki close as she wailed.

"Shh," she soothed her, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I scared you. You didn't do anything wrong. You don't have to cry..."

Still sniffing, Aki dried her tears with an arm. "It's okay. I won't cry anymore."

A chill went down Asuka's spine as she heard those words. Consciously, she knew Aki hadn't meant it that way, but with the ghost of the past still lingering in her mind, it sounded too much like a fatal resolve she once made herself.

"No," she pleaded, cupping Aki's cheek to keep her gaze. "Cry when you're sad. Laugh when you're happy. Never hold back your feelings or one day you'll forget which is true. Promise?"

The child seemed confused, but she nodded anyway. "Promise."

Asuka breathed a sigh of relief, pulling Aki around and onto her lap, who in return had the doll in her hands.

"So... what's her name?"

"Name?" Aki wondered.

"Whaaat? You haven't thought of a name yet?" Asuka asked exaggeratedly. "I'm sure she'll be sad without one. We have to think of something we could call her."

Aki scratched her head. "But I don't know..."

A smile spread over Asuka's lips as an idea hit her. What would work better against demons than bravely facing them without showing a trace of fear?

Her fingers brushed through the red strands of the doll's head as she rested her head on Aki's shoulder. "How about Kyoko?" she merely whispered.

"Ky- Kiko?"

"No, no, Ky-o-ko." Asuka tried to explain, but Aki's attention was apparently already somewhere else than listening to advises.

"Kiko!" she exclaimed gleefully, hugging the doll. Her huge smile making it obvious that there was no way that she would change her mind again.

Asuka chuckled at the heartwarming scene, ruffling her daughter's hair. "Okay then," she said, leaned down and kissed the back of Aki's head, "'Kiko' it is."

It felt great to finally let go of the past. But that was nothing compared to seeing her happy.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Nooooo!"

"Yeeees," Shinji retorted the protest of the child in his arms. No matter what she said, she was obviously tired, already having extended her wake time by an hour. "Or do you rather want to brush your teeth again?"

"Noooooooo!" Aki squealed even louder, shaking her head as wildly as she still managed.

"Well, it's settled then," he declared as he sat her down on her bed. She didn't fight as he started to pull

her shirt over her head. Wordlessly, she let her father redress her into her nightgown.

"Aki, did you go out without your sandals again?" he asked as he saw her feet when she crawled up to her pillow..

She just nodded as she turned around, reaching for her doll to place it next to her.

"No sandals, no shoes, no socks," Shinji muttered, shaking his head. "Doesn't that hurt to run around like that when you step on all those pointy little rocks out there?"

"Uh-uh," Aki denied.

"Yeah, I guess so. Just look at the callus you have there already. You're not even ticklish here anymore." A malicious grin flashed over his lips. "But I bet you still are under your armpits!"

Aki couldn't do much more than squeal in laughter as her father jumped on her, his fingers drumming under her arms. The attack lasted only a few seconds though as he watched her come to rest, her giggling fading to a broad smile.

"Goodnight," he told his daughter, placing a kiss on her forehead, before he tucked her in. "Sleep well."

"Kiko too!" Aki instantly mumbled from under the covers.

Shinji chuckled before he bent over her and gave the doll a quick peck. "Goodnight, Kiko," he said playfully. As he looked back to his daughter she already had her eyes closed. The sight warmed his heart and he savored it a few more seconds until he went to dim the lights.

"Papa?" Aki's low call stopped him. "Tell me a story."

'I should have known.' He smiled to himself as he returned to the small armchair next to her bed.

"Any special wishes?" he asked, glancing at the table at his side where her favorite storybooks lay in a loose heap. The only reply was a small shake of her head.

"Well then..." he began quietly. "Once upon a time there was a lonely prince, who was always too scared to reach out to others, a mysterious princess from angelic blood, and a fiery princess from a far away country. Together, they fought many beasts with their huge magical armors that were blessed with their mothers' spirits. The armor of the prince was purple and a large horn sprouted from its head. The one of the mysterious princess was blue and had a single eye. The four-eyed one of the foreign princess was as red as the princess' flaming hair.

"The prince never really liked to fight, but he knew the princesses and his other new-found friends were in need of his help and so he did it for their sake, as they were the reason why he didn't feel so lonely anymore since he got to know them. But he only fooled himself. He was still too scared to reach out to them; he told himself that he already reached happiness by being accepted for fighting their enemies.

"But when the two princesses were hurt in battles, he realized that he was lonely again. A stranger approached him during that time, and again the prince chose the easy way. But the kind stranger turned out to have been sent by the enemy. The prince had no choice but to fight him, yet the stranger offered no resistance, asking to be slain as he did not want the prince to lose his life. Having been forced to make a gruesome decision, the prince had lost the remaining faith he had in other people and himself.

"Nine white beasts attacked as he was in this state. The foreign princess, who had just recovered, fought them bravely and seemed to succeed. But these foul beasts could not be slain and they attacked her again and again. The prince knew of this, but he was still lost in his self-pity, telling himself he could do nothing to help her anyway, that he would eventually lose her anyway.

"It was his armor that took the decision for him, moving him on its own to the fight. The prince screamed as he reached the battlefield: The princess had apparently fallen at the hands of the beasts; he could only see them devouring her red armor. The loss pained his heart, as he had grown to love the foreign princess and guilt clouded his mind for not having come earlier to her side.

"The mysterious princess heard the prince's agony and decided to grant him the powers of her angelic ancestors. With them, he called upon every soul on earth and they helped him come to realize that he could have anything he wanted if only he believed in himself. By the prince's wish, the mysterious princess used her remaining powers to cleanse the planet from friends and foes alike, but had also exiled herself in that process. The prince feared that he would be the only one to roam the earth from now on, but then he saw the foreign princess that he loved. She had been revived and together they'd..."

"Papa?" Aki interrupted him tiredly.

"Yeah?"

"You shouldn't always bring yourself and Mama into your stories..."

He smiled, gently running his hand over her head. "You noticed?"

"Hmm..." was the last she could say in affirmation.

Shinji kept sitting next to his sleeping daughter for several minutes, the proud smile never vanishing from his lips as he slowly stroked her hair, sharing his warmth to let her know, even in her subconscious state, that her father was there for her to protect her from any bad dreams.

The prince had never liked fighting. But he would do anything in his power to ensure that his and the foreign princess' child would live happily ever after.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"PAPA!!"

Startled, Shinji's attention was drawn from the heap of dirty clothes he had been sorting to the wailing figure of his daughter that came running to him into the bathroom. Instantly, he scooted her up in his arms.

"Hey, hey, shh," he tried to soothe her, "what's wrong?"

"Mama... Mama had been mean to me..." Aki sniffed as she clung closer onto her father, and it dawned to him what the earlier yells coming from outside had meant. She had done something to upset Asuka who scolded her for it and now she was trying to get him on her side against his wife. And he **really** hated to be caught between the two women who both could make him do anything they wanted.

"Oh... well, I know Mama can become very angry sometimes..." he tried to argue in the best way he could think of to please Aki, but before he could clarify, he felt a stinging slap against the back of his head. "But I'm sure she had a good reason..." he quickly finished in fear to anger the redhead behind him even more.

"You bet I had!" Asuka's angry voice boomed at him, before addressing Aki. "And I thought I explained myself well enough, kleines Fräulein! Didn't I tell you to go to your room?"

"But..." Aki tried, but was instantly blocked.

"No buts!" Asuka yelled, her finger pointing towards the child's room. "Right now."

Aki's face was a mix of hurt and anger, brows furrowed, lips quivering, but she eventually ran out of the room, the sound of a door slamming shut following shortly after.

Shinji could tell that she was just upset, scared only of punishment if at all, unlike the incident on the day she got Kiko. But still, seeing her like that hurt him as well. "Wasn't that a bit harsh?"

"If she doesn't want to listen when we're explaining things to her calmly, I guess we'll have to raise our voice sometimes!" she grumbled anyway.

Shinji swallowed hard. He knew there was some truth in that, but he doubted he would be able to be that aggressive to his little girl.

Stepping behind Asuka, he laid his hands carefully onto her shoulders, somewhat afraid that she would snap at the touch. "Why... why don't you calm down a little first? Was it really that bad what she did?"

He had more success than he expected as she suddenly sounded crestfallen and tired as opposed to her prior rage. "I was on the roof, checking the solar panels. I could see her playing in the garden from up there and she knows not to follow me, so I thought it was all right. But then she was suddenly up there, balancing near the gutter, even with Kiko in her arms. She probably just wanted to see what I was doing, but..." She shuddered slightly under his grip. "What if she had leaned too far over? She could have broken her leg or arm or even worse if she had fallen down. Last week she burned the carpet as she pulled down the lamp and now this!"

"Well, she's probably testing her limits," Shinji figured.

"Yes, and that's why we need to draw a line **now** or she'll go further and further! She finally needs to understand that some things are just too dangerous to do."

Shinji sighed, biting his lip as he looked up to his wife. He knew she was right, but...

"And stop that pleading look! I'm not going to be the lone 'bad guy'! You're going to chide her as well when it's necessary!"

Once more, Shinji sighed. "Yes, dear..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

One thing Shinji Ikari couldn't complain about were the lack of surprises in his life. Not always were they as earth-shattering as being persuaded to pilot a huge "robot" against some monster that almost squashed you before; learning that you would become a father; or even a much too human-like penguin shaking itself dry just as you were about to enter the bath. But that didn't mean he was immune to the smaller ones.

Just like that one morning as he, still drowsy and yawning, entered the kitchen to find it only illuminated by several candles. He would have expected some problem with the power – if the candles wouldn't have been on a neatly decorated cake that stood on the table and his two apparently much more awake women waiting behind it.

"SURPRISE!" they greeted him loudly, driving the sleep instantly out of him, but his confusion did not fade so easily.

"Happy Birthday, Papa!" Aki squealed as she ran to him, stretching her arms out to give her baffled but complying father a big hug that she only unwillingly broke to let her mother have that place.

"Happy Birthday, Liebling."

"But we don't even know when my birthday is," Shinji indirectly asked his wife quietly as she kissed his cheek.

"She asked me on hers and I just said yours is three months after that and mine in another two," Asuka whispered back. "I didn't really expect her to remember, but three days ago she asked me what we would give you as a present."

"A present too?" he asked, louder this time.

Loud enough for Aki to hear. "Oh, I get it!"

"No, wait! That's too heavy for you!" Asuka called after the girl that was already out of the room, quickly following her daughter.

Shinji took the chance to let himself slump down on a chair. "Too heavy?" he wondered.

Soon enough, the two conspirators returned, carrying (or rather Asuka carrying and Aki holding her hands against) a large, bulky object, more or less hidden by several layers of wrapping paper. Shinji smiled at the cute sight, but also because he could already guess the nature of his present by its form, especially with the neck pointing out.

"Wow, now what could that possibly be?" he feigned ignorance nonetheless as he received the package.

"It's a shello!" Aki revealed excitedly before he even started to unwrap the package, instantly hiding her sheepish laugh behind her hands now that she had told despite not being supposed to.

"Is it?" he played along, ripping the last shreds of the paper off, exposing the instrument and an accompanying bow. "Aw, it really is!"

"You like it? Mama said you would!"

"Yes, it's great," Shinji exclaimed, pulling his daughter into a one-armed hug, careful with the cello in his other. "Thank you very much," he added, though while also looking at his contently smirking wife.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Asuka questioned demanding, after he had let go of Aki. "Aren't you going to test our generous present?"

Shinji stared at her, then at the instrument. "Uh... I'm probably quite rusty," he mumbled apologizing, fumbling with the bow in one hand as the other positioned the cello. "And I probably need to tune it first..."

"Oh, come on!"

"Okay, okay, let's see if I can remember something," he conceded. Her eagerness on this made him wonder somewhat. After all, he had never got much chance to play for her before. Over the years, he had almost forgotten that he had ever played at all.

The bigger was his own surprise as he set the bows on the strings and the music started to flow out, sounding almost as though he had never stopped. Hard to believe that he actually missed something so much that he had done for so long just because no one told him to stop.

Asuka caught Aki just before her fingers mashed into the cake she was reaching for and pulled the slightly startled girl onto her lap as she sat down herself. She shut her eyes, holding her daughter close to her as she listened to his playing. The way she smiled, she quickly seemed to melt into the music, let it carry her wherever her mind went.

A few minutes into the song he could hear her whisper to Aki. "You know, the day I heard your Papa play on his cello for the first time was also the day we had our first kiss."

Shinji could hardly contain himself from joining the giggling of his women, but as much as he concentrated on the notes, a wide smirk would reveal that the memory of that kiss had made its way into his thoughts as well.

Finally the song ended and he gave a small bow as his wife applauded overly loud to signal the young child to do like her. But Aki didn't chime in.

"That's all so sad," she mumbled disappointed. "Why don't you play a happy song?"

Shinji raised an eyebrow. "A happy song?"

"Yeah, you know, a song that's more..." The girl looked to the floor, pondering for a moment, before she threw her arms expressively out. "Happy."

"Ahhh... a 'happy' song..." Shinji tried to sound as though he understood, but he could only take a good guess at what she meant. She might have been clever for her age, but sometimes he wished her vocabulary was just a *little* more explicit.

"Tell you what," he continued, leaning down to her. "I'll practice some more until I get as good as I used to be and then I'll play the happiest song ever, just – for – you." With the last word he lightly poked her nose with the tip of the bow, eliciting a giggle from his daughter.

...Who continued to stare at him with wide, expectant eyes. "Now?"

Shinji swallowed his whimper behind a weak smile. "N-not right now, okay? Give me a little time..."

"So at lunch then?"

This time, he didn't even try to hide his sigh. "W-we'll see..."

He wasn't sure if Aki would be satisfied with that as an answer, but Asuka intervened anyway, letting her child back to the floor. "Didn't you make a special birthday picture for Papa?"

"Oh yeah! I'll get it!" Aki exclaimed, already on her way to her room.

Shinji breathed a sigh of relief, before aiming a pleading look at his wife. "Please tell me you know any 'happy' song that I can play with this."

"Me?" Asuka laughed, patting him on his shoulder. "Oh no, no, no. You got yourself into this; now see how you get yourself out."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The day was as sunny as Aki's face. She couldn't remember how long it had been since they had their last picnic, but to her it seemed like an eternity.

"Aki, not so fast!"

But like a typical three year old, the girl had no intention of listening to the well-meant request of her mother, whose hand she had just pried herself away from. Now that the glittering blue of the lake was already in sight, the temptation to run the rest of the way to get there as fast as possible was much too hard to resist. Of course, in comparison to her parents she had the advantage that she was only carrying Kiko, not fishing utensils, cool box and two more bags with the remaining items and food they needed for their day full of swimming and picnicking.

But like a typical, much too hasty three year old, Aki realized that she better should have listened to her mother as she stumbled over a root and fell flat on the grass. The pain wasn't bad enough to reverse the

previous enthusiasm completely into a loud wailing, but the shock had wiped the smile off her face. Even before she managed to get back on her legs, the warmth of her mother's arms already surrounded her.

"Oh, Aki, everything all right?" the woman's soothing voice comforted her as she was carefully spun around. Aki nodded slowly as her Mama's concerned eyes examined the small body thoroughly for any bruises, but there was only some dirt at the knees that was quickly brushed off. A kiss on the child's forehead completed the short check-up.

"See? That's why I told you not to run so fast," her Mama explained, fortunately sounding not too scolding.

Again Aki nodded and grabbed for her mother's hand as she rose, timidly walking along with her parents the rest of the way. But no matter how startling that incident had been, it quickly drifted into the back of her mind when they finally reached the lake. She instantly hurried to the shore, laughing as she let the water that washed around her naked feet splash as she ran through it.

"Don't go in yet," came the unnecessary reminder from behind her, where her parents were setting up the big blanket. She loved the lake, but even though she wouldn't admit it, she was still a little scared to be in there without Mama or Papa next to her to watch out.

"Go to her," she heard her Papa say. "It doesn't look like she can hold out much longer. I'll finish this." She turned around expectantly to see her mother approaching with two familiar objects in her hand, her broad grin mirroring Aki's own.

"So, is my little goldfish that eager again to go swimming?" she asked as she squatted down to her daughter, who answered with a wild nodding. The woman chuckled at that. "I don't really get why you're not nearly as enthusiastic at home when you're supposed to take a bath. Oh well, let's get you ready then, huh?"

Quickly, her Mama helped Aki to take her clothes off, before she pulled the water wings over her small arms. Aki didn't like them very much, but her parents insisted on them and she had long learned that protest was useless in this matter. Once her mother let go of her, the girl slowly waded into the lake until her feet were entirely encased by water, before the uneasy feeling returned and she looked back, waiting for her Mama to finish undressing herself and follow.

Kiko had to watch from the shore while they went deeper into the water and Aki quickly felt the wetness rising up to her chest. It still gave her a sense of danger, but feeling her mother behind her, ready to help her in any case, she didn't worry. Even when her feet no longer touched the ground.

She tried to move on a little more, proving her bravery to go farther than ever before. But of course, Mama had instantly noticed.

"No Aki, that's far enough!" she reminded her.

Aki wanted to protest, trying to get allowance to be more daring today, but she never got a chance. Her Mama grabbed her, whirling her around in the water to face her, and Aki couldn't help but laugh as her own body cut the surface, creating a huge wave.

Her Mama was too large to fully submerge, but she crouched so that Aki could directly look into her smiling face. Her expression turned into one of shock though, as the giggling girl splashed her.

"Oh you little...!" Mama threatened playfully, her red hair dripping.

A water fight ensued almost instantly, squeals and laughter echoing over the lake until both were drenched almost equally under and above the surface. Eventually though, the fun was starting to cease

and Aki was getting a bit tired, so peace was declared (for now).

Looking around, she saw a distant figure sitting on a large stone at the shore, a fishing rod in his hands.

"PAPA!" she yelled, waving excessively. He responded with a more reserved one.

"Why's he so far away?" she asked her mother.

"Well, that's because we'd scare the fishies away if we're too close and then Papa couldn't catch any."

"Fishies?"

"Yes of course," her Mama told her. "Have you never seen them swimming around here?"

Aki shook her head.

"Guess you're always a bit too loud then, eh?" Mama laughed. "Maybe if we're quiet, we can go to where Papa is and watch some fishies?"

Her curiosity sparked, Aki eagerly nodded, promising her silence by bringing both hands up to cover her mouth. Not making any unnecessary noise, they slid out of the lake and rounded it after Mama had taken the water wings off to meet with her father.

"Hi, Pa...!" she began, but was instantly met with both of her parents raising their fingers to their lips, and she chimed into the "shh"-ing herself, before she ended whispering with "...pa".

"Aki wanted to watch the fishies," her mother explained with a low voice and Aki nodded.

"Oh?" her Papa wondered. "Do you want to help me then? You can see many of them from here."

Aki's eyes widened as did her mouth. That offer to "work" with her Papa was, after all, even more attractive. He let his left hand go of the rod and motioned her to come closer, helping her onto his lap once she was in range.

"Here," he whispered, guiding her hands to the rod with his own. "Now we're going to catch some fishies."

"Look, Aki," her Mama said as she nudged her, pointing at a gray, quickly moving mass under the glittering surface. "There's one."

"Oh, and there's another," her father noticed. The one he pointed out was bigger and slower, watching the underwater-world with his glassy eyes.

There was a splashing a bit away, the tail fin still at the air as Aki looked. "THERE'S ANOTHER!" she exclaimed excitedly, though instantly covering her mouth again, giving her parents an apologizing laugh as she noticed her mistake. Neither made an attempt to chide her though.

It was forgotten anyway, when there was a firm tugging at the other end of the line.

"Oh, we got one!" her father explained. "Quick, you've got to pull!"

She gripped the rod and pulled with all her might, leaning back as far as she could, while her Papa "helped" reeling it in. Her Mama giggled at something, but Aki was too busy to bother thinking about what, huffing and clenching her eyes shut as she strained against her powerful opponent.

"Yay! You got it!" her mother applauded finally and Aki opened her eyes again to see the fish flapping wildly at the other end of the rod, her Papa already pulling it closer. He unhooked it and threw it in the red bucket at his side.

Beaming with pride, Aki climbed off his lap to investigate **her** (and *a bit* her father's) catch. The fishy still splashed nervously in the shallow water of the bucket.

"What're we going to do with it now?" she turned back to her parents, who's smiles fell somewhat.

"Well," her Papa started to explain. "Ehm... you... you know what we usually do with the fishies I bring home...?"

The ones he brought home...? He would bring them in the kitchen and then...

It took a few seconds for her to realize, but then her face contorted in shock. **Her** fishy was supposed to become dinner?

"NO!" she yelled, stepping protectively in front of her catch.

"Aki..." her mother tried, but she wouldn't have it.

"NOOOO!" she screeched, trampling with her feet to emphasize her point. She wouldn't let them have her fishy to eat. Clutching the bucket that was half as big as herself with both arms, she just threw it to the side.

The fish flapped twice over the ground before it reached its safety and freedom in the lake.

Aki turned back to her baffled parents, her smile proud and defiant.

"Somehow I fear we'll always have to find a way to feed her fish secretly from now on," she could hear her Papa whispering to her Mama.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Asuka nervously paced back and forth in the living room, waiting for Shinji to return from Aki's. The nerve of that idiot, telling her to leave! He should be professional enough not to be distracted by her suggestions. So what if she wasn't of much help?

Her baby was sick after all!

Sure, it's not like Aki had never been ill before, but it was usually not more than a cold. A high fever like this was an entirely different level.

It seemed like an eternity of anxious uncertainty until Shinji finally emerged from the room.

"Well?" she instantly asked as he walked closer.

"I think she has measles," he reported his diagnosis.

"Measles?" Asuka repeated aghast, her eyes widening with fear.

"Yes, she even got some red dots already," Shinji began, instantly bringing his hands up as he noticed her concern. "But don't worry. We still have some medicine that should work and I already gave her some fever-reducing..."

"No, no, you don't understand!" she broke his attempt to calm her. "I... I never had measles!"

He stared at her in obvious shock, his eyes still wide and fixed at her as he slumped down into the armchair close to him. Asuka actually started to worry when he still hadn't moved after several seconds. His reaction was hardly a surprise, the news couldn't have come at a worse time, even if it hadn't been likely to have been unveiled otherwise.

"But..." he finally gave a sign of life, his voice carrying a hint of hope, "you're surely vaccinated?"

"Don't know," Asuka muttered solemnly, shaking her head. "I mean, it's likely. But no one bothered to

tell me and I never bothered to check such things."

Again he fell silent, the thoughts and worries that were going on in his head almost visible for her. If she, as an adult, would get a child's disease, it could easily become much worse and lead to complications. For her, it could easily be...

"Okay..." He eventually breathed out, still seeming in thought despite having started the sentence. "I... it shouldn't be too much of a problem to get her through it, but for you..." Shinji swallowed, nervously rubbing his forehead. He suddenly looked her straight in the eyes. And she certainly didn't like that look. "It'd probably be for the best if we do everything to make sure not to get you infected in first place."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Make sure not to get her infected. She had hated the sound of that idea immediately, because she had known what that meant before he had been able to say so.

Isolation.

She had to be separated from Aki for the whole time of the girl's sickness. Separated from her little sunshine for days when she needed her more than ever.

The temporary goodbye had been more heart-wrenching than most everlasting ones. Aki had already started to cry before she had been able to finish explaining the reasons to her anxious child and all hope to make Aki understand the situation was in vain. Shinji had to hold the wailing girl back, failing to soothe her as she had desperately reached out for her mother, wanting nothing but to be taken in her arms. It had never felt so hard for Asuka not to give in herself. Many tears were shed that night, way too many. Maybe it would have been better if she'd just avoided her without having announced it.

She really had her doubts that this was really worth it. Pharmaceuticals weren't at their best in the years right after Second Impact, but the chances were still high that Gehirn/NERV would have taken care that their pilot candidate wouldn't suffer a mere children's disease. And it was more than likely that wherever Aki got the virus from, she would have long gotten it as well. After all, she had spent lots of time with her daughter during the incubation time. And even if she was indeed not infected by sheer luck, a few seconds with her daughter wouldn't kill her right away.

But what after those few seconds? She had to admit, she had little faith in her strength for another separation. Seeing the small arms reaching for her without being able to embrace the child; the wide, tearful eyes full of fear of abandonment without being able to make any those worries go away – she felt incredibly selfish, but she couldn't bear such a heart-breaking scene again.

But this wasn't much better either. She was too worried to work, her attempts to get her mind off of it never succeeding longer than a few minutes. So she stood there in the hallway, next to Aki's door, reduced to listening to her husband's attempts to cheer the sick girl up.

"Do you want me to play your happy song?" she heard him ask. It was bedtime by now, the song supposed to be a lullaby.

There was no vocal answer, but there was a faint rustling which Asuka figured was the movement of Aki's head against the pillow.

"No?" Shinji sounded exaggeratedly disappointed. "I even got the cello. Do you want me to play anything else?"

"I jus' want Mama!" Aki's tired whine made Asuka flinch. It was bitter-sweet to hear that her child was

missing her just as much, but it hurt all the more that she had to deny her that wish.

"Aki..." Shinji sighed sadly, noticeably tired himself for having to tell her again and again through her tears that her mother couldn't see her for now. "I'll play anyway and you try to get some sleep, okay?"

He started to play the song he had composed himself extra for her when he couldn't find anything that matched her request of a "happy" one and Aki had been very pleased with the result. He really had managed a small masterpiece, much better than anything he could have gotten from some century-old sheets, and it had quickly become a favorite that was often heard in the house, whether hummed or played on the cello. Today though, it didn't sound quite as "happy" as usual, the cello's natural somber tone shining through much more often.

But Asuka's focus was elsewhere anyway. She strained to listen to sounds of her daughter, her movement, her deep breathing, the only contact she had. Becoming so engrossed with the signs that Aki was drifting off to sleep, Asuka failed to notice that the melody had stopped until the door went open.

Shinji seemed equally surprised. "Asuka!" he angrily whispered instantly. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" she quietly hissed back, waving her hand to the dark room, towards the bed. "My baby's sick and calling for me! You can't expect me to just do my chores and not even check on her! I can't stand this anymore!"

"Of course she's calling for you. She's sick and has a fever, so it's no wonder that's she's a little cranky. But that isn't going to change just because you are there. She'll just cry for something else then."

"Something else' is hardly comparable to her mother's love! Sure, maybe she'll cry just because she wants it, but you can't tell me that this isn't something she really *needs*!"

He averted his eyes. "I don't want and can't argue that," he admitted and she took it as sign of defeat, moving towards Aki's room.

"Good that we agree on tha..." She was cut off when his arm went around her waist just as she wanted to go past him, holding her back.

"I'm afraid we don't," he muttered, looking back into her eyes. "Do you think this is easy for me? She's afraid, Asuka. And it pains me seeing her like this every time I go in there, having to tell her that you can't come in currently! I know she's suffering and scared that you might abandon her and don't want to see her again, despite what I tell her! But what do you think how scared she would be if I told her that it could *kill* you to be with her right now?"

The slap came too quick for either to avoid it. But even if it was the first one in years that had been anything but playful, Asuka didn't regret it one bit. "I love you, Shinji," she panted. "But don't you dare to get between me and my child."

Shinji, however, just tightened his grip. "I'm sorry, Asuka. You can pummel me all you want, but I can't..."

"Mama...?"

The soft voice instantly ended the fight, though Shinji shot her one last warning glare, before he let go and went back in the room, closing the door behind him.

"Hey, I thought you were asleep by now?" Asuka heard him ask.

Aki ignored the question though. "Thought I heard Mama..." she muttered.

Shinji said something, but Asuka couldn't quite understand it. She stepped closer, pushing her right ear

against the wooden door.

The next spoken words, however, pierced her heart.

"Mama hate me?"

Her ears heard Shinji's attempts to appease the sick girl that this wasn't the case, but her mind wouldn't register it. Her fists trembled as the cruel accusation echoed in her head, she had trouble to breathe.

She couldn't bear it anymore. Not looking back, she ran as fast as possible.

-x-x-x-x-

"...still loves you more than anything, but..."

Shinji didn't get any further as the door was forcefully pushed open. The figure was shadowed by the light from the hallway behind it, but that changed as it rushed inside.

"Mama!" Aki squealed happily, reaching her arms out to Asuka, now donning the quickly retrieved medical face mask.

"Asuka!" Shinji instantly protested, but she silenced him with a quick glare that left no doubt that she wasn't willing to discuss her decision any further.

"Mama!" Aki repeated, before her face got accusing. "Where have you been all the time?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Asuka apologized as she knelt next to the bed, pointing at the white mask. "I have to wear this for a while and I was afraid you'd laugh at me for that." She obviously lied, but it was enough for the sick three years old.

"That's a stupid reason," Aki merely rebuked pouting.

Stroking her child's tousled brown hair, Asuka smiled behind the mask, glancing back to her husband who still seemed far from happy about her change of plans. "I guess I'm a little stupid then."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And you always called *me* 'baka'!" Shinji muttered as he shook his head, a few tears glittering in his eyes.

"God damnit, Shinji, I'm not dead yet," Asuka groaned, feeling her whole body aching as she turned on the bed that she had inhabited for the last two days. "Get yourself together! What if Aki sees you like that?"

Yes, he had been right. Yes, she had been infected. Yes, she felt like she was burning up.

But she didn't regret it, not one bit. This was much better than losing Aki's trust and love.

However, she couldn't deny a certain fear that he was also right about the severity of her condition. It wasn't big, even though she felt worse than ever. But the thought of leaving him... and her... behind was plaguing her conscience. What mother she'd be to force her child to grow up without her? Just like their own...

"Mama?"

Both of their startled views went to the door, where the timid call had come from. Aki was still wearing her pink pajamas, Kiko clutched in both arms.

"Hey," Shinji moved to intercept her, "you should still be in bed yourself."

"But I'm fine again!" Aki whined, and even though she indeed had gotten much better, her voice was still proving her wrong. Her eyes too, quickly softened again as they darted from her father towards the bed. "And wanted to see Mama..."

"Aki..."

"Let her," Asuka cut him off as harshly as her aching head allowed. "For a few minutes."

Shinji visibly disagreed, but reluctantly nodded and Aki made the few steps over to the bed.

Asuka forced herself to smile. "Hi, Schätzchen."

"Hi," she mumbled weakly, her view averted as she tugged nervously at her doll's hair. "H-how are you Mama?"

"It's not that bad," the redhead lied, but she realized herself that it hadn't been very convincing. "What about you?"

Aki didn't answer. She was still staring at the ground, her lower lip starting to tremble. "Is... is this my fault?"

"Oh..." Asuka was close to tears herself as she saw her daughter so ridden by guilt. Using her remaining strength, she robbed over to the edge of the bed, and threw her arms around the rocking body. "Oh, Aki..."

"No. No, it's not your fault. If anything, it's..." She stopped, rethinking her words. Taking the blame on herself might be more noble and truthful, but it could lead to misunderstandings that would only increase the burden on her child's shoulders if anything should happen after all. "It's nobody's fault. Don't worry, I'll be fine soon, just like you."

But despite her reassuring words, Aki's tears flew freely now, sobs breaking her voice. "Love you, Mama."

Asuka's heart skipped a beat at those words and her smile was no longer forced through the pain. It even broadened.

It wasn't the first time Aki said them, she had uttered her first "Ah luv ya" rather soon after she had started to speak. But Asuka could tell that this was the first time she said it without just repeating a phrase she heard often from her parents. This time, Asuka knew, she meant it with all her heart.

"Ich liebe dich auch, mein Schatz," she hushed as reply, kissing her child's brown hair in the tight embrace. "I love you so much."

She held on until Aki calmed down to a mere sniffing. "Get... get better soon!" the three year old half plead, half demanded.

Coming from a tear-stricken child, it seemed rather funny and Asuka didn't even try to suppress the laugh. "I'll do my best, okay?"

Aki nodded, drying the wetness on her cheeks with the back of her right hand.

"Aki," Shinji brought the attention back to him, "Mama really needs her rest now. And so do you."

Again she nodded, but turned back to her mother once more. Wordlessly, she held her doll up with both arms.

"You want me to have Kiko?" Asuka inquired bewildered. Ever since she had got it back from her, Aki had basically never been separated from the toy.

But once again, a nod, though a timid one. "She can watch out for you when I can't."

Smiling broadly, Asuka took Kiko. "Thank you," she said, giving her child another kiss. "Now, go back to bed, yes? Or do you want me to be fit first?"

Aki smirked weakly, but didn't say anything. Obediently, she shuffled to the door, but not leaving without turning back once more to give a small wave goodbye and receiving the appropriate reply from her parents.

Asuka kept looking after her for a while even when she had long closed the door behind her. Eventually, her view shifted to the red-haired doll in her arms.

"See?" she muttered to her husband, brushing her fingers through the red tresses of her daughter's most valuable property. "I couldn't be further away from being dead."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I don't wannaa!" Aki whined, jumping at the other end of Shinji's hold.

"Well, whether you want it or not, you're going to take a bath," he said calmly.

"But I can't! I'm still sick!"

"You've been completely fine for a week," he didn't accept her excuse. "Even Mama has long been cured."

He held his hand in the water that streamed into the tub, even though it was pretty pointless. His little rascal had the amazing ability to somehow notice it when the temperature was off by even a single degree.

And of course, just as he heaved her into the water, she instantly yelled and kicked when her feet barely touched the surface. "Too hot! Too hot!"

Shinji rolled his eyes, slightly nudging the lever of the faucet towards "cold" with his elbow, so that Aki finally let her be lowered into the water.

"You don't have to do that anymore anyway..." Aki grumbled pouting, shoving some of the foam away. "I can get in the tub on my own."

"Is that so?" Shinji smiled at her as he gathered the soap and washcloth while she started to play in the bath she had declared her everlasting hatred of just moments ago.

"Yeah, I'm big enough for that!"

"Well, that's good for you," he chuckled, ruffling the brown mob of Aki's hair. The disgruntled child instantly protested as she had always done lately when he did that with a loud shriek, flailing her arms around in the water.

Smiling, he remembered the first time he had used those familiar words. He hadn't even realized their origin until later, after Aki had long stormed out of the room to go playing again and he already sat back at his desk, hunched over his books. They came just naturally with his pride whenever she came running to him, calling his attention with an excited "Papa! Look!" to show something new she had found or made, a picture that came off especially good in her eyes or if she learned something that completely amazed the three years old.

"The problem is just that I somehow fear you won't get very clean anymore when we decide to let you take care of that alone," he explained as he started to lather her.

Aki pouted again, but at least didn't try to fight him. "Why do I have to bath anyway?"

Shinji laughed, she always asked this at one point or another. But unlike most of the time, he now had a better answer than "Because you have to."

"You," he emphasized, nudging the washcloth against her small nose, "have to be clean, because we're going to make a special visit tomorrow."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was quite an unusual sight for her parents to see Aki so timid. The usually so energetic girl now hid behind her mother, clinging frightened to her skirt with her free hand while the other held her ever-present doll close to her.

"What is it, Aki?" Shinji asked his daughter, concerned, who barely dared to look up from fear.

"What is all this?" she replied timidly, barely audible.

Asuka reached behind her back to cup the child's head soothingly with her hand. "This is the place where all the people we told you about have gone," she explained, giving an appeasing smile over her shoulder. "You've been here before, don't you remember?"

The girl shook her head. As the tears started to dwell up in her eyes, her parents exchanged a mournful look.

"You... you don't have to go, if you don't want to," Shinji tried to calm her, having gotten onto his knees to be on the same level as Aki. "But I swear there is nothing you have to be afraid of."

The girl bit her lower lip, unsure whether to take that offered escape or to trust her parents' words.

"Hey," Asuka softly called to get her attention back, reaching her hand out. "You know I'll be there, no matter what."

Hesitatingly, Aki took the presented hand in hers, tightening the grip instantly as she felt her mother's warmth.

"Okay to go then?" Asuka asked and got a shy nod in response.

As they made their way over the beach towards the red sea, she could feel the small hand constricting around her fingers ever so often as Aki took in the eerie surroundings. It probably was a bit too much for someone her age after all, but since she had been so carefree despite all this the last time they had been there, they hadn't quite expected this sudden change of heart.

"What are they?" her daughter's almost whispering voice reached her. Following Aki's eyes, she saw the crucified statues that had once been two Mass-Production EVAs.

"They... hurt me once..." she told her a bit too truthfully, not realizing her bad choice of words until she felt Aki pressing herself whimpering against her, away from the monster. "Don't worry," she hastily added. "They won't do anything anymore."

Sniffing, Aki relaxed a little, but flinched yet again as she made out the shape of the white "hill" in the horizon. But she didn't sound as frightened as before; curiosity and maybe compassion for the sadly smiling giant apparently having taken over as she lay her head to the side. "Who's she?"

"She... she was a friend..." Shinji answered her, the melancholy unmistakable in his voice as he stared over the sea.

"A friend...?" Aki repeated wondering. "Were all people like that?"

Her parents' eyes met in confusion as they did often in hope the other understood what she meant. But all too often, asking was the only possibility to find out what was going on in the little one's mind.

"Like what?"

"So big!"

With a light chuckle from the two elder, the mood seemed to have turned completely by that innocent question of the amazed child.

"No," Shinji told her smiling, "she was pretty... exceptional."

-x-x-x-x-

"Hello! Mama and Papa told me to talk with you, but I'm not sure what," the girl scratched her brown hair. "Uhm... well, I'm Aki and this is Kiko! She's my favorite, 'cause she has red hair just like Mama and also a red dress! I really like red! And I really love Mama, and Papa too!"

"They often say I would have liked you too and you me, so why did you leave? Mama and Papa won't tell me. They often seem sad when they talk about you. I don't like when they're sad. So I don't know if I would have liked you, 'cause you make them sad." Aki pouted at the red sea. "But Papa said it wasn't your fault and they're sad 'cause they liked you so much that they miss you now. So maybe I would've liked you after all!"

"Well, uhm..." She glanced back to where her Mama and Papa sat smiling on the sand, her Papa nodding at her. Turning to the sea once more, she waved. "Bye then; see ya!"

-x-x-x-x-

It had become rather late when they finally returned home, the darkness of the night only pierced by the car's headlights as it rolled the last meters onto the drive before it came to a stop. Asuka stalled the engine and gave a last look into the rear mirror. Aki naturally still sat secure in her child seat, clutching Kiko to her chest.

The girl had fallen unusually silent awhile ago, but Asuka blamed it on tiredness. It was long past bedtime after all, and once in a while she had wondered whether her child had given in to the tempting call of sleep. She still seemed awake for now though.

Shinji had already loosened his seatbelt and got out, moving to the back door on his side to retrieve Aki. Asuka had just got out herself when she heard the low mumbling on the other side as he was scooping his girl into his arms.

"Papa? What's a friend?"

"A friend...?" Judging by his voice, he was just as surprised at Aki's question as Asuka herself. She was at an age where she'd ask many questions seemingly out of nowhere, and they weren't always easy to answer. But this was certainly different from "Why is the sky blue?"

"Well..." Shinji began his attempt to explain, no doubt that his brain was working overtime. "A friend is someone who... plays with you and... uhm... you can talk about everything, who's there for you..."

"So Mama and you are my friends?" Aki tiredly asked further, barely audible from her mother's position.

"Eh, not... not really..." Shinji half-sighed, half-groaned. "A friend is usually someone who is not in your family."

"So I can't have any friend?"

Silence fell over them like a suffocating curtain.

Asuka didn't move to intervene, not just because of the agreement they had made that neither should interrupt when the other explained something to Aki to prevent her to favor one as being smarter. She actually saw him through the windows of the car, giving her a pleading look. But how to help him when she couldn't think of any words herself?

"Papa?" Aki waited for an answer.

"Look, it's not that bad, Mama and I never had..." he stopped what he had stupidly blurted out, taking a calming breath. "We... we'll see what we can do to find you a friend, okay? But it's really time for bed now."

Aki fortunately didn't protest at his way out, rubbing her tired eyes with her arm as her father carried her inside the house.

Asuka didn't follow them right away. Her view went to the dark city behind her.

She wasn't sure whether it was the whole day, visiting the sea of LCL, or just Aki's innocent question that had hit a much touchier spot than the little girl could have anticipated, but – for the first time in years – she had that uneasy feeling at the lack of lights...

Chapter IX: The 16th

As always, Ritsuko woke up alone. Not bothering with her nudity, she sat up, reaching for her package of cigarettes on the night table. Hitting the lighter three times, the spark eventually emitted a small flame, shortly illuminating the dimly lit room.

'Foolish girl,' she berated herself as she took a drag, 'Are you still hoping for a wake-up kiss in the morning? Or to find at least a note?'

Why was she still doing this? Why was she that desperate for a human's... for his touch? Someone like her shouldn't be reduced to such state. She was a logical woman of science. She knew it was merely a result of hormones and chemical reactions. And yet, here she was, yearning for that silly emotion called love.

Pressing the halfway burned cig in the ashtray, Ritsuko stood up to get dressed for another normal day. Just as always...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It had been a long day for Hisao. That bunch of kids that always hung around at the school's back entrance had kicked another window in. Of course they were denying it and it happened when no one was in sight, but he had no doubt it had been them. They just reeked of trouble. And who had the wonderful task to do the repairs? Of course it was him.

But the door to his small single-apartment slid open and he let out a sigh of relief, as soon he would finally get some rest. He could really use a relaxing bath and then a nice mellow evening with a good movie.

However, he figured his day was still not over as he flipped the light switch – and everything remained dark.

"Oh great, is that bulb burned out too?" he angrily muttered to himself at the prospect of still not being able to come to rest; absently hitting the switch several times against better knowledge.

"No, it's the fuse, actually."

Hisao froze. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he ever so slowly turned to the voice that had come from the shadows.

All he could see was the silhouette of the man that was sitting idly on his armchair, feet on the living room table. The glowing end of the cigarette he was smoking gave only enough light to reveal a stubbly chin and a wry grin.

A fear that he liked to suppress but had accompanied him in the last fifteen years now hit him full force. "Who- who are you? How did you get in here?"

"I've heard you were a member of the rescue team that went to search for survivors of the Katsuragi expedition."

"I... I don't know what you're talking about. I-I'm a janitor. I've never set a foot out of Japan."

"Oh?" He couldn't see it, but Hisao just knew the man was smirking. "It's surprising that a simple janitor knows that a highly classified experiment had been taking place outside of Japan."

The ice in Hisao's guts spread further. "That... that was just a guess. I don't really..."

"You're a busy man, Mr. Yamaki," the stranger interrupted him. "You made it quite a challenge for me to find you. Changed your identity twice, moved your location eight times. How was the weather in Osaka?"

Hisao swallowed hard. Lying would get him nowhere. No matter how, this guy knew. "How- how did you find me?"

"I've heard some rumors you know? That a certain someone had found some data and documents that he didn't pass on to his superiors," the stranger kept ignoring him.

"Listen!" Hisao yelled pleading. Oh god, he didn't want to die just yet. Why hadn't he just left the stuff on the ice floe where he found it? It would have drifted out on the sea and eventually drowned, never to bother anyone again. "I don't know who you are, but I have nothing to do with that anymore. I-"

"Relax, Yamaki. I'm not here to kill you. In that case you would have long been dead. All I want is that data."

"Yeah, right," Hisao spat back sarcastically, not believing a word. "And once you have what you want, I'm-"

The stranger threw his head back and let out an exaggerated sigh. "If you want me to take out my gun and ask you for the data while shoving it under your nose, just say so. However, I can't force you to trust me. But rest assured, I'm not working for them; quite the contrary. As far as I know, you did your job well enough to hide your very existence from them. In fact, they probably never doubted that it was lost during the Second Impact."

"But... but I don't have it anymore," the janitor tried to explain. "Honestly, when I realized what that knowledge would get me into I was happy to get rid of it."

"You destroyed it?" The stranger's voice sounded grim, making Hisao fear that he had given one wrong answer too much after all.

"No," he tried to justify himself quickly. "About twelve years ago, there was another guy who asked for it. He was the one who told me I should go into hiding. I gave him everything I had. I never made any copies."

The cigarette wandered from one corner of the mouth to the other as the stranger most likely wondered what to make of this info, whether to believe him or not. After a short while of silence, the shadow blew out a last cloud of smoke before the small light was extinguished in the ashtray on the table.

"You wouldn't happen to remember the name of that guy?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Ever since their talk, Misato tried to spend some more time with Asuka. Given their shifts and school schedule that wasn't very often, but at least once a week would be "girls' day", where they'd just go shopping, have lunch or just sit in a café. Misato hadn't been sure at first if it wouldn't be a bit too "girlish" for the grieving mother and Asuka had indeed been a little hesitant at the idea. Soon enough, however, she had started to enjoy it as much as Misato – surprisingly – did herself.

She had forgotten how much she had missed this, going out with a friend. Ritsuko wasn't interested in much more than a talk, she got most of her clothes by ordering from a catalog. And it just got worse lately. Misato wasn't even sure when the doctor had been on the surface the last time, outside the Geofront. And eventually Misato followed suit, only going shopping when she really needed something.

"Friend" – That's probably the best term to describe how she saw Asuka now. Not "charge", not "surrogate daughter", not even so much "little sister", but a woman on equal level. It even had gotten much easier to see behind the teenage body.

"Hey Asuka!" she got the redhead's attention, who was looking through the discounted lingerie.

Broadly grinning, she held up a red thong for men. "How about this for Shinji?"

Asuka face-faulted. "No, thanks," she mumbled smirking, shaking her head in disbelief. "He once tried to surprise me with one. As much as I love him... well, let's say it doesn't really help the mood when you can't stop laughing."

While Misato sometimes missed the times when her teasing had a visible effect, it didn't stop her from chuckling at Asuka's story. "That bad?"

"Ohh, yes. And he even *was* better built than he is now."

Misato smiled. She had heard a lot of these tidbits about their time in the Post-Impact world recently: the nice, the bad, the romantic, the naughty (if only implicated), the funny – and of course those about Aki.

She couldn't deny that after all this, she really wished she could have met the girl; to see for herself how a daughter of Shinji Ikari and Asuka Soryu would have turned out. No, **had** turned out. If she already felt such sorrow for the loss of the little child, it was hard to imagine the pain that the parents must feel.

"I don't think there's anything here for me," Asuka muttered with a final look at the clothes, ending her "guardian's" trail of thoughts. "Let's go to that little boutique near..."

Misato wondered about the sudden stop in voice and movement of her companion. "Asuka?" Following the redhead's gaze when she didn't get an answer, she turned around to be faced with a blue-haired girl.

"Major Katsuragi," Rei greeted, slightly nodding. "Pilot Soryu."

"Ah, hello Rei," Misato replied friendly. "What brings you here?"

"I am in need of new socks," she calmly replied. Glancing down, Misato saw a large hole in the right one, the contrast of the pale skin showing between the dark cotton making it impossible to miss.

"Figures," Asuka snarled as she stalked over to her. The sudden switching of her behavior was almost scary. And she wasn't even as bad as she used to be. "The devil will probably visit the Arctic to spend a holiday in the warmth before you'd buy yourself some new outfit."

Rei, however, seemed as unfazed as usual. "The clothes that were supplied by the school are sufficient for me."

