

Makoto sat before the Eye of the Magi. The three of them stood behind him, ready and waiting towards such ends as the Commander had authorized. The Eye itself, several hundred square meters of optical feed and data, displayed running statistics on the Geofront. The learning AI had control of the cameras, and it displayed what it claimed Makoto wanted to know, whispering into his ears.

On the smaller screens before him Makoto was observing a slow parse of all data from the satellite EGC-11, or the Extra-Global Camera 11. The EGC series had been put in orbit by a global mapping project before the Second Impact in a first step towards real time mapping of ocean currents. Now it detected two hundred and seventeen aspects of the planet Earth that two hundred and seventeen other satellites were doing for almost that many countries. It greatly increased NERV's autonomy and provided the commander with low level bargaining chips he could use against the UN. It still measured seawater temperature best, and that was what Makoto had it doing. Best of all, the entire series had been purchased for less than a quarter million Euro while the nations of the world had better things to worry about. Now most of the important information on oceanic temperatures was ready to be studied.

Makoto had been doing this for seventeen consecutive hours.

"Shiny," Aoba observed.

"Hey."

"Ocean temps?"

"Yes. I'm trying to find a way to predict Tapp streams."

"You know what a Tapp stream is?" Aoba was surprised.

"Not in the slightest. Ritsuko will give me plots of them whenever I ask, but she won't tell me what they are. Oceanic something or others."

"Oh." Aoba stepped forward and peered over Makoto's head at the Eye.

"You're blocking my light."

"Sorry. The maintenance techs say I won't get my chair back until tomorrow, possibly the day after. Apparently that soup crashed the HD, and the thing won't reboot."

Makoto turned his head to peer up at his coworker amused. "You crashed a chair?"

"Sick, isn't it?"

"And it won't boot?" Makoto barely restrained his laughter.

"Freaking chairs. It's the stupid security. These things here," Aoba prodded a couple knobs on the back of Makoto's seat. "tie into bridge security and tell them all sorts of useless crap including how we're doing, what we what for dinner last night, and probably the scent of our cologne. Of course they can't vibrate or massage, because that would be a luxury, and therefore a waste of money."

Makoto gave up and burst out in peels of good natured mirth.

"Shaddup."

"You crashed a chair. Ha! We did that in college but it required alcohol and four flights of stairs." He leaned back, non-nonchalantly hit the posture release, and wiggled his back to get comfortable. Aoba, still standing behind him, grunted and grabbed him by the neck, dead certain that no one would be comfortable if he couldn't. "Get off me before you break mine."

"Feh. Like you could make me."

"I'll break you like a twig. I've been lifting. Feel that." And Makoto flexed his shoulders.

"So you have." Then Aoba decided to get a little payback. "Trying to impress the ladies, eh?"

"Like I ever see any ladies."

"Oh? What about our sexy commander?"

"Are you kidding? She's on me like white on rice. Twice now I've had to tell her 'no.' She's letting her hormones get control of her military bearing."

"You wish." Aoba leaned forward and stared at the EGC output. Something was curious about it.

"Of course," Makoto replied.

"Ah, does that mean you don't love me any more? And just when you got buffed too."

"Sorry, I never loved you."

"That's not what you said last night."

"Is there a point to this gayness or are you just being obnoxious?"

"Obnoxious, mainly."

"Then let go of me."

"What is that?" Aoba asked as he did so. He pointed at the lower right hand corner of Makoto's screen.

"What?"

"That display. What is it?"

"Temperature graph. The red is hot, blue is cold. I've got it overlayed on a geothermal map. You can see the rings around the Pacific plate," he traced them with his finger.

"What do the different sized dots mean?"

"Stray Tapp readings. Those are all geological points."

"Those dots are geologicals? Rocks and suchlike?"

"Yeah."

"Why are they moving?"

"Tectonic drift."

"Two centimeters a minute?"

"Because of-they what?"

Aoba pushed Makoto aside and sat on his heels next to him by the computer screen. The two of them stared at the map for a minute in dead silence. The map they were looking at flickered and loaded onto the Eye.

The phone rang suddenly, loud and obnoxious in the silence.

"Makoto," he said as he tapped the speaker phone button.

