

## Winding Journey

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# Winding Journey

by [Magpythe](#)

## Summary

Where does one life end and another start? From Shin'ichi to Conan, and now to this new existence--what's the distinction? Can he really say it's all the life of one person?

Shin'ichi's brain gets metaphorically shoved in a blender with Unknown Substances and he and his friends from a past life or two get to drag their relationships back from the fringes.

## Notes

Ohoho boy. Alright, to start, this is very inspired by deductionfreak and inferno-silentdragon's Zergnan comics that I absolutely adore. I also have never played any starcraft games! So while wiki pages are great and all, I mostly just threw whatever I didn't like from actual zerg lore out the window and went with what I thought was more fun. It's very self indulgent, as are the other dozen snippets I've written before this actually long one hit me. ^^

- Inspired by [Before The Swarm](#) by deductionfreak, inferno-silentdragon

## Day Zero

Conan squeezed himself as tightly as he could against the corner just behind where the door would open, and waited, chest pounding, for the thing to slam open.

He was waiting to die. There wasn't any other way out of here, and if there had been, those things would be pouring through it already. Given the choice to be attacked from any angle, or to know his back and left side would be clear, it wasn't a hard decision. The fewest surprises the better. Maybe he wouldn't die in a complete panic.

A shrill, familiar but abjectly unwanted, series of sounds just about made him jump out of his skin. It was coming from his pocket though. His phone. He dug the thing out to silence it or something--

Heiji was calling him.

He was some fifty feet underground. How the hell was his phone even ringing?

Right. Some of them acted like giant signal hubs or range extenders. There must've been a sizable enough nest down here that they had a line of communication to the surface, and into central Tokyo--so long as Heiji was following quarantine, and he had better be following quarantine, or he'd find some way to tear into the guy about it before he died.

He...did want to take the call. He just *needed* to make sure it was off before...

He needed to make sure he turned it off before he wouldn't be able to anymore. Heiji didn't deserve to hear any of that.

A quick glance, and they definitely hadn't made it to the door yet. He had...some amount of time.

Taking a deep breath, he accepted the call, and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Kudou! Where the hell are you? Nee-chan's gettin' worried!" Hattori's voice came through clearly, though he could tell there was a lot of other noises--cars maybe? and he was shouting into his phone. Conan felt one knot in his chest unwind and another tighten. It was...nice to hear his voice.

If he told Heiji where he was, he might try to do something about it, now or in the future, that could get him killed.

"...I-I'm. On one of the last buses," he started, tongue heavy in his mouth. "I got separated from everyone." That part was at least true.

"Fuck, man, you gotta be fuckin' careful." There was a pause. Conan cast a nervous glance to the door. Nothing yet. "You hurt at all?"

Not yet. "No. How's the camp? Is anyone we know hurt?"

"No, everyone's fine. Haven't seen the kids yet, you with them?" Conan let out a sigh of relief. He and Ran were at least okay...he really hoped Ai got the rest of them out intact...

"That's good--and no, like I said, I got seperated..."

He could hear them getting closer.

"...Hattori?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you feel like...how do you feel about the future, from here?"

"...I think it's hard ta say, with specifics, but we're gonna make it through."

"No, I mean, how do you feel about it? On your own."

"...I mean. I'm worried...Kudou?"

The call went quiet, save for the crackling sound of engines and a crowd coming in and out on Heiji's end. Something metal and too close screeched, presumably as it was ripped apart by those things' claws.

"I'm sorry," he managed, voice cracking. "I just. I wanted a normal conversation." He couldn't hold back the emotions anymore, from his voice or otherwise, the tears were hot and stinging, and weren't helping him keep track of the status of the stupid door.

"Where are you?" Heiji's voice was suddenly quieter with intensity. The twisting feeling worsened.

"I'm. not anywhere I know the name of. It's concrete and creep and burrows."

"It can't be that far down or the call wouldn'a gone through. Walk me through it and I can see if anyone can make it down there and get ya out."

Conan took a deep, shaking breath.