"Sufficient, sufficient," Asuka repeated mockingly, throwing her hands up and rolling her eyes. "This is not a matter of sufficiency. You should do it to feel more comfortable, to show the world that you have another life than school and duty. And most importantly to make you feel better!"

Misato smiled slightly. Despite her tone, it was obvious that she wanted to help Rei rather than to put her down. But her face quickly dropped at the sadness that resonated along with the answer.

"There is no reason for me to desire such thing," Rei said as if "feeling good" was a luxury, so unobtainable anyway that it wasn't worth pursuing. She apparently wanted to leave it at that and walked on, but she didn't get far. As she was about to pass Asuka, the redhead suddenly snatched her wrist to stop her.

"Yes, there is," Asuka told her unusually stern. And even more strange, it seemed to reach Rei, as she

did nothing to break the eye-contact or Asuka's grip on her arm.

They would probably have stayed like that for quite a while if Misato hadn't eventually felt the need to intervene. "Uh, Rei?" she gained their attention. "We wanted to go for lunch soon. Wouldn't you like to join us?"

The girl seemed almost surprised at that invitation, but not negatively. Misato took that as cue to continue. "I'm sure they'll have some vegetarian food as well."

Rei's mind was obviously in a turmoil. Hesitatingly, almost shy, her gaze returned to Asuka as if searching for a confirmation, which – what must have been an even bigger surprise to her – she got in form of a small nod.

"I..." She trailed off, her shoulders sagging ever so slightly as did her head. "I apologize. I can not accompany you," she quickly excused herself, freeing her arm without much resistance and walked away at increased pace.

"She could at least say goodbye," Misato mumbled, a bit disappointed. For a second she had actually thought they might succeed. "Well then, let's go get something to eat. Or do you want to check that boutique first?"

There was no reply. Glancing over to her, Misato saw Asuka still staring in the direction Rei vanished, a disappointed frown on her face.

"Asuka?" she asked again, finally reaching the redhead.

"Yeah..." Asuka muttered, forcing herself to move. "I'm coming..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Despite that incident, it had overall been a day of fun. The two women were both laughing loudly about another of Asuka's anecdotes of Shinji's attempts to impress her when they entered the apartment a few hours later, loaded with several bags from the various stores they had visited. Upon arrival, the voice of the third inhabitant could be heard.

"Yes, Mr. Satori, I know it's the third time in the last two weeks, but..."

"Oh no..." Asuka sighed, the previous elation instantly fading.

Misato, however, was unable to see the connection from Shinji speaking with someone on the phone to such a change in mood. "What is it?"

"He's clinging to a futile hope again," Asuka commented flatly, staring solemnly at the form of the boy in the hallway.

"I know... yes, I know you said you would call if you'd see..." they could hear him say.

"Why, who is he talking to?" Misato curiously asked further.

"The caretaker of an orphanage in Gora. After all, it's not like Shinji could just make an official missing report..."

"No! No, please!" the boy's voice suddenly became frantic. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bother you! Please don't stop... I-I'll even pay..."

That was when Asuka had enough and made that fact loudly known. "Shinji, stop it right now! You're not going to throw your money at that greedy bastard!"

"Eh, I...I have to hang up," he almost whispered sheepishly as if he hadn't even noticed them until then.

"Thank you very much for your work."

Asuka shook her head. "You know she won't show up there," she said pitiful and tired. Apparently, this was a long argument they had kept up for already quite some time.

"Are you still so sure that she's not here?" he muttered sadly.

"I realized by now that she's here with us, but not like that," Asuka replied with an equally low voice. "Don't you think she would have shown up somewhere long ago if she would have come back with us?"

"I-I have to try at least..."

An uncomfortable silence was threatening to become overwhelming. But it didn't get the chance to.

The sirens announcing the arrival of the 16th Angel caused all three of them to flinch in surprise and especially Shinji's face was contorted in fear.

"Rei..."

-x-x-x-x-

Makoto slammed the phone onto the receiver. "Major Katsuragi is on her way and will arrive in a few minutes along with the Second and Third Children!" he screamed over the overall noise in the Command Center. "Unit-00 is to start over gate 32 by her orders!"

"Fourth Children has just arrived!" Shigeru signaled as well. "Apparently he was close to an entrance when the alarms went off."

"Without an EVA, he is of no use," Commander Ikari stated calmly. "Unit-02 will start as soon as the pilot is ready."

"Sir, what about Unit-01?" Makoto inquired. "Major Katsuragi..."

"Has hopefully not forgotten her limits," the Commander firmly cut him off. "EVA-01 will remain frozen until my explicit order."

"Yes, sir."

"*Unit-00, start!*" the orders were repeated over the speakers. "*Move to intercept position!*"

-x-

Rei held her positron rifle ready as she watched the Angel from behind her cover. The double-helix seemed to do nothing but to spin there over the ground, though she knew better than to trust this apparent peace and not just from past experiences with its predecessors.

Every fiber of her being was calling out to her, screaming that something was wrong. Never before had she felt such impending dread. This unsettling emotion disturbed her so much that the wish that it should just attack formed within her, so they'd get it over with.

"Rei," Major Katsuragi's voice came over the comm, "we'll observe its status for a while."

That the Major had arrived meant that her back-up would be coming soon. But she couldn't feel relieved. That feeling had reached its bursting point.

"No," she voiced her senses, "It's coming."

And indeed, the helix stopped spinning, morphing into a single glowing ring that suddenly opened at one point – before it shot right at her. It penetrated her AT-Field as though it wasn't even there; penetrated her EVA before she could evade. She tried to ignore the pain of the impact that was

transmitted from the EVA's stomach to her own, getting a hold of the Angel with her left hand to retaliate. But even though she fired several times from extreme close range, the rounds were deflected completely, causing no harm at all.

Worse yet, the Angel was starting to infect the EVA; she could feel it seeping inside as it pushed Unit-00 to the ground. Rei lost the rifle as she fought to pull her enemy away with all her power, but even using both hands she could do nothing to hold it back. It was invading – not only her EVA, but also herself.

There was something.

A feeling as if there was another, unknown presence along with her in the EVA.

But she could notice only herself, yet... not. As if... as if it was a different part of her that she had never noticed before. Or something else merging with her.

'Who are you?' she asked the being, if only in thoughts. Light flashed before her eyes as the bright snake wavered outside. 'Is that you? An Angel? That being that we call an Angel?'

"An Angel?" she could hear it speaking with her own voice as clearly as though they were talking eye to eye with each other. She could almost see it in her mind, wearing her own face. "Does it matter? We are going to be unified soon. We will be one and the same."

'No. I am I. I do not wish to become something else.'

"No? I see... But it is too late." The voice was so clear, just like her own. "This pain... It is not so bad anymore, is it?"

'Pain?' Rei wondered, recognizing almost instantly the feeling that was shared over their connection. 'You speak of... loneliness?'

"Yes. But I do not understand. You do not have to feel it anymore. Yet you avoid it to be eased because of that other feeling."

'Because... I am afraid...?'

Rei could almost see the smile of this thing with her face. *"Yes."*

There was a disturbance before she could answer; a feeling that for a second reminded her of surprise and eagerness.

"A new one appeared. She is a talented warrior, is she not? That is what you know of her."

Forcing her head to turn, Rei looked out of the cockpit to see the red Evangelion just exit the elevator that had transported it to the surface. *"Soryu?"*

"Do not worry. I will adapt to her will to fight us. She will become one with us soon."

'No. I do not wish for that to happen.'

"Liar. I can see it. I can see your heart's desire; to unify with others. You can not deny it."

-x-

Asuka instantly went into cover behind the few buildings in front of her as soon as she got out of the lift, trying not to draw the Angel's attention by spreading her AT-Field just yet. In some distance, a little outside of the city's borders, she could see the struggles of EVA-00 and the wavering tail of its attacker that had buried itself into the blue Evangelion.

It was doubtful she could shoot fast enough without risk of hitting the hostage, but if she took her time to aim properly, the Angel would most definitely strike before she could fire. Besides, as far as she

knew it wouldn't have any effect on it anyway. So it was up to close combat.

She peered carefully around the skyscraper again, trying to come up with a strategy to get near it without being noticed. But that seemed hardly possible, as it was surrounded only by – compared to an EVA – short trees.

"You need a diversion?" Misato's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. Apparently she had been reading her mind.

"That might be helpful," Asuka answered nodding.

"How about a little smokescreen? You think you can attack through that?"

Asuka just shot the Major's face on the comm-window a dry smirk in return.

Misato accepted that answer with a nod and continued to explain her plan. "There's a missile launcher on the hill to your right. We'll shoot a few into the Angel's direction, so that they'll hit maybe about fifty meters away from it. Hard to tell how well it's going to be distracted by that, but I'm afraid that's all we can give you right now."

"Guess we'll have to see about that," Asuka muttered, extracting the prog knife from her shoulder.

"Are you ready?"

She focused her view on the Angel's position. "Yeah."

"Then we'll launch in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... FIRE!"

Asuka waited another second until she heard the first impact, then she hurled forward. A thick wall of smoke hid the Angel from her view as warhead after warhead detonated on the ground, elevating earth, rocks and trees. She could only hope it was just as blind to her as she was to it as she ran full-speed ahead into the dirty cloud, the knife ready in her fist.

She could barely evade the lightning-tentacle as it shot at her.

Drawing up her longtime trained instincts, she dropped, rolled away and got up on her feet, facing her opponent again from a safer distance; all within a few seconds. But the only thing she saw from the Angel was the part that still stuck inside the writhing EVA-00.

"Damn! I didn't know that thing was *this* fast!" she cursed, frantically scanning the ground. But under the thick cover of the woods, she could barely make out a faint glowing of the snake-like body here and there, its movement too erratic to follow.

Like a pillar of light, the Angel suddenly shot upwards directly in front of her, startling the redhead enough to stumble backwards. She didn't fall, but the short distraction was all the Angel needed to rush unstoppable towards her. In the very last moment, Asuka saved her EVA from taking a direct hit similar to Unit-00, but her shielding arm was apparently more than enough for the Angel as it burst into it with full force.

Asuka screamed, more in shock than pain, clutching her own arm at the same spot where the Angel was penetrating the one of her EVA. To her horror she felt the same veins spreading under the plugsuit that infected the armor of her and Rei's Unit. But what fueled her fear and her rage most was the tingling sensation on her mind; flickering, but quickly becoming stronger.

"Not... NOT AGAIN!" she yelled with all her hatred as she clenched the prog knife in her EVA's fist, extended it to full length and drove it into the writhing snake-like Angel with all her might; determined to cut the 'head' invading her Unit from its body. But the Angel, screeching in pain, released its unwilling prey after a short struggle, the knife still deep inside it.

"Shit!" Asuka cursed at the loss of her weapon, despite the relief in her shoulder and the fading presence in her mind.

A wailing screech deafened the ears of everyone who heard it as the end of the Angel wavered around in pain. It seemed like it went mad from the agony; slamming into the ground, running against trees in its attempt to get the blade out of itself, but it just ended up uprooting or cutting the wood.

-x-

Drowned out by the Angel's cry, no one heard the other one who was screaming in pain. Rei could feel the knife as if it was impaled in her own foot; she felt the sharp steel, the cutting vibration of the blade, every movement inside the flesh as the Angel tried to free itself from it.

'Just like the EVA,' she realized, but unlike the creature that was controlled by its mechanical implants there were no safety measures, no one but the Angel itself to dampen the connection between them.

"It hurts, doesn't it? Make it stop! Pull it out!"

Rei grimaced at the Angel's words. "No."

"Are you willing to suffer just to watch me suffering? It is too late to go back! There is no more 'my pain' or 'your pain'! Only 'ours'!"

"If I have to suffer for you to be defeated, I will."

"Then you will have to die with me as well."

"If I have to..." Rei winced as the knife moved in the wound.

"You are a fool! You just think that you are replaceable because you think you are lonely. But no one can really be replaced, not even you. You know that, do you not? That is why you are afraid," the being spoke. *"But if you still desire to throw your life away, so be it. I will not give us up. If you do not want to help us, then it has to hurt even more to get better."*

Rei screamed, but not even with all her lungs could provide was she able to voice the exploding pain as the Angel slammed to the ground again, driving the knife even deeper inside it. Sparks went flying as it ground the hilt with its body along a street, slicing its own flesh apart. When the blade finally scattered on the road, Rei had the mental image of her foot being split up to her toes.

The Angel's 'tail' looked just like that, torn apart in two, though it was quickly fusing together again.

-x-

Asuka's triumph of her successful counterblow was slowly turning into frustration again. Despite the Angel's regeneration, it had obviously been hurt more than she had expected and she had even managed to retrieve her weapon while performing an evasive roll. But the snake of light had become much more careful now with its attacks, dodging the knife with ease as it closed in on the red EVA again and again from various angles until Asuka got the impression that it was coming from all sides at once. She managed to fend it off for now, but defensive play was definitely not her forte.

"Damn it, hold still already so I can kill you!"

-x-

"It's no use if she's too busy evading to attack properly. One alone can't do it," Misato analyzed the situation equally frustrated. "Commander, we need..."

"Agreed," she got the permission much faster than expected, "The freeze on Unit-01 is canceled, effective immediately. Sortie as soon as possible!"

-X-

Shinji gritted his teeth, urging the forces that catapulted him up to multiply their efforts, but it still took several agonizing seconds until he finally reached the surface. The moment he spread his AT-Field, the Angel jerked away from Unit-02, facing the new threat as it had before. But it didn't look nearly as lost between the two possible targets as he had expected or at least hoped. The light began to tremble strangely, and Shinji was afraid it was not out of fear. Just a second later, he was proven right.

The 'tail' seemed to split up, the Angel parting down to half of its length. However, both ends were of the same width as the single one before, more like it duplicated rather than tore itself apart.

"It can do that?"

Shinji had no more time to wonder about this unknown ability. His instincts barely saved him against the initial shock, getting him out of the way of the end that was speeding towards him. The Angel crashed into the elevator building behind his EVA, but it already renewed its hunt for him before the dust had settled.

-X-

Rei could only watch in horror how the Angel kept up its simultaneous attack on the two other EVAs. She had already been afraid before, when it was going after Soryu, but now... him too... And if anything, the Angel had become even more determined to succeed.

"To unify with them", she remembered the Angel's earlier words. "Is that... my wish...? To become one with them?" she questioned herself for the truth that she hadn't wanted to see before.

She had desired to get away from the loneliness that had consumed her for her entire existence. She had wished to bond with others, to have others as part of her life. But she knew it was not meant to be. For what she was, for her purpose, she would have ended up hurting them and be hurt in return. So she had stayed away from them, even if they reached out to her. That was for the best... or so she deluded herself.

But now she was not given a choice. The Angel made it for her in its own agenda. It would unify the three of them... against their will... and then...

Commence Third Impact...

"No." She couldn't let that happen. Humanity – millions of people she didn't know at all. A few that she did know, yet not very well. But it was her purpose to protect every one of them. Even if that meant...

"It will not work," the Angel's voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

"What?"

"Your plan to destroy us. I have seen it inside the other. So I have already deactivated that mechanism before you could surprise me."

Rei felt ice in her guts as her mind registered those words. Should everything be lost now? She no longer had the power to fight. And the way things were going, it was just a question of time until Ikari and Soryu would suffer the same fate as her, even if they could manage to retreat for now. With the Lance of Longinus gone, they had nothing at hand against this enemy, no one...

No... There was still one ally left. An unwilling one, one that despised her very existence and under any other conditions would rather break its bindings that imprisoned and enslaved it than to assist its enemy. But now that it was facing its death at hand of its distant kinsman, she could only hope that it would heed her plea.

"Adam's replica. I am opening my heart for you. Please accept it."

It heard.

It heard and accepted. It would not let her control it, but she had known that. It just needed her heart and soul for itself.

She could already feel herself fading as the Angel's voice rang in her mind one last time and it was full of panic, of fear of its inevitable demise. *"You can not do that! You know what will happen in that connection! The Lilim you are trying to protect will suffer just as well! The very thing you try to avoid will be caused by you and you alone!"*

"It would, if this was the forbidden bond. But this is not the true body of Adam and the heart I am offering is not that of Lilith, but the heart of Rei Ayanami. This is my gift, my own power to protect those close to me. Even if I have to give myself up for it..."

And with that, as she closed her eyes, she smiled, embracing the warmth of nothingness. As long as he would let her.

-x-

"Rei's synch-ratio is rocketing! 75 percent! 80! 85! 95! – It's off the scale!"

Misato whirled around alarmed. "Is the Angel merging with her?!"

"No, it," Maya wheezed, giving her a panicked look. "It's the EVA!"

-x-

The armor wasn't broken, it rather looked like the inside was melting out through invisible pores to create a new skin of a crude mixture of white and blue. Like in fast motion, hairs seemed to grow from the steely head, not stopping until they reached the familiar form of Rei's cut.

Where once had been the prominent single lens were now two red human eyes staring hollowly into the world. A gap opened below, showing teeth and tongue, before lips formed a laughing mouth.

The figure raised in an inhuman motion, leaving the shoulder pylons on the ground as they slid through the body as though it consisted of a semi fluid substance. It somehow resembled a grotesque version of Rei wearing the armor of EVA-00.

-x-

Misato gaped in horror at the display of the events outside. "How... how can this be? When Shinji... he just vanished into LCL, not... fused with Unit-01."

Forcing her eyes away from the sickening sight, she tried to regain her composure as she turned to the crew for explanation. "Is she above 400 percent?"

"I don't know!" Maya yelled back, the fear in her voice making it apparent that she neither had forgotten the way EVA-01 got its S2-Engine. "The numbers are fluctuating! The MAGI can't comprehend it!"

-x-

The Angel's body jerked wildly like the tail of a stuck tadpole in an obvious attempt to free itself in vain from the abdomen of the "newborn". The hybrid looked down at it as though it was the first time "she" even noticed the thing sticking inside "her". And just like a curious child, the being reached out for the interesting object with its giant hands.

-x-

"Unit... I mean... something's being emitted by... it!"

"AT-Field?" Misato inquired despite knowing that something so obvious wouldn't make Makoto so nervous.

"No! Dimensional values are inverting, going negative," Ritsuko replied for him. "Anti-AT-Field..."

-x-

Shinji didn't even notice that he hadn't moved an inch, not even blinked, as he stared in horror as the Angel suddenly blew up; bursting with a gut-wrenching squashing sound. A fine orange rain of LCL sprayed over the optical sensors of his EVA, dimming the sight from his cockpit before the 16th's remains dripped off.

"Rei..."

As if it heard his whisper, the hybrid's head snapped up, focusing on him. Craning its neck, it looked like it was trying to remember the purple form of his Unit. Then, with slow heavy steps, it swayed forward.

-x-

"Ikari?" Fuyutsuki's voice quivered ever so lightly as he addressed the man sitting next to him. "Have we failed?"

"No," came the calm, simple answer. "That power is not meant to be held by this union."

-x-

The monstrosity meanwhile continued its way, either not noticing or not minding that its left arm stretched beyond its limit as the hand became more and more a victim of gravity until it fell to the ground.

-x-

"What's happening?" Misato wondered at that scene. "Is the Anti-AT-Field affecting her too?"

"No," Ritsuko figured with scientific calmness. "She's draining too much energy. The EVA's internal batteries are empty, but the core doesn't know whether it can rely on a S2-Engine or not, it just keeps consuming more and more energy from her until there is nothing left to hold it."

"Affirmative!" Maya concurred. "The core is getting unstable!"

"So we just wait until the problem solves itself?"

Misato shuddered at Shigeru's harsh definition of what had been Rei just a few minutes ago; a fourteen year old girl, whom she might not have known as well as Shinji and Asuka, but who still had been close to her, to all of them. And now, after that girl had been hurt by the Angel and transformed into that grotesque being out there on its certain way to death, she had become a mere "problem".

But Ritsuko's words made it even worse. "I'm afraid it won't be that easy. When the core leaks with all that absorbed energy inside..."

"You don't mean...?" Her hand hovered unconsciously over the scar on her chest, the nightmarish memory of the Second Impact unstoppable surfacing to her mind. *"It wasn't an Angel that caused it,"* she remembered Shinji's words. *'Did he mean this? Have they failed...?'*

-x-

'We... we have failed...'

Shinji unconsciously brought the EVA's arm up as the giant seemed to reach out for him, staring right at him with that deformed, yet scarily joyous smile as the face slowly melted in front of his eyes.

"Rei!"

He hadn't noticed he had been moving forward until he was stopped by Unit-02's hand on his EVA's shoulder.

"Shinji! Shinji, get yourself together!" Asuka's voice came from somewhere, but his mind was not able to recognize it originating from the usual comm-window at the side, too occupied with the being before him.

Their fingers almost touched, only mere meters apart. If he could reach her hand, hold it, then he would save her. He didn't know how, but somehow it would be enough. Even if all logic defied that, even if it was far... too late...

The smile changed to an expression of surprise as the hybrid looked at its arm, breaking off just above the elbow.

Shinji's cramped hands quivered around the controls as he, powerless, had to watch it returning its eyes, full of disappointment and sadness, at him; silently pleading for help that he was unable to provide.

-x-

"The core is getting critical! Explosion inevitable!"

-x-

"Shinji!"

Piercing wails of agony echoed in the valley as the white being shook and writhed in pain.

"Shinji!"

As much as he wanted, he couldn't avert his eyes from this gruesome life-and-death struggle. "Rei, no..."

"Damnit, Shinji!" Asuka continued to yell, but he didn't find himself able to answer. "There's nothing we can do for her anymore! But we have to contain...!"

Her voice was drowned out as the scream changed into the agonizing sound of the explosion, the flames of the bursting core engulfing the huge body in a split second, burning trees, evaporating water of the nearby lakes... Then they reached his EVA, blinding him from the sight of Asuka trying to block the blast from the city with her AT-Field. But with the close proximity and the limited range of her shield, her attempts were of little success.

He had failed...

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Misato sighed as she stepped into her apartment, physically and emotionally worn out by the after-effects of... the fight. Large portions of Neo Tokyo-3 had been destroyed or were now drowning in water from a leak in the formation separating the city from the Ashi lakes. The civilians were safe in the shelters, so there hadn't been many casualties, but now NERV would have to face many homeless people who would demand answers.

Shinji and Asuka were probably home before her and she felt somewhat guilty for not having the time to be there for them. After all, it wasn't like there hadn't been any casualties at all.

Shinji's condition especially worried her. It was bad enough if it were just some anonymous numbers or names of people you never heard of, but it was always worse if it was someone close to you.

So she went to look for him first, and almost collided with Asuka who just got out of his room, closing the door behind her.

"How is he?" Misato asked as soon they made eye-contact.

Asuka's expression actually said enough already, but she answered anyway. "He's taking it very badly. I guess it was to be expected, but still..." She shuddered, brushing her hands over her arms as if to warm herself from a nonexistent chill. "I just don't like to see him like this."

Misato smiled weakly at that. "If I ever needed a proof that you've matured, I have it now. I'm surprised that you don't show any sign of jealousy that he's mourning her like this."

"Oh, I was jealous, quite a while in fact, even after learning her true nature. But I realized a long time ago that, while strong, his feelings for her are different to those he has for me. She's not a threat to me in that regard."

"Her true nature?"

Asuka closed her eyes. "I think Shinji – or maybe Rei herself – should rather explain that."

"Rei?" Misato's surprise rose even more.

But Asuka shook her head, smirking weakly. "Shinji is sulking because he thinks he has failed. But I'm not so sure if there's really no chance."

"But... you really think she could have survived that?"

"Oh, of *that* I'm quite certain." the redhead allowed herself a weak laugh, but that quickly ebbed away.

"Take over for me a bit, okay? I'm really thirsty from all the talking."

Misato naturally nodded, and went for the door as soon as Asuka moved aside on her way to the kitchen.

"Shinji? I'm coming in," she announced respectfully before opening the door.

She had already wondered why he chose his old room, seeing that he was practically living in Asuka's by now, but it became clear as she entered. The small chamber had no windows that would allow natural lights to come in, and the artificial one seemed perfect to add to the depressive mood he obviously wallowed in.

"Hi, Misato," he greeted without looking at her. He just kept staring ahead, limply sitting on his bed.

"Hey," she muttered back. Despite her earlier confrontations with a depressive Asuka, she still felt far from being an expert in such talks. Giving orders, interrogating, complaining, teasing, she could do well; even admitting her flaws was comparably easy. But when it came to comforting someone, words just wouldn't come.

"You're not thinking of taking advantage me, are you?"

Misato usually wasn't one to blush easily. But she also rarely found herself on the other side of the teasing. Whether it was the implication or the half-hearted smirk he shot at her, she felt her face heating, but she quickly caught herself. "Depends. Does a hug count?"

Before he could answer, she had already made the few steps to the bed, sat down next to the boy and drew her arm around his shoulders, pulling him close.

"To be honest, even after all the thinking I did today, this was pretty much all I could think of to make

you feel better," she admitted. Before a playful smirk made its way to her lips. "Until your offer just now..."

That brought the ball back into her game. "Mi-Misato!"

But it just took a second of silence and the moment of joking and smiles was overshadowed again by memories of the hours before.

"So... how are you feeling?" she tried carefully.

"I don't know. I've seen her dying before. And that first time had been devastating. Back then I didn't have Asuka to help me and you... well, I just didn't want anyone near me. So in that regard, I'm a little better off. Also because I know more now. But..." He swallowed a sudden sob, clenching his eyes shut in obvious anger and pain. "But it still hurts! I had sworn to myself not to let it happen again, that I would protect her. Instead... instead she died even more in vain! I don't know how I can face her anymore."

"Face her? Shinji...?" Misato raised an eyebrow. Was he just as delusional as Asuka? Maybe that last time things hadn't been as definite.

"I know you don't understand Misato, but she's still alive."

"Oh... oh, Shinji. I know, as long as we remember her, she'll never cease to exist. But even more so, you shouldn't..." She was cut off by something she never had expected in this situation: A weak chuckling escaping Shinji's throat.

"You don't understand, Misato. Rei Ayanami **is** still alive. And will probably come off with fewer bruises than me or Asuka." Though the smirk left his face as quickly as it had come. "But I failed to protect her anyway."

"Wha- what do you mean? How could she have survived that? If she did, why does it matter so much that you failed? Is she that badly hurt or...?"

"No. As I said, she will appear to be completely unharmed."

Misato still couldn't follow him. "But then...?"

"It won't be her," Shinji muttered. "Not the Rei we knew."

"So it's mentally? Amnesia?"

"No. No..." He sighed frustrated. "She's... a clone..."

Misato's eyes widened in shock. She had expected a lot, but this? "A... clone...?"

"Do you understand now? Rei Ayanami **is** alive. A **new** Rei Ayanami. The one we knew however, the one we... she... she died. She died because I couldn't protect her."

Misato's head was still spinning. The mental image of dozens of identical Reis on an assembly line, all fitted with the same basic "settings", each ready to replace the previous one once she had a "defect"; it gave her chills. How much did NERV keep secret even from her? She had thought she didn't need it with the knowledge that he was still alive and pursuing the truth himself, but maybe she should take a closer look at Kaji's farewell gift after all.

But first things first. "Shinji, you... you did your best..." she tried to console him, but was cut off by the opening door.

"Don't tell him such things or he'll really believe that all is over already," Asuka chided peevishly.

Misato was about to berate the redhead for such harsh behavior, which seemed to contradict the

compassion she had seen in her just a few minutes ago. Yet Shinji was faster to protest. "But Asuka..." "No buts! You yourself told me that you had barely even seen Rei after it happened because you were too scared of her! You have absolutely no idea what she's like and how much of the old Rei is still left! You only *presume* that she died."

Given that logic, Misato almost felt bad for her previous thoughts. She had again forgotten that she wasn't dealing with a poor, angsty kid that needed some motherly compassion and protection from the harsh world or a little brat who was jealous of the attention the other was getting with his meek behavior, but with two adults; a wife who didn't want to see her husband destroying himself by wallowing in self-pity.

But before she could comment on that, the ringing of the telephone cut her short.

"Come on, Baka!" Asuka demanded, pulling Shinji from his bed by his shirt. "I guess that's our signal."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rei awoke coughing, a faint coppery taste of LCL still lingering on her tongue. Her muscles felt weak, even opening her eyes seemed to be a very straining task. When she finally succeeded, she noticed that she could only see out of her left eye, even though she felt no pain in the right one that was apparently covered with a bandage. Her right arm appeared to be bandaged as well, already bound in a sling around her shoulder.

She realized that she was in the infirmary already before she looked around. Anyone else would have come to that realization by the apparent injuries, the lack of pain due to medication. But Rei knew better.

She didn't know what had happened. And she knew she would never remember. Because she knew that she never made those memories. Because it hadn't happened to her.

She must have been the third now. But...

"I am still alive..." she whispered to herself, the hoarse words burning in her throat.

Of course she was still alive. He would never let her go, not until she had fulfilled her purpose in his scenario. But then, why did he even let her die? She had always known that she was replaceable. Though she had not expected it to hurt so strangely in her heart. He had saved her back then, when the test run of EVA-00 had failed. Why not this time? Why did he let her be replaced?

She suddenly felt the overwhelming need to get up, to get away from that trail of thought. Her body ached as she forced it to sit up in the bed and turn towards its edge, draping her legs over it before slowly sliding down.

The floor felt cold as her unclad feet made contact with it. Carefully she rose, balancing her weight for a moment before she took a first step, then another, slowly nearing the exit. Her hand reached for the knob, encasing the metal with palm and fingers, turning it to open the door.

As she stepped out, her eye narrowed at the invading light coming from the windows on the opposite wall of the corridor. But she didn't shield it by turning her head away from the brightness. She rather felt a kind of curiosity, a need even, to walk forward to look – outside.

Something in her mind reminded her that it wasn't really the outdoor world, but a man-made recreation inside the Geofront. And yet, to see mountains, trees... for the first time...

"Hey, First!"

The call averted her attention, redirecting it on a red-haired girl and a brown-haired boy. She knew these young people. They were her classmates, her comrades... There was something else too, especially regarding the boy, that she couldn't quite place.

The boy, Shinji, didn't meet her gaze; if at all, he just glanced quickly at her. He seemed uncomfortable being there, meeting her; differently from his common uneasiness with the opposite sex. Could he know? Did he witness the end of her second life? It would explain his uncertainty about her survival.

If it wasn't for his companion, he probably would have turned and left, but the girl, Asuka, nudged him forward and mouthed a "Come on".

"Ikari," she greeted with a nod towards the boy, then the girl. "Soryu."

Shinji winced at her words, though she wasn't sure why. Was there something unusual about her greeting? His mouth opened and closed, but she couldn't understand his words.

Asuka glanced expectantly at him, but when nothing came, she eventually stepped in. "Hey, First. Misato told us to check on you, so here we are."

It seemed unreasonable for Major Katsuragi not just to consult the medical reports, but Rei nodded acknowledging anyway.

"I am still rather weak," she reported her condition, feeling the strain on her body even more the longer she was out of the bed. "I would like to sit down."

Already while making that announcement, she went for the nearest of the rows of waiting chairs that stood at the walls in the hallways of the infirmary. Ikari and Soryu watched her taking a seat on the chair in the middle of the empty row, but they made no attempts to follow her example.

Rei noticed that Asuka seemed to be expecting something. She kept glancing back and forth between her co-pilots, her expression growing more impatient and she eventually started tapping her foot. Shinji didn't notice though, or he ignored her, until she nudged him forcefully with her elbow and made a wide gesture towards the presumably injured girl.

"Uhm... how... how are you, Ayamami?" he finally stammered.

Apparently, it wasn't what his redheaded companion had wanted him to ask. "'How are you?' What do you think how she is?!" she hissed at him.

"But... just look at her. She's not..."

"She's not what?! To be honest, I don't even see a big difference, especially not considering her condition!"

They were keeping their conversation low, probably not wanting her to listen, but Rei heard every word, even if she couldn't understand the meaning perfectly.

"But you don't know her as much as I do."

Asuka sighed angrily. "Fine! Maybe some distance is just what is needed here. If you don't want to, then I'll do it!"

"Asuka!"

But his attempts to hold her back were too late, she had already turned away from him and was closing the gap between her and Rei. Once she had reached her sitting teammate, Asuka knelt down so she could meet the red-eyed girl's gaze.

"What is the last thing you remember, Rei?" she asked in a tone that Ayanami had never heard from her

usually brash co-pilot. "Before you woke up?"

The memory of the dark chamber came to her mind, as seen from her point of view behind the LCL-filled glass. "I am..." she averted the eye contact for a moment, "not allowed to tell you."

Asuka nodded, but didn't give up. "That's okay. But can you tell me when it was?"

She answered the question truthfully, though something about the Second's unnatural behavior made Rei uneasy. Not only did the redhead's voice seem much softer than usual, her entire body language had changed; no longer attempting to block everyone out, but rather seeking openly, invading in a non-hostile manner. And Rei was now in the focus of that attention, much more than she was used to, much more personal. It certainly unnerved her. And yet... she somehow felt... cared for.

"So you actually still remember everything until yesterday afternoon? You remember me and Shinji?"

She nodded affirmatively, but was still unsure what Soryu had in mind.

"You still remember all the things we did together? Our fights against the Angels? Or when we went to that Ramen stand with Misato? Or our hiking trip? How about when Shinji rescued you from your plug and asked you to smile? Or the time we waited together for him to return from Unit-01?"

All those questions irritated her, but each called up pictures, flashing in her mind. "Y-yes."

"Then tell me, do you remember how you felt those times?"

"How I... felt..." She broke the gaze in shock as it came back to her.

Yes. Yes, she could remember. Those other feelings besides loneliness. The warm feeling when someone cared for her, when someone wanted to be with her. The comradeship... friendship...

At first, almost on its own, her free left hand started to move. But as she looked back up to the face of her fellow pilot, a small smile graced her lips.

"It would be... convenient," she repeated an old memory, the outstretched arm slightly trembling.

"Yes," Asuka answered with a small grin of her own as she took the offered hand in hers. "Yes, it would."

-x-x-x-x-

"Asuka?"

"Yees?"

He couldn't help but smile at the expectant tone of his love's voice, satisfactorily savoring what was about to come.

"Thank you."

Her head turned only slightly, but it was enough so he could make out the smirk on her face before she looked ahead again. "What? No, 'You were right, oh great Asuka, wisest and of course most beautiful of all, Goddess above all Gods...'"

Shinji cut her off as he took three quick steps to catch up to her, leaning close to her ear. "We'll wait for that until we're home, okay?"

She didn't answer to that, but he saw the playful smirk widen before she went ahead once more.

However, as glad as he was that he had been wrong about Rei, the way Asuka had proved it just wouldn't leave his mind. "You know... The way you talked to her... It almost looked as though you were talking to..." He stopped himself, hesitating a second to finish, "...a child."

Asuka surely knew what he really wanted to say, but she didn't let it affect her – visibly at least. "Well, I thought, in a way, she still *is* a child," she spoke softly. "Was it wrong?"

He shook his head. "No. I guess no matter what age you are, it's always nice to have someone who shows you that he's trying to help and guiding you. It just..." He closed his eyes, trying to get the last words out. But they were a mere whisper. "...reminded me..."

"Yeah... Me too..." Asuka answered and though he couldn't see her face, her awfully cracked voice told enough. "And you know what?" All the more it surprised him when she turned around and, despite the glittering wetness in her eyes, had a smile upon her face. "Even if it was just for that moment – it was nice being a mother again."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

These eyes saw it for the first time, this nose smelled it for the first time, her ears picked up the sounds of the neighborhood for the first time... and yet it was also the place she had recognized as hers for many months. Physically, it didn't feel any different, as though she just returned as she had every day. And yet it was very unsettling.

When her first self had died, the second had been too young to fully understand that she wasn't really the same who had just woke up again after a deep slumber. She couldn't have realized that she was another being with the imprinted memories that had been secured from the first.

Thanks to Ikari and Soryu, she also remembered the emotions of the former Rei. But were they actually hers as well? They felt right, but had it been her who made them? Her soul was the same, but had it been her who formed it and let it be formed by the ones she interacted with?

She had become friends with them, but did she even have the right to, when they didn't actually know her but only her predecessor? Wasn't she just a stolen soul in a stolen body with stolen memories and emotions? They seemed to know, but they didn't seem to mind. Did they not understand? Were they in denial? Or could it be that she was the same Rei Ayanami they had known after all? Could she actually be not just a replacement, but herself?

If she had her former self's soul, her former self's memories, her former self's emotions, could she be the same?

Rei felt confused.

And she hated that feeling.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"We don't want to humiliate you any longer." How generous of those old lechers,' Ritsuko mentally fumed, zipping her top back up again. 'As if I could have gotten something into a holographic chamber that could have put them in danger.'

But it was hard to concentrate her anger on a bunch of perverts. All it did was to serve as a little distraction from the other words that had nagged more on her than she would have liked during the whole questioning.

He had sent her to be humiliated instead of Rei.

She wasn't really surprised that he hadn't told her that little tidbit when he had given her the order. She was even less surprised that he wanted to protect his precious Rei. But that didn't help to ease the bitter

feeling of betrayal.

Maybe it wasn't much of an incident in a long row of disappointments, but it was the famous last straw, enough to make her finally see what she had always pretended to be blind to: He would never choose her over his precious Rei.

She was still a fool just like the youngster she had been, who had dived into the false affection he had been giving her after her mother's death. The fool that once had dyed her hair blond to get a compliment from someone to her as woman, not as her mother's daughter. The fool who had kept it that way to distinguish herself against better knowledge from her "foolish mother". The fool who thought she might could make him forget *her* despite the presence of precious, precious Rei.

Ritsuko clenched her hands in anger. She wasn't so stupid not to realize that this reaction was just what the old bastards wanted, but she was more than happy to grant them this satisfaction.

She might be a fool. But he was a bigger one if he thought she was never going to let him know.

-x-x-x-x-

"Yes, Dr. Akagi, I understand."

As he hung up the phone, Asuka sat up from the floor where they had made themselves comfortable with each other for a while before the call had interrupted. "So it's time?"

Shinji nodded with a sigh. "Yes, I'll just get myself ready and then I'm off," he said quietly. "You're sure you don't want to come along?"

She shook her head with a gentle smile. "Not unless you want me to," she answered. "That's something I don't need to – or maybe even shouldn't see."

"Alright," Shinji nodded. "I just hope Misato will be there in time. She wasn't very happy when we explained the plan to her."

"That's hardly surprising, is it? After all, she had been her closest friend..."

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Ritsuko smiled to herself. It hadn't gone as well as she had hoped for, not with Misato anticipating her just when she met up with Ikari's son. The usually so sensible boy also had taken the sight of Rei's "nursery" and the dumping ground much better than she would have guessed; even the mentioning of his oh-so-beloved mother's death had left him relatively unfazed, only glaring at her passively. But that didn't matter. That all had just been a build-up for this.

It might not be fair to direct her hatred for his parents at Shinji. But so what? She wasn't the type for compassion anyway. He was just a tool, everyone was regarding him as that. So why should she hesitate to use him as tool for her revenge? Depending of the impact this shock would have on him, his ability to pilot would considerably drop. And already having lost one active EVA, it would most definitely hurt the Commander to lose another one.

And if Shinji would separate himself from *her* because of this revelation... well, Ritsuko certainly wouldn't mind seeing her suffer just as she did because of her.

"You said this is the core of the Dummy Plug?"

Ritsuko smirked again. Misato always had to question what she had been told, didn't she? Granted, as imposing as the chamber was with the huge brain-like construction overhead, it seemed rather empty because of the darkness and only the single tube visible in the middle. But that would change now.

Her hand closed around the remote. "I'll show you the truth."

The lights went on with a single touch of the prepared button, illuminating the surrounding LCL tanks. And their contents, their mindless giggling filling the room as they were awakened.

"Rei?" The gasp she had been waiting for had come, but not from the source she had expected. Glancing behind her she saw that her worries were unfounded. Apparently, Shinji was shocked so much that he stood still, his fists clenched, eyes cast to the floor, refraining to look at either side. Misato was the one who stared unbelievably at the sight of the clones. "EVA's Dummy Plug is...?"

"Yes, these are to become the cores of the Dummy System," Ritsuko explained with satisfaction. "And this is the factory for manufacturing them."

"This is...?"

"These are dummies. Nothing but spare parts for Rei," she cut her college friend off. The repetitions were getting on her nerves. She finally had to get this over with. "Humans found a God and tried to obtain it. As result humanity was punished. That was 15 years ago. The God that they found vanished. However, man tried to resurrect God with his own hands and created Adam. From Adam, man created what resembled God. That is EVA."

"Human? It is a human?"

"Yes, it's a human. EVA, which originally didn't have a soul, now has that of a human. All of them were salvaged." Ritsuko smiled. It felt good to finally get these secrets out, to have this burden taken from her. But it still wasn't enough to be free. Not with her still here, so many of them. "However the vessel which truly contains a soul is Rei. Only she has a soul. None of the other vessels have one. There was nothing in the room of Gauf.

"These," she glared at the laughing forms around her, anger rising, "are nothing but empty containers. They have no souls. Nothing but vessels. So I'll-

"MISATO!"

Ritsuko flinched, startled by the sudden cry of the boy who had remained so silent until now. It took her just the fraction of a second to come back to her senses, but in that time Misato had already closed the gap between them, grabbing the remote that was still in her grasp.

"NO!" Instinctively, she tightened her grip.

"Let go," Misato demanded coldly, the gun that she had never put away since she had stopped her at the entrance now pressed against the blonde's back.

Ritsuko didn't fear death anymore, though. But she had to do this before at any cost. Then she would gladly go. So she held on with all her strength, trying to reach the button with her thumb. But the well-trained Major eventually pulled the remote more and more out of her hand despite her efforts.

No, she couldn't lose yet. It didn't matter afterwards, but not yet!

Driven by nothing but pure determination she grabbed her long-time friend's wrist with her free hand, using up every resource of strength she could muster to keep the remote from slipping away from her fingers.

A sharp pain against her cheek, strong enough to send her tumbling backwards, ended her struggle as Misato backhanded her with the gun hand. However, it caused both of them to let go of the device that now flew through the air. Cupping her burning face, Ritsuko could do nothing but follow its flight with her eyes before it clashed on the floor, sliding a good way over the slick surface until it came to stop right in front of two feet. Her eyes widened in surprise and they weren't the only ones in the chamber

that did.

Slowly, Rei bend down and took the remote control.

A relieved sigh escaped Misato. "Well done," she praised. "Now give me that thing, okay?"

However, the girl just stared at her, then back at the device.

Ritsuko saw that as her last chance. "Give me the remote, Rei!" she ordered, hoping that in the confusion the girl would not be able to decide whether to follow her or Misato's order.

But all she got was a cold look from the albino. "I am afraid I cannot do that," she explained as she stepped closer to the tank, eye-to-eye with one of the clones. It was as though she was looking into a distorted mirror; on the one side clad in her school uniform, seemingly emotionless staring ahead; on the other a floating nude form, carefree as a newborn. Slowly, Rei held the device up. "This is something I have to do myself."

The victorious smirk Misato had held until now vanished instantly. "Rei!? You... do you want to become a mass murderer like she did?"

"You misunderstand, Major. These are not human beings. Their official purpose is to serve as core for the Dummy Plug system, but even that is only secondary. As Dr Akagi explained, they are mere vessels to hold my soul. That was the only reason they were created for, just like the body I possess now and the ones before."

With her free hand, she touched the glass separating her from her copies as she continued. "Without a soul, they can not become aware of their feelings. They notice the feel of the warm LCL around them, of this glass holding them; they can see us, the world outside of theirs. But... it does not matter to them. All they are doing is existing, blissfully unaware of everything. They cannot understand the difference between pain and joy. They do not know the vast variety of human emotions. They do not feel hope or fear for the future."

She cast her head down and her voice followed. "I always wondered whether to pity or to envy them."

A slight pressure of her thumb. That was all that was needed to engage the deadly mechanism that took the bodies' forms forever, the orange LCL reddening as it was mixed with blood and disintegrating flesh.

"Rei..." Shinji asked in disbelief, visibly fighting to watch this horrific sight. "What have you done?"

"I have... set them free..."

Unnoticed by almost everyone, a single tear dripped onto the floor.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Commander had instantly demanded that Ritsuko and Rei were brought to him. She and probably Shinji would eventually have to explain their role in this matter as well, but for now he only wanted the two main suspects, giving Misato time to drive her visibly disturbed charge home.

Not that she wasn't disturbed herself. They had told her about it, but actually seeing all those identical copies of Rei had been such a shock that she had almost forgotten their plan. Maybe also because she hadn't wanted it to be true that Ritsuko was willing to go that far. She had always suspected the doctor of keeping more secrets from her than she would have liked, as Major, as Director of Operations and mostly, as friend. And then there was, of course, what had happened afterwards. As if she didn't already have enough gruesome pictures in her mind to haunt her dreams.

To think Shinji now witnessed that twice...

"I'm sorry. I probably could have stopped Rei, but... I guess she took me too much by surprise myself."

"It's... it's alright," Shinji muttered, for the first time since they left the Terminal Dogma. "It was her decision."

"And you are okay with that?"

"It was surely... disturbing to see 'her' dissolving like that. But maybe... maybe I really don't understand it completely. If even she herself doesn't regard them as humans, then maybe I tried to interfere with something I had no right to – because I couldn't understand it. I didn't even consider such a possibility. That she would want set them – set herself free... I thought I wanted to do it for her. But I guess I just wanted to do it for myself."

"You did what you thought was the right thing to do."

"Yeah. But what is right for one doesn't mean it's right for everyone else." He smirked weakly as though he remembered something. "After all... there are as many truths as there are people."

Then, he fell silent, just staring out the window. But just when Misato thought he was waiting for her to answer, he spoke once more. "It just makes me wonder... what if I'm not as right as I thought in other matters as well?"

-x-x-x-x-

Gendo Ikari had no reason to smirk. The destruction of the Dummy System was more than just a slight setback. Treason on such a level, so close to the end, that was something he couldn't afford now.

"Why did you do it?"

He knew that Akagi wouldn't answer that question, at least not now, but that defiant smirk as she stood there at the other side of his office told him enough. She had wanted to hurt him and she had succeeded. He had come to expect to be hated, to be betrayed, but that he could anticipate it didn't ease the bitter feeling inside him a single bit.

But it didn't matter. His scenario wasn't affected too severely. And then he wouldn't need a replacement anymore.

Still, he needed to know. He wasn't sure why she didn't answer. Fuyutsuki probably wouldn't be very surprised if their affair would be revealed and Rei wouldn't care. And it would hurt his reputation more than hers in the current situation.

But he was a patient man. He had enough to imprison her for treason. He could wait while she'd spend the rest of her time in a holding cell until she realized her place and would be desperate enough to tell him everything he wanted to know.

"Dr. Akagi only configured the device as I asked her to. It was my wish to destroy the Dummy System."

Everyone in the room appeared shocked at Rei's words, but no one so much as Gendo Ikari. Other people probably wouldn't have noticed the surprise in his voice as he fought the previous nausea returning a hundred times stronger. "Why?"

