

ONLY CONNECT

A Neon Genesis Evangelion and Serial Experiments:Lain Fanfiction

by Michael Huang

“Shinji,” Ritsuko said as she and Misato carried the cardboard box through the doorway, “We have a little present for you.”

“For me, Dr. Akagi?” Shinji laughed nervously. Presents, for him? “But—it's not my birthday or anything or--”

“Does there have to be an occasion, Shinji? Come on, relax. It's for you.”

Misato then nodded in his direction. “There's one more box outside the door, would you mind getting that for us?”

“Ah, *hai!*” Shinji's conditioned reflexes snapped to attention, and he briskly walked down the hallway toward the entrance. The two women were having little trouble carrying both ends of the bulky box, but when Shinji tried to pick up the equally bulky package outside, his fourteen-year-old forearms strained at lifting it even a few inches.

“That's the system unit, Shinji,” Misato shouted. “Is it heavy?”

“No—that's all right—I'm coming, Misato--” He set it down once the box was inside the apartment. He gave the effort to carry it down the hallpushed the box down the corridor until he reached the kitchen. Once there, he finally got a good look at the box's side. It read “TAICHIBANA LABORATORIES NAVI-MODEL 2015A.”

Shinji's eyes widened. “A Navi for me?” He looked at Misato and Ritsuko, who were seated at the kitchen table and sipping cans of Yebisu beer. “But why?”

“Well, Shinji,” Misato said, “if you must, think of it as a reward. For all your hard work at NERV--”

“--and for agreeing to cook tonight instead of Misato,” Ritsuko said.

“*Hey!* There's nothing wrong with instant food,” Misato replied, sniffing. She turned to Shinji again and smiled. “This is the latest model, you know.”

“What?” Shinji gasped at all this unfounded, unusual generosity. “How much did it--”

“Never mind about that, Shinji,” Ritsuko said. “We can afford a little extra for our pilots.” He then heard her mutter under her breath, “As long as the Committee's not looking, that is.”

“So—can it go on the Wired, and all that?”

“Don't be silly. Of course it can. It's even got an *Accela* chip.” Ritsuko put a finger over her pursed lips. “Don't tell anyone.”

“Wait a second—Kensuke said--aren't those illegal?”

Ritsuko shook her head and grinned slyly. “Not for NERV.”

“Oh, OK . . . the Wired . . . hmm . . .” Kensuke mentioned his daily trips to the Wired at school sometimes. He always was talking about the latest hardware upgrades to his Navi at home, with his father bringing home all the latest defense technology and all. He had even boasted of hacking the school Navilettes so he could play dungeon games while the teacher droned about the Second Impact. But Shinji had never been on the Wired before. “Misato?” he asked.

“Hmm, Shinji?” She leaned back in her chair, downing the last dregs of her beer.

“Do you think, uh, I could set it up now? I've never really tried the Wired.” He put his hand behind his head nervously. “Of course, uh--”

“How about after dinner,” Misato said. “Aren't you hungry?”

“Well—yeah, but---”

“Misato,” Ritsuko said. “I think he wants to do it. Now.” She stood up. “Come on, I’ll help you, Shinji.”

“Ritsuko, really, I’m starving--” Misato sighed. “Oh well, all right. If it makes him happy.” She chuckled, muttering something about “at least he’s smiling now.” And Shinji was smiling, as he pushed the unit through the kitchen into his “lovely suite” with Misato and Ritsuko carrying the other box behind him. When he slid the door open he noticed how bare his room seemed, with nothing but a wooden desk, a neatly-made bed, and posterless walls inside. Now there was going to be a computer inside, sitting on the desk. It was one less empty space in the room to stare at, at least.

He opened the main system unit’s box, and after Ritsuko helped him lift the unit out of the box and shed all the packing material, Shinji looked at his new machine. It looked like a monolith, an obsidian cube whose metal exterior shone under the pale fluorescent light. The front panel had black buttons and dark slits for disk drives, and the backside contained a few ports, but from a distance it resembled a smooth, solid metal block, like black ice.

“No wonder it’s so heavy,” Shinji said.

“Well, it was designed for more *secure* environments,” Ritsuko replied. “Like the Command Center. Or Terminal Dogma.”

“Swiped it from the inventory, eh, Ritsuko?” Misato said, jabbing Ritsuko’s shoulder.

“Don’t be silly, Major. We have plenty of surplus machines that can’t be sold on the regular market. Shinji, you should feel very special.”

“Thank you, Dr. Akagi. I do.”

“Anytime, Shinji. Why don’t we start setting up now? I’m getting hungry too.”

They unpacked the 21" LCD display from the other box, and soon both the unit and the monitor stood on Shinji's desk. There were only a few cables to connect--"most everything's wireless now," Ritsuko explained—the most prominent being a fiber-optic cable for Wired access. "It's come a long way since 10 years ago," Ritsuko continued. "No one had fiber access—except NERV, of course—until two years ago, and now everyone's installing it like mad . . . so you'll get to meet a lot of people on the Wired, Shinji."

"Really?" Shinji wondered if they were all people like Kensuke, who certainly seemed like a computer nerd. "Well, I don't know."

Ritsuko plugged the last of the cables into the back port. "You might even find it easier to make friends online. You can be almost anyone you want. No one can see you through the computer screen, after all."

"Ritsuko," Misato said, "I don't know if that's so healthy--"

"Oh, stop being so backward. The Wired is supposed to bring people together. It connects people across the world. I don't know how I'd keep up with the latest research without it. And Shinji can meet some new friends." She smiled at Shinji. "Just don't get *too* addicted, all right, Shinji?" He nodded. Ritsuko then checked all the cable connections, adjusted the monitor's viewing angle, and stood back proudly. "Well, Shinji, it's all yours. Go ahead, turn it on."

"OK." He peered at the black cube quizzically. "Um, where's the—oh, there!" He found the power button, and pushed it gingerly.

The near-silent whir of the system fan hummed from behind the unit. A green LED blinked to life, and on the display, a 3-D animation of a spinning globe sprung to the fore. Superimposed over the field of stars were the words:

TAICHIBANA LABORATORIES NAVI-2015A

WORLD WIDE WIRED NODE #3B0FF

WELCOME!

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

_____?

“Um . . .” Shinji searched on the keyboard for the katakana characters that would spell his name.

“Just say your name,” Ritsuko said. “No typing.”

“Oh, all right!” The cursor blinked patiently on the screen, waiting for his command. He took a breath and recited, “Ikari Shinji.”

“Ikari Shinji,” a warm, female voice from the computer echoed. “Irrashai, Ikari-san.” VOICEPRINT IDENTIFIED! The screen proclaimed, with a cheesy electronic fanfare. A little white ghost then popped onto the screen with a *poof!* “Hello, Ikari-san,” he said. “Welcome to the Wired. Would you like me to check your e-mail?”

Shinji saw Ritsuko grimace with displeasure. “I *thought* I ordered the professional version, not the consumer operating system . . . damn requisition people . . . don't worry, Shinji, I'll tell you how to turn it off later.”

“It's OK, Dr. Akagi,” Shinji said. “I'll get used to it.”

“Anyway . . .” Misato yawned loudly. “Shinji, go cook dinner, I'm starving. And, I want you to finish your homework before you get on the computer.”

“*Hai*, Misato-san.” With that, he took off to the kitchen, leaving Misato and Ritsuko by themselves.

Misato sighed. “I don't know, Ritsuko, a Navi? Do you really think he needs it?”

“It'll give him something to think about and do,” Ritsuko replied, “when he's not

piloting Evas for us anyway. He can't stay useful for us if he doesn't get some kind of relief.”

“Useful.' Is that how you talk about another human Ritsuko?”

“Well a fact's a fact, Major. Besides, he seemed a happier today than usual.” A sly grin crept up her lips. “Even if it takes a little unreality, a happy pilot is a winning pilot. And Kami-sama knows we can't afford to lose.”

“Right, right.” Misato shrugged. They both rose and left for the kitchen, where the sound of the running faucet and the stove fan filled the air, and the aroma of fish stew trickled into her nostrils. Well, she thought, at least the food tonight is real.

Shinji could not remember what any of them said to each other over dinner. There must have been some banter, because he did recall Misato's raucous, beer-induced laughter and inaudible mutterings coming from Dr. Akagi's lips. Pen-Pen, as he was given edible food tonight, had remained quiet. After the usual “itadakimasu!” at the meal's start, his memory skipped ahead to him standing up with the dirty dishes in his hands, ready to pile them on the kitchen sink for washing. The only remnant of the food he himself had cooked was its aftertaste. As soon as he finished scouring and sponging the stains off the dishes, no proof remained that anyone had eaten anything. It was like this almost every night, and Shinji never had any specific memory of any of the dinners they ate together. The numb routine had almost rendered such scenes unreal in his mind.

“All right, Shinji, do you have a lot of homework to do tonight?” Misato asked him after Ritsuko left. He shook his head. “Nothing? At all?”

“Just some physics problems,” he replied, shrugging.

“How long do you think it'll take you to finish?”

“An hour at most.”

“Well . . . hmm . . .” Misato gazed at the ceiling thoughtfully. “All right, Shinji, if you want to go online for a little, you can. For an hour. But then you have to finish your homework.”

“Um—oh! All right.” Oh yes, He had a new machine in his bedroom. Ritsuko had set it up for him, hadn't she? He wondered why the thought of trying it out didn't excite him more—for one, he doubted Ritsuko's claims that it would make him more friends, and that he could be anyone he wanted. It was only a computer, after all. But any generosity pleased him, and he had been the recipient of much today, so he smiled politely and said, “Thanks.”

“Shinji? Are you all right?” Now her brow creased with worry. “I thought you'd be interested and eager to try it out.”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I'll see.”