"Ensign, this is the Chief down in maintenance. We were doing some calibration checks on Ensign Aoba's reclining life status sensor array and were using you as a baseline to make sure we had everything working. Your RLSSA just went crazy. Are you all right?"

"Chief, I think I just got promoted."

"Eh?"

"I'll call you back." Makoto tapped another button to end a call. With the spell broken he spoke softly. "Do you realize what this means?"

"No," Aoba replied.

"We're going to be promoted."

"I caught that part. Why?"

"The Tapp streams."

"So you know what a Tapp stream is?"

"No. But I can predict them."

"How?" Her voice was high and iron. Ritsuko Akagi strode onto the bridge, her lab jacket flying wide behind her like a white cloak.

"Subduction zones, Ma'am."

"What's a Tapp Stream?" asked Aoba.

"Explain," Dr Akagi ordered. Her expression was hard enough to shatter stone.

"Ninety seven percent of all Tapp readings on graphs ninety eight through," Makoto consulted his figures, "eleven thousand and six are classified non-geothermal and ranged randomly throughout the world. The remaining three percent are outliers and discarded by the seven sigma three method used to calculate locations. Their magnitudes are below the threshold for being statistical anomalies. However, I noticed that more than sigma of those were in subduction zones, as on screens nine and ten," The Magi displayed those graphs without needing additional instructions. Their user interface was helpful that way.

"What's a subduction zone?" Aoba contributed.

"Explain why less than three percent of Tapp readings of magnitude nine or greater follow your subduction pattern."

"A brilliant question, ma'am," Aoba agreed.

"Because of non-tangential drift with response to sidereal motion. Observe what happens when we put an appropriate pattern finding algorithm into place." Makoto turned and began flashing his fingers over his keyboard. Silently he gave thanks to every spirit, god, or angel that he'd spent the last nine hours doing just this and could make an appropriate program in approximately nothing flat. "As you can see, ma'am, sigma shrinks to less than eighty nine kilometers."

"Get it to less than one and you'll get your promotion. Less than fifty meters and I'll get you a commendation as well."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Dr Akagi stared hard at the screen and then swept out imperially.

"What about me?" Aoba yelled after her.

"Help him and you won't get fired." The doors snapped shut behind her with a hiss.

"Jackass."

"Like white on rice, baby."

Ritsuko could hear them through the door but kept walking anyway. The seal on those doors had been carefully programmed to allow her to hear what was being said after she left. She took a elevator to one of her offices and shut the door carefully. This particular office was on floor nine in the maintenance sector, which meant the chances of her being interrupted were similar to Makoto's with Misato.

"I am retarded. I have lost my mind and am retarded." She slumped into her chair, one of the old low tech versions that didn't actually have any circuitry in it. It held her butt and back when she sat, and that was it. "God, Makoto figured it out before me."

She took a couple folders from her desk looking for the one on Tapp streams. Three on Rei Ayanami she put aside, the other seven she filed. Another odd dozen on Shinji Ikari were filed as well. She picked up a small, thin folder with only three pieces of paper in it, marked with a red circle. It wasn't marked as classified, because if anyone who read the cover that needed to know it was classified they were already being sighted by snipers. She tapped it to her lips twice before dropping it into a small incinerator she kept for such occasions. Under fourteen other kilograms of loose paper, she found what she was looking for. Her desk looked like the parted Red Sea.

"Tapp signals. Mostly found in streams, blah blah blah, signal velocity, blah blah blah, used to identify natural currents of PPE." She read the papers within in silence until she dropped them with a groan and massaged her temples. "Ugh. Not again." She reached into one of her pockets and withdrew a veritable pharmacy of small pill bottles, half of which she dropped putting them on the table. Her hands were shaking. Looking more irritated than pained she found the one she was looking for and took three, ignoring the suggested dosage written on the label. Then her head slumped into her hands and she stopped moving, breathing in deep raspy gulps. Behind her the small incinerator flashed inside a Plexiglas window and chimed. With

a puff of ash and hot air the door opened.