"No it's-- I have a time limit, Hattori, I just wanted to hear you. They're almost in."

Conan crumpled down to the ground, arms around his knees. "I just-- I'm sorry. I thought I could find a way out, and then I just wound up deeper, I fell down, it's--I'm sorry. I should've figured it wouldn't have worked, or found some other way but--" a loud crunching sound sent Conan's head shooting up to look at the door, body frozen.

It wasn't breaking yet. He had seconds left.

"Woah woah, Kudou, it's-- yer fine." He could hear Heiji's voice crack over the line. "You're, I, can I do anything?"



"Yeah," Something slammed into the other side of the door. "Don't hate yourself for not being able to save me."

"Hey--" Heiji started. A barb shot through part of the door and embedded itself into the far wall with a sharp sound.

"Goodbye, Hattori."

"No, no, no, Kudou--"

Conan ended the call, his heart crawling up his throat.

A longer, painful, drawn out screech of metal ground out from just next to his head. Conan stared ahead, every nerve in his body screaming. Of course the sight of the first one rounding on him still sent his body into a panic: sharp limbs and glowing eyes and toxic looking green drool spilling out from more sharp pieces of carapace--

His hindbrain tried to convince him to phase through the solid wall behind him or climb it-- but that wasn't possible. More of them were pouring into the room: a sea of deadly scythe-fins and other bug bits, and then the one in front of him was slowly closing in, and he didn't have time to even react when it lunged in, teeth that could cut through metal sinking into his arm, that sickeningly bright ooze spilling over onto his skin and clinging to it. He kicked, he screamed, more teeth sank in, and then he was being dragged across the floor, pain and fear drowning away eventually into a choking feeling, then blackness.

-

Black turned into light, eyes opening., blinking. Quiet. Thrum of noise--comforting, safety-- but unfamiliar and wrong.

A need to struggle--

A sudden overwhelming blanket of mental pressure weighed in, pressed, eased. Hive. No need to run unless they ordered. Too soon.

No--No. Too long. Out, out, out out out out out out---

Pain--everything was wrong. Abandoning orders was emptiness, following was terror, and wrong, and not--him. Him? What?

*Nonsense.* Nothing made sense. Nothing-- Out!

Something broke, released, slid into a pool and heaved the fluids out of the lungs.

*If hive is ready for fight, then fight.*

No--this wasn't out--this was still--

Blinking against the ooze still caught in what was being seen from--this was wrong. He...He was one person.

Something like a mental scream ripped through his head, screaming, screaming, he screamed back, defenses raised, ready to attack, bite, cut--

The pain eased back. That part had been correct.

He shook his head. No-- Wrong. It was wrong.

It...

The limbs in his field of view were...wrong.

The fingers moved when he made them. Extra limbs even--sharp--

Hyperventilation.

He took a step forward, fell, something dragging behind him that moved unconsciously at the thought of it--for balancing and attack--no...no...

Curled up, tail over head, safe, cry--foreign--but cried.

*Urgent. Attack. Surface. Attack. Move to Surface.*

He curled in around himself tighter, and willed Hive out.

There was no silence. He laid curled for many, many alerts, then desperately crawled on his legs to the green goo and shoved head first into it, let out as long of a breath as he could, and then let himself breathe it in.

Darkness.

-

He opened his eyes again to the feeling of severance, and sat up, coughing up clumps again, to utter silence.

It was gone? All of it? Hive and all?

He sat, mind turning in slow circles.

That was...bad.

Alone...

This was what he'd been so desperate for...but...alone was a gnawing hunger, empty, pitiful, weak, afraid.

He Needed. He needed to find Hive.

Dim memories--loose and centered and different--but Hive. That. He wanted that.

Standing, he stumbled forward again.

Standing again, he pulled the balancing part forward until his spine was perpendicular to the floor. It was sticking in front of him, awkward, impossible to aim, but taking steps didn't trip him anymore. This was how he was supposed to stand. This was 'walking.' It required two legs.

