

**all your doors flung wide (alternate version)**

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# **all your doors flung wide (alternate version)**

by [Euphorion](#)

## Summary

Thirteen-year-old Kanji runs away from home and ends up in Iwatodai. Set early on in P3 canon, after Minato and Junpei join SEES but before Ken does and before Shinji rejoins.

I posted this fic with an [alternate, canon-compliant ending](#) back in November; I wrote this happier ending at the time and went back and forth on which one I liked better. I still think I like the angsty version slightly more, but for those of you (like me!) who have trouble dealing with sad endings, here's this.

(Title from Level Up by Vienna Teng, who continues to write the best songs for fic titles of any artist alive.)

There were sixteen different reasons they shouldn't be doing this.

The first one was Mitsuru, who was—somewhere, could be a block away, could be around the corner, could on the other side of the brick wall currently digging into Akihiko's back. It didn't matter. She was getting better and better with Penthesilea, could see Shadows all over the city without even really having to try. The dark might hide them from her human eyes, but her persona's would pick up their racing hearts as easy as breathing. What she knew, the others would surely know as well, and this—*him*—was something he wasn't ready explain to Yukari or Junpei or Minato. Not yet.

And there was the weird green of the world around them, the dangerous unworldly edge to everything, the dimmed streetlights, the tooth-yellow moon hanging low and heavy above the skyline. They were out here—Akihiko, anyway, was supposed to be out here in the dark hour to help people, not for—this.

Unfortunately, there were a hundred reasons this should very much be happening, and all of them sparked across the skin of Akihiko's throat, pressed into his pulse-point by Shinji's perfect smirk.

“We've got to stop meeting like this,” Akihiko murmured against the shell of Shinji's ear. The joke fell flat, his voice a little too desperate, a little too sad. He closed his eyes and focused on the warmth of Shinji's palms as they slid up his sides. His own hands were buried in what he could get to of Shinji's hair, shoved up underneath his hat. He tugged at it, not to make him stop, not to make him do anything, just to make sure he was solid.

He could hear Shinji's breathing and the shift of his clothes against his skin. Far away, bells—the bells of Tartarus, tolling their madness across the desolate city. And then, coming closer, the slapping of shoes on pavement. Someone running—

Before he could do more than take a breath to speak, Shinji had stepped back from him and into a street-brawler's easy stance, one hand raised in what could be fist or taunt, one leg back to balance his weight. Akihiko instinctively mirrored him, movements precise where Shinji's were looser. He concentrated, slowing his breathing. His evoker was heavy in its holster under his arm, but he waited to draw it. Shadows didn't generally run on human feet.

A boy skidded around the corner in front of them, his face pale with panic. Together with his spiky, bleach-blond hair it gave him a ghostly look, not at all out of place with the dark hour surroundings. But he was breathing hard, and his throat bobbed with fear, and he was definitely human. There was a shadow of a bruise around one of his eyes, a dark line through his lower lip where a split was healing over. His eyes flicked to Shinji and then Akihiko and then back to Shinji. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded, his voice shaking.

Shinji relaxed, pulling his hat straight. For an instant he met Akihiko's eyes, and Akihiko nodded, Shinji's thought clear in his own head. The kid had the potential, at least, if not a persona of his own. Otherwise he'd be like the coffins lying on the street around them, unknowing witnesses to their meeting.

“We could ask you the same question,” he said. Shinji stepped forward, studying the kid’s face. The kid immediately scrambled away from him, his eyes flickering back the way he’d come. Akihiko barely had time to open his mouth in warning before the thing came coiling around the corner, not a shape so much as the absence of one – a roiling mass of nothing with a purple mask where a head might be, if this were a creature with any use for a head. Two of its curling limbs slid through the air towards the kid.

He screamed. Shinji leapt forward, scooping him bodily off the ground and throwing him over his shoulder as Akihiko flicked the clasp of his evoker’s holster with a thumb and drew it smoothly upward. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the presence at the back of his mind, the electric strength of the thing he shared his body with, the warmth and brotherhood and love and self that was his persona. He felt his lips move as he squeezed the trigger, his mind flashing bright white.

When he blinked the spots from his vision, the thing was gone. The air smelled of ozone and a little like rain. He felt as he always did, after—sweaty, shaken, a little boneless from having been so violently taken over by sensation and then so quickly dropped again. He licked his lips, tasting salt and sulfur, and turned to find Shinji carefully placing the kid back on the ground, safely away from the alley where the shadow had arrived.

“You okay, kid?” Shinji asked gruffly, his fingers catching him under the chin, tilting his face up to look at the bruise around his eye.

“K-Kanji,” said the kid, his eyes huge but the set of his mouth defiant. “M’not a kid.”

Akihiko grinned to himself, careful to smooth it away immediately in case Kanji looked over at him. It didn’t seem likely, though—the kid was staring at Shinji like he’d never seen anyone like him in his whole life. It could just be the natural color returning now that the terror had eased, or adrenaline—but Akihiko could swear he was blushing.

Shinji, for his part, was frowning. “The shadow do this to you?” he asked, ghosting his fingertips over the split in Kanji’s lip.

Kanji seemed to shake himself awake. He turned away from Shinji’s hands. “Nah,” he said shortly. He looked at Akihiko, young face serious. He looked thirteen, maybe, at most. “Thank you,” he said, and glanced back at Shinji. “Both of you.”

Akihiko shrugged and walked over to extend a hand. “Akihiko Sanada,” he said. He jerked his head at Shinji, who was still scowling down at Kanji. “That’s Shinjiro Aragaki. Do you know what’s going on, Kanji?”

Kanji shook his head. “Feels like someone goddamn drugged me. What—what is this place? You two are the only human beings I’ve seen since I woke up—you, you are human, right, what you did to that thing—“

“You’re not drugged,” Shinji said shortly. “And we’re as human as you are.” He glanced at Akihiko, a wall down behind his eyes. “Aki.”

Akihiko took a breath against the disappointment. “Go,” he said. “I got this.”

Shinji nodded, and then hesitated. To Akihiko's surprise, he crossed quickly to him and pressed a kiss to his mouth, quick but hard. It made Akihiko's heart go liquid, and it was only with a great effort that he didn't grab Shinji and make him stay. Instead he watched him go, eyes caught in the set of his shoulders and what they told him about Shinji's mood—a little embarrassed, a little pleased with himself, a lot worried. He tried to remember the last time they'd kissed in front of a stranger—in front of *anyone*.

He shook his head, turned to the kid, and understood. Kanji was bright red, staring between Akihiko and Shinji's vanishing figure with an expression like someone had just punched him between the eyes. When he saw Akihiko staring at him, he shoved a hand into his hair, stammering. "I—what the fuck just—"

"He's got stuff to do," Akihiko said quietly. He crossed to where he'd left his gym bag and coat, slinging them up over his shoulder. "C'mon, I'll walk you home. Where do you live?"

Kanji scowled, setting his shoulders and attempting a look more badass than any flustered thirteen-year-old should. "You don't gotta do that," he muttered. "I'll be okay by myself."

Akihiko arched an eyebrow at him. "Yeah?" he said. "You can handle another one of those shadows, or two, or three, or four? We were lucky earlier, they don't usually travel alone."

Kanji gnawed his lip. Finally he muttered something inaudibly, staring at the ground.

Akihiko snapped a finger next to his head. "Yo," he said. "If you're gonna talk to me, talk to me, not the street."

Kanji glared at him. "I'm not from around here, okay? I don't exactly have somewhere to go back to."

Akihiko studied him for a moment. "Fine," he said, "then you can walk me home."

He started forward without waiting to see if Kanji would follow him. After a moment he heard him move, keeping pace a couple feet back. He pulled out his phone, and then spun so he was walking backwards. "Hey, Kanji."

Kanji blinked at him. "Y-yeah?"

Akihiko met his eyes and held them. "When we meet up with the others, don't mention Shinji, okay? If they ask, I found you myself."

Something dawned in Shinji's eyes—realization, maybe, resignation. He set his jaw, but all he said was "Others?" and Akihiko couldn't make enough of a guess at what was wrong to be able to pursue it any further.

"Housemates," he said, because it was easier and mostly true.

The city was quiet as they wove through the streets, although Akihiko kept up his guard. Clouds scudded across the huge bulk of the moon, and the summer night felt by turns sickly hot and oddly cold, with strange eddies of wind caught in alleys and doorways, waiting for

them. Kanji drew closer as they walked, Akihiko's pale, scared shadow, not touching him but close enough that he could if he needed to.

He didn't ask many questions, which was kind of surprising—maybe he assumed he was dreaming. Akihiko had, the first time.

“Where have you been, senpai?” Junpei demanded as they caught up with the others on the dorm steps. Akihiko ignored him. “This is Kanji,” he said, moving aside to reveal the boy. “He ran into some trouble with a shadow.”

Yukari darted forward. “Are you okay?”

Kanji backed away from her. “I'm fine,” he insisted. “I'm fine, leave it—“

“Takeba,” Akihiko warned. It wasn't that he begrudged her the concern, but Kanji had barely put up with it from Shinji. He doubted the kid would react well to being coddled by a girl in pink.

“You'll come inside, of course,” Mitsuru said calmly. Hers was not a voice you disobeyed, and Kanji looked at Akihiko. He nodded, and followed Kanji into the dorm.

As he passed Mitsuru, she put a hand on his arm. “How is he?” she asked quietly, and Akihiko knew she didn't mean Kanji. So much for getting the kid to lie for him. He wasn't sure what to say, though, so he just shrugged, and she dropped her eyes. He touched her hand, trying to be reassuring. He had no reason to think Shinji was doing any better than he had been for months, but it was hard not to think about the press of his mouth, harder not to take it as some kind of sign.

