

**both our hearts in your hand (a pound of flesh)**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/24573667) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/24573667>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Persona 4</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Hanamura Yosuke/Seta Souji</a> , <a href="#">Hanamura Yosuke/Narukami Yu</a> , <a href="#">Hanamura Yosuke/Persona 4 Protagonist</a> , <a href="#">Investigation Team &amp; Seta Souji</a> , <a href="#">Investigation Team &amp; Narukami Yu</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Hanamura Yosuke</a> , <a href="#">Seta Souji</a> , <a href="#">Narukami Yu</a> , <a href="#">Investigation Team (Persona Series)</a> , <a href="#">Shadow Seta Souji</a> , <a href="#">Shadow Narukami Yu</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Platonic Cuddling</a> , <a href="#">Canon-Typical Violence</a> , <a href="#">Canon-typical Temporary Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Referenced Canonical Sexual Harassment</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of <a href="#">measure our time by the movement of shadows</a>
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-06 Words: 11,617 Chapters: 1/1

# both our hearts in your hand (a pound of flesh)

by [Pfeffermouse](#)

## Summary

The Investigation Team members have always done their best to protect their leader. But some wounds are harder to see than others, and it's the ones left to fester that do the most damage.

## Notes

I pretty much consumed the P4 franchise by taking the various P4-related games, the P4 manga, the PQ manga, the P4 anime, and a whole bunch of fandom, dumping them in a blender, and chugging the whole thing down in one go like some sort of extremely questionable breakfast smoothie, so my grasp of what happened in which canon is occasionally a bit shaky. This should be pretty canon-neutral, although it was written with the game in mind (specifically, how *bad* I am at the game), with one reference to an anime-only scene involving a non-consensual kiss. Also, I'm pretty sure the Binding Cry chain attack came from the PQ manga.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The silence was eating at Yosuke, thrumming relentlessly in his ears like the bassline for a song he couldn't quite make out but hated all the same. For once, though, he didn't bother reaching for the headphones at his bedside to try and cover it up. The only music that could have matched the tempo of the whirling in his brain and the churning in his gut was his battle playlist, and just the thought of *that* made Yosuke kind of want to hurl. He'd been listening to that playlist for too many days now; he didn't need it haunting his nights too. Not that Yosuke's nights could get much more haunted, really; every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was grey – grey hair, grey eyes, the grey fog that had swallowed Souji whole in the time it had taken Yosuke to look up from where he'd been healing Chie after what was supposed to have been a simple training mission for Naoto had gotten wildly out of control.

So yeah. What did it matter if Yosuke lost a few more pieces of himself to the silence? There was already a gaping hole in his chest from that day in the TV world, when they'd realized that they weren't going to find Souji that afternoon, that they were going to have to give it up for the day and leave him behind. In a weird way, that ragged, empty sensation made Yosuke feel better – if Yosuke'd left part of himself in the TV world, it meant Souji wasn't all alone in there.

*Hey partner, you know that, right? No matter where you are, I'll be right there with you whenever you need me. I'm your backup, remember? Whatever you need from me, take it. Even if I could never bring myself to say it, you have to know that it's pretty much all yours already anyway. You don't even have to ask.*

The thought made Yosuke's throat tighten painfully, and he couldn't help tightening his arms around Teddie too. Good old Ted, who had climbed into Yosuke's bed the minute Yosuke had turned out the lights and had latched onto Yosuke as though Teddie were a koala instead of... whatever kind of bear he was supposed to be. Yosuke felt like he should have put up some sort of token protest, reminded Teddie about boundaries or something, but Yosuke was so stupidly *grateful* for the comfort that all he could do was cling back.

"Hey Ted," Yosuke whispered, cringing at the way even that small noise jarred against the not-bass of the silence surrounding them, like a note out of place.

"Yeah, Yosuke?" Teddie whispered back, his breath warm where he'd buried his face in Yosuke's chest.

"The Shadows only attack when the fog lifts over there, right?" Yosuke asked, like he hadn't been visiting the TV world for a good half a year now, like he hadn't helped rescue everyone so far – like a little kid asking his mom to leave a night light on, because everyone knew that monsters couldn't come out if you had a night light. "Like... his Shadow can't do anything to him until then, right?"

Yosuke felt pretty stupid, but judging from how quickly Teddie responded, he must have wanted to say it as much as Yosuke wanted to hear it, which was something. "Yeah, of course! As long as it's sunny over here, Sensei's outlook is sunny too!"

There was a pause as Yosuke processed that particular statement. “That... was the least cool thing I think I’ve ever heard someone say in my life,” he said at last.

There was a dull thump in the general vicinity of Yosuke’s kidneys as Teddie tried to thwack him without actually letting go. “It was *beary* cool!” Teddie insisted.

“Knock it off, stupid bear!” Yosuke hissed, shoving at him, and any further conversation was lost in the scuffle that ensued.

*Souji’s Personas aren’t normal; why would his Shadow be?* neither of them said.

*What about his Midnight Channel?* neither of them said.

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*They hadn’t been sure whether Souji would actually show up on the Midnight Channel at first. He hadn’t been on TV before he’d disappeared, and they didn’t know whether that would make a difference. Yosuke and Teddie had ended up parked in front of the TV by 11:30 that night, after an evening spent failing miserably at pretending to be focusing on anything else. Teddie fretted out loud, grabbing at Yosuke or rolling around on the floor, wailing about how the wait was unbearable. Yosuke mostly ignored him, aside from shoving him away now and then when he got too up in Yosuke’s personal space. Part of Yosuke wanted to yell at Teddie to be quiet, but he couldn’t bring himself to interrupt his concentration for even a moment, as though he could somehow summon Souji onto the screen by sheer force of will, if he just focused enough. After all, if Souji appeared on the Midnight Channel, that meant he was alive, he could be rescued, just like the rest of them. If he didn’t appear...*

*Ugh. If he didn’t appear, they’d just have to try a new approach, that was all. There was no reason to assume anything else.*

*Still, Yosuke just about passed out in relief when the golden static of the television faded in on Souji – or rather, on his Shadow, although it would have been an easy mistake to make; there was no elaborate set or costume this time, just Souji standing there in his school uniform. He was standing against a black-and-white backdrop of TV screens like the one that flashed before their eyes as they fell through the TV, as though he’d only just gone through himself. The only giveaway was his eyes, which glowed gold long after the TV screen had adjusted to Souji’s grey-and-white color scheme.*

*“Welcome to the Midnight Channel,” Souji’s Shadow said smoothly. “I’m your host for this evening, Seta Souji.”*

*He paused then, leaning to the side as though he were straining to hear something off-camera. “Hmm?” he asked, very politely. “Oh, I’m not supposed to call it the Midnight Channel? I’m supposed to call it something about me? And put on a costume? A little more visual flair?”*

*Souji’s Shadow sighed, shaking his head with a motion that was just a little too theatrical – too insincere – to belong on someone with Souji’s face. He leaned into the screen as though he were confiding a secret. “It really doesn’t matter what the show’s called or what I’m wearing, you know,” he said, voice low. “After all, everything’s always about me anyway! It*

*seems a little tasteless to rub it in, though.” Souji’s Shadow winked and grinned, a flash of white teeth, and suddenly his eyes weren’t the only giveaway; two sharp white fangs flashed by, there and gone again.*

*“But we aim to please, of course,” Souji’s Shadow continued pleasantly, “– whether we agree or not. So based on popular demand, tune in next time for a whole new program, with a whole new look!” Souji’s Shadow gave a little wave, and the program faded away.*

*That was the first night.*

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“Hey Yosuke,” Teddie half-whispered, once they’d settled back down in a sort of exhausted truce. “We’re gonna save Sensei tomorrow, right?”