And it was so slow.

Slow steps out of the room, through the collapsed and then burrowed through corridor, into dimly memorable places he'd walked before. He could retrace most of this. He'd find Hive.

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Walking was...he needed to stop thinking everything he did was 'wrong.' It was uncomfortable. Bracing against the wall as he moved, spine still stung, hot pain, bad.

He wasn't a monster. He needed to find Hive. If he crawled, Hive wouldn't see him, they'd see a monster.

-

Voices. Near, whispering. Surging hope filled his chest as he stumbled forward, then went back to the slow pace he'd had before. Found him, they'd found him--

Rounding the corner, a hulking mass of metal stood towering in smooth, bolted shapes, armor, he reminded himself, not carapice, another hunk of metal guarded in its hands--a gun. Big. Dangerous. He stopped, frozen, instincts screaming to attack or run.

The gun levelled with his eyes. He felt something at the skin level sharpen outwards, like hair stood on end.

"...Oh that's different. Can you hear me?" A voice. Speaking to him. He blinked, eyes now trained on a smaller form, no armor or different, much smaller gun, pistol.

He eyed the gun still aimed at him, then looked back at the less towering one.

Yes --Talking. He knew what it was, in theory, but throat heavy, mandible twitching against his lips, teeth suddenly feeling awkward in his mouth, tongue too much for words...

Slowly, he drew his head up, then back down. Nod. Agreement.

"It's coming back, then, Kameyo."

"It's tiny; you think it's infested?"

"There's an elementary school in the radius. I'm positive."

He took a cautious step forward, hand still braced. The taller one's eyes and gun never leaving him.

"What about the previous target?"

"That would be riskier--this one's passive, for now. They're probably going to send us down here again, anyway."

The tall one sighed. He stared between them, body still shaking from the angle he was standing in.

"Come on, we'll get you somewhere safe," the short one said, taking a step back. There was something off in the way they were talking, but...That thought in and of itself made his head hurt.

He needed Hive.

He could move a little faster if he let the balancing part slide behind him again, let himself stand at an angle. Back still ached, but at least he could take the next steps forward without bracing on the wall.

Two sets of eyes stayed on him as they walked through the burrows and hallways, still as oddly lit as they had been when he'd come down the first time.

"Can you speak, kid?" the less tall person's voice cut through the quiet.

He worked his throat, which clenched taught after a humming sound he'd intended to make came through. Irritation. It was psychological. He could speak.

He nodded again.

"...Right. What's your name then?"

'Name'--did he have a name? There was Shin'ichi, and then there was Conan, but those were two different states, and this was a third.

He shook his head. There wasn't a name for this yet.

"Great name, 'No,'" the taller one said this time. Fine. That would do for now, if they really wanted. He didn't care.

He was leaving, at gunpoint, but he was leaving.

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Half way to the exit a twinge of pain sent him to the floor. It was embarrassing. When he thought about the gun trained on him, embarrassment twisted into something else, and he scrambled onto his feet again, felt another ache, and slowly lowered himself to all fours,

mind buzzing with a nervousness that had him needing to force his tail down--it was armed. They were armed. If he was a threat they'd shoot.

After a tense conversation he wasn't a part of, they returned to their previous pace. Now, despite the fact that his body clearly preferred it, he couldn't shake the sense that he was crawling away from them as they led him to--something.

Maybe he should've run when he heard their voices.

At best it was humiliating, and he wasn't thinking about the worst. Shaking, tail pressed low into the ground he passed over, too aware of the weapon pointed at him. Too late to run without a distraction. Too late...

Why wasn't he ripped to shreds in the corner of that room--what happened to him--why was any of this happening?

When they reached a point near the surface, a barricade, the other two shouted out ahead of time that they were carrying conscious cargo.

The reaction was immediate, more heavily armored units arriving in a swath and surrounding him. Orders. He followed them, laying himself flat onto his belly, limbs spread, heart pounding. Another wave moved in, more of the less armored ones, to put heavy equipment on each limb.