He moved past Mitsuru and into the dorm. The others were headed off to bed, weary with the night's exertions, their eyes a little hollow from extended use of their powers. He tried not to feel guilty about not being with them, and found Kanji instead where he was wandering the common room, staring around at everything.

He jumped a little as the dark hour ended, the lights clicking back on. It felt like taking off in an airplane but without the build up, a sudden inner-ear pop of the world rewriting itself over the lapse in time and space and sanity. He stared at Akihiko, wild-eyed. “Is it over?”

“For tonight,” Akihiko said tiredly, and put a hand on his shoulder. “C'mon, let's get some sleep.”

He lead Kanji up to his room and opened the door, figuring he could afford to give up his bed for the few hours before he had to get up for school, but when he tossed his boxing gloves on the desk he saw Kanji had stopped in the hall, staring up at the door next to Akihiko's, where Shinji's name still hung on the door.

Akihiko crossed back to Kanji and laid a hand on his shoulder. “He used to live here, too,” he said quietly. “C'mon.”

“He saved me,” Kanji said, almost under his breath, like he didn’t understand it. He followed Akihiko to his room. “He could’ve gotten killed, but he got in the way, and he—he did something like you did, he had a gun and there was a—a figure, it came out of him and it made me feel.” He swallowed. “Safer, somehow.”

Akihiko smiled a little. Shinji was never one to leave things to chance. “Rakukaja,” he said absently.

“What?” Kanji frowned at him.

Akihiko shook his head. “Nothing, nevermind. He—“ he fumbled for words. “Cast a spell on you, I guess. To make sure you wouldn’t be hurt, in case more of them showed up.”

Kanji frowned harder. “Why? He didn’t have to do that. He was so nice. You’re both so nice.” He sounded almost angry about it.

Akihiko tried not to laugh at him. He leaned against his desk and gestured for Kanji to take the bed, then took out his phone. He traced a hand over his mouth and scrolled to Shinji’s number, ignoring how long it had been since they exchanged more than a ‘meet me here’ or a ‘where are you’ (and one ‘miss you’ that they both ignored).

‘How come you never swept me off my feet like that?’ he sent, emboldened by the memory of Shinji’s mouth on his.

He looked up. Kanji hadn’t moved from the doorway. He was looking around Akihiko’s room, from the punching bag in the corner to the small collage of photographs on his wall. A lot of them were of himself and Mitsuru or Minato, one of Yukari that she had put there herself (he didn’t have the heart, or even really the inclination, to move it), a picture from the moving-in party they had for Junpei. There was one small, bent-cornered photo of Miki. And everywhere, Shinji’s face was impossible to ignore—almost always scowling, brows lowered beneath the line of his hat. In the picture that Kanji was staring at, however, he was laughing, his face open, his grin wolfish and joyful. Cameras didn’t work in the dark hour, but they could capture the minutes just after.

*Akihiko’s muscles trembled with exertion. His head ached from the effort of calling forth his persona. He had to physically pry his stiff fingers from the trigger of his evoker.*

*Shinji slung an arm around his shoulders, making him wince. “We won,” he said, half laugh, half growl. “We fucking won.” He nipped at Akihiko’s earlobe like a dog too excited to remember to play nice. Akihiko shivered against him, weariness and happiness blending into a sort of exhausted overstimulated daze.*

*“Keep it PG until I’ve gone to bed, please,” Mitsuru called from behind them, but even she was too tired and too pleased to really be annoyed.*

*It was their first real night out, the first time SEES had an actual mission—breach the walls of Tartarus and retrieve something from within, something the chairman could analyze so they could work towards finding out what was actually happening to the city and maybe, someday, find a way to cure it. The thing was secure in Mitsuru’s schoolbag, slung over her*

*shoulder—a thin, surprisingly heavy golden mask, with eyeholes that glittered with the same light that emanated from the coffins littering the street.*

*Shinji barked a laugh, spinning away from Akihiko to shove at Mitsuru's shoulder. Her hand came up to block him, slapped him away, but she was smiling, eyes full of relief. "I know," she said, heading him off. "We won."*

*When they got back to the dorm the lights were back, the common room lit with warm, safe, man-made light. Akihiko hooked his hands into Shinji's belt loops and clung, not sure if he was keeping Shinji up or the other way around. Shinji kept muttered half-words against his temple as they climbed the stairs. Akihiko just concentrated on keeping his eyes open.*

*"Hey," said Mitsuru as they reached her floor, and they turned as one, Shinji swaying away from Akihiko to look at her. She was holding a disposable camera. "Smile," she advised, "this is something to remember."*

Akihiko's phone buzzed in his hand. 'because you would have beaten the shit out of me if i tried.'

Akihiko bit his lip, grinning, and sent 'come home tonight', while he was still buzzed from adrenaline and more clear flirtation than he'd gotten in months.

Kanji dropped his eyes and sank back onto Akihiko's bed. "Are you ashamed of him?" he asked, almost inaudible.

Akihiko blinked at him, jolted out of his good mood. "What?"

"That's why he doesn't live here anymore," Kanji explained, like he'd put together a puzzle and was laying it out for Akihiko to see. "That's why you asked me to lie. You're ashamed because it means you're weak."

Anger rose in Akihiko's throat, but it wasn't anger at Kanji, so he swallowed it down. "You think I'm weak?" he asked, and it came out through gritted teeth.

Kanji wouldn't meet his eyes. "N-no," he ventured, "but..."

"But what? Look at me," Akihiko said. "Kanji. But what?"

Kanji clenched his jaw, clenched his fists at his sides. "Only weak men kiss other men."

Akihiko took a breath. He didn't ask *who told you that?* because it didn't matter, and it probably didn't have a concrete answer anyway—Kanji wasn't necessarily parroting one person's words, just a truth he'd grown up with, unquestioned and mostly unvoiced. Instead, he went to sit on the other end of his bed, kicking off his shoes and folding his feet underneath him. He left several feet of space between them. The kid was jumpy enough already.

"I fell in love with Shinji when I was nine," he said softly. "I was standing in my bedroom at the orphanage where we grew up and he—he'd found this frog, and he ran up to show me, he wanted to put it down my little sister Miki's dress. He was so excited, so happy, and I looked



at him and I thought I want this forever.” He swallowed. “I didn’t know it at the time, but that was it. Him and me, hand in hand.” He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wall, and let himself remember the orphanage before the fire. “He’s always—been there, picking me up when I fall. When Miki died, he was the only thing that kept me alive.” He took a breath and opened his eyes. “You saw how strong he is, and fast. I’m fast too, and I’m getting stronger every day. Us, and the others downstairs, we’re saving this world. We’re making it better, and we’re doing it together.”

*Were*, said a voice in his head, whisper-soft. *You were doing it together.*

He ignored it. “Loving Shinji doesn’t make me weak, Kanji,” he said firmly. “Love can only make you strong. I’m not ashamed of him. I’m proud of him, and I’m lucky as hell that he loves me back.”

Kanji drew his knees up to his chest, his hands locked together over them. He said nothing.

Akihiko looked at him for a long time. “Are you ashamed?” he asked gently. “Is that why you ran away?”

Kanji’s lip curled. “I’m not like you,” he said derisively, and then something broke in his eyes and his lips trembled. “I’m—I’m not like you,” he repeated, softer.

Akihiko held his eyes. “You could be,” he offered, “if you want.”

Kanji shook his head, his jaw working. He turned away, rolling his forehead along his forearms so Akihiko couldn’t see him cry.

Akihiko stood up. He put a hand on Kanji’s head for a moment, trying to put as much reassurance as he could into the touch, and then left, flicking the light off behind him. He turned to go downstairs, but paused at Shinji’s door. He took a breath. The couch in the common room was barely long enough for him, and whenever he slept there he always woke up when Mitsuru left for whatever student group held meetings at obscenely early hours of the morning.

He was, just barely, exhausted enough to justify opening the door and slipping inside.

He stripped out of his clothes without opening his eyes, not wanting to let the familiar actions meet the familiar surroundings and trigger—anything, any of the panoply of memories that lingered here, both good and bad. He couldn’t do anything about the way the room smelled, though, and if his eyelashes were a little wet as he burrowed into Shinji’s bed, well, there was no one there to see.

He woke Kanji up before school the next day. When he crept into his room the kid was curled up on top of the covers, sunlight slanting across his face. In the clear light of day his bruises looked even worse—his thin shirt was torn, and Akihiko could see more purple shadows across his ribs. He frowned. He didn’t want to assume—at thirteen, he himself had certainly had worse, but at thirteen he’d already been an aspiring boxer, matching up against fifteen-year-olds and older. This kid might have the pluck for that, but he definitely didn’t have the muscle.

“Kanji,” he said. Better not to touch him.

Kanji stirred, stretching like a cat, and then popped upright with a cough. His wide eyes took in the room and then Akihiko himself. “Shit,” he breathed, disbelieving. He ran a hand over his face. “Fuck.”

“Not a dream,” Akihiko confirmed for him, answering the question half-asked in his tired eyes. “I don’t have much time to explain, I gotta get to class, but everything you saw and heard last night was real. You’re safe here—daytime in general is safe—and I’ll be back this afternoon to give you some answers, okay? Get some more sleep.”

Kanji wrapped his arms around himself. “You—I can stay here?”

“Yeah,” Akihiko said. “There’s food in the fridge, don’t eat anything marked with a stupid-looking J but anything else is free game.” He hesitated. “Might be a guy who comes in, wears glasses, makes a lot of stupid puns. Just tell him you’re a friend of mine and he’ll leave you alone. Probably.”

Kanji stared at him. “Why are you doing this?”

Akihiko shrugged. “I figure we owe you some answers. After that, you can go home if you want. Hell, you could go home now.”

Kanji dropped his eyes. “Stupid,” he said. “You don’t owe me shit.” He flopped back onto Akihiko’s bed and curled onto his side, to all appearances ready to go back to sleep.