In response the air-conditioning unit shot a blast of frigid air into the room. Ritsuko didn't react to it at all, her skin didn't goose bump, but sudden beads of sweat stood out on her forehead and hands. The hot and cold air equalized after a few seconds. The sweat evaporated or streaked down her face to be absorbed by her collar. She never moved.

At some point that evening her phone rang. The noise was a surprisingly discordant chime that echoed about the room and broke her out of her reverie. She sat bolt upright, gasping, "Dosage interactions result in increased cellular consumption causing runaway symptom escalation until Jesus Mom I'm sorry you were right."

The phone rang again.

"Dr Akagi," she answered it, her voice utterly cool and controlled.

"Hey, Ritsy."

"Hey, Misato."

"Listen, the third child and, oh, isn't that just a horrible way to refer to him? The third child? I'm sorry."

"What's wrong with the 'third child?' He isn't one, two or four, is he?"

"But he's got a name. Shinji. It isn't even hard to pronounce."

"You barely got it right last night."

"That's because I was drunk."

"Go figure."

"Anyway, he and Asuka have decided that they're boring and want to stay home instead of going out with me this evening."

"Maybe they're going to do a little hanky panky."

"I hope so."

"Misato!"

"What? It would be good and healthy for those two. Besides, might build some team unity."

"Misato, you listen to me right now you twisted half brained twit. If you so much as breath one iota of the stupidity that just emanated from you mouth in any fashion that I cannot immediately discount as being the phone connection overridden by hackers--"

"Jeez, jeez. Relax."

"You're their guardian! Not some twisted match maker!"

"I know! Relax." Ritsuko could not see Misato roll her eyes, happy she'd never bought one of those video phone contraptions. "Anyway, before we get off topic, my plans for dinner have been canceled. The question is can I kidnap you

away from that job of ours for an evening?"

"What about the children?"

"What about them? They're fourteen. They can mind themselves for an evening. I want to go to the grill I was telling you about anyway. It's in the lobby of the building."

"Misato, those children carry the fate of the world on their shoulders and--"

"You've been spending too much time with the Commander." Misato interrupted her, unable to see Ritsuko jump and get a caged look. "You're even talking like him. I'm talking about getting something to eat in the same building. We're eighteen seconds away by elevator. I checked. Besides, think of it like an experiment. We'll be far enough away to generate the illusion of independence but close enough to monitor the subjects while we're away."

Ritsuko was silent on the other end of the phone for several seconds. This made Misato smile. Talking Ritsuko into doing anything was basically impossible, but letting her talk herself into it was cake.

"How expensive is this place?"

"They have a special tonight. Three course meals for six eighty."

"That's pretty good," Ritsuko admitted.

"Exactly."

"About an hour and a half, then?"

"I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking."

"Yeah, well played, Moriarty."

"Who?"

"I'll tell you in an hour and a half."

"Good. See you then!"

"Later."

Misato hung up and dropped the phone back into its cradle. She luxuriated in a stretch of victory and strolled into the kitchen to enjoy the sounds of children fighting.

"Silence! I, as the adult here, shall decide what you are authorized to watch tonight!"

"Oh, really?" Misato asked dryly.

"Well, when you're gone I will be," Asuka replied.

"Tell her that's not true," Shinji begged. "All she wants to watch is that dancing show and I'm sick of it. She had control of the TV all day, and I want to see the string quartet."

"Asuka?" Misato asked.

"Screw the string quartet. We've already got a string quartet. Why do we need to watch another?"

"We do not!" Shinji disagreed.

"See? Exactly my point!"

"No! I mean we don't have a quartet. There's only three of us."

"Well, there's only three children. Maybe when we find the fourth child he'll be our fourth," Misato offered a compromise. "Wouldn't that be interesting? The only real requirement to pilot an EVA is the ability to play a string instrument?"

The children refused to be distracted.

"So I'm watching the quartet tonight, right?" Shinji asked.

"No, you aren't. As the older, better looking, and better educated child, I'm determining that we're watching Dancing on the Town."

"Hey!"

"Now Asuka, you aren't older. All of you children were born the exact same day."

"But I was born on German time, which starts earlier, which means I'm older."

Misato could feel a headache coming on. She wandered to the kitchen and found something to drink. Before she had to resume the fray and satisfy her obligation to keep peace the door chimed.