“Hm. I could tell that Ritsu was into it more than anyone else. Well, give it a try, then, and see how you like it, OK?”

“All right.”

Shinji left the kitchen and went into his room, which was already dark as the sun had set. He flicked the light switch on. There stood the Navi sitting proudly on his desk, all set up and shiny and untouched. When he drew near to the display, it flickered back to life from its screensaver and the white ghost announced cheerily, “Welcome back, Ikari-san!”

“Call me Shinji,” he replied. He sat down at the chair, his eyes fixed on the screen.

“Of course, Shinji,” the ghost replied, bowing. It then perked up again and asked

“Shinji, where do you want to go today?”

“Umm—the Wired.”

“The Wired it is. My records indicate that you have never been there, however.

Would you like a tutorial before you explore?”

“Um, I dunno if I need one--”

“The Wired can be disorienting to a new user such as yourself. The tutorial will help you get your bearings, Shinji.”

“Well . . .”

“Taichibana Labs has carefully designed this tutorial based on careful user-interaction studies and has been proven to--”

Now the ghost was really beginning to irritate him. “Look—just stop. Go away.”

A sad, droopy face appeared on the ghost's face. “Are you sure?” it whined.

“Yes.”

Suddenly the ghost popped out of existence, and was replaced with a full windowed user interface. Shinji, unfazed, used the cordless mouse to maneuver over a conspicuous icon that read in clear letters, “CLICK TO GET WIRED.” He double clicked, and deep inside the cube unit's innards, a hard drive whirred.

He only needed to wait a second before colors swirled on the screen, his eyes glazed and crossed over, and darkness enveloped him--

--and then blankness, pure whiteness swallowed up the darkness around him. Shinji looked below him, and there was no floor; above him, and there was no ceiling; around him, and there were no walls; he felt completely weightless in the void. He raised his arms to look at them, only to find the sketchiest outline of an arm, a hand, and five fingers.

He suddenly felt very afraid.

“Where am I?” He felt his lips move, but no sound echoed in his ears. “What’s going on? What is this place?” His loudest thoughts were silenced by the vacuum. “Where’s the ground?” he thought, and then, suddenly, he felt gravity yanking him down and he fell to a newly created ground. “Ground?” he thought. He looked below him, and sure enough, there was a line separating one part of the whitespace from the other, and he was standing on the lower end.

“Ground . . . sky?” His thought instantly animated the view above him with the brilliant blue haze of a clear day—but the ground was still white. It was still a blank world with a blue canopy. “Clouds?” Clouds then floated overhead. “Grass?” Green leaves sprouted instantly all over the bare white floor.

He raised his arm again—it was still an outline. He thought of all the times he stared at himself in the mirror, cursing his scrawny muscles and short stature. The reflection that had stared back almost always wore a downcast face, with sad, blinking blue eyes that tried to see any worth in his body. If only he could be taller, and built, and not have such a soft, round face--

Unknown power began to ripple through his arms and legs. The level of his eyesight rose by several inches. He looked down and watched as a sketchy body began to fill with color, and muscle, and then clothing as he remembered what he was wearing that day.

“You can be almost anyone you want,” he recalled Ritsuko saying, and, seeing that it turned out to be true after all, Shinji leaped into the air and shouted, “YES!” His newfound voice echoed over the heavens, blowing the blades of grass back and scattering the wispy clouds above. When he jumped, he launched himself straight into the sky,

leaping high above the newly created trees before his personal gravity set him down on the ground as gently as a feather. Thinking again, he took off into the air again, and with his arms outstretched, he could fly like a bird, surveying the endless fields of green below and punching through clouds ahead. The wind blew freely through his hair and caressed his skin. “I'm flying! I'm flying! I can't believe it--” In the wake of his disbelief, the weight returned and he felt his stomach and body dragged down by a sickening lurch. His now heavy body tumbled toward the earth. “Don't crash—don't crash,” he shouted, which saved him from crashing just seconds before he hit the ground; it was as if someone had cast a levitation spell that set him down safely into the waiting blanket of grass.

Shinji stood up, shook his head in disbelief, and spun around twice to marvel at his new Wired world, a world where thoughts made things so. To think that he had to do homework and had to wash dishes and pilot painful robots when he could have been here! He could live here forever if he wanted.

“But” Another of Ritsuko's statements came to mind. “Where's everyone else? Aren't there supposed to be lots of people--”

The entire landscape dissolved, and before Shinji could reorient himself, he suddenly landed on his butt on a cold, hard surface. He looked up to find a sea of legs and feet moving rhythmically in all directions around him. Loud, bass-driven music throbbed in his ears. Strobe lights flashed in his eyes as he struggled to pick himself up amidst the dancing crowd.

“A club?” Shinji asked himself. “Where--?” Somehow, information popped unbidden into his mind; he instantly knew that this was Cyberia, one of the most popular dance clubs on and off the Wired, and that the current track the DJ was spinning was the

extended mix of Negative Light's latest hit single.

Well, Shinji thought to himself as he scurried away to leave the floor to people who could actually dance, *at least I found some people*. Then, as he moved to the sidelines, he remembered: who said that his feet were clumsy here in the Wired? With his head held high, Shinji strode back onto the floor. “Dance,” he whispered, and soon he felt a natural rhythm guiding the muscles in his legs to move in time with the music.

Then the music changed, along with the beats. But Shinji could not stop, and soon, his feet were tripping out of control on the floor. His limbs were being jerked around like a marionette and soon, he tumbled onto the ground, nearly knocking over someone next to him in the process. He could not see who it was as he fell.

“Hey, watch it!” a female voice cried. “Damn klutz.”

“Huh?” Shinji rubbed his eyes as he recovered from disorientation and saw an angry girl standing over him. A lock of her hair was tied in an X and a scowl cut across her expression. Her chestnut-brown eyes glared fiercely at him.

“Yeah, you!” she shouted, pointing at him. “Little boy thinks he can dance, eh?” Somebody dared to laugh, but most of the clubgoers had stopped dancing and talking and gave the girl wide berth, as if she were radioactive. The music had stopped and the room was lit only by dim red spotlights. But the girl looked brighter than everyone else in the dark floor; she seemed to emanate a strange glow, a ghostly light from inside her skin. But this was clearly a displeased spirit.

“I was just trying to . . . come on,” Shinji said, with an unfortunate whine in his voice. *I really do sound like a little boy*, he thought. But he took a good look at the girl, whose face seemed awfully fresh and was no taller than he. *She can't be much older than me*. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, watch where ya going next time, boy,” she replied gruffly. Then she began stepping forward, toward his direction. *What is she doing*—Shinji felt her hand pushing against his chest as she shoved him aside, almost knocking him down again. The crowd began to disperse and the chatter rose. “You tell him, Lain!” someone shouted through the rising din. The girl chuckled and moved on, toward where the DJ stood.

Lain. So that's her name—and she had just pushed him aside as if he were just another piece of meat. Blood rushed through his virtual body, filled with the anger that he so often felt in the real world but never dared show. *That's right—I'm in the Wired now!* He didn't have to put up with such treatment here, not where he could stand taller and stronger than anyone else if he wanted. No. No more. Lain wasn't going to get away with a shove and a shrug on the way to her own business.

Shinji followed her. She had almost reached the DJ's counter when she turned around and spotted him. For a moment, her eyes looked glazed over and half-open, burdened by too many hard nights or drugs, before they widened and hardened into the familiar glare. “What?” she demanded.

“What'd you push me for?” *Did I sound angry enough?* Shinji was still new at this role. “It was an accident. I apologized.”

“You were in my way,” Lain declared flatly.

“You could have walked around me.”

“Too much trouble.”

“Hey Lain,” the DJ said, “who is this guy? Haven't seen him before.”

“Dunno. I just bumped into him today. He can't even dance, the little jerk.” She laughed caustically. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I’m Sh—Shinji.” He almost lapsed into his old, scared voice before he caught himself.

“Shinji?” The DJ nodded. “Lain, if this Shinji’s giving you any trouble, I can haul his ass outta here in no time--

“Screw that, he’s not worth the trouble.” She turned to Shinji. “Look,” she said, almost snarling, “just stay the hell away from me.”

Shinji instinctively backed away, and as he was turning around, he felt his pulse rising again. He turned back in her direction. This time, he would settle things. *Don’t run . . . don’t run . . . don’t run . . .* This time, his mantra would actually mean something. He stood with his feet planted firmly on the ground. “No,” he said. “Not until you apologize.”

Lain sniffed. “Apologize! For what?” She shook her head. “You don’t even know who you’re crossing, do you?”

“Maybe I don’t, *Lain*,” Shinji said, telling his virtual body to stand taller, “but--”

He felt a yank and suddenly the height effect was canceled, as were all the modifications he made to his muscles and build. He was Boy Shinji again, and Lain was cackling. “You think you can fool me, boy? I already know all about you. You live in Tokyo-3 and it’s your very first trip on to the Wired. Anyone can see through that pathetic disguise of yours, Shinji.” She laughed some more. “You think you’re pretty brave, don’t you?”

No, no, no, not at all, I’m a sneaky coward—but as the sting of her words drilled into his mind, Shinji swallowed his tearful outburst and clenched his open fist shut.

“Why do you care?” he said with all the defiance he could manage.

“You want to earn my respect, don’t you?” A cocky smile spread across her lips.

“A lot of people want to earn Lain's respect, boy. But I know. There's one way.”

“What?”

“A game. You like games don't you?” Shinji shrugged, though he was confused.

“You'll love it. Phantoma. I can set you up and we can have a little . . . deathmatch.”

“Phantoma?” Shinji had never heard Kensuke mention it.