“Obviously,” Yosuke scoffed, trying to inject as much certainty into his voice as Teddie had earlier. “It’s not like he really needs *saving*, anyway. He’s done all this loads of times; there’s no way he’s gonna deny his Shadow. He probably just needs a little encouragement or reassurance or something, right? No biggie.”

“Yeah!” Teddie agreed, loudly enough that Yosuke shushed him and yanked the blankets up higher, just in case his parents came to see what the fuss was about and Yosuke had to die of embarrassment before they’d even gotten to Souji.

“I’m gonna do my bear-y best to cheer Sensei on!” Teddie continued, either unaware or uncaring of the concept of an inside voice.

“Okay, okay, sheesh!” Yosuke said, shoving Teddie’s head further under the blankets by way of giving him a noogie. “In that case, save your voice and go to sleep already!”

If the noogie was more affectionate than rough, neither of them said anything about it.

If Teddie didn’t try too hard to wriggle free, neither of them said anything about it.

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*The second Midnight Channel was worse.*

*Souji’s Shadow had apparently taken whatever supposed criticism he’d received to heart; the black-and-white TV backdrop had been replaced with a graveyard and castle straight out of some old Western vampire movie, and Souji’s Shadow was decked out in a black suit and a long black cape lined in red satin, the hilt of his sword just visible in a scabbard at the bottom of the screen. The costume should have made him look ridiculous – a sort of dime-store Dracula – but there was something just a little too predatory in the lazy amusement on his face and the controlled grace with which he flourished the cape as if to show it off; it made the red satin look less cartoonish and more like a warning. Danger. Stop. Fog advisory. Don’t leave the road and don’t trust your eyes.*

*“Good evening, and welcome to Moonlighting with Seta Souji,” Souji’s Shadow declared grandly, then paused. He made a face. “That’s still not very good, is it?” he mused. “Sorry,*

*I'm not really that creative. It was all I could think of, though; being the Wild Card is all about moonlighting as whatever you need me to be.*

*"That's what they call me, you know," Souji's Shadow continued, lowering his voice in the same faux-confidential tone he'd used before. "The Wild Card. Infinite potential, or so I'm told. Of course, that's just a pretentious way of saying that the strength of my Persona is based on the strength of my bonds with others, rather than on my own soul. Interesting, isn't it? I can't say that I had a lot of experience with bonds before all this started, but one thing I've learned is that there's quite a bit of give-and-take involved – and that sometimes it can be hard to tell which is which. When someone gives you a gift you don't want but you thank them and let them give it to you anyway, is it giving or taking? I don't think I have enough understanding to answer that one just yet. All I'm sure of is that I've let things get out of balance lately, one way or another. But don't worry!" Souji's Shadow added, with a smile that was as sharp as the fangs it displayed. "I'll make sure that your Wild Card gets everything that's coming to him."*

*Souji's Shadow hefted his sword in a mocking salute. Blood dripped down the blade and onto his hand as the picture faded out.*

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*We've been going to rescue Sensei tomorrow for days, neither of them said.*

*Shadows don't bleed, neither of them said.*

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The thing was, Souji's dungeon was frikkin' *hard*. And it wasn't like that was a big surprise or anything, but it still sucked. They hadn't even been able to find it at first, with Rise and Teddie both getting increasingly frustrated at the way Souji's presence seemed to be everywhere and nowhere all at once; it wasn't until Souji's second Midnight Channel, with its over-the-top vampire aesthetic, that they'd been able to pin him down. Even then, they were still flying blind in a lot of ways. Yosuke assumed that the portal had dropped them at the edge of the graveyard they'd seen behind Souji's Shadow because they were clearly outdoors, judging from the tall stones and brambles that kept tripping him up, but there was no way to confirm it visually. Souji's dungeon appeared to exist in a sort of perpetual midnight – which made sense, Yosuke supposed, but it was also really super-annoying. Yosuke'd thought that nights in Inaba were dark compared to the city, but this... There were no streetlights or glowing windows from distant buildings, and the sky appeared to be permanently covered with heavy clouds that blocked the moon and stars. If it weren't for Rise's guidance, Yosuke had no idea how they would have even begun to make their way through. There was just enough ambient light for their eyes to play tricks on them, catching flickers of movement that turned out to be nothing – usually.

Yosuke'd honestly thought they were done for the first time a bunch of Shadows attacked them – how were they supposed to fight when they couldn't even see each other, much less the target? Rise was doing her best to direct them, but the Shadows were moving too fast for it to do much good, and they'd left the reserve team back at the entrance to the dungeon, just because it was too difficult trying to keep track of each other in the dark, so they didn't even have any backup. Yosuke had yelled for everyone to cast defensive spells, just to buy them

some time to work out a strategy – but to his surprise, as they did so, the clouds over the moon parted just a little, for the first time since they’d set foot in this place.

“Yosuke-san!” Naoto shouted, and Yosuke nodded so fervently that he had to shove his glasses back up on his nose.

“Yeah, I know!” he shouted back. “Chie, Naoto, Teddie – hit them with everything you’ve got!”

The clouds parted further and further as their magic swelled, until the moonlight painted their surroundings in stark relief – the uneven rows of crumbling, mossy headstones; the dark woods that seemed to be slowly swallowing up the edges of the graveyard; the piles of dirt surrounding the occasional open grave.

The instant the Shadows disappeared, Chie dropped to crouch on the ground, burying her face in her hands. “Why did it have to be a graveyard?” she moaned. “This is so creepy!”

“I mean, you did see his Midnight Channel, right?” Yosuke pointed out logically – maybe a little too logically, given the way Chie punched his shin in response. “Ow! Okay, okay, sorry! Look, just think of it like that one goofball kung-fu movie you liked – Mr. Vampire, right?”

“We don’t have any talismans to kill vampires like they did!” Chie wailed, then suddenly brightened. “Wait, maybe the fox – ”

“So I’ve been meaning to ask, but I didn’t really understand Sensei’s Midnight Channel,” Teddie interrupted with a wave of his paw. “Why was Sensei dressed as a vampire?”

“Yeah, a vampire really doesn’t suit him at all,” Yosuke commented, still rubbing his shin and shooting Chie a dirty look. (Which he promptly dropped the instant she glanced back in his direction. Yosuke wasn’t always great about thinking ahead, but he wasn’t *stupid*.)

“Right?” Teddie agreed earnestly. “Sensei didn’t mention scoring once!”

“Yeah, I – wait, *what*?” Yosuke ignored the way his voice had jumped an unflattering octave on that last word. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Vampires, of course!” Teddie huffed, as though appalled at the depths of *Yosuke’s* ignorance. While Yosuke sputtered – there were just... so many things wrong there – Teddie continued, “I know all about it – vampires are pale guys with sharp teeth that brood a lot, until some lovely young lady shows up and they have to heroically restrain themselves from biting her and give her really confusing warnings that just make her more curious, and then – ”

“Enough, enough!” Yosuke groaned as he finally got hold of himself, lunging at Teddie and covering his mouth. “I *told* the other workers to stop letting you borrow romance manga to read in the breakroom. That’s not what vampires are! Er, sort of. I mean – ”

“I believe what Yosuke-san means is that vampires originated as a horror trope, rather than as a romantic one,” Naoto interjected smoothly. “They were monsters that drank the blood of innocent people and either killed them or turned them into monsters as well. As for why

Souji-san's Shadow would choose to present as a vampire... Well. I don't know Souji-san as well as the rest of you do, but I have a preliminary theory."