"Shinji, get that," commanded Asuka.

"No!"

"Now!"

Misato left them and went to the door herself. On the other side she found a gentlemen with unkempt stubble, roguish good looks, and a thoroughly disreputable appearance.

"Hey, beautiful. How are you doing?"

She decided gentleman was certainly not the word she had needed.

"Hey, Kaji. Come in?"

"Love to."

Asuka squealed when she saw him and bolted to hug him. This meant she was no longer in a position to fight Shinji, who bolted for the remote and seized it. Within seconds he had the TV appropriately tuned. He made eye contact with Kaji and mouthed 'thank you.' Kaji winked.

"So, beautiful ladies, how are you tonight?"

"I'm fantastic!" Asuka gushed.

"Excellent." He gave her a squeeze and released her. Asuka was disappointed for half a second before she realized what Shinji had done and dashed over to make his life hell.

"That was quick," he observed.

"Want something to drink?"

"Beer, if you have any."

They shared a look. Then Misato shook her head and went into the kitchen. Kaji followed.

"I hear through the grapevine you and Ritsuko are heading to that grill downstairs tonight."

"The grapevine?"

"I asked Ritsuko if she wanted to head out but she told me you two already had plans."

"Oh, putting the moves on the good doctor herself?"

"Hardly. I think the three of us have known each other long enough that a dinner is not 'the moves.'"

"You don't have to justify yourself to me."

Kaji groaned but took the beer. They toasted and sipped.

"You must have called her just now. I only got off the phone with her a few minutes ago."

"I did. I was on my way over here to invite you along too and finally got through to Ritsuko in the parking lot out back. It seems I have nothing to show for my pains."

"Are you fishing for an invitation?"

"Of course," replied Kaji, completely unselfconsciously.

Misato rolled her eyes again and leaned against the counter top. "Fine. Would you like to come?"

"I don't know, I may have other plans."

"I hope you do!"

Kaji laughed.

"I have an idea." Misato suddenly smiled. Her face took on a decidedly evil expression. "Why don't you stay here and babysit while Ritsuko and I are out? You can spend some quality time with the children?"

"Woman, you are cruel."

She batted her eyelashes at him.

"But if I'm babysitting, I can't buy you a drink, and I owe you for this

delectable beverage you have so graciously provided."

"Fine, so be it. I assume Ritsuko told you when?"

"She did. I'll be—" There was an interrupting chirp, and Kaji checked his phone. There was a short text message he read and deleted. "late, probably."

"Work?"

"You know how it goes. I've got to go."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." He tossed the rest of the beer down. "For this too."

"You'd better show tonight. You owe me one."

"I'll be there."

He shut the door behind him and looked out into the dark night. A city the size of Tokyo-3 should be covered in lights this time of the evening, but instead most of it was dim. He supposed that was why the government was willing to grant such loans to start up businesses. Loans and grants were the reason the grill they were going to would be able to keep its prices so low. Kaji wasn't complaining.

He trotted down a few stairs, across the parking lot, and caught a train. Within fifteen minutes he was descending into the Geofront and soon in the back offices of NERV. Kaji amused himself with the thought that the annals of history would pay little attention to the annals of NERV, namely division 405, where most of the real work got done that was never on television with giant robots. One of the robots in question lay dissected on a vast table to his left where technicians toiled ceaselessly over details he never attempted to understand. At some level that bothered him, but the sheer complexity of the process involved required it. He found one of his superiors, Gendo Ikari, and reported in.

"Sir."

"What do you know about Tapp streams?"

Kaji was startled enough to blink. "According to SEELE they're a relatively trivial phenomena associated with deep sea currents. Apparently Tapp streams, named after Wolfgang Tapp of the late eighteenth century are temperature fluctuations of a given nature found in large bodies of sea water. Later work by the GEHIRN project related streams of this nature to side effects of AT fields, but only in peripheral ways. Further development was considered unnecessary and not worth the required funding, heavily limited before the Second Impact and now considered unimportant."

"Interesting."

Not really, Kaji did not say. The thousands of loose ends and fruitless theories and factoids that abounded in this line of work did little to stress the important of any one. He waited patiently.