"I no longer saw a purpose for them. Evangelion Unit-00 is destroyed. Evangelion Unit-01 no longer accepts me. Everything indicates that it would be similar with Unit-02. With that, not only the Dummy Plug itself is proven useless, but as there is only one more messenger to come, the chance that I will participate in another fight in person is almost nonexistent. Therefore the risks for this body are

relatively slim."

As obvious as the lie was, she offered a reasonable excuse.

"That..." Gendo forced himself to remain calm, "was not for you to decide."

Rei, however, made no move to apologize.

"Akagi," he turned to the no longer smirking blonde, "I can no longer accept you as head of Project E. I am aware that it wouldn't be of much use to revoke your passwords and access codes, but be warned that I can and will not tolerate another break in the chain of command."

He saved himself saying "*You won't be as lucky to have someone stepping in for you next time*" as that was obvious to every attendee.

"You are dismissed," he breathed. He had never expected having to let her go with such light punishment for her betrayal, but what choice did he have with Rei covering her? The doctor seemed equally surprised to get off so relatively easy as she wordlessly nodded and left the room.

But he barely noticed her anyway. His eyes were locked with the red ones of the blue-haired teen. Why was she doing this? What could be the reason for her to want the destruction of the Dummy System? What was he supposed to do with her now? For once, he actually found himself at a loss for words.

Fuyutsuki eventually ended this silent stand-off. "That goes for you as well, pilot Ayanami."

She nodded and moved to leave.

"Rei," Gendo stopped her however, just as she reached the door. She only turned her head slightly. "You have disappointed me."

It wasn't a question, so there was no need for her to respond. But if it bothered her in any way, she didn't show it. The only sign of acknowledgment she gave was the short pause in silence. Then she resumed her movement and left.

As the door shut, the professor gave an amused laugh Gendo couldn't really share. "She's clever. In a way, she made sure that you have to take good care of her now."

"That could easily be done by locking her up in a holding cell."

"I was a little surprised that you didn't. If anybody else would have done it, that would have been the most merciful punishment." Fuyutsuki allowed himself a smirk. "And other parents would have long given their rebellious teen house arrest."

"Other 'parents' aren't dependent on the cooperation of their children. So far, she is still obedient enough not to go against a direct order. But if I were to lock her up now, it would only fuel her grudge against me. She might not accept to fulfill her purpose just out of spite when the day comes. That is something I can not risk."

Gendo knew the old man was regarding him with slight disgust. The professor had always had a problem with his way of using people. And he had to admit that it had its disadvantages, having to stay on their good side as long as he needed them.

But fortunately, Fuyutsuki was professional enough not to voice his discomfort with his decisions. Instead, he brought up another problem.

"They were seen to have made contact with her after her resurrection. You think they have influenced her as well?"

-x-x-x-x-

Ritsuko's head was still spinning as she left the Commander's office. What just had transpired there was hard to grasp for the doctor. She had honestly expected to find herself in a holding cell, or probably even dead soon when she had entered and now she was... free...

A deep breath escaped her; suddenly feeling the weariness that had piled up in the last months overwhelming her. That was all gone now. No more secrets to add. No more unbearably responsibility. No more hoping for a love that could never be...

Lost in her thoughts, she almost missed the door next to her opening again.

"Rei!" she called out, almost on reflex, but it got the blue-haired girl to halt, waiting to hear what Ritsuko wanted. If only she knew that herself.

There was a "thank you" on her tongue, but it wouldn't come out. She wasn't even sure if Rei could appreciate such words of gratitude. Instead, the next logical thing got past her lips. "Why?"

"I think... you still have a purpose here," was the calm answer. Slightly turning around, Rei's piercing eyes stared into hers as she continued, "You are not replaceable, Dr. Akagi. You should not waste your life."

The words shocked Ritsuko more than she would have thought. Not out of frustration or anger. But because she heard them from the last person she had expected them from. And a weak smile crept over her lips. "What you did in there... I didn't even know you could be capable of that."

Rei narrowed her eyes. "To lie?"

Ritsuko shook her head. "To help someone like me. Siding against him at that."

The blue-haired girl seemed surprised at her words as though she hadn't even realized what she had done until then. After a second of contemplating them however, she turned to leave. "I am my own person. I can decide for myself."

She left before Ritsuko could say any more, but even if the scientist had wanted to, she found herself actually at loss of words because of that statement. A baffled smile formed on her lips.

He might have chosen Rei over her. But that didn't mean Rei chose him as well. And somehow, that thought was more pleasing to Ritsuko than she would ever have expected. Because, in the end, he might come to see that he had chosen wrong.

And Ritsuko would be there to watch his face then.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Oh God," Daisuke Tanaka muttered, nervously shifting his feet as he watched the transport came to a stop. "Oh God, oh God."

"Relax," the pony-tailed man next to him told him grinning. It was all his fault. "One could think you'd need to take a leak."

"Relax? RELAX?!" Daisuke repeated shouting. His shaking hand ran through his sweaty hair in a vain attempt to calm down. "I'm as good as dead. They'll find out. There's no way they couldn't. Something as big as this just doesn't go unnoticed."

"Don't worry," the other appeased, scratching his stubbly chin. "They take a lot of work from us with all that secrecy of theirs. As you said yourself, no one knows what the other does. The transport company doesn't know what is being transported, the smelters in the plants don't know what it is they're supposed to rip apart and melt into an indefinable metal mud. They'll be happy with the 300 tons of

discarded artillery and we're happy with this discarded beauty here." He nodded over to the wide trucks that carefully drove their covered load backwards into the hall.

"Don't worry," Daisuke repeated to himself, burying his shaking head in his left hand. "Don't worry," he says. I'm as good as dead, and he says 'don't worry'..."

"Well, see it like this: We're even now."

"Even? EVEN?!" he threw another hysterical fit, not caring that the drivers were looking by now. "Oh, no, no, no, we're not even. Now you owe me one. A very big one!"

His companion chuckled loudly. "Alright, alright," he laughed, slapping Daisuke's back hard enough to push his admittedly not too muscular frame forward. "But I guess that should be soon, before it's too late, eh?"

"That is not funny," Daisuke grumbled, though the other's opinion was quite different.

"Believe me, dying isn't as bad as they say." The man's laughter ceased, but he kept a smug grin. "And I have experience in that after all."

Chapter X: Repeat

"Wake up. Wake up!"

It was definitely not the nicest way of being pulled from his slumber. A sweet kiss was much more favorable than being shaken and yelled at.

"WAKE UP!"

"Asuka?" Shinji mumbled, trying to force his heavy eyelids open. "It's much too early..."

"Tell me... tell me you remember!" she pleaded with an almost hysterical tone. "Tell me that it wasn't just a dream!"

"Calm down," he groaned, trying to get the rest of sleep out of him. "Wha... what are you talking about?"

Finally his eyes started to adapt to the dim light – and if he had been more awake, he might have wondered why it came from a door that shouldn't be in that direction.

Asuka tried to say something, but she choked on her words. It was then that he finally noticed how much she was shaking; how much her hands trembled, holding his shirt in a cramped grip.

"Asuka, what's wro...?"

He didn't finish the sentence. The last remains of sleep vanished instantly as he saw it.

Her hair. Her *long*, flowing hair.

And it wasn't just that. Her face, what he could see of it in the dark, seemed more round and soft, her cheeks not as defined; her body as well was shorter and slimmer, the muscles on her bare arms that had been toned from strenuous work with the garden and the machines seemingly faded...

She was young.

She didn't look much older than on the day they had met so long ago.

His mind was racing, trying to comprehend such an impossibility, but none of the thousands of thoughts could give him an answer he liked. He literally jumped out of the bed, almost throwing Asuka aside, as he unbelievably took in the surroundings. A small and tidy room. He could make out the shape of a cello case in one corner, the familiar silhouette of a S-DAT player on the desk near the bed.

This wasn't their bedroom at home, this was his old room in Misato's apartment – but without any dirt and debris, without any sign of destruction at all.

But it wasn't just everything around him. His body, too, felt different as though changes that were supposed to come slow enough to adapt to had been made instantly. He may never have had as distinctive and hard features as his father, but reaching up to his face, he also could only feel smooth skin, not even a hint of stubble.

Just what was going on?

He turned back to – was it still his longtime wife and lover? – who now sat cowering on his bed. "How can...?"

"Shinji?" she cut his anticipated question off with a mere whisper. "Where... where is Aki?"

The hand he had still cupped his cheek with slumped down as the echo of her words taunted his mind.

-X-X-X-X

*'This has to be a dream. A very, **very** bad dream.'*

It was the only plausible explanation Shinji could come up with. The previous years had been too long to be sheer imagination, they had felt too real.

But so did this.

"How is this possible...?" he asked himself whispering once again and still with the same result.

They were definitely in Misato's apartment, but it lacked any sign of the destruction that had been all over the place the last time they had been there. And it wasn't the only one. Before him, outside the window in the living room, beyond the balcony were the lights of the very intact city of Neo Tokyo-3.

But not even that sight was as shocking as the mirrored face of his fourteen year old self staring back at him from the glass.

There could surely be explanations of how they had gotten to the other side of the city in their sleep. That it would magically rebuild itself was harder to believe, but even for that, some kind of explanations (albeit illogical ones) could be found; maybe that they were knocked out for longer than just a night, maybe it wasn't really Tokyo-3, but some replica built at a different place in a similar looking region.

But that they had become younger was just impossible.

Prying his eyes away, he turned around. Asuka sat at the table in the kitchen, her face buried in her hands. She wasn't crying, at least not anymore, that much he could tell. But it was obvious that she too was more than distressed by all this.

"Where is Aki?"

Her question stood above all others. If they really had been displaced by unknown returnees, Angels, aliens or whatever, she would have to be out there somewhere. She would be alone, maybe in danger, and they had no chance to help her. But even that horrible thought was better than...

Their attention was drawn to the sudden opening of the second refrigerator, where a well known penguin waddled out, acknowledged their presence with a quick glance at them before he went over to the bathroom.

"PenPen?" Shinji breathed in disbelief. "If he's here, then..."

He felt the sickness in his stomach growing. If they really somehow had gone back in time, then that would mean...

No. NO! He just couldn't accept that. He hadn't wanted to listen when Asuka pointed that possibility out and neither did he now. There **had** to be another possibility.

"May-maybe another Angel came and now it's messing with our minds somehow," he eventually offered, breaking the silence.

"No," Asuka said quietly, shivering slightly. "That would feel... different..."

Shinji averted his view, guilt now also coming into the mix for reminding her of that.

There was the other possibility that something – be it Angel or maybe even NERV – had altered their minds so that their life after Third Impact and the events leading to it had seemed more real than a dream. But that was a possibility that he knew she would accept just as little as he did himself.

"So you really mean..." he trailed off. "But if we somehow traveled through time, wouldn't we rather be

in our own – well, our own *older* bodies than in our younger ones?"

"How should I know?!" Asuka snapped. "I'm about as much of an expert at this as you are!"

"My, my, so early and already bickering?" Misato mumbled tiredly as she passed them on the way from her room to the fridge..

Misato... passed them...

"M-Misato..." Shinji whispered unbelievably at the sight of the woman that had died years ago to save him standing there, grinning with the just-retrieved can of beer as if nothing had ever happened. For a moment the unreal situation was forgotten, his mind too wrapped up in the fact of facing her again.

Not taking his eyes off his old guardian, he stepped over to her and, hesitating, almost fearing she would vanish again if he acted on impulse, pulled his arms around the surprised Major.

"Hey, hey, good morning to you too," she muttered with amusement, breaking the moment.

Instantly, reality came crashing down on him again and he slowly backed off. "Uhm... sorry..." he muttered. "I just..."

"Everything alright?"

He blinked, looking up at her in surprise.

Misato smirked at him as she passed by to get to her chair. "Well, you'd normally blush furiously at something like that," she explained. "Feeling a little manly today?"

Shinji's shoulders sagged. He had already expected this, but now it was obvious that she didn't share their predicament and wouldn't know what was going on either. "No." He shook his head. "Not really."

A short glance at Asuka was enough to make this a temporary agreement. It probably was the best decision not to let their old guardian in on the situation as long as they had absolutely no idea what was going on themselves.

"What's up with you two anyway?" Misato asked, as if listening in to their thoughts. "No breakfast yet? Shouldn't you be getting ready for school by now?"

School? He looked over to Asuka and met her disturbed eyes, similar to his own. No, school just wasn't a possibility now. There was too much to decide before either of them would be able to just go to school – again.

"Misato... Asuka... doesn't feel very well. Would you mind if we stay at home today?"

"We?" Misato repeated, her eyes flickering back and forth between them.

"Well, I... uh... thought it would be better if someone would be here... in case she needs something... And since you have to go to NERV..."

Misato's initially surprised look quickly changed into a flat grin that spread behind the beer can. "So you two want to skip school?" she asked teasingly. "Stay at home all alone for the whole day? I hope you're well prepared for that. Can't use a pregnant pilot, can we?"

Her smile faltered when the usual reaction was missing. She couldn't know that what she had intended as a joke only reminded them even more of the painful situation.

"Huh? No frantic denials, swears and death threats? You really must be sick," she figured in a half-apologizing tone.

Then she suddenly froze, blanching, her view fearfully aiming at Asuka. "You... you're not pregnant for real, are you?"

Asuka clenched her hands, but she failed to hide her trembling as well as she hid her eyes behind her bangs. "No," she breathed through gritted teeth, almost choking on the single word.

Misato smiled nervously, apparently still unsure about this unusual scene. "Well... you two are under a lot more stress than other kids your age. I guess it's not too surprising if you feel a little burnt-out," she figured, regarding Asuka's downcast face. "Okay, since your grades aren't that bad currently, one day off won't hurt too much. But if someone asks, you had at least a temperature." She winked at them, before taking a look at the clock.

She groaned, running her right hand over her forehead. "Maybe I should start feeling a little feverish myself," the Major moaned in prospect of a much too soon beginning work day as she stood up to get ready. "But the Intelligence Division is probably going to rip my head off if they don't get my reports today."

-X-X-X-X

They had barely said another word to Misato that could have made her curious, but after she had left, the situation hardly changed at all. Shinji sat in silence, not bearing much more than a short glance at the opposite end of the table now and then. The episode with Misato hadn't been more than a short diversion from the spinning in his head and even less than from the pain in his chest.

But the silence didn't help at all; it just made it worse. It became constricting. Eventually it felt like he could barely breathe anymore. A part of him wanted to run away from it, but he knew well enough that that wouldn't help. He had to break it, to speak up, before it would become unbearable.

"So what... what are we going to do?"

At first Shinji thought she was just pondering about that herself, but when the listless form of his rejuvenated wife that was hunched over the kitchen table didn't show any sign of response at all, he began to doubt if she had actually heard his low question.

"Asuka, what...?"

"How should I know?"

He sighed. After the world had died, even after such an impossible catastrophe, she had almost immediately taken her professional stance, driving the two of them on, making plans, handling everything necessary, before she allowed herself to cope with the traumatic events of the Third Impact. She had seemed so strong again, just as she had been before her devastating encounter with the 15th Angel.

But now...

Now it seemed just as then, the aftermath of that horrible attack on her psyche, when he could only watch how life was seeping out of her. Maybe even worse. That hollow voice she cut him off with, the bitterness that rang with every word she spoke without moving an inch; that all were attributes of the Asuka he hated most. The Asuka who didn't care anymore. The Asuka who had given up.

How could she? How could she give up now, that Aki was...

"We.. we should ask Dr. Akagi. Maybe she knows how we could... get back or..." he trailed off, sighing tiredly, "or get her here..."

Asuka just sneered at his idea. "Time travel is practically impossible. And Akagi's not even an expert on that field. Some help she would be..."

"But it **must** be possible," he protested. "I mean – we are the best proof for that, aren't we?"

"And what do you think it would get us?" she snapped back, some of her fire finally returning. "They'd either call us crazy or test and probe us to death. So why and how should *anyone* help us with something that science deems impossible? Unless of course you have some handy way to beat the speed of light!"

"But... should we just sit back and give up then? I-I mean, we have to tell someone anyway! We have to do our best that it all won't happen again! We have to warn the people!"

"Do you even listen to yourself?"

"But we have to do *some*...!"

"WHAT'S THE POINT?!" Asuka suddenly screamed full of frustration. "Why should I care about doing this all over again?! Why should I do everything in my power to make this world better when it took everything from me?! Just so it can reset itself **once again**?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So... have you really given up already?" he muttered, shaking his head. "What if she came with us after all? Shouldn't we go... home? Out? Try to find her?"

"She's not..." she whispered, biting down sobs in complete contrast to her previous outburst again, shaking her head as she slumped back on her chair. "I can't... *feel* her. She's not here."

"Asuka..." Shinji sighed a little relieved, albeit sadly. But he knew that berating the redhead about her belief in her natural mother instincts and its limitations wouldn't help at all now.

She trembled and her voice now broke completely. "Do... do you really think I would want to accept it just like this? That I'd really want to give up on such a matter that easily?" Her tears fell unhindered onto the table now, each drop increasing Shinji's heartache even more. "But... but the more I think about it, the less I see a possible solution."

When it became unbearable to watch, Shinji quickly went to her, pulling her into an embrace. He felt guilty as he realized how egotistical his intentions had been, feeling her warmth sooth him as she leaned against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. But feeling her calm down as he ran his hand over her back, his conscience was reminded that she needed him as much as he needed her now.

"What about Misato?" he carefully tried again eventually. "We could tell her at least."

But Asuka shook her head before he even finished formulating his idea. "She already cares more for us than it's good for someone in her position," she mumbled. "If she were to know what we're going to endure in the upcoming fights, she might try to find some way to keep us out of them or at least somewhat safe, which would most likely just make them end up for the worse."

-X-X-X-X

They spent most of the day in silence after their dispute. They barely moved from the table as time trickled by painfully slowly. Lunch time came and went, but even though they had already missed breakfast, neither of them had any appetite. All they did was think.

And Asuka hated that. She couldn't, didn't want to think with that black hole that was eating her heart from inside out. Whenever her mind started to wander, it always ended up at the same impossible conclusion: Aki was gone. A so completely unreal disaster had struck and crumbled the very foundations of her happiness.

Every fiber of her being protested against that fact, screaming at her that it was just a horrible nightmare or the very cruel joke of some higher being. But she knew, since the moment she had woken up without Shinji at her side, since she noticed where she was, the state she was in. She just had to open her eyes to know. This was real. She couldn't explain how or why, but she knew it was real.

Aki was gone.

As a child, it had been devastating to lose her mother, the most important person to her at that time, the one she loved most of all and wanted nothing but attention in return.

Now, as a mother, she had lost her child as well, and again the one closest to her heart had been ripped out of her life, because she had failed to protect Aki from this unknown threat. But the guilt was nothing against the emptiness inside her.

Maybe that curse she once told Shinji about did exist after all. A curse aimed directly at that special bond between mother and child, severing it long before its time in the most gruesome way.

Both of them flinched in surprise, startled for a fraction of a second by the loud, by now so unfamiliar sound before the memory of the doorbell kicked in.

"Who... who could that be?" Shinji wondered, rising from his chair to get the door.

Asuka's curiosity however was nonexistent. "Does it matter?" she muttered, but more to herself as he was already out of range.

She heard the door hissing open a moment later, followed by Shinji's surprised gasp. "Oh? H-hello."

"Hey there. Katsuragi told me to check on you two when I have time."

That voice...? No, that couldn't be...

And yet, she found herself rising to her feet, moving almost on their own towards the hallway.

"K-Kaji...?" Asuka could do nothing but stare at the pony-tailed man, her wide eyes eventually flickering nervously to Shinji next to him. Rarely had she felt such uncertainty as in that moment, this situation she had never even thought of preparing for. She had completely forgotten that this all meant that *he* would be here as well.

She couldn't deny that there had been a pang of jealousy when Shinji had embraced Misato so affectionately, something she hadn't felt for years. When the only other female person on the planet in competition for your husband's love is your own daughter, there's not much reason for such feeling. But even though she had sometimes missed their old guardian as well and though she knew where Shinji stood with Misato and where with herself, the scene had made it painfully clear that she would have to share him again to some extent, also with people she didn't want to. It was harder than she had thought it would be not to get swallowed by all those upcoming, old emotions and remind herself of the present.

And now, there stood the man she had admired for so many years and she was faced with the other side of the coin. She still remembered how much she had yearned for his attention, to accept her as adult, how much she had wanted to find her fulfillment with this hunk of a male, to the extent of a delusional crush. She also still remembered the sadness, rage and denial at his 'disappearance' even after Shinji had told her flat-out that he was dead.

She also remembered him, however – and she couldn't suppress a tiny smile at that – to be more handsome.

-x-x-x-x

Kaji stayed only a few minutes before he excused himself for work again, but not before taking Shinji aside when they reached the door.

"I wasn't sure what to make of this sudden sickness," he admitted lowly with a last look back at the redhead. "But I guess this is really more than her usual cramps." His playful smirk materialized. "She didn't even try to throw herself at me at all."

"I... I know Mr. Kaji," Shinji agreed.

"And you don't seem to be quite yourself either."

"Eh?" Was he suspecting something? Had he somehow noticed already? It was his job to uncover secrets after all. Shinji knew that Asuka didn't agree that they should seek help, but if Kaji figured it out on his own...

"Yeah, you're sure that you two don't want to see a doctor?"

"Y-yeah," Shinji breathed out, trying not to show his disappointment as his hopes were crushed. "Just... just a little tired."

"Tired, huh?" Kaji grinned knowingly. "Well, I'm off. Try not being so tired again tomorrow."

With a last wave goodbye, the unshaven man was gone and the door closed behind him.

And even though his words didn't have the meaning Shinji had thought, they left him wondering.

"What was that about?" Asuka's words snapped him out of his musings as he returned to her. The positive effect Kaji's visit had had on her, however minimal, had been very short-lived.

"He just noticed that we weren't quite our old selves."

"Our old selves?" she repeated muttering, before falling silent again and staying like that for quite some time.

Shinji tried to distract himself in the kitchen. He only fixed a quick soup for a late lunch though. After all, he didn't suspect her to be any more hungry than himself. It was just when he placed the bowl in front of her that she suddenly spoke up again. "She would hate me, you know?"

"Hm?" He couldn't quite follow her thoughts.

"My old self. She would hate what I've become. Settling for being wife and..." her lips quivered as she forced the word out, "... and mother. Finding my happiness with you of all people. She – I – never wanted any of that. All that mattered was to be the best. The best pilot, the best student, the best at everything, and only the best was good enough for me in return. A family would have been only a hindrance. I had enough to do caring for myself, I couldn't waste my time and efforts on caring for others."

"So you changed your views. That's nothing to feel guilty about," he reassured her.

"But in a way, I betrayed 'her'. All she lived for and all she did not. That's why she would hate me. For accepting you. For allowing myself to fall in love with you. For loving my new life." She smiled weakly at him for a second as he laid his hand soothingly on her back. "She would even hate me for enjoying this touch. I don't know how I could ever be her again."

"You make your old self sound worse than she was." He shook his head. "People change, Asuka. Especially while they grow up. That's completely normal, even if it goes as far as throwing everything you believed in over board. We learn from mistakes, we learn from new people we meet, we learn from new experiences we gain. If we cling onto our beliefs and never question them or never dare to move on, because of fear of the unknown possibilities that step might bring, we would always be stuck with the questions of what could have been."

"So what?" she spoke in a tone that made him wondering whether she had listened at all. At least it wasn't the answer she had wanted to hear.

Shinji closed his eyes, rethinking his words. "She wouldn't hate you. If she did, she would never have become you in the first place. I doubt 'he' would hate me. Though it would probably surprise him to see

how he would become one day. But more importantly: I don't hate him either. He was too afraid, too full of self-doubt and he despised himself for it. Yet I can't hate him, because I know full well why he was that way. But... Asuka..." he formulated what had been on his mind since Kaji had left. "You know, if we don't want anyone to know, to make sure that they don't even suspect anything, we'd have to act exactly like our old selves." He carefully glanced at her for any reaction. "Do you really feel up to that?"

She didn't answer, averting her eyes to the ground. They both knew what that would demand from them in this current situation. But while a depression would go relatively easy with his old lifestyle, it would be a thousand times harder for her to maintain that fiery attitude of her old self. At least as long as there was no sign of their only child...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The morning sun shone through the window, having awakened her already a while ago. But Asuka hadn't moved since.

She didn't want to turn around to feel for another person next to her. She didn't want to open her eyes to see if she was in the bedroom of her beautiful home. She tried not to listen to sounds outside that shouldn't be there. She didn't want to do anything at all.

As long as she did, she could keep the hope up that the previous day had just been a bad dream after all or that whatever happened simply had reverted itself; that she'd be back to that world, so alone and desolated for some, but so full to her already with just the two people most important to her being there.

But the tears that escaped her eyes were proof enough that her hopes were in vain.

-X-X-X-X

It was loud.

That's what Shinji noticed first when they stepped out of the apartment building, even before he became aware of the perfectly intact skyline. That there weren't any signs of destruction from the Third Impact was to be expected, but just as the sudden, overwhelming silence had been eerie once, he was taken by surprise at the impact of the sounds of thousands of engines, honking cars, construction sites – and people.

They didn't encounter that many pedestrians on their way to school, but after having seen only two humans for such a long time it seemed so unreal to pass by just a dozen. After years of isolation, it suddenly felt like they had just returned from a desolate island, as though humanity had lived on without them and not the other way around.

It was strange and yet so familiar, remembering all those little things like to stop at a red traffic light, to watch out for the cars when you cross the street, or the way to school itself.

But while these new old impressions hit him, he couldn't really focus on any of them. Every so often his eyes went to the teenage girl next to him who had been his wife and mother of his child less than two days ago. More than once he wanted to ask her if she really was up to this. But he'd be lying to say that he felt anywhere close to being ready himself. They couldn't hide forever. Sooner or later they would have to face them.

He was a little startled when he felt her hand brushing against his, intertwining her fingers with his. She didn't say anything and kept her stoic view ahead, but he understood anyway. He expressed his thanks by returning the light pressure. It wouldn't be wise to be seen like this, but they kept their silent support

until they were a block away from the school.

From there on Shinji walked a little ahead as they had decided. It hadn't been unusual for Asuka not to want to be seen with him, so it would probably cause fewer questions than if they went in side by side. And the last thing they needed today were stupid questions.

As he eventually entered the classroom of 2-A, he was again feeling that tainted joy as he was confronted with so many familiar faces. Three in particular stood out of the mass.

He fought hard with himself not to rush over to them, repeating the scene when he was reunited with Misato at least with the two boys, who used to be his best – and for a long time only – friends. It was, however, the third person who hurried to meet him on his way to his old desk.

"Where were you yesterday?" Class Representative Hikari Horaki demanded to know ever so strictly.

"Uh? Didn't we get excused?" Shinji wondered, trying to recall their cover-up. "Asuka was sick and..."

A heavy pat against his shoulder shoved him forward. "Yeah right," Toji cut him off, grinning cockily. "Since when do you need to watch her when she's not feeling so well? Come on Ikari, spill it: How was she?"

Shinji had to suppress a grin of his own as he fought the urge to take him by surprise and tell in detail how good "it" really was beyond the jock's teenage fantasies. But he reminded himself that for everyone but Asuka and him, he was the same shy and naive boy they had known for the past months. His answer was equally short.

"Huh?"

"Oh, who are you trying to fool? Can't say I'm very happy with your choice, but I guess the character doesn't matter much when it comes to that and the body is alright, so... which part felt best? The breasts, right? So smooth and squishy..."

"Uh... wha...?" Shinji didn't even have to try hard to blush, though not because of the implications, but rather of his friend's embarrassing salivating as Toji continued to list and described – at least what he expected to be – the feel of the various female body parts. That dreamy look was instantly replaced with one of fear though, as an angry female made him aware of her.

"Suzuhara!" Hikari shouted warningly, pinching Toji's ear quickly in a painful grip.

"Owowow, damnit Class Rep, what is it?" he winced until the brunette reluctantly let go.

"You still have to water the flowers!"

"Again?! Ow!" Not letting any weak spot in her excuse to stop him from doing things that would make her like him less, Hikari dragged the jock away.

"He'll never learn," Kensuke chuckled at that display, but any hopes he would rather accept Shinji's story than their testosterone-driven friend's were quickly buried. "So where have you two really been?"

"But I've just said..."

"It has something to do with NERV, doesn't it? Something so secret that you weren't even allowed to admit that much."

Shinji sighed inwardly. He remembered Kensuke well enough to know that whether or not he'd admit that much, he wouldn't hear the end of it in the bespectacled boy's quest for the truth behind that secret. Thinking desperately for an excuse, he noticed Asuka standing in the doorway, apparently having watched the scene for a while.

"Eh... yeah, you know what, I still have something to discuss with Asuka..." he quickly mumbled, shuffling over to his partner. Standing with his back to the class, he allowed himself a deep breath.

"Tough start?" Asuka figured, keeping her eyes to the room.

"It was to be expected, I guess. But still..." he muttered, shaking his head slightly as he sighed. "It's strange. They're just like I remember them and yet..."

"They seem so young," Asuka finished with a nod.

"Hey, what're you two love birds mumbling about?" Toji shouted over to them as he noticed their distance.

"That you're an immature pig!" Asuka barked back at him in her attempt to revive her old spirit, but to Shinji it was noticeably hard-fought.

In that moment he noticed Asuka suddenly twitching ever so slightly and as he followed her gaze, he could understand the reason just too well.

There she was; that long-time enigma: cloned from remains of his mother; partial Angel; the one with the power to return every single human on the planet back to nothing. After seeing her for years only as that, in the tremendous form she had taken at the end, it seemed impossible to ever look at the delicate fourteen year old girl that was Rei Ayanami in the same way again.

It felt more than strange to see her walking past them as she entered, over to her desk where she hung her satchel on the hook at the desk's side before sitting down. Even the way she rested her head on her hand and let her gaze soon wander from the interior of the classroom to the outside through the window; everything seemed so... normal.

Surely, Rei had always had an aura of mystery or, depending of your point of view, weirdness about her. But there had never been any serious doubts that, while withdrawn, even somewhat apathetic and despite her unique appearance, she was a "normal" human being.

Suddenly, it seemed much harder to go through with his plans.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Asuka stared at the open can in front of her. She had felt thirsty when she had returned from school today; alone, since Shinji had cleaning duties. But as soon as she had sat down at the table, she felt unable to move the cold lemonade to her lips. In fact, she didn't feel able to move at all.

It had only been a few days now, but she felt so tired, so worn out. She had tried to pretend that everything was okay, but how could she succeed when it was anything but? Acting brash and arrogant had once been a natural shield to hide her pain from others, but building that up had been a slow and seeping process that had started long before her mother's death, a bit even before her loss of sanity. This however, had come as total shock, numbing her before she could have prepared in any way.

She just couldn't get her mind off it. No matter where she was, no matter what she saw, she always felt reminded of her. How should she follow classes, when all she could think of was that smile that she would probably never see again or the small warm body of her little brown-haired angel that she may never hold in her arms again.

Even a look at the clock. 4:30 pm. And all she could think of was that in two more hours, she would have to tell Aki to brush her teeth and get ready for bed, which would take at least another hour until she was asleep.

"Still not feeling well?"

Asuka snapped out of her thoughts. She hadn't realized until now how much her hands had been shaking, slightly crunching the can she had held the whole time.

Misato walked past her to the fridge, retrieving a beer for herself. Asuka hadn't even noticed her coming home. "If your still not better..." the concerned woman continued, popping the can open as she sat down at the opposite side of the table. "Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor?"

"Yes, I am!" Asuka grumbled lowly, attempting to appear merely annoyed. But she only managed to maintain that act for a second before she let herself slump forward with a tired sigh, resting her head against her palms. "I just feel..."

"Burnt out?" Misato finished for her. "Well, that happens from time to time. But knowing you, you'll probably feel better once you're in your EVA."

"My EVA?" Asuka looked up to her, almost shocked. She hadn't even thought of it.

"Did you forget? You two have a synch-test today. That is, if you're up to it. They're still a little touchy about that 'incident' despite having taken the whole complex apart piece by piece, so the test-plugs are still out of the question even if it's all rebuild by now."

"Incident?" Asuka mused, more to herself. She suddenly realized that they – or she at least – hadn't really thought about the actual time they had returned to. She had seen the dates, but they hadn't meant very much to her. And school had been too ordinary to be a distinctive reminder. The only 'incident' with the test-plugs she could remember was when they had been ejected while sitting naked in the plugs.

Which meant that this shadow Angel would come next. The one that swallowed...

"My, still so moody..." Misato commented with a pitying look, which was quickly replaced by a careful grin. "Afraid Shinji could finally beat you? He's been catching up quite fast recently."

"No, that's not..." Asuka began lowly, but then remembered her role again. She wouldn't have reacted with a simple denial once, would she? "I mean: Of course not! These... tests are just boring, that's all. We already know I'm the best anyway!"

How childish...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"To think that we would be wearing these again," Shinji muttered, wearily smiling as he glanced down at the gray and blue plugsuit on his body.

Asuka didn't feel like commenting on a triviality like that however. She leaned with her back against the side wall of the elevator that would bring the pilots to the gangway leading to their EVAs' entry plugs. It wasn't that she ignored him, even though it probably appeared as such – as it was intended to – she understood him very well.

It was even worse than when she had first put her old school uniform on again. This pressurized red outfit that tightly encased her skin; she used to wear it proudly as a symbol of her rank and status as pilot, but now it just reminded her of a life she had been glad to have left behind when she had finally been able to. When she had pushed the button that caused the suit to contract around her until there was no interfering air between her body and the conductive material, she had almost felt imprisoned by it.

"Asuka?"

"Sorry Shinji, I'm not in the mood for small-talk," she hissed lowly, remembering that he wouldn't stop otherwise.

"Sorry..." Shinji understood how to interpret the tone behind her polite words. "I just thought it would be helpful for a bit of encouragement."

"Who says I need encouragement?" she muttered under her breath.

"Hey, I didn't mean that just for you. I-I'm nervous as well. After all, I was never really..."

"Nervous?" Asuka snapped, backing off the wall towards him while pointing at the direction of the cages. "My mother is in there! When I learned of that I had only a few minutes and was much too busy to fully contemplate it. And now I'll suddenly be with her for hours. How am I supposed to suppress that? Even if I wanted to, I'm not sure if I could block her off again."

"But... why block her?" a baffled Shinji asked.

Asuka sighed silently in anger. That he couldn't figure that out himself... "Don't you think they'd notice when our synch-ratio has suddenly skyrocketed over our last results just over night?"

"Wouldn't that be just what we need? A proof we could use to confirm that our story is true? We could tell them then."

"I thought we had this discussion already. They'd rather search for more realistic explanations than time..." A movement of white and blue in the corner of her eye quickly shut her off.

But if Rei had heard too much as she entered the elevator, she didn't let it show. Of course, it would have been a surprise if she would have done anything else but to stride to her usual place at the elevator's door and wait to be transported upwards.

-x-x-x-x

"Well, guys, been a while since you got a chance to be in there, huh?" Misato's voice chimed through the comm.

Asuka winced at the irony in those words. It had been a very long while indeed, though the Major just referred to two or three weeks since their last deployment against an Angel – or was it that cross-compatibility test? Wasn't that about sometime now? Today even? Or was it yet to come? There had been so many tests that she couldn't really remember.

"Don't get too used to it," Dr. Akagi ripped her out of her thoughts. "I've set up another test in the new Pribnow Box for the next week and I'm positive to get an OK."

"Just get it over with," Asuka muttered under her breath, before realizing that she actually could have said that out loud. But she didn't get a chance to repeat the words louder and more aggressively.

She gasped involuntary as the connection was suddenly established. It used to be entirely natural to her, but after all this time it came like a shock. She could feel it again, her hands going around the butterfly controls on their own; she remembered exactly what she had to do, what to think, *how* she had to think to make this behemoth move under her control. But most importantly, she could feel *her*, the warm presence surrounding Asuka, bathing her in an aura of pure bliss.

"No!" she violently shook her head in an attempt to escape the embrace a part of her longed for so much. "No, I can't. I'm sorry... Mama..."

Clenching her eyes shut that started to burn with tears, she forced herself to ignore the intense feeling that made her feel so sickeningly comfortable.

-X-X-X-X

"Did you...?"

He didn't have to finish his question, she already knew.

They were alone on their way from NERV, but they had remained silent and hadn't spoken about what had transpired during the test until they were close to the last stop of the train they were using, sitting side by side with a little space between them.

Asuka nodded.

"I felt her too," Shinji muttered, before falling silent himself.

Again, there was only the rattling of the train as it made its way over the rails, minutes passing without a single word spoken.

"At... at least we know for sure now, that we really – somehow – went back in time."

"You think something powerful enough to create such a world in every little detail wouldn't be able to emulate our mothers' souls?" she found herself replying.

"To be honest: No."

Asuka swallowed the sob that was forming in her throat. She knew. She knew he was right. But that didn't make it easier. She had already been sure, but there had still been a bit of hope. But not anymore.

An enemy they might have been able to fight somehow. But time was an enemy she had no weapon for.

An enemy...?

"We did the tests in our EVAs because of an incident in the Pribnow Box," she recalled. "That means the next Angel would be that shadow one."

"Yeah, I know. In little more than a week. Maybe two. I checked the date the day we came back."

His confession surprised her a bit. "You remember that well in what time-frame this all happened?"

"Of course," he replied, almost as if shocked that she didn't. "It attacked shortly after the eleventh anniversary."

"The eleventh anniversary...?" Asuka repeated as searched her memory. Her eyes widened as she figured it. "You mean of...?"

Shinji nodded. "Of my mother's death." He said simply, before smirking weakly. "Or rather her absorption."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It had been almost a week by now, but neither of them had really adapted yet. They had gone to school and NERV as it was required of them and apparently it had been enough even for their closer friends not to notice anything too unusual.

'Perhaps one of the advantages of not being very outgoing in the first place,' Shinji thought, grinning wearily to himself. He and a few others were busy sweeping the floor of their classroom, just as the rest of his fellow pupils were more or less busy cleaning up everything else, when he noticed Rei kneeling at the other side of the room, wringing a wet cloth into a bucket of water. Seeing her like that, he remembered what he had once felt reminded of at that moment, without knowing how close to the truth he had actually been then.

'Just like...' He sighed. *'...mother...'*

His eyes snapped open as another memory alarmed him of danger... too late...

WACK

The broom forcefully connected with his head and a stinging pain spread from the point of impact. In situations like this he was glad that Toji was his friend and not his enemy.

-x

"YOU! Get back to work!" Hikari yelled into the class from the doorway, but Asuka barely registered it.

"Really, these boys sometimes..."

It wasn't that she ignored the class-rep.

"Boys? That reminds me..."

She barely registered a lot of things lately.

"Asuka?"

She only functioned.

"Ehm... Asuka?"

She still didn't pay much attention to the timid call of her friend, her eyes fixed on the floor of the hall as she swept it. It was hard enough to fight the visions of a little brown-haired girl dancing around her and demanding attention. If she were to give in to those...

"Asuka, you're all right?"

She finally realized that she should answer. "Hm? Yeah..."

A sigh of relief came from her friend. "Good, um... Can I... well... ask you a favor?"

The broom came to a sudden stop. Asuka blinked at that by now familiar feeling of *deja vu*, trying to remember what Hikari had wanted from her in a similar situation. The memory returned rather quickly.

Asuka looked at Hikari, and the brunette took that as a sign to continue. "You see, there's this friend of Kodama and, well, he... he..."

"Wants a date with me," Asuka finished for her, scowling slightly.

"Well, yes..."

Her hands clenched around the broomstick. "I'm sorry, I... can't."

"Eh? But you don't even know when he wants to date you," Hikari wondered perplexed. Her face suddenly lit up as she apparently came up with a reason for her friend's instant decline. "Is there somebody else?"

Taken by surprise, Asuka almost honestly smiled for the first time since her loss. But it was quickly drowned in the sickening guilt at the upcoming denial of the last years she had spent happily with Shinji and then also with... "No, I guess not," she quickly shot out. "Uh, but... but of course there's Kaji..."

"Oh please," Hikari pleaded, bowing slightly. "It's just one time. I'm sure Mr. Kaji won't mind if you go out with someone else just once."

'Even she knew how ridiculous that was,' Asuka realized at the hard to miss sarcasm in her brunette

friend's comment. *'Or she thought I wasn't really serious about it myself.'*

"I guess you won't give up anyway..." she figured.

"I promised to do my best, sorry," Hikari explained, visibly embarrassed, her apology truthful. "If I had known before that it was you he wanted me to ask out, I wouldn't have agreed."

"You Japanese and your honor..." Asuka muttered.

"So you will...?" the Class Rep asked hopefully.

"Let him know to wait for me tomorrow at five at the fair," Asuka recalled the date. "But I'm not promising anything."

Her friend didn't seem to mind that as she was too happy to have succeeded with her difficult assignment. "Oh thank you very much! Don't worry! I'm sure he's a nice guy, so you won't have to do anything you don't want to."

Asuka grunted silently, already knowing fully well what she didn't want to do.

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

It was an awkward silence in the elevator, at least in Shinji's opinion. Of course, he had always been reserved to say the least, but he was sure that – if he wanted to – he could talk much more openly to others now.

Others, yes. With *her* on the other hand, it was like nothing had changed at all.

He had avoided Rei maybe more than intended in these last few days. But now, with the latest synch tests just over and on the way home, he found himself separated from Asuka and everyone else, "trapped" alone with Rei for the duration of the ride, with no escape.

It was pathetic and he knew it. All these years he had hoped for a chance like that, to talk to her once more, to get answers to questions that he hadn't even thought of until it had been too late. And now here he was, merely watching her back as she stood there as always right in front of the elevator's doors, unable to open his mouth like it was sealed.

What did he fear? That she would suddenly spin around to liquefy him? That was absolute nonsense. Maybe that she'd tell his father if he'd say too much? No, he was sure he could articulate carefully enough not to make her suspicious. And even if she would notice something, it wouldn't instantly mean that all was lost.

It was probably just that she had lost her innocence in his eyes. He thought he had come to terms with that, already soon after it had happened actually. But he never had to face her afterwards – not until now. Was he such a hypocrite? He knew he still needed to talk to her, to be there for her, to help her. And he still wanted to. The problem was just...

He didn't know how.

"Are you afraid of me?"

Shinji felt himself jumping slightly in surprise. That she would start the conversation startled him so much that he forgot to answer until she continued. "You seem... anxious... in my presence."

"W-what?" he stuttered, still gathering his thoughts. How did she know? Did she have such powers even now in this form after all? Could it be that she *knew*, that... that it had been her all along? Then she could tell him what was going on.

She could tell him where Aki was.

"I noticed that you were watching me. But you have not greeted me for the past week," she explained however, giving, of course, a much simpler reason. "And you appear to be nervous when you are with me."

Shinji just stared agape at her. He hadn't known she had kept such a close eye on him.

Turning her head slightly, she glanced at him. "You have not been like that since the day you brought me the new ID card."

He had come a long way from being a hormone-fueled teenager, but he still had to fight a blush at the memory that Rei's casual spoken words brought back.

"Sorry," he eventually answered. "I... I have a lot on my mind lately."

"I see."

There was neither sadness nor bemusement in her voice. Shinji wouldn't have been surprised if she was curious as to what had been occupying his thoughts, but he also knew she would never pressure him to talk.

That brought a weak smile to Shinji's lips. She might have been the most powerful being on this world, but he had almost forgotten that she still was Rei. He should never have forgotten that.

"But I'll try to make it better," he assured. "If that's what you want."

For a second Shinji thought he saw a faint blush on her pale cheek as she averted her face again before she nodded.

A chime signaled that the elevator had reached its destination and Rei did not hesitate a second to exit as soon as the doors opened. Shinji followed her out, but they would be going different ways now anyway.

"And Ayanami," he called after her just before she was out of sight. "Thank you."

"What for?" her low voice echoed back to him.

But for once Shinji decided that he'd be the one leaving without explaining the cryptic message.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The sea of LCL hadn't really been a graveyard, but it had been the place that housed those of his loved ones that were gone. It had been the place they had gone to when they wanted to speak with them or just to remember. But somehow, despite the knowledge of the billions of lost souls in the sea, he had never felt so bad there as here, in the seemingly endless rows of cold, black markers.

Shinji wasn't even sure why he had come today. The date had long lost its terror to him. Another one had taken that place now. And to visit his mother, she would more likely take notice in the EVA cages than from an empty grave. He almost felt silly that he still brought a flower bouquet anyway.

No, it was rather because of *him*. The first time he would see him again. When they had last spoken here, it had also been the last of very few opportunities where he had been able to talk openly with his father. It probably was a foolish hope, but maybe, just maybe he would be able to reach him.

Asuka would most likely go ballistic at the idea alone, even though Shinji didn't plan to go into details. She had already been not very happy when he had told her that he was planning to go through with this meeting, if only not to make room for more suspicions than necessary by avoiding such an important

date that many of the people around him knew about. Not that she was happy with anything these days. But while it was risky that he could say too much, both knew that this was an exception, a one-time thing that wouldn't be repeated anytime soon.

He just had to try at least. It was only a blurred memory of a vague dream that he wasn't even sure whether or not it had actually happened. But he faintly remembered feeling his father during the Third Impact, when the AT-Fields were gone and neither of them could hide or block anything. He had seen that broken man that was his father behind his cold shields. And that man had asked for Shinji's forgiveness.

While Shinji didn't honestly expect anything like that to happen now; even if he couldn't erode the walls around his father, maybe he could at least scratch them.

There he was. Shinji didn't blink as the dark silhouette in the distance slowly grew into a tall man, clad entirely in black. The ever-present sunglasses reflected the light, hiding the eyes. It made Shinji wonder if he never got them replaced with new regular ones just because of that reason; that he noticed that it made it even harder for people to see the pain and weakness inside him.

"You're late, father," he greeted with more confidence than the other should be used to. But the Commander didn't show any surprise that his meek son didn't falter this time as he stared down at him. As usual, he didn't show anything at all, unless one counted the short stop to recognize the boy in front of him before walking on, towards his wife's grave. Shinji followed him silently to the marker.

He knew there was no body, but reading his mother's name on the black stone made him shiver involuntary. He clenched his eyes shut, suppressing a sob, when for a second he imagined a smaller one next to it.

Taking a deep breath, he knelt down and placed the flowers on the seamless earth of the empty grave.

"It has been three years since the last time we came here together," the voice of his father broke the silence.

Shinji remembered. "I ran away then," he quoted himself automatically, but then he sighed. "And you did nothing to get me back."

"I was notified of your position and you safely returned to your teacher," Gendo replied with the sickening lack of emotion that Shinji had almost forgotten. Maybe he had been wrong with his assumption after all. "It was your own choice not to visit your mother's grave and there was no reason for me to force you."

"What about yourself?" Shinji waited a bit for an answer, but none came. Realizing that his father probably didn't understand and simply didn't bother with a question that made no sense to him, Shinji tried again. "Did you come here the years I did not?"

"Does that matter?"

"Man survives by forgetting his memories, but there are some things a man should never forget."

"No," Shinji muttered half-heartily, barely listening to himself.

"Yui thought me about the irreplaceable things."

"I guess not..."

"I come here to confirm that."