Lain rolled her eyes. “And you don't even know. Sucks to be a newbie, ha. Fine, I'll set you up--” Suddenly Lain's eyes were closed and she held an outstretched palm in front of her. She clamped her hand on his forehead, and in a few seconds, a voice inside Shinji's head proclaimed, “executable downloaded.”

“What?” Shinji suddenly felt dread creeping up his spine. “What did you just do?”

“God, kid, I just gave you the program. It's hard to get, it's only available on illegal servers. But I see you got a Psyche chip anyway, so I guess that wouldn't matter to you.”

“It came with--”

“Whatever. Spare me the sob story. So if you beat me in a game of tag in Phantoma—*then* I'll apologize.”

“Tag?”

“What kind of boy are you? Never played tag? We'll be in a maze, that's all. Like that game, DOOM XII.”

Shinji nodded. “Oh.” That kind of game, a dungeon-style maze, but presumably this time in full motion 3-d.

“You have two days to practice and get ready,” Lain said. “So, do you accept the challenge?”

Shinji stepped forward, right in her face. “Yes.” *No! I haven't even thought about it . . .* His mind quickly reasoned that Kensuke could probably teach him whatever he needed to know about the game. *How do you know he even knows how to play?* But Lain was nodding smugly.

“Fair enough, then,” she said. “I'm looking forward to it.” She chuckled again, and Shinji was unnerved by its tone.

The DJ whistled. “You don't know *what* you just got into, kid,” he said. “Do you?”

“Well, I'm going to find out, aren't I?” Shinji said.

“Heh, whatever suits you. This'll be fun. Lain's going to beat the hell out of you and your ass.”

“We'll see.”

Lain laughed, and, unexpectedly, put her hand on his cheek. It was cold to the touch. “You know, I kind of like foolish guys like you,” she cooed. “You're going to be *so* much fun to break.” Shinji's face filled with blood, both out of embarrassment and anger, but before he could shout at her she was already slipping back into the dancing crowd.

Shinji felt exhausted. How long had he been on anyway? He still had homework to finish . . . he shrugged, and looked for the club's exit sign. He found it eventually and as he stepped out into the virtual city night, he thought he saw a shadow moving ahead of him, walking up the stairs away from the club's entrance. When he reached the stairwell, he found Lain, standing on top of the stairs. But she was dressed differently, in a pale pink blazer with a pink cab emblazoned with a teddy bear on it. She seemed much younger, her eyes wide with naivete and her expression blank—and yet, she wore a

single braid hanging down the side of her head, tied with an X. *How did she change clothes so quickly?* Shinji thought.

“Lain?” he called.

Lain blinked, and then, to his surprise, faded into nothingness.

The Wired is certainly an odd world. Maybe that's how Lain was in real life—as innocent as he was. He shrugged. It was time to go back, so he said to himself, “exit.” The cityscape dissolved into a swirl of psychedelic colors, and before long he found himself staring at his computer screen, his eyelids blinking furiously as they adjusted to its glowing glare.

“Two hours, Shinji.” Startled, he turned around to find Misato standing in the doorway, her arms crossed. “I told you one hour.”

“Ah—sorry,” he said. “I kinda got—caught up.”

“Did you now?” Misato could not help but smile. “Well, it's your first time. So did you meet anyone, like Ritsuko said?”

“Well . . .” Shinji paused for a moment. “Kind of.”

“That's good, Shinji. Your first day and you've already met a new friend.” She beamed. *Friend? Not exactly . . .* Shinji forced himself to smile in return, though.

“But your schoolwork is important too, right?”

“Right, it is.”

“So finish your homework before you go to bed, is that clear?”

“*Hai.*”

“OK, then.” She left. Shinji plopped down on his bed and stared at the still-glowing screen, and then at the blank ceiling. *Lain . . . they all seem afraid of her.* Yet she came in two guises, and Shinji could not tell which one was the real Lain. And the

game, "Phantoma," and the way she offered to play against him so quickly . . . *strange*.
All so strange.

He sighed, got up, and pulled out his homework assignment. At least physics equations and math problems were unfamiliar things that he could handle in one night.

* * * * *

"You *what?*" Kensuke Aida stared at Shinji, his eyes bulging nearly out of their sockets. "*You, Shinji?*"

Toji scratched his head. "Do I know this girl, Lain?"

Shinji shrugged. "I just bumped into her last night, that's all. Then she challenged me to a match. I said yes, that's all."

"You're a brave man, Shinji," Kensuke said, shaking his head. "Lain and her gang the Knights are like the most powerful people on the Wired! And you say your Navi has a *Psyche* chip? Unbelievable! My dad isn't even allowed to have one!"

"Hey, keep it down, I probably shouldn't tell anybody--"

"Man, Eva pilots have all the connections! I really wish they'd make me a pilot." Kensuke clapped his hands together and stared dreamily at the classroom's ceiling. "Oh Kami-sama, please, please, please, let me pilot *and* live with Misato too!"

"And me, too!" Toji added.

"Will you stop?" Shinji asked. He sighed. This was becoming routine already. It would be ten minutes before the old teacher arrived and so he sat back, staring at the Navilette on his desk and every student's desk that he couldn't use to access the Wired. He didn't want to think about the Wired at that moment, though; part of him never wanted to even log on so he wouldn't have to face Lain in Phantoma. *Speaking of which* . . . "Hey, Kensuke?"

“Yeah?”

“You ever play Phantoma?”

“Sure! Everyone on the Wired's playing it. You want help, don't you?” Shinji nodded. “I'm not so bad, but you're taking on Lain . . . I dunno”

“I've never even heard of it before until last night!”

“Well, don't worry, it's not so hard to learn. Come over to my place after class, I'll show you.”

“Thanks.”

“It's really exciting. Online I've got the *biggest* guns and the coolest looking uniform, stun grenades and infrared vision and” Kensuke began to ramble into a description of his equipment, and Shinji's attention wandered away again. He looked in the direction of the window. To his surprise, Rei Ayanami was present, staring out the window, still wearing a sling from her last injury after he had rescued her by opening the hatch.

“Hi, Rei,” he said, raising his voice so she could hear him. But she did not turn around or say a word in return.

“Man,” Toji said, “has she always been hurt or something?”

“Being a pilot can sometimes be . . . rough,” Shinji replied.

“Then how come you seem OK most of the time?” Kensuke asked.

“I almost died once. But only on a day when I was excused from class.”

“Oh.”

Shinji grimaced. That was right, he almost did die. And on any second on any day, the siren could wail throughout Tokyo-3 and that would be his call for Rei and him to head back to NERV HQ, to ride down the windy escalators and into the nauseous

LCL-filled entry plugs where every strike of an Angel was magnified into painful, painful shocks that seemed unending until either the Angel exploded furiously into a blinding, searing cross or Shinji tumbled into blackness and woke up again in a hospital bed.

A simple game on the Wired seemed so much more fun.

“Maybe Rei would like the Wired,” Kensuke said. “I bet someone like her can open up a lot in a safer place like that.”

“Maybe,” Shinji said, shrugging. “It was pretty cool, pretending to fly and all that. But it isn't real, right?” Kensuke and Toji nodded. “So, what's the point then?”

Kensuke shrugged. “It's fun, I guess. Isn't it boring to be yourself all the time? I mean, like I can't really own a gun or do any real military exercises at my age, so I get to play soldier in the Wired.”

“Dr. Akagi said I could maybe make more friends,” Shinji said.

Toji sniffed. “Like you need it! What, we're not good enough for you anymore?”

Kensuke nodded, and then grinned. “And if you're thinking about *that*—they *all* look pretty on the Wired, Shinji. Every single one of them.” He chuckled. “Unless you know how to take off their disguises, of course. I can show you that too”

“I think I'll pass.”

The classroom door slid open, revealing the wizened visage of the teacher.

“Stand up—bow!” Class Representative Hikari ordered, and, like automatons, Shinji and everyone else stood at attention and snapped their bodies forward. As they sat and he began yet another lecture on the Second Impact, Shinji heard people whispering, typing notes at each other, and otherwise not paying any attention. He thought about how enforced and insincere all the bowing and deferential gestures they practiced every day

were. *People pretend just as much in this world as in the Wired*. . . . Shinji sighed, trying to think of any place anywhere where people like himself didn't have to pretend to have big muscles or pretty faces or respect. Even the chat function of the Navilettes in front of him seemed like a pretend-conversation, the words appearing on the screen giving the illusion that someone was there when in fact it was just him staring at yet another glowing monitor.

Shinji saw Rei walking alone after school dismissed, as usual.

“Hi, Rei,” he said. She did not answer. “How's the arm coming along?”

“Fine,” she replied.

Shinji thought for a moment, desperately trying to fill the silence. “How was your day?”

“Fine. No problems.”

“Good.”

They said nothing for some time. The crickets chirped and traffic roared on the roads.

“Hey, Rei,” Shinji said, “have you ever been online? On the Wired?”

“No.”

He thought again for a moment. “You know, I think you're a very nice person. You might open up a bit if you tried it sometime.”

“If ordered to, I will.”

“No one's ordering you to do anything.” He tried to smile. “But if you ever come, I'll try to meet you, all right?”

Rei turned around and looked at him intently. “What does it mean to meet

someone through a machine?”

“You know, meet. Like--” He waved his arm around him. “Like what we are now.”

“I don't understand.” She turned around. “Goodbye, Ikari, I have to go.”

“Wait, I--”

But she had already started walking purposefully down the street, away from Shinji. He sighed, and walked behind her, saying nothing, not even a goodbye when the road branched and he walked in the direction of Kensuke's apartment.

* * * * *

So Kensuke showed Shinji the ropes--and the guns, the grenades, and the moves. They spent the rest of the evening standing about with goggles stuck around their eyes, with Kensuke patiently teaching him how to will his first-person character to run, jump, shoot, and strafe the myriad of opponents generated by the computer. The dungeon they played in had grimy walls and a dank, mildewed odor wafting through the air. Sometimes the stench of human remains infected Shinji's nose--which reminded him, for some reason, of LCL.