"Why was the cost considered prohibitive?"

Kaji hoped his expression was serious and confident. He felt like staring blankly, perhaps blowing snot bubbles at this absurd and random line of interrogation. "Problems predicting them were the primary difficulty. Streams have been found in every large body of salt water and similar, possibly related

phenomena have been found in many of the freshwater lakes of the world."

"How were they related to AT fields?"

"After an accidental contamination of DSATE 14A2 by ambient sea water off the Ross Antarctic Ice Shelf by the Katsuragi Expedition in 1997 it was observed that in high density Tapp streams AT fields took approximately six percent longer to form and required nine percent more energy. These consequences were considered trivial in comparison to such factors as geographical position and proximity to stage Four Alpha or higher personnel."

"What is the rate of movement associated with these phenomena?"

"A Tapp incident, the singular incident of which a stream is comprised, usually moves at about one to six centimeters per minute."

"How long do they last?"

"A few days."

"Excellent." Commander Ikari sank down behind his interlaced hands, and Kaji had the oddest sensation his CO was smug. "You are dismissed."

"Sir," Kaji acknowledged this and turned away. He let his eyes roam over Unit 00, memorized such details as he was able, and vanished the way he had come. Ikari Gendo watched him leave.

"Not very useful, Gendo." Fuyutsuki murmured in his ear.

"You have such a pedestrian understanding of usefulness, Fuyutsuki. This information is most likely as useless as Kaji made such a point of mentioning, though it is interesting he had such a command of details on points he considered irrelevant. No, this offers leverage for the manipulation and proper evaluation of something far more important than deep water phenomena."

"Ritsuko Akagi."

"Of course."

"I thought you had her under control by other methods?"

"I do. However, multiple points for the application of force enable one to dictate the movements of a subject with far greater discretion. Layers upon layers of domination must be wound about a human subject to establish total control, something I find absolutely necessary given Dr Akagi's level of clearance and knowledge of the project."

"You're paying a vicious game."

"A necessary one. The last Angel brought to light certain unpleasant facts that we can at best be aware of."

"You speak of the divergence."

"Indeed."

"Given the abstract nature of the Prophecies it is very unlikely that the divergence is as important as you seem to believe."

"There are exactly nine places in the Dead Sea scrolls that get specific enough to mention dates. Nine. Five of them were not wrong. Three have not happened. But bizarrely Sandalphon is detected and disposed of two days late, a coincidence the Magi do not report until a week later. You consider that unimportant." It was not a question. It was an accusation.

"I consider it more likely to indicate that we have a problem with our dates than the scrolls are inaccurate. Given the difficulties we've have and overcome, a date being two days off is trivial."

"I've survived by less than that by having absolute faith."

"This is not a time of absolutes."

"There you are wrong, Fuyutsuki. This is the perfect time for absolutes." Ikari smiled like he had won.

"When do you intend to use this information against the good doctor?" Fuyutsuki asked.

"Tomorrow morning, when she's rested and healthy."

"Surprisingly charitable of you."

"Crush your targets when they are strong. They will have fewer reserves to summon when they are weak."

"Sun Tzu would dissent."

"Sun Tzu was a fool."

"Indeed." He borrowed his superior's expression. The two of them watched the repair work on Unit 00 for several seconds. "Odd that the unit that was barely activated in the conflict with the last angel took the most damage."

"Yes. This is not in accordance with any of our simulations."

"Troubling."

Ikari did not respond.

Shortly after midnight the shift switched, and new technicians came in. Fuyutsuki left with the old shift, and later Gendo did as well. He walked purposefully to his office and sealed the doors behind him. No one went in or out through those doors for the next nine hours. That was recorded on surveillance cameras. There were, however, no surveillance cameras within Gendo's office and no one knew what transpired within.

At nine fifty four Ritsuko Akagi depressed the 'call' stud on the door panel and waited.

"Come in, Dr Akagi," Gendo's voice said from the small speaker. The doors hissed open without being touched. Dr Akagi walked through and let the doors hermetically seal behind her.

She left two hours later with an inscrutable look. As the elevator opened before her she took a small vial from her pocket, the same one as before, and tossed back three caplets. The elevator opened and she entered.