It was naive to think that...

"You know," he began, the bitterness in his voice rising as he got back on his feet. "I thought I might be able to understand you better by now. But actually I understand you even less than before. How..." He turned around. "How can anyone really want to send his own child away?"

"I have no reason to explain myself if you are already aware that you cannot understand."

"No, maybe not. You'd just blame everything on the pain of losing her anyway. Do you really think you're the only one who ever felt like that? You're not the only one who lost a loved one!" He paused as he realized the two implications the last sentence carried, but his father didn't even show any sign that he registered the most obvious. "But unlike most, you didn't hold dear what was left of her. Instead of using it to remember the love she gave, you just saw it as reminder of her loss. So you just threw it all away, because the very existence hurt you."

"What is your point?"

Shinji's eyes hardened, but he couldn't bear to bring them up to those of his father. The fear of what he might find there as answer was still too big, even after all these years.

"Does... *my*... very existence hurt you?" he finally asked, his voice as cold as the one of his opponent.

There was a brief pause before the Commander replied, but Shinji couldn't tell if he was actually thinking about it or just needed the time to adjust his glasses. "Do not ask questions you don't really want to hear the answer to."

A loud roaring sound of a landing VTOL, so out of place, so pretentious, so disrespectfully disturbing the peaceful rest of the dead, announced the end of the short meeting.

"It's time," Gendo merely stated. But just as Shinji thought he would turn around to his transport, the man faced him once more. "It was probably for the best that you released your anger now instead of keeping it pent up inside you. It does not matter to me if you detest me here and now. But it better not influence your ability to pilot back at NERV."

"Don't worry," Shinji muttered solemnly, watching his father leaving before waiting for his answer. "It won't happen again. Seems like it's true: The AT-Field is impenetrable. From outside and within..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm home!" he announced as he entered, even though it was doubtful that anyone was there to hear.

"Could you please not do that?" a timid answer came from the living room nonetheless. "I know it's tradition and all, but... at least for a while, please."

Following the voice, he found his love sitting on the floor while staring lifelessly in the direction of the TV, obviously not even trying to pay attention to the program.

"Asuka? I thought Hikari convinced you to go to that date again?"

"I told her I wouldn't promise anything."

"Well, not going at all seems even harsher than leaving while he's standing in a line for you," Shinji muttered as he walked over to her. A weak chuckle escaped him. "Though I surely don't mind this," he added, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

There had been no jealousy, as he hadn't felt any threat coming from that student, remembering her reaction to him very well. In fact, he had somewhat hoped she might have a little fun to distract her, even if it wasn't with him. But after the disappointing reunion with his father, he was more than happy to have her near now.

Asuka however was not in the mood to exchange affections. "Did you honestly think I would even be able to go on a date now with a guy that I already couldn't stand the first time I went out with him while my... my daughter is missing?"

Shinji closed his eyes, trying to push the upcoming feeling away. But as so often before, he failed miserably.

"Aren't you afraid that Hikari might take it badly?" he tried to change the topic back again before it really started.

"She might be disappointed, but she's much too nice to hold it against me. I'll just say I still didn't feel that well and she'll accept it," Asuka muttered in a tone that already told him that his diversion had failed. "It's not like it's much of a lie..."

Looking down at her downcast form, Shinji clenched his fists. As much as he wanted to hold it back, he could no longer conceal his anger. He was angry at her for letting herself go like this. And he was angry at himself for having just watched her wallowing in self-pity for so long.

"Do you really want this?" he hissed. "Just go out and pretend that everything's fine to everyone at school and NERV and sulk when we're on our own, until Third Impact comes yet again? That's even worse than what you did before!"

He knew he hit a nerve as he saw her flinching. "Don't say that."

"Why shouldn't I? Do you think this doesn't affect me at all? It hurts me too! But we can't change anything if we just play along in the vain hope that we might see her again that way."

The sob that escaped her throat broke his heart and his anger. And with a sigh, his determination escaped him again to be replaced by guilt. Who was he trying to fool that he could get her out of this state by force? By hurting her even more...

He knelt down to her, pulling her into a hug. "I'm sorry. But... Asuka, please don't do this to me. It hurts so much already. To see you giving yourself up like this... I don't want to lose you too."

"I know it's hard, but... we really have a chance to change everything now. I can't just let that slip away. Even if it's not for her... Even if it doesn't bring her back... I know I have to try at least. Because otherwise, should I ever see her again, whether in this world or the next, I don't know how I should face her if I wouldn't do my best."

"But I don't think I can do that alone," he whispered in her ear. "I need you, Asuka. If we have to relive this then, please, let's try to make it for the better."

She didn't answer, but at least she seemed to calm down. He gave her the time she needed, keeping the soothing embrace for several minutes.

"Do you remember?" he finally heard her mutter. "When I came home from the date?"

"I was playing the cello," he concurred. Carefully smiling, he anticipated her request. "Do you want me to play it now?"

She just nodded weakly in reply.

"Okay..." He kissed her hair, tightening the embrace shortly before he let go and stood up. "I'll be right back."

It took Shinji only a few minutes to retrieve the cello from its case and set it up in front of him as he sat on a chair he had moved from the kitchen to the living room.

"Any special wishes?" he asked, testing the instrument with a few light strokes of the bow while Asuka

knelt on the floor next to his chair, her gaze anywhere but on him.

"A happy song."

A loud screech sounded as he scratched the bow over the strings in shock.

"Play the happy song," she pleaded again, her voice nothing but a low wail.

He brought the bow back up to the cello, but he couldn't move it to evoke the sounds. Of course it wasn't because he couldn't remember it – it was *because* he remembered it so well. He had played it so often, the necessary movement becoming so natural that his fingers could have repeated it without him even having to think about it.

He had played it so often... for Aki...

Letting it drift her into sleep, the melody lowly keeping on when watched her entering the realm of dreams with that beautiful smile of hers, cuddling close to the little doll in her arms.

Accompanying her as she hummed the song while lying, as so often, with her belly on the floor, idly drawing on a picture.

Trying to cheer her up when she was sick.

Shaking, the bow hovered in midair for several seconds, before he let it fall back to his side. "I..."

Asuka's quivering hands suddenly dug into his trousers, forcefully enough to almost make him lose balance. "Please... Please play her – *her* happy song! I need to hear it again!"

"I'm sorry. I- I don't think I can. It **is** supposed to be a happy song after all. But now it wouldn't bring anyone happiness – **because** it was hers."

"It would ease **my** sadness!" Asuka yelled, glaring up at him with teary eyes. "I have nothing else from her! I don't have photos of her, I don't have one of her drawings, I don't have Kiko, I- I don't have..." Her outburst was stopped by a sob blocking her throat. "Please. That song... that song is all there's left from her."

"I'm sorry," he managed to repeat, unable to close his eyes from this heart-breaking scene as much as his instincts told him to. He really was. Involuntary, he had to think back to the graveyard, where nothing but the black marker remained of his mother. He had already known what it's like to have no remainders, but as horrible as it had seemed to have almost no memories left, he wasn't sure if it hadn't been better that way than to have so many to haunt them. "May-maybe if I... when we are both ready for it. Maybe then. But not now..."

He hated himself for saying that. Even if it was the truth. But he knew how much it hurt her, this involuntary betrayal, as she broke down, burying her face against his leg.

He wasn't sure what song it was he started to play as he felt the wetness of tears running down his cheeks as well as soaking through his trousers. But it wasn't a happy one.

-x-x-x-x

Neither had cared about the time, but he must have played for a few hours until the phone started to ring. Asuka had instantly protested, wanting him to ignore it since they already knew that it was Misato telling them she wouldn't be home anytime soon, having gone drinking with Kaji after the wedding the two had attended that day. But he had already stopped playing then, breaking the moment. And he hadn't wanted to worry Misato. When he had returned after the short talk, Asuka had retreated to the table, her back facing him. An obvious sign that she wanted him to leave her alone for now, maybe even feeling betrayed by him. He had tried to persuade her that it wasn't the case, offering to play for her again, but she didn't even answer. He had quickly given up.

So now they were sitting opposite to each other, neither saying a word. Again.

Looking over at Asuka's sullen face, Shinji berated himself for what must have been the thousandth time in these last few days. He knew it couldn't go on like this. No matter how much it was hurting them, they couldn't dwell in grief forever if they wanted to be successful.

The problem was that Asuka didn't even seem to want to be successful. He had foolishly hoped for her to somehow regain her fiery spirit, that she would be the one to drive them onwards again. Of course that was egoistical beyond belief. Pretending to everyone but themselves that everything was as just as it had always been was much harder for her than for him. And they couldn't keep blaming her unusual withdrawn state on being burnt-out or some mysterious yet harmless sickness much longer.

Had he not learned long ago that he had to take the initiative when she wouldn't? Sometimes even against her wish if that wish was doing nothing but hurting her?

He needed her. But first she needed him. Only then, together, did they have a chance to heal.

"Hey, Asuka. Let's kiss."

His soft call was at least already enough to snap her out of her thoughts. "What?"

"Kissing, you know? You have already kissed, right?" Shinji continued the act, smiling faintly at her baffled look. "Then let's do it."

"Shinji, I'm really not in the mood..." Asuka muttered as it finally settled in what he had in mind as he raised from his chair and slowly rounded the table.

"But we have nothing better to do," he argued, having no intention to stop, cocking his head and smirking as wide as he could. "You're not scared of kissing on the anniversary of your mother in law's death, are you?"

"This is nonsense..." she mumbled with mild anger, getting up to sulk somewhere else, but he quickly blocked her way.

"Then here I come..." he whispered, gently holding her arms as he leaned in.

"Shinji..." she breathed, her resistance fading more and more the closer he got.

"I don't care if you haven't brushed your teeth," he hushed as he watched her eyelids fluttering shut in expectation of what was inevitably about to come, "Just..."

She was startled, stiff against his lips as his hand suddenly came to her nose, pinching it softly to block both of her airways. But just when he feared that his attempt to cheer her up had failed, he felt her hand on his. Shinji didn't resist as she removed it from her nose with that light grip and guided it to her waist. Slowly at first, she pulled her arms around his neck, returning the kiss. Then, like a breaking dam, they pulled, crashed their bodies together; the kiss in its way intensifying to new heights, more passionate than in years, maybe more than ever before.

He could feel the need, the desperation for love and comfort that flowed through both of them through the kiss. After all they had lost, they still had each other, only each other, and if this was the only way to show it, they would make it as perfect and as lasting as possible whenever they would have the chance.

"That..." She managed a weak smile as they eventually broke away for breath. "That is what you're supposed to do when someone's holding your nose while kissing you."

"I'll try to remember it," he chuckled. "So, do you feel a little better now?"

To his dismay, he saw her smile suddenly cracking at that and he already feared that the previous

moment had been nothing but a short flicker of normality as she turned away from him.

"Asuka...?" he called after her concerned as she went straightforward to the front door, squatting down to put her shoes on.

"Sorry Shinji, but..." She rose up again and turned halfway around to him. "I know you're not trying to push me. But that's... I-I have to do some thinking. For myself, okay?"

She had already left before he could answer.

-x-x-x-x

The setting sun bathed the playground in a soft orange light, but Asuka didn't take notice of the time or that she must have been there for at least an hour. She hadn't bothered enough to regard the few other people and no one seemed to be bothered by her either. At least no one had spoken to her as she sat in one of the swings, rocking back and forth ever so slowly as her eyes focused on nothing but her memories.

This swing had been the only one of the three that had been intact, but it was stable enough to catapult Aki laughing into unreachable heights. The playground itself had been the only one nearby that was usable, even though that only referred to the swing, the seesaw and the, albeit deformed and thus a little bumpy slide. The sandbox had been filled with too much debris to play inside and the structure of the climbing frame had collapsed at the first testing tug.

Coming there had always been a little straining on her nerves, constantly having to watch out for dangers without letting the child know. But it hadn't mattered as long as Aki was happy.

Shinji once had brought up the idea to put up some playground toys like a swing and a sandbox in a part of the garden, maybe as present for Aki's upcoming birthday, so she could play and they wouldn't have to worry about her safety any longer. But she had wanted to think about it first, as these trips were a way for the confined girl to get out of her comfortable prison of the house once in a while.

Now it was too late.

Asuka couldn't even tell anymore if there were still tears running down her cheeks or if her eyes were as empty as she felt. It was so hard now already. How could Shinji expect her not just to play, but to *be* her fiery fourteen year old self again, fighting with all her heart for a better world? Of course she could understand his wish to help, that he wanted to save them. He missed Aki just as much as she did, but it always seemed so easy for him to swallow his own pain in favor of others. He often said he was just selfish, wanting everyone to like him, and that's what she had thought for a long while herself. But compared with others, including herself, he was, even with that motive in mind, the most caring and compassionate person she knew.

She couldn't keep up to him in that regard. He seemed so eager to help, to undo everything that went wrong, and she barely managed to maintain this act through these last days. She knew she had to keep a certain status quo, as the consequences weren't very desirable.

But what reason did she have left to help them? What did she have left to bother fighting for? Because Shinji had asked her to, yes. And she would do it for him, and not just because she didn't want to disappoint him. She wouldn't be able to bear it if he'd get hurt or even killed while trying to push back what they knew was coming all alone. But what about herself?

A ball suddenly bounced into her view, rolling right up to her feet. Slowly getting off the swing, she reached down to pick the unexpected object up. For a second she had almost forgotten where or when she was, her senses telling her that it would have to have come out of nowhere as there was no one left

in the world who could have thrown it. It wasn't until a timid voice reminded her that this was not the case, not anymore.

"Auntie!" It took her a moment to realize that the voice belonged to a little girl next to her, stretching her small arms out. "Canay 'ave my ba' back, pwease?"

Asuka did as asked, but her eyes and mind kept focused rather on the girl's face than on the task. It would have been a blatant lie to say she looked just like Aki. Not only was the girl a good year younger, her eyes were brown and her hair pitch-black. And Aki always hated to have it done into pigtails (or any other way). And yet...

"You awight, Auntie?" the girl asked curiously, apparently unlike Asuka herself noticing her staring.

"No. I mean..."she stammered, shaking her head, "Yes.."

"Kimiko!" a middle-aged woman called a few meters away. "We have to go now!"

"Aweady?"

"Yes, honey, it's getting late!"

Kimiko pouted slightly as she turned back to Asuka. "'Ave to go, bye Auntie."

"Bye..." the redhead replied, but the girl had already hurried to her mother.

And she wasn't the only one. As Asuka looked around she saw several parents calling their children to go. Others who shared the latest gossip while their kids played tag around their legs. Some who played along with their own.

A mother who was feeding her newborn, ever so often glancing at a girl that was "baking" sand cakes. A father who was tending his son's scrapped knee. Children laughing, unaware of the dangers that could fell upon them any day.

Her stomach turned with guilt. How could she have been so blind? There were so many families. So many innocent children, just like Aki, that would be alone and helpless if their parents were ripped out of their lives. So many mothers and fathers, just like her, that would miss their children if something happened to them.

She wouldn't wish such a feeling on her worst enemy. But with so many Angels yet to come, with such a big danger of an Impact that – in its way – could be even worse than the one she witnessed, it was much too likely that too many would suffer like her.

Wasn't she the Second Children? The best EVA pilot of all? These parents couldn't protect themselves or their children from the foes and the fate that awaited them.

But she could. For them, she had to.

They relied on her, needed her. And who was she to let them down? After all, she was Asuka Langley Ikari... or Soryu – that didn't really matter.

Determined, her hands curled into fists, she turned towards the direction she had come.

"Okay, Shinji. Let's save this world."

Chapter XI: The 17th

"A lot more than expected did not follow our plans. The situation at hand differs significantly from the situation we aimed for."

"That may be, but it's not all to our misfortune. We are still able to commence the ceremony once the last Angel has met his fate."

"But what about Ikari?"

"We will send our trump-card to him, regardless of those changes to the scenario. "

"He might be a traitor, but he is no fool. He will get suspicious when we send it without proper reason."

"He would get suspicious already from the reason alone that it is our wish. But so he shall. He will accept nonetheless. He is certain that his God will not fail. We shall see which beast stands last. It will be to our fortune either way."

"So be it," the other faceless voices agreed as their monolith-avatars vanished into the darkness.

"So be it," Lorenz Keel repeated quietly to himself, allowing his voice to drop. His aging body felt tired as it slowly kept on rotting. He knew he didn't have much time left before even the cybernetic implants wouldn't be able to stop the inevitable anymore. He only had this one chance left and he would not let one single man stand between him and his salvation. "Ikari... if you'll never serve me in your life... at least serve me with your death..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"A Fifth?"

The news had taken everyone by surprise and Makoto Hyuga was no exception. There had been an overall gasp in the briefing room when Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki made the announcement that another pilot would arrive in just two days.

"But we haven't got a report from the Marduk Institute yet," Maya protested. "How are we supposed to prepare simulations for him without the necessary data?"

"The committee is rather fond of this candidate and..." Fuyutsuki scowled ever so slightly, "pushed a few matters to get him assigned as quickly as possible. The Marduk report will soon be available – though if I were you, I would prepare to make the needed tests yourselves anyway."

A low grunt came from the corner where Dr. Akagi sat as disgruntled as most of the time since the events after the last Angel. Her voiced dissatisfaction was understandable, not just because of her new position in this round as mere chief operator of the MAGI system. Almost everyone in the room knew that this meant that, *if* it came anytime soon, the report would be heavily censored and lacking a lot if not all valuable information about this boy.

Fuyutsuki cleared his throat. "Anyway, the pilot will arrive the day after tomorrow. I expect all of you will do your best to show him NERV's... hospitality," he finished, a rare playful smile accompanying the last word before issuing the final order. "Dismissed."

Most attendants scrambled and moved to the exit as usual after a briefing, but it lacked the typical murmuring as everyone seemed to be in thought about this announcement.

"Even when not counting Rei we already have more pilots than EVAs," Misato muttered, as if to

herself. "Why do we need a Fifth Children?"

Makoto heard it well enough though. And he understood the silent request between the words. It seemed like he would again have a few hours overtime ahead.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Smile everybody!" Kensuke demanded, shoving his camera under the noses of the attending children. "After all, it's the last time we'll all be together for a while!"

If it hadn't been for her manners, Hikari would have slapped him for his overly enthusiastic behavior that no one really seemed to share during this sad event. He, herself, Toji, as well as Asuka and Shinji had gathered one last time to say goodbye. She and Kensuke had to evacuate from the city that had taken too much damage in the last fight. The pilots, however, including Toji on stand-by, of course had to stay, in case of another attack.

Now they stood here in front of her home and – at least most of them – in silence in this depressing mood. Behind her, she could hear her father making the last preparations, securing their luggage that hadn't fit in the trunk on the top of the car. Her sisters had already taken their seats inside, waiting for the trip to begin. PenPen, who had been brought along by Shinji and Asuka, was supposed to go with them to safety, and was currently a cuddly playmate on Nozomi's lap.

"Oh really guys," Kensuke complained, lowering his camera. "It's not like we'll be gone for all eternity. We're just going over to Odawara for a while."

Hikari was about to snap at him for his insensitivity when she noticed something that made it hard to suppress a squeal. Sneaking, as if on their own, the hands of Shinji Ikari and Asuka Soryu had found and intertwined with each other.

"Y-you finally did...?!" she stuttered, beaming at the long-awaited sight.

The addressed pair blinked in surprise, then looked at their joined hands as though they hadn't even noticed the hold.

"Um..."

"Well..."

With both of their faces blushing slightly, they stuttered incoherently while looking everywhere but at the other. But their smiles, let alone the fact that they didn't let go was proof enough that she was right.

And not only to her. "WHA-? You two?" Kensuke shrieked, almost letting his camera drop at the shock, but catching it in the last second. "You mean she was right all along?" he added, pointing at Hikari.

"Well, she does have a talent for seeing such things," Toji explained sheepishly.

Hikari started to blush at the compliment, but the red on her face quickly changed into that of anger as the teasing voice of her older sister rang through the air. "Too bad it doesn't work for herself!"

"SHH!" the brunette hissed as she spun around.

"Just get smoochy with your boyfriend already, so we can go!"

Forcing herself to forget Kodoma's embarrassing remark, she returned her attention on the couple.

"Oh, I'm **so** happy for you two!" she exclaimed, giddily clapping her hands. "When did it happen? You should have told me then! Did you kiss already?"

"Well..."

"Um..."

"Please, kiss now!" Hikari begged, failing to resist the urge to witness the manifestation of their love. "I know it's impolite, but please, just once. I want to see it before I go!"

They sheepishly glanced at each other, Asuka even biting her lip with a coy grin as they reluctantly turned around, their faces nearing jerkily until their lips met for a short peck from which they instantly separated again.

Hikari wasn't disappointed at all that it wasn't a very passionate, movie-like kiss, quite the contrary. She was overjoyed at the cute display of the just-found couple.

A loud honking made everyone flinch and turn their attention to the car, where her father now had taken his place in the driver's seat. "Would you please hurry up, Hikari? We still have a long day ahead and I'd like to avoid the expected jam!"

"Just one moment!" she shouted back, her heart racing as she bit her lip. She couldn't contain it any longer. If Asuka and Shinji could, why shouldn't she?

"Toji!" she called, throwing herself at the boy, startling him as she pulled his head down slightly while standing on her toes. And doing even more so when she planted a quick kiss on his cheek. "Watch out for yourself, okay?"

"S-sure..." the baffled jock mumbled when he finally got his voice back after Hikari had let go.

Stepping backwards, she couldn't help but smile in pride and joy despite her burning cheeks as he absentmindedly reached for the spot her lips had touched. "Well, bye then..."

"S-sure..."

"We... we'll see each other soon, right? Once this is..." she paused, surprised as her back already made contact with the car, "Once this is over?"

Before Toji had the chance to continue like a broken record, Asuka's hand shot in front of his mouth.

"Don't worry," she replied for him. "You're watching our pet, we'll watch yours!"

Hikari wouldn't even understand that joke until much later, her mind still spinning as she tried to open the door and get inside while not breaking her view of her... friends.

Just in time she remembered to wave out of the window when her father started the engine. "You all take care of yourselves!"

-x-x-x-x-

Shinji's hand was still intertwined with Asuka's as they walked home. Not only was that precious contact much cherished, so was the laughter about the far-more-lighthearted-than-expected farewell that was still accompanying them.

"Shouldn't we have made sure Toji would finally go home?" Shinji chuckled. "When we left, he still hadn't moved an inch."

"Yeah," Asuka chimed in. "He was staring after the car like an abandoned puppy even after it was long out of sight. He didn't even notice Kensuke saying goodbye as well."

"Poor Kensuke, I hope he doesn't feel left out."

"Ah, I don't think he really cares. Or do you think he would stop tagging along, even *if* we couples want to... well, 'get smoochy'," she said grinning as she leaned closer to him, brushing her lips over his

cheek.

"Oh," Shinji sighed exaggeratedly. "No, probably not."

"It was just too funny when Hikari asked us to kiss," Asuka brought the topic back up. "I had to bite my lip not to laugh out loud."

"I know, I could hardly hold back either." His smile fell slightly as he looked at her, giving her hand a light squeeze. "I guess we really needed that. A last diversion from all that trouble lately – and all that's yet to come..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The can on the table was still unopened. It wasn't a test of self-discipline on Misato's part, just sitting in front of it. She didn't even see it, despite looking right at it. While her eyes were set on the beer, her mind was not.

A sigh escaped her.

She had rushed home as soon as she could and had ended up arriving long before her "charges" returned from seeing their friends off.

That she had feared how Shinji would take the news of another pilot even before she knew that it was one of his friends had only worsened the situation when the Fourth had been appointed, almost turning it into a complete disaster. Even after it ended up well and learning that Shinji had known all along, she still couldn't shake the guilt for having been so unable to face him with the truth; too afraid of the confrontation, too afraid to be the one to cause him to hurt even more.

It wouldn't happen again. She liked to tell herself that it was easier now that she knew that he was a stronger man now, and had faced much worse. But when she heard the front door opening and their entry in an obviously cheery mood, her resolve faded. Even more so when they reached the kitchen and saw her. Their laughter ebbed away instantly.

"Something wrong, Misato?" Shinji immediately asked with concern.

"No, not really, but..." Once more she sighed, standing up to face them. "I have to tell you something. This was supposed to be confidential – for whatever reason, 'cause even if you don't know it yet, you probably will by tomorrow anyway..." She drew in a deep breath. "The Fifth Children has been appointed and will arrive within the next 48 hours."

"Kaworu?" Shinji's head sprang up, his eyes wide as he stared at her in shock, all color draining from his face. Visibly concerned, Asuka was quickly there to support him, her left hand steadying his chest while her right ran soothingly over his shoulder.

"So I take it you know him?" Misato figured, grimacing slightly for having brought it up. But it was for the best.

Seeing that Shinji was still not quite in a condition to answer, it was Asuka who spoke for them first, shaking her head. "I don't. I was..." She squeezed her eyes shut, obviously fighting an unpleasant memory, "...out... for a while at that time. But for Shinji, he was..."

"Even if just for the few days I knew him, he was the most important person in my life," Shinji quietly continued for her as the initial shock faded.

Misato was taken aback by his choice of words, but didn't want to hold it against him. "I-I'm sorry, Shinji. I didn't know it would have *that* much impact on you."

"It..." he sighed, shaking his head clear, "It's all right. I just – I somehow hoped he wouldn't have to come. Originally, he was supposed to be..." he swallowed, looking at the girl that was still holding onto him, "the... the replacement pilot for Unit-02. I guess that was just a foolish wish."

"I'm sorry," Misato apologized again, not knowing what else she could say.

"It's okay. It's just... I just don't know how I should face someone..." closing his eyes, he clenched his quivering hands, "someone I killed..."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Misato shifted restlessly on her chair, staring blankly at the folders on her desk as she twirled a pen mindlessly in her fingers. She had wanted to catch up on some paperwork, something to get her mind off of what Shinji and Asuka had told her. Needless to say: It didn't work.

An Angel in human disguise. And they were supposed to let such a dangerous monster walk around freely through the halls of NERV. Why not send him an invitation for tea at Adam's feet while they were at it?

The pen in her fingers had stopped rotating, the other hand clenched in anger around the cross hanging from her neck. Hadn't she sworn to fight them in any way she could? How could she now just sit back and watch?

Of course they couldn't just go and kill someone who, to all others, was a normal boy, their fifth pilot. They'd have a lot of trouble explaining themselves even if they could prove afterwards that he was an Angel – and who knew if that was possible. No, they had to wait until he acted. She could only hope that she could at least keep him monitored all the time. Shinji had assured her that this Kaworu kid wasn't really hostile per se, but still...

A beep from her computer brought her out of her thoughts.

A pop-up window on the monitor demanded her attention, apparently some reminder from the calendar.

"Thursday, 2:00 PM: Meeting in Matsushiro, storage depot."

She would have dismissed that message, having neither time nor intention to drive all the way for a pointless meeting with some controller about stocks that didn't even exist anymore. But aside from the point that – even if anyone would still work there – it could have easily been settled with a phone call, she couldn't remember having made such an appointment. In fact, she had never made much use of that calendar-tool.

Maybe a trip to Matsushiro was just the right thing to get her mind off this Angel-boy.

-X-X-X-X-

After the incident with the 13th Angel, the facility had been abandoned aside from a minimal maintenance crew that was supposed to take care of the local MAGI-system. And given the MAGI's system-structure, they didn't need to come more than once a month. There hadn't been anyone in the large and presumably empty storage hall since EVA-03 had been moved to the test side.

So the bigger was Misato's surprise when she opened the lock and pushed the gate open, to be instantly confronted with a massive form, taking up most of the hall's space. Naturally, her curiosity grew as she eyed the huge mass that was covered entirely with tarps.

It wasn't so much that she wondered how it had been possible to smuggle something so big into a NERV facility, apparently without anyone noticing or caring, or why someone would use such secrecy

to let her know. She rather felt like a child with a big Christmas present, trying to figure out what it was before opening it.

That impression was even heightened when she saw a small white card dangling from a cord attached to the gray covers.

/A Gift from the Dead/

Her stomach fluttered at those words as the flimsy hope that Shinji had brought up was stirred again. Not losing any more time, she lifted one of the tarps enough to climb under it.

It took her a bit to realize what she was looking at. But as she realized the nature of her "gift", a broad grin swept over her face. Flipping her cell phone open, she auto-dialed the most-used number.

"Major Katsuragi here. Get me Dr. Akagi."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Twilight had set in and bathed the sunken remains of the city in a golden hue. He closed his eyes, enjoying the warm summer breeze that blew over the new Ashi Lake. This sight must have inflicted the affected ones with sorrow and loss, but to him, it was serene. Even the statue he had chosen to rest on, once modeled on the often-used religious form of a winged Angel, now grotesque and beheaded, fitted in this peaceful picture as it stood halfway submerged in the water.

Almost on its own, an old melody came to his mind and he started humming it in expression of his joy.

He knew he was expected to report back to NERV headquarters, but he needed to do this first. He had not liked the confinement inside the plane that had brought him to Neo Tokyo-3. So the more he cherished this freedom.

That was, until his peace was disturbed.

"You!" a voice called out, but he didn't seem to care; he merely toned down the volume of his song.

"Hey, you! Damn it, I'm talking to you!"

Now he stopped his humming, though he still didn't turn around to see who had come out here to find him. Not that he needed to.

"And what might I do for you, Asuka Langley Soryu?"

There was a short silence. For sure, she was taken aback that this person she had never even met before knew her name.

"You're Kaworu Nagisa, aren't you? The Fifth Children?"

"That is what they have named me," he confirmed with a hint of amusement in his voice. "But I must admit that I had expected to meet someone else before. So tell me, Second Children, designated pilot of Evangelion Unit-02, what brings you out here? Do you want to warn me not to take your spot as pilot? Or not to take the one you love?"

Again, there was a short silence, before he heard her huffing. "Listen; I know more about you than you might think! If you try anything stupid, I'll be the first to kick your ass!"

"I am unsure what you could mean by 'stupid'," he calmly replied with amusement. "I am going to do what is my given task and I will do it when the time has come."

"Fine, I'm warning you one last time: If you try to hurt... anyone of my friends, you'll regret it!"

"Indeed you speak for someone else, Soryu? Such declaration seems so unlike from what I heard about

you, but I cannot deny that it fills my heart with joy. Your love for..." he chuckled lightly, "*them* has to be great if you are willing to risk this slip from your true self."

There was a loud impact of a smaller stone hitting the statue he was sitting on, but he didn't flinch. He was slightly saddened though, that she would rely on a physical act as a further warning, rather than use her verbal ability. He would have liked to continue the talk, but the sound of shuffling sand told him that she was already turning to leave.

"Just stay away from him!"

"As you wish..." he spoke softly, as he turned his head to watch her as she was walking away, "...Mrs. Ikari..."

-x-x-x-x-

"Asuka? Where have you been?" Shinji asked curiously as he heard the door closing, but immediately regretted it when he saw her frustratingly kicking her shoes off, just letting them lie where they fell.

"Out," was all he got for an answer as she rushed past him towards the kitchen.

Sighing, he picked up her shoes and placed them properly to the side. "You went to see him after all, didn't you?" he called after her. Of course there was no response.

As he followed her to the kitchen, he found Asuka leaning her back against the fridge, holding a can of soda against her lips. He wasn't sure if she was actually sipping it, judging by the way she just stared ahead.

"I thought I could catch him off guard, outsmart him with my future knowledge. But it was him who outsmarted me," Asuka eventually muttered. "Do you think he could know?" she added, glancing at him for the first time since her disgruntled return.

Shinji thought about it, but finally shook his head. "I have no idea. He *is* an Angel after all. Did he say something... you know... about us being from the future?"

"Not exactly," Asuka admitted mumbling, finally pulling the can from her mouth. "But he – he knew who I was without even looking at me. And he made strange implications about... 'my loved ones'."

"So we don't really have any proof that he knows?" Shinji figured. "Any sign that he'd be able to tell us...?"

Closing her eyes, Asuka sighed tiredly. "No, nothing he couldn't have gotten from reports and fine senses or good guessing," she concurred. "But I don't know, it was... unsettling..."

He couldn't suppress a slight grin at that. "Well, that's Kaworu for you..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"And here we have the break room. Here, people can get small refreshments and have some casual talk when not on duty."

Maya didn't intend to do just that, rather she wanted to finish being a tour guide as soon as possible. But as she continued her way, she quickly noticed the presence behind her was no longer following. Turning around she saw the Fifth Children still standing at the vending machines, staring fascinated at the colorful display.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked wondering.

"No, I do not believe that is the case."

Maya gave a nervous smile. She hadn't opted against showing the new pilot around, but that was mostly out of politeness, not because she had been very eager to spend her time with him.

The boy seemed to have a strange aura, not quite eerie, but... awkward. This constant, overly friendliness just wasn't normal. Of course, that implied a sad fact, but it **was** undeniably true of human nature to think of oneself first. So the more it freaked her that he showed absolutely no sign of such behavior.

"Well, shall we go on...?" She trailed off as she heard the footsteps of someone coming in their direction. Craning her neck to look over the wild silver hair of her companion, she saw two familiar forms approaching, discussing something she could not hear. Both, their talk as well as their steps, ceased instantly as Shinji and Asuka noticed them.

"Ah, good that you're here," Maya greeted the two. "I would like you to meet Kaworu Nagisa, the Fifth Children. He's going to be a back-up pilot in case... um..."

As if sensing her predicament, the boy took over and finished the introduction. "Why not say that we all hope that there never will be a need for me to take the place of one of you?" His smile widening, he held out his hand towards Shinji. "You must be the famous Shinji Ikari. It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

The dark-haired boy still didn't look up. "W-welcome," he muttered flatly. Then he strove past them without a second glance, Asuka following him close behind, only glaring warningly at the newcomer as she passed.

Kaworu's smile lessened but did not falter, the unshaken hand falling back to his side as he looked after them as they left.

"I-I'm sorry," Maya tried to excuse the not-so-warm welcome. "Asuka can be a little... cranky sometimes when it comes to possible... um... rivals. But Shinji is usually a lot nicer than that."

"Do not worry," the boy assured her. "I am sure it was not their intention to hurt my feelings. Indeed, I am positive that we will play our parts together just as we are destined to..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Others often complained about the slow speed of the long escalators and conveyor belts that served as bridges to connect the various sections of the headquarters over vast abysses. She had often witnessed people giving up the comfort of being transported in favor of saving time by additionally using their feet to walk along them. Rei never minded it. The only reason for her to do as they did would be an emergency situation, but other than that, it didn't matter whether she'd spend her time on the way or at her destination.

Ikari and Soryu had left awhile ago and she had decided to return to her apartment herself. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate their company, quite the contrary. It was a pleasant feeling to know that there were people who cared for her. They tried to include her in their activities, but often she felt out of place when they talked with each other. They attempted to hide it, maybe even hadn't noticed it themselves yet, but there appeared to be a bond between them and she felt like she was disturbing it.

She knew it was unreasonable to feel guilty this way. Maybe she just wasn't used to this new situation. Maybe, eventually, she would feel as accepted as they wanted her to. Maybe... there was another reason for the sadness in her when she watched them.

"You must be Rei Ayanami."

She only then noticed the gray-haired boy that watched her from the nearing end of the escalator and she wondered why she hadn't before. A strong aura seemed to be emitted by him, something not just vaguely familiar. She couldn't remember ever having seen him before, but she knew him, of that she was sure.

"You are just like me," he eventually told her with a smile. "We have both taken the Lilim's form as our body to live on this planet."

Her eyes narrowed at his words.

Lilim?

"Who are you?"

"Ah, where are my manners?" the boy asked himself, before bowing slightly. "I am Kaworu Nagisa, the Fifth Children."

"No."

An eyebrow rose. "I am afraid I do not understand."

"Who are you," her eyes became mere slits, "really?"

Kaworu's smile didn't change, but for some reason, it suddenly felt... menacing. "I think you already know..."

He was right. She long knew... him... "You are aware that I cannot allow you to succeed?"

"I would have expected no less. But..." he began, closing his eyes and the tension suddenly seemed to have vanished as if it had never been there, "that can wait until the time comes."

He walked past her then, leaving her with the impression that the conversation had ended. But as she moved to continue her way, he turned back to her. "Since I cannot spend my time with... someone else, as I had expected... Would you like to accompany me?"

Rei just blinked in surprise.

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The sound of chatter surrounded her. All around her, people were talking with their colleagues as they ate their meals chosen from the limited menu, sipped on their drinks or just enjoyed a few minutes away from their work.

Rei did none of those things. She just frowned at the full tray of her opponent as he sat down at their table.

"It is not too much, is it?" the gray-haired boy inquired, noticing her stare. "It was not my intention to appear as being greedy."

"I am unsure whether others are repulsed by such behavior," she told him, eyeing the three bowls of different soups, as well as one noodle and one rice dish along with a bottle of the carbonated beverage called cola. "But it is improbable that you will be able to consume all of it."

"Ah, I guess I am just not used to the Lilim's habits," he admitted, curiously regarding the shiny spoon in his hand. "It is impressive, even out of a gross necessity of their mortal body, they have created a beautiful art."

"An art?" Rei repeated, unable to follow his thoughts.

"Why, yes," he started to explain, stirring the spoon in one of the bowls of soup. "To survive, it would be enough for them just to eat the raw ingredients on their own. But they are joining them together,

spicing them, until, in the end, they have created a small masterpiece that does not just satisfy the plain need, but is a pure joy to consume."

"What I gathered from the conversations among the staff, many of them would not agree with you about the meals in this cafeteria."

Incomprehensible to Rei, a silvery laugh erupted from the boy. "Ah. Humor. Another most enjoyable feat that this culture created," he said as he calmed down. "But yes, I may cherish their achievements more than they do themselves. These sensations are still new to me, but to them, they are natural, having them around for their whole lives. And it has been awhile since I have last been able to feel these pleasures."

With that he brought the filled spoon up to his mouth. Rei considered reminding him of the heat. But despite what others thought, the concept of humor wasn't entirely lost on her.

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Looks like everything's progressing nicely."

While not really startled, it surprised Ritsuko to hear that voice. Deciding to use this opportunity for a short break, she connected the last three cables inside the panel and rose from the control-unit she had been working on.

"Yeah," she agreed, stepping backwards to her friend without turning around to her, while she fumbled for her pack of cigs in the pocket of her lab coat. "The remote is as good as finished and once they're finished assembling the final parts, we can start first simulations before we transfer it to headquarters."

"What did you tell them?" Misato asked, nodding towards the technicians who were busy on the back of the colossus.

"The usual: Nothing," Ritsuko shrugged. "They are used to doing their work without questioning. Even if it's quite obviously not the MAGI maintenance they were appointed for."

"So... no signs that the Commander could get wind of our little project here?"

"Ikari?" Ritsuko mumbled, lighting the cigarette between her lips. She took a draw, then blew out a cloud of smoke, before continuing. "Unless we're getting too careless, I doubt he'll notice. He likes to make people think he's an all-knowing, ever-present shadow; professional and calm in every situation. But truth is that he's gotten much too focused on his plans, now that they're so close to coming to their conclusion. He's... giddy..."

"Giddy? The Commander?" Misato shuddered visibly at the image that must have surfaced in her mind.

"Well, in his way at least," the doctor muttered solemnly. "Speaking of Ikari... I haven't spoken with Shinji yet."

The announcement seemed to hardly surprise the young Major. While never very outgoing in the first place, Ritsuko had become more distant since the incident with Rei's clones, at least towards the two witnesses. It had already been a hard fight for the blonde to apologize to her old college friend. Shinji, however, had always been – to her at least – a mere child; someone below her, not even in a negative sense, but someone for whom she, as an intelligent adult, had to be a good example. Even if she'd never put it that way, she felt deeply embarrassed that she had shown him such a weak, emotional side of her.

"Don't worry," Misato assured her, however. "He understands it better than you might think."

"Hmm." Ritsuko spaced out for several seconds, letting Misato's words sink in as her cigarette burned

down. Did her friend just try to cheer her up? That was in her nature after all. But as his guardian, Misato knew Shinji much better than she did herself. Not coming to a conclusion, she spoke up again.

"Anyway," she changed the topic, "the code is pretty simple, it shouldn't be much of a problem to adapt the control system to something more efficient."

"I better not ask how you already know the code," Misato interjected half-grumbling.

Ritsuko just flashed her friend a meaningful smirk. "I'm more worried about the human component. Are you really sure the Fourth is capable of this?"

Misato shook her head, probably more to dissolve her own doubts than to answer the question. "He is a trained pilot after all, so it should be easier for him to get used to slightly adapted controls than for someone who has to learn them from scratch." She sighed. "Yes, he's young and doesn't have much experience, but the Commander made pretty sure that Rei is off-limits and finding a new one wouldn't really get us anywhere. And I don't really trust the Fifth."

Ritsuko regarded her. Sure, she had seen Makoto snooping around again in the Fifth's data. "So you know...?"

The Major nodded. "Probably more than I should..."

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"Hey, Ayanami!"

"Well, if that isn't our Rei," Asuka added to Shinji's greeting, causing the addressed girl to stop as she exited the door.

"Is it surprising to meet me at the door to our changing room?" Rei asked, puzzled by the tone of the redhead's voice.

Asuka sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Humor, Rei, humor! That's something we really need to work on."

Rei chose not to answer. In fact, Asuka noticed that she had seemed to have picked up Shinji's annoying habit of ignoring her ramblings as they went through the hallways together, nodding mindlessly to show agreement, whether or not they actually meant it. That could be considered a step forward compared to the blue-haired girl's completely uncaring manner in her earlier life, but Asuka still felt like slapping Shinji silly for being such a bad role model. All that was lacking now was for Rei to slip in a "Yes, Asuka" (or worse, "Yes, honey"!) now and then.

At least she could trick Shinji with questions like "Are you going to do my chores for the rest of the month?" or "Would you like a bottle Tabasco in your curry?" when she noticed that he wasn't listening to her. But unlike him, Rei somehow managed to listen even when she was not, as paradox as that sounded.

"So, what do you think of the Fifth?" Asuka eventually got to the real point of picking Rei up and, as she had almost expected, she got an answer without a second of hesitation this time.

"I am positive that he would be a very efficient pilot." Whether the implication that Asuka had wanted to know her opinion of him on a personal, rather than a professional, basis was lost on Rei or if she just chose to ignore that fact was impossible for Asuka to tell.

"Is it true that you spent time with him?" Shinji sounded maybe a bit too pressing, but Rei didn't seem to have noticed.

"I was in his company on some occasions, yes," she admitted without remorse. "Should I not interact with others?"

"Oh, it's fine, great actually that you do that," he quickly tried to cover a potentially fatal misunderstanding. Having her open up and finding friends was more than welcomed after all. "But he... maybe he's not... I-I don't think he's the best company, you know?"

"He's dangerous," Asuka added bluntly.

But their warnings didn't seem to upset Rei very much as she regarded both of them as though they just had told her that the sky is blue. "I know that he poses no threat to me," she simply stated as she turned to leave.

With anyone else, Asuka would have seen that as an attempt to escape an uneasy discussion of which they knew they couldn't win. But with Rei, it was much harder to guess if that was the case or if Rei was just being Rei, having said everything she needed to say.

"We're just worrying about you, you know?"

That seemed to catch the blue haired girl by surprise, as she came to a startled halt. "I... thank you," she said without turning around. "But there is no need to. I can assure you that no danger is coming from him towards me."

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

She really had grown to hate the synch tests. While she had been able to delude herself from the boredom once, had even used to look forward to them as a way to boost her ego with her high scores, they were now just tedious. Of course she couldn't just tell them that her synch ratio would be high enough in battle for sure, though she was currently seriously contemplating doing that. But sadly, even if she did, it was doubtful that they would believe her and just force the tests on her anyway.

Groaning inwardly, Asuka absently glanced at the comm-window showing the interior of Shinji's plug, but just as she was averting her view, something out of the corner of her eye drew her attention closer to the screen. Apparently Shinji was staring at something himself. She couldn't see what he was looking at, but it wasn't hard to guess.

That freaky Angel-boy. He sat there, calmly grinning in Rei's test-plug, probably beating all previous scores as he wished to. She probably would have never become friends with that "guy" even in other circumstances. But Shinji wasn't her and in the state he had been in, it was understandable that he had taken any kind of affection that he could get. Even if it came in such a ridiculous amount in the form of that bastard.

Shinji might have been a blind fool, but it was Kaworu who had known that one of them would have to die; it had been him who knew that this "friendship" would end up hurting her later husband either way. And she knew, deep inside Shinji was still the same blind fool.

If he couldn't see, then it would have to be up to her to do it for him.

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The synch-test eventually ended after another hour. Kaworu hoped the Lilim weren't too confused with the results they got, smiling to himself as he climbed out of the test-plug. He saw Shinji and the Second doing the same, instantly going for the exit, though he noticed Soryu glaring at him for a second. Had she been told the results already? It was said that she was quite competitive with these numbers.

He wouldn't get the answer anytime soon. While his fellow pilots left for the showers, he found his path

blocked by an athletic, brown-haired boy of Shinji's age, clad in a dark plugsuit similar to the one he was wearing.

"Toji Suzuhara, I presume," Kaworu greeted. "The Fourth Children."

"Uh, yeah. You're the new one, eh?" Suzuhara replied, holding his hand out. "Karo..."

"Kaworu Nagisa," he corrected friendly, taking the offered hand in this common ritual.

"Oh, yeah. So how does it feel like to be cannon fodder?"

"Cannon...? Oh yes, I heard about your unfortunate... accident..."

"Yeah..." Suzuhara took a step back, regarding him a little differently. Kaworu had noticed that look in quite a few people, but he had never thought much about it. "Hey, you know... the way you're moving and talking... and that smiling... you're not..." The boy slowly waved his hand. "I mean not that I'd have anything against it... but still..."

"I am afraid I do not know what you are referring to."

"Yeah, sure, never mind," Suzuhara hastily babbled, slowly walking backwards to the plug. "I better get going. They still want me for that super secret... eh, hehe, secret stuff. Really, with five pilots, they could have five test-plugs, couldn't they? Would make things much faster. Well, bye..."

The Fourth quickly turned around then, mumbling something about fresh LCL in the plug. Kaworu found that reaction very interesting. Maybe he should do some research about it eventually. But for now, he decided that it was best to head for the showers.

However, he was a little surprised to find a glaring redhead guarding the doors to the wet rooms. Apparently, she hadn't bothered with showering after all, just changed clothes quickly, as her hair and skin still showed traces of LCL.

"And where would you be going?" she spat contemptuously.

"I was just heading for the showers to clean my body from the remaining LCL," he stated the obvious.

But she shook her head, her wet hair sending some drops flying. "Shinji just went there."

"Did he? Well, our introduction had been rather short..." Kaworu commented as he made another step towards the door. But the girl stopped him yet again. The glare of the two blue orbs intensified, but their intended effect was lost on him.

"I thought I told you to stay away from him."

"I apologize. I was not aware that I was approaching him more than I was 'permitted' to." He didn't take the implied threat very seriously. It did make him curious however. "I wonder... this paranoia, this aggression... is this what is called jealousy?"