Akihiko snorted at him and checked his phone. His text to Shinji sat unanswered. He’d been an idiot to send it at all.

He was about to leave when he noticed his boxing gloves sitting on his desk rather than in his gym bag where he’d left them the night before. He picked them up. They were well-worn, and recently the left glove had split open at the seam. Now, turning it over in his hands, he saw that someone had expertly sewn it back together, rows of impressively tiny, neat stitches in black thread against the red.

Mitsuru found him at lunchtime, striding up to him outside his classroom in a swish of skirts and a click of heels. “Kanji Tatsumi,” she announced. “His family owns a textile shop in a small mining town about a three-hour train ride from here.”

Akihiko raised his eyebrows. That explained the needlework. Three hours, though—something had Kanji running scared.

“I’ve notified his school that he is on medical leave. His family may be a different story. It would help if he could call them. For now, I have manufactured a field trip in a cell-phone dead zone and a case of convenient, rebellious forgetfulness. It will only hold up another day or so, though.” Her voice was kind, but it was a warning nonetheless.

“Thank you,” he said. “I hope he’ll want to go home by then. If not...” He shook his head.

Mitsuru cocked her head. “He has the potential,” she said.

Akihiko looked at her. “You’re not suggesting we recruit him? Mitsuru, he’s thirteen.”

Mitsuru regarded him coolly. “I was eight,” she said. “We don’t get to choose.”

*“You have to stay,” Akihiko insisted. “Shinji, please.”*

*Shinji backed away from his pleading hands. “Aki. Don’t.”*

*“You can’t just turn your back on this! It’s not your decision!” Akihiko called after him, the force of his misery throbbing in his throat. “We were chosen, we don’t get to choose!”*

Akihiko shook his head. “You didn’t get to choose,” he said, as gently as he could. “Kanji—he hasn’t awakened to it yet. He was four inches from a shadow last night and all he could do was scream. He’s not ready.”

Mitsuru held his eyes for a moment and then sighed, her shoulders dropping. “You’re right,” she admitted. “Besides, he feels different than we do. Penthesilea can’t see him, not really—he’s blurred, like there are two of him overlapping, or like he isn’t quite fully formed. I’m not sure an evoker would work even if we gave him one.”

Akihiko had no idea what to make of that. Thankfully, he was saved from answering by the buzz of his phone in his pocket. He flipped it open with a muttered apology and read Shinji’s ‘skip math, meet me at the shrine. bring the kid’. He wondered if Shinji was even still enrolled or if he just knew Aki’s class schedule by heart. He wasn’t not sure which answer he preferred. To think that Shinji might sometimes attend class without telling him, that he might just be sitting somewhere dozing through geography, only a couple rooms away...

When he looked up Mitsuru was watching him, head on one side. “I wish you would bring him home,” she said softly, and then squeezed his shoulder and walked away. Akihiko swallowed. He loved her like a sister, but she could always read him too well—always left him a little more vulnerable than he liked.

He looked back at his phone. ‘be there in 30’

Kanji was curled into the corner of the couch when he got back. He jumped up when he saw Akihiko. “Finally,” he groaned. “Christ, I was goin’ nuts here.”

Akihiko arched a brow at him. “You’re welcome,” he said. “C’mon, we’re gonna go meet Shinji.”

Kanji’s eyes widened. “We are? Oh, uh.” He followed Akihiko, giving himself a panicked once-over in the hallway mirror. Akihiko tried desperately not to laugh as he tried to fix his mess of bleach-blond hair. He looked better than he had earlier, less scared, less tired.

“Thank you,” Akiiko said as they left the dorm.

Kanji was still fussing with his hair, his face screwed up with a kind of inner concentration. He blinked himself out of it. “For what?” he asked, puzzled.

Akihiko smiled at him. “My gloves,” he said.

Kanji looked away, shrugging. “Yeah.” He coughed, then scratched at the side of his face. “You box, huh?”

Akihiko nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m captain of my school’s team, actually.”

Kanji whistled. Akihiko thought maybe it was sarcastic, but when he glanced at Kanji the kid looked relatively impressed. He gnawed at the cut in his lip. “You think you could teach me some moves?” His voice was carefully light.

Akihiko matched his tone. “Sure,” he said, though he itched to press against that studied nonchalance, figure out what Kanji was hiding.

Shinji was leaning against the gate of the shrine. He straightened up when he saw them, giving Akihiko a nod. There was a tiny curl at the corner of his mouth, but the motion still put up a wall, graffittied clearly with *last night was the exception, not the new rule*. Akihiko nodded back, shifting his tongue in his mouth so he couldn’t taste his disappointment.

Kanji hung back, looking between them with wary eyes like he thought they might start fucking in the middle of the street in broad daylight. “Kanji,” Shinji said, finally breaking Akihiko’s gaze. “Hey.”

“H-hey,” said Kanji, finally joining them. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Akihiko muttered. “Two days in a row, he’s making quite the exception for you.” He meant it teasing, but it came out a little too cold.

Shinji gave him a warning look. Akihiko smiled at him to take the edge off, but he could see Shinji not buying it for a second.

“Um,” said Kanji, “why?”

Shinji turned, beckoning him up the steps of the shrine. “Two reasons,” he said. “One, we owe you answers.”

Kanji shook his head. “Akihiko-senpai said the same thing,” he said. “You guys already saved my life, you don’t owe me shit.”

“Are you saying you don’t want answers?” Akihiko asked, at the same time that Shinji said archly, “Oh? What else did Akihiko-senpai tell you?”

Akihiko looked at Kanji, who stared back like a deer in the headlights. “I—“ he started, and then swallowed. “J-just that you’d give me answers today. And of course I want them, I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

Shinji rocked back on his heels like he was considering that. “That’s it, huh,” he said, looking sideways at Akihiko.

Akihiko kept his face as blank as possible. “That’s it,” he said.

“What’s the second reason?” Kanji asked quickly.

Shinji swung himself easily up onto the monkey bars to perch like a huge brooding crow. “It can wait,” he said. He looked at Akihiko. “You wanna start?”

Akihiko sighed and licked his lips. “Was last night the first time it happened to you?” he asked. “Waking up to everything being—you know.”

Kanji shook his head. “The night before that, too,” he said. “The night I—got here.”

“It’s called the Dark Hour,” Akihiko said. “It happens every night. Here, anyway, we’re not entirely sure where else it extends.”

“Those coffins everywhere?” Shinji added, “That’s what happens to normal people. You can see the Dark Hour because you’re different.”

Kanji flinched, just a little. Quickly, Akihiko said, “Different like us and the others—strong. You saw those things we summoned. They’re called Personas, and they’re—us, I guess, pieces of ourselves that can be called on to fight the forces of the Dark Hour.”

Kanji scowled at them. “Man, I’d think you were full of bullshit, except...”

“Except you saw it,” Shinji said quietly.

Kanji nodded. He thought for a moment, staring hard at the ground. “So you’re saying I could learn to fight those things. If you gave me one of those guns—”

Akihiko swung himself up next to Shinji. “I don’t know,” he said. “Mitsuru says maybe not. You might be too young, or maybe your destiny’s just different.”

“Great,” Kanji muttered. “So every night I’m gonna be in terrible danger, but I can’t learn to defend myself.”

Akihiko held out a hand to Kanji so he could clamber up next to him, and the three of them looked out across the city. It was so different in the daytime—cleaner but faded, somehow, both more and less real at the same time. He could hear the hiss and shriek of the trains coming into the station; rolling, hypnotic waves of sound.

Akihiko shifted, just a little, so his side was pressed along Shinji’s side, his thumb against Shinji’s thumb where they gripped the bars. Shinji didn’t look at him, but he didn’t pull away, either.

“It’s nice here,” Kanji said wistfully. “I want...” He trailed off, then cleared his throat and changed the subject. “I don’t really get it, the persona thing. What do you mean they’re pieces of you?”

Akihiko shrugged a little. “Souls, I guess,” he said. He closed his eyes and tried to put Polydeuces into words. “When I awoke to my power, the most important thing to me was keeping people safe,” he said. “I was so angry at the world, at what it had done to me, and I swore it would never happen again.” He felt Shinji’s hand move against his, just a little, felt the pad of Shinji thumb trace little circles over his knuckles. He opened his eyes. “The

powers my persona has are like—emblems of that. I can heal people, and protect them, and call down lightning on my enemies.”

“Woah,” said Kanji, sounding more thirteen than he had since they’d met. “I mean, I—I saw the lightning, but. You can heal?”

Akihiko nodded. “Wanna see?” he asked.

Kanji nodded, wide-eyed.

“Not up here,” Shinji warned, pulling his hand away, and Akihiko nodded, jumping down from the monkey bars and waiting for Kanji to follow suit.

He looked around. The shrine was deserted, everyone still at school or at work. “Ready?” he asked.

Kanji turned to face him, standing arms akimbo. “Yeah,” he said, nervous.

Akihiko unclipped his backpack and took out his evoker. Shinji raised his eyebrows at him. “You’re gonna get arrested, taking that thing to school.”

“And if I do, Officer Kurosawa will get me off, no questions asked,” Akihiko answered easily. “You know that.”

Shinji just snorted and settled back to watch, his legs dangling in empty air.

*“So,” Kurosawa said, closing the door behind them. “What actually happened?”*

*Akihiko didn’t take his eyes off Shinji, who was white-faced and trembling. He collapsed into one of the chairs in the interrogation room and sat there looking more statue than human, his eyes red-rimmed and staring but absolutely dry.*

*“It was an accident,” Akihiko said desperately, begging understanding, begging Shinji to look at him, or speak, or do anything. “We were fighting a shadow and it lunged towards the door—Shinji—the building must have been made of, of fucking paper, the whole thing just caved—”*

*Kurosawa moved to lay a hand on Shinji’s shoulder. “Aragaki—”*

*Shinji shuddered violently away from his touch, his mouth moving around choked, inaudible words. Akihiko leaned close to him, not touching, just trying to listen.*

*“I killed her,” Shinji was saying, distant but utterly certain. “I killed her, I killed her.”*

Akihiko raised the evoker. Summoning to heal was a little different than summoning to fight, and summoning outside of the Dark Hour was something else entirely. He roused Polydeuces like an old man from a deep slumber, a cracking of limbs and groaning of a thousand voices. Finally he raised his evoker and tucked it under his chin, holding Kanji’s eyes.