"Good morning, ma'am."

Dr Akagi turned and looked down, seeing Shinji Ikari looking up at her. He seemed nervous and eager to please, and her stomach rebelled.

"Good morning, Shinji. You're here for the sync tests?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Getting out of school?"

"No, ma'am. It's Sunday."

"Oh, is it? I seem to have lost track of a few days."

"Yes, ma'am."

They rode the elevator in silence for a while. When it stopped, they emerged and walked together down a long hallway, not speaking. Shinji turned left to enter the pilot's briefing area. Dr Akagi stopped in the hallway, considered the short walk down to the technician's area, and then followed him.

"Ma'am?" Shinji looked up curious when she came in.

"I'm going to observe this briefing. Carry on, Shinji."

He watched her curiously as she took a seat halfway down the long table. She relaxed in her chair, an artificial and unnatural motion that implied incredible force coming to a halt. Shinji looked at his thumbs and then the clock and then back at his thumbs.

The clock ticked very loudly.

"I thought Dr Hinako was going to give me my briefing, ma'am," Shinji asked tentatively.

"She will, if she gets here on time. What time was she supposed to be here?"

"Two fifteen, ma'am." He looked up at the clock. "We still have half an hour, ma'am." He regretted saying that as soon as the words left his mouth. He was sure Dr Akagi could read a clock as easily as he could. It was a stupid thing to say.

Dr Akagi blinked and looked around, seeing the room for the first time.

"You're a half hour early?"

"I usually am, ma'am."

"Why?"

Shinji was suddenly terribly confused by this line of questioning. "I don't have anything else to do?" he offered tentatively.

"On a Sunday?"

"No, ma'am."

Dr Akagi nodded but did not say anything. Shinji looked over at her serious expression, noticed the way her piercing eyes seemed locked on something he

couldn't see, and wondered why she was here. She had never come to a Sunday session with Dr Hinako before.

"What happened to your elbow?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Your elbow."

"Oh, that." He looked down and forced himself to remember how he had scraped it. "I went to an arcade with Asuka and fell. Two dogs ran by, and I jumped out of the way. That's when I scraped it."

"It must have hurt."

"Not for real."

"Oh?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was EVA pain."

Dr Akagi had been staring through the clock. Offices for administrators and commanders, including her own and her boss's were in that direction, many floors and walls away. As what Shinji said slowly trickled through the filters on her distracted mind, her expression changed. Her lips hardened into a frown, and she turned to face Shinji very slowly

"What do you mean, Shinji?"

"It didn't hurt very bad, ma'am?"

"No, Shinji. What do you mean it was EVA pain?"

"It felt like the way an EVA feels. I remember I fell and scraped my arm going down, and I could see the blood on the wall. I thought, 'This is going to hurt.' Then I looked down and saw my elbow, but it didn't hurt yet. And when it did it wasn't like me, so I could just ignore it."

"You felt pain like an EVA when you scraped your own arm?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is this new?"

"No, ma'am. It's been a little while. I noticed it a few months ago, but it had been going on longer than that."

Dr Ritsuko Akagi stared at him, and slowly cracks in her imperturbable mask splintered inwards from the corners of her mouth and eyes until she was gazing at Shinji in unadulterated shock and horror. He watched her lift a small bottle from her pocket, heard her murmur, "Cellular consumption, Mom, you whore," and understood that as little as the effects of the small cluster of white pills she took without water. She gulped them down with absent minded hunger.

"Shinji, suit up. There's a test we're going to do first."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, but she was already stalking out the door, her back to him and head held high with rigid determination. The concerned boy watched the doors snap shut with a hiss. "It really doesn't hurt that bad," he said, confused.

Plug suits are cold and uncomfortable when first put on. For some reason that he had not paid attention to, they had to be stored at two hundred and eighty five Kelvin, and he was under strict orders to put his suit on as soon as it came out of the cooling locker. He did so and felt it snap tight, protecting his body like a thick rubber coat of paint. It pulled the small hairs of his arms and legs. A large, reinforced door lead to the prep room.

Dr Hinako, a short handsome woman with an air of ruffled pride met him in the prep room. "What on Earth did you tell Dr Akagi?"