But, as always, he eventually got used to it.

By 10:00 PM, when Misato expected him home, Shinji had played enough Phantoma to not flee when a monster leapt in front of him from above or to freeze when another player was aiming in his direction. He knew enough to throw his back to the wall with his gun cocked and pressed against his chest whenever he heard a suspicious noise, and to duck when the booby traps sent a hail of bullets, spears, or other life-piercing projectiles at him. Standing about with goggles, willing his limber persona by the force of the will: how it resembled the training from months ago, when he sat inside the entry

plug, telling the giant body he piloted to shoot. But this was no matter of centering the target and pulling the swith, centering the target and pulling the switch. Phantoma targets moved, unfortunately.

Shinji panted in exhaustion as he pulled the goggles off for the last time. "Thanks again, Kensuke," he said.

"Heh, you sure learn fast," Kensuke said. "Must be all that training they give you in NERV, huh?"

"Mmm, maybe."

"Gosh, if only" His voice trailed off into the air. "Well, anyway, is that enough for today?"

"Misato wants me home by 10:00."

"Oh, ok. Don't wanna get her mad, do you?" He grinned wickedly. "Well then, see you later."

Shinji left, heading for the train station. Tokyo-3 had always seemed like a ghost town in the evenings, a valley of streetlights illuminating nothing but asphalt and sidewalk and darkened office and shop windows. Misato had told him that no one ever bothered to have a nightlife in a fortress-city. "They just huddle around their TVs at home, drinking beer and waiting for the end to come" Just like Misato does, Shinji thought.

The 10:12 JR line slid to halt at the platform. The lone passenger in the carriage had already fallen asleep, his snores audible beneath the open newspaper covering his face. Shinji sat two seats away from him, donned his headphones, and stared at his shoelaces for the rest of the ride home. Over the music, the train's wheels rumbled and

rattled down the track, its echoes filling the empty spaces where conversation or the patter of a crowd's footsteps would go.

" . . . this is the last stop on the Kanto/Shinjuku line. This train will be going out of service. Please remember to take your personal belongings with you as you exit the train"

Shinji finally looked up and took off his headphones. He saw that he was the last passenger on the train when it stopped at his station. The platform was empty, too, and the moment he passed through the sliding doors the lights in the train flickered off. His footsteps echoed on the tiles as he found his way to the escalator, and he planted his feet on the bottom step and waited as it cascaded upwards to street level.

Come.

A sudden chill raced from his spine to his shoulders. Shinji had felt that fear before--it was the subconscious awareness that he was being watched. He whipped his head around, but found no one standing behind him on the escalator, or indeed any other soul loitering on the platform below.

Why won't you come?

He heard the voice clearly this time. It was a breathy, raspy, whisper, both gentle and threatening. It was certainly not Shinji's own voice, but as he frantically jerked his head about to find the mouth that uttered the words, he saw no one. The voice seemed not to have come from left or right, below or above, but almost from within, and yet without.

"Hello?" Shinji's voice echoed through the empty station. "Anyone there?"

Then he looked up at the advertisements hanging from the ceiling, above the escalator. In black, block kanji and kana, the sign read:

COME TO THE WIRED AS SOON AS YOU CAN.

There was no company logo or address that marked it as an ad from a service provider. But then Shinji turned to his left, and to his right, and every one of the posters read in splotched, blood-red scrawl,

COME! NOW!

It'll be good for you, Shinji. It was Lain's silky voice, coming from the top of the escalator. His nerves froze, and his right hand that held his satchel trembled violently, as he fixed his eyes ahead of him. There, indeed, was Lain, still in the dress she wore at Cyberia, glaring at him with a triumphant scowl.

"Why are you here?" Shinji cried. "Why are you following me?" He squeezed his eyes to ward off the panic. Don't run, don't run, don't run . . .

The fear then vanished as quickly as it had come. Shinji opened his eyes. No one stood at the top of the elevator. The posters on the escalator's side had become normal ads for Pocari Sweat, DoCoMo wireless service, and Matsushita electronics. The banner hanging from the ceiling read: WATCHYOUR STEP AT THE TOP!

A bump shook Shinji's feet, as they collided with the edge of the ramp at the escalator's top. Still shaking and breathing heavily, he turned back around for one last look at the station. It was still deserted. He clutched the strap of his satchel and, without ever looking back again, walked briskly back to the apartment. It was 10:15 PM already, and Misato would be worried enough about his safety. There was no need to tell her about this. After all, she might unplug the computer if she found out about it.

* * * * *

And Shinji didn't tell anyone else, either, about the visions he had the night before. Misato asked no questions when he came home, and had already left early for

work when he arose the next morning. Kensuke and Touji never bothered asking what he had been doing the night before. They just walked together, Shinji trailing the two of them as always, talking about the weather or listening to Touji absently whistle some Osakan folk melody. In class the teacher asked him no questions about anything, not even the subject at hand, and when the dismissal bell tolled, Shinji was able to leave without having to tell anyone where he was going. The closest he came to having to answer a question was Kensuke asking as they were walking home, "I guess after last night's practice, you feel ready, don't you?" Shinji only nodded, without a word. "Well, good luck! Tell me all about it tomorrow."

"I will," Shinji replied. Unless it goes badly, that is--no need to burden others with the pain of defeat. And if the sinking, twisting sensation in his stomach was any indication, defeat was the most likely outcome. Whoever this Lain girl was had the power to haunt him even when he was alone in a train station. Surely a 3-D game could pose no threat to her.

He sighed, and stared out the commuter train's window, watching the power cables, the shrubs, and the train tracks blur into lines racing roughly past his sight. The chatter of the passengers and the clicking-clacking of the train's wheels all coalesced into a drone in Shinji's ears. A translucent reflection of his face stared and blinked back at him. Gingerly, he touched his mirror image's nose, his finger only meeting cold glass. Shinji chuckled. "It's just a reflection" The reflection moved his lips in silent echo of his words. "It's not real after all, is it?"

Why yes it is, his reflection continued, its lips moving after his own had stopped. It's even more real than what you call "real."

Shinji's eyes widened, as did the reflection's. He waved his hand in front of his

face. His reflection mimicked him. He moved his lips but made no sound, and his likeness made the same movements. "It talked to me," he whispered to himself. "I know it did--"

The sun's rays fell over the window and erased his reflection. The background noise continued to drone. Shinji turned away from the window, his hands trembling. Let's get this over with, and then, no more, that's it . . . it's making me crazy . . . He stared resolutely at his sneakers and did not look up until his station was announced over the PA.

"Tadaima!" he called as he slipped his shoes off and entered to their apartment. No response came. On the kitchen table, Shinji found a hastily scrawled note from Misato, telling him to cook his own food as she would be working late that night. He remembered her grumbling about preparing a new Eva Unit coming in from Germany sometime in the next week, and he supposed that her absence had to do with that matter. I wonder who's going to pilot it . . .

But there were more pressing matters at hand. With some trepidation, Shinji dropped the note back on the table and opened his bedroom door. The Navi had been left on overnight, and its fan's hum filled the otherwise silent apartment. It only seemed to grow louder the closer he stepped toward the unit, as if it were reacting to his presence like the growling grumble of a watchdog.

"Hello Navi," Shinji mumbled as he sat down.

"Shinji has new mail," the computer's voice replied.

"Open it." A beep and a whir later, the computer read in halting tones, "Today-is-the-day. I-shall-see-you-at-this-address: xxxx-xxxx. Come-to-the-Wired-as-soon-as-you-can. Come-now! --Lain."

"So it was her, then" Shinji gritted his teeth. "Well, we'll see about that"

He flexed his fingers and his arms, as if he would need them in the virtual Wired world, breathed deeply, and mentally jumped into the Wired as he clicked on the address.

He landed on his feet, fortunately, sparing him the indignity of falling into a heap on the dank ground. The mortared walls of the dungeon looked identical to the practice maze he saw the night before. But as he lifted his eyes upward, it seemed that the walls ran high forever, for there was no ceiling to speak of but the inky darkness. Shinji then turned to look at himself, and instead of armor and a weapon, he discovered he was still in his threadbare short-sleeved school uniform, with no shoes but his sneakers and no weapon but his hands.

"The game has begun," Lain's disembodied voice announced throughout the dungeon. "You, Shinji, are it. Catch me if you can!"

And the voice faded into an echo, leaving Shinji all alone in the virtual maze. He gritted his teeth. He would have to use wits alone for this challenge.

He tentatively stepped forward and walked down one of the identical-looking corridors. The dungeon still seemed unpopulated, the only sound he heard being the clacking of his footsteps on the stone floor. Soon, the path he had trod upon split to the left and right. Shinji chose to go right.

After strolling about for five minutes and encountering nothing but more blank, brick barriers and the same musty odor throughout, Shinji's perplexity grew. How big was this dungeon? In a game of tag, he expected his heart to be pounding now and his blood rushing at the thrill of the hunt

But then he remembered when he was younger, every time the children tagged him, he would only stumble about on the playground, feebly trying to catch up with all

the stronger, faster, and more agile children. He couldn't catch them, so how could he catch Lain? In the past, he learned to simply give up when he was tagged, because running after uncatchable people was useless, especially when they didn't want to be caught. He was no hunter. He could only be prey, nursing his wounds after being caught in the trap and curling up and waiting for the predators to come--

Stop. Stop. Stop. Shinji took several deep breaths. *It's only a game. It's only just started*

He raised his eyes to the darkness above. "Lain! Where are you?"

The only immediate answer was silence. But just as he was about to chastise himself for trying such a stupid tactic—of course the prey wasn't going to announce herself—a deep, unsettling, but clearly feminine voice boomed all around his ears:

"I'm *here*, Shinji." Laughter followed.