"What is it?" Yosuke asked, trying and failing to suppress a belligerent edge to his voice. Which was stupid – Naoto was a professional detective; of *course* she'd see things other people wouldn't. Even if the other person was Souji's best friend. His *partner*. Someone who should have noticed that Souji was struggling, or at least been able to figure out *why* he was struggling, once the problem had gotten too big to ignore –

Naoto's voice neatly derailed Yosuke's train of thought, for which he was intensely grateful; his inner monologue was beginning to sound a little too much like his own Shadow for comfort. "It is my understanding that Souji-san has frequently visited the TV world since April and has never had a Shadow until now, which indicates that whatever issue has rooted itself in his subconscious must have reached its tipping point fairly recently," Naoto said. "Between working with Dojima-san and the time I have spent either observing or interacting with Souji-san, I am reasonably certain that there have been no recent upheavals to Souji-san's home life or school activities, correct?"

"I mean, he's seemed pretty normal to me," Chie said, her face scrunched up in concentration as she evidently racked her brain. "Not that I know everything he's involved in, but..."

As stressed as he was, Yosuke couldn't help huffing a laugh at that one. "Yeah, his schedule is terrifying. I don't think anyone but Souji has any idea where he is or what he's doing half the time."

Naoto nodded. "Be that as it may, some of the things that Souji-san's Shadow said were... revealing, considering that Chie-san was injured quite badly taking an attack that was meant for Souji-san immediately before he disappeared."

Chie shrank back, and even in the rapidly growing darkness as the clouds began drifting back over the moon, Yosuke could see the blood drain from her face, and his own blood rose in retaliation. "What do you think you're saying?" Yosuke demanded. "This wasn't Chie's fault! All she did was take a hit for Souji, and we've all done that before!"

"Exactly," Naoto said, in a way that didn't lower Yosuke's blood pressure one bit. "I didn't mean to accuse you of anything, Chie-san; I can't imagine that a single such incident would be enough to make Souji-san doubt himself to that degree. However, it's hardly a single incident. I've observed that everyone on the team has a tendency to volunteer themselves to be injured in Souji-san's place. It's perfectly logical from a tactical perspective; Souji-san is our leader and also our strongest fighter, especially given his ability to switch Personas. That said, I'm a little concerned about the cumulative psychological impact of these episodes over time. Based on Souji-san's Midnight Channel appearances, he seems to view himself as someone who feeds off others. I believe that Souji-san carries considerable survivor's guilt, despite everyone's subsequent revivals."

"Survivor's... guilt?" Teddie asked uncertainly. "What's – "

Yosuke didn't give him a chance to finish. "That's bullshit," Yosuke spat. "If we wanna protect him, that's our choice, isn't it? It's not like he asked us to do it or anything. He's got



nothing to feel guilty about!” Yosuke distantly registered pain in his hands, and he looked down to see that he was clutching his kunai so tightly that he was in danger of slicing his hands open with the handles alone. He forced his hands to relax, taking a breath and trying to let some of his anger dissipate with it. “If Souji doesn’t understand that, we’ll just have to make sure he gets it – him and his Shadow both.”

The clouds were almost completely covering the moon now, the light nearly gone, but Yosuke couldn’t hold still for another second. He turned and stomped away, leaving the others to catch up behind him.

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Yosuke was self-aware enough by now to know that he was mostly pissed because they clearly *hadn’t* protected Souji, now had they? It had been obvious that something was wrong in the TV world that day; even the small-fry Shadows had been weirdly focused on attacking Souji. Yosuke’d wanted to pull back for the day, try to figure out what was going on before they went any further, but Souji had brushed off the suggestion, saying that he was fine and that they wouldn’t figure anything out without gathering some information first, and Naoto had agreed. Even Chie had wanted to keep going – or at least, *hadn’t* wanted to spend all day sitting around the Junes food court trying to pull theories from thin air again – and so they’d pressed on, so focused on keeping Souji from taking too much damage that they hadn’t even noticed the fog that was slowly starting to seep in around the periphery, even with their glasses on.

Chie’d been hurt pretty badly protecting Souji from a Shadow that had snuck up on him while Souji was busy dealing with three others, and Yosuke’d been too focused on healing her to pay much attention to anything else going on. He was pretty sure that Souji and Naoto had finished off the Shadows and were coming over to check on Chie when there’d been – some kind of noise, Yosuke hadn’t heard it clearly, but Souji and Naoto had snapped to attention, weapons at the ready. Naoto’d said something about the fog, asking if it was normal or something, and Yosuke had glanced up just in time to see Souji fading out of sight as the tendrils of fog thickened and deepened around him, even with the glasses. They’d yelled, of course, and searched, and gotten Rise and Teddie to scan the area again and again, but Souji seemed to have disappeared with the fog as it rolled through and slowly dissipated. In the end they’d had to go back without him. Yosuke had cranked his music as loud as it could go, but it couldn’t drown out the silence next to him, where Souji should have been, or the single thought running through his head on endless repeat.

*Why can’t I ever be enough to save the people that matter most?*

He would be, though. This time, he would be. No matter what happened, Yosuke wouldn’t let Souji become another Saki-senpai.

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“Okay guys, this is it,” Rise said, her tired voice filled with a drive they hadn’t heard in days. “Senpai and his Shadow are just through that gateway. Be careful – there are some powerful Shadows in there, and they seem pretty agitated.”

“Thanks, Rise,” Yosuke said automatically, every scrap of his attention focused on the gateway in front of them, embedded in a long wall that looked something like a mausoleum, based on the brief glimpses that Yosuke had gotten of it as they fought their way close. Without giving himself time to think about what they might find inside, Yosuke shoved his way through. He stumbled to a stop on a viewing platform overlooking a sunken garden, full of dark trees and clumps of crimson spider lilies poking up through the remnants of broken stone walls. A full moon was shining artificially, obscenely bright, hyper-exaggerating the detail on each leaf and petal and giving the shadows such a crisp edge that they looked like they could peel away and turn into Shadows at any moment.

Not that Yosuke had much time to contemplate lower-case shadows; his attention was arrested almost immediately by the scene taking place in a clearing down at the bottom of the garden: Souji, the color almost completely drained from his face, holding his sword up defensively even as he wavered visibly on his feet. Across from him was an enormous Shadow wrapped up in a shroud. Whatever passed for its face was hidden from view, but even so, something about it made Yosuke swallow hard against the sudden queasiness in his stomach.

“Partner!” Yosuke yelled as loud as he could, and if his voice cracked, well, no one could hear it above the sound of the others shouting for Souji too. Not that it did any good; no matter how loudly they yelled, Souji didn’t seem to register them at all.

Rise called, “Guys, his health is at critical! Someone – ” but by then Yukiko and Teddie had already stepped forward, both preparing healing spells, and Yosuke couldn’t even bring himself to call for one of them to back down and conserve their magic.

Apparently someone else could, though.