"I don't know. I skinned my arm, and then she got all strange."

"She got all strange after you skinned your arm? How did you scrape yourself in the briefing room?"

"No, I told her about it in the briefing room. I skinned it a few days ago."

"Well you've broken the eggs for this omelet. Hurry up, Third Child, we've got some a full load on us."

They hustled along the hallway while Dr Hinako began the preliminary questionnaire. "When was the last time you ate and what did you consume?"

"Three hours. I had instant ramen."

"When was the last time you had a bowel movement?"

"Last night at eight fourteen PM. It was normal." He answered her next question before she could ask to avoid having to talk about it. "Dark brown. No blood."

"How much sleep have you had in the last twenty four hours?" She was scribbling on a clipboard as they moved. In tandem they rounded a corner to come to a white door with a large purple "3" stenciled across it in a NERV proprietary font.

"Between seven and eight hours. I feel rested and awake."

Thick steel doors snapped open before them. They stood before a long catwalk, suspended over a blood red pool of LCL, a optical illusion caused by the light above and not an inherent property of the fluid below. Dr Akagi had mentioned that a while ago, and Shinji remembered it very carefully.

"How much fluid have you consumed since sleeping and what was it?"

"A total of three 300 ml glasses of water and one 250 ml glass of green tea."

"When was the last time you drank anything caffeinated?"

"Friday. I had a can of soda with lunch."

At the end of the catwalk was a variable form docking bay, a round platform roughly seven meters in diameter that could allow him to board a test plug, a docking station, a suspension harness, or a myriad other contraptions and connections that did not require the immediate proximity to an EVA unit. Four technicians in coveralls were assembling a bizarre assembly of wires and metal bars enmeshed in electronic measuring devices.

"Watch my finger, please."

Shinji obediently followed the fussy woman's finger with just his eyes, watching it move in circles and then at the limits of his peripheral vision. He let her pull down his bottom eyelids impassively, displaying a patience born of the intimate awareness of the futility of resistance. She added and subtracted some figures and filled in several pages of small boxes and multiple choice questions.

"You gained one point zero two kilograms," she observed finally.

"Is that good?"

"For me, no. But since you're only fourteen, you can get away with it. Good luck." She turned to leave.

"Dr Hinako! You haven't given me my briefing?"

"What? Oh, right." She turned back and indicated the now mostly assembled product of the tech team's labors. "Upon receiving the initiation command, you will enter the testing apparatus. There is a self contained breathing apparatus there that you will place use while submerged in LCL. The LCL will not be hyperoxygenated so do not attempt to inhale it, or you will drown. Before submersion you will place the standard TT4-J sensor rig on your skin beneath the plug suit. This test should last God only knows how long. Do you have any questions?"

"No, ma'am," Shinji lied.

"Good." She turned and hurried off.

By the time she left the testing area she had filled out another sheet of data entry. Back in the hallway the two of them had traversed earlier she took a different door and entered a secure translational elevator that whisked her to the test bridge. She was finishing the final sheet when the doors opened, and she emerged.

"Ma'am, subject is prepped and ready." She came to attention and reported in.

"Preliminary paperwork?" Dr Akagi demanded.

"Here." Dr Hinako presented the clipboard. Her superior skimmed it and handed it back.

"Have all data entered into the system as usual and take your place. There will be three experiments that I will supervise before you begin your typical round of simulations. Upon completion of the initial experiments, you will continue as normal unless instructed otherwise. Neither you nor the Child will leave without my express permission. Is everything understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," she lied.

"Good. Shinji, can you hear me?" Dr Akagi turned her back and spoke to the screen, a small tertiary display of the Eye of the Magi.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please, board the testing apparatus and put on the sensor array."

She watched Shinji sigh with resignation and begin inserting the skin contact receivers.

"It's like wearing an octopus," he complained.

"It's necessary. Place the green sensors on the scabbing on your elbow."

He did so without further communication. One of the technicians, the last to leave, finished his work with a crescent wrench and stepped back to observe with a critical eye his work. The test apparatus looked like the bastard love child of a dentist's chair and pool filter. It was shot through with inexplicable equipment and wiring.