Kanji swallowed hard, and Akihiko pulled the trigger.

For a moment he was soaring on a wave of pure, crackling heat, and then he was acutely aware of all the aches and bruises of Kanji's body: he had a cracked rib, bruising up and down one of his sides. His nose had been broken and never healed properly. He could feel ghosts of previous injuries, too: black eyes, bloody knuckles, an arm pulled from its socket. There was no longer any doubt: he'd been beaten, probably by several people at once, multiple times over a series of months.

Akihiko let Polydeuces go and watched as Kanji straightened, turning his face up to the afternoon sun. His eyes slipped closed and he sighed out a long, long breath, his whole body swaying forward. The broken blood vessels beneath his skin retreated, leaving it smooth and clear. Akihiko saw his shoulder shift backwards, his fingers relax.

After a long moment of complete silence he opened his eyes, his gaze wandering, unfocused, until he found Akihiko. "Shit," he said reverently.

Akihiko grinned. "You get used to it," he said.

"Nah," said Shinji, and when Akihiko turned he was looking at him intently, something of Kanji's awe reflected in his eyes. "You really don't."

Akihiko felt his cheeks heat. He pressed the heel of his hand into his eye, shaking his head. "Anyway," he said, "I think it's time for the second reason we called you here."

"Woah, senpai," said Junpei from behind him, "careful where you're waving that thing."

Akihiko turned to look at him. He wandered up with his hands in his pockets, Minato a silent shadow at his heels. Akihiko sighed and bent to zip his evoker back into his backpack. When he straightened, he was surprised to see Kanji greeting Junpei with a fist-bump and Minato with a genuine smile.

Junpei shrugged when he caught Akihiko's eye. "We were hangin' earlier," he explained vaguely.

"The second thing," Shinji reminded them from his perch. "Your injuries."

Akihiko wasn't sure whether Kanji would be willing to talk in front of the others—whether he would be willing to talk at all, really. But Junpei seemed to immediately understand the gravity of what was going on, taking a seat at the base of the monkey bars, and Minato was as quiet as ever, leaning against them at his side.

Kanji looked away. "I dunno what you mean," he said, but it was weak and he knew it.

Akihiko took a step forward and lifted his chin. "Three black eyes," he said, holding Kanji's gaze, and Kanji's eyes widened. Akihiko released him. "I could list the rest, I felt it when I was healing you."

"We all noticed," Junpei cut in, voice quiet. "C'mon man, you can't bottle this shit up." His jaw tightened. "Trust me."

Akihiko raised his eyebrows. He barely saw Minato move, but suddenly the hand that had been in his pocket was at his side, his fingers just barely curled at the back of Junpei's neck, a tiny, casual motion. Junpei visibly relaxed, his eyes still on Kanji.

Kanji was staring into the distance. "It's—they're just some fucking punks," he said, voice tight. "Just—they're assholes, okay? I can handle it."

"It's because you can sew, huh?" Shinji growled. "Because you care about stuff they think you shouldn't." Everyone turned to look at him. "What?" he demanded, scowling. "You think I don't know what that's like?"

"You do?" Kanji asked incredulously. "But you're so..."

*"Aki." Shinji was standing in his doorway. There was an odd, almost nervous note to his voice. "Wanna show you something."*

*He led Akihiko down the stairs and into the common room—their new common room, in their new home, where they had whole rooms to themselves and a real purpose to fulfill. As they descended, smells rose to meet them—onion and pepper and broth and the deep, smoky smell of char-grilled meat. Shinji pulled out his chair for him like Akihiko was some girl he was trying to impress. It made Akihiko's stomach do a little flip, and then he sat and Shinji draped himself over his shoulders, all heavy, solid muscle, and he thought he might split out of his skin with the beat of his heart.*

*Shinji lifted the lid of the dish in front of him to reveal a perfect, beautifully arranged beef bowl. "Happy birthday," he said, hot breath against Akihiko's cheek, and all he had to do was turn his head the slightest bit to press their mouths together. Their eyes met first, but only just—just long enough for Akihiko to see Shinji's long lashes slip closed as he leaned in to meet him halfway.*

"We're not saying you can't handle it," Akihiko said seriously, and Kanji shook himself out of staring at Shinji to look at him. "We're saying you don't have to do it alone."

Kanji's brows drew together. "What, you mean like bodyguards? Yeah, that'll convince them I'm not a fa—" he cut himself off, a flash of guilt in his eyes, and then finished, quieter, "—a coward."

Akihiko shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the tiny shock of cold that went through him at the almost-slur. Thirteen, and he was pretty sure it was only his presence and Shinji's that had stopped Kanji from finishing the word. He wondered how many times it had been thrown at the kid, both viciously and casually, like it was nothing. He cleared his throat. "Not bodyguards. You already asked me to show you some moves, but most of what I know's good against one, not multiple attackers. That's what the others are for." He turned to look at Junpei and Minato. "If you're willing?"

Junpei nodded and accepted Minato's hands up. "Put 'em up, Kanji-kun," he said cheerfully, and when Kanji turned to face him he winked, raising his arms, fists loose.



Akihiko shook his head. Junpei was a joker, but he was fast, and—there it was. While Kanji's eyes were on his hands, Junpei slid one leg forward, hooking it around the back of Kanji's knee and overbalancing him. Kanji tipped over backward, arms flailing, and Akihiko caught him neatly under the shoulders so he wouldn't hit the ground. He grinned as Kanji stared at him upside-down, flustered, and then set him carefully back on his feet. "Let's move this to the gym, shall we?" he suggested. "I already healed you up once today."

They worked with Kanji until dark, one-on-one or in groups. When archery club let out Yukari joined them. Kanji faltered when he saw her, unsure whether her presence meant they were done or not. Shinji took advantage of the opening to jab him in the ribs. He'd shed his coat, moving easily in the ring in just his grey tee and jeans. Akihiko let himself watch the shift of his muscles, the curve of his neck when he lifted his hair off it to cool down.

"Ow," complained Kanji, rubbing his side.

Yukari clicked her tongue. "Should've kept your guard up," she said, and perched on the corner post of the ring.

"Takeba," Shinji said abruptly.

Yukari yelped a little. She was still intimidated by Shinji. They all were, to some extent, Mitsuru obviously excepted. Akihiko got it, when he made the effort to look at Shinji from an abstract, outside perspective, but he was so—Shinji, so warm and sad and angry and his. He couldn't imagine being scared of him.

"Got a hair tie?" Shinji asked.

Yukari gaped at him before checking her wrists. "Uh—yeah, sure. Here you go."

"Thanks." Shinji took it from her and shed his hat, twisting his hair up into a knot at the back of his head. It opened up his face, making him look younger, softer, like he'd been before the Amada incident. Akihiko wanted to slip up behind him and press his face to the nape of his neck, wrap his arms around him hard. It'd been months since they did more than make out in back alleys and he felt like he was going mad, like all his joints were locking up, like he couldn't even turn his head without his body screaming. It wasn't even the lack of sex he minded—well, he did, but not only that, not even mostly that. It was the little things that sex brought with it—shared breathing, shared silence, shared presence. The perfect space that, for him, had and always would define what it meant to be *intimate*.

Shinji turned. His gaze caught Akihiko's and dragged; Akihiko could almost feel it—nails on skin. Shinji swallowed, and it was all Akihiko could do not to close the distance between them and press his mouth against the fluttering movement in his throat.

Kanji tripped him. It was a clumsier form of Junpei's earlier leg sweep, and Akihiko was impressed even as he fell. He twisted, planting his shoulder on the mat and using it as a pivot to roll back to his feet. He came up facing Kanji, Shinji at his back. He could hear him laughing, little more than a quickening of breath.

“Pretty good, Kanji-kun,” Junpei called from where he was lounging on the bleachers. “I’ve never managed to pull that one on Akihiko-senpai.”

Kanji was watching Akihiko, his hands up and ready. “He was distracted,” he said, something dark and complicated in this voice.

“You guys have been at this for hours,” Yukari said. “Shouldn’t we be getting back? We’ve only got a week ‘til the next full moon, we can’t afford to exhaust ourselves during the day.” She paused. “No offense, Kanji-kun.”

Kanji watched Akihiko for another minute, and then sagged, all the energy going out of him. “None taken,” he said, sounding relieved and tired. Akihiko kicked himself for not thinking about how exhausting all of this must be.

Warm fingers closed around his shoulder. Akihiko wondered whether it was possible to know someone’s touch so well that you could feel the tiny whorls of their fingertips. He thought maybe if he sat down with a pen and a piece of paper he could draw them, capture the complicated pattern of grooves and lines that made up that exact skin, no one else’s, those hands that were the only hands he’d ever wanted to hold.

The touch only lasted for an instant and then Shinji was past him, walking over to Kanji. He picked up one of Kanji’s arms unceremoniously and studied it. “Build your muscle,” he said. “You’re fast, and you’re smart, and if you remember what we taught you today you’ll outmaneuver any fucking punk who ever tries to lay a hand on you, but if you’re not stronger none of that’ll matter.”

Kanji nodded, his small face serious. “Shinjiro-senpai,” he said. “Thank you.”

The corner of Shinji’s mouth turned up. “Any time, kid.” He dropped Kanji’s arm and laid a hand on his head, ruffling his hair. “See you around.”