“There’s really no need for that,” said a voice that was at once both achingly familiar and completely alien. Yukiko and Teddie’s spells both fizzled out as their concentration broke, and the group turned almost in unison to see Souji’s Shadow step out of the shadows behind them.

“You!” Kanji shouted furiously, hefting his weapon as though he were just barely restraining himself from bashing the Shadow right now, before it had even transformed. Yosuke could sympathize; he wanted nothing more than to wipe off that smug look that sat so wrong on Souji’s face.

“Me,” the Shadow agreed, mildly. “And you know, you’ve got to let me stand on my own two feet eventually.” He paused, his gaze shifting to somewhere behind them. “...Or not,” he amended, and Yosuke wrenched back around to see that the shrouded Shadow had used a Binding Cry on Souji, chains wrapping around him and sending his sword clattering to the ground. Souji staggered, the impact throwing him off-balance, and without being able to use his arms to correct himself, he ended up falling hard on his knees, curling in on himself as the impact jarred through him.

“Partner!” Yosuke yelled again, but Souji didn’t even twitch.

“I wouldn’t bother calling to him,” Souji’s Shadow noted. “I’m very good at dissociating, you know. I don’t think he even knows that *I’m* here right now. Which does put a damper on the whole ‘accept or deny yourself’ aspect of this little tableau, but then, flexibility *is* supposed to be my strong suit.” He smiled in a friendly sort of way, like he was inviting Yosuke to be in on a joke. His fangs stood out white and sharp in the artificial moonlight.

The thought that Souji really *hadn’t* realized they were there – that he didn’t know they’d come for him – was more than Yosuke could bear. He leapt forward, but a hand reached out and caught him by the arm. “Really, it’s fine,” Souji’s Shadow said, as though Yosuke’d just – gotten eggshell in the eggs for the twentieth time, or something else stupid and meaningless. Yosuke snarled and tried to break away, while Yukiko and Teddie both went to cast their spells again – until the shrouded Shadow raised a taloned hand and sent them all stumbling back disoriented, as though the air had suddenly turned to water around them. Yosuke reached for Susano-o, for healing or defense or even just something to *distract* the thing from Souji, but the connection kept slipping out of his grasp.

The shrouded Shadow approached Souji, one unhurried step at a time. Souji lifted his head, slowly and with evident effort, until he was glaring up at the Shadow as it loomed over him.

It was a gesture Yosuke couldn’t bring himself to match. Even as he fought against Shadow Souji’s hold – ineffectually, still too off-balance to put up much more than a token protest – he found himself looking away from the scene below, frantically trying to nudge his headphones up from where they’d slid down around his neck.

It didn’t do any good; Yosuke was going to hear that crunch until the day he died.

Rise *screamed*, high and sharp and piercing, like she was trying to defend Souji too late with the only weapon she had. Yukiko’s gasp started loud and then was abruptly muffled with a rustle of fabric. Chie and Naoto and Kanji and Teddie were all shouting for Souji, but Yosuke’s voice had died in his throat. All he could think about was getting to Souji, getting him help, because there was no way he was... he couldn’t...

“Calm down, would you?” Souji’s Shadow demanded in the same tone that Souji used to issue orders in a fight, and it was close enough to the only voice Yosuke wanted to hear right now that it penetrated the fog in his head. He stopped struggling, and after a moment, the Shadow let him go and began rummaging through his pockets. “You don’t have the faintest clue how many Balms of Life and Revival Beads ‘I’ carry around all the time, do you?” Souji’s Shadow continued conversationally, as he pulled out the little bag that Souji stored their medicine in. “For what it’s worth, anyway. I suppose if you’re too much of a coward to lance a wound properly, you might as well treat the symptoms. Drag it out as long as possible, right?” Souji’s Shadow pulled a Revival Bead from the bag and tossed it down to the shrouded Shadow below, which hadn’t moved from where it crouched over Souji’s still form. The shrouded Shadow caught the bead with apparent ease, then wrapped its talons in a fist and squeezed, cracking the bead over Souji.

For a moment Yosuke was caught between surprise and terror at what exactly Souji’s Shadow might be playing at – and then both fear and surprise gave way to a kind of desperate, clawing hope as Souji’s head moved a little. The chains fell away, and after a few false starts, Souji slowly sat up, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Thank God,” Naoto breathed, tugging her hat down over her eyes.

“Awright, Senpai!” Kanji hollered with significantly less restraint, and the girls and Teddie erupted into cheers.

Souji’s eyes locked onto the Shadow in front of him, and he felt around gingerly without looking away until he managed to grab the hilt of his sword. He got to his feet slowly, still a little unsteady – but the instant he was fully upright, the shrouded Shadow’s arm shot out, extending far beyond its original length. The taloned hand wrapped around Souji’s neck, the momentum carrying him backward until he slammed against one of the ruined stone walls dotting the landscape. Souji dropped his sword again, clawing desperately at the hand around his throat, but the shrouded Shadow just squeezed tighter.

“Of course, eventually you run out of medicine to treat the symptoms,” Souji’s Shadow said contemplatively, shaking out the contents of Souji’s bag into his left hand. Only two Revival Beads fell out, rolling around in his palm. “If you haven’t treated the underlying condition by then, well...” Souji’s Shadow shrugged, dropping the beads back into the bag.

“What the hell are you trying to get at, you bastard?” Kanji snarled. He took a step toward Souji’s Shadow, and Yosuke realized abruptly that the disorientation had worn off. He scrambled back a few steps, kunai at the ready, but found himself twisting back and forth, unable to decide exactly where to aim – whether to start by helping Souji, still choking in the shrouded Shadow’s grip, or by targeting Souji’s Shadow, the source of it all? Souji’s Shadow was watching him knowingly, that awful smug look back on his face. *The symptoms or the underlying condition?* God, Yosuke hated this. This kind of thing was exactly why he’d never wanted to be the leader.

*So you made Souji do it instead. How’s that working out for him?* a voice that sounded suspiciously like his own Shadow whispered in the back of his mind.

*Can we not make this about me and my issues for one minute here?* Yosuke shot back irritably.

*What if it already is?*

Souji’s arms dropped limply to his sides, and Yosuke couldn’t stand it anymore. He dashed down the steps toward the garden – only to stop abruptly as a dark shadow descended from the sky and cut off his path down the stairs. Yosuke jerked back involuntarily as the shadow resolved itself into a multitude of smaller shapes, then squinted. Those were...

“Bats?” Chie yelped from behind Yosuke.

“No, Shadows!” Rise called.

It was hard to get a good look at them, darting this way and that against a dark sky, but what Yosuke *could* see was... unsettling, in a way he didn’t know how to describe; a lot of the Shadows they ran into were way more horrific, but something about these just pinged *wrong*, their proportions not quite right somehow and their features always a little blurred no matter how hard Yosuke tried to make them out. He was keeping a close eye on one of them in

particular as it flew closer to the group, only to see it suddenly drop down and sink its oversized claws into another Shadow that had been flying just below it. The second Shadow shrieked, thrashing around and trying to twist up to bite at the first Shadow, but it was too late; the first Shadow had already latched onto the back of the second Shadow's neck and appeared to be feeding on it, flattening itself against the second Shadow until Yosuke couldn't tell where one began and one ended. After what seemed like ages but could only have been a few seconds, the first Shadow lifted its head – but the second Shadow remained attached to it, their bodies merged into a sort of dysfunctional chimera, with the second pair of wings flopping uselessly and the second pair of claws twitching spasmodically, as though they had just been electrocuted.