"W-what are you...?" For the first time her resolve weakened as he stepped closer, letting her back away from him until she was stopped by the wall next to the door, leaving her no escape as he entered her personal space.

Leaning as close as possible to her face without touching, he darkened his voice. "Are you really that afraid to lose him by my hand?"

The girl's eyes were unable to conceal the fear any longer, no matter how much she tried to keep them hard. The expected answer came sooner than he had thought.

Kaworu flinched from the exquisite pain as Asuka's fist rocketed into his stomach. It took merely a second until his smile returned while the redhead used the chance to escape his close proximity.

"If you really need to know: Yes, I am afraid!" she admitted yelling. "I won't let him be hurt, not by you or anyone else."

"Is it because he would do the same for you?" Kaworu wondered.

"No, because he *does* the same for me!" Asuka firmly answered, leaving no doubt in her belief.

"Does he indeed?" he questioned anyway. "This possessiveness seems not like him. Or is it just me you do not want to share him with?"

"Heh," she laughed mockingly. "You're calling me possessive but then demand to 'share him' with you?"

"My choice of words might not have been the wisest, I admit. But they still stand. You do not fear 'anyone' to hurt him. You only fear me."

"I..." she trailed off, trying to hide the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes by avoiding them. "I have my reasons."

"But you do not even know me," he continued eagerly, cornering her now verbally. "Yet you are judging me by things you have heard."

"I don't need to know more," she said, already regaining her spirits. "If you're nice to him, you're going to hurt him; if you're an ass to him, you'll hurt him just as much. I don't care what you're like. I don't want to get to know you. Last I could use is you hurting me as well."

So was that her motive? "You know, for someone who appears to know who I am, it was very courageous to confront me like you did. Was that really just the bravery that is preceding you, or could it be that you know me better than you admit?"

She didn't answer him. She glared at him, gritting her teeth, her fists clenched ready to strike as she kept blocking the path, huffing in anger and frustration. Kaworu smiled to himself. He knew then that he had hit a nerve.

Asuka probably would have stood there for all eternity, but a hand on her shoulder made her jump in surprise, before her face softened as she looked at the one behind her. Kaworu's smile, however, faltered slightly as he noticed the sadness and remorse that appeared in Shinji's eyes as they locked onto him.

"I'm... I'm sorry..." It took him a second to recognize the brown-haired teen's voice. The words were barely audible and was obvious that Shinji struggled hard with himself to get them out; his lips barely moving. "If you have anything to say... But if not, I don't... I don't..."

"Don't bother," the redhead cut him off, demonstratively taking his hand in hers as she kept glaring at Kaworu. "He just likes to play with people, using deceiving words. It's no use to listen to someone who can't prove his talks by actions."

Shinji's head sagged slightly, before he nodded. Asuka took that as sign to leave, pulling him along. The couple hurried silently past the silver-haired boy, not wasting another look at him, and eventually not even the sound of their footsteps could be heard anymore.

Kaworu, however, still didn't move.

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-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

She knew that many envied her for becoming the new head of Project E, even if it was just temporarily. As the former assistant of her predecessor, she was well accustomed with the work and currently the

one most suited for the job.

But Maya had been much happier at Dr. Akagi's side.

Whereas others saw the fame and privileges that came with such a position, more so when reaching it already at her young age, she just saw the hardly bearable weight of responsibility on her shoulders and the impossible amount of work that made her wonder how her idol had managed it.

Giving the Commander the reports of the latest harmonics-tests seemed rather easy in comparison, but to be alone with him in this dark eerie office made her stomach clench.

"I see," he finally muttered, the only response to the most unusual results they had ever received.

'Oh God, have I embarrassed him? I shouldn't always be so scientific!' her mind raced, blaming herself as she tried to hide behind her clipboard. 'But he has a doctorate himself, doesn't he? He should understand. Oh God, what to do?'

"T-to be honest, I don't have an explanation for these results," she tried to appease him. "Maybe... maybe Dr. Akagi should take a look at them."

That hardly had the desired effect. While he finally showed some emotion, she could have done without the angry glare. "Dr. Akagi?"

"Um... Yes, Sir, she has been absent lately," Maya stammered nervously. The last thing she had wanted to do was to get her idol in yet more trouble, even if just by accident. "I thought after that incident recently, she was... well... since... since I've been put in charge..."

"Indeed, she is no longer of importance to me," he interrupted her. The young woman shuddered at his use of "me", rather than the collegial "us" at that.

The Commander fell silent again after that and stared down. He appeared to be lost in thought and soon Maya got the impression that he had completely forgotten about her. Her eyes darted from one end of the vast office to the other, glancing at the abstract symbols that decorated the room as she waited for a sign from him as to what he expected from her next. After a few minutes of shifting from one foot to the other, she wondered if she was already dismissed, but she didn't dare to leave just like that either.

So she jerked in surprise as he spoke again, though she wasn't sure whether he talked to her or to himself. "Never mind this now. Other matters have higher priority." He finally looked up at her again. "You may leave."

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She had always liked the feeling of the clean water, purifying her body and soul as it rinsed over her skin. She enjoyed going swimming in the large pool NERV provided, but she also got that feeling in the showers and baths of the headquarters. The latter especially allowed her to calm her mind, to let her thoughts drift away, as she often visited them when no one else was around.

This time however, the peace and quietness were suddenly interrupted by approaching footsteps. Slowly, she halfway opened her eyes, but she didn't feel the need to turn around to address the newcomer.

"These baths are not coed."

"I apologize. Does my presence unsettle you?"

Rei didn't answer and after a quick glance over her shoulder, she just stared back at his reflection in the water. He obviously knew she wouldn't be bothered by his presence or by his and her own state of

undress, otherwise he wouldn't have followed her here. After waiting respectfully a moment for a positive answer anyway, he eventually sat down next to her in the warm, shallow water.

He remained silent and Rei didn't pressure him to explain his reason to come to her. Even though she noticed that something apparently troubled him.

Sure enough, he eventually spoke on his own. "So she is a lot like him, I take it?"

"Who?"

"The Second Children. An interesting person. So full of fear and pain that she protects her remaining happiness at all costs, even at the danger of missing what she seeks. He did not have any happiness left at all back then. But it would not surprise me if he would indeed have done the same as her."

"I do not understand... "

"A fragile heart just like his," he continued without really addressing the matter of her confusion. "And yours as well." he commented, glancing at her with a short-lived recovery of his typical smile. But his face quickly reverted to his thoughtful expression. "Are all Lilim like that? I had thought that I understood them. I knew that they always feel pain. That all of them were alone. Shutting each other out so as not to get hurt, but with that also closing themselves off from the ones that could help them to ease the pain. But I had thought that he, the intensity of his suffering, was a special case. Now I wonder if the others, instead of forgetting their pain, just know better how to hide it."

"I am not..." she tried to deny, but was instantly interrupted.

"No, but you are a lot like them. Whether that is because of your heritage or because you lived among them for so long, even I cannot say."

"Maybe it is not a characteristic just of them, but of all living beings." She narrowed her eyes. "How else is it that you are here with me instead of being with him?"

He was unusually quiet at first, confirming her success at turning the table. "I will face him when the time comes."

"And why is that not now? What is your reason to wait?"

Again, he took his time to ponder about her words and his face became solemn, giving her almost the impression that he suddenly got replaced by an entirely different person. He might have been an expert at reading other people's thoughts and emotions, but – just as so many humans – he was not as insightful when it came to his own.

"Maybe you are right," he eventually admitted. "This... fear... it might be a more powerful emotion than I thought. But I will not be able to hold back for much longer."

It wasn't hard to figure the meaning of his words. "So you will act soon..."

"Yes..."

"You are aware that I can not allow you to succeed?"

"I would expect no less..."

Those were the last words they spoke as they sat there in silence. It was hard to tell how much time passed as the only sounds were the drops and splashing of water made by their slight movements. But whether it had been three minutes or three hours when the lights were shut off as well, neither cared.

Eventually though, Rei stood up from the cooling pool. One last time she looked at him, almost as if to ascertain that he was actually still there. Her gaze was returned with a smile that didn't seem as self-

assured as usual, but a smile nonetheless.

Without saying anything more than that as a farewell, Rei got out of the bath, gathering and changing into her clothes before she went, not bothering to dry herself before.

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"This seems awfully familiar," Kozo muttered as he raised his hands. The amusement in his voice would appear unsuited in this situation, but he had doubts that the man behind him actually intended on harming him. He would probably already be dead if that would have been the case.

"Sorry, I'm usually not a man of repetitions," the intruder apologized, vocalizing his smirk. "Unless it involves a woman that is. And it's not my fault that your guards are still unable to react properly to surprises. Guess that last time didn't teach them well enough."

"I must admit, I, too, did not expect to see you again, Mr. Kaji," Fuyutsuki said, turning around without waiting for permission.

"To be honest, me neither," Ryoji shrugged, still smirking. He held the gun out for a short moment longer before putting the safety on and placing it back in its holster under his suit.

"What can I do for you then? I take it that your time as SEELE's errand boy is over as well, and this is not the style of the government."

"No, probably not," Kaji concurred. "But as you might remember, I want to find the truth for myself. Well, maybe myself and a handful of others – a handful, if we're talking about a God's hand that is."

A gray eyebrow rose. "Really? I had the impression that you had figured that your quest for the truth had come to an end and passed it on."

"I thought so as well for a while," Kaji admitted with a shrug. "But I realized that there were still some mysteries left that were interesting enough to take the necessary precautions to allow me to solve them."

"You will eventually see that there will always be mysteries in your life that are worth investigating. But may I guess that you are referring to the extraordinary travels of the Second and Third Children?"

For once, the smile on the stubbly face vanished. "You know about them?"

Fuyutsuki nodded, affirming the man's conclusion. "So far it's mostly a theory based on circumstantial evidence that still needs a final proof, but it's enough to make Ikari rather nervous about their knowledge. I don't know what he has planned with them as they, or at least Shinji, are most likely still needed even after the 17th Angel is destroyed, but I don't think he will watch them disturbing his precious scenario for much longer."

"For someone who always stood trustworthy behind him, you don't really sound all that much like you agree with him."

"For someone who has watched us for so long, you know very little about me," Fuyutsuki retorted. "I didn't and don't agree with a lot of his decisions. But there's not much I can do other than to be the voice of his conscience. Though I admit, I sometimes think I should have been louder."

He took a breath, feeling his age as he straightening himself. "I am here on behalf of Yui Ikari, not of Gendo. When they explained their plans to me to work against those of SEELE, which I had been about to uncover, I did not hesitate for long. But unable to cope with his wife's sacrifice, Gendo changed them. He no longer wanted to prevent Third Impact, now he's aiming for his own version that would

reunite him with Yui, and created a catalyst that would grant him control over it."

"Rei?" Kaji guessed correctly. "But why are you still helping him then?"

"I don't believe anymore that there is a way to prevent it. And as hard to believe as it might sound, his version would be the lesser evil."

"You seem quite sure of that."

Kozo nodded. "The original plan involved the death of Lilith and Adam once the other Angels were defeated, so they couldn't be used to initiate the Instrumentality. But with the EVAs under his command and Adam literally in his hand, that is out of the question."

"There is still the possibility to take the old men out before they can strike."

Fuyutsuki furrowed his brows at the agent's lack of sense. "You should know that SEELE is too powerful to be taken out that easily."

But Kaji just shook his head. "No one is powerful enough to go against the entire of humanity."

The old man couldn't help but smile. That naive idea sure reminded him of someone else. "How would you let humanity know? Evidence leading to them may exist, but it is hard to interpret and even harder to make it impossible to shoot down. I was once just as foolish to think that way. But if I hadn't gotten the offer to work here when I confronted Ikari with what I gathered, I would have been dead long before I could have made it public."

"Oh, I know of that. Actually, a little talk with Mr. Yamaki is the reason I came to visit you at all." Kaji scratched his chin. "I just want to know: Do you still have the documents?"

"You know you have no chance to get them to the people," Kozo reminded once more.

But the former spy just grinned. "Let me worry about that. So, do you have them or not?"

Reluctantly, Fuyutsuki shook his head. "I'm afraid most of it was destroyed when I joined GEHIRN," he said. Disappointment was written all over the other's face and he couldn't blame him for that. Years of work coming to such an abrupt end, a noble quest being for naught. However, he couldn't do anything to help...

Could he?

"But that doesn't mean there are no others." Kozo closed his eyes with a sigh. "Look for a disk in a trashcan at the Nagao Toge station tomorrow after seven PM."

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-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

His smile was a solemn one as he silently stood on the gangway in the EVA cage. He felt regret for having to do this, but she was right. He could not wait any longer. Even though he knew that what he searched for would not be there, he would willingly go into the trap that SEELE had sent him into as their pawn. He would have preferred a different opportunity to sort certain things out with Shinji, but apparently that wasn't meant to be. This would be his only chance.

And so, Kaworu looked up at the giant instrument he was forced to use once again. "Come, Adam's alter ego, servant of the Lilim."

But as he turned, he felt that his command was not acknowledged; not even heard.

"Not quite as willing as expected, I see..." he figured without any sign of disappointment. His smile did not falter when he leered over his shoulder at Unit-01. "It would surely be interesting to see the roles

reversed. But I am afraid I will not have a chance to have her joining me. So it will happen as it is destined."

With that the Final Messenger turned back to the red behemoth, his feet lifting off the ground as he unleashed his true power and spoke with a booming voice right in the heart of the familiar beast.

"Thus, Offspring of Adam, silence the voice of the Lilim's soul inside you and follow, as it is meant to be!"

And the beast awoke.

-x-

"EVA Unit-02 just activated!" Hyuga yelled over the alarms that had blared instantly at the unauthorized activity in the cages.

"What the hell?" The situation took Misato by surprise just as the rest of the present crew in the Command Center. Did they plan to go after the Angel themselves without telling her? "Asuka?"

She prayed that her question about the pilot would be answered negatively. If they went after and killed an "innocent boy and fellow pilot", they'd get in serious trouble. Even if it was proven later on that he was an Angel, how were they going to explain that they knew?

However, the way Maya shook her head buried any hopes of relief. "I can't tell; we're getting no signals from the plug!"

'*Can't tell?*' the Major pondered. '*Does that mean the Fifth...?*'

She got her answer a second later. "AT Field detected in Central Dogma!"

"Unit-02?" she had to ask even though she was sure of what she'd hear next.

"No. Pattern is blue. No doubt, it's an Angel!"

-x-

The source of the blue pattern kept advancing, already having used the powerful behemoth to clear the path to the main shaft that would lead him to his goal. Tabris descended slowly on his AT-Field, shielded by the mighty hands of Unit-02. He had no reason to hurry. In fact, he was still waiting, his head raised to see when they would finally react.

Up there, way above him he could finally see the small purple form of EVA-01 entering the shaft.

His smile widened in relief. "You are late, Shinji."

"No, he's just in time!"

For a moment, the seemingly everlasting smile was replaced by a look of surprise as he suddenly felt a presence that shouldn't have been there. But it was already too late. The hands of EVA-02 that had sheltered him until now crushed close around his body.

"Mighty impressive, I must admit. Your bond must be very strong for her to be able to hide you from me. Let alone override mine."

"I usually don't mind compliments, but you can spare yours!" the emotional voice of the Second Children boomed. "Unless that's what you'd like to say as your last words."

"Last words?" He repeated calmly. "No, that would be too soon. And I wish to speak with him before."

"I warned you! I'm not going to let you do this to him again!" Asuka shouted and he could feel the giant palms squeezing more tightly against him.

"I am afraid I cannot let this happen yet. If it had not been for my foolishness and letting myself be distracted, you would not even have come this far."

"Well, too bad for you! I don't think you have much of a choice in this anymore!"

He just smiled as he closed his eyes. "He has chosen very well, I see," he said softly, more muttering to himself than to her. "A loyal companion, even when the times are rough, even though it is a commitment that could be of little gain and has so much to lose. Just like himself. Those bonds that are hardest to make are the hardest to be broken. And when two fragile hearts manage to unite, they will not be of glass anymore, but of diamond."

"What... what are you talking about?"

"Shinji will be here any moment. And since you effectively managed to disturb my plans, we will have to speed things up a little. Farewell, Mrs. Ikari."

"Hey! Wha...?"

Before she could finish her question, it changed into a piercing scream, as an AT-Field appeared between the EVA Unit's hands and arms, slicing them off with a precise cut.

The now limp fingers freed his body as the massive hands fell into the abyss. Before the Second could react, he reversed the power that he had used to reduce the speed of their fall to accelerate the colossus now, sending it crashing through the remaining blockades as he followed.

-x-

Shinji didn't like what he saw at all. Using Unit-02 as a battering ram, Kaworu suddenly sped down and even though the experienced pilot let himself fall freely through the shaft, there was no way he could catch up to them in time. Despite the speed at which gravity pulled the EVA down, it took many long, agonizing seconds until he landed on all fours on the bottom of the seemingly endless pit. The heavy impact shook him to the bones and it took him another moment to re-orientate himself in this bizarre underground world that mirrored the deformed Antarctica with its rosy sky and stalagmites of ice. Shinji's eyes soon fell on the red Evangelion, lying sprawled on the frozen ground.

"Asuka!" he yelled, "Are you okay?!"

"Yeah. Jus- just a hard... a *few* hard landings," was the groaned answer. "Don't waste time, go and get him!"

He nodded at the comm-window, moving his EVA around as Asuka's voice rang out once more. "And Shinji?"

"Hm?"

"Sorry."

He didn't reply. There was no need to. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, then ran after the small floating figure in the distance, nearing "Heaven's Door". However, no matter how fast he fought his way over the slippery floor, he was too slow. The gate opened, revealing the giant white being that was crucified in the middle of the vast lake of LCL. It wasn't until the smaller Angel floated up to Lilith that Shinji managed to catch up.

"KAWORU!"

"I have waited for this moment. And I have dreaded it. But..." The Angel turned around, smiling weakly at him. "I am glad to finally meet you once again, Shinji Ikari."

With that, Unit-01's hand closed around the gray-haired boy. And he expectantly closed his eyes.

-X-

The crew went silent as they waited to see whether the Angel's life signs would cease or if Unit-01 would suffer the same fate as the German Production Model. Not even a man like Gendo himself could deny a certain amount of nervousness, even though he was gifted with the ability to remain calm even during stressful situations. That Angel was much too close.

With all their strength and cunning, none before had managed to reach Heaven's Door, and this one had just walked through. Maybe he had underestimated this "boy" and the old men that had sent him after all.

But before anyone could find out, the earth began to tremble from an enormous shock; the holographic displays erupting in static.

"The strongest AT-Field ever has been detected!" one of the technicians shouted.

"Light, magnetism, sub-atomic articles! It's shutting out everything!" another yelled. "We can't monitor anything!"

"Did he wait for this until he could entrap Unit-01 along with him?" Fuyutsuki mused next to him, too low for the bridge crew to hear.

"What for? Neither is the one he truly sought;" Gendo replied, feeling the implant in his right hand against the white glove. "Unless... he is rather interested in the pilot."

"To fight him?" the old professor questioned. "Or to help him?"

Gendo had no answer for him. And he wasn't given the time to search for one.

"A second AT-Field!"

"Another AT-Field as strong as the first one has surrounded Terminal Dogma!"

"It's invading the other AT-Field!"

"Impossible! Another Angel?"

"I don't know! I can't confirm – it... it just vanished!"

"Vanished? The Angel?!"

Now Gendo allowed himself a relieved smirk under his clasped hands. Unlike his anxious subordinates below, he had a very good idea who that "other Angel" was. And it was certainly none he had to fear, quite the contrary.

Fuyutsuki had apparently come to the same conclusion. "It's her, isn't it?"

"Yes. Our victory is as good as assured."

It seemed almost unreal. The last obstacle in his path was about to be removed. After all this years, the day his hopes would come true was finally close.

"Have Section 2 stand by for the task we talked about," he surprised his Sub-Commander.

"Ikari!" Fuyutsuki warned. "Don't you think that would be foolish? It would be too early, with SEELE on the move."

"It doesn't matter how fast they move. Once the 17th Angel is gone, I can move faster. I will not have a need for them anymore."

"Then why bother?"

"Because I cannot risk anyone stabbing me in the back now."

"Isn't it rather," the old man spoke knowingly, "that you're just curious?"

-x-

"I can't..."

Shinji had wanted to go through with it without hesitation, to kill him without a second thought, just to get it over with. He would hate himself afterwards either way, but he would have avoided reliving those long agonizing moments in which he had been forced to make such a gruesome choice. But the moment he had closed the giant fist around the Angel's body, his heart had taken over his will yet again. "I just can't do this, Kaworu..."

"As I have told you once before, it does not matter to me if I die here. Life and death are as unimportant to me as are time and space..."

"Time...?" Shinji repeated lowly. "*To meet you once again...*". "*As I have told you...*" His mind had registered those words, but it wasn't until then that it calmed down enough that it was able to make sense of them. "Y-you? You *were* behind this, weren't you? You sent us back!"

"I can neither deny nor affirm that. But I can tell you that you have been watched, your fears and sorrows, and you were pitied. When the time came that you made your wish, it was granted..."

"Wish?" Shinji asked in disbelief. "You say I had wished for this? You say that I wanted to leave my-my child behind?"

"Indeed you did – and yet did not. Do you not remember the day before you returned into this time?"

"What...?" he muttered, easily recalling the last time he had seen his little girl.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Asuka stood in the doorway of Aki's room, as he had found her countless times before. Quietly embracing her from behind, he laid his chin on her shoulder, following her gaze to the sleeping form of their daughter.

"Shouldn't we change her into her nightgown?" he whispered smirking at the sight of Aki lying halfway under her blanket, her left leg kicking itself free, with her pants and T-shirt still on.

Asuka shook her head, though. "She fell asleep on the porch like that. I'm glad that I got her to bed without waking her up. I didn't want to risk it."

On any other occasion, he would have laughed. After all, he knew first hand what his little rascal was like when she was forced to wake up again. Either she'd be grumpy or become so lively again that it would take hours to get her back to sleep.

But Asuka's sorrowful expression and emotionless voice prevented his natural reaction. "What's wrong?" he inquired gently.

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently. Innocently enough that it was obvious that she was denying the truth.

"Something seems to be on your mind lately," he kept voicing his concerns. "You've been looking at her like that quite often."

"Like 'that'?" Asuka argued. "I've always looked at my child."

"No, not in this way. When she's with you, you act like always, so she won't notice, but as soon as she

turns around, you seem to get troubled because of something."

Her body sagged slightly as she sighed, finally giving in. "It's just... since our last trip... since she keeps asking... I've started to wonder how lonely she really is without even knowing..."

Shinji almost wished he hadn't asked. "Well... I-I guess we can't do much more than to be there for her as much as we can."

"Yes, but... is living with only the two of us the worst way to grow up or will she never miss the interaction with others, when she'll never know *what* she'd miss?" She shook her head. "Recently, I keep wondering what her life would be if we weren't the only humans on earth. She's almost four now. She would be in kindergarten by now, meeting other people, making... friends..."

He felt his heart wrench as he saw her grimacing. Not just because these thoughts obviously pained her, but also because he felt she was right. He had been wondering about this himself ever since Aki started to question about others. About friends. They could do their best as parents, but was that enough to keep her happy?

"To be honest, I... I just wish I could do something to allow her a normal life. A life in which she could grow up like a normal girl."

"Yeah..." Shinji muttered, looking over at the sleeping, unaware child. "Me too..."

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"That's it?!" Shinji yelled. "Because of a stupid wish? You took Aki away from us, because we wished *her* a better life?"

"I am deeply sorry. But surely you agree with me that bringing her into this time with you would have been counteractive to your purpose here."

"W-what? But that doesn't make any sense!"

"It does not?" Kaworu wondered, visibly surprised by that conclusion. "You wanted the possibility to create a better future for your offspring. To give you that chance, you were brought back to a point from where on you would be able to fulfill your intentions."

"But we weren't able to! We couldn't change anything! Toji still was hurt. Asuka still was tortured. Rei still died. And now I'm supposed to kill you again!" Shinji choked back an angry sob. "And none of this could bring my daughter back!"

"But your friend's injuries were not as severe as they could have been. Your spouse did not close her heart off from everyone, including herself. And while Ayanami's body changed, her soul and emotions did not, because her friends didn't turn away from her either." Kaworu closed his eyes for a moment after he made his reasoning, his smile fading slightly. "I can understand the pain the loss of your child has caused you and I am sorry for that. I can understand the hate you feel against me now for that and I do not blame you for it. Maybe it will help you with this choice. Though I wish we would not part on such terms. Trust me, Shinji. You will find your happiness again one day, as long as you follow this path."

"But it will never be her again!" Shinji rebutted unbelievably. He understood that for someone like Kaworu, his happiness had come from having a family at all. But there was so much more to that.

"How do you expect me to be happy without her?"

"Do not fear. You are not alone," the Angel, however, assured him once more. "Now, do not hesitate much longer. I may be the Angel of Free Will, but that is my offer, not my power. My freedom of

choice is as limited as that of my brethren, unable to resist the call. My true freedom can only be granted by you, my friend."

"But..." The words remained stuck in Shinji's throat. He was unable to stop trembling from the familiarity of this situation. "I... I don't want to do this again. Can't you ignore it? That call? I... we... we could need your help! Kaworu, please..."

But the Angel just continued using his soothing voice. "You do not need me to accomplish your goal," he dissolved Shinji's attempt to persuade him otherwise and looked up. "You already have more allies than you think."

-x-

Rei returned the gaze of the boy clasped in Unit-01's grip. She wasn't able to hear the words that they exchanged from her position, but she could see the pleased smile he was giving her. Surely he knew that it was her who disrupted his AT-Field, rendering him vulnerable. He knew that she couldn't allow him to succeed. He knew...

Was that the reason... why he smiled...?

-x-

"This is destined to happen, either this way or the other. And Shinji, you have come so far from the shy boy I once knew. You have found yourself. You have found your reason to exist. You should not give that up for me." Kaworu urged him on once more. "Do you not want to see them again?"

"What do you...?" But Shinji trailed off. He knew what he meant by that. If he wouldn't do this now, Kaworu had to merge with Lilith, starting Third Impact. And this time, there wouldn't be any hope for them to survive. He would never see anyone again...

"I see... You still do not realize..." The Angel smiled. "But that does not matter. You will eventually. An unexpected joy is even greater than one you are anticipating," Kaworu mused, and it seemed to Shinji that his red eyes were staring right through him, as though there was no Evangelion between them. "So, Shinji, make your decision. Keep on living. Keep on protecting those you love."

Shinji's head sagged. He wanted to protest, to argue that he couldn't possibly fulfill both of those wishes if he had to do this.

But in the end he had to admit that Kaworu was right.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be..."

Shinji closed his eyes. Just a light tug on the handle. And even without looking, he knew it was over.

The 17th Angel was dead.

-x-x-x-x-

Asuka cursed to herself, pacing back and forth as the elevator shot up. She had failed yet again to take this horrible burden off of Shinji's shoulders and wasn't able to be there to support him either. Not to mention that she failed at kicking another Angel's butt.

She could only hope her EVA would be repaired quickly. There was a certain score to settle all too soon and she and her Unit-02 needed to be in top shape for that. The fight was going to be hard enough as it is – and there was no way that she'd lose. Not again.

The elevator's doors finally opened, and Asuka moved to step out – but instantly halted in surprise as

she found her way blocked.

"Pilot Soryu?"

-x-x-x-x-

The entry plug had already been ejected, but Shinji still didn't make a move to get out of the seat. Somehow, he just couldn't move. He could barely remember moving the EVA back out of Terminal Dogma.

All the other Angels – they were huge monsters, destroying everything and everyone in their path. They were so out of place, so unreal that it was easy not to regard them as living beings. Easy to kill them without feeling guilty.

But Kaworu was not like that. He was so... human.

It had been foolish to think the second time would be easier.

He breathed out, trying to force most of the pain in his chest along with the air, before he finally found the strength to climb out of the plug; his body working agonizingly slowly. As he turned to leave, he almost instantly bumped into one of five bulky men of Section 2. Warily, he looked from one of their stone-cold, sunglasses-hidden faces to the other.

Shinji tentatively took a step back. He didn't like this. Not only was this much different than he remembered, it was quite doubtful that they were here to congratulate him.

"Pilot Ikari," the one he had almost run into bellowed coldly, his hand closing around Shinji's shoulder in an iron grip. "By the Commander's orders, you are hereby under arrest for conspiracy and treason against NERV."

Chapter XII: The Final

"You bastard! You don't know anything about her! You have no right to talk about her! I swear, if you do as much as to say her name once more, I'll kill you!"

"Kill me? You don't seem to be in any position to make death threats. That aside..." He calmly pushed his glasses up his nose. "That is not a very motherly way to talk..."

"You... I'll kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll K-agh... y-y..."

As the body collapsed before him Gendo unconsciously reached for his neck the cuffed hands had only been inches away from, concealing the betraying motion by adjusting his uniform in the last second. He wouldn't admit it, but there had been a moment of shock when she broke free to leap at his desk. Maybe it would have been better to start with the boy...

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

He had always hated these cells.

Of course, cells were not supposed to be liked by its inhabitant, but in this case he doubted they would be legally accepted by any country that held true to the concept of human rights.

Not that NERV ever cared about those.

The only reason why any normal person didn't instantly suffer claustrophobia the moment he was pushed into the small confinement, barely offering any space that wasn't taken by the hard bed and the cold toilet, was the constant darkness. That was probably the worst psychological weapon the place held; taking away the ability to tell the flow of time, leaving you with nothing to do but to think.

Thinking was something Shinji had done a lot since... since he was brought here. Thinking and worrying.

He should have anticipated this. They had thought of every possible way to change what had happened, but they had underestimated one important thing: Gendo Ikari was no fool, and to discount the possibility he'd simply overlook what they were doing had been wishful thinking. They had obviously not been careful enough to prevent his father from discovering some little bit of information.

But why did it have to happen now? They had been so close...

Not knowing what happened with Asuka was the worst for him, though. He hadn't actually expected that they'd be allowed to be together, not even that anyone would answer his questions about her. But the longer he had to endure without any notice from her, the more it was driving him crazy.

For about the hundredth time, he mentally noted to himself to apologize once more for the month he had left her worrying and in doubt.

Just how long had he been there now? For all he knew the JSSDF could already be infiltrating the headquarters, aiming for the holding cells, where they'd be an almost as easy target as he had made out of himself that other time. Or perhaps the ruthless soldiers had already been there and hadn't cared about the cells, which would mean that no one was left to ever let them out.

Shinji kicked the prison wall in frustration. To his surprise, light flooded into the darkness from the door that opened at that very moment, but any ridiculous idea that he had accidentally hit a secret "exit"-button were quickly crushed as the shadowy figures of two NERV agents stepped into view.

"The Commander would like to have a chat with you."

-X-X-X-X-

'The Commander'.

Shinji wondered if he could ever see this man before him as anything else again. The way he sat there at his pretentious desk, staring at his son like just another criminal – the same way he stared at anyone, actually. That he couldn't even show a father's *disappointment* in his insurgent child...

"You may leave us now," the older Ikari told the two agents who had escorted Shinji to the office.

"Are you sure, Sir?" One of them asked. "After...?"

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

"No, Sir!" both quickly replied with a hasty salute.

Shinji smirked wearily as he watched the brutes closing the door behind them. "You seem to feel rather brave today," he allowed himself to comment sarcastically, tugging demonstratively at the over-the-top three-layered handcuffs that still encased his wrists.

With all the frustration he had pent up in the last hours, he didn't bother to pretend anymore. There was no need to anyway; acting like his old meek self, insecure and unknowing, wouldn't do him any good now. His father wouldn't have gone so far as this without a very good suspicion and he wouldn't let it rest until Shinji would confirm it. Now it was just a question of how much his old man actually knew.

The Commander didn't seem to care much about his unusual cheekiness. "I prefer to keep this discussion private," he said calmly. "And I was under the impression that you would like to do so as well. After all, you have been very cautious so far to keep your return to this time a secret. Nonetheless, I had to take precautions."

Shinji's eyes fell on the gun, on the desk near his father, but it didn't trouble him as much as the previous confirmation of his fears.

"The Second," Gendo continued, "reacted rather harshly when she was confronted with my questions, especially when the subject of our discussion turned to the communication the two of you shared during the incident with the 15th Angel. We had to sedate her after she tried to attack me when asked about the matter of this... 'Aki'."

Shinji's fingers dug into his trembling palms. Rarely before he had felt such raging anger as he did in that moment toward his father. The only thing that held him back was the knowledge that the Commander wanted just that: provoke him. If he really had hurt Asuka, he could pay later for that.

"What... what do you want?" Shinji hissed through gritted teeth.

"I'm sure you are aware of that." His father took his time to readjust his glasses before continuing. "I want knowledge... of what will happen."

"What?" It wasn't that Shinji didn't understand. Future knowledge was probably tempting for anyone, even more so for someone with plans as crucial as the Commander's. What he still couldn't believe was the arrogance of the man before him.

However, the older Ikari misunderstood his reluctance. "You don't have to play dense. I know that you have seen it. The conversation with Soryu has already confirmed my theory, but due to her lack of cooperation, I'm still unaware of the details."

Shinji tried to swallow his anger, but he had little success. "What makes you think I would give you more answers than she did? Are you going to torture me? Or hurt her even more in front of me?"

The Commander's next words, however, hit him much more than any of that. "You are..." he spoke

almost pleadingly, "my son..."

Shinji couldn't believe his ears.

"What?" he whispered hoarsely, his trembling arms tugging unconsciously on the cuffs around his wrists. "WHAT?? Those words... those words that I had been longing to hear for so long... and you dare," tears formed in his eyes, but he couldn't tell whether from anger or disappointment, "you DARE to say them now? You've never been a father to me. You've sent me away, only called me back to pilot against my will, forcing me through the worst time of my life. Just in the last few hours, you imprisoned me, indirectly threatened to kill me and worst of all used my missing child to torture the woman I love. And you seriously expect me just to be... a good son... and tell you everything you want to know..."

"It would be the most preferable way," Gendo merely concurred, "but I can also take more drastic measures if necessary."

"I... I hate to be your son. I hate to have you as my father. Because... because I really wish I could hate you with all my heart right now." Shinji managed to stop the flow of tears, but unable to wipe them off, there were still wet streaks on his cheeks as he returned his view from the floor to the man sitting in front of him; a cold, maniacal grin spreading on his face as he did so. "You really want to know? Fine," he snarled calmly. "You will die!"

If that announcement touched the Commander in any way, he didn't let it show. "Hollow threats will not do you any good either."

Shinji's smirk vanished as quickly as it had come as he returned the cold stare of his father with one that easily matched it. "It wasn't a threat! You **will** die! Everyone will die! You're right; I've seen it! I've seen the end of the world! Just because of that selfish plan of yours!"

The silence that followed his outburst was only disturbed by his low panting, echoing in the vast office.

"It will bring you nothing but death," Shinji added whispering, but it was loud enough in the stillness. "Do you really think she would come back to you because of that?"

For a second, he could have sworn he actually saw a reaction in his father's face. Though it had most likely been his imagination, as not a single muscle had moved, he had seen the old, broken man behind that hard mask.

"Go."

Shinji blinked in surprise. The command had been calm, but not in the cold way he was used to from his father. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought it had been the voice of someone else.

"Apparently I have been wrong with my assumption. I have no time for a foolish prank of two kids."

"But..." He couldn't believe his ears. The man who kept them locked up for hours, if not days, who probably even had gone as far as torturing Asuka to get the information he desired, now gave up that easily – after he actually got what he had wanted to hear?

"You can find... the Second Children in room 303 of the infirmary. The guard outside will take your cuffs off. "

"I'm no... I'm not joking!" Shinji fought for words through his confusion. "It's the tru..."

"Go!" the Commander cut him off, with some renewed harshness.

Shinji sighed angrily, but he wouldn't question the decision any more as it was only to his benefit, so he turned and went to the exit without looking back.

Slowly, he realized that while he had answered the man's question truthfully, it had of course **not** been what he had wanted to hear. It wasn't that his father didn't believe him. But the Commander, his father, that old, broken man; all he had wanted to get was a reassurance. Anything that would say that his wish would never come true – such thing he would never *want* to believe.

"Do not ask questions you don't really want to hear the answer to."

-X-X-X-X-

Room 303. Why of all did it have to be this one? It couldn't be that all the other rooms were in use, could it? Was the cranial wing the only one secluded enough that it wouldn't raise too many questions to have her placed here? Destiny must have thought that it would be incredibly funny to remind him of his weakest moment like this.

It was all too similar. Sure, there weren't as many machines to constantly monitor her status and there was no IV to keep her alive through her coma. But seeing her lying on that bed, the slight rhythmic heaving of her form being the only response to his soft calls of her name was enough to make his stomach churn at his helplessness just as it had then.

Another difference were the restrains that had been used to hold her arms to the frame of the bed, but he had quickly undone those, after which she almost instantly rolled onto her side in return, turning her back to him. That only added to the uncomfortable familiarity.

For a while, he had settled for watching her, sitting next to her on the bed, while he held her warm hand, stroking the soft skin with his thumb.

Eventually though, he *carefully* turned her onto her back again. Cupping her face so it wouldn't fall to one side, he slowly leaned into her slightly parted lips and met them with his own, holding them like that for several seconds.

"Kissing the sleeping beauty awake again?" a hoarse voice asked. "Maybe you should have tried **that** last time."

His smile surpassed her weary one. "I somehow doubt it would have worked then."

"It would have been better than a certain other activity."

"I know." He ended that topic quickly with another kiss. "How do you feel?"

"Tired. I'm not sure what they gave me, but it was probably enough to knock out an elephant."

Shinji chuckled at that comparison. "You hardly have the figure of an elephant."

"But I probably scared them like a wild one on a rampage." Her face hardened as the memory fully returned. "That... that bastard! He had no right... not about her..."

"Shh." He caressed her cheek. "It's all right now."

She let herself be calmed, easing into the pillow, looking like she was about to drift back to sleep. But then she blinked as if realizing something. "How... how did you get here anyway? Did you escape somehow? You didn't... you didn't tell him, did you?"

"Yes, I did actually. But not quite what he wanted to hear." He paused for a moment and he noticed the curiosity intensifying in her eyes. He quickly shook his head. "Don't worry about that now. Get some rest. We'll need to be in perfect shape much too soon."

Asuka didn't even try to argue. A small nod, then her barely opened eyelids fell shut again.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Level 1 alert!" Shigeru sneered. "Sometimes I really wonder what they're thinking! First they say the boy was the last Angel and now they say we're not even allowed to leave the base."

"Well, let's hope he WAS the last," Makoto joined into badmouthing the higher-ups. "If they now declare they made a mistake, we better hope the JSSDF has a few N2-bombs to spare."

"Yeah, we have two pilots without EVAs and two EVAs without pilots. With our otherwise limited armory, we're nothing but sitting ducks."

"I don't get this with Shinji and Asuka anyway. They were arrested for conspiracy, but why would they work against us? They're our own pilots."

"Maybe they were brainwashed by some rival faction. It wouldn't be the first time Section 2 let something slip."

"But why didn't they try to get away with the EVAs then, or wreak havoc on purpose to ruin our reputation forever? Or even use them to fight us? We couldn't stop Unit-01 when Shinji disobeyed before, so he at least had all the chance he needed."

"Maybe they wanted to wait until all the Angels were destroyed. No one managed to find a way to destroy them by conventional means after all. But thinking of regular enemies..."

"Don't talk like that," Maya pleaded, shuddering, interrupting their discussion for the first time. "If we don't get disbanded... I hope we won't ever use the Evangelions against humans. I-I'd rather quit then."

An awkward silence fell over the three colleagues and friends. Though they all shared the same moral concerns, Maya was probably the only one of the three to set their importance over her job's, but neither of the two men was willing to voice that.

"Well, there's of course also a lot of talk that Commander Ikari just wanted to get them out of the way now that he wouldn't need them any longer," Makoto eventually shifted the topic.

"Out of the way?" Shigeru asked, raising an eyebrow. "What for?"

Makoto just shrugged, but Maya softly spoke up.

"Do you believe what they say? That Shinji and Asuka are..." Her whispering tone got even quieter, "...from the future?"

"Who's saying that?" Makoto wondered, the disbelief audible in his voice.

The nervous woman bit her lip, just wanting to hide herself behind her mug of coffee. She shouldn't have let that slip, but she was never someone who could stand keeping secrets all to herself. "I-I was there when they recovered the recording that was made, when that boy... during the attack of the last Angel. Sub-Commander Fuyutsuki told me to forget what I've heard, but..." She closed her eyes, almost expecting the wrath for her betrayal any second. "It sounded like they had been together for quite some time. That... that they were married and even had a child. And then got 'sent back' here somehow and lost it because of that."

"Time travel?" Shigeru pondered, sharing a look with Makoto. "Is that even possible?"

"I don't know. But Shinji sounded so upset about the loss of that 'Aki'... I don't think it was just some act," Maya justified. "Apparently they tried to change some things for the better. Maybe the Commander..." she lowered her voice even more, "maybe he doesn't want things to change."

"Change... from what...?"

The three stared at each other questioningly. "Does anyone of *you* know what the Instrumentality Project actually is about...?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The bright light of the full moon fell through the window, but it wasn't the reason Rei woke up.

She could feel it. It was calling her, louder than ever before. The time to fulfill her destiny was close.

She didn't make any sound as she stood up, not bothering to dress herself in more than the shirt she wore, and silently stepped to the door.

Just one more time she wanted to swim, before he would call her. Then, she finally would be free again; free from the pains and worries that haunted her in this world.

Yes, that was the voice she was supposed to listen to. Not the one that frightened her; the one telling her that her whole reason for existence was wrong, that his selfish wishes didn't matter any longer. The one that lately made her question the righteousness in this way for humanity.

If she listened to that voice, she would never be able to –

"Where're you goin'?"

Rei's eyes shot wide open. Her hand didn't even touch the door's handle.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Misato's fingers flew over the keyboard of her laptop, a convenient way to keep them from freezing in the narrow confinement of her hideout in the vast depths of the MAGI's cooling systems. Hacking into the database from these nodes had been much easier than she had thought, but it was hard to tell whether that was because of Kaji's excellent instructions, because NERV didn't expect any potential spy to find this place (or to come this far) or if this place was so unprotected because it had simply been forgotten when the base and the super computers were still under construction.

She hadn't used Kaji's farewell gift to its limits yet. Having two time-travelers at home, she could get many answers directly. But even those two hadn't known everything that was going on deep inside NERV and they were reluctant to let her in on all the crucial tidbits until their possible exposure wouldn't pose a threat anymore.

Apparently, that secrecy had been for naught.

Misato couldn't help but feel guilty for hiding while Shinji and Asuka were arrested. It felt wrong, like she was running away, abandoning them. But she knew she wouldn't be able to help them either if she were to be imprisoned herself. So, until she could be sure that the Commander didn't know about her involvement in the sadly not quite as secret transmission, a tactical retreat had been in order, leaving the Command Center as discretely as possible after the Angel had been taken care off, watching out that no one had tracked her as she entered her hiding place of the last, uncomfortable hours.

A loud sound suddenly pierced the silence, making the Major instinctively jump, which sent the computer on her lap crashing to the floor.

'*Did they find...?*' Her hand was already on her weapon as she realized that the sound was the ringing of her cell phone. She had reactivated it when it became apparent that NERV would have better things to do than pinpointing her to lock her up. If what she had found out held any truth, they couldn't afford to lose their Director of Operations now – though much less their only two active pilots. Who knew what the Commander was thinking these days... '*Giddy, my ass...*'

Pulling the phone out of her jacket, she contemplated her decision once more. The caller ID only indicated that it came from the Command Center. But if they really wanted to find her, they already could have anyway. She pressed the button.

"Katsuragi here... Makoto? ... No, I was... doing some research... Any occurrences?... What? They were? Really? That's great!... Yeah, I'll visit them as soon as possible. Room 303 was it? ... Yes, thanks."

Terminating the connection, Misato let out a sigh of relief. Finally some good news, even if it made her doubt Ikari's decisions more than she had already done. Had he just wanted to scare and intimidate them to show he was still the boss? Not necessarily the best way to motivate your subordinates.

Shaking her head, she speed-dialed another number.

"Rits? It's me. How far are you? ... You are?... He's there? Oh, you read my mind." Glancing at the display of the overturned laptop, she shivered slightly at the sight of the picture of the white creature. "I know I may have had my assumptions, but you really could have told me that Ikari was leading us into a holy war against SEELE."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji had tried to catch some sleep himself while he sat next to Asuka's bed, but the anxiousness about the upcoming day barely let him doze off for more than a few minutes at a time. He had tried to contact Misato as soon as possible to inform her, but no one had seen her for hours. More than ever he cursed himself for not having let her in on the details earlier. If they couldn't warn her in time, they wouldn't be able to make the necessary preparations anymore, just because they had wanted to play it safe.

Asuka woke up after the darkness of the night had long settled in. It wasn't until she was out of the bed and stretching her tired limbs that a familiar purple-haired woman finally came through the door.

"Hey you two, Hyuga said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Misato!" Shinji exclaimed with relief. "Where have you been for so long? I tried to reach you hours ago."

"Sorry. Since the two of you were out of action, I decided to make use of Kaji's farewell present and do some research of my own."

"Never mind! If we don't hurry, then..." he trailed off, feeling the nausea rising inside him as he thought back to the gory details of that day.

"The JSSDF will attack us any time now," Asuka answered for him.

"The JSSDF? Why would they...?" she broke off, quickly figuring it herself. "SEELE..."

"Most likely. I guess they were told that *we* would initiate Third Impact. Otherwise I can't explain how they... they..." Shinji clenched his eyes shut to suppress the urge to empty his stomach as the memories that he usually tried to bury as deep as possible surfaced again. "It wasn't just an attack, it was a massacre! I hadn't been all there at the time, that helps not to think about it. But I still heard most of it, and that alone was enough to give me nightmares up to this day. The gunfire, the screams. They didn't care if people were armed or not. Sometimes it even smelled of burned flesh."

Misato shuddered visibly. "I found out myself that SEELE wants to use the EVA Series to initiate the Impact themselves. But I only expected them to send those against us. I knew they had some high ranking officers on their pay list, but that their influence goes far enough to manipulate the JSSDF into such a drastic, unquestioned attack..." she sighed, rubbing her temples. "I guess I need some sleep. At

least Ikari must have some expectations of his own already, at least that would explain the curfew."

"Curfew?" Shinji wondered, surprised.

"Yeah, didn't he do that last time?"

He shook his head. "As I said, I was pretty much out of it. Shit, and I wanted..." He quickly ceased his mumbling as he noticed that he was about to give himself away, but too late for the two women who looked at him expectantly. "N-never mind..."

Asuka kept her suspicious glare awhile longer than Misato, obviously not happy about a possible change in plans that she didn't know of, but eventually she turned her attention to the Major. "We also need to get Rei under surveillance so she won't get to the giant down there."

"Rei?"

Shinji nodded. "She was the center of the actual Third Impact, after she somehow fused with that Lilith."

"Similar to what happened to EVA-00?" Misato figured.