"Hey, Ikari-san," he said when he finished his examination. "Ikari-san," he said again more insistently.

"Huh?" Shinji replied, looking around. His father was nowhere to be seen, and the man was looking at him.

"Two weeks ago you saved my house. You stopped the monster from crushing it. Thank you." The tech bowed to Shinji very seriously. "I'm proud to be able to help you now."

"Um, thanks."

The tech straightened. Shinji had reflexively bowed back, wires and suction cups dangling from his open plug suit. They regarded each other for a moment.

"Good luck, tiger. My wife says she's rooting for you, too."

Before anyone in the test bridge could order him to leave, he smiled again. It was a warm smile, unforced and motivated by real respect, unaffected by the boy's confusion. Then he hustled off.

"The sensor rig, Shinji," Dr Akagi demanded over the radio.

"Yes, ma'am."

In a few minutes he had finished attaching the cold metallic plugs to his skin. They sucked at his flesh and caused the scab on his elbow to tingle unpleasantly before suddenly, suspiciously going numb. When he limbed into the testing apparatus, he made himself comfortable on a peculiar chair that forced him forward like he was riding a motorcycle. His knees were bent as well.

"Insert the blue end of the black tube into your mouth," Dr Akagi ordered. "Good. Now breathe in through your mouth and out through your nose. Have you ever been snorkeling?"

"No."

"Oh." Dr Akagi scowled. "Don't worry about it. It's very simple. Now, as Dr Hinako mentioned, this LCL is not oxygenated. You're used to inhaling LCL like air, but you cannot do that now, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Here you go. Crew, submerge test assembly."

The apparatus lurched like EVA launch. It didn't even affect Shinji anymore. Steel cables lifted him up and lowered him into the LCL, submerging him ten feet under the surface. He could see the lights from above turned crimson, but could not

move enough to see the surface.

"Inhale, Shinji," Dr Ritsuko commanded over the radio.

Shinji gurgled and experimentally sucked at the mouth piece. It had moldings that fit his teeth and tongue, allowing it to fit comfortably though it filled his mouth with plastic. LCL crept in through leaks in his lips, oozing over his teeth and gums. It tasted funny, not metallic or salty like usual. He forced himself to concentrate on his breathing, forcing himself to override the instincts he had just as forcefully learned. Every time he exhaled he felt like he was blowing snot bubbles, but LCL was thick like that. There was nothing he could do about it.

There was nothing he could do for the next seven hours. Breathing was a labor, and his lungs never felt full. Sometimes he received orders from above delivered to him on a text screen mounted before him. More often he sat and breathed, frequently going almost catatonic as boredom stripped him of his sense of self. Then the screen would resume flashing, and he forced himself to execute whatever menial instruction he had been given.

With a deep base thrum the apparatus suddenly began moving and shaking. Clutching the slim handrails he barely kept himself aboard as it returned to the docking bay. Dr Hinako told him he could emerge, and so he began stripping wires and connections from his body.

Dr Akagi stormed out the main doors, coming towards him fast and desperately. He stood upright and shrank a little from her when she reached out and seized hold of his face, pulling him towards her and shining a penlight in one of his eyes.

"Ma'am! What are you doing?"

She ignored him, grabbed his lower eyelid with her thumb and pulled it down so his eyeball was exposed to her inspection. Before he could react, she flicked the naked organ.

"Ah!" he screamed, broke free of her, and dropped to his knees. "What are you doing!?"

"That. Did it hurt for real or like an EVA?"

"What?"

She grabbed him, lifted him to his feet, and shook him. Shinji froze at the look in her eyes. They showed too much white, and her hands were twitching spastically on his wrists. Her fingertips were digging into his wrists. "You miserable idiot. You didn't think that was something worth mentioning to me? To anyone?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You have a ninety seven percent standing sync rate!"

"Isn't that good?" he whined.

"With yourself! Not the EVA!" she shrieked.

Shinji froze. Dr Akagi pinned him with her gaze, boring through his head and mining his soul for secrets. It was physically painful and unnerving.

Just as suddenly she dropped him, swore, and fled the testing chamber. As she

disappeared she was reaching into her lab jacket, looking for something.