Yosuke recoiled, nearly dropping his kunai and having to fumble them back into position. “Rise, stats!” he shouted urgently.

“I’m trying, I – ” Rise said, one hand pressed against her visor as though it might help her see better somehow. “They look the same, but they all have different weaknesses and attacks! Some of them are pretty weak, but others are *really* strong!”

“Are you kiddin’ me?” Kanji grumbled, and then the Shadows were upon them. At first it didn't seem so bad – only about a dozen of the massive swarm seemed to be actively attacking them – but of course it was always the strongest ones, and they darted around so quickly that it was almost impossible for Rise to pinpoint who should attack which Shadow.

“Ugh, Rise-chan wasn't kidding!” Chie complained as one of the Shadows took an ice attack without any noticeable damage. “This *sucks*.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Yosuke saw Souji's Shadow toss another Revival Bead down to the shrouded Shadow in the garden, and he felt his heart stutter in his chest, his arms and legs going as cold as if he'd taken Chie's attack instead of the Shadows. *One bead left. Then...*

“You know, in some versions of the European vampire myth, vampires could transform into an entire swarm of bats, not just one,” Naoto commented as she lined up another shot.

“That's great, Naoto, but is it *really what we need to be focusing on right now*?” Yosuke asked, not even trying to keep the frantic edge out of his voice. He should be trying to play it cool for everyone, the way Souji always was, but he *wasn't Souji, dammit*, and it was all he could do just to bite his tongue against the panicked stream-of-consciousness that was rising higher and higher in his throat, because they were losing, no question. None of the damn bat Shadows had gone down yet, plus there was the shrouded Shadow that was currently *torturing Souji*, God, and they hadn't even seen Souji's Shadow transform yet. Yosuke risked a glance behind him; Souji's Shadow was leaning against the garden wall next to the portal, watching them quietly with a look of smug amusement on his face.

“I had been wondering how Souji-san's ability to summon multiple Personas would affect his Shadow,” Naoto said, with an air of long-suffering patience that was probably half of what got her kicked off the police force. “I suspect that these bat Shadows each represent one of his Personas, with the main Shadow being the Persona he had equipped at the time of his disappearance.”

“Do you mean that we need to fight all of Souji-kun’s Personas at once?” Yukiko gasped. She was already pale and sweaty, and her hand trembled with exertion as she sent another wave of fire toward the bat Shadows.

*Oh, great! We’re screwed!* Yosuke did *not* say, but then, he hardly needed to; it was written on everyone’s face. The realization that not only could they die here, they were probably *going* to was... oddly calming, somehow. Deciding what to do next was a lot less stressful when you didn’t have to worry about whether or not you were going to succeed.

“Yukiko, Teddie, you’re on healing,” Yosuke said, and this time his voice didn’t waver. “Don’t waste your magic on anything else, and keep an eye on Souji. Chie, Naoto, cover them and take out whatever you can. Rise, do what you can to help them out. Kanji, cover me.”

Yosuke didn’t wait for their acknowledgement; before he’d even finished speaking, he threw himself into the mass of bat Shadows, dodging where he could but mostly focusing on getting down the steps to where Souji was. Not that he had any particular plan for what he was going to do once he got down there; all he knew was that if they had to die here, he was going to do it at Souji’s side.

He was just a few steps away from the clearing, close enough to see the way Souji shook with exhaustion as he clumsily blocked a swipe from the shrouded Shadow’s talons, his uniform drenched in sweat and other things that Yosuke didn’t want to think about too hard, when he heard Souji’s Shadow say, conversationally, “You know, there *is* such a thing as loyal to a fault.”

The voice was close, almost directly in his ear, and Yosuke instinctively jerked away and around to see Souji’s Shadow standing just behind him.

“Not that I can blame you,” Souji’s Shadow continued, unperturbed. “Or anyone else, really. Can’t afford to, not if I want to keep pulling my weight. They act like the Wild Card power is so special, but I have to say, I don’t know what’s so special about having to suck up to everyone to get ahead, instead of having any potential of my own; any middling salaryman could have taken this job. But whatever, it’s fine; my opinion’s not the one that matters. So bring it on! Get sexually harassed by a nurse who thinks it’s *funny* to watch me squirm? Sure, no problem! Make out with someone who refused to take ‘no’ for an answer? Absolutely! Give myself flashbacks to my own shitty childhood by walking *multiple* adults through the idea that part of having children is actually spending *time* with them? Of course I’ll listen – tell me more about how *hard* it is to give a damn about your own kid!”

Shadow Souji’s voice rose steadily as he spoke, even as Yosuke’s stomach sank.

“Dude, none of that... None of that is okay,” Yosuke said, his voice catching in his throat as he tried to push the words out around the rapidly growing lump there. For a moment he forgot that he was dealing with a Shadow, and he stepped a little closer. “Why didn’t you *tell* us – ”

“Tell you *what*, exactly?” Souji’s Shadow spat, his face twisted with rage and something that looked suspiciously like despair. “Thanks for burning to death in my place; sorry I couldn’t

take out the Shadow before it came to that, but I didn't feel like putting up with a few suggestive comments this week'?"

"None of us would have asked you to – " Yosuke started furiously, but Souji's Shadow cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"That just makes it worse!" Souji's Shadow snarled. "You all keep sacrificing yourselves for me, and I'm supposed to just sit back and *accept* it because – what, because I have the power of sycophancy on my side?"

"We're not protecting you because you're *special* or whatever!" Yosuke yelled. "We're protecting you because we – " Even now, Yosuke couldn't say the word, but he didn't have time to worry about it. "Because we *care* about you, dammit!" he finished.

"Do you think that makes it better?" Souji's Shadow said, voice low and venomous. "Do you think that makes it *okay* for me to watch you all suffer and die for my sake, over and over again? Maybe I've had enough of that kind of 'care.'" The Shadow's voice was mocking as he pronounced that last word, and Yosuke was pretty sure he knew exactly what Yosuke hadn't been able to say. "Maybe I just want to be *equal*, for once in my goddamn life."

Yosuke jerked back as though he'd just been punched in the face all over again, and Souji's Shadow smiled, without any warmth to it. "I really don't see why you're allowed to punch away your demons, but I'm not," he mused. "But it doesn't matter anymore. I've cheated death a few too many times now, and demons will only be put off for so long."

Souji's Shadow reached into the bag with the medicine and pulled out the last Revival Bead, tossing it down to the garden below. Yosuke's heart seized; cursing himself for letting the Shadow distract him, he whirled around to see Souji sprawled across the flagstones like a bloodstain, the shrouded Shadow standing over him. The shrouded Shadow caught the bead and cracked it open over Souji once more. At first Souji didn't move, and something cold started to seep through Yosuke's chest – but then Souji spasmed and slowly staggered to his feet, clutching his right arm tightly.

"Partner!" Yosuke yelled – screamed – but Souji gave no sign that he could hear it. He didn't even reach for the sword lying abandoned at his feet; he just stood there in the moonlight, shoulders heaving with his great, slow breaths as blood welled up through his fingers where he had them clamped around his arm.