"Well... in a way. She seemed more conscious of what she was doing than with the EVA. And... *much* more powerful. And she chose me of all people to decide how to handle those powers. Because of the state of my mind at that time... I just wanted to die... and take the world that had brought me so much pain with me."

Misato's eyes widened in shock. "You? You were the reason for...?"

Again he nodded solemnly. "I was still ridden with guilt for having killed Kaworu, I was scared of Rei for what I had recently found out about her, Asuka was in a coma. And I did something to her that made me feel even more miserable, at least at that time."

"It's still gross," Asuka interjected growling, before a slight smirk appeared on her face, "But at least you're waiting till I'm awake now."

Shinji laughed weakly, but it quickly faltered. "Soon after that, the attack began. During that... you... you were shot as you tried to drag me to my EVA. You tried to make it look like it wasn't that bad, but after you were out of sight, I knew..." he raised his hand to his chest,

"I knew that you died. Just because I had been too messed up to go the cages by myself."

By now he had to force himself to look at her, trying not to be overwhelmed by the upcoming pictures of the past. That sad smile when the elevator's doors closed... "As-Asuka had meanwhile woken up from her coma and was fighting, but again I... I just sulked. EVA-01 had been frozen in bakelite and that sight alone had been enough to make me give up. By the time I finally got out there to help her, there... there was nothing left of Unit-02 except a mutilated corpse."

Misato's shocked eyes wandered over to Asuka's distant-looking face at his words. Shinji could tell that it must feel sickening to hear about her own death, but at least, unlike the redhead, she couldn't remember it.

"You see, I was not in a very objective state of mind to judge mankind's fate at that time," he continued. "But I finally realized my mistake. I realized that in a world without pain, no other emotions were able to exist either. If I ever wanted to feel real happiness, I had to return to reality, even if that also meant to endure pain, sadness and loneliness again, just as long as they would be real. So I ended it and with that gave everyone else the chance to return as well. But for some reason, as you already know, only Asuka chose to."

"As you can see," he took a breath, "aside from SEELE, we also need to stop Rei from fusing with

Lilith. We have no idea if she would this time grant my father's wishes or do something on her own. Even if she would choose me again, we can't be sure that everything will be fine if I ask her to stop everything and return to normal."

The Major nodded, but her face looked anything but reassured. "There's just one problem: We don't know where Rei is. We already tried to get her here when the curfew was imposed, but she wasn't home anymore and left her phone behind."

Shinji's shocked expression met Asuka's. Was it too late already?

"Why don't we just destroy Lilith then?" Asuka proposed aggressively. "We have to get rid of that thing eventually anyway and during the attack..."

"We'll need anything we have," the tactician finished for her, dismissing the idea with a shake of her head. "And if it is as important to the Commander as I think it is, I doubt the JSSDF would create enough of the diversion we'd need to get the necessary means to destroy it past him without him noticing."

The redhead shrugged. "Alright, alright! But let's get going!" Asuka urged them on and headed for the door. "If we can't do anything about it now, we'll have to handle it when we can. I don't want to still be sitting here when our 'guests' arrive."

"Don't you want to change beforehand?" Misato asked her, pointing at the hospital gown she was still wearing.

"Not much point in it. I'll change right into my plugsuit in the locker room."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Do you really think she would come back to you because of that?"

Why wouldn't the boy's words leave his mind? Was it the punishment for wasting precious time and effort?

What had he been thinking? He didn't have time for such foolishness. The old men would make their move soon, and he had to make his before. The chances that neither of them would succeed were almost nonexistent. He couldn't afford to lose his head start by interrogating rebellious, lying teenagers. Whether they made that story up for their enjoyment, directly to spite him or if it was true madness on their part; soon enough, it wouldn't matter anymore. However, the longer they'll hold off SEELE, the better for him.

It was as though even the implant in his palm knew that the promised day had arrived.

Ironically, so did Keel. "The promised time has come!" his voice boomed, undistorted, but still hiding behind his monolithic hologram. "With the Lance of Longinus lost, complementation using Lilith is impossible. Our only hope is to proceed with Lilith's only true offspring, EVA-01."

Gendo had expected this move, but tensed at the words anyway, even though he was professional enough not to let it show. Sacrificing her for the old men's sake was definitely not acceptable. "This differs from SEELE's original scenario."

"Humans have reached their pinnacle to create the Evangelion," Fuyutsuki protested in his own way. It had almost been a surprise to find the professor to his side. As of late, he had seemingly become more distant.

"Humans must evolve into a new world. That is what the EVA series was created for," Gendo reminded everyone, still maintaining his act of being only true to the plans made long ago.

"We have no intention of giving up our human form to use the EVA as our Ark," one of them naturally showed his true face behind his holographic mask and others agreed.

"It's merely a part of the process to rebirth those who are imprisoned."

"The fate of destruction is also the joy of rebirth."

"A sacrament of death to unite God, humans and all other life forms."

Hypocrites. That was all they were. Talking about bringing the greater good for all mankind. But that was not how humans were.

Gendo had enough of them. "Death creates nothing." he spoke defiantly.

"Then we will bring you death!" Keel's voice announced before the monoliths faded into thin air.

"It will bring you nothing but death." He frowned as his son's words echoed in the back of his mind. *'Not if I can forestall it.'*

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji took a deep breath, fidgeting with the object in his pocket as he stood in front of the door. He wasn't as nervous as most other men in his situation, at least not for the same reasons. He wasn't afraid of rejection. But he knew what she could be like when someone made her worry – and he had little doubt that he had. She would love it; that much he was sure of. But it didn't save him from the slap he had already expected when he eventually entered the locker room.

"I'll be right after you', my ass! You were gone for **three** hours!"

"Sorry, I just had to get out to..."

"OUT? Where the hell have you been?!" Asuka yelled at him. As she had announced, she was already clad in her plugsuit, ready to sortie any time. "How did you get out with the curfew on anyway?"

"Just like we got in during the blackout. We should tell Misato to guard the ventilation shafts better."

"You idiot! What if they *had*? You could have been shot before anyone noticed it was you crawling around!"

"Yeah, I know. The guards at the entrance were quite fidgety despite knowing me when I got back," Shinji shrugged. "But I needed to get something from home before the fight."

"What were you thinking?!" Asuka continued unfazed. "You know they could be here any time now! What if they had caught you? You were risking your life for some stupid thing? You... you could be..."

"Relax," Shinji cut her off, placing his hands on her shoulders. "My mind might not have been working its best at that time to remember every detail, but I'm quite sure it wasn't at night when they attacked."

"That doesn't mean they're not around already! They could have..." Again she was interrupted, this time by his finger on her lips.

"Even if they could have, they didn't," Shinji attempted to calm her, though trying to suppress the involuntary shiver that ran down his spine, as he really hadn't thought of that possibility. But now wasn't the time for guilt. Carefully, he nudged her towards the bench running between the lockers.

"Wh-why don't you sit down?"

She complied, though looking rather puzzled at the request, even more so when he knelt down in front of her, reaching into the left pocket of his trousers.

"As for the 'stupid thing'... well it might be, but..." He smiled, hearing her surprised gasp as he

produced the velvet box. "I wanted to do this before we go out there."

"But... Shinji, we already..."

"I know we are, at least in mind. And... and it was the best time in my life. But after all that happened, it felt right to me if we would renew that bond, also to the law and our friends." Looking up, he saw her biting her quivering lower lip as he opened the box to reveal the golden ring. "Asuka? Do you want to marry me again?"

"Baka!" she cursed quietly, averting her eyes from him. That was not quite the reaction he had hoped for. "Don't you know that something like this brings bad luck before a fight? You know... like saying that it'll be your last job before retiring."

"Asuka...?" he asked bewilderedly, hardly able to believe that she was about to refuse because of such a superstition.

He wasn't disappointed as she turned back to him with watery eyes and a wide smile. "You can be glad that I don't believe in luck," she announced eagerly before leaning down, cupping his face in her hands to give him a tender kiss, first on his lips then another one on his nose and finally his forehead.. "Of course I do, Baka," she whispered with a voice quivering with joy.

Pressing the button at the wristband of her plugsuit, she loosened the tight outfit around her upper body, pulling it down enough to peel her arm out. She let him hold her hand while he removed the ring from the box with his free one. Their eyes remained locked at each other as he slipped it on her finger.

As her gaze eventually wandered to the golden band with the small red stone embedded in it, Shinji could see in her eyes that she finally noticed.

"Shinji... is that...?"

He nodded. "It sure did cost me more than last time, but in return it's whole and your size." Smiling at her bafflement he stood up, kissing her forehead while her gaze was still fixed on her hand. "Well, I better go now and get ready myself."

He turned to leave, but only managed a few steps.

"Shinji...?"

Stopped by her quiet call, he looked back to hear what she had on her mind. She let him wait though. Her eyes downcast, she was apparently contemplating whether or not she really wanted to say what was on her mind.

"Would... would you stay here for the night... with me?" She didn't leave much doubt to the deeper meaning of her request, exposing her chest a little more than it already was.

Shinji swallowed hard as he slowly walked back to her. Technically, it was hardly their first time, but it had been so long that it almost felt like it.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he sat down next to her, pulling her into a light embrace. "Don't we need to be in shape for tomorrow?"

"Baka," she whispered, smiling, her arms loosely going around his neck. "I'm not asking for a wild night of passionate sex. We don't even have to go all the way until the literal climax. I... I just want to make love for a while, okay?"

"Okay," he answered with a kiss. "Though a bench in a changing room wasn't quite what I had in mind for our 'new first time'. Aren't you afraid of those 'old perverts' with their security cameras?"

She joined into his chuckling. "Let them watch. They'll probably die from an enormous nosebleed

anyway if they do."

Their lips met again, the kiss quickly growing in passion as their hands roamed each other's body in their tight embrace; his shirt falling to the floor while her suit was slipped down inch by inch.

"Just remember," Asuka breathed between her panting, breaking the kiss shortly. "At least... at least in body, I'm..."

"Yeah, I know," Shinji reassured her. "I'll be careful this time."

No more words were spoken for the next hours between the lovers as they became one for the first time – once again.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It hadn't been the best time to take a break, but Fuyutsuki wasn't the youngest anymore and the seemingly endless waiting for SEELE's first strike had taken its toll on him. But of course, the kettle boils just when you're not watching.

He hurried back to the Command Center as fast as he could when the alarms sounded. If his informant had been right they would use a subtle approach at first, trying to hack the MAGI and without a doubt wanting to use them to gain control of the facility. Though somehow he doubted that it would happen completely without bloodshed even in that case. And the result would be even worse.

If they'd somehow managed to hold up against this initial attack, it wouldn't take long until SEELE would attempt to take the headquarters with all the force they could come up with. Either way, it wasn't looking good for NERV. One way or another, this day would surely be the one to end it all.

As he hurried through the corridors, he noticed many agitated personnel, but he was surprised to see one figure, clad in its black uniform, nearing him.

"Ikari, the alarms," he reminded the younger man. "Aren't you coming?"

"No," Gendo spoke clearly as he walked past him. "Fuyutsuki... Take care of the stones the old men are going to throw at us."

"Already?" the elder asked spitefully enough to startle the Commander. Though Ikari didn't show it except to halt and stare back at him.

"I will forestall them. And I will not take any chances," he merely announced before resuming his way.

Kozo knew he should stop him. This scenario of his, it went against their old plans, against her wish. No one, probably not even Ikari himself, could tell if its outcome would be any better than the one that SEELE desired.

He knew he should stop him. But... he could understand him, too. Because he as well, missed her.

"Ikari," he gravely called after his superior. "Greet Yui from me."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Misato hated this. All she could do was stare at the diagrams and listen to all the technical details that she could hardly grasp. She preferred to have the enemy in sight. It reminded her all too much of the 11th Angel, only worse. This time it were their own MAGI systems from around the world trying to hack into their original.

And if that hadn't been bad enough, every communication going outside was blocked, even satellite

connections were jammed. So even if they wanted to, they couldn't even surrender, let alone explain themselves and call for help.

Ritsuko had assured her that their plan was not threatened by this, but all Misato could do was to hope the doctor was right. After all, her friend had already explained that they couldn't use this remaining means of communication to send a message, as it was bound to that one terminal and no human would be there to receive it.

Glancing down to the lower levels of the Command Center, she saw the raised housing of MAGI-Caspar where Ritsuko was busy working on something for those now hostile computers to chew on for a good while.

Long enough for the JSSDF to open the gates of hell for NERV.

Even if she hadn't heard about it already, she'd have come to this conclusion easily. Not handing anything over after the A-801 order demanded was equal to open rebellion after all and would be met with severe punishment – especially given their potential threat. But just letting SEELE have their way was out of the question.

"Hacking against MAGI has been stopped," Maya announced, accompanying the change of display, which now showed overlapping meshes of hexagons indicating the successful activation of a 666-type firewall "A Danang Type-B defense screen has been deployed. External access is impossible for the next 62 hours."

"Is it over then?" Misato heard one of the operators ask naively.

"No. They won't give up this easily," she muttered sadly. "It's just about to begin..."

Closing her eyes, she tried to clear her head for the upcoming task. This wouldn't be a fight against an unknown enemy. It wouldn't be against huge monsters with tremendous powers. This would be against other humans. An enemy who will easily outnumber them. An enemy who knew their strengths and more importantly, their weaknesses. An enemy they were never prepared to face. This would be their hardest fight yet.

'With the Angels gone, it might be all over after this. Maybe I can finally put you to rest then...' Her view went down to where her hand was clutching the cross around her neck. *'Father...'*

-x-

Down below, within the depths of MAGI-Caspar, Ritsuko granted herself a small, victorious sigh as she put the keyboard aside. Now that this was done, she had to get back as fast as possible. Without doubt, SEELE would bring the heavy artillery soon and if she wanted to avoid running through embattled areas, she'd better hurry.

'That'll probably be my last affront against him. I know he would have deserved worse, but I'm sure it will hurt him more than death. Don't you agree...' her hand caressed the steel that housed Casper's cybernetic "brain", *'Mother...?'*

-x-x-x-x-

Toshiki Asakura had always prided himself as being a "hardliner". The time of chaos after the Second Impact hadn't allowed any weaknesses. The nation had been in need of strong men like him to guide it, to rebuild it to its former glory. And his course had eventually granted him the position of Prime Minister.

But learning of NERV's treason, a para-military organization fitted with the most powerful weapons on earth was certainly... unsettling, even to him. To think he once had been proud to have their main base

on Japanese soil. But then again, he had never really trusted that Ikari.

He hadn't realized how much the tension was affecting him until he flinched when the door to his vast office suddenly flew open. He wanted to bark an angry reminder to knock, but then he recognized the person entering in such rude manner, followed by his visibly stressed secretary.

"Sir, I'm terribly sorry, but he didn't..." she babbled, but was cut off by the unshaven newcomer.

"Excuse my sudden entrance, Sir, but this is very urgent. If you want to, I'll repeat my security clearance, but it already took too long the first 34 times to get here."

Toshiki nodded thoughtfully. "Please excuse us, Ms. Yamashita," he told his secretary who followed his order to leave after a formal bow.

"I remember you, Mr. Kaji," he addressed the newcomer as soon as the thick doors shut. "You are one of the agents working for the Intelligence Office. Appointed to infiltrate NERV to keep an eye on their intentions, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, but I'm afraid there is not much time for formalities. Prime Minister Asakura, I have received several data in the last few months that is indicating that there is at least one high-ranking traitor in the military. General Kato is apparently influenced by a powerful secret organization named SEELE. And as I've heard, he recently took command over an unsettling operation against NERV."

"Hmm, if what you say is true, then it might be unsettling indeed. But back to your personal data, it came to my notice that you were... dead," he spoke calmly as he drew his hidden gun from under the table and aimed it at the spy without any hesitation, "and I really hate to have all that paperwork going to waste."

However, the pony-tailed man didn't seem to be fazed by this turn of events at all. In fact, he was grinning. "Did you think I wouldn't know of the highest-ranking traitor against the Japanese nation as well?"

"That might be a matter of the point of view." Toshiki smirked. "But either way you must be very courageous or just a fool to confront me with this so directly."

"Cancel the attack on NERV," Kaji demanded calmly.

Not believing his ears, Toshiki waved the gun. "I think you're not quite aware of the situation you're in. If you think I would hesitate because of my reputation you're making a fatal mistake. My staff here is very discrete. It wouldn't be the first time this office had to be cleaned up."

"I think *you* are not quite aware of your situation," Kaji said, chuckling softly. "I've naturally taken some precautions to make it out of here in very good health. If I don't check back, a lot of unpleasant documents will be released to the public. About Second Impact, SEELE, their intentions and of course their little pawns like you."

Toshiki frowned. This guy couldn't seriously come here with such a weak story and expect him to just accept it, could he? "There is no national or international police, news agency or government that would make use of anything you might have ready to be sent to them. SEELE will intercept it before it will be made public."

"SEELE might be in control of all or at least a lot of important positions to reroute the truth from the people. So of course I took action to take it directly to them." His smirk widened. "The Internet is a fabulous thing, wouldn't you agree?"

"The Internet?" the Prime Minister suddenly burst out laughing. "The Internet is a farce! Conspiracy theories are popping up there all the time. Their followers however are too small to be a threat. No one

will take it seriously."

"Oh, I think that depends on the scale. In two hours, a worm that is already implanted in the servers of every major news publication will activate, replacing the regular content with my 'special report'. And even if you could take the servers down in time, which would get a lot of attention and suspicions on its own, it will only stale things a bit. As worms usually do, it will spread over the entire net, always reminding the people of your schemes."

"So-called proofs can easily be denounced," Toshiaki spat, a bit too angrily, as he noticed himself. He couldn't show any weakness in front of this much too smugly grinning bastard.

"Oh, I can't wait to hear the story you're going to throw at the masses to cover this up. A meteor probably won't do this time, I guess. But no matter what it is, the people will remember this event and there will always be loud voices questioning your honesty."

Noticing that his hand holding the gun was shaking too much, he put it reluctantly on the desk. He hated to admit it, but for now he was in this guy's hands. He would have to make sure that he'd get his revenge later on. "W-what do you want?"

"Cancel the attack on NERV," Kaji spoke, now serious.

Toshiaki couldn't believe his ears. "You... you fool! Do you honestly want NERV to initiate the Third Impact?!"

The spy's features hardened. "You are the fool if you honestly believe that SEELE wants to prevent it! Just because they funded your career doesn't mean they're always right!"

"They... they wouldn't!" Toshiaki paled. They wouldn't. They were the good ones. Taking some drastic and unpopular measures that forced them to act in secret, but always working for the right goals. Why would they have helped him reach his position if not for Japan's greater good...?

He slumped back in his chair as he made the uncomfortable connections. "It's too late," he merely muttered. "It has already begun. And they have strict orders not to communicate with us once the signal is given."

"So whatever happens there won't be tracked back to you and can be dismissed as the gruesome solo act of a few traitorous soldiers if it doesn't quite go as planned," Kaji spat scornfully. "Then get the remaining troops to Tokyo-3 as fast as possible! If we can't tell them by radio, we have to tell them face to face – or gun to gun if we must!"

-x-x-x-x-

Arms crossed in front of her, Misato's fingers of her right hand tapped nervously against her left elbow. "How's the evacuation of non-combat personnel coming along?"

"About half of them have reached the inner shelters."

Not fast enough. "Not fast enough," she repeated out loud. "We could be attacked any..."

The first explosions cut her off just that moment.

"Radar sites 8 to 17 have gone dead!" someone yelled, as one monitor after another showed nothing but noise.

"JSSDF tech battalion breaching through Gora defense perimeter!"

"Two battalions approaching from Gotemba!"

Misato's fists clenched as more and more reports of casualties and lost ground came in, her mind racing

to analyze the situation. If only Shinji had been able to remember anything of tactical importance. The enemy forces were already invading, but why would they...?

'Wait! They're surely moving to take out their biggest threat first, but they have nothing against the EVAs. But they could take out the EVA's weak point...'

"The forces attacking the west side are a decoy!" she yelled out her realization. "If their real target are the EVAs, they'll be going after the pilots! Where are Shinji and Asuka?"

"They're already at the cages and signaling that they're ready to move out," Makoto told her.

"Good. At least one piece of news that isn't devastating," Misato sighed with relief. "Deploy the Evangelions directly to the surface as soon as they're ready. What about Rei?"

"Whereabouts unknown," Shigeru reported. "We're still unable to confirm her location."

Misato gritted her teeth. That she couldn't be found either meant that she was with the Commander and about to initiate Third Impact or that she was already dead. And a sickening part of her almost wished for the latter. But that the Commander wasn't here, now of all times, lessened the chances of that by a great deal.

However, she had other things to worry about now. The invading forces were still seeping into the halls of the headquarters so much faster than she had anticipated, breaching through any kind of blockade NERV could come up with as if it wasn't even there.

Shinji had told her that they'd kill everyone in their way, but maybe she had underestimated their brutal efficiency. She had been thinking of upping the manpower to intercept the expected attack force, though now it was obvious that she'd just have sent them to certain death.

No, this wasn't a fight they could win face to face.

She had to think! What would she have done before? What could she do to make it even more effective? She heaved a frustrated sigh before she braced herself and opened the comm. "Everyone retreat into the central complex! Block your path behind you as much as you can, but don't try to hold them off by yourself. If you can't make it in the next minute..." Her voice dropped. These were the decisions she always hated about being in command; decisions that reduced a human life to a mere number in a cruel cost-benefits analysis. "Hide and pray they won't find you."

There was much doubt that anyone would be able to survive if it came to that. Those who, just like the invading forces, were still in the outer levels hardly had a chance to make it in time. But they didn't have much choice.

"In 50 seconds, fill Levels 2 to 4 entirely with bakelite," Misato ordered calmly. "Open every gate, every door to flood every passage and every room. We should get quite a number with that, and at the very least hold them off for a while. If we're lucky it'll be long enough."

"Long enough... for what?"

Misato wished she had an answer for that question.

-x-x-x-x-

The tanks instantly turned their cannon barrels at the two giants, wasting their munitions against the impenetrable AT-Fields. VTOLs roared around the titans' heads like huge, annoying bugs; the pilots apparently taken by surprise by the obstacles that had suddenly been catapulted into their flight-path, as one evaded too late, crashing against EVA-01's orange defense shield.

Shinji's comm-window appeared on her left, showing his downcast face. "Asuka..."

"It's all right," the redhead said gently, knowing all too well that he wouldn't kill humans unless there was really no other way. It wasn't like the thought of taking lives was a pleasant one to her either, but she could more easily convince her conscience that it was a necessary act of self-defense than he could. "I'll handle them. These guys aren't the real problem after all. Just take care of my cable, okay?"

He smiled weakly as he nodded. "Of course."

Asuka smirked back at him, before closing her eyes; taking a deep breath. Then she charged.

-x-

General Kato didn't like at all what he saw through his binoculars, a few miles away from the battle zone; though given the size of their enemies, they could have just as well have been standing right next to them. The red monster took out their VTOLs like swatting flies, smashing their tanks like squashing bugs under the giant heels and worst of all, not taking any visible damage itself as even heavy bombardments with multiple warheads were stopped short by that damned forcefield before they could even get near.

There had been a single moment of hope as one missile found its target, impacting directly against the beast's ugly head, but that hadn't even scratched the surface. Either that shield could constantly change its perimeter or the armor was thicker than they had been told. To see the puny progress they had made so far in their advancement; such an amount of power, money and not to mention human lives wasted against that apparently impenetrable red wall was devastating.

But he wouldn't be worthy of his rank if such a setback would already be enough for him to lose all hope of victory. It would have been preferable to "secure" the Evangelions and their pilots before they could enter the fight, but it wasn't like they hadn't been prepared at all for this situation.

"The cable!" he barked the command over to his comm-officer. "Concentrate all fire on that power cable!"

"It's no use, Sir! Purple's guarding it!"

"WHAT?!" Instantly, he spun around to focus his view on the second behemoth that hadn't seemed to have engaged in combat yet, and indeed, it kept close to the red one's cable, impressively ducking and jumping to evade it without letting Red's pilot having to worry about her partner accidentally restricting her movements. Whenever one of his forces started to fire at the power supply, those orange hexagons would appear, obviously being emitted by the purple unit.

And Purple itself had no cable as a weak point.

Kato grunted in frustration. "I guess that's it for us then..."

One of his officers looked at him, waiting for clarification. "Retreat, Sir?"

The General closed his eyes in thought. He still had a N2 mine at his disposal, but that was valuable and he had seen Angels withstanding even more than one of them. Who could guarantee him that it would be enough to dispose of two of the beasts that had proved to surpass the others? And he had planned to breach the Geofront with it.

"Yes," he finally confirmed grimacing. No matter how futile a fight was, it was always a stab at his honor to give it up, even if only for tactical reasons. "Give the signal and ask for the big boys. Let the monsters kill each other."

-x-

"I'm picking up eight, no, nine transport aircrafts!" Aoba reported. "Releasing... releasing EVAs?"

"The EVA series," Misato muttered, not nearly as surprised, though she was anything but gladdened by the news. "Took them longer than expected."

"N-nine?" Maya gasped. "Against two?"

"Well, I'll see about the odds," Misato mumbled to herself, working on her cell phone. It had to ring only once. "Ritsuko? Are you ready down there?"

"Already on the way," came the blonde's short reply through the speaker.

The Major grinned. "Good girl," she praised, before ending the short call and putting the phone away again.

Hyuga, like most of the others, hadn't even noticed the exchange. "Seriously, nine to two. They're overdoing... WAIT! There's yet another signal, quickly coming closer!"

"Don't worry about that one," Misato now announced loudly. "That's one of ours!"

-x-

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I could be," she answered warily smiling, not taking her eyes off the small white spots that could just as well have been birds from this distance. "Which isn't much."

Watching them so high above, she wondered if they shouldn't have asked for a long range weapon and try to snipe one or two of them as long as they were in the air. But she knew better than anyone that they'd take more than one shot to go down, no matter how precise.

Her heart beat wildly, but it was hard to tell whether it was from the strain of the previous fight or the thought of the upcoming one. Most likely both. Taking a deep breath, she flexed her hands to ease the tingling feeling in them that was transmitted from her EVA's. Most likely a result from being hastily reattached after being cut off by the last Angel. Better than fighting with nothing but stubs, though hardly calming when the possibly hardest fight of her life was ahead of her.

Back to back, the two Units waited for the white beasts to end their descent as they were circled by them. Shortly before the nine EVAs landed crashing on the ground, Shinji and Asuka both stormed forward, towards the ones closest to them, tackling their foes before they could steady themselves, let alone be ready to fight.

At least that was the plan.

Not even a second after she had wrestled her target down, she felt its feet kicking into her own EVA's back, toppling her instantly over. She used the momentum to roll away before she would be an immobile target for the others, turning back while rising up again.

The Unit she had sent to the ground was already up on its feet as well, being awfully close already so that she barely had time to evade the blow of the sword that it still wielded. Much to Asuka's surprise, the retaliating kick was just as elegantly dodged by the grinning MP-EVA, as well as the following attempt to grip its arm to haul it over, letting her run past it.

Noticing from the corner of her eye that two other Units were closing in on her and another one nearing her cable, she decided she'd better retreat. Shinji must have had experienced similar problems because they met where they started, back to back, facing the leering monstrosities.

"Something isn't right here! They shouldn't be so strong!" Asuka shouted as she drew her prog knife from the shoulder holster, a move that was copied by Shinji.

"But I thought they've... well..." his voice became so quiet that it was barely audible between his

breaths, "beaten you..."

She quickly shook that thought off. "But only because they regenerated. And because of the..." A gasp stuck in her throat as she noticed with a flicker of her eyes that the two that had fought with Unit-01 had already transformed their swords, "Lances... They weren't nearly as good fighters then. Unless..."

Her sudden realization produced an icy feeling deep in her guts. It wasn't just death they had brought her, it had been a total destruction. And for that she felt a cold rage rising in her, even far beyond the hate she had felt then. "They just toyed with me..."

"What?"

"My energy was running out sooner or later without the cable," she continued in a low voice. "They knew I couldn't beat them. So they just waited; having a little fun with me while they did. They just wanted to fuel my pride so they could shatter it again. They played with me like a cat with a mouse before breaking its neck."

"Asuka..." Shinji gaped unbelievably. "A-are you sure they can even be malicious? They would have risked..."

"I don't care why they did it!" she silenced him with a yell full of anger. "But I'm going to make them pay!"

She stormed forward with that, not heeding Shinji's calls to wait, to stay calm and think it through, make a plan. But even though these white beasts before her were already ganging up to welcome her, even though they had taken her by surprise for the second time already, she wouldn't back down. She would destroy them, rip them apart until she made sure they'd never stand up again.

But then she came to a screeching stop. A huge shadow leaped seemingly out of nowhere onto the battlefield, crashing down on one of the surprised MP-EVAs, jumping back off, before the others could react.

"W-what is that?" Asuka wondered gasping.

Shinji however easily recognized the bulky gray and red form, but his surprise wasn't any less. "The Jet Alone?"

"Hey there!" A self-assured voice came through the comm. "I've heard you could use some help!"

"Toji?" Shinji asked, perplexed at hearing his friend.

"Yep, it's me."

Asuka found it even harder to believe. "**You** are piloting that thing?"

"Well, yes..."

-x-

"...and no. I think 'controlling' is the better word," Toji said from his seat, down in one of the chambers deep within the headquarters, as he glanced over to Ritsuko. "But I guess the doc can explain it better."

The blonde grimaced at the nickname, but decided that it was not the time for arguments. "As you might remember Shinji, the JA was supposed to work unmanned, receiving its commands from several controllers via radio signals. I just replaced that simplistic setup with a more effective intuitive control that is more similar to the EVA's."

Indeed, Toji's pilot seat was an old model from entry-plug prototypes; he even donned an interface headset. But that, just as the controls, sported wires to a nearby MAGI terminal to let the super

computers handle the conversion of the signals sent to the robot.

"But..." Shinji began, noticeably nervous because, as the displays showed, the enemy EVAs were closing in again after the moment of surprise faded. "How did you get it? Wasn't it confiscated by the government after the incident? If at all, I would have expected it to be on the other site."

"You had your secrets, I had mine," Misato chimed in over the open channel, allowing herself a little moment of triumph within this chaos. "But let's say we have a common friend who presented us this little gift."

"We did our first test-run when the ban of access was declared," Ritsuko explained. "Perfect timing as otherwise, we'd never have gotten Toji here in time."

"He never handled it before?" Asuka's shrill voice protested over the comm, instinctively dodging a blow from behind.

"Oh don't worry, Soryu!" Toji barked teasingly back. "I've done some simulations already. And I think I hold up well enough!"

"Whatever," Asuka acknowledged grinning after throwing her attacker over her shoulder. "Just don't get in our way!"

"Me in yours?" the boy laughed in reply, jerking at the controls to let the long arms spin around the robot, hitting two Units at once. "I bet I get more down than you!"

Ritsuko cleared her throat to remind the teenagers of the seriousness of the situation. After all, this was a fight that might decide the life and demise of the entire human race, not a friendly competition.

"Remember, the Jet Alone has neither an AT-Field nor can it erode one, so you will have to take care of that," she addressed the EVA pilots. "But on the other hand, it also nullifies the advantage of the lances."

"Also keep in mind that it runs on atomic energy," Misato took over again, grimacing slightly at the memory, when she had tried in vain to stop the colossus. "A nuclear explosion isn't as bad as a Third Impact, but I'd still prefer to avoid it if possible."

"Understood," Shinji complied.

"Then let's show them that numbers don't matter much to us!" Toji announced.

"Don't have to tell me," Asuka chimed in. "I've seen the results of your last test in Math."

Ritsuko shook her head. Kids...

-x-

"Status report!"

"Shinjo Squad here!" Akita answered into the radio. "Level 2 finally secured, over!"

"What took you so long?" blared the arrogant voice in return.

The soldier was even more pissed off at that. "That bakelite was everywhere! We couldn't find a way around it, so we had to cut through!" He took a breath, deciding whether or not to voice his anger at a superior officer. "And that would have been much faster if we'd had our promised reinforcements!"

"We couldn't get them past Purple and Red."

Akita sighed. "Might not matter anyway. We haven't encountered much resistance since they blocked the first levels!"

"That shouldn't be too surprising; most of them lack a military training. They probably threw all they

had at us first before they went hiding."

"No sir, I meant we haven't encountered many people at all." He paused, looking around for the rest of his squad. "Do you think it's a trap?"

-x-

Gendo Ikari was not a man to smile openly in mere anticipation, but he certainly felt elated as he walked through the dark halls of the Terminal Dogma, the quickening beat of his heart undeniable as he neared his goal. It was so close now, the years of work finally coming to fruition. Once he had picked up Rei, it was only a matter of minutes that he'd finally see her again.

The last door slipped open.

"I knew I would find..." he trailed off as he realized his mistake. The chamber was empty, only the remains of the clones were floating in the still illuminated LCL-tank.

He had been sure that she would come here, to the place of her birth one more time. Maybe he was too early and she was still preparing herself to leave her form, neutralizing her own AT-Field. But wouldn't he have noticed her on his way here then?

He turned around, speeding up his steps as he started to search the secured area. The pounding of his heart was still there, but it was no longer caused by elation. Uncertainty and dread were now fueling him.

She had to be here! It was her purpose, her destiny! Every fiber of her being would be drawing her here by now. That she couldn't be found by NERV's intelligence had to mean that she was down in the Terminal Dogma! She had to be here somewhere!

But wherever he searched, the basins, her birthing room, the graveyard, the old labs; she was nowhere to be found.

A thought too horrible to be true was haunting him all the while: '*Had the boy been right?*' What if SEELE had gotten their hands on her long before they started their attack? Even if there had been spares left, he wouldn't have any time to resurrect her. But even though his Intelligence had orders not to bother him with trivial matters, he surely would know if something had happened to her – or to the agents watching for her safety. On the other hand, they had proven to lose sight of the pilots before. Could he have more traitors in his ranks than he knew?

Whatever it was that had hindered Rei to come to him, there was nothing he could do anymore to get her here. And without her, everything was slipping from his grasp, all he had worked for, so close that he almost could have touched it already.

It just couldn't be...

He was panting from his search as he already reached the giant hall that had been supposed to be the place of rebirth for the second time. But as before, there was no one but him and the white crucified being hanging limply on its cross in the lake of LCL.

No sign of Rei...

He dropped to his knees, physically tired, but much more so emotionally drained. So close...

As he looked up at the giant's face, the seven eyes on its mask stared back at him. They seemed to burn into his soul, mocking him for his foolishness. Lilith might have been imprisoned, helpless to their probing, to their tests, to their experiments to gain her power. But now it was like she laughed at him for thinking he could achieve it. Never before had he realized how futile it had been, how inferior he was, even with all of mankind's science behind him, against this god.

There was an itch in his right palm, a desire stirring inside him to go through with it on his own, to initiate the connection without the intermediary, but Gendo knew better than to listen to Adam's lures. He would stand no chance of controlling it.

In that moment he knew that all he had hoped and worked for, all that had kept him going for these many years, all he had sacrificed his humanity for, had been for nothing.

Because the one that always had been the most reliable piece in his game had betrayed his hopes.

He had lost after all. Their defenses would be overrun eventually. Nothing could stop the JSSDF from entering the most sacred realms of the headquarters forever.

But as his hand got hold of the cold steel in his pocket, he realized that there might be one other way left to see Yui again.

And while hundreds of meters above him the guns and weapons of the soldiers blared in the corridors and halls, a single shot echoed in the Terminal Dogma.

-x-

With the surprise of the unexpected enemy long worn off, the nine Mass Produced Evangelions showed no hesitation, let alone respect for NERV's warriors. Unlike in Asuka's first battle with these creatures, they didn't wait to attack one after another. They advanced in groups, but not simply three on one – once one of the three enemies was attacked they passed on to the next, unimportant whether they landed a blow or were successfully fended off, maybe even got kicked or scratched themselves by a prog knife.

This way, they forced the pilots to defend themselves against a seemingly endless swarm without any chance to focus on one to do any serious harm. Some even sped things up by extending their wings again and flailing their giant blades at their grounded opponents from above. Unnecessary to mention, particularly the redheaded pilot was far from pleased by this situation.

"GodDAMNIT!" she cursed in frustration as she barely avoided being beheaded while her own weapon hit nothing but air yet again. "Maybe you two should leave me alone, I was better off against them on my own!"

"Asuka!" Shinji managed to protest, despite his own troubles with the white beasts. "Don't say such things!"

"She might have a point though," Misato mused over the comm. "If you'd split up some more, they'd have to break their pattern. Just don't move too far away from each other in case one needs back-up if they plan to concentrate all on one."

"Easier said than done!" Asuka shot back.

"Why aren't they using those lances?" Toji wondered. While he wasn't in an immediate danger like Shinji and Asuka, he was straining just as much to keep his giant avatar undamaged. It wasn't just the immersion, which wasn't nearly as deep as with his short experience with Unit-03. But he was there to help, not just to watch his robot being ripped apart without taking at least one of these bastards down for his friends.

"They probably don't want to risk hitting each- SHIT!" Asuka's conclusion was drowned by the alerts as her timer started. Behind her, unnoticed until then in the overall chaos, stood one of the grinning beasts, its blade still between the two parts of the just-cut umbilical cable. "Fine! That's it!"

Fueled by rage, Asuka didn't try to block the next blow. Instead, she stormed at the EVA with a fierce war cry, head-butting it before it could strike. The impact of the red Evangelion smashing against its

chest caused the surprised Unit to lose its weapon that Asuka instantly dived for while her opponent was distracted.

"Asuka, calm down," Shinji pleaded as she started to flail the blade wildly around, scaring the attackers into keeping a farther distance from her. "Think of your energy! You should just..."

"I should just what?" she barked back. "Get to safety and let you handle them? Don't be ridiculous! I have another four and a half minutes to take them down!"

"Asuka..." Shinji tried once more, but gave up. "Just promise me that you'll use the last twenty seconds to get out of here!"

Watching the exchange, Toji almost missed the MP-Unit that ignored the new threat in EVA-02, gliding down towards the JA. Almost.

He ducked to the side to avoid the hit; at the same time shooting his arm out. The Unit was roughly stopped as the metallic hand grabbed one of its wings. Toji used the JA's momentum to hurl the EVA around, intending to send it flying against a nearby mountain wall. However, a loud ripping sound announced the failure of his plan, though not negatively so. One wing less, the Unit crashed to the ground, the white body overturning several times, its mass digging into the earth until it crashed against a small formation of rocks where it fell silent.

"Wohoo!" Toji congratulated himself. "That's the first one down!"

"Not down enough!" Asuka's yell came only a fraction of a second before she jumped with her EVA past the JA at the apparently silent Unit, ramming the sharp tip of the blade deep into the red core. Sparks flew as she drove it deeper and deeper, more and more cracks appearing on the smooth surface. The not-so-dead EVA suddenly jerked up with a loud screech, its arms reaching out to its attacker – and fell limp for good as the core shattered in a thousand pieces.

A maniacal, yet ever so satisfied grin spread over the panting girl's face as she turned around. "Erster..."

-x-

Not a moment after, an outcry was heard in the meeting room of the SEELE council. "They have destroyed EVA-09! How could that happen?"

"The Series was supposed to be unstoppable! Even the cores should not cease functioning until reaching 63 percent damage!"

"Everything is lost! How shall we commence the ceremony now?"

"There is no reason to panic! We still have a replacement on the battlefield."

"A replacement that is not on our side and lacks the necessary power!"

"It doesn't matter. As long as we're victorious, we can secure Lilith and Adam from Ikari. We'll build a new Evangelion to take the place of the fallen one. The ceremony will merely be postponed."

"Build a new one? That is easy for you to say! But what if more fall? My country has used up all its resources to build the ones we have now! And I know for a fact that we're not the only ones!"

"I agree. However, resurrecting the space project would be cheaper. We could retrieve the original Lance!"

"The Lance will only do us good if we're indeed victorious! We have made a mistake to put all our hopes into this attack! We were too reckless and underestimated those children!"

"How could we lose? We merely lost ONE Unit! We're still outnumbering them by far!"

"Let us not fight among ourselves now! We can adapt to this situation once we have won this battle."

"Indeed. Is there any news on that traitorous squadron that was sighted?"

"We have other things to worry about than a few missing VTOLs!"

The discussion heated more and more, chatter overlapping, everyone long having lost track of who said what behind their anonymous holograms.

In the ensuing chaos, however, no one noticed that the monolith with the inscription "SEELE-01" remained silent.

-x-

"Sir!" the pilot of the VTOL yelled over the roaring of the engines. "We're nearing Tokyo-3!"

Kaji just signaled that he understood and resumed his view out of the window. The notice hadn't really been necessary, even still several miles away, the fight between the now eleven giants was hard to miss. He felt some pride to see that Katsuragi had found and made good use of his gift. But they were still outnumbered and it was hard to tell if Shinji and Asuka's experience and the element of surprise in the form of the JA would be enough against the skills of the Mass-Produced EVAs.

"Is there any way to stop them?" he asked Sakamoto, the leader of the squad that was accompanying him.

Most of the soldiers weren't very fond of having to go against their own comrades to say the least. But some who knew to some extent what this was all about were glad to stop what might become the greatest shame of the JSSDF. Sakamoto had actually been supposed to be part of the assault team, but had refused; unwilling to kill everyone in sight, unarmed civilians and even children.

"If that would have meant the end of the world, at least I would have been able to go as a man, not as a monster," he had told Kaji. Given the delicate situation, they hadn't have to fear a tribunal for their insubordination, but they had been confined to their base under a complete embargo. But that had given him three full squads that were now on their way to the battle zone and others were following close behind.

"I'm afraid not." Sakamoto shook his head. "They're not under our control."

"Feared as much," Kaji muttered as he watched EVA-02 blocking a kick to the head. "Good luck then, kids..."

He was just about to get away from the window when something caught his eye, on a parking space not far below them. "LAND ON THAT STREET IMMEDIATELY!" he yelled at the pilot without a second thought as he stormed to the hatch.

Hastily securing himself, he snatched a rifle from a surprised soldier next to him, then braced himself and hit the release button. The decompression gripped him instantly, trying to suck everything out of the cabin, but he held his place and aimed. Strangely there seemed to be only one soldier with a raised gun opposed to the three he had thought to have seen before, but the blue patch of hair was unmistakable. He wasn't sure what she was doing so far out here, but now wasn't the time to think. The first two shots missed due to the distance and the movement of the aircraft, but the third one hit. Not lethally apparently, but all he needed was to gain some time anyway. Only then he noticed that the other two bodies he had previously noticed were already lying on the ground.

A few seconds later, the VTOL was low enough for him to safely jump out and Kaji ran to the parking space, followed by Sakamoto and a few others from the group.

Rei appeared to be waiting for them.

"I appreciate your assistance, Mr. Kaji," she thanked him formally, while the soldiers rushed to the wounded and the apparently dead comrades of theirs.

"No problem," the pony-tailed man shrugged the thanks off. "Though it was sure a surprise seeing you out here."

"I attempted to escape before they would strike," Rei admitted calmly. "I was sure that it would not be safe at the headquarters."

Kaji regarded her for a moment, but as usual for her, her body language didn't say a thing more than her words. "I wasn't quite talking about safety reasons..."

"I..." Unexpectedly, she was showing an exception to the rule, her eyes flickering to the ground. "I had my reasons not to... assist the Commander..."

Figuring that it would be the most he would get from her now, he nodded. "Very well then, that should ease things a lot. Sakamoto!" he yelled over to the officer. "Do we have room for a hitcher?"

"I'm afraid it'd get a little cramped with these three already!" the soldier answered regarding the fallen comrades that were carried into the VTOL.

Kaji scratched his chin, thinking for a second as his eyes fell on the radically-stopped patrol's jeep. They certainly wouldn't need it anymore, would they?

"You think you can end this on your own?" he called over once more. It was an unnecessary question really, as he wasn't much more than a passenger anyway without any real influence on the JSSDF troops. But a part of him was probably hoping to hear a "No", just to feel needed.

Naturally though, that didn't come as Sakamoto raised his thumb.

"Okay then," Kaji turned back to Rei. "We'll take that jeep and I'll get you to wherever you want until this is over."

Rei nodded, but didn't move to follow him as he started to walk to the vehicle. "Could you drive the car to the other side of the woods? I do not wish to pass this scene again."

"Um, sure," he wondered as she was heading to the nearby patch of trees between the parking space and the street, "but why can't I just take you with me right now?"

She stopped shortly. "I have to pick someone up."

"Wha...?"

-x-

The loss of one of their brethren had forced the MP-Evangelions to a new strategy. Instead of keeping their prey in one place and attacking it all at once, they now formed groups to drive them apart, while attacking much more fiercely. Gone were the blades in favor of the lances, aside from those of the three Units pursuing the Jet Alone. When a stab at the robot barely scratched the thick armor, they had quickly reverted their weapon to its previous form.

"Hey, Asuka!" Toji yelled at the redhead, who was still fending off her three foes with the captured sword. "Why don't you change that thing too? I thought EVAs would be allergic to those lance-things."

"Sure, no problem," Asuka answered, the sarcasm evident in her words as she threw her now obsolete prog knife bullseye into the head of one of her enemies. As expected though, the white beast merely staggered slightly from the impact, apparently not bothered at all by the steel in its brain. But it was diversion enough for Asuka to drive the sword into its shoulder, effectively cutting the arm off before the EVA could get away. "You'd just have to tell me how!"

"How come they're not throwing them?" Shinji wondered. He was by far the most troubled currently, fending off four EVAs with just his prog knife. Needless to say, he was more busy evading the stabs of their lances than anything else, trying to get as much distance as possible from them. "Then I might be able to snatch one at least!"

"You probably answered your own question there," Misato pointed out through the comm. "They want to – HEY! Toji, watch out!"

Two flying Units dived into the JA from behind, grabbing it by the shoulders and the rods that jutted from the head. Apparently, they had planned to crash it against a mountain or let it fall from a great height as an easy victim once it lost its precious contact with the earth. But they only managed to drag the heavy giant along on the ground for a short distance before Toji reacted and flailed one of the elastic arms of the robot around.

While unable to hit very hard from this position, the close proximity of the two attackers proved fatal for them. The struck Unit was brought off course and crashed against the other, sending both of them to the ground when their wings intertwined.

Toji smirked triumphantly from his seat. "Heh. You're not getting me that eas..." His taunt faded as he saw the robot's only reaction to his latest command was to slump forward and come to a complete stop. He pulled the controls again and again, but still nothing. "What's wrong with it?!"

Akagi's grimace as she watched the status-screens already told more than he needed to know. "Looks like they damaged the control rods with that last attack. Signal-strength is less than five percent!"

Toji fell back in his seat, not in relaxation but in sheer anger. To be beaten because of such a minor damage, rendered helpless and forced to watch while his friends were fighting there for their lives. Growling, he let his frustration out by driving his fist against the now useless controls.

"Sorry guys," he muttered. "I guess you have to take care of the rest alone."

-x-

"Misato? Ritsuko here," the blonde said into her cell phone as she walked deeper into the complex, her pace a notch quicker than usual. "Yes, I know you're 'kinda busy'! But you know, I told you I also had something else to do and now that our little toy is broken, I really got to go... What? Yes, I was just coming to that; I just wanted to know if the Commander has shown up at all by now?" She clenched her eyes at the negative answer, suppressing a curse. "Yeah, feared as much. But thanks anyway."