Suddenly, a fearful pall fell over him like a blanket thrown over a bed or like water spilled over his head. The sensation of mortal danger prickled the hairs on his neck, his head and heart began to throb in time with each other, and he felt as if he were shrinking in comparison to the dungeon's intimidating, still-empty corridors. There was a path ahead and behind where he stood at the moment, and he quickly looked behind him. Still nothing. His breath came out of his mouth in ragged, staggered huffs.

"Who's there?" he called.

Boom. A thud echoed throughout the dungeon, from the direction of the hallway that turned off to the right down the corridor. *Boom—boom—boom.* The floor trembled as the thuds grew louder, thuds that sounded like giant footsteps. They were heading down the far corridor toward the main hall where Shinji stood. *Boom, boom, boom,* it announced, the vibrations of the floor growing convulsive—whatever was approaching

was immense—it plodded and lumbered nearer and nearer--

Then it turned the corner of the corridor, and faced Shinji. He gasped and that vaguely humanoid, greenish body mass and its hulking, square shoulders, and felt sick when he saw a familiar insignia emblazoned on its chest--

“No. Not an Angel. I thought I beat this one already!”

The Third Angel kept trundling forward, its shadow falling over the Eva pilot who was charged, in the real world, with defeating such beasts—with an Eva unit. Not with his bare hands.

“Lain! What are you doing—I'm supposed to--” But of course, no reply came from Lain, not even a mocking laugh.

He squeezed his eyes shut. *Don't run, don't run, don't run . . .* Then he turned his heel and fled anyway.

I can't do this. This isn't fair, no, it's not, I can't live through all this again— memories of that horrifying first battle, his broken arm and broken neck and the horrible, wrenching pain—*not again, not again, not again—I can't win . . .* finally, he ran into a dead end. Huffing and puffing in exhaustion and frustration, he collapsed on his knees to the hard ground.

“I quit!” he cried. “I quit! I can't play like this! You win!”

Then he heard an audible sigh filling the air. “Well, that's no fun,” Lain's voice said. “Quitter. Why don't you just try *thinking*, Shinji? Over here, thinking makes it so!”

“What?” Was she offering him help? “Why? Shouldn't you be trying to--”

The Angel had now caught up with him and stood still, seemingly staring at its prey. But for that moment it did nothing else. The Angel-destroyer and the Angel faced

each other as if puzzled at their first face-to-face meeting. Perhaps it was astonished that beings so small were the ones defeating his kin.

“Isn't it much more fun,” Lain said, “when you're not just limited to your body?”

“What?” Then, in a flash, Shinji understood. “Just think, just think . . .” Still facing the Angel, he looked into its cyclops eye. It began to glow—it was about to fire!

“Yes! Eva!” He shut his eyes and thought about the bloody smell of the entry plug, the surrounding controls at his fingertips and all the other sights of the cockpit, with the authoritative voice of Misato crackling over the PA. When he opened his eyes, there he was, sitting inside Eva 01, head to head with the Angel. “Yes. I can do this.”

The eye flared into a burst of bright light. It fired . . .

“AT Field!” Shinji screamed at the top of his lungs. In response, Eva 01 raised its arms in a protective cross, and when the Angel's energy beam struck, the octagonal AT Field harmlessly diffused the ray. “Charge!” Shinji threw all of his battle rage into his neural connection, and so with a roar, Eva 01 surged forward head first like a wild beast. The Angel attempted to draw back, but it was too slow to escape the Eva's powerful vise wringing the Angel's neck. After popping its neck, Eva tore apart its arms with its other hand as blue blood splashed the walls, just as it had done in the first battle. The Angel still continued to struggle, but clearly, it was weakening.

“Prog knife!” The vibrating blade popped out of the Unit's back and the blade unsheathed itself. With another war cry, Shinji jammed the knife into the Angel's core, sparks flying out of it as the Angel tried to squirm out of the Eva's stranglehold. It did no good. Soon enough, the red light in the core turned into a white hot glow, and Shinji covered his eyes as the expected explosion rocked the entry plug and sent blinding light throughout the dungeon. When he uncovered his vision he found no sign of the Angel,

and the cockpit HUD showed no sign of damage on the Eva unit.

Yes . . . I did it again . . . The familiar relief of victory rushed through his head. Then, suddenly, the video screen flickered to life—but with Lain's face, not Misato's.

“Very good, Shinji,” she said, with a sneer on her face. “Now, do you understand the rules of the game?”

“Understand?”

“How this world works. How the possibilities here are endless.” She laughed, though not entirely with malice—he thought he heard a note of sincere appreciation in her voice. “Now, remember, that you're supposed to catch *me*. Don't get distracted!”

Her image flickered out, and suddenly, the trappings of the entry plug disappeared and Shinji fell on his bottom to the cold floor. *Understand, eh?* He thought he

understood. Strategies, equipment, and other necessities could be conjured by mere thought in the Wired. Now he only needed to find Lain . . . he shut his eyes, and thought of Lain's face. *Take me to her, take me to her . . .*

Another disembodied laugh echoed in his ears. “It's not going to be *that* easy. I'm not letting you do *anything* in this dungeon, you know. There has to be rules in a game or it's no fun!”

“Aw . . .” Having tried that strategem, he focused his mind and his energy on finding Lain with somewhat more effort. He picked himself off the floor and traversed the corridors again. After some time, he remembered again; he then said, “Gun,” and a machine gun appeared in his hands. *Just in case . . .* this was Phantoma, after all.

But even with a weapon, after several moments, the fear began to return. She

hadn't promised not to provide any more “distractions,” so he was always on guard. The slightest squeak or knock startled him. Sometimes he thought he heard rustling around the corners of untaken paths, but when he checked, he saw nothing. Moreover, with no map to guide him and no way to conjure one, he was increasingly lost. He found himself traversing paths that he swore he had taken before, and he was unable to mark either the floor or walls with anything he could conjure, as Kensuke had suggested the previous night—Lain had apparently made it so that he couldn't.

Finally, he took a path that seemed somewhat unfamiliar and eventually came to a dead end. When he turned around, though, he found a door on the side of the wall, a typical iron-clad door in every Phantoma dungeon with a carved handle. Normally in the game, doors would lead to rooms full of demons or other typical game monsters, but this being the first door he had ever encountered, he decided to open it. He placed his hand on the handle and turned.

But it would not open. The door was locked.

He tugged at the handle, shaking it with all his strength, but still it would not budge. He banged on the door, but no one answered. He shouted, “anyone there?” but no reply came.

Then he heard the growl behind him.

Shinji turned about and saw where the growl came from—the throat of a giant, brown grizzly bear. The bear could have had an adorable, stuffed-animal expression on its face if its teeth were not bared and its dark eyes not flashing with predatory anticipation. When Shinji looked into its eyes, the bear's growl turned into a lowing cry, a wild cry that announced: *I've got you now, Shinji. Come, come to my arms* It stretched out both its arms as it rushed forward to wrap him in a deadly embrace.

“Fire!” He squeezed the trigger of the machine gun, and a stream of bullets spat out of the barrel. Shinji could not hold the weapon steadily, though, as the recoil almost made him stumble backwards onto his bottom. So three quarters of the ammunition missed its target, and the remainder seemed to not faze the beast in the least. They seemed lodged in its furry body, but no blood flowed from any injury, and ultimately they did not slow the bear's continued charge toward him.

A bear? In Phantoma? The roars and cries of the beast vibrated in his ears, growing louder as the bear came closer. It was now close enough that Shinji could see the dim light glistening on the tips of its fur and the glint of its claws, could smell blood in its breath undoubtedly from its last victim, and even see a small, crossed knot that looked like a braid hanging down the side of its head--

A crossed braid? A bear in a dungeon?

“The game is tag,” Lain had said.

“It's only a game,” Shinji remembered telling himself once.

“Yes,” Shinji said. “It's only a game.” His mutter rose to a shout just as the bear was about to squeeze the life out of him. “It's only a game!” He stretched his hand forward and as soon as his fingertips came in contact with fur, he triumphantly cried,

“Tag! You're *it*, Lain!”

A keening howl shook the dungeon. The brown bear stopped in its tracks and began to convulse, roaring and crying as smoke escaped through holes that were eating up its body. The bear was dissolving before Shinji's eyes, and he watched in horrid fascination as the smoke began to swirl all around and obscure his vision. Soon the stench of decaying flesh and burning fur filled the whole hall and he covered his nose. At first the smoke nearly blinded his vision, tearing up Shinji's eyes, but eventually he

could make out a shadowy figure through the dim fog, a figure much shorter and slighter than the bear. That confirmed it for him. He crossed his arms and patiently waited for the smoke to clear, knowing that he had won.

The smoke thinned, and there, amidst its swirling wisps, stood Lain—a girl his age with wide eyes and dressed in a brown teddy-bear pajamas. Her braid hung limply down the side of her face. She began to step forward toward him tentatively, as if she were nervous, with an outstretched hand, as if she were reaching for him and imploring him to understand something that words failed to express--

Then a loud buzz crackled through the air. That image of Lain flickered out into a single point, and then disappeared, as if it were a projection of an invisible television that had just been switched off. But only the shortest instant passed before the pajama-clad, shy Lain was replaced by another buzzing image that flickered to life: this was the Lain Shinji recognized, the provocatively dressed club girl stepping confidently toward him. She was laughing heartily.

“Well, wasn't that fun?” she said.

“It's more fun now that I've *won*.” He relished the taste of that last word, having won so few contests in his life. “Now apologize like you agreed you would.”

“All right, all right. I'm sorry I knocked into you. God, you make it sound like such a big deal or something. There, you happy?”