Cursing under his breath, Yosuke summoned Susano-o to cast a Diarama to heal Souji the rest of the way – no time to wait and see if Yukiko or Teddie was on it – then headed straight for Souji's side. He'd half-expected Souji's Shadow to stop him, but there was no trace of movement behind him – probably because there was no need for it, Yosuke reflected bitterly. Souji's Shadow knew as well as Yosuke did that they'd already lost. Yukiko and Teddie could stretch things out a little with their healing, but in the end, there was nothing Yosuke could do to save the one person who mattered most – *again*. God *damn* it, he'd never wanted to feel this way again – this sort of helpless rage and grief and desperate, ragged desire, all tumbled together until he felt like a dungeon himself, full of Shadows threatening to tear the place apart. He'd never wanted...

And maybe Yosuke wasn't as self-aware as he'd thought, because it occurred to him now that he *had* known what Souji's problem was the instant he'd shown up on the Midnight Channel; he just hadn't wanted to acknowledge it. Better to feel guilty about not keeping Souji safe from physical harm than have to admit what a selfish jerk he was – someone willing to put Souji through what he wasn't willing to go through himself. It was kind of a miracle that his own Shadow hadn't shown back up – except in a way, Yosuke supposed it had.

Yosuke's feet slowed down almost before he'd finished the thought. He stopped and turned back to Souji's Shadow, which was watching Yosuke without much concern, looking only mildly curious at the sudden change in tactics.

"Look, I get it already," Yosuke said, dropping his hands so his kunai hung loosely at his sides. "I'm you and you're me."

Shadow Souji's expression faltered, as though he wasn't quite able to decide between genuine confusion and derisive amusement. "You... do know that isn't how this works, right?" Souji's Shadow asked. "You can't accept someone else's Shadow."

"Maybe not, but it's still true," Yosuke said. He could feel his shoulders hunching up defensively and tried to relax them, but they crept right back up again. "You're Souji's guilt and anger at himself because we keep sacrificing ourselves to protect him, right? In that case, you might as well be my Shadow too, because I'm pretty pissed at myself right now for letting Souji get hurt to keep myself safe. I mean, I'm not going to say I know exactly how he feels or anything, but all this time I've been pretending that I was protecting him, when really I was just protecting myself. I didn't want to feel like I did when Saki-senpai died ever again – so instead I made Souji feel that way, over and over again. Yeah, we always get revived, but it's not like that's a guarantee, you know? And even if it was... I knew I couldn't handle watching it happen to Souji. So I took the easy route, and I don't think... I don't think I can forgive myself for that. So... yeah. I'm you and you're me."

Souji's Shadow stared at him, golden eyes wide and startled, and Yosuke forced himself to meet the Shadow's gaze, despite the steadily growing exhaustion and self-loathing that made him want nothing more than to close his eyes and turn away. In fact, he was so focused on the Shadow that it took him a few moments to realize how quiet it had gotten, the battles paused like a held breath.

The sudden hush was the only reason Yosuke heard the raspy whisper behind him. "Yo... suke?"

Yosuke turned around so fast that he nearly fell over. Souji had lifted his head and was looking directly at Yosuke. His expression was still dazed, but there was a glimmer of recognition in his eyes that burned away Yosuke's exhaustion in an instant.

"Partner!" Yosuke called joyfully, but before he could make a move in Souji's direction, he was interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps crunching down the crumbling stairs. Yosuke tensed and turned back, only to see Kanji heading toward Souji's Shadow, which had turned to watch him.



“Senpai’s right,” Kanji said, slowing to a stop a few steps away from Souji’s Shadow. He slung his weapon back over his shoulder. “I thought it was real manly, taking hits for a teammate like that – but I wasn’t thinkin’ how it’d make Senpai feel. A man’s gotta fight his own battles, and standin’ in the way of that just to feel better about myself was kinda shitty of me. So... me too.” Kanji flushed, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. “I’m you and... and you’re me.”

“Yeah!” Chie agreed with surprising intensity, taking the steps two or three at a time before taking the rest in a flying leap, landing next to Kanji. “All I wanted was to protect the people I care about, but... somehow it turned into an ego trip, just like with Yukiko. Pretty dumb, huh?” Chie laughed a little, but her face was red and blotchy, and her eyes were wet. “Looks like I didn’t learn a thing from my Shadow. I think... I think maybe I don’t really know what it means to protect someone. I’m you, and you’re me.”

“It’s the same for me,” Yukiko added as she made her way down a little more slowly and with significantly fewer dramatics. She came up behind Chie and wrapped an arm around Chie’s shoulders, and Chie turned and hid her face in Yukiko’s shoulder. “This is the first time I’ve ever felt like I really had the power to protect someone, or the freedom to choose to do so. What I didn’t realize was that by making my own decisions without consulting anyone else affected by them, I was taking away Souji-kun’s ability to make decisions for himself.” Her eyes were downcast, and her arms tightened around Chie. “I’m sorry, Souji-kun. I’m you, and you’re me.”

“SENSEI!” Teddie blubbered, apparently unable to stand it for another second. He was having a hard time with the stairs – no wonder, with those stubby little legs – and after a few moments he gave it up entirely in favor of flinging himself down the staircase in a bouncing roll, crashing into Kanji with some serious force.

“What do you think you’re doing, you stupid bear?” Kanji snarled, just bear-ly – *barely*, goddammit, barely – keeping his footing. Teddie ignored him.

“I’m sorry, Sensei!” Teddie cried as he sprang to his feet, too busy wringing his paws to bother wiping away the fat tears rolling down his face. He sniffled. “I couldn’t bear the thought of being useless, so I acted without thinking. I wanted to be someone Sensei could rely on, to prove that I deserved to be here, but in the end, it looks like I hurt him just like some worthless Shadow. That means... that I’m you, and you’re me.”

“I’m just as bad,” Rise said, her voice low as she slowly came down the stairs. Her eyes were glued to her shoes. “I don’t have a combat Persona, so I couldn’t take hits to protect you the way everyone else could, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t want to. You always helped me sort through my feelings, but I never once thought about how we must have been making *you* feel, or even considered that you might have just been putting on a front when you thanked us after someone took a hit for you. I’m sorry I was so selfish. I’m you, and you’re me.”

“I haven’t been a member of this team very long, but I’ve seen you all take damage for Souji-san a few times now, and I had no objections,” Naoto said as she trailed behind Rise, hat tugged down to cover her eyes. “Souji-san is our leader, after all; it only made sense to ensure that he was able to function at optimal capacity at all times. I didn’t consider the psychological toll until it was laid out in front of me. For a detective – no, for someone who

has struggled to fulfill their roles on their own terms, rather than simply accepting what I am told that a detective, a woman, or a child ought to do – such an oversight is really unforgivable. I'm you, and you're me."

"No," Souji said. His voice creaked painfully, but it was stronger than before, and when Yosuke jerked around to look at him, his eyes were clear and focused for the first time since they'd arrived.

"Partner!" Yosuke exclaimed, and the sudden swell of relief and happiness was so strong that Yosuke couldn't have held still if he'd wanted to. He started to leap toward Souji, to give him a hand – but then froze, unsure. Would Souji even want him to...?

Of all the things Yosuke liked about Souji – and there were a bunch, way more than Yosuke was willing to acknowledge – the way he was almost scarily perceptive sometimes was definitely in the top ten. Like right now, for instance – Souji evidently noticed Yosuke's dilemma, because he flashed Yosuke a grateful, if exhausted, smile and nodded. In a flash – faster than Yosuke'd ever moved before – Yosuke was next to Souji and pulling Souji's arm over his shoulders, taking as much of Souji's weight as he could. The line of warmth down his side where Souji leaned against him – the solid, irrefutable proof that Souji was *here*, that they'd found him, and that if he wasn't exactly safe, he would be soon now that Yosuke finally had a say in the matter – was almost overwhelming, and it was a few seconds before Yosuke could focus on what Souji was saying.