She terminated the connection with an angry huff.

"Damn," it escaped her after all, touching the remote in the pocket of her lab coat as she entered the elevator that would take her down to Terminal Dogma. "I wanted him to see his hopes crushed, not to go with them."

-x-

Asuka stood horrified as the memories overwhelmed her. The third Unit had met up with the two that had brought the JA down and one after another appeared from the other groups. They had no intention to devour their metallic prey, but they took sadistic pleasure in slamming their claws into the helpless robot, ripping it into pieces. And she felt it, felt it as if it was her EVA, her own flesh and bones that were torn apart again.

The shock only lasted a matter of seconds, but those were already much too long. She moved, but not fast enough.

Her shoulder exploded in pain.

The impact of the piercing lance forced her forward, sending her EVA crashing to the ground. The surprise didn't last long, but the pain remained. Her breathing was reduced to gasps as she silently berated herself for not having noticed the threat in time. Now that her combat-senses returned, she quickly wanted to bring her EVA's good arm to the damned spear that impaled its left shoulder, pinning her to the earth, dangerously immobilizing her in the heat of the battle.

But her attempt to free herself was already cut short. Looking up, she saw a giant white hand clutching the red wrist of Unit-02 – as well as the sickening, twisted grin of its owner. Six loud thuds shook the ground around her, leaving no doubt that its backups had arrived.

She smiled sadly as her eyes wandered to her ring finger, where a small bulge stretched her plugsuit. *'Baka... I told you it brings bad luck to do that beforehand.'*

She refrained from whimpering as she felt the claws clutching her EVA's armor, but barely managed. The worst thing about death was the knowledge that you were about to die. The loss of one's existence; any form of happiness taken away, along with any chance to regain it.

She didn't want to die. Not now, not like this.

But she knew how slim Shinji's chances were of beating all of them in time if he were to come to her aid. She could only hope that he'd end up victorious at all, that at least he could live on with everyone. And maybe she could finally see...

Her fear was gone. There was a feeling, a feeling of pride and love. But there was something else as well, something that felt like... sadness?

'Goodbye?'

As the realization hit her, it was already too late.

-x-

Just as Shinji made sure he had created enough distance from the pursuing Unit, he hurled EVA-01 around again to look where the other three had suddenly gone to. But what he saw made him freeze instantly.

Shinji didn't want to see it. But he couldn't turn away either. For that moment, he wasn't able to do anything. He couldn't even blink.

Shinji didn't want to see it. But he saw everything.

He saw the Mass-Produced EVAs trying to escape the flames. He saw each of them getting caught in the explosion that sent them to the hell they deserved. But that didn't matter anymore.

He saw Unit-02 self-destructing.

"A.. Asu... Ah..." It was not even a whisper, just a rattle. He didn't even realize that it was him who made that sound.

They had known it could become worse with their changes. They had always known. But he had never wanted to see...

It wasn't until something pulled on his EVA's arm, slamming him to the ground, that a part of him vaguely remembered the enemy that had hassled him and was now slouching over his Unit.

Another one of those white monsters. Because of them... It was because of them that Asuka... Asuka... That beast didn't even see it coming.

EVA-01's hands had grabbed its neck before it could even think of evading. Tighter and tighter they

squeezed. Maybe that beast was trying to fight back, but Shinji didn't feel any blows. He didn't feel anything but hate.

The shining white was stained with blood as the neck ripped open under the unforgiving pressure. He screamed as he tossed the lifeless body off him; screamed his loss and hatred out to the world as he stood up; screamed for the instrument to make them pay!

It was their fault! Everyone! Everyone's...!

It didn't matter anymore. The man he had become for her. The achievements they had made together. Their family... first Aki... and now her too...

It didn't matter anymore. Not even if he became the cause. At least – maybe – he could see them again then. And maybe they would forgive him.

"You will help me, won't you... mother?"

-x-

The shock wouldn't leave Maya's face as she watched the display showing the crater where Unit-02 had been just moments before. She had never been all that close to the children, but she had always felt with them. After all, they were the ones fighting for them; mere teenagers risking their lives with the fate of humanity resting on their shoulders. And now it had cost one.

However, a low alarm caught her attention before she could completely be swallowed by guilt and sorrow. "Shinji's... Shinji's synch-ratio is rising..."

-x-

A throbbing pain elicited a groan from her as she forced her eyes open, her mind still spinning. As if the wound by the lance hadn't been bad enough, the LCL had not been able to fully absorb the impact when the plug had crashed against a nearby rock face only to roll down it until the cylindrical form finally came to a rest.

With her good arm, she reached over to the handle of the emergency-hatch, heaving herself out of the pilot seat. Unlike the outside, which would be heated from the friction to a hardly bearable degree, the interior was barely affected because the LCL inside quickly dissipated most of the heat. The plugsuit dampened the rest without any problem, but that didn't make it easier to open the hatch by hand, especially if you could use only one properly.

Finally, she managed to open the lock, eager to see what had happened outside during the minute that she had missed.

She almost wished she hadn't.

-x-

Misato had heard Maya's announcement, but she could hardly maintain her professionalism that was still needed in the severe situation. The explosion of EVA-02 had ripped a hole in her heart that the emptiness used to gain entry. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Shinji felt right now. And she couldn't really hold it against him that he apparently gave up fighting.

Even if it meant the end of the world.

-x-

Unit-01 was filling most of her vision, howling deafeningly at the crater where her EVA had been. The giant stood too close to see its face far above her, but she could easily picture the glowing eyes of the demonic creature.

Hastily, she reached back into the plug for a second to activate the communication system before he would be lost inside again, probably once and for all.

"Shinji, calm down! I got ejected just in time!"

But if he could hear her, he showed no reaction.

-x-

Everyone in the Command Center was surprised by the voice, though Misato's was definitely the biggest sigh of relief. However, it only lasted until Maya updated her report.

"Synch-ratio still rising, nearing 100 percent!"

"Why isn't he stopping?!" Misato spun around. "Didn't he hear her?"

"She must have accidentally only opened the channel to us!" Shigeru informed her agitatedly.

"Then tell her!"

But he shook just his head. "I-I don't think she would be able to hear us over all that noise out there," he answered with resignation.

She already wanted to change the order, but Makoto interrupted her. "AT-Field is spreading!"

-x-

Her hair began to wave in a strange wind that seemed to be growing stronger from the EVA's inhuman screaming. Daring to look around, she noticed that indeed dust and debris were spinning through the air, bending trees to form a circle, making it appear as though the purple Unit was not only the epicenter, but the very source of the cold storm.

"I'm all right, Shinji, calm down!" she yelled in the comm with increasing nervousness.

A strange tremor went through her body, causing her to look up again. The EVA had again broken free of its restraining armor, exposing its red core to the world. Her mouth stood open in a shocked gasp as an AT-Field like she had never seen it before sprouted from the EVA's back like deformed wings, while it outstretched its hands to the sides, leaning back as if to welcome something from above with open arms.

And that something already pierced the clouds.

-x-

"Something's approaching from the atmosphere with tremendous speed!"

That was the last thing Misato could use now.

"Patch her through already!"

-x-

"GODDAMNIT, BAKA! STOP IT!"

-x-

"*Asuka...*?"

-x-

Giant, bloodstained hands stopped the flight of the Lance of Longinus in an instant.

It strained against the hold, so close to its goal, just a few meters between its pointed tip and the red

core that had called the Lance towards it with its infinite energy. But the spear's new master no longer wished for destruction.

Instead, it was rammed into the partially beheaded Mass-Production Unit that had just risen back to its feet, going through the white body with ease, straightly piercing its S2 engine. EVA-01 didn't even turn around to watch it sliding limply from the red weapon.

Its glowing eyes scanned the ground around the crater that the explosion had left behind. There was nothing left that could be identified as belonging particularly to Unit-02, but there were a few white parts scattered around, a hand here, half of a head there.

One had apparently survived the blast after all, trying to crawl away by using its right arm, the only limb that was still left. It was actually not much more than that burned arm and a torso, most of the armor gone. It fell silent as EVA-01 sank the Lance into its flickering core.

Finally, at some distance, there was the cylindrical shape of an entry plug, a tiny red figure looking out from it. The figure leaped out completely, waving up to the giant.

It was impossible to see her shocked face though, when the Evangelion spread its energetic wings and leaped up in the air, rising higher and higher.

-x-

"Is it okay now?"

"Yeah. She's fine. That's all that matters to me. But..." Shinji averted his view, "...is this really necessary?"

"There mustn't be a single EVA left behind. Only with them – and the Lance of Longinus – gone, the world has a chance. Shinji, you know that this has to be done, right?"

He nodded. "As long as the sun, the moon and the earth exist, everything will be all right," he recounted. Yet his smile, even this sad one, faded, as he looked back up. Parting from someone important always came too suddenly. "But do you really want that? Do you really want to be out there for all eternity? Won't you feel... lonely?"

"No..." was the honest reply. "For I will always have you with me in my heart." Proudly smiling, she caressed his cheek. "Goodbye, my son. Take care of those you love; your little family, your friends. Always be there for those who need you. Goodbye..."

"Goodbye... mother..."

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

As Shinji opened his eyes, his first reaction was to quickly close them again from the invading, blinding light. He waited a second before blinking twice again until he found himself staring at the white space above him. "Unfamiliar ceiling..."

"You should know it by now..."

Surprised at the unexpected voice, he turned his head. Asuka sat on the bed next to his, smiling back at him. Apart from the bandages around her shoulder that forced her to wear a sling, only a few Band-Aids covered some small bruises on her body. Otherwise she seemed perfectly fine.

"I don't know, I think they gave it a new paint-job..." he joked flatly as he sat up.

Asuka stood up from her mattress and went over to him, kissing his forehead.

"Good afternoon, Sleepyhead," she mocked excessively. "Seriously, you just got some bruises from being shot out with the plug at a high of a mere hundred meters or so, while I got hit more often and much harder, had my shoulder pierced – but look who decides to be out cold for hours."

"You forgot to mention that you were ejected as well."

"Hm, oh yeah, I didn't want you to feel *too* bad," she shrugged playfully. Climbing onto his bed, straddling his legs, she put her arms loosely around his shoulders; grinning as she looked in his eyes. "You know, we've both been 'thrown out' by our mothers. Wonder how people would interpret that."

"Well, in a way, they just did it for our own good." He smirked, returning the light hug by placing his hands on her waist. "I just wonder how we should... you know... take care of the rest now."

"I guess we don't really have to worry about that anymore." He gave her a questioning look, urging her to explain, which she did with a smirk. "Ritsuko got rid of Lilith for us."

Shinji blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Yeah," Asuka sounded still a bit surprised herself. "She programmed the MAGI to set the explosives that were meant for the HQ's self-destruction only to detonate in Terminal Dogma and the few, at that time empty, floors above. Whatever of Lilith survived that blast lies now crushed under a few hundred tons of concrete."

Baffled, Shinji was speechless.

Asuka's face, however, suddenly grew more serious, anxious; her voice dropping to a hopeful whisper. "So... we did it, didn't we?"

Weak, but contentedly smiling, he nodded. "Yeah."

She suddenly pulled herself closer, holding him tight. "Then can we... can we finally mourn her?" she asked, hardly restraining her sobs.

His heart sank instantly, the big victory forgotten as he felt his eyes moisten at her words. "Yeah," he repeated, but now more solemn as he tightened their embrace himself. "In any way we want."

"I... I think I'd like to have a funeral for her. Even if the grave would be empty. Just... just a reminder for everyone that she was there; that she wasn't just a ..." Her voice was suddenly cut off by the hiss of the opening door.

Rei took a step back as she saw them, her pale cheeks coloring with a light pink. "I apologize. I did not intend to disturb you."

The couple shared a look, slowly entangling themselves from each other.

"No Rei, it's okay," Shinji said. Seeing her here was a relief, but though there were many questions on his mind, he for now settled for: "Is there anything we can do for you?"

The blue-haired girl nodded. "You have to accompany me back to my apartment. There is... something I need to show both of you."

-x-x-x-x-

Asuka felt a chill running down her spine as she entered Rei's home. Since their enigmatic pilot seemed in an unnatural hurry and Shinji still had some forms to fill out (as well as change clothes) before he could leave the infirmary, they had agreed that the two girls would go ahead.

Asuka had heard from Shinji about Rei's awful living conditions, but it was the first time she actually saw the rundown building with her own eyes. She hadn't expected it to be *this* bad.

At least Rei seemed to have decorated the walls with a few pictures, but Asuka's attention was more on the bullet holes that were all over the place. She couldn't remember any in Misato's apartment back then and hoped there wouldn't be any this time either. Apparently, they either knew where to expect the pilots or SEELE had instructed the JSSDF that Rei was the biggest threat of them all and had to be eliminated at all cost. That would also explain why they didn't bother with the risk of precision and wildly shot everything in sight. It seemed surprising that they didn't use a grenade or just bombed the whole building.

Only one glass still stood on the refrigerator in the corner, but the shards around it showed that there had been a few more. The bed stood in the middle of the room in an odd angle, the also perforated mattress was not quite fittingly placed on the frame, making Asuka guess that it had been provisionally set up again after been knocked over during the attack.

She shook her head, turning to her host. "So what do you want to show us?" Asuka asked, with curiosity but also a bit of annoyance in her voice, while Rei looked around, apparently searching for "it" herself.

But before the blue-haired girl could answer, the redhead's attention was suddenly drawn to the ruffling behind the curtain near her left. She couldn't tell if her breathing and heart stopped or rather multiplied in speed when her wide blue eyes met a similar pair as the fabric was hesitantly pulled aside.

"Mama...?"

Chapter XIII: End

It was the afternoon of the day after she had witnessed the 17th's death when Rei found herself wandering through the streets of Tokyo-3. She wasn't sure why she was doing it. It served no real purpose. She could have waited these last hours at her apartment or at NERV. But yet here she was, going on what the voice in the back of her mind had dubbed "a last hiking trip".

Maybe this was what humans often experienced as restlessness, hoping to calm their nerves before an important or frightful act in their lives. Maybe it was a human's melancholy habit to do something for the last time, even if it was just walking through a neighborhood that they would soon never see again.

For a long time she had questioned herself whether or not she really sought to fulfill her destiny. With Ikari's and later Soryu's help, she had begun to feel like there might be more to her life, that she might find other reasons for it. But since the 17th's death, the call had grown so loud that every fiber of her being was screaming at her to finally serve the purpose she was created for and seek the rest *he* wouldn't grant her otherwise.

But she was afraid. She couldn't deny that. All her life she had known it would end this way and had looked forward to it without remorse. But now that this end was near, the young woman couldn't quiet the doubt in her mind.

The 17th's decision had left her wondering. He had avoided his destiny to join with Lilith and live forever by letting himself be annihilated. For her, for NERV, however, that was exactly what was destined to happen. If even destiny was a matter of perspective... what was hers?

As she walked through the almost empty streets a faint sound suddenly brought her out of her thoughts. More on instinct than curiosity, she followed the low wailing to an alley a few meters ahead. She saw nothing at first, until her eyes went down to the ground. A young, brown-haired girl, not older than four or five, sat cowering in a corner. Her appearance was similar to that of a homeless; her clothes too big for her small body as though they were the only thing she had to wear; her feet bare and dirty.

Her soft crying seemed to go unnoticed by the few people passing by. It was a common trait of humans to ignore the pain of someone not attached to them in any way, telling themselves that the parents surely would eventually come back to take care of her, or passing the responsibility to the authorities or others who passed by. And that habit came even more natural when it concerned apparent outcasts of society.

But something was off with that picture. The girl's clothes showed only little dirt, which could have resulted from sitting on the street, leaning against the wall behind her.

Rei wasn't sure about the feeling that this scene evoked in her, but there was nothing she could do. She had no experience in comforting children, no knowledge of the girl's needs or what kind of help she desired. And whatever it was that caused her pain, her ordeal wouldn't last much longer anyway. She would never feel any more pain in a matter of hours.

But as Rei was about to continue her way and to forget about this moment just like everyone else, the girl suddenly ceased her crying and while sniffing, looked back at her with tearful eyes. Had she been standing there staring at the child for so long that she had perked the child's interest?

The urge to leave rose as the girl kept gazing at her in awe, cocking her head to the side as though she was searching for something in Rei's face. Something about this child was unnerving, but Rei couldn't tell what.

Rather on instinct than anything else, she abruptly turned and left without looking back. She couldn't

place that feeling deep in her guts, it wasn't one of danger or very alarming, but she didn't like to face it for some reason. But even while keeping her gaze forward, she knew she couldn't shake it that easily as she heard the small steps behind her, hurrying at first to catch up, then adapting her pace to keep a respectful distance. Even when Rei quickened her speed, the presence behind her kept up.

Eventually, realizing there would be no easy escape, she stopped.

"Why are you following me?" Rei asked without turning around.

"You look like friend," the small voice answered shyly.

Now she did turn her head to look over her shoulder at the child that was still watching her with fear, yet also hope in her eyes. "You must mistake me for someone else. I do not know you."

"What's your name?"

"I am Rei Ayanami," she answered automatically.

"I'm Aki!" the girl exclaimed now more cheerful. "Now we know each other, right?"

Rei couldn't really argue with that logic. But she wished she could. "You cannot accompany me," she explained. "You should seek your legal guardian."

"My gardin?" the child apparently didn't understand the definition.

"Your parents or other attachment figure that took care of you until now."

Aki's lips started to quiver again at those words. "Mama and Papa are gone," she said sniffing. "And I can't find them."

"If you are lost you should seek help from an authority."

"Are you an authory?" Aki asked hopefully.

"I was referring to the police or a similar institution who has the capacities to search for your parents."

The child still didn't really appear to understand, shifting nervously on her bare feet. "Can't you help me...?" she asked timidly.

"I do not know your parents or their current whereabouts," Rei told her truthfully. However, seeing the girl tearing up again also called back that unsettling sensation she had felt before. "I can... take you to the nearest police station, though, if you wish to."

For the first time, a slight smile crept onto the child's face as she nodded, sniffing.

"Follow me then," Rei told Aki and started to walk without looking back. She didn't need to look back at Aki to know she would do as asked anyway.

"Rei?" Sure enough, the girl's voice soon called out for her again, close behind. "Are you part of my family?"

That question startled the teen, as it didn't make much sense to her. The chances of meeting an unknown relative in a city the size of Tokyo-3 were rather slim, but she figured that the girl was just too young to calculate such chances. As, given the background of her creation, she had no family to speak off, she answered truthfully, "No."

Aki, however, seemed to be very pleased with that answer as she sounded much happier than before.

"So you **are** a friend then!"

Startled, Rei... said nothing.

-x-x-x-x-

Along the way, Rei quickly registered how Aki closed the distance between them more and more. Eventually, there was a light tugging at the side of her skirt, a small hand grabbing for hers. At first Rei tried not to show her surprise at the contact. But as she felt the girl's body pressing against her every so often, she couldn't help but glance down and notice Aki nervously looking around, taking in the surroundings with curious yet fearful eyes – and flinching whenever someone passed by.

"Are you afraid of strangers?" Rei eventually questioned, not quite understanding the obvious fear, as the girl hadn't shown much hesitation in approaching her.

Aki shook her head. "There're suddenly so many. And it's so loud. I don't know why. And... and Mama or Papa can't tell me..."

Rei wasn't sure what to make of that explanation as the child started sobbing again at the reminder of her lost parents. Questioning herself, she decided to inquire further, knowing that it would be of help later on. "Do you come from a desolate region?"

The change of topic seemed to distract Aki from her depressed mood, but the uncertainty in her eyes as she looked back up to Rei made it obvious that she failed to fully grasp the question.

"I... I come from home...?" she sniveled apologetically, guessing correctly that such an answer was not very helpful.

-x-x-x-x-

It was halfway to the nearest police station when Rei felt a tug on her hand. "Eh! Wait!"

"Why?"

Turning around, she saw the girl shifting her pleading gaze between her and the department store they just passed. Did the child recognize this place? It was one of the many wide spread branches of a well known chain, and at her age, every store might look the same anyway. Maybe she just had learned that there might be a possibility to relieve herself inside.

"My crayons are almost gone! I need new ones!"

Rei watched the ecstatic girl letting go of her hand and storming into the store before she could answer. Now that Aki was distracted and out of sight, Rei could finally leave without giving her the possibility to follow any longer. She could finally end this encounter that had taken much too long and had disturbed her usual routines way too much already.

But she found herself unable to move. A thought haunted her of the girl happily exiting the store with her new possession until she noticed that she had been abandoned once again, being lost and alone. And Rei did not want to be the fault of the cries she knew she would hear, even if she was long out of earshot.

After all... a friend wouldn't do that.

A loud "Hey!" from inside ended her train of thoughts and she instinctively rushed inside. As she almost expected, she found Aki cowering apparently close to tears in front of a clerk who held a package of crayons.

"You can't just walk out with this!" the young man said friendly but firm. "Didn't your parents tell you that you need to pay before?"

"Was there an inconvenience?" Rei caught their attention.

The clerk eyed her shortly. "Are you her sister?" he asked, pointing with his thumb at Aki. "Didn't you watch her? I know kids that age can't handle money, but they at least have to learn that they can't just

take whatever they want."

For some reason, Rei found her cheeks warming at the implication of being the child's older sister. It wasn't quite out of embarrassment, but...

A sob to her side brought a quick end to her confusion.

"I apologize for this misunderstanding," Rei addressed the clerk, bowing formally. "I will cover the payment."

-x-x-x-x-

It took them another five minutes after the incident at the store, which had left Aki noticeably troubled, to reach the police station. She kept quiet the whole way, clutching the package Rei had bought for her tightly in her arms while she stayed as close as possible to the teenager, apparently even more afraid of strangers than before. The encounter with the clerk must have scared her a lot.

The station was in fact just one of the small police "boxes", so it wasn't all too surprising to find only one officer behind the counter that filled most of the narrow space. He looked up from the papers he was filling out as they entered, seeming almost surprised to see people coming in.

"Oh... hello," he managed to say before he recovered properly. "How may I help you?"

"This girl was apparently separated from her parents." Rei lost no time, not moving to sit on the offered chair. After all, the visibly stressed Aki was using her body as protection.

"Oh?" Sergeant Sato, as Rei could read on the middle-aged man's name tag, noticed the child's fear as well and tried his best to form a disarming smile directed at Aki. "Hey, how old are you, little one?"

But Aki didn't reply to the officer's question. She stared up at Rei, apparently searching for support from her newfound teenage friend, after being confronted by this stranger.

"Please answer his questions," Rei told her calmly. "Otherwise, he will not be able to search for your parents."

She still barely even looked at the large man behind the desk, but held her right hand up showing three fingers. "I-I'm three," she mumbled, before she suddenly looked shocked as if she remembered something. "But it's my birthday soon! Then I'm four!" she hastily added with a prideful voice as she held another finger up, but that outburst of joy didn't last long and she fell back to cowering at Rei's side almost instantly, maybe even more so from embarrassment.

"I see..." Sato chuckled as he made his note.

Rei's gaze however lingered on the girl, wondering whether she had been told that she would soon be four very often, or if she had figured it by herself. As far as she knew, it was not a given thing that children of that age could come to such conclusions.

"And would you also tell me your name?" the officer continued his questioning.

"Aki..." she answered timidly.

"Good, Aki," Sato said as he began to scribble down the information. "And what is your surname?"

"Sur- surname?" Aki repeated, glancing with confusion at the officer, then at Rei, and back at the floor.

"Yes," Sato nodded, leaning a little more over the counter. "You know, your family name."

Insecure, the girl started to chew on her lower lip, obviously still not understanding what was asked of her.

"Aki...?" she tried, the tiny fingers of her free hand clenching and unclenching nervously.

"No, look," the Sergeant tried again, "I mean the name other people call someone from your family. How do people call your father for example?"

"People...?" Aki shook against Rei, tears starting to well in the little girl's eyes. These – to her – impossible questions were visibly becoming too much for her already anxious mind. "I-I don't know..."

"O-okay, okay, n-no need to cry!" the officer quickly tried to appease the distressed child, though even Rei noticed that he was rather clumsy at that. Apparently, he had little experience with children. "Do you... do you at least know his first name?"

This was apparently a more comfortable question, as she calmed a bit and answered without hesitation: "Papa."

"No, see," Sato bit his tongue not to give in to his noticeably growing frustration and came up with an easier way for the three year old. "What... what does your mother call him? Aside from 'Papa' or 'Darling' or something like that."

This time it took Aki a little longer to think, but her answer was just as confident as her previous one. "Baka."

Sato's shoulders slumped. "Which would be about every married man in this city. So much for isolating it." He sighed. "Well, if we don't get the necessary information from her, I could try the other way round and take a look if someone filed a missing report for her."

But as he typed away, sometimes glancing from the computer monitor to Aki, his face grew more serious with every second. Eventually, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I haven't got a description that would fit her."

Rei glanced down at the girl who in turn stared with concern up at her. She had done what she could, hadn't she? And yet, it didn't feel quite right as she asked: "I expect you will take care of her now?"

"W-wait!" Rei had expected Aki to voice her fear as she turned to leave, but Sato beat the child to it. "I can't keep her here. Look around you, girl. The city is being evacuated and so are we. There's barely anyone left who doesn't work for NERV and we have orders not to interfere with their matters. We're currently taking care of this district with **three** people. And two of them are on patrol. There's no way we can handle childcare right now." He scratched his head nervously. "There are some rumors that the JSSDF is on the way here to assist. But so far I've yet to hear something official about that. Until then, all I can offer you is to call a social worker who would get her to an orphanage in Gotemba or Odawara, but that would take at least a few hours, not counting the red tape. I doubt anyone would be all that willing to come down here anymore today."

"What you are telling me is that she would have no place to spend the night?" Rei figured.

"Ah... shi-" Sato caught himself as his eyes fell on Aki. "I mean... look, I could get in serious trouble for suggesting this, but..." the officer shrugged uncomfortably, "maybe you can... or know someone who can take care for her for one night?"

Rei felt like she was pushed into a corner by that proposal. She shouldn't get even more involved with the child. She had done what she could...

No, she had done what had been expected from her. But she couldn't seriously... Under other circumstances, Major Katsuragi might have taken the child in with Ikari and Soryu. But this option was not available for now.

A tug on her skirt settled her decision.

"She... can stay with me for tonight."

-x-x-x-x-

"Where are we going now?" Aki asked instantly as she followed Rei out of the police box after her temporary guardian had left her address and the number of her mobile phone. The overworked officer had certainly felt much more at ease with his proposal when he saw her NERV ID card.

Surprised, the teen glanced down to her right hand for a second as she felt the girl getting hold of it with her left again, but she didn't say anything against it. "We are heading for my apartment. You will spend the night there."

Aki kept quiet at first, but she grew noticeably tense rather quickly. Eventually, she voiced her troubles. "So I can't go home anymore...?"

"You can return once we find someone who knows where you live," Rei tried to assure her.

"But *I* know where I live..."

That really startled Rei, enough to make her stop and regard the child. "You know the address of your place of residence?"

Aki's face fell. "Well... no..."

"Then you..."

"But I know the way back," the girl interrupted her quickly.

Rei felt a slight pain in her head. "Why did you not mention this before?"

"I... I didn't know I should..." Aki admitted sheepishly.

"It is likely that your parents will eventually be there as well," Rei explained. "You could have waited there for them."

Aki's blue eyes nervously darted to the ground. "But... that scary lady was there..."

"Scary lady?" Rei repeated.

"Yeah, I woke up and Mama and Papa weren't there, but that scary lady, so I've ran away until I found you!" Aki explained, taking heavy breaths in between as if she was forgetting to get the necessary air.

Rei simply looked at the small child, before trying to analyze the problem in the best logical way possible.

"That woman might have been a guest of your parents. Also it is common for parents to hire a 'babysitter' to watch their children while they are out." Though she had to admit, while she was inexperienced with such matters, that it seemed unusual to have someone look after their child if it didn't get to know this person before. "We should go there then. If it is really your home, it is likely that someone there is waiting for you."

"But..." Aki began to protest, but then dropped her head, staring at her fidgeting feet. "Will you go with me then...?"

-x-x-x-x-

"That's my home!"

The sun was already setting when Aki pointed excitedly at the familiar house from the entry of a rather large estate on the outskirts of Tokyo-3.

It seemed an odd coincidence for the girl to have picked this one. Too big was the temptation not to ask

the question that was lingering on Rei's tongue. "Are you positive?"

Her answer consisted once again of a pair of non-understanding eyes.

"Are you sure that this is the place where you live?" she tried again.

Aki nodded, but glanced around once more anyway. "The fence is gone... But everything else is like always."

Rei frowned slightly. At least one of their memories was deceiving them. And she had her doubts that it was hers. But there was only one way to make sure.

As she started to walk over to the front door, however, she noticed that her small shadow of the day was no longer following for once. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the girl still standing on the same spot, fidgeting nervously as if unsure to go forwards or run backwards. "Do you not want to go to your home?"

"W-what if that woman is still there?" Aki whimpered, tugging on her yellow shirt. "She... she scared me..."

"You will not find out if you do not accompany me," Rei stated and went towards the door. It took only a few seconds for Aki to run after her, clinging to the teen's skirt just as she pushed the button of the bell.

Footsteps were clearly heard on the other side, quickly coming closer and with each one, Rei could feel the little fingers pulling harder on the fabric. A loud whimper escaped the child when the door finally swung open, revealing an elderly gray-haired woman.

"Hello, what can I..." Mrs. Yamadera began until her eyes fell on the blue-haired pilot. "Ah, don't I know you from somewhere?"

Rei plainly nodded.

"Yes, you're that girl that fainted when you were hiking with your friends, aren't you?" the pensioner remembered. "So, what brings you here?"

But before Rei could answer, Mrs. Yamadera glanced at her side, apparently noticing the girl that tried to hide behind her back. "Oh, if that isn't our little housebreaker," she said smiling and in a friendly tone that voided her accusing words. She leaned down a bit to Aki, but it just caused the girl to cower more against Rei, gripping tightly the back her skirt. "You ran out so quickly that I couldn't even talk to you."

After a moment, Aki used the perceived safety that Rei's body provided to gather a little courage.

"Where're Mama and Papa!?"

The elder woman blinked shortly. "Oh, I'm afraid I don't know where your Mama and Papa are. Do I know them? If you'd tell me your name, maybe I could help you."

There was another pause, but the grip on Rei's uniform softened slightly. "I'm Aki..." she mumbled carefully.

"And what's..."

"She cannot recall," Rei answered the unfinished question. There was no point in repeating that discussion again.

"Oh? Well, why don't you two come in for a while and we can see what I can do. I think I also have some cookies left," she added with a small wink at Aki.

As it seemed, it was enough for the little girl to decide that the old lady might not be that scary after all.

-x-x-x-x-

A few minutes later, they sat at the table in the Yamadera's living room. The long-time housewife used the rare opportunity of having guests to offer some tea. Rei had politely declined, but found a filled cup on the table in front of her anyway.

Aki sat on the couch, nibbling timidly on a big chocolate-chip cookie that she held with both hands, her treasured crayons at her side, while watching their host still with a certain nervousness as she moved around, filling a cup of her own.

"So what's the story with you two?" Mrs. Yamadera asked Rei curiously after sitting down herself. "The little one got lost?"

"Everything indicates that that would be the case," Rei answered calmly. "I saw her alone in an alley and she followed me from there on."

Realizing that they were talking about her, Aki's gaze wandered between the two older females, but didn't decide to speak up herself.

"But why would she think her parents would be here? Are they on a visit to Tokyo-3?" She turned in her chair and lowered her head to ask Aki directly. "Could it be that you live somewhere else in a house that looks similar to this? Did you have a long drive before you got separated from your parents?"

Sniffing, being reminded of her parents, the brown-haired girl just shook her head.

"Are you sure? Maybe you were asleep during the trip?"

Again Aki shook her head negatively, not much to Rei's surprise. After they had returned to the alley where they had met, the girl had found the way back impressively easily; just rarely being in doubt and searching for particular characteristics, despite always looking around in wonder and fear. As they had reached this area, she recognized this house as her home the instant she saw it. It felt hard to believe that someone who had been so sure would be mistaken after all.

"No visit," the young child said with a low whimper. "This's home."

The elder woman offered her a pitying look. "Oh, I'm so sorry, but that can't be. Me and my husband have lived here for a long time already." The apologizing smile still lingered on her lips as she straightened up again. "But it's true, why would anyone want to visit the city at times like this, when everyone just want to get *out* of the city. It all went down the drain before it really started."

She sighed, staring dreamily at the ceiling as she drifted down memory lane. "I can still remember when this was just a peaceful outskirts of Hakone. But as if the Impact hadn't done enough damage, they came with their transports, their diggers and cranes and started to dig as though searching for some buried treasure. When they just found that huge cave I thought they'd give up, but instead they decided for some reason to build the new capitol here. Those government cowards probably had come up with the idea for those elevator-building-things to get their a... I mean, themselves safe in case of another war. I knew that would just attract such war to start right here, but I didn't want to give up this place that we'd built up. I didn't expect our enemies to be some huge monsters, but I knew nonetheless. And now that the one robot destroyed most of the city, I'm afraid the time has come that we'll have to move out after all. We have everything already settled to move in with our eldest son in Tokyo-2, but after living here for so many years it'll be hard to leave in just a few more days..."

Now that she came to a stop, she finally noticed that no one had interrupted her. "Oh, I'm sorry, I was rambling again. I don't get to talk to many people lately. Did you want to say anything?"

"No," Rei stated. She had probably listened just as attentively as the girl she had watched, who seemed deep in thought.

"I know!" Aki startled the two as she suddenly jumped up with a broad, hopeful smile. "I can prove! I... I burned the carpet there in the corner with a hot lamp and Mama got really angry at me!"

Full of energy, she hurried over to the spot she had pointed out, close to the door leading to the veranda; the two others more or less curiously after her.

But the wide smile faltered as nothing was there to see. Tears welled up in Aki's eyes and low sobs started coming from her, as she looked frantically around to see if she had made a mistake with the location. But there was nothing; no burn mark; just plain, smooth carpet.

To find her last hopes being crushed must have been too much for the girl as she started to cry, harder and harder, so much that her small body shook.

It was apparently quickly too much to see for the long-time mother and maybe even grandmother. "Oh Honey, I'm so sorry," she tried to soothe Aki as she knelt down, pulling the wailing child into a caring embrace.

Rei couldn't quite say why... but she could understand that urge to take that girl's sadness away like that... as she could barely contain it herself.

-x-x-x-x-

It was already dark outside when they left the Yamadera's. Aki had eventually calmed down, but had remained very quiet ever since. The friendly old woman had offered that she could take care of the child for the night, also inviting Rei to stay, as she wouldn't have minded some company with her husband out of town to prepare their move and not expected to come home until late that night.

But Rei had declined. It wouldn't be wise staying so far away from NERV in these times. And Aki was still too attached to her friend to stay behind with the senior woman all alone.

The girl's previous feelings while on the streets seemed to have shifted in favor of curiosity, probably partly because they barely met anyone on their way. With her wide blue eyes, the girl stared at the neon lights of advertisements, signs and traffic lights. Even the street lamps seemed to fascinate her utmost.

Rei in turn found herself strangely intrigued by the brown-haired child's behavior. She couldn't tell why. She had never easily become attached to other people, let alone to children so much younger than herself. There had never been a reason to. So why now? Now that it was too late to make a difference?

A distinct sound broke the evening's silence, causing Aki to speak up again. "I'm... I'm hungry..." she told her companion sheepishly, emphasizing her point by placing a hand on her stomach. "My tummy's already growling."

Rei regarded the girl a moment. "Have you eaten anything today aside from the pastry from Mrs. Yamadera?"

Aki took a moment to think, but unsurprisingly shook her head eventually. It was still awhile until they would reach her apartment and she felt a slight appetite herself, so Rei let her gaze wander around until she spotted an open restaurant a little farther ahead on the opposite side of the street.

"There is a Ramen shop," she announced. "We can eat there."

"Ramen?" Aki asked curiously.

"Yes," Rei affirmed, ignoring the oddity that she didn't know one of the most famous elements of Japanese cuisine. "A noodle soup."

"Ah! I know!" Aki exclaimed at that. "Papa made that sometimes!"

Rei took that as agreement and led the girl over to the small restaurant. In fact, it was even smaller than the stand she had visited months ago with Ikari, Soryu and Major Katsuragi; only a few chairs at the counter. But that hardly seemed to matter as they were the only ones there.

The chef, a balding man in his late forties, apparently thought so as well. "Oh, customers! I was already wondering whether to close early today," he admitted sighing. "I should have known better than to stay when the majority of the city is either destroyed or empty."

Not feeling the need to comment, Rei assisted Aki to climb on one of the high chairs before sitting in the one next to it.

The man smiled friendly as he leaned over the counter to address the cute three years old. "Well, what can I get you, little one?"

The question visibly irritated Aki. "Um... Ramen?"

"Yeah, but what flavor?" he tried further.

"Noodles?"

The chef threw his head back with a hearty laugh that took awhile until he calmed down again. "I can make you fish-flavored, chicken-flavored, pork-flavored, shrimp..."

"Pork?" The curious girl interrupted his listing. "What's that?"

"You don't know?" the friendly man asked. "That's meat from a pig."

"Meat?" Now Aki seemed genuinely surprised. "Wow! Is it some special day today?"

Again the chef chuckled. "Of course it's a special day! I have two such lovely young ladies as customers!" he justified. "So one pork, I take it? And what...?"

"Garlic, without meat."

-x-x-x-x-

"It looks so sad..." were Aki's first words as she looked around.

How a room was supposed to express the emotion of sadness was beyond Rei, but she didn't argue. "It has been this way since I have lived here."

That the looks of her apartment wasn't very appealing to the child hardly came as a surprise. They were to none of the few people that had visited her over time, even if most of those had been too polite to admit it. For herself though, it always had been sufficient.

"But doesn't it make you feel sad?" the child tried further. "You need something to make it look more happy!"

"I never felt the need to change anything."

"I know! We draw some pictures and put them on the wall!" Aki exclaimed and held her new box of crayons up, apparently not even having listened. Her eyes darted around the room in search of something. "Don't you have any... Ah!"

She quickly toddled over to the cupboard, where Rei's satchel lay open, and retrieved a stack of print-outs from school, examining the blank backsides. "We can use these!" she stated without even asking Rei for her opinion on that matter.

But there was no need to care about that anyway. She hadn't been at school for a long time. And soon

enough, no one ever would anymore.

Aki naturally didn't care about such thoughts though, she found herself a spot on the floor where she dropped the papers, laid the box of crayons next to it, got on her knees and started to draw right away like she didn't even have to think about a motif.

Rei watched the girl filling the paper with various colors, changing the crayons every so often, when she noticed something right next to Aki shining in the artificial light. After she had lost her trust in him; her faint hope that she might be more important to him than just a pawn in his scenario after all, she had crushed the symbol of that hope and simply dropped it on the floor where it had remained ever since. She had never bothered to remove it, as it was no obstacle let alone a threat to her. Children of Aki's age, however, were known to be oblivious to such a possible danger, so she went and carefully picked up the sharp remains of the broken glasses, the brown-haired girl seemingly too lost in her work to notice her.

She carried them to the rarely used bin, but just as she was about to drop them, her hand wouldn't move. Rei suddenly wondered whether or not it really was just indifference that had prevented her from having done this earlier. While it had been easy to pretend to ignore the glasses she had held dear for so long as they lay on the ground, they had always remained in sight. Now they would be gone for good.

It was certainly strange to feel such attachment to a lifeless object. Was it still... because of him...?

The broken remains fell heavily in the empty trash.

Turning around, Rei expected Aki to still be working on her picture, but that was lying alone with the scattered wax-pens. Instead, the girl was blocking her path, holding one of the papers and a dark-green crayon up to her.

"You too!"

"I have no experience in arts."

Aki tilted her head to the side, which didn't appear to be a sign of understanding. Eventually, she held out the drawing utensils again. "You too!"

As arguments were apparently of no use, Rei took the crayon and paper, watching Aki as she instantly ran back to her workspace to lie down and start drawing again with wild strokes.

Rei stared at the blank sheet in her hand. She had never drawn anything in her life before, but she didn't really wonder how to form shapes on the paper. However, she was at loss at what to choose as motif. It wasn't even that there was too little to choose from, quite the contrary.

As she stared at the white space, it felt as if it was calling to her, offering her a chance to fill the emptiness with anything that she wanted to express, anything that she never could otherwise. She had never realized how much that was. She just couldn't decide.

The humming of a soft tune snapped her out of her thoughts and her gaze wandered back to the young girl lying on her stomach, feet kicking absently in the air. And as if on its own, the green crayon in her hand started to move over the paper's surface, lines becoming structures, structures becoming detailed forms.

"Whoaa!" an amazed exclamation next to her ended the trance-like work. "Is that me?"

Rei blinked, looking at the picture in whole for the first time, and it felt as if it hadn't even been her who created it. "Yes."

"That's really good!"

It was indeed. At least as much as Rei could tell. There seemed to be no flaws in form and proportions, the shading creating a sense of depth, the fine details showing the characteristics of the girl precisely, so that, if she hadn't kept her face down on her own papers, she would have been instantly recognizable. It was as much of a perfect copy as was possible with a single-colored pen.

"Here, I've made one of you too!" Aki proudly exclaimed, pulling one of her many pictures out of the heap and running back to her. It was a grotesque stick-figure with wild blue streaks as hair, two thick red lines as eyes and – rather unlike her real self – a broad smile. Glancing over into the hopeful eyes of the child, she wasn't sure what Aki was waiting for.

"How you like it?" she eventually ended Rei's wondering.

Taken aback, the teen didn't answer immediately. Being honest was likely to hurt the girl's feelings, and Rei didn't want that. But wouldn't she also do the same by lying to her?

"The... shade of blue is well chosen," she eventually settled for.

Apparently, it was enough of a compliment for the girl as her smile widened before she eagerly returned to her workspace. Rei quietly followed, a certain curiosity sparked as she saw how many pictures the young artist had already produced.

"Is blue your favorite color?"

The sudden question surprised her. "I have not chosen a color to prefer above all others."

"But you like it?"

Rei pondered about that. Did the color have any meaning to her? "It is... comforting."

"My favorite color is red!" Aki declared proudly, not aware of the conflict she put her hostess in.

"Red...?"

She may not have picked a favorite color, but she did hold an aversion against red. It wasn't a conscious choice, rather an instinctive one, so it felt better not to voice it in the presence of this girl who liked it so much.

"Yeah! I like red things! They remind me of Mama's hair," Aki continued, her voice growing weaker at the last sentence.

"Your mother's hair...?" Rei repeated. "That information might prove helpful in locating your parents."

"Huh?" Aki now stopped drawing and looked up at her. "Why?"

"Red is a relatively uncommon pigmentation for hair," she explained. "Even more so in Asian countries like ours. I am in contact with only one person who sports hair of that color."

Leaning over the girl's shoulder to look at her current work, a picture of what seemed to be a family came into her view. The person with short reddish "hair" was not to be missed. "Does that represent your mother?"

"Yeah! That's Mama, that's Papa, and that's me!" Aki listed, pointing at each of the figures. "And that's Kiko I'm holding!"

Rei didn't quite understand the feeling the picture evoked. It seemed impossible to recognize someone from such a simple drawing that lacked anything but the most obvious characteristics, and even if it had been detailed, she was sure that she had probably never met these people.

And yet, there was something strangely familiar about them.

-x-x-x-x-

One hour later, a yawn announced the end of the art session. Rei couldn't know that it was already long after Aki's bedtime when the girl gathered the sprawled sheets.

"Have to put them on the wall now," she declared as she presented Rei the heap, now much less energetic than before.

"I am unsure if I have something to attach them to the wall."

"No sticky tape?" The voice was low, but whether from disappointment or tiredness, Rei could not tell.

Not wanting to add to it if the former was the case, her eyes wandered through the apartment in search of an adequate alternative. They came to rest on top of the refrigerator where her medical supplies lay. Quickly striding over to it, she easily found what she was looking for.

Retrieving a good length of the alternate material, she looked for approval, which she received in the form of a smile and a nod.

In a matter of minutes, all the pictures were spread over the once desolate wall above the bed, held with pieces of band-aid in each corner.

Rei stared awhile at the unfamiliar decoration, at the unfamiliar fact of having a decoration at all, something that served no other purpose than making the room look less "sad".

And she had to admit that it succeeded.

-x-x-x-x-

Rei couldn't sleep that night. She couldn't tell whether it was from the anxiousness she felt or from sharing not only her room, but also her bed with another person for the first time. She wasn't used to such close proximity and she wasn't sure if it felt pleasant or repellent to her, but either way, she didn't try to escape it. Unlike her, Aki had actively searched it in her sleep, having shifted closer to her and cuddled up against the teen.

As she lay awake, Rei watched the warm body pressed against her. The pale light of the full moon illuminated the room enough to see every detail of the brown-haired girl, the soft features of the child's face that contorted every so often in her dreams.

'What would it be like to hold someone?' she couldn't help but wonder. As if on its own, her right hand reached out for the child's head. It moved only slowly, hesitatingly, but Rei couldn't stop it either, until it almost touched, just a fraction of an inch and...

"Mama," a low whimper suddenly escaped the girl as she clutched tighter on Rei's shirt. "Papa..."

Though she never had been able to experience one herself, she could tell that the child apparently was having a restless dream. That had been the third time she had called out for her parents in her sleep.

Rei's fingers lingered in the air for another second... but then glided carefully through the brown hair. And to her surprise, it seemed to have a soothing effect on both of them. Maybe she just felt better because Aki was no longer clinging onto her as tightly as before, but seeing the drying tears glittering in the moonlight, she knew it was something else: She disliked seeing the girl sad.

This child...

She seemed so... pure.

If she would have needed any proof that Instrumentality was not the only hope for humanity to evolve, it lay right there. Humanity was born anew with each child that saw the light of the day. It was up to those around them to ensure that they would not be corrupted, that they would not suffer the pain of loneliness.

Up to her...?

-x-x-x-x-

Eventually, she had fallen asleep as well, but it couldn't have been for long. The moon was still in a position to shine brightly through her windows. But that wasn't what had woken her up.

She could feel it. It was calling her, louder than ever before. The time to fulfill her destiny was close.

She didn't make any sound as she stood up, not bothering to dress herself in more than the shirt she wore, and silently stepped to the door.

Just one more time she wanted to swim, before he would call her. Then, she finally would be free again; free from the pains and worries that haunted her in this world.

Yes, that was the voice she was supposed to listen to. Not the one that frightened her; the one telling her that her whole reason for existence was wrong, that his selfish wishes didn't matter any longer. The one that lately made her question the righteousness in this way for humanity.

If she listened to that voice, she would never be able to –

"Where you're goin'?"

Rei's eyes shot wide open. Her hand didn't even touch the door's handle.

Slowly she turned to see Aki sitting sleepily on the bed. She had always known of the consequences of her purpose, that humanity would lose themselves against their will by her hand. Humanity never meant much to her.