“OK, now that's done, so--”

Lain continued to laugh. “Well, it was only because I let you win, of course.”

“I saw through your disguise.”

“It was meant to be seen through. I just wanted to see how fast you could think in a panic situation. Pretty good, I'd say. Maybe I really should have let you quit earlier

. . . .” She chuckled. “Would have been faster that way.”

“Um, um” Embarrassment and self-shame welled up in his mind and the blood rose in his cheeks. He turned away from Lain, who only now did he realize was standing only inches away from him. “I didn't mean anything I said then! I take it all back!”

“Oh, don't lie, Shinji. I know you well enough to figure out your worst fears. I was just trying to teach you the rules of the game, that's all. The way *this* world works.” Shinji faced her again, and for the first time, saw her smile. It was a smile that still had the curl of a smirk tucked at her lip's corner, but there seemed to be a warmth about it that was absent from all her other expressions. Maybe it was the way her eyelids wearily dropped over her eyes, making her look tired and even vulnerable. They softened the hard edges that remained in her voice and her swaggering manner. And now, she took the few final steps that separated the two of them with a slink in her gait, moving forward with an anticipating deliberation. If Shinji did not know better, he'd think that she was—his head began to throb at the thought that she was trying to--

“Well,” Lain said, “how do you like the Wired now? You can get in an entry plug any time you want. If you want a gun, you can have it too. You're not confined anymore, you're not limited to this helpless, miserable fleshly shell” She cupped Shinji's face in her cold, soft palms. He gasped but could not breathe in, as if her touch somehow cut off his breath. “You seem so fearful,” she continued to say, her voice lowered to a hoarse whisper, “but you don't have to be afraid. You can throw off all your disguises in the Wired . . . just let go”

What the hell is going on? For a moment, the moment when she touched him, he felt something like an electrical current passing from her fingertips into his face, a

pulsing energy that made him feel giddy and weightless, like he were about to levitate. The centers of Lain's eyes were dark and empty, but to Shinji the vacuum and void seemed to stand for all the possibilities, all the potential elements of the cosmos that were waiting to take shape in the darkness. Anything could happen, anything could be created out of nothing if the two of them were *connected*—if they were *Wired*

“I just thought that this was the best way to teach you these things. I really wasn't mad at you in the club, you know. That was just for appearances' sake at the club. But here, we can be honest, when we are by ourselves.” She dropped her hands from his face. “Do you see now?”

Shinji blinked, and saw Lain blinking too, waiting for an answer with those empty, half-shut eyes. “Well--” He put his hand behind his head and laughed nervously. “I guess.”

A grin suddenly spread across Lain's face. “Well, I hope you do,” she said, “because I just touched you. You're *it*, again, Shinji.” She beamed smugly, but happily.

The enchantment shattered, and Shinji felt as if he had been struck by a hammer's blow. “*What?* That was what you were—I--” He sputtered his words, unable to finish a complete sentence. But he did not only feel manipulated, but also, for some reason, highly amused. It was as if there were a glimmer of a twinkle in Lain's otherwise dead eyes.

“Well, it's just a game, right?” She giggled—a choked, forced kind of giggle, but a giggle nonetheless. “Catch me if you can!” And then she disappeared into the air, only to reappear at Shinji's side. But before he could tag her, she opened the door that was to her side and rushed out. Beyond the door was light, air, sun, bright white flashes illuminating the darkness. . . he could hear her laughter trailing her fleeing form.

With roaring indignation and laughter, Shinji ran after her through the door, out of the dungeon, and into the blinding light.

* * * * *

The moments that Shinji ran on the white air felt the freest. As soon as he had passed through the door, the light engulfed him and he felt as if he had entered a blank sheet of paper—everything above, below, ahead, and behind him was as bare as newly fallen snow. His pumping arms and legs swung as loosely as a well-oiled hinge or the wings of birds. He ran as if he were weightless, flying through this pure world.

Then, a light even brighter than bare white blinded his vision, and, startled, he stopped running. Eventually the light began to die down, and after blinking repeatedly and allowing his pupils to adjust, the whiteness faded into a sky-blue shade. The sun was shining, but outside of his field of vision. Shinji looked down and found himself standing on grass, soft emerald blades rustling under his feet as he tentatively stepped forward. Looking up a little, scattered through the grass were dandelions and the occasional butterfly flitting over the tops of the leaves. Straight ahead, the grass and flowers and butterflies were part of a grassy knoll stretching out before him, a hillside that ran down to a valley where the buildings of Tokyo-3. Their metal surfaces and windows of the office buildings and Eva arms depots glimmered in the early morning light. The leaves of the trees that stood on the hill swayed in the light breeze that blew by Shinji's cheek. Near one of the trees, several people sat, chatting and laughing gaily: Misato, Toji, Kensuke, Rei—and Lain.

“Hey!” Shinji cupped his hands around his lips. “I’m over here!” His friends all turned around and waved a greeting to him.

“Hey, Shinji-kun! Come and join us!” Misato called to him.

A rush of relief and joy gave him the energy to almost seem to fly toward where they sat. They were the same, familiar people that he had formed a shaky, but real trust in the past several months; they were all he had. And yet, on this hillside, their familiar presence somehow felt so new and ideal; it was not the kind of familiarity that would never settle into complacency like fizzled soda. It was instead like opening a well-worn book from childhood to the first page, except that every page and every chapter would be the beginning of something new that would never end.

At last he was with them. Shinji closed his eyes and inhaled the cool, fragrant air, not sneezing though he had allergies, not shivering though it was a little cool. Then he opened his eyes and took his place next to Lain, sitting on the clean grass. They all faced the side that sloped down to the Tokyo-3 valley, watching nothing in particular, seemingly talking of nothing in particular either.

“Shinji,” Misato said, “it’s nice to see you here. Isn’t it lovely?”

He looked around. Sparrows fluttered and sang in the trees and darted in the sky. There was no sound but the peaceful warble of the crickets and the whistle of the wind from some far distance. Once in a while, a car horn honked from the streets of Tokyo-3 below, but even that seemed like part of the natural order as birdsong or wind.

Shinji sighed, smiled, and nodded. “Yes, it’s beautiful, Misato-san,” he said.

“Sometimes,” Kensuke said as he stretched his arms, yawned, and laid his head down on the grass, “you have to get away from the world, from everything. Even playing soldier gets boring after a while, and so you come to places like this . . . where

it's perfect . . . “

Touji nodded in agreement. “When I was little,” he said, “my aunt and I would climb up the mountains outside Osaka and we'd stand just a few feet from the ledge. We'd look down, and see all the green fields, the trees, the fog covering the roads and the cars below—you know, for a second, sometimes it was like the Second Impact never happened”

“Really?” Shinji turned to Misato. “Misato, what was it like then? I mean, before the Impact? You were alive before it, right?”

She sighed, looking out into the distant city again. “I was little then, Shinji, so it's hard for me to remember that far bak. I do remember that in the autumn, all the trees on the hills—like this hill—would change colors, into beautiful shades of yellow and red and brown. And when the winter came, there would be snow everywhere, white snow covering everything. You've probably only seen things like that in pictures It's so sad, Shinji. That world is gone forever now, after the Second Impact.” Her voice had become soft, almost a whisper, and she looked at him with wide, sad eyes. “Things are getting better now, maybe. But in a real, irreplaceable way, the world is ruined. It will never be fixed again like it once was.”

“Ruin.” For the first time, Rei spoke, though she continued to look at the city far in the distance. “What is man, but the maker, destroyer, and memorializer of his ruined worlds and creations?”

Misato nodded in agreement. “That's the tragedy of man. We alone are responsible for the things our children inherit, I guess. But, even so, I could learn to like it here, too. Isn't this beautiful? Look” She stretched her hand toward the city. “I wish I'd never have to go back into the city. It looks so much nicer from far away. What

about you, Shinji?"

"Yes." From a distance, the city looked like so clean. From there he could not see all the rude traffic or the rude pedestrians that crowded the sidewalks during the daytime. From there, the power supplies, weapon racks, and elevators for his Evangelion unit looked just like any other buildings. "It's wonderful from here."

"I could stay here forever," Toji said.

"Me too," Kensuke concurred. He pointed to some clouds in the sky. "Ahh . . . look, that cloud looks like a rifle . . . that one like a mortar"

"You and your weapons," Toji said, sniffing.

Lain, who had been silent, then spoke. "Well, I don't see why we can't all stay here together, forever."

"Yay! Thank you, Lain!" They were all cheering their approval of Lain, even Rei. It seemed strange to see her with such a warm, genuine smile, one that he had not seen since he rescued her from the entry plug in their last battle. It was the smile that had made him cry. Taken aback, he wondered: *If even she can smile, then maybe, just maybe, this is happiness*

"How 'bout you, Shinji?" Lain had now turned to him. In the sunlight, even her drooping eyes seemed to be full of light, brimming over with care and warmth and invitation. "We can stay here forever. With everyone, Shinji. Everyone."

He looked at his friends, and then at Lain. "You mean, everyone here?"

"Yes, everyone here."

Everyone here. That means . . . no Father. Shinji sighed, full of longing.

The ground beneath Shinji was getting warm after he had sat there for several moments. He too stretched his arms and lay down on the grass, resting the back of his

head on his hands, staring up at the clouds drifting across the blue fields of heaven. They moved to the slow beat of eternity, not the nervous, erratic rhythm of stop-and-go traffic, nor were they blown about by the gales of a storm.

“Yes,” he said, “I do want to stay here. Forever.”

Lain smiled, and nodded. She was leaning over and looking down on him. “The world beyond this place, like Misato said, is ruined. But not here. And unlike anywhere else out in the world, you don't have to leave if you don't want.” A rustle and a warmth at his side later, Lain too had laid down, looking at the sky, beside Shinji. He could hear her even breath, its serenity and constancy giving him such comfort that all the bickering, all the glares and harsh words they exchanged before, were but dim memories that had begun to take on the glow of warmly remembered lovers' quarrels.