He turned and walked away, slinging his coat over his coat over one shoulder as he went. He was two strides behind Akihiko when he paused. “Aki,” he said. “Talk to you for a sec?”

Akihiko scrambled to gather his bag. “I’ll meet you guys back at the dorm, okay?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just followed Shinji out. Behind him, he heard Yukari call, “don’t take too long, please!”

Shinji lead him out of the school in silence, turning down a complicated pathway of alleys until they were well away from anywhere they’d be overheard. He disappeared around a corner and when Akihiko followed he found Shinji had turned around and was waiting for him. He’d tossed his coat aside. His hair was still up and his t-shirt was tight across his chest. He was beautiful, stripped down this way, without his protective layers. Akihiko could see the boy he’d been, sculpted upwards into broad shoulders and a wide-mouthed face, meant for laughing but lined instead by frowns.

Akihiko had stopped, too, just looking at him. Those were the rules—never laid out in words, but most things didn’t have to be, with them. He couldn’t push. He couldn’t pressure.

Anything that happened between them came from Shinji or it didn't happen at all. The first and only time Akihiko had broken the rules Shinji had vanished on him for a month straight.

Today was different, though—today Shinji spread his arms wide, his face expectant. “Come on, then,” he said. “You gonna look at me like you did in there and then not follow through?”

There was a heaviness in Akihiko's head, a weird new center of gravity at the bridge of his nose. It made a lump rise in his throat, made his eyes prickle hot. He felt suddenly hopelessly, helplessly *sad*, and without any prompting from his mind or heart or anything but the relentless weight of it, he felt himself start to cry.

He saw the moment Shinji noticed—saw his whole body twitch, saw his face collapse into horror. He was across the distance between them in an instant, gathering Akihiko to his chest and keeping him there, tight. He smelled of sweat and dirt and cigarettes and spices and Akihiko could feel the thundering of his heart where their chests were pressed tight together. “Fuck,” he was saying, “hey, *no*—“

Akihiko squeezed his eyes closed against the tears and turned his head so he could brush his mouth across Shinji's throat, not even kissing so much as tasting, mouthing at his skin. It was slow and it wasn't enough but it made Shinji groan, a buzz against Akihiko's lips. He opened his mouth and ran his teeth along a tendon in Shinji's neck, following it upwards to latch onto the soft skin under Shinji's ear. He was overflowing with nervous tension, arousal and misery merging into one fury of need that coursed through his veins and made him struggle against Shinji's arms even as he shoved himself closer, made him work himself around so he could get a hand between them. He released Shinji's skin with a pop and Shinji sagged, his arms loosening. “Aki,” he managed, and Akihiko felt a sharp, bitter stab of triumph at the need thick in his voice. He ignored the rest—the hurt, the worry—and focused on that need, clung to it.

Shinji tried to pull back, maybe to kiss him, maybe to talk, but Akihiko knew that either would stop him in his tracks, shatter the thrumming energy he was riding, and he couldn't let that happen, couldn't go back to feeling powerless. His power was *here*, in the way Shinji gasped when Akihiko tugged at the lobe of his ear with his teeth, in the way he shuddered when Akihiko skimmed his fingers up under his shirt, flicking his blunt nails just too roughly across Shinji's muscle. He nipped at Shinji's jaw and found a nipple with his fingers and Shinji growled, his arms tightening again around Akihiko's waist. Akihiko fitted a leg between his and rolled his hips.

Shinji jerked against him, his head falling forward. He pressed hot little kisses into Akihiko's skin, all up and down his shoulder and neck as Akihiko continued to grind against him. It was still too much—too gentle, too sweet. It made Akihiko's heart ache and tears threaten again and he couldn't; he bit a little too hard at Shinji's jaw and fought free of his arms, dropping to his knees so fast that he knew they'd bruise. He nosed against Shinji's stomach, looking up at him with hooded eyes.

Shinji was staring down at him, pupils blown, but his face was—he looked *shattered*, heartbroken even as his lips parted slick around harsh breaths. He wasn't touching Akihiko at all. His hands were hanging loose and lost at his sides, his back against the wall behind. His hips were canted towards Akihiko like an invitation but—

“Please,” he said, almost involuntary, like Akihiko’s gaze had pulled it from his throat. It was desperate and miserable and it stopped Akihiko dead. “Please.”

Akihiko got to his feet slowly, not breaking eye contact. Shinji licked his lips, once, and again, like he didn’t know what else to do with his face. “Please...” he said again, and Akihiko kissed him, slow and impossibly sad.

Shinji made a little broken noise in the back of his throat, one of his hands coming up to cup the back of Akihiko’s neck—gentle, always gentle, supporting without demanding.

Akihiko pulled away. “I can’t do this,” he said, all his panic and his helplessness given way to a kind of horrible calm. “I can’t deal with it, having you—halfway. Either come home or don’t bother to text me again.”

He didn’t wait for Shinji to answer, just left him there. His throat hurt so badly it felt like he’d been swallowing knives and every step the storm in his head was growing, the thunderheads building in his sinuses, but he couldn’t break now. Not yet.

He managed to get three streets away before he collapsed against a wall, shaking so hard his teeth rattled, breathing like he’d run a marathon. It wasn’t far enough. If Shinji really wanted to catch up, he would—but Akihiko stood for a hundred thousand beats of his rabbit heart and only the moon kept him company, low over the horizon, creeping ever onward toward its full girth.

Akihiko swallowed painfully—flesh against a dozen knives—and walked back to the dorm alone.

Junpei stood up when he came in, starting to say something, but he must have seen something in Akihiko’s face because he stumbled to a stop almost immediately and stared at him. “A-are you okay, senpai?”

Akihiko just brushed past him—past Yukari on the stairs, who breathed “oh my god,” after he’d passed, past Minato where he stood contemplating the vending machine, and finally into his room. He closed the door behind him and sank down with his back against it, trying desperately to get his breathing under control, to feel less like he’d just fucked up the only thing he’d ever been sure of in his entire life.

His bed creaked and he opened his eyes to see Kanji sitting cross-legged, something in his lap. He was staring at Akihiko. “Ah, do you—do you want me to leave?”

Akihiko leaned his head back against the door with a thud. He’d entirely forgotten the kid, forgotten everything but the way Shinji’s mouth moved when he begged. “No,” he said, and to his surprise found it was true. “No, it’s fine.”

Kanji bit his lip. “Okay,” he said. He picked up the thing in his lap. It was a complicated contraption of four knitting needles in a square, looped and knotted with black yarn. With a defiant glance at Akihiko he untangled his skein and continued to knit.

Akihiko watched him for a while, eyes on the repetitive, deft motion of his hands. “What are you making?”

Kanji’s cheeks colored. “It’s a hat,” he said. “For Shinjiro-senpai. As, like, a thank you.”

“Oh,” said Akihiko miserably, and closed his eyes.

Kanji was silent for a minute, and then he said, “I saw how you were looking at him. I thought—when you stayed—I expected you to come back like. You know. Happier.”

“You expected me to get laid, huh?” Akihiko asked. “Well maybe that’s not what I *needed*, maybe that’s not.” He worked his jaw. “I could have. He would’ve broken that rule, today, I saw it in his face.”

He opened his eyes to look at Kanji, who was blinking at him, his hands still moving. “Rule?”

Akihiko rolled his head along the door, pushing his tongue into every hollow in his mouth and replaying the scene in his head. He wondered what would’ve happened if he’d stayed on his knees, if he’d just leaned in, if he’d teased and taunted until that horrible broken expression on Shinji’s face had been lost in mindless, desperate pleasure. He imagined Shinji arching over him, hands in his hair, could remember the taste of him, the smell, the gorgeous stretch and burn of lips and throat. Maybe Shinji would have walked away forever on his own after that, spent and furious and vulnerable, and it wouldn’t feel like all of this was on Akihiko’s shoulders alone.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, and slid his knees forward so he could rest his head on them. “It’s over now anyway.”

“No,” said Kanji, “what—what are you talking about, what do you mean it’s over?”

Akihiko ran a hand through his hair. Were there even words for it? Did they break up if they’d never been dating, really, in the first place? How do you break up with half of your own goddamn heart? “I told him not to text me unless he was coming home,” he said simply, hollowly.

“And he—?” Kanji prompted, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

Akihiko felt his lips thin into something that might resemble a smile. “You see him anywhere?”

There was a knock on the door. Akihiko forced down the wild burst of hope that threatened to overwhelm him, ignored Kanji’s just as wild hopeful expression, and just called, “Yeah?” without moving.

“We’re heading to Tartarus soon,” Yukari called, “I just wanted to know if you wanted to come or if you were gonna stay here with Kanji.”

Akihiko licked his lips. It was tempting, the idea of losing himself in the fight, not having to think about anything but destroying the shadows in his way. He was about to tell her that he’d

come when Kanji called, “Akihiko-senpai’s gonna stay here with me, I don’t really feel comfortable being here alone.”

“Okay!” Yukari called. “Be careful, you two.”

“You guys too,” Akihiko called, glaring at Kanji. “Have Mitsuru call me if you run into anything serious.”

Kanji glared right back at him. “What?” he snapped when Yukari had gone. “It’s true. Besides, you have to be here when he gets back.”

Akihiko balled up his fists, feeling his knuckles creak. “Kanji,” he said tightly. “He’s not coming back.”

Kanji set his jaw. “You know, I was fucking buying it?” he said bitterly. “I thought yeah, maybe you’re right. Seein’ the two of you so, so wrapped up in each other, I thought—maybe these guys figured it out. Maybe it’d be okay, to be.” He stopped. He drew his shoulders up, like he was protecting himself. “You said you were lucky, ‘cause he loved you back.”

“I am,” said Akihiko, weary. “He—he does.”

“Then where the fuck is he?!” Kanji demanded. “Why’d he let you just walk off? And why’d you walk off at all, I thought you said—I thought you said side by side, hand in fuckin’ hand!”