"– my fault," Souji continued. "It's not like I told any of you how I felt about it – I couldn't even really admit it to myself, it seemed so ungrateful. It really does mean the world to me that you all care so much, and I know it would make everything a lot harder for you all if I got knocked out and couldn't be revived right away, but..." He paused, and Yosuke realized that Souji was looking at his Shadow now, instead of the group. His Shadow waited quietly, face blank; the smirk was nowhere to be seen. "...But even if I couldn't acknowledge it, I was angry with you for constantly putting me in that position, and I felt guilty about being angry with you, which just made me angry at myself instead," Souji finished. "To avoid thinking about any of that, I focused on doing anything I could to get stronger instead, so I could take out the Shadows before you all got hurt. But some of those things... really weren't good for me, and the fact that I was willingly exposing myself to them just made me even more disgusted with myself deep down, I think."

Souji closed his eyes and took a deep breath that Yosuke felt as clearly as if it were his own. When Souji opened his eyes again, he was smiling just a little, wryly. "I of all people should have known better than to repress my feelings. I should have been honest from the start. I'm you, and you're me."

Souji extended his free hand to his Shadow, and the Shadow took it. The Shadow's golden eyes narrowed as he studied Souji's face for an agonizing moment; then, evidently satisfied, he nodded once, sharply, and dissolved. The other Shadows followed.

"Oh, thank God," Yosuke breathed, with great feeling.

"Tell me about it!" Chie agreed just as fervently, dropping down to sit on the step just a little too quickly to be casual. "I really thought we were goners!"

“Yeah, your Shadow’s freaking scary, dude,” Kanji added.

Yukiko had sat down next to Chie, but she leaned forward, apparently trying to get a good look at Souji’s face. “Souji-kun, are you – ”

Because he was just that obliging, Souji saved her the trouble of finishing her question by abruptly collapsing.

“He – hey, Partner!” Yosuke exclaimed, trying to keep them both steady, but the sudden shift in their center of balance meant that the best Yosuke could do was make sure that he cushioned Souji’s fall as they both went down. The end result was an undignified tangle of limbs and possibly one less kidney than Yosuke’d had before, but no one cracked their head open on the flagstones, so Yosuke wasn’t going to complain. (Much.)

“He’s okay!” Rise shouted, visor already on, as the others crowded around them and Yosuke managed to find his hands and use them to shift Souji off his chest and into his lap so Yosuke could sit up. “He’s just exhausted, and his body’s been under a lot of strain.”

*Yeah, no shit.* Yosuke stared down at Souji’s face, blood-smeared and deathly pale but more peaceful than Yosuke’d seen it for a while. It was... *strange*, seeing Souji so vulnerable for once, and his unconscious weight against Yosuke’s legs was doing weird things to Yosuke’s insides – his chest was full of something fiercely hot and tight and soft all at once, in a feeling that was simultaneously too big to keep inside and too big to put into words. Yosuke wanted to pull Souji into his arms and just hold onto him, bury his face in Souji’s hair and breathe in a way he hadn’t been able to for the better part of two weeks now – breathe and feel Souji breathing too, his chest rising and falling under Yosuke’s hands, Souji’s heart beating a solid and steady bassline to accompany the litany in Yosuke’s head: *He’s safe, he’s safe, it’s over, he’s safe.*

But that wasn’t what *Souji* needed right now, so Yosuke just surreptitiously kept a hand over Souji’s heart in the guise of keeping him steady as Yosuke dug through his pockets for a Goho-M.

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“I bet you’re gonna be glad to get out of here tomorrow, huh?” Chie asked from her perch on the windowsill of Souji’s hospital room. (Private room, even – apparently there were some perks to being both a kidnapping victim and the nurses’ pet.) The Investigation Team had all arrived together, before Dojima-san got off work to come bring Nanako-chan by, but the battle for seating had been *brutal*. Yosuke’d ended up leaning awkwardly against the wall between the chair by the bed and the window after Rise elbowed him out of the way when they both went to claim the chair at the same time. (She had sharp elbows, too. They never warned you about *that* kind of thing in the idol magazines.)

“Definitely,” Souji said. The mattress was raised just in case, but he was sitting up straight under his own power, smiling. “I’ve cleaned this room a few too many times to be able to relax here; I keep feeling like I need to get up and go find a mop.”

“I had wanted to speak with you about that,” Naoto said from where she’d managed to snag a chair near the door, quietly slipping into it while everyone else was busy fighting over the

two chairs nearer to the bed. She opened a little notebook and flipped a few pages. “It wasn’t difficult to identify the nurse your Shadow mentioned; she had something of a reputation. It seems that she left the hospital’s employment some weeks ago; however, I had a word with the hospital’s director – without providing any specifics, of course – and he’s agreed to hold a yearly sexual harassment training course for the hospital employees. The principal of our school has agreed to a similar program, one for employees and one for students. I recommended that he hire an outside consultant to provide the training, given what some of the current staff consider to be appropriate behavior,” she added, and while she didn’t exactly make a face, Yosuke got the distinct impression that in her heart of hearts, she was side-eyeing the hell out of them in absentia. “I also spoke with the community center about offering parenting classes. I have yet to receive confirmation from them, but I anticipate favorable results.” Naoto closed her notebook with a flourish that spoke of someone who watched waaaay too many cheesy whodunnits during their formative years.

Souji just stared at her. It wasn’t exactly unusual for Souji to keep his opinion to himself, but seeing him at an actual loss for words was new and exciting – or at least, it would have been, if something sour hadn’t twisted in Yosuke’s gut and ruined it the instant Naoto had opened her mouth. Not that Yosuke wasn’t happy about what Naoto had done – what they’d all done – just...

“I... Naoto?” Souji finally said, helplessly.

“Yeah!” Rise said, bouncing a little in her seat in her excitement. “And I’ve been helping Chie-senpai and Yukiko-senpai and Kanji-kun find all sorts of stuff in the TV world to sell to Daidara! We couldn’t bring it to the hospital – “ Yosuke ignored the multiple sets of eyes that were suddenly turned in his direction; seriously, you get arrested *once*... “ – but wait until you see the new armor and accessories we got for you!”

“Ooh, ooh, and Yosuke and I have been practicing our healing and stat buffs!” Teddie said excitedly. He *also* bounced up and down in his seat, more than a little – which wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t claimed the end of Souji’s bed.

“Calm *down*, Teddie, you’re gonna get us kicked out!” Yosuke said, more irritably than was probably warranted – not that it mattered; Teddie had amazingly selective hearing when it came to criticism.

“You’re gonna be the hardest-hitting, most evasive, most defense-packed guy any of those Shadows have ever seen!” Teddie concluded, with no indication that he’d heard Yosuke except another, very pointed bounce. *I’m going to make a bearskin rug one of these days.*

Souji still seemed lost. “I... Thank you?” he said, or rather, asked.