“No, Lain,” Shinji said, his voice filled with satisfaction. “I don't ever want to leave here. Or leave you.”

“I don't either,” she replied. “Not ever.” Then, to his surprise, he felt her fingertips caressing his knuckles and the tops of his fingers, before they clasped his willing palm. The moment she took his hand the warmth of an electrical pulse swelled in his hand and swept up his arm and into his whole body, like some intoxicating elixir of eternal life. He felt more alive than he had ever felt before, and yet also slower and sleepier, more resistant to the idea of ever raising his head from the grass. The slow shocks made Shinji's eyes widen in pleasure for a moment before he gently closed them so he could savor the feeling coursing through his being.

“Woooo!” Shinji opened his eyes when he heard Toji's laughter. “Nice girlfriend you got there, Shinji!”

“What, so Rei's not good enough for you now?” Kensuke said. “Ha—look, Rei's

blushing! Ooh, this is going to be good”

“Well, well, Shin-chan,” Misato said between chuckles, “I knew you'd find someone eventually. See, Shinji? It's not so hard to make friends here. Could you ever have found someone like that in the outside world?”

Outside world? For all he cared, there was no outside world, only this warmth and this sunshine and this hillside “Uhh, thanks guys,” he said, weakly. He did not mind the brief embarrassment that flared in his cheeks, as he lay still in the restful stupor that wrapped his whole body. He felt as if he were sinking in a soothing sea of quicksan, and as if his form were melting away and his spirit was stretching its wings, about to escape the cocoon that had contained it for so long.

“And all you have to do,” Lain said, whispering sweetly in his ear, “is connect. Only connect. To me, to everyone, to all” She squeezed his hand, filling Shinji with another jolt of pleasure.

“Connect” Shinji heard her voice echoing along with his. “Yes.”

He felt some things bump against his body, soft things, fleshly sensations weighing on his chest. Hands caressed the side of his head and rested on his cheeks. When he opened his eyes, his eyes met her face just inches away from his own. She was lying on top of him, and her slight frame still felt heavy bearing down on him. But it was a pleasant weight to bear, like a thick, warm blanket in the middle of the cold.

“Shinji,” Lain said, “do you want to become one with me?”

Yes. “Yes.”

“Do you want to be of no body, one mind, and one soul with all?”

“Yes.”

“It would be very, very nice. Wouldn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Just a moment. This won't take long. Close your eyes.”

He did so. And in the darkness, the kiss that followed on his lips felt like a dive into deep water. Her mouth was wet and warm and it flooded over him like a rising tide. He felt like he was floating, drifting away from the ground and suspended in the air—though he still could see nothing. A faint echo in his mind cried, *open your eyes, open your eyes*, but his eyelids felt too heavy and the sweetness filling his mouth and blood overcame any desire to release himself from her hands gripping his face or her mouth locking his lips. He felt as light as air.

She stopped, and he saw her face through blurred vision when tried to open his eyes. “Keep them closed,” she said. “Just a moment . . . and the moment will soon become eternity”

So he closed them again, Lain's voice now sounding like a faint echo ringing through the vacuum of space. The darkness then gave birth to colors, nebula clouds twisting and writhing through his personal cosmos. He could no longer feel her lips meeting his, so he tried to open his mouth to speak. But now his lips were heavy to open, as if they had been sealed so that he could marvel and awe at the process unfolding before his blind sight. The nebulae, at first scattered around him, then began to coalesce into a whole kaleidoscope of colors, which then combined and swelled into white. The whiteness spread from the center until it engulfed everything around him. At that moment, an invisible engine pushed him forward, and he felt as if he were hurtling through the whitespace toward a goal, though no visible destination lay in the horizon.

“It'll be coming up . . . now,” Lain whispered. “You'll be back soon.”

A single black point appeared in the middle of his sight, growing larger as he was

rushing toward it. It grew from a dot to a blot to a splotch, and as it approached it turned into a coherent image: there, the size of a postage stamp at the moment, was the green, sunny hillside that he had been sitting upon a while ago.

“You're almost there . . . you'll be free forever soon . . . all free”

Something like an interior, silent sigh rippled through Shinji's being. The scene loomed closer, and as it did, he could begin to make out the welcoming figures of Misato and Rei and Toji and Kensuke and Lain. *Hold on*, he wanted to say, but was unable to. *I'm coming. I'm coming to stay, and I want to be with you all too*

Then, suddenly, the vision of the hillside distorted and flickered with a loud POP! Static lines ripped across the scene, as if it were an image on a broken television. The crackles, hisses, and pops shattered the peaceful silence and shook the entire white world. The engine that was pushing Shinji came to an abrupt halt, almost knocking him off whatever his feet were standing on—it seemed to be nothing—and when he look ahead, the hillside was nothing but the static jungle of white and black noise. Then, another picture began to emerge out of the chaos. The face of a girl—Lain—materialized, the young, wide-eyed version of Lain that he had seen in passing before. But this time, her soft eyes were fixed in anger.

“This ends now,” she declared. “I am not letting you take him away, too.”

“Lain?” Shinji, at that moment, found himself able to speak for the first time.

“What—I thought—what are you--”

“Don't listen to that one over there,” young Lain said. “I know this must be very confusing, but—”

“--but you're too late.” The other Lain's familiar voice sounded from behind him. He turned around and saw her walking forward, the Lain who had just kissed him and

shown him all this, with a familiar scowl on her face. “He wants to stay here now. All he has to do is take a few steps forward, and he will shed his body. Past you. Past all help.” She turned to Shinji. “Don't listen to this one in front. She's not Lain. She's an impostor.”

“No, Shinji,” wide-eyed Lain in front pleaded. “I am Lain. I live in Tokyo-3 and I have been watching you all this time . . . that is not Lain, that is a software creation that looks like me. Listen to me! If you go through this, you'll never be able to come out—your soul will forever be trapped in the Wired” A buzz of static cut across Lain's face, which twisted in agony before it disappeared. But it only reappeared a moment later, with a body attached below the head. This Lain was dressed in a plain white nightgown, and her expression was simple and innocent but filled with urgency. Fear flickered in her brown eyes.

“Shinji, listen,” young Lain said. “Don't follow her into the Wired. You have to stay in the real world, because--”

“Because why?” The other Lain suddenly appeared beside the younger version, a maniacal gleam in her eyes and the same scowl on her face. With a grip of her hand, she clutched the young Lain's shoulder. She shrieked in pain before she disappeared in a storm of static. Shinji recoiled and began to back away from the scene. But the remaining, proud Lain followed him.

“Humph,” she said. “She's a nuisance. Shinji, there are those who don't like people like us. People who want us to stay in the “real” world full of pain and suffering and sadness. They want us to stay because they do not have the courage to outgrow their bodies, so they want us to stay on their level. You've already come so far. Just follow me, and then you can rest happily for eternity. No more loneliness, because everyone

you know will be there. No more ruin or pain, because there nothing can be ruined and you can turn off any feeling of pain you have. It's all up to you.”

But before Lain could finish speaking, jolts of electricity shattered the walls of the white world. Cracks split the once pure surfaces, and jagged pieces of the whiteness began to fall like broken glass, revealing only yawning, starless darkness beyond. The pieces kept falling until finally, the last remnants dissolved into oblivion and left Shinji and Lain floating in a void. Then young Lain's voice boomed all around them:

“I understand everything now, Shinji. I used to think that there was no difference, too, between me and that girl over there, that we were all souls destined to leave our bodies behind. Now I know better.

“I've tried to warn you before, Shinji. I was watching at the top of the stairs of the club when you first came to the Wired. I tried to contact you after you defeated the bear in the dungeon. And now, I am reaching you . . . please. Don't believe her. Don't follow, if you want to live and if you want everyone you care about live.” Her voice choked with a quiet sob. “Or else, you'll be just like all the girls in my school . . . all the girls who killed themselves and are now trapped forever in the Wired”

“Ha! They are not dead. They have only outgrown their shells and are superior beings. What do you need a vessel that lives in a dying, decaying world for?” Lain's eyes flashed with conviction, her voice rising to a dramatic crescendo. “The body is so weak. It gets sick and it feels pain at the slightest wound. And what do people gain by trying to preserve it and have long lives? It dies anyway. What good is that? Someone with your powers, Lain, should know that.

“You can live forever in the Wired, Shinji. And you would be powerful, maybe even more powerful than that Lain, because you have the mental powers to connect to

Angels and to Evangelions. Anything, almost anything you wish for can come true, right here.” Lain smiled. “That’s all I’m offering. To you, and to everyone who I invite.” A glimmer of light appeared behind Lain, and it grew until it again presented the hillside scene. “This is all yours, if you come.”

Young Lain’s voice sighed. “*This*,” she said, “is what *that* really is.”

Immediately the hillside vanished, replaced by a grid of pulsing, flashing wires. But even the wires then vanished, revealing a host of drifting, human-shaped ghosts moaning emptily in the blackness. “This is the Wired: dead souls, never to find their rest because there is no rest here, only permanent connection—only life sucking other lives until there is nothing.

“And it’s all useless anyway. If you don’t go back, Shinji, the Angels will win and then all this in the Wired will disappear along with the rest of humanity. Or, there will still be a Wired. But there will be nothing left to sustain its illusions, because there will be no one to take care of the network. You will be like those ghosts, lonely, wandering, sharing in their miseries forever.” The voice paused. “Is that what you really want, Shinji?”

“Nonsense! Go away!” Angrily, the other Lain shook herself and sent bolts of electricity flying loose throughout the dark void. But young Lain only laughed, though sadly.