Akihiko let his eyes slip closed, feeling sick. “It’s more complicated than that,” he said weakly. “It’s—“

“It’s bullshit,” Kanji snapped. “You’re just scared. You’ve gotten this far but you’re gonna graduate high school soon and everyone’s gonna be looking at you, big boxing star, and you’re scared of what’ll happen when they find out you’re a, a—“ he licked his lips, still unwilling even in his anger, “—you’re g-gay and you’ve got some scummy back-alley drop-out of a boyfriend. You’re just being a goddamn coward and you’re throwing him away!” He sounded like he was going to cry, but Akihiko was too sick of it, too angry to care.

He was on his feet before he was even aware of moving. “Shut the fuck up,” he snarled, and Kanji looked up at him, startled out of his own anger. “Don’t you ever fucking talk about Shinji like that again,” Akihiko said levelly. “Ever.”

*“Don’t talk about yourself that way,” Akihiko said. “You’re not stupid.”*

*Shinji grunted. “You’ve seen my grades,” he said. “There’s no way I’ll move up with you at the end of the semester.”*

*Akihiko gnawed his lip. “I met this girl, Mitsuru,” he said. “She’s really smart, and nice, I’m sure she could tutor you.”*

*Shinji curled into himself atop the monkey bars. “Don’t want a tutor,” he said sullenly.*

*Akihiko laughed and bumped shoulders with him, swinging his legs out over the shrine grounds. "Fine," he said. "Then I'll just stay right here with you for the rest of the semester. I'll miss so many classes they'll have to fail me, and then we'll be in the same class again."*

*Shinji looked sideways at him, his eyes warm in that way that always made Akihiko feel amazing, like he'd just won a match and the whole school was cheering for him. "Yeah," he said. "Okay."*

*"Okay," Akihiko parroted, slinging an arm around his shoulder and pulling him close. "Okay."*

"I'm sorry," said Kanji. "I didn't mean it, I was just angry, I was trying to—to make you angry too, so you'd *do* something."

"I am angry," Akihiko said tightly. "I'm angry at myself and I'm angry at Shinji and I'm angry at what happened to him, I'm angry that we lost—we lost so much, and we're never fucking going to get it back." He turned his eyes to Kanji. "Mitsuru says your destiny's different. I'm glad. Maybe you'll be spared some of the pain that came with ours."

Kanji hesitated, then held out a hand to him. Akihiko took it and sat next to him on the bed, his anger like a dull roar at the back of his mind, constant and exhausted. "You're right about one thing," he said. "I am scared. I'm scared because every time I look at him I feel like I'm shaking apart. I love him so much and it's—it's killing me, to see him but not to be able to be with him like we used to be—like we *always have been*, even before I knew what it meant." He ran a shaky hand through his hair, once, twice. "One of these days it might actually kill me. You shouldn't have been able to trip me, today."

"That was really his fault for looking so good," Kanji muttered, and squeezed Akihiko's hand.

Akihiko laughed at him, startled and too-loud, and Kanji gave him a sideways grin, his cheeks pink. He drew his eyebrows together. "If you say a fuckin' word to him—"

Akihiko shook his head. "Never," he promised.

They lapsed into silence, Akihiko's smile fading. "Fuck," he said at last. "What've I done?"

"He'll be here," Kanji said, sounding more certain than Akihiko thought possible. "He'll come."

Akihiko carefully let go of his hand. "He won't," he said. "But thank you." He stood up. "We should try and get some rest, both of us. Yukari's right, I can't afford to be exhausted. And as for you—you're going to have to go home eventually."

Kanji lay down and closed his eyes. "I know," he said. He smirked, just a little. "Gotta show those assholes my new moves, right?"

"Right," Akihiko said, and let himself out, turning the light out after him. He didn't even pause before letting himself in next door. If this was all of Shinji that he could have, he was

going to fucking take it.

There was a full mirror in the corner. He stared at himself in it, at the redness around his eyes, at the tiny, almost invisible hickey at the joint of his shoulder and neck. He watched himself undress, taking his time, willing his panic to recede, his thoughts to follow the same slow rhythm as his breathing.

*Shinji knocked his hands away. "Let me."*

*Akihiko felt himself go red, but he obeyed, trying not to squirm as Shinji slipped the shirt from his shoulders. His hands were calloused but gentle, raising goosebumps as he traced a pattern up Akihiko's throat to his face. Akihiko shivered and leaned into his touch.*

*"Beautiful," said Shinji, almost to himself.*

*Akihiko felt like he should object—'beautiful' was not the manliest of descriptors—but all he could see were Shinji's dark eyes, drinking him in, eager and awed. "You really think so?"*

*Shinji frowned at him. "Of course," he said, like Akihiko should already know.*

*Akihiko bit his lip, his stomach twisting when he saw Shinji's gaze drop to his mouth. He slipped his hands between Shinji's shirt and his skin. "How long have you thought so?"*

*Shinji's eyelids fluttered. "Forever," he said immediately. He traced warm fingers up and down Akihiko's sides, over and over, like he was trying to memorize the contour of his body.*

*Akihiko gathered his courage and pulled him closer, his fingers working at his fly. "How long will you think so?" he asked against Shinji's cheekbone, teasing now, heart in his mouth.*

*"Forever," Shinji whispered, shuddering against him. "Forever, forever."*

Akihiko took a long breath, running a hand over his face, and went to sleep.

He woke up when the weird sideways shift of the Dark Hour hit. He wondered if Kanji had felt it too, and slipped into his jeans and out into the hallway, opening his door quietly in case the kid was still sleeping.

He wasn't there. The bed was empty, the light switch still off—not that it mattered, in the Dark Hour. Akihiko spun back into the hallway and down the stairs. "Kanji?" He called, trying not to panic. "Kanji!!"

No one answered. The dorm was silent, the shadows long and green, and there was no sign at all of where Kanji could have gone.

He went back up the stairs for his evoker and his phone, starting the process of waking Polydeuces as he ran. He had no kind of sight like Mitsuru, but if there had been shadows here—he went cold at the thought—he could maybe see where they'd been and maybe where they were going.



When he reached his phone it was already ringing. He didn't bother to check who it was, just flipped it open. "Hello?"

"I need you," said Shinji, "Kanji—"

"Where are you?" Akihiko demanded, ignoring the way his heart quickened at the sound of Shinji's voice.

"Port Island Station, two blocks down," Shinji said, and Akihiko could hear him breathing hard. "Hurry."

He hung up. Akihiko cursed, slinging his holster across his bare shoulders. He took the stairs down two at a time and, with a muttered apology to Mitsuru, swung himself astride her motorcycle.

Kirijo tech—his evoker, his phone, the motorcycle—didn't feel the same as regular electric equipment. Ever since Polydeuces had awakened, Akihiko had been bizarrely aware of everything electrical—like he could smell it, or hear it, maybe, a constant tiny whisper of voices that called to him, ready to be harnessed. The bike beneath him was entirely silent, cutting through the night like a shark through still water. It meant he could hear everything else—the bells of Tartarus, the rush of the wind through unnaturally empty streets. Behind him—but not far—there was a short, aborted scream.

He grit his teeth hard and kept going.

He could hear the sounds of combat before he could see them—a clash of metal on metal, or maybe metal on stone—and then he sped around a corner and saw Shinji, arms outstretched, a metal pipe in one hand, standing between a twisted creation of shadow and rock and terrible, grimacing faces and the still form of Kanji, collapsed in the street. Akihiko flicked enough power toward him to make sure he was breathing before he noticed that Shinji was favoring one of his sides, and as he leapt away from the creature's clumsy strike he left bloody footprints on the asphalt.

Akihiko had his evoker out before his brain caught up with him. Polydeuces came to life with a roar. His total knowledge of Shinji's injuries—Shinji's *body*—came on so much faster than it had with Kanji. He'd been here before, and Shinji's body welcomed him immediately. The cut wasn't deep, but it was bleeding freely, and Shinji was shaky on his feet. Akihiko imagined himself sewing him up, guiding Polydeuces in his mending even as he indulged the daydream. He was laying a hand on Shinji's side, feeling the flesh knit up under his fingers. He was leaning in to kiss his new skin, birth-pink under his lips—

He pulled Polydeuces back and sent him immediately out again, gathering all the longing and frustration and anger of the last several hours and pouring it into his persona. Polydeuces hummed with it, shook with it, and the sky darkened. Akihiko stepped up beside Shinji and closed his eyes as the lightning struck.

He opened them again when the thing *howled*, high and horrible. It shrieked and burned but it did not fall, and Akihiko swallowed hard. He glanced at Shinji. There was color high in his cheeks and he wouldn't quite meet Akihiko's eyes, and Akihiko knew, suddenly and

wonderfully and horribly, that he'd felt the ghost of Akihiko's mouth as clearly as Akihiko had tasted the ghost of his skin.

"The kid's okay," Shinji said, eyes on the creature before them. "Hit his head, but he's gonna be fine. This thing..."

Akihiko looked back at it in time to see it move, hurl a singed arm to the sky, and suddenly the air coalesced around him, deep cold setting into his very bones. He tried to take a breath and couldn't, tried to move and couldn't. His vision swam, and then the air *shattered*, and he was listing sideways, all the strength in his legs gone.

"No!" he heard Shinji shout as he hit the asphalt, and watched through unfocused eyes as he threw himself bodily forward, swinging his pipe. He tried to call out but his throat still felt frozen. He pushed himself up as fast as he could, muscles shaking, but Shinji was already on the thing, his pipe cracking stone and tearing flesh. It wasn't enough. The thing retreated under the onslaught but thickened as it did so, gathering itself for a counterattack, and Shinji was in too close, couldn't see—

Akihiko let Polydeuces flood his own body, thaw enough of his frozen muscles as he could in the split second that he had and then he was running, every step a painful, jarring, cracking thing. He hit Shinji shoulder first. Shinji's pipe glanced off his spine and the pain of it joined up with the rest, spiderwebbing throughout Akihiko's body. He stumbled, taking Shinji down with him, and they rolled to the edge of the alleyway as huge spears of ice shattered again and again on the pavement behind them.