“Y’see,” Chie said, her voice weirdly small as she worried at the cuff of her jacket, “ever since your Shadow, we’ve been talking about what we should do. Because, I mean, you’re really important to us, you know? Both as a friend and as a leader. So of course we still want to keep you safe, but we also want you to be happy, too. So we thought, maybe... instead of waiting until things go wrong before we jump into action, we could be a little more... proactive, I guess?” She peeked up at Souji.

“We thought that if we knew you had the best armor and abilities, we wouldn’t worry quite so much, and it would be easier to stop ourselves from interfering,” Yukiko added with a smile, first at Chie and then at Souji, whose confused expression was rapidly melting into a smile as well, one warm enough to ease the sick twist in Yosuke’s stomach a little.

It was a good plan, really. Everyone was happy, and Souji would... probably be fine.

The problem was, Yosuke wasn’t really a fan of “probably.”

“And for the other stuff – jeez, Senpai, why didn’t you tell us?” Kanji asked, although there wasn’t much bite in his voice; he was grinning, still not really over the high of having Souji safe and sound in front of them. “I coulda gone with you to the hospital, given that nurse a piece of my mind, and even before Naoto joined the team, I’m pretty sure that between us, we coulda figured something out so you weren’t stuck dealing with all the shitty parents in Inaba. It’s not like you to be such a...” Kanji paused. “What’s that word, where you say one thing and do another?”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is hypocrite,” Naoto supplied quietly.

Kanji snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that! Like, if you want us to stop getting hurt protecting you, you gotta stop hurting yourself to protect us too, okay?”

Souji bowed his head. When he raised it again, his smile was more tremulous, but even warmer. “It’s a deal,” he agreed. “And – thank you, all of you. For rescuing me, and for accepting me, and... and for listening to me. For letting me rely on you.”

“It’s nothing you didn’t already do for us, you know,” Chie said with an eyeroll, but it was mostly drowned out by Teddie’s wailing.

“SENSEI! I’M SO BEARY MOVED!” Teddie cried, and before anyone could catch him, he’d leapt onto Souji and promptly knocked Souji’s heart monitor loose. The monitor abruptly flatlined, and the nurses came running, and then they really *did* get kicked out.

They headed out, the others so absorbed in first chewing out Teddie and then making plans for Souji’s welcome-home party that they didn’t notice as Yosuke slowly dropped further and further behind, then stopped entirely. The flatlining had been a stupid accident – he’d seen it happen, for crying out loud – but even so, Yosuke couldn’t get the sound out of his ears, no matter what music he put on. He took off in a random direction, wandering aimlessly as he flipped from one song to the next before he’d even got past the intro of any of them, and he tried very hard to be surprised when he found himself standing in front of the hospital once more.

It wasn’t too hard to sneak back to Souji’s room (although *avoiding* nurses was not a dilemma Yosuke was usually faced with), but crossing the threshold was another matter entirely. Yosuke stood in the doorway, hovering awkwardly once again – he was pretty good at it, if he did say so himself – unable to tear his eyes away from the scene in front of him. Souji was lying back against the raised mattress now, eyes closed. He was still kind of pale and kind of tired around the eyes and mouth, more obvious now that he wasn’t smiling, and that too-big hot and tight and soft feeling slammed into Yosuke again, like it was trying to

push *him* out of the way of a hit. He wanted – he wanted – he didn't know *what* he wanted, except to never see Souji in a hospital bed again.

"I thought I'd cornered the market on vampirism," Souji murmured, his eyes still closed.

Yosuke started to let out a startled yell, then bit his tongue to swallow it back; if he caused *another* scene – never mind that he didn't cause the first one – hospital security was probably going to call the police on him, and Yosuke obviously wasn't done living down his *first* arrest yet. "Eh?" he said weakly, once he was sure he could control his volume.

Souji opened his eyes, regarding Yosuke with the carefully neutral expression that meant he was *totally* laughing at Yosuke on the inside, dammit. "You seem to need an invitation before you can come in," he said mildly.

It figured that, where the rest of them avoided all mention of their Shadows if they could help it, Souji was cracking jokes about his. Really *bad* jokes. Ugh. Yosuke slunk into the room in lieu of having to acknowledge it. With no competition this time, he sank into the chair next to Souji's bed – then kept sinking, leaning forward until he'd buried his face in the sheets next to Souji's leg. Which was kind of weird if Yosuke thought about it, so he didn't.

"Yosuke?" Souji asked, his voice a little concerned now. "Are you alright?"

*Only if you are*, Yosuke wanted to say, but his throat was already full of things he didn't know how to express, and the words got stuck in there with the rest. *Only if you are, and I'm so goddamn scared, I just want –*

"I just don't want to see you get hurt," Yosuke said into the mattress. "I don't want... to feel like I did with Saki-senpai ever again. But I don't want to make *you* to feel that way either." Yosuke sighed and rolled his head just enough to be able to see Souji's face with his right eye. "You're Mr. Fixit, right? Tell me how to fix this so *neither* of us gets hurt."

Souji was smiling down at Yosuke, but his eyes were sad. "I wish you could," he murmured. "I wish *I* could. Unfortunately, I think there are always going to be times when we're not going to be able to avoid someone getting hurt. And I'm not saying that you can never jump in when I'm in trouble, just... Let me be the one to break a rib sometimes, instead of my heart, okay?"

The eye contact was suddenly more than Yosuke could stand; he let his head roll back so his entire face was smushed against the mattress again. "Yeah, I get it," he said – petulantly, maybe, but apparently it was enough for Souji, because a warm hand landed on the back of his head, and Souji began to stroke his hair. That was... new, and probably Yosuke should say something about it – should try to squeeze out some of the words that were stuck in his throat – but if he did, there was always the chance that Souji would stop petting him, so instead Yosuke just lay there and let himself be comforted for a while.

It wasn't like Souji didn't have a point; Yosuke knew that. After all, Yosuke was the one who had been so adamant about them being equals. Besides, it wasn't like Yosuke's heart hadn't been broken more often than not ever since he'd arrived in Inaba. What was a few more times, when Souji always helped him piece it back together afterward, as if Yosuke's heart

were one of Souji's models? Actually, saying that Souji helped put Yosuke's heart back together wasn't right – Souji always seemed to examine each piece carefully, sanding down rough edges and hammering out dents and helping Yosuke pick out the most twisted bits to straighten out or discard, until his heart was better than before. Who knew? If they mended it enough times, Yosuke's heart might end up being something he could almost be proud of.

And if Souji *wasn't* there to help Yosuke piece his heart back together someday, if that was the reason it was broken in the first place... Yosuke didn't know. But that possibility seemed a lot further away when Souji's hand was so warm on Yosuke's head. Yosuke wondered, a little wistfully, who it was that helped Souji put his own heart back together when he'd broken it over one of them – except clearly no one was helping Souji, not if Souji'd managed to end up with a Shadow over it. That meant it was up to Yosuke – except Yosuke didn't have Souji's delicate touch, not really. The only thing Yosuke knew how to do was hold on tight and not let go, no matter what, and that... hadn't really worked out for him so hot in the past.

Still, it was all Yosuke had to offer, so without lifting his head, Yosuke reached up with one hand and captured Souji's hand in his, lacing their fingers together and squeezing tight. Souji squeezed back, and for a moment, Yosuke let himself believe that maybe, just maybe, this time it would be enough.

## End Notes

And then Souji showed up for Halloween dressed as a vampire like the goober he is and ended up directly responsible for sending seven people into cardiac arrest. The end.

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