“Even now, your powers are fading. The Knights who programmed you to deceive everyone are being eliminated as I speak. Your God will have no followers soon. Don’t you understand? If you get Shinji in here, and everyone’s bodies disappears in the Third Impact, there will be no one to enter the Wired anyway. You too, will be left all alone without your illusions.

“I can't let you ruin things anymore. You--go away!”

Lain's visage then appeared overhead, a giant version of her head bearing down angrily on the doppelganger. Rings of electricity and fire engulfed the false Lain, who shrieked in tortured pain. Through it all, Shinji watched, unable to move, unable to say anything as the lookalikes battled. A mixture of emptiness, horror, and confusion raged through his mind. He had been on the brink of achieving the only solace that he had ever known in his life, and now he was being told it was no solace at all? As the false Lain began to melt, amidst the electric fires burning around her, her agonized cries and pleas for help filled Shinji's heart with terrible, empathetic pain. She had given him his first kiss, and had offered him happiness when no one else ever had, when everyone else had told him to get in a robot and told him to save a world that he never cared for in the first place, all run by a father who abandoned him and whom he hated.

“There are those who don't like us . . . they want us to stay so we can be on their level,” she had said. Now, as she was disappearing, she was crying feebly, “Help me . . . help”

He could stand it no longer. “Stop! Stop! Don't do this!” Anger and indignation at the grisly sight and at what was happening rose. “You can't be the real Lain. How could you? You look the same but you're different. She wanted me to be happy. You just want to destroy everything”

“I'm only destroying what's not real.” Now, only trails of smoke remained where the other Lain once stood. “And it's too late anyway. I haven't actually destroyed her, I've only blocked her from this part of the Wired for the moment. She will continue to exist as long as you, and many others she has misled, continue to have memory of her. We only exist, Shinji, when we are remembered by others.”

“I don't understand.” Shinji stared at the young Lain's softened face, gazing in her wide eyes. “I don't understand anything here at all!”

The face disappeared, and young Lain again stood in front of Shinji in bodily form. “What is the Wired, Shinji?” she said. “It's a place where everyone can connect. It was made for that reason. The Wired isn't anything more than the sum of everyone's communication with one another. If people don't connect with anyone, they become lonely, and then they begin to die. People cannot live long without connecting to others, whether it's in the body or in the Wired.

“But there are those, like the ones who created the false Lain, and others, who want to make the Wired the only place to connect to others. In the Wired, you can potentially always be with others, and they with you, without any barriers. The difference between you and others dissolves, and only then can they think they eliminate their emptiness. And they can only do that by getting rid of your body, because bodies are what separate us from others

“But look at everyone here without bodies. None of this is *real*. It's all illusions, illusions that are only possible because people have memories of the time when they did have bodies, and because there are real machines that run the network, maintained by people with bodies. If the Angels come, there will no longer be anyone to maintain the illusion. And then everything will be for naught. Everyone will just simply be dead.”

“So.” Shinji sighed, and hung his head, looking at his shoes that were standing on nothing. “I still have to stop the Third Impact, don't I? I still have to go out and fight.”

She nodded. “There is no future here, Shinji. Only endless eternity wandering through the void. Even if you want to come back to the Wired to enjoy an illusion once

in a while, you can't do that unless there is a future too.”

“But—but--” The stress of all the cataclysms that he had just witnessed was beginning to bear down on him. His head suddenly felt very heavy. “Lain—I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to go back. Not after what I saw.”

“I know you don't. No one who's had a taste of the Wired usually wants to go back. But you are only as alive in the Wired as you are outside of it. I saw you stand up to the other Lain earlier, Shinji. If you can do that here, it means that you can eventually do it outside, too.” She smiled, still sadly. “But I know you won't believe me . . . do you?”

Shinji shook his head sadly too. “I'm different here. I'm free. I'm confident. I don't hate myself the way I do when I wake up every morning in the real world. Why should I stay there? What right do you have to take it away from me?” He began to cry. “Maybe I'd better off if I never came here at all”

Lain sighed. “No one ever believes me,” she said. “Too much damage has been done. You are so hurt and confused, and so leaving this place with a memory of the happiness that you felt is always going to haunt you. You do want to forget, don't you?”

He nodded. “But that's not possible. You can't erase memories and go back to the past. Even if you could, and I had never known all this, I'd still hurt, no less than before, but then again I wouldn't know just how happy I could have been, either. You can't, you can't”

Through his blurring eyes he saw Lain blink and gaze at him compassionately. “Oh no, Shinji. It is possible. I don't like resetting thing and erasing memories. Ignorance is never a good way to escape. But, just the knowledge of this place has been tainted, tainted by me and my lookalike. Together we have made too many mistakes.

“So I *have* to erase your memory, by erasing myself. When I cease to exist, things will return to where they were before. Do you understand even a little?” She offered him her hand; his arm shaking violently, he took it.

“No. No.” Now the tears began to run down his face, trickling hot trails of salt water. “Why do you have to do that? Why destroy yourself? Don't take away my memory of this place . . . please . . . it's all you or I have left.”

“If I don't, then you will just keep coming back, and then you will never leave. The other Lain will still exist because you remember her face, her kiss, her promises. And then one day, you will no longer feel a thing when the Wired dies along with the rest of the world. You want love. You want peace. You want hope. I can help ensure that those things will still be possible, even if just for a little while. I can help you forget—by your forgetting me.

“I'm going to start now, Shinji. Farewell. Keep us safe.”

“Wait!” But before he could persuade her to stay, he felt her hand slipping away from his. Then her body began to glow with unearthly white light, imbuing her with a near-angelic glow. She closed her eyes as the aura surrounded her and as she began to float above Shinji in the air. A wind began to blow from nowhere in the darkness, ruffling the edges of her nightgown, and its whistle grew into a howl as it beat faster and faster against her form. Crashes echoed throughout the vacuum, as if invisible trees were falling everywhere around them. Meanwhile, Lain was ascending higher and higher above, until a sudden gust of wind violently blew across her body. It dissolved instantly like sand scattered into dust by a hurricane.

Then, the noise stopped, filling the blackness with echoing silence. Shinji floated in the nothing, and then, the darkness gradually turned to greyness, and then a shade

brighter and brighter until all was white again. And then, a blinding flash--

* * * * *

The first thing Shinji saw when he awoke was whiteness. *What? Where am I? Am I*—As he blinked repeatedly and his vision adjusted to the light, he saw the familiar contours of ceiling plaster and the ceiling lamp with a fluorescent bulb fixed just above him. *Yes. It's that blasted familiar ceiling again*—the ceiling of the hospital. *Did I get hurt in battle again?*

As his sense returned to normal and he no longer squinted at the sunlight pouring into his room, he at last fully awoke with a start. His mouth hung open and his eyes were wide as he sat up for a moment, staring at the hospital wall, before his head plopped back down onto the pillow. He rolled his head to the left, and saw the IV pouch hanging from the rack and a tube protruding in his arm. To his right, the blinds were pulled up all the way and sunlight streamed through to shine on his white bedsheets. A radio softly announced the day's weather for Tokyo-3 in the background.

“What happened?” he mumbled. “How did I get here?” He only remembered the last thing he was, which was to log in to his computer to play a game with a friend— which friend? Kensuke?--and now, he was lying in a hospital bed? This was not the first time it had happened, he recalled. Perhaps another Angel battle and the pain from the Eva unit had knocked him unconscious.

He raised his head again, this time fixing his eyes on the half-open door. To his surprise, he saw a girl standing in the doorway, a girl about his age with brown, bowl-cut hair, with a crossed braid hanging down the side.

“Hello?” he said. “Who are you?” He blinked and rubbed his eyes, and when they opened again, she had already disappeared. *Who?* She was a new visitor. No one

ever usually visited him other than Rei or Misato when he got hurt. Maybe it was one of their friends . . . he looked in vain at the empty space between the doorframe and the door. A strangely hollow, blank feeling gnawed inside him as he contemplated in the silence. *Do I know her?* But he had never seen her before.

Just then, as he was about to rest his head, footsteps clattered down the hall, and the door flew open. The doorknob crashed into the wall. “Shinji-kun!” Misato's anguished voice cried. “Thank God . . . oh, Shinji, we thought you'd never make--”

In a single instant, Misato's lovely face, worry-brimmed, furrow-browed, tear-stained face loomed over him, filling his whole vision. He felt her soft hands cupping his cheeks—a gesture that also, somehow, felt warmly familiar. But why?

“Misato-san,” Shinji said, his voice still weak from anaesthesia, “what happened to me?”

“I found you—collapsed by the computer—they said it was permanent brain damage then, but now—oh, God, it's a miracle, thank God.” The crooked smile on her face sent more warmth rushing through his body than anything he had ever seen. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, but--” He stared at her, gazing into her eyes, at this woman who had taken him in when he could have been alone, who had waited for him outside the hospital every time he had been hurt, who told him what he had to do in his entry plug and had saved his life so many times. She was the most wonderful person in his world. Wasn't she? And now here she was, so full of love and care and concern for him, in a way he had never known--

--or had he? He closed his eyes and tried to think, to access some part of his brain that refused to be opened. Something was missing, he knew. Something

impossible to define, a sensation that was beyond emotions or words; something was lost in the deep abyss of memory, but he had no idea what that was. It was somehow real but without name, place, or identity.

But it was a loss, all the same. It hurt so much, tears welled in his eyes. “I don't know what it is,” he sobbed. “I just don't know.”

“Shinji,” Misato said. “I don't know either.” She embraced him, cradling his head in her arms as he cried like the fourteen-year-old-child that he was. “Maybe we'll never know”

Shinji nodded. He closed his eyes again, and in the darkness, rested his head on her shoulder. Her arms felt strong, warm, and real.

THE END

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