Akihiko pushed himself up on shaking, screaming arms to look down at Shinji below him, his eyes flickering over his face to make sure he wasn't hurt. Shinji was breathing hard, eyes wide, mirroring Akihiko's concern. One of his hands came up to cup Akihiko's face, his thumb sliding over Akihiko's cheekbone. It came away wet, with tears or sweat or melted frost Akihiko didn't know. "You look like shit," Shinji said, breathless, shaky, smiling.

Akihiko sagged in relief, too pained and tired to really laugh. He licked his lips five or six times before he felt like he could actually speak. "Fire," he said at last.

Shinji stared at him. "What?"

"Fire," Akihiko said again, clearer this time. "Need you to call Castor. Really call him, for what he's for."

Shinji swallowed hard, and Akihiko was tired enough that he found the action completely arresting. "Aki..."

Aki twisted his lips at him. "You wanna die like this?" he asked, and then, because there was something in Shinji's eyes that made him feel suddenly and horribly sick, "You want *me* to die like this? And Kanji?"

Shinji closed his eyes. Next to them, Akihiko was aware of the shadow turning, gathering itself again. "Shinji," he warned.

“My evoker,” Shinji said, opening his eyes, and then glanced sideways. Akihiko followed his gaze. Shinji’s evoker was lying across the alley next to Kanji, beyond the shadow.

Akihiko swallowed. “Okay,” he said, and brought up his own. He held it out for Shinji to take, but Shinji took his wrist instead, guiding him until the barrel of the evoker was tucked up under his jaw, Akihiko’s finger still on the trigger.

Akihiko took a breath, dizzy by the amount of trust that took. His mouth tasted bitter with self-loathing. Kanji’s voice rang in his head: *You’re throwing him away!* There was a time when he would have laughed at anyone accusing him of ever hurting Shinji. Now...

Shinji’s fingers tightened around his wrist, centering him, and he forced himself under control. “Ready?” he asked, mouth dry.

Shinji’s eyes were steady. “Do it.”

It hurt him. That was what Akihiko noticed first—the click of the evoker, and then Shinji went tense against him, pain lines appearing around his mouth and eyes. Castor flickered into existence between them and the shadow, broad-shouldered and graceful. He opened his red, red mouth and roared at the thing, hollow, grieving. As if in answer, flames rose up before him, racing toward the creature. Its faces twisted in pain and it tried to retreat, but within moments it was consumed, the stone flashing into steam, the shadow vanishing at the touch of Castor’s pure light.

Castor turned as he faded, and Akihiko felt Polydeuces stir at the back of his mind as their eyes met. His mind felt too full for a moment, like someone was using it for something he could never understand, and then Polydeuces was gone again, curled into whatever metaphysical space he occupied when he wasn’t needed.

He looked at Shinji, who was surfacing, his lips parting first and then his eyes opening. He took a breath, looking almost surprised to see Akihiko still there. “Aki,” he said, small and wondering, and Akihiko didn’t have the strength remaining to resist. He leaned down to kiss him, slow and thorough, and Shinji arched his neck to kiss back hard.

Akihiko used to dream of kissing Shinji—used to wake up hard and panting, thinking about the way his mouth would move, the sweep of his tongue. At twelve, thirteen, fourteen, he’d imagine it starting out chaste and gentle—had trouble imagining what Shinji could be except gentle with him, except tender and absolutely loving.

Now, after years of the real thing—after stumbling first starts and nose-bumping attempts and exploratory, luxurious afternoons and desperate stolen kisses in corners and locker rooms and janitor closets—he *knew* this mouth, knew how to flick his tongue at the seam of Shinji’s lips to get him to open up to him, knew how hard to tug on his bottom lip with his teeth to get him to gasp and shudder. And he knew that Shinji could be a thousand things while kissing—gentle and tender and loving, yes, but a man who loved to fight the way Shinji did was never going to be content with simply kissing and being kissed. Shinji kissed to win, and it had been a long time since either of them let themselves really play.

Shinji fought his way up onto his elbows. Akihiko pulled back for a second to breathe, but Shinji growled and curled a hand around the back of his neck, licking back into his mouth. Akihiko's breath stuttered, and when Shinji ran his tongue along the line of his teeth he couldn't help but moan.

"*Fuck*," Shinji muttered against his mouth, and Akihiko nodded, nodded, their foreheads rolling and knocking together as he pressed kiss after kiss to Shinji's mouth.

"I'm sorry," he said, breathing only Shinji's air in big, gasping breaths, "I'm sorry."

Shinji cut him off, nipping at his lips, and Akihiko sobbed with it. It was like they'd been speaking different languages for months, talking around each other, never really connecting, and now—now they clicked like they always had, now Akihiko could just lean down and lose himself in the sweetness of Shinji's mouth because of course he could, of course he could, of course he could.

"Missed you," Shinji said, and Akihiko laughed, feeling crazy. They'd seen each other just hours ago, but the difference between how he'd felt then and how he felt now was—god.

"Gotta thank Kanji for being an idiot," he muttered, and Shinji's eyes crinkled up when he smiled.

"He came to ask me to come back," he said.

Akihiko froze. "What?"

Shinji stared up at him. "He told me you were miserable without me, that it wasn't right. He said—" He licked his lips. "He said, *'he loves you so much he's worried about dying from it.'* He said I had to come back."

Akihiko's tongue was thick in his mouth. "That's not fair," he said with difficulty. "He shouldn't have done that."

"No?" Shinji asked, raising his eyebrows. "So it's not true, then?"

Akihiko felt himself go red. "Of course it's fucking true, you idiot. God."

Shinji laughed soundlessly, his hands tracing up Akihiko's sides. "What are you doing saying shit like that to thirteen-year-old boys, huh?" he asked.

"Some thirteen-year-old boys need to hear it," Akihiko muttered, and buried his hands in Shinji's hair, scratching blunt nails across his scalp. He felt like his heart might burst open at any moment. Maybe he wouldn't even mind.

Shinji hummed, his eyes slipping closed in pleasure, and Akihiko leaned down to kiss his ear. "You know," he whispered, "we could be doing this in bed."

He expected Shinji to tense, maybe even to pull away, but he just pushed his face into the curve of Akihiko's neck. "Want that," he murmured, "want you."

Akihiko pulled back to stare down at him. "Really?"

Shinji scowled at him. "No," he said acidly, "that's why my dick twitches every time you fucking blink at me."

Akihiko coughed, his face hot. "Don't be an ass," he said. "I meant you'd be okay with—coming home."

Shinji took a long breath, really thinking about it. "Yeah," he said. "I think so. I feel—something changed. Castor..."

Akihiko cocked his head. "I think Polydeuces, might've talked to him."

Shinji raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Castor looked at me," Akihiko said, "and then Polydeuces used my brain for a minute."

Shinji blinked at him. "I didn't even know that was possible," he said, "but—summoning him, it wasn't like I thought it would be, I didn't feel..."

Akihiko leaned down and kissed him between the eyes. "Maybe you have better control than you thought," he said. "Or maybe my soul told your soul the same thing we showed Kanji today."

Shinji shifted so his mouth was hovering inches from Akihiko's. "Hm?" It was more breath than word.

"You don't have to do this alone," Akihiko murmured, and when Shinji kissed him he sighed into his mouth.

He stayed there for a moment, eyes closed, concentrating on Shinji's breath on his face, on his heartbeat. "Okay," he said at last, and levered himself painfully up onto his feet. "Come on, then."

He gave Shinji a hand up, nearly overbalancing himself in the process, and Shinji caught him as he swayed. "Hey," he said against his temple, "hey, careful."

Akihiko grimaced. "Sorry," he said, "not too good with ice." His throat still felt a little numb, and he couldn't seem to get his feet properly under him.

They walked together over to Kanji, Akihiko letting himself lean on Shinji to stay upright. He savored it—the warmth of him, the steadiness, the relief of letting someone else hold him up.

Kanji stirred. The last vestiges of Polydeuces, clinging to Akihiko's mind, told him that his unconsciousness had given way to sleep some time ago, that he would wake up with a horrible headache but nothing worse.

Shinji knelt and Akihiko knelt with him, keeping his arm slung over Shinji's shoulders as Kanji opened his eyes. He blinked for a minute and then stared up at them. "You—" he

started, and then broke into a grin. “See,” he said, “that’s more what I was thinkin’ you’d look like earlier. All blissed out.”

Akihiko blinked at him, and then chuckled. “We just kissed, Kanji.”

Kanji pushed himself up so he was sitting. “Yeah, well, not that much else to do, is there?”

Akihiko looked at Shinji, and then back at Kanji, baffled. “What?”

Kanji looked between them, looking sleepy and pained and very thirteen. “‘Cause guys can’t have sex.” He wrinkled his nose. “Blowjobs, I guess, but *gross*.”

Akihiko stared at him for a long moment and then dropped his head into his hands. Someone save him from rural thirteen-year-old boys. “Nope,” he said. “Not having this conversation right now. Preferably not having this conversation ever.”

Shinji's voice was tight with pent-up laughter. “Trust me, kid,” he said, “guys can have sex.” He slid a hand down Akihiko’s spine to palm across his ass, and Akihiko lifted his head to glare at him. He couldn’t keep the expression on his face, though—Shinji’s eyes were warm as he looked back, warm and dark and happy in a way Akihiko thought he’d never see again. He lifted a hand and cupped Shinji’s cheek, thumbing at the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t wanna know,” Kanji muttered, but he sounded happy, and when Akihiko tore his eyes from Shinji’s face he was grinning at them.