Though there had been exceptions. Commander Ikari at first, later his son, the Major and even Soryu. However, none of them was able to remind her of the consequences, to remind her that they too would be gone along with her. But this little girl that she didn't even know for a day had reached her heart by just being there.

She couldn't. She couldn't let this child lose herself. She couldn't let her get harmed in any way.

"Quick!" Rei ordered as she hastily went back to the bed, picking up Aki's clothes from the floor and placing them on the mattress. "Get up and dress! We have to leave!"

"Now?" Aki groaned tiredly.

"Now' might already be too late..."

As whatever was going to happen in the following hours, this city would be far from being a safe place for her.

-x-x-x-x-

It was an unusual sight for this hour of the day: Two girls, a teenage one with blue hair in a school uniform holding the hand of a barefooted, brown-haired toddler with oversized clothes as they waited at the platform for the only line that would take them out to the outskirts at this time. But no one who could have seen them would be at this desolate station until several hours later.

The train that finally arrived after 38 minutes wasn't much different. One passenger lay sleeping on the bench, a newspaper over his face shielding his eyes from the artificial light. Another one sat, but his face was downcast and hidden by a baseball cap that was as dirty as the rest of his clothes. A heavy stench of alcohol filled the air.

Rei led Aki quickly to the next, empty car. They sat there in silence while the train drove onwards, stopping now and then, but no one was joining the ride. The girl that had been so energetic and

talkative before, now just rested her head against Rei's side, close to losing the fight to keep her eyelids open. The only sound that would come from her now and then was a yawn.

Usually, all that Rei would do during such rides was to sit straight and stare ahead until her stop came, not minding her surroundings in the train or the landscape that passed by. But this time, she found her eyes fixated on the small body that pressed against hers.

It helped her to remain calm. She could hardly believe that she was really doing this; running away from her very purpose in life, defying the man that created her. For once she wouldn't follow his orders. From now on, she would have to make her own decisions for her life... as long as that would last.

She had broken free of her bonds, but had given up her safety. All that just for her.

So it was only normal to feel nervous, afraid to have made a mistake... wasn't it?

"*Dear Passengers,*" an announcement from the internal speakers of the train brought her out of her thoughts, "*due to damage to the rails from the last attack, this train will end at our next stop in Togendai. Passengers to Gora please change for line 14, passengers to Gotemba can use the bus to Sengoku. Your ticket will be accepted there. We apologize for any inconveniences.*"

Rei frowned at the announcement. "The line was not damaged in the fight. Something is not right," she mused. Glancing over to Aki, she decided to trust her feeling of alarm. "We have to get off now."

She stood up, pulling Aki with her before the stumbling, drowsy girl was able to comprehend the situation; gripped the handle for the emergency break and put all her strength into its activation. The screech pained her ears, and Aki, too, instinctively covered hers as the train shook in its unintended attempt to stop. The final jolt almost swiped her off her feet, but she managed to keep her balance. Hurrying over to the next door, where Rei used the emergency activation, they rushed out as quickly as possible.

"Where're we goin'?"

Rei stopped shortly, but didn't answer the girl she had tugged along just yet. Her eyes went far back to where the lights of the station illuminated several people, obviously armed. And of course, they already had taken notice of the premature halt of the train. It would only be a few minutes until they got there to search for the reason behind it.

Her eyes then went to the dark mountains that loomed over them, appearing even huger, so close to the city's borders.

"Rei?" Aki asked again, "Where are we going?"

"Away," she told her. "As far as possible."

-x-x-x-x-

"I'm tired and my feet hurt," Aki whined with honest discomfort. "Let's stop here."

Contemplating, Rei looked at her exhausted companion, breathing hard herself. It wasn't as hot as on her hiking trip with Ikari and Soryu, but their long, steep way through the woods had taken its toll on both of them. Yet she also knew that they were still far from being a safe distance away from the city.

It had been a few hours since they got off the train; morning had long settled in.

"It might have been wiser to get you appropriate footwear," Rei told the child.

"Footwear?"

"Shoes," she specified.

"I don't like shoes," Aki pouted, apparently having had such a discussion already before. "They make my feet get hot and sweaty and stinky."

"They would protect the soles of your feet," Rei argued. "Our progress could be much faster."

Aki just craned her head questioningly.

"They would not hurt as much now," the pilot specified.

"It's not that. I can walk here. Just not so long."

Rei closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath herself. As she opened them again, she noticed that they had reached a small clearing. A few large boulders lay scattered around, inviting to be used as natural seats. "We can rest here for a few minutes," she declared and went to sit down on one of the flat rocks, Aki following suit by climbing on a stone opposite to hers.

It was then that she noticed that she could see the city of Tokyo-3 from there.

Below there, he would be waiting for her, expecting her to fulfill her purpose, to bring him to the one whose image she was built after. She could still hear the call that wanted her to return, seeming to only grow louder the farther she got away, sounding so tempting, so alluring, so...

"Something wrong?"

Rei gasped in shock. She hadn't realized until now that she was shaking, cold sweat mixing with the perspiration from the straining walk. Her eyes wearily went over to the concerned-looking child in front of her, still waiting for an answer.

"I... yes... no..." Rei shook her head. "I am not sure..."

"If something's wrong you would know!" Aki spoke assuredly.

Sensing that the girl wouldn't be appeased that easily, Rei nodded. "I... was supposed to do something. My whole life was dedicated to that task. But I decided against it."

"Why?"

"It might have brought great pain to many people," Rei told the curious child, not mentioning that she was the major reason for her decision. "And I do not want that to happen."

Aki cocked her head to the side. "But why are you sad then?"

Sad? Rei wondered if that was just the girl's limited vocabulary again – or if this feeling could indeed be described as that. "I am disappointing someone with my insolence," she explained. "Someone very important to me, who had been there for me my entire life. But... recently... I am confused about my feelings for him. And I have been questioning his motives. I have come to the conclusion that I can not possibly help him. That it is not right." Her now quivering hands wrinkled her skirt as they dug into it. "But... but still... I... I feel..."

Her shaking stopped abruptly as she felt small arms loosely hugging her waist. She hadn't even noticed Aki coming over to her, but raising her head she found herself looking into the empathetic face of the young girl.

"I don't know about that someone," Aki mumbled. "But I still like you."

At first, Rei didn't know how to react, confronted with such honest care. It seemed much too easy how her sorrow was eased by those words. But then she remembered what she was supposed to do in such a situation.

"Thank you," she said smiling.

A loud thunder above startled both of them, Aki jumped screaming into Rei's arms. The First Children instantly recognized the source as a VTOL roaring above their heads towards the city. And apparently it wasn't the only one.

Listening closely, she noticed the sound of explosions in the distance.

"It has begun," she whispered to herself, but Aki heard.

"What has?"

Rei regarded her small companion. "Never mind that now. We have to go on," she declared, pulling the girl behind her. They were too much in the open in the clearing. If only one person in the numerous aircraft would look down, she would easily be recognized, putting both of them in danger.

But Aki didn't follow, having dug her heels in. Turning to her, Rei could see that she was staring at the city, where two familiar giants had appeared to intercept the assault force. The child seemed to be surprised by the sight – but apparently not frightened at all.

"Are those... armors?" she asked Rei, sounding hopeful. "Hu-huge armors, blessed with... with the mothers' spirits?"

Rei frowned in surprise, but Aki already explained unquestioned. "Papa once told me about them!"

"Did he...?"

-x-x-x-x-

Aki's words followed Rei as they continued their way through the woods, trying to leave the raging battle behind. It could have been a mere coincidence. The Evangelions were well known by now, so the father might have made up a story that came closer to the truth than he had known himself. Or maybe the girl just drew connections to some entirely different tale.

But the suspicion that had formed was only strengthened, as the question remained: What if not?

"Ein Männlein steht im Walde ganz still und stumm,"

Rei blinked as the melody chimed above the steady explosions and gunfire that had grown noticeable louder since EVAs joined the battle, interrupting her thoughts.

"Es hat vor lauter Purpur ein Mäntlein um,"

She turned around to the small source, singing quietly to herself as she climbed over a rock.

"Sagt, wer mag das Männlein sein,
Das da steht im Wald allein,"

"Aki," Rei disturbed the song, "please remain silent."

The child flinched, visibly shocked at the sudden prohibition. "I... I just tried... those loud sounds..." Aki mumbled an excuse, apparently thinking she had done something she could be punished for.

"I apologize," Rei quickly moved to clarify. "But your singing might attract someone."

"Would that be bad?" Aki naively asked.

"There are men out there who might... hurt us should they find us," she tried to formulate it in a way that would scare the child the least.

But the silence that followed for once bothered Rei herself. And not just because she came to another realization.

"Those words... they were German, were they not?" she asked, turning back to the following child.

Aki nodded. "Mama taught me. She said I was better than Papa," she exclaimed proudly, but her mood changed at the memory. "He never minded that. He then just told me 'That's good for you' and ruffled my hair. I... I always said I didn't like it when he did that, but... but..." Her lips quivered as she sniffed, tears escaping her eyes. "But I-I did!"

She stopped, crying openly now.

Rei hesitated for only a second. She went to the wailing girl and knelt down to her, her pale hands carefully cupping the tear stained face. It had the desired effect of calming Aki down and causing her to look up at her.

"Do not worry," Rei told her. "You will soon see your parents again."

"Really...?"

She nodded sincerely. "Really."

A large shadow suddenly darkened the area, the sounds of giant wings making her look up, but it was already gone. Dread was filling her, this thing having been so different from the aircraft she knew.

She started to sprint without second thoughts, the startled Aki after her, until they reached another clearing from where she could confirm her fear.

"The EVA series?" she whispered to herself.

The small fingers trembled as they dug tightly into the skirt of her uniform, along with the body that pressed cowering against her. "They- they hurt Mama!" Aki whimpered with fearful hiccups.

Rei didn't take her eyes off the nine white winged creatures as they descended in a perfect circle toward their designated prey. Outnumbered by technologically advanced models, it would be a hard fight for NERV's EVAs to prove that assumption wrong. Especially for the cable-dependent Unit-02 that only had the expertise of its pilot as a real advantage over the mindless beasts.

A loud stomping broke Rei's concentration; the earth shook as the sound's source rapidly neared. Even she jerked in surprise as it suddenly leaped over their heads, another giant shadow blocking the sun for a moment.

Watching the bulky mass of the Jet Alone storming onto the battlefield, where the fight had already started, Rei placed her arm on the frightened girl's back and pulled her closer. "No," she told her quietly. "They won't."

-x-x-x-x-

It had been hard at first to get the child back to moving on again, the three years old being too engrossed in the sight of the Evangelions, but Rei had managed before the fight could start for real. They had come a good way, when the trees suddenly parted, revealing an empty road.

Rei peered in both directions to make sure it was indeed deserted, before she climbed over the guardrail and helped Aki over it. She quickly urged the both of them into the woods on the other side. The road would have made their travel over the mountain easier, but even though the sounds and tremors emitted by the fighting giants were only faint in the distance, they were not far enough away from the battle zone yet to risk walking in the open.

However, the fleeting feeling of safety of the surrounding woods was short lived. The road must have taken a sharp turn, as they suddenly found themselves on the parking space of an outlook post – facing a patrol jeep with three just as startled soldiers of the JSSDF who were leaning against their vehicle.

The second of surprise wore off much too quickly though, giving not nearly enough time to escape, as

the soldiers raised their weapons at the two girls. Not thinking twice, Rei moved protectively in front of Aki, who seemed to be overwhelmed by the situation, cowering against her defender.

"Hide," she told the little girl quietly. "Hold your ears and do not look back until I say different."

"What... what about you?" Aki's frightful voice asked.

"Do not worry about me. Now leave, quickly. I will be with you soon. Until then, do not look back," she repeated once more. It took several more agonizing seconds during which she stared warningly at the carefully nearing soldiers, until the nervous child finally came to a decision and Rei felt relieved to hear the small feet hurrying back into the woods.

She didn't feel threatened by the men's rifles. She was not afraid to die. But she did not want Aki to see the bloodshed. This pure being was not to be stained. At any cost.

"HEY!" the man who must have been the commanding officer yelled after Aki. "Yoshida, get after that girl!"

"I..." Now she felt panic. These men... that they wanted to kill her was understandable. But that they were willing to hunt down and kill an innocent being was unforgivable. So the panic became the spark that lit an emotion that frightened her, but also fueled her determination.

"I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO HARM HER!" Rei doubted that combat-trained soldiers felt very intimidated by the display of a teenage girl standing there with arms still protectively spread, but they halted as she raised her voice in anger.

"Geez, do you really think they were training toddlers as pilots of those monsters?" the more nervous man to the officer's left asked. "That kid wasn't on the list."

"I don't care!" the officer snapped back. "She was with this one and *SHE*'s definitely one of the pilots. There aren't many kids with blue hair and red eyes. That other child is probably the first of a new batch NERV's been breeding and now that they know we're here to stop their plans, they're trying to get it to safety to start again in a few years."

Rei only felt her irritation growing by the paranoid thoughts. "She is in no relation with..."

"SHUT UP!" the agitated officer silenced her. "You may not know it, girly, but you pilots are to be shot on sight! Ishida!" He gestured at the soldier to his right, who slowly nodded and took aim.

Rei closed her eyes, trying to calm her breathing and rapid heartbeat that was unreasonably fast just from the sight of the weapon pointing at her. She focused, preparing herself for the shot – but nothing happened.

"What are you waiting for?" the squad leader demanded angrily after several uneventful seconds.

"I..." the soldier swallowed before he abruptly lowered his rifle. "I'm sorry, Sir, I... I just can't shoot an unarmed civilian."

The officer's anger boiled. "Where the hell were you during the briefings?! We can't afford any mercy!"

"I know!" Ishida yelled back.

"They said anyone who would have second thoughts is to stay out of it!"

"I KNOW! Hell, I requested only a position in the patrol units for a reason!" He breathed angrily.

"Damnit, I don't want the end of the world either, but... Shit, I have a daughter that age!"

But the leader didn't show understanding. "If you don't shoot right now, I'll charge you with treason!"

"I don't care! At least I'll have a clear conscience!"

The officer snorted with disgust. "Fine! I'll do it myself then!" he declared, raising his weapon to take aim. "I'll never understand how you passed the..." The sound of a gunshot ended his sentence. His uniform was drenched in blood before his body hit the ground.

Ishida hurred around for his other companion, but Yoshida's reflexes were faster. His shocked face made it apparent that he didn't even realize in his attempt to survive what he was doing, until the shot sounded and Ishida collapsed at his feet.

Rei expected this to be enough of a diversion to escape, but Yoshida noticed her before she could move more than two steps.

"S-STOP!" He called with a voice that was just as shaky as his hands holding the blood-stained weapon, which he now pointed back at her. The shock of the last few seconds had left him pale. The shock of one of them becoming a traitor. The shock of having killed that former colleague, maybe even long time friend.

But now, he surely would not hesitate to kill the one who was indirectly responsible for it.

He never got that far. A shot came out of nowhere, chipping a small piece of concrete from the road; another hitting right in front of the panicking soldier; before a last one pierced his shoulder. He screamed as he dropped his gun and then fell himself, cringing in pain while he held his wound.

Confused, Rei looked around, now finally aware of the sound of a nearing VTOL. As she turned toward it, she saw that it was apparently trying to land on the road at a safe distance. At the sight of the uniformed men, she at first feared they were coming to the assistance of these fallen JSSDF members; the last shots aimed at her, but fatally gone astray. She had no hope left for escape in that moment.

But then she noticed a familiar face ahead of the nearing men.

"I appreciate your assistance, Mr. Kaji," she greeted him when he was close enough. That he was supposed to be dead didn't bother her much, as he was – obviously – not.

"No problem," the pony-tailed man shrugged the thanks off. "Though it was sure a surprise seeing you out here."

"I attempted to escape before they would strike," Rei admitted calmly. "I was sure that it would not be safe at the headquarters."

Kaji regarded her for a moment, but she felt no desire to tell him more. "I wasn't quite talking about safety reasons..."

"I..." She was taken aback by his prodding, even though it wasn't entirely unexpected. The previous shame for her betrayal returned shortly as she wondered about how much she had to say until he was satisfied. "I had my reasons not to... assist the Commander..."

He didn't seem entirely pleased, but nodded. "Very well then, that should ease things a lot. Sakamoto!" he yelled over to one of the soldiers that had accompanied him. "Do we have room for a hitcher?"

"I'm afraid it'd get a little cramped with these three already!" Sakamoto answered, pointing at the three fallen soldiers that were being carried into the VTOL.

Kaji scratched his chin, his eyes falling on the patrol's jeep.

"You think you can end this on your own?" he called over once more.

He winced slightly as Sakamoto raised his thumb, obviously not all that happy about the answer.

"Okay then," Kaji turned back to Rei. "We'll take that jeep and I'll get you to wherever you want until this is over."

Rei nodded, but didn't move to follow him as he started to walk to the vehicle. Her eyes lingered on the blood-stained concrete. "Could you drive the car to the other side of the woods? I do not wish to pass this scene again."

"Um, sure," she heard him behind her as she was heading to the forest where Aki had gone, "but why can't I just take you with me right now?"

She stopped shortly. "I have to pick someone up," she merely announced before entering the woods.

Any worry that the girl would have run too far in fear was short-lived, as Rei quickly spotted her "hiding" behind a tree that was actually thinner than her. If anything would have gone wrong, it was unlikely that she would have survived. But at least the chances were high that she hadn't witnessed too much, as she was cowering towards the opposite direction, clenching her eyes shut and covering her ears as she had been told to.

It worked well enough that Rei had to touch her after two failed vocal attempts to get Aki's notice, the child gasping in surprise as the hand came in contact with her head. "The danger was averted," Rei told her, now that she had her attention. "We can leave now."

Aki didn't ask for details. She took Rei's retreating hand to coax the teen into helping her up to her feet and didn't let go as they left the woods. She even tightened the grip, flinching when she saw Mr. Kaji in the jeep waiting for them on the road.

"Do not worry," Rei tried to soothe her. "He is here to help us."

Aki glanced once more from him to Rei and back again before she let out a timid "Hi..."

The man seemed equally baffled at the sight of the shy little girl hiding behind the other's skirt. A just-lit cigarette was quickly flipped out of the car without Kaji taking his eyes away from Aki.

"Um... hi?" he greeted back, giving Rei a look that she knew as one searching for answers.

"Her name is Aki. I met her yesterday," she explained quickly. "I am helping her find her parents. May we get going now?"

"Yeah, sure. Hop in," he muttered, still staring, but now giving the child a friendly smile. "I didn't mean to scare you, little one. Just... could it be that I know your parents?"

"I don't know you," Aki answered truthfully as she was helped by Rei into the backseat.

Kaji laughed. "No, I don't think we have met before. I wouldn't forget such a lovely little lady," he catered to her. "But there's something in your eyes that seems familiar..."

"I am certain that we will meet up with her parents soon," Rei interrupted, feeling the need to remind him of the severe situation at hand despite the shimmer of hope in Aki's eyes. "That is, as long as we start moving eventually."

"Right," Kaji turned back to the wheel. "So where do you want to go?"

"I was planning on leaving the city as far as possible and tried to head for Gotemba or Hadano. But if you will indeed manage to stop the attack, that will no longer be necessary."

"So you're okay with going to NERV then?"

"No," she shook her head. "Take us to my apartment. If the raid on the headquarters has been as aggressive as I fear, I do not wish to take her there now, even if it has ended by the time we arrive."

"Very well then," he announced as he shifted the gears, giving one last longing look at the ascending VTOL that just roared over their heads in direction of the Geofront.

Kaji neared the city more carefully, taking detours obviously to avoid any further dangerous encounters or getting caught between the fronts until they got notice that the firing has definitely ceased. Not to mention the fight among the EVAs that could reach them in a matter of seconds if just one of the giants were to leap in their direction.

Rei every so often shot glances at Aki. The fight was far from being harmless, none of the participants seemed to be without at least some bloody cuts from the sharp weapons that were used, even some limbs were missing. And just now, the enemy EVAs were gathering around the Jet Alone that had gone silent for some reason, ripping it to shreds.

It was hard to tell what scars such a fight could form on this innocent soul. Even more so with her... personal connection.

But fortunately, the lack of sleep was finally taking its toll on the girl now that she was feeling safe and her eyes fought harder to stay up than to bother watching the monsters outside.

A deafening explosion suddenly hit the jeep, shaking the vehicle through and through. Kaji's quick reflexes saved them from being turned over, the car turning halfway as it came to a screeching halt after the shockwave passed them.

It took only one look in the direction of the source to confirm Rei's fear. It was hard to tell if it was one of the enemies that had fallen and taken several of his brethren with it, but that didn't matter. EVA-02 was no longer on the battlefield.

Dread filled her as she looked at the unaware girl who was still covering her ears and clenching her eyes shut as though unsure whether or not the frightening experience was already over. Kaji, of course, understood instantly, just as Rei did. She could see the grief in the man's eyes as they met hers. But he had faced death often enough not to be disabled by the shock and pain.

"We should get going," he muttered gravely.

Rei was about to nod in agreement... but then it hit her. Just as Kaji turned the jeep back on course, an enormous amount of pain, despair and rage surged through her, with an intensity even beyond what she had thought herself capable of, if it had come from herself.

"Oh no..."

The others didn't seem to notice until a few seconds later, as a loud thunderstorm darkened the sky out of nowhere. But the sound wasn't a thunder. It was the roaring scream of EVA-01 as it spread its wings.

"Holy shit..." she heard Kaji cursing in awe, but she barely recognized it through the numbing emotions that were carried by the deafening scream.

"Ikari..." she begged quietly, clutching her aching head. "Ikari, don't..."

"What... what's happening?" Aki asked fearfully.

"He's calling it," Rei muttered, not sure herself whether she was answering or just stating the feelings that were surging through her. "He's calling it to end... to end everything..."

"Who's what?" Kaji asked with concern from the driver's seat.

"Ikari!" she repeated, almost yelling in pain. "Quick! We have to contact him! Before it is too late!"

"I doubt that we can. We'd be lucky just to find an open NERV frequency," Kaji argued, but was already working on the radio with one hand anyway.

"It... it's too late. It's coming..."

"...INJI, STOP IT ALREADY!" a familiar voice suddenly blared through the noise of the comm.

The pain, the infinite grief of an unbearable loss was instantly washed away by a tremendous relief that Rei wasn't sure of if it was just his, or her own as well. Looking back at the battlefield, she saw the Lance of Longinus pointing right at Unit-01's core – but was held safely in its hands.

The small passenger next to her was much too excited by something else to notice. "That..." she said hastily, pointing at the radio. "That was..."

"Yes," Rei concurred, nodding weakly, "that was her."

-X-X-X-X-

They couldn't see the end of the fight, their path taking them around a mountain shielding the view of the EVAs. But with Shinji wielding the Lance of Longinus, there was little doubt that he would easily finish off the enemies that survived Unit-02's self-destruction.

When it was finally announced over the comm that all combat operations were to be ceased, and all units were ordered to retreat and wait for further instructions, relief washed over the two inhabitants of the jeep who could make use of that information.

It was over. While it was impossible to tell yet if they'd be able to call it a victory, they were safe for now.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rei screamed.

They had just stopped the vehicle in front of the apartment building she was living in, but the moment she stepped out of the jeep, her whole body screamed in pain. She broke down, oblivious to the frantic calls of her two companions. This pain was different from the one she had felt from Ikari. This seemed much more physical. She felt like she was on fire, her skin, then the flesh below it, burning. And the flames only stopped as they were crushed along with her body. Then...

It was all gone in a single instance.

"Rei!" she heard Aki's upset voice as she lifted herself up from the sidewalk, accepting Kaji's help halfway. The little girl wiped her sniffing nose with her arm. "Y-you awight?"

She had to look down at herself before she answered, surprising herself: "Yes."

"What happened?" Kaji inquired. "Something about Shinji again?"

"No... I think, Lilith..." she paused, as the meaning of that thought manifested in her mind, "Lilith's body was destroyed."

"Lilith...? HEY, careful!" He steadied her as she made a weak step, threatening to fall again. "Should I come up with you?"

"That will not be necessary," Rei assured him, the dizziness slowly fading. "And I take it you wish to go to NERV as soon as possible."

"Okay," Kaji gave in after a few seconds of thought. "But be careful. Who knows if they didn't leave any surprises."

They didn't wait to see him off. Taking Aki's hand in hers, she led the girl up the stairs to her apartment. The destruction was already evident before they even entered, the door having endured a heavy blast, as a large bulge showed in the metal. It only grew worse as they entered. There hadn't been much for

the soldiers to ravage, but they had apparently taken what they could get.

Leaving the still baffled Aki behind, she went to the bed that had been thrown to the side, and strained to pull the heavy frame over until gravity took over, letting it land crashing back on its legs. The little girl's attention was returned to her by the loud sound, but her offered assistance as Rei heaved the mattress back up was rather redundant as she could hardly provide the necessary strength. As the bed was set, albeit not in its old position but diagonally in the room, she motioned for Aki to get on it.

"You can rest here now. I will search for your parents."

"Can't... can't I come with you?" the girl asked timidly, obviously scared by the thought of being left alone even if only for a short period of time, most of which she would probably spend sleeping.

"You are tired, are you not?" Aki reluctantly nodded. "The necessary trip might take an hour or longer. It is in your best interest to rest."

"But..." Aki muttered, trailing off. Apparently she was waiting for something to continue explaining her problem.

"But?" she repeated as offer.

"But w-what if the bad men come back?" she finished, cowering at the thought.

Rei regarded the frightened child for a moment. It would most likely make no sense trying to argue that the JSSDF soldiers were retreating and no longer a threat to their lives. Her eyes went to the next room, hidden by the partly ripped-down curtain.

"If you hear someone coming, you can take cover behind there," she advised, knowing fully well that it would provide no safety at all if someone would indeed try to harm her. But Aki accepted it with a nod, before lying down on the mattress, nestling her head in the just retrieved pillow.

Seeing her eyes closing, Rei turned to leave. She didn't get very far though. "Rei? Can you... stay here until I'm asleep?"

She didn't answer. She just went back and sat down on the mattress, where she remained for ten more minutes.

-x-x-x-x-

As she walked through the desolate city, Rei's thoughts still searched for an explanation for the conclusion she had come to. She still didn't know how it was possible, but she knew that it had to be. The mother's heritage. The father's knowledge and well-known words. And most of all the familiarity that she felt with the girl.

The last doubts had begun fading when Aki recognized the enemy's EVA series, then had been entirely wiped out when she identified her mother's voice.

While she couldn't find a logical explanation, while she didn't know how, she *knew* the identity of Aki's parents.

As she reached an access to the depth of the Geofront, a lone guard stood visibly shaken at the demolished entrance, a haunted look on his face. The rifle in his hand was held anything but steady. The JSSDF had apparently used a small warhead or several explosive charges to gain entry as only debris and blackened walls served as reminders of the heavy gates. That, and being the only man at a position that was meant to be secured by three, after such an attack, was enough to make the pale guard overly nervous at the mere sound of her feet.

"Halt! Who's...?" He lowered the gun as he recognized her distinguishing features. "Pilot Ayanami?"

She did not waste time with unnecessary greetings. "Where can I find pilots Ikari and Soryu?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Shinji had been surprisingly lucky and had been able to leave the infirmary rather quickly. He had almost caught up with the girls as they reached the apartment complex, but they had walked in just as he wanted to shout for them. Hurrying after them, he ran up the stairs before he came panting to a stop in front of 402's demolished door. He hoped Rei had waited with that important announcement.

However, as he opened the door and stepped in, he instantly knew he had missed everything.

He found himself unable to move as his mind was busy contemplating whether the scene before him could actually be real or if he was still in the bed in the infirmary, dreaming an impossible dream. Light sobs rang through the air from where Asuka was kneeling on the floor, her good arm tightly wrapped around a little brown-haired girl that was hugging her back.

His little brown-haired girl.

"You're hurt," the voice he had longed to hear again for so many months said as Aki noticed the bandages on her mother's shoulder, but Asuka quickly shook her head.

"It's not bad. Not anymore," she hushed, probably lying partially. She must still have felt it, but he could easily figure that it was overshadowed by far by the feeling of holding her daughter in her arms again.

"Where have you been? And how come you look so strange? Your hair... it's so long."

"It's a long story," Asuka half sobbed, half chuckled. "I-I'll cut the hair as soon as we're home, okay?"

But Aki shook her head. "It looks nice," she said, backing off to regard her mother. "Are you sad?"

"No," Asuka laughed. "No, not at all."

"But you're crying...?"

Asuka cupped her daughters cheek, stroking it twice as if to reassure her of Aki's presence herself.

"Smile when you're happy. Cry when you're sad," she repeated their old promise. "And do both when you're happier than you've ever been."

The girl didn't seem to understand completely, but nodded anyway. His girl...

"Aki..." he finally managed to breath out, calling the attention to him.

"Papa?" she said wonderingly, staring at him for another moment before she separated from her mother and laughingly ran to him, reaching her arms out to have him pick her up.

He would have done so anyway.

She squealed as he pulled her up, holding her tight. That small warm body against his, that sweet scent flooding his nostrils; he hadn't forgotten this, but it had never seemed so intense. He didn't want to ever let her go again.

Aki, however, apparently had other ideas as she backed off a bit. "You look funny too!"

"And you... you look just like the little angel I remember," Shinji breathed out, the silliness of his words eliciting an embarrassed giggle from the girl in his arms. His eyes briefly met those of his wife, looking at them contentedly as she reluctantly rose from the floor. "Just how did you get here?"

The question had rather been aimed at himself, but of course, she decided to answer anyway in the ever so enthusiastic way of a three years old. "I dunno, I woke up and all my toys were gone, even Kiko, and

my pictures too and you and Mama weren't there, but that scary lady, who wasn't that scary actually 'cause she gave me cookies, but back then I thought she was scary so I ran away and everything was all weird and loud outside and so many people! I was really scared then, but then I met Rei and we went to an authority who wore some funny suit and we got new crayons, but they didn't just let me have them, 'cause they wanted some paper for it but they didn't just say so!" She pointed at the wall. "We did those pictures with the crayons! You like them?"

"Yes," Shinji laughed, pulling his energetic child close to him again. He only understood half of her story at best, but that didn't matter. It felt so good to have her back in his arms after all the time he had feared he'd never be able to hold her anymore. He would listen to anything she wanted to tell him, any drawing of hers would be a masterpiece worthy of exhibit, no matter how simple or crude it would seem to others. "They're great."

"Aren't they? We went home then, and that lady was still there, but I wasn't afraid with Rei and the lady gave me the cookies then. They were good." She got a little quieter. "But... but you still weren't there. So... so we went here. Oh, but first we ate Ramen! Did you know they have meat?"

"Really?" He acted amazed.

"Yeah! And then we went here and drew pictures and put them on the wall so it wouldn't look so sad! And then we went to sleep, but Rei woke up and me too and then she said we have to run far away from the bad guys and we went in a huuuge car! That was so big that I couldn't even see who was driving! And then we walked a looong, long way through the forest until my feet hurt and Rei said I would need shoes, but I don't like those! And we saw huge armors just like in your stories and they made a lot of noise. Then the bad men found us and I was really scared but Rei and Mr. Kaji scared them away! And then we drove back here and I heard Mama in the car and Rei was in pain, and later again, but then she was fine and I was supposed to sleep here while she was gone, but I was still afraid that the bad men would come back, so I soon woke up again and then there were sounds, so I hid, but then I saw that it was Mama, though I wasn't sure if it was her at first, 'cause she looks so funny now!"

"My..." he gasped, trying not to worry too much about certain disconcerting elements of her tale. After all, she had made it through completely fine. "Sounds like you had a very exciting... day..."

Aki nodded, but that excitement was apparently short-lived and the lack of sleep was still demanding its toll as he noticed her rubbing her eyes. "I had lots of fun with Rei!"

"Rei?" he asked, and all eyes now were on the blue-haired teen. Up to now she had stood in the back of the room, silently watching the family reunion without interrupting. Now she seemed to shrink away under the sudden attention.

"Rei," Asuka repeated gratefully, walking the few steps towards her, before surprising the blue-haired girl by pulling her into a tight hug. "Thank you..."

Startled by the redhead's seemingly uncharacteristic behavior, it took Rei a while to react, before she – hesitatingly – returned the embrace. "You're... welcome..."

-x-x-x-x-

It was almost as if time had made a jump back – or forward – yet again. A family, finally united again, walking through the deserted city. Of course, the destruction to it wasn't nearly as severe. And the two parents, whose smiles just wouldn't fade, were still merely fourteen years in body.

"She's heavier than I remember," Shinji said along the way. Aki was riding on his shoulders, her arms instinctively wrapped around his head while her body rested against it in her sleep that had finally overwhelmed her. Even the prospect of Kiko waiting for her couldn't keep her awake anymore.

"Baka," Asuka chided mockingly. "My girl hasn't gotten heavier. It's you who are weaker."

"Yeah, I guess," he chuckled, carefully watching out that Aki wouldn't slip down. "Don't quite have the well-trained body of a hard working farmer anymore."

"Well, you could have exercised a bit," Asuka stated sternly. But that act quickly faltered again as she watched her sleeping daughter. Tears of joy threatened to form again as she lightly stroked her child's back with her good arm, still needing the contact to confirm that this wasn't just a dream. "She's back, Shinji. She's really back with us."

"And for her it was just a single day," Shinji mused, shaking his head as they entered their apartment building. "Why didn't she come with us right away? Kaworu said something about an 'unexpected joy' and that it would be even greater than an expected one. He certainly had a point," Shinji grinned, savoring the feel of his child's body resting against him, her warmth, her weight, the tiny fingers curling into his hair, even the little bit of drool running down the back of his head, "but I can't believe it was just for the surprise. Was it because we already had a body here while hers had to be brought back as well? Or was she not allowed to be here until we made sure that we succeeded? But then, why did she already come back after Kaworu's death and not after today?"

"Tell you what, Shinji," a wide grin sprawled over her face while they walked up the stairs. "I don't give a damn. She's back and that's all that matters to me."

He couldn't help but agree with that, yet remained silent for the rest of the way. Though just as they passed the threshold to their apartment, there was a light mumble to be heard from the sleeping child.

"m home..."

-x-x-x-x-

Rei looked around her, a strange feeling threatening to overwhelm her. The destruction didn't bother her much; she had never taken much care of the place anyway. She had lived here alone for many years and loneliness was nothing foreign to her. But somehow the apartment seemed emptier than ever before.

So... quiet.

It had been such a pleasurable feeling, maybe surpassing any before, to watch the happiness in the faces of the reunited family. It had felt good to be thanked so thoroughly, even if she wasn't sure she deserved the gratitude for something that seemed to be a mere coincidence in the first place.

But now that they were gone, after having experienced such warmth, she felt cold again despite the rays of the sun falling through the windows. Their departure had taken something from her, leaving a void behind that she yearned to be filled again. She had thought that loneliness was nothing foreign to her...

But it was much worse now, that she knew what she truly missed.

As she took a step to the side, her foot brushed against something. Looking down, she saw a sheet of paper. Curious, she bent down to pick it up. And as she looked at it, her troubles suddenly didn't feel so bad anymore.

Carefully, she replaced it on the empty space on the wall, making sure the band-aid would stick again. The one in the upper left corner wouldn't though, no matter how often she ran her hand over it, so she ripped off a fresh one and replaced it. Her work finished, she took a step back, her gaze wandering from picture to picture.

Most of them showed members of the same family, a woman with red hair, a man with dark brown hair, and a child, a little girl. Some of them showed them together, in some there was only one or two of

them. Some pictures just showed things that the girl liked. In some pictures was also a person with a patch of blue hair and two red dots that served as eyes. And there was the one Rei had done of Aki.

Eventually, Rei's view rested back on the picture in the middle, the one that she just had put up again. The small figure of the girl stood there next to the one with the blue hair, the lines of their arms intertwined. They all were smiling at Rei.

And Rei smiled back at them.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Entering her apartment, Misato felt thoroughly tired. The adrenaline that had kept her pumped during the day had long subsided, replaced by sheer satisfaction, but even the joy of having seen Kaji again currently seemed dwarfed by the joy of seeing a shower soon.

She took a deep breath as the door opened. It was finally over. Sure, there would still be a lot of paperwork coming up, a lot of decisions that still had to be made, a lot of questions still to be answered.

But the fights were over. Hopefully once and for all.

Kicking her shoes from her aching feet, not caring to place them neatly to the side, she walked in, not noticing Shinji who stood in front of his room until she almost bumped against him.

"Shinji!" The weariness seemed instantly gone when, as if on reflex, her arms flung around the just as surprised boy.

"Mi-Misato..." he whispered. "It's good to see you, but..."

"Misato!" Asuka hissed just as low as him, cutting him off as she came around the corner, apparently having heard her loud greeting. "Shh! Be..."

Their guardian didn't really listen, though, and instead startled the redhead as she pulled her into the tight embrace as well.

"Oh god, it's so good to see you!" Misato squealed in glee. "Where have you two been? When I got to the infirmary you were already gone."

"Geez, I wonder what took you so long to get there," Asuka muttered, while she tried to struggle against the bear hug as she caused Misato to blush with the reminder of her "emotional" reunion with Kaji. "But be quiet already!"

"Quiet? Why...?" Misato loosened the embrace, looking puzzled first at Asuka, then at Shinji for answers. But instead her surprise grew when she noticed the pen in Shinji's hand and faintly recalled him using it at his door before she almost crashed into him. And just as her view shifted to the wood in search for the mark, she could just make out that his name on the heart-shaped sign she once had put there was crossed out and replaced with something else. But what that was, she couldn't read anymore as the door was suddenly moved to the side.

"Mama...?" a small, tired voice called out and Misato's arms now finally released her charges, falling limply to her sides just as her mouth fell open in surprise at the sight of the little brown-haired girl that stood there in the door frame, rubbing her sleepy eyes with one hand, a red-haired doll clutched in the other.

Asuka didn't hesitate to drop down, gently stroking the girl's back. "Hey Schätzchen. Did we wake you?" she asked, with a concern Misato had never heard from her before. After a responding nod, she pulled the child even closer, rocking her slightly. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you sleep well at least?"

"Uh-huh..." came a still timid reply.

Misato's confused mind barely could find the words as she looked at Shinji in search for an explanation. "Is... is that...?"

"Yeah," he plainly answered, though his smile, easily the broadest she had ever seen from him, would already have been answer enough.

"Misato Katsuragi?" Asuka asked overly formally, slowly standing up, her hand still on her daughter's back as she stepped aside and cleared the space between the two strangers and the curious eyes of the oldest and the youngest met. "May I introduce... Aki Ikari?"

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

An unknown ceiling.

Only slowly, he became aware of his surroundings. He found himself unable to move, even to speak; and he had no feeling at all in his right arm. But he was still alive...

So he wasn't even allowed to see her again this way? Maybe he really didn't deserve it...

The sound of an opening door made his ears perk up, but he couldn't even move his head to see who was there, coming into this room.

"You really want to do this?"

That voice was familiar. Yes, it was... that girl...

"I have waited long enough for this. I can't put it off forever." That was the boy, his son. "And it's not like Misato needs another hand to hold."

"Who's that?" That was a voice he didn't know. High-pitched, like from a small child.

"That is my father," Shinji said. "Your grandfather."

Grandfather? Could it have been so long already?

"Is he sleeping?" The young voice again. "It's not bedtime. Why don't you wake him up?"

"He... he won't wake up..." Shinji said, sounding almost regretful.

"Is he lying here because of that? Is he ill?"

"No, he... he got hurt pretty badly."

The face of a brown-haired girl suddenly filled his vision, curiously looking at him.

"How can he sleep with his eyes open?" she asked.

Shinji now stepped into his view as well. He couldn't tell for sure without his glasses, but the boy actually didn't look much older after all when he put his hand on the little girl's shoulder. "Aki... It's not like when we are sleeping for a few hours. He sleeps for a long time."

Aki? That name...? This was Aki? After all...?

"But he doesn't look happy like this," she pouted, looking up at her father. "We should wake him up!"

Shinji smiled down at her. "I told you, he won't wake up. The doctors said they don't know if he ever will again."

"Never?" she asked again and the boy shook his head. The girls blue eyes showed honest concern as

they turned back to his. "But it would be sad." Another flicker to her father. "Are they sure?"

"I'm afraid they are."

She seemed to ponder that for a second, before... smiling brightly. "I know! It's like in the fairytale! If I give him a kiss, he'll surely wake up!"

Her father apparently moved to stop her, and so he would have himself if he would have been able to, but Aki was faster. Her small mouth squarely met his in a short peck. "Are you awake now?"

There was a hesitant chuckle from Shinji as well as from that girl, Asuka, outside his vision. "Aki," she called to get the slightly disappointed child's attention, "come, why don't we leave Papa to talk with Grandpa and check on Auntie Misato?"

Aki regarded him once more. "Bye Grandpa!" she said, before she left his view. Shortly after, the door opened and shut again.

How could this be? It had lasted only the fraction of a second, but he could still feel that touch. She was gone, but he could still see that smile.

How could this be? Something like this hadn't happened since... *her*...

The sound of screeching metal, scrapping against the floor interrupted his thoughts.

"This must be strange to you," Shinji spoke, apparently having sat down in a chair somewhere next to his bed. "She doesn't even know you and she still loves you, just because you are her father's father. That is something you never understood; that someone could love you without a better reason than being of your blood. Who knows if she would, if she *did* know you..." he muttered under his breath.

"Then again, it's hard to imagine her not liking someone. It's funny in a way that someone, who lived pretty much alone, not knowing anyone but her parents for most of her life could adapt and open up so quickly to others. And that as a child of two people who always had so many problems with just that. In her first week in kindergarten, she made more friends than I did in my entire life." He laughed quietly, his pride seeping through his voice.

"You might wonder why you're still alive. Actually, everybody does. The doctors tried to explain it, but even though having studied medicine for several years, I barely understood it. Granted, neurology wasn't part of my studies. But apparently your aim was distracted in the last second, maybe because of a tremor or maybe you even rethought it when your finger was already pulling the trigger.

"Though you still would have died if Ritsuko hadn't found and helped you. At first she always said she didn't even know why she had done it. Later she changed it to 'Having to live in this condition is a bigger punishment for him than death'. She's still visiting you fairly often though. I don't really know what to make of it – none of us does, actually. Probably not even herself."

Akagi... Ritsuko... did...?

"Speaking of visiting... You're probably wondering why I came with everyone though sit here alone with you now. Well, to be honest, you weren't the main reason for this visit to the hospital. Misato is... well, it looks like Aki is going to have a little playmate soon." Again Shinji laughed. "Surprisingly, Kaji proposed almost immediately, but she declined. I guess she just wants to leave him hanging for a while as payback, but somehow I doubt she can hold it up longer than a few more months.

"On the other hand, Asuka and I are going to marry again soon, in three weeks to be exact. I would have thought it would have taken longer to get a license, given our physical age, but I have the feeling Misato pulled some strings there. I guess I should say something like 'I wish you would be there as well', but I'm not sure if that would be entirely honest," he sighed.

"I guess you also wonder about Rei. She hasn't visited yet, has she? You really should see her, it's almost like she's a different person. Well, okay, that's a little far-fetched, but still... Did you know she had talent as an artist? I guess not; she started after she had met Aki. But really, her pictures are pretty amazing. I've actually seen a letter from a gallery in her apartment when we were over, but she wouldn't tell me about it.

"Aki and she are pretty much inseparable when they're together. It's quite fascinating to watch them interacting – I'd almost dare to say 'cute'. Just last week we were at the fair with them for the first time, and both of them had the very same look of awe on their faces as they stared up at the Ferris wheel."

His chuckling ebbed away then. "There was some talk whether or not we'd have to move away; get a new identity to ensure that we could live in peace. Of course it would be safer, I mean we all know of the religious fanatics out there and potential unhappy followers of SEELE wouldn't greet us friendly if we'd met them on the street, either. It would also give us an easy opportunity to adjust our age a little and have an 'official' birth certificate for Aki, as that would avoid a lot of awkward questions and formalities about our unusual family situation. After all, even some people who know us didn't believe that she really is our daughter until we had the results of the DNA test.

"But Asuka doesn't want to hear about it, and I have to admit, neither do I. It's not just the loss and denial of our names and pasts. Aki just got used to the life here, it wouldn't do her any good to rip her out of yet another world and away from her just-found friends. And SEELE shouldn't be too much of a threat for a while anyway.

"Chairman Keel was found dead, apparently having suffered a heart attack around the time of their attack. It was guessed that the stress was too much to be compensated by his implants. As for the others... Well, Kaji somehow 'forgot' to disarm his computer worm and caused a lot of ruckus in politics worldwide. One of the named SEELE members committed suicide after the news got out, another also attempted to, but was found before he succeeded. The rest are either denying their role in the organization or trying to blame the other members in hope of getting off easily. So they should be busy enough ripping each other's head off, before coming for us.

"Another reason we'd like to stay is that the Yamaderas have offered us that we could buy our old house again as they had already settled for living with their son in Tokyo-2 and would be glad to have us have it. We've met them quite a few times since Aki's little adventure, you know? Strangely enough, they were one of the few who believed us instantly when we presented ourselves as her parents. We'll still have to see how we handle the finances, but the thought of going home is more than intriguing, especially with our current living conditions. We don't want to have Aki living in my small, windowless room for much longer after all, and Kaji and Misato will soon need more space as well."

Shinji took a deep breath after all the talking and there was a long pause before he continued. "You... you know, there's something else I wanted to admit to you," he muttered lowly. "Maybe... maybe I can understand you a little better now. When I thought I had lost everything, I was almost willing to follow your path. It was only for a short moment, but it would have been a fatal one. Because then I **really** would have lost everything. Maybe that was the only thing you never quite understood..."

The door opened again, ending Shinji's monologue. The redhead stepped into his view, carrying her child who held onto her shirt. "Hey, are you finished yet?" Asuka asked quietly. "Misato's check-up is already done."

Shinji looked once more at him before he slowly rose from his seat. "Yeah, I think so," he answered as he met the two. Aki grinned broadly at her father, instantly getting hold of his clothes with one hand in an attempt to climb over to him, which he assisted by taking her from Asuka's arms. "Hey, my little angel. Did you have fun?"

The child's smile formed into a pout. "They didn't let me play with the dollies."

"She means the models of a fetus in various stages," Asuka explained half groaning, half amused, ruffling her daughter's hair what succeeded to change the pout back to its former state. Leaning towards him, she placed a short kiss on Shinji's cheek. "So, how is he?"

"Oh, he..."

But Gendo couldn't follow the discussion much longer. The low chatter faded out and the veil before his eyes seemed to grow again, leaving the picture of this family lingering in his mind as the last one before sleep slowly consumed him again.

A family...

Unnoticeable to him, he smiled at that thought. That was what he had always wanted. He had almost forgotten it over the path he had taken in these past ten years, but... they had been like that once too. Only with Yui gone, there had been a critical part missing that he couldn't see replaced by anyone else but her. Without her, they couldn't have possibly been happy.

Now Shinji had all he had ever wanted for himself. A life with people who loved him without question. People he could be happy with.

Gendo felt envy toward his son for that. But most of all, he – for once – was as proud of him as a father could possibly be.