“It worked,” he boasted as Shinji helped him to his feet. “You guys are okay.”

Shinji dropped his arm as soon as he was up. “What the *fuck* were you thinking?” he demanded, all the warmth gone from his face. “You almost got yourself killed. You almost got all of us killed!”

Kanji stared at him, then at Akihiko where he still knelt by his side. “But—”

“But *nothing*,” Shinji growled. “If you ever pull anything that stupid again I will hunt you down and kill you myself. Not that I’ll probably have to, you’ll already be fucking dead.”

Kanji’s lip trembled. “I was trying to help—”

“We don’t need your help,” Akihiko said, getting to his feet. He sounded harsh even to his own ears, but Shinji was right. “Us, this?” He gestured between him and Shinji. “This isn’t yours to worry about, and it definitely isn’t yours to put yourself in danger for.”

Kanji stared hard at the ground. “But—I—I needed you to be okay. I needed you to be happy. F-for me, so I could see...”

Shinji sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Kid,” he said. “We can’t be responsible for you feeling okay about what and who you are. That ain’t fair on us. We’re just people.” He took a step forward, and Kanji looked up at him. Shinji pressed a palm to his heart, his hand comically large against Kanji’s small chest. “What you are is *you*, and no matter what, that *is* okay. Maybe there’s nothin’ you see out here—” he gestured around at the streets, “—that

says it is. Maybe there's a bunch of assholes who say it isn't. You just gotta be louder than them, say it so loud to yourself you drown 'em out."

Akihiko nodded, stepping up beside him. "You're a good kid, Kanji," he said quietly. "You're kind, and you're smart, and you're brave as hell." He smiled a little. "Maybe more brave than smart, but no one's perfect. You'll be a good person." He watched Kanji's face. "A good man."

Kanji's eyes welled with tears. "You guys," he managed. "You—*god*, you can't just say shit like that!"

"Too late," Shinji said, and ruffled Kanji's hair. "You ready to go?"

Kanji mopped at his face with a fist. "I—fuck. Yeah."

+

Kanji was asleep almost before he managed to get through Akihiko's door, and Akihiko just closed it behind him, tugging Shinji's arm over to his room. Shinji raised his eyebrows at him, and Akihiko shrugged, one-shouldered. "I've been sleeping here lately," he said, deliberately casual. "Since Kanji got here."

Shinji swallowed, and he raised a hand, his thumb sliding up Akihiko's throat and over his jaw to his mouth. Akihiko parted his lips at the touch and Shinji's breath hitched. He reached around Akihiko to the doorknob and then walked him backward through the door, letting it swing closed behind him.

"You've got me at a disadvantage," Akihiko murmured as Shinji continued to walk him back, one hand on his hip. When Shinji cocked a brow at him he gestured at himself—still shirtless, his pants tattered and torn, with Shinji's blood on one leg and the other covered in ash. Shinji's gaze dragged over his skin and Akihiko shivered in its wake. He felt hot and cold by turns, exhausted and aroused and desperately happy.

Shinji shed his coat and shirt and Akihiko bit his lip. Dried blood emphasized the line of his hipbone, but the skin of his side was as new and as pink as it had been in his daydream. Without looking up he leaned forward and kissed it, soft and open-mouthed, fluttering his tongue against new muscle, new nerves.

Shinji's hands flew to his hair and tugged him away, tilting his head up so Shinji could kiss him, deep and slow. "Too much," he said against Akihiko's mouth, and then kissed him again, and again, hard kisses like punctuation, like affirmation.

He went to his knees, his hands at Akihiko's fly, and stripped him of his pants with efficient, gentle hands. He started to tug at Akihiko's boxers but Akihiko stopped him, drawing him back up and kissing him again as he returned the favor, undoing Shinji's fly and pushing his pants down so he could step out of them. Akihiko broke the kiss, skimming his hands over Shinji's chest. His whole body was shaking, shaking. "Sleep with me," he said. "Just—sleep, we have all the time in the world."

Shinji licked his lips and looked like he might protest, but he must have noticed the tremble in Akihiko's arms, the slowness of his movements. "Tease," he murmured, but it was warm and understanding, and when he pushed down his boxers it was just to clamber into bed behind him. He lay there on his side, up on one elbow, and for a long moment there was nothing Akihiko could do but stare, his eyes flickering over every curve of his muscle—the hard lines of his chest, lightly furred, the curve of his stomach, the trail of hair leading down the vee of his hips to the flushed, half-hard weight of his cock. He knew every inch of Shinji's body and he wanted nothing so much as to learn it again, with his hands and his teeth and his tongue.

He forced his eyes back to Shinji's face, and Shinji smirked at him, slow and knowing. "Come on, then," he said, voice deep with arousal, "sleep with me."

Akihiko scrambled to push down his own boxers, almost toppling over on his shaking legs, and then he slid in beside Shinji, fitting in against his chest, breathing in the warm perfect musk of him. Shinji wrapped an arm around his back and threw a leg over his hip, drawing him in tighter, and Akihiko pressed tiny kisses to his collarbone until sleep took him away.

+

He woke to Shinji mouthing at his hipbone. For a dizzying instant he thought he must still be dreaming—lying alone in Shinji's bed, his longing so intense it had called the idea of Shinji to him—but then Shinji nipped at the skin of his thigh and he came fully awake with a gasp, instinctively burying his hands in Shinji's hair. Shinji was looking up at him with hooded eyes, his hands splayed on Akihiko's thighs. As Akihiko watched he ran his tongue over the place he'd bitten, and Akihiko made an embarrassing, strangled kind of noise.

Shinji laughed at him, open-mouthed, his breath ghosting hot over Akihiko's cock. Akihiko's hands clenched hard in his hair, tugging and urging, but he pushed back against them, leaning in only long enough to kiss the tip of him before switching to Akihiko's other thigh, latching his mouth onto the skin there and sucking hard. Akihiko was shaking, shaking, his heart drumming and drumming. He threw one arm across his face, breathing harsh, as he bucked against nothing, desperate for more contact. "Don't f-fucking do this to me, asshole," he growled as Shinji backed off, peppering tiny kisses to the backs of his thighs. "Need you, need you."

Shinji hummed against his skin and lifted his head. "Look at me," he said, breathless, rasping, and Akihiko did. Shinji's hair was tangled in his fingers, his cheeks flushed, his lips shining. He blinked slow, long lashes over dark, dark eyes. "Love you," he said, and swallowed Akihiko down.

+

Kanji left in the morning, taking a noon train away into the fog. He was silent on the way to the train station, his face set and determined. They all went with him, Junpei and Yukari talking at the back of the group, Akihiko and Shinji walking with Kanji, not touching but walking close enough that their hands and shoulders brushed. Mitsuru walked in the middle, and several times Akihiko caught her smiling Shinji's way, looking more relaxed than she



had in months. He felt a stab of guilt at that—he'd been so caught up in his own worry and guilt and anger that he'd barely spared a thought for hers.

The train whistle was too loud in the quiet, and Akihiko winced. He had what Junpei referred to jokingly as a “Hero’s Hangover”, his whole body aching with both physical and spiritual exhaustion. He watched as Minato touched Kanji on the shoulder, then leaned forward to speak to him, his words lost in the screech of the arriving train. Kanji looked confused, but nodded slowly, and Minato nodded back with a smile.

Yukari hugged him, and Mitsuru held out a hand with a smile. Junpei gave him a high five, and finally Kanji turned to Akihiko and Shinji. He approached Shinji first, holding out a small, solemn hand, which Shinji ignored. Instead he bent and took Kanji’s face in both hands. “Don’t forget what I said, yeah?” he said gruffly, and Kanji, bright red, nodded. Shinji nodded back, then leaned in and kissed him in the center of the forehead, hard, leaving him reeling.

Akihiko was worried Kanji might actually pass out, but he managed to get a handle on himself, turning slightly glazed eyes on Akihiko at last. Struggling not to laugh, Akihiko held out a hand for him to shake.

Kanji scoffed and used it to pull Akihiko forward, wrapping his arms around his chest hard. Akihiko put a hand on his head, his heart suddenly in his throat. “Kanji,” he said softly.

Kanji pulled back and shoved a fist across his eyes. “Gonna miss you, asshole,” he said, all of the respect he’d been giving Akihiko since they met dissolving, and Akihiko laughed, soft and startled.

“Goodbye,” he said, smiling down at him. “I’ll miss you too.”

They watched the train pull out of the station, taking Kanji back home, to his own life and his own battles, and Akihiko could only hope they’d helped to equip him better for them—that they’d managed to give him some weapons against a world determined to hurt him. He sighed.

*“I don’t get it,” he said, tracing the puffy skin by Shinji’s eye. “They just jumped you?”*

*Shinji shrugged and swallowed, and Akihiko could hear the secret kept close behind his teeth. He frowned. “Stop that, I know you’re lying to me.”*

*“I didn’t even say anything,” Shinji grumbled, but it was a lost cause. He opened his mouth, and then said very quietly, “it’s because of—us.”*

*Akihiko’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”*

*Shinji’s mouth worked. “Called me a fag,” he said shortly, and then caught Akihiko’s hand as he flinched. “Aki.”*

*Akihiko closed his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll—we’ll be more careful, we won’t hold hands in the halls, we’ll—”*

*“No,” Shinji growled, and brought Akihiko’s wrist to his mouth, pressed kisses there with bruised lips. “No. I won’t keep you a secret.”*

*Akihiko’s heart hurt. “Then—what? You can’t keep getting beat up like this!”*

*Shinji smirked against his skin. “Just gotta get stronger than all the assholes,” he said. “No punk’s gonna take me down.”*

Shinji’s hand found his, and he laced their fingers together. “Let’s go,” he said quietly, and Akihiko nodded. Together, they turned—together, they walked away, side by side, hand in hand.

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