Then they rolled him onto his back without warning, and connected the bindings on his hands and legs together. A heavy material they'd placed on his back pressed a third set of limbs into his sides.

A syringe came next. His teeth were bared by that point, eyes wide. It didn't knock him out, but his vision started swimming soon after, and then he was in a metal container--probably a 'truck'--with two heavily armored and armed guards. His head cleared not long after they'd started driving, but he kept his eyes on the ground, hands distantly scratching at the metal capping off his tail. It hurt.

Were they planning to get him on an operating table and cut him open immediately, or was this going to be something more drawn out?

Maybe he was catastrophizing. Maybe once he forced his vocal cords to work, and he showed them that he wasn't violent, he'd get some autonomy and space, and maybe he could leave wherever they were taking him after that...eventually...

He closed his eyes, hands clenching. Unrealistic. That was unrealistic. He'd really fucked up somewhere in there. Should've corralled the kids better, kept them from sneaking away, kept them from falling through that gash in the floor...Let the first one of those things he'd found eat him and get it over with.

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Eyes opening: bright lights and empty walls save for a camera and a wide mirror--like an interrogation room, one way--his body looks too dark, plates on his limbs, uneven, unorthodox--

When did they take him here?

He can remember the drive over, bright light as they lead him out, the warm sun on his body almost pleasant despite the smothering nature of everything, then...

He blinked. Nothing. Then it was now.

Okay. He was still alive. That was a good sign.

...Could he move?

The things tethering his limbs were heavy, but he could. His tail--and he really did have that now, ugh--was difficult to raise. He tried; the sharp barb at the end was covered meaning it wouldn't really be considered a threat to anyone.

He could still walk, though he wasn't going to be propping himself completely upright again anytime soon, especially with the bindings there.

...It was so quiet.

He made his way to the one way glass, looking at it as though he could see through it if he tried hard enough; his eyes were different after all.

Nothing. Figured.

He blinked, mind slowly turning, then closed one of his eyes. Almost nothing changed. He closed another, and the walls looked suspiciously greyer. Looking down at himself, purple and red were still visible, but that meant only one of his eyes was seeing in normal color, and he had at least three now.

Closing the third eye--just above the first he'd shut, he breathed out in relief. There weren't any more. Just the one extra.

Holding his hands in front of him, he opened the color seeing eye.

It was...dimmer. A dark sheen of brown reflecting some purple in the fluorescent light, but the paler parts of his hands weren't the brighter purple hues color he'd been seeing before. A look down at his feet--not as different, but still missing those colors, and then over at his tail--very different--

He opened his other eyes, then closed them. Opened them again. Was he...seeing ultraviolet light?

Maybe, he determined. There was no way to be sure...

Maybe the people who worked here would be able to answer that in a non-obtrusive way.

He was already feeling a lot more optimistic. Amazing what not having a gun to your head could do.

# Memento

With their luck they were going to wind up finding a new goddamn nest down here or something. How many idiot teenagers did it take to fall into a deathtrap? Five, apparently.

Heiji let out a sharp sigh. He wasn't being fair, sure, and it wasn't like he was voicing anything to the rest of them, but damn if being pissed off wasn't making it harder to sleep than it already was.

A murmur from his left gave him another spike of annoyance. Whatever, if he couldn't sleep anyway people might as well make noise. Wasn't going to attract whatever thing had eaten that guy they'd found's face, definitely.

Familiar blue eyes were suddenly crowding in his vision, and Heiji had to restrain himself from shouting out a curse at the bastard.

"Ya can't just do that," he hissed at Kuroba, who leaned back and gave him a few more inches of space.

"I can practically see you fuming, you need a distraction?"

" *You* need ta keep watch."

"I asked Saguru to keep an eye out for now. What's up?"

"What's--You know it ain't easy ta sleep when there's somethin' out there eatin' people's faces that can probably outrun you."

"We knew it was dangerous the last two 'nights,' you slept alright then. But--We don't need to get into it. Do you just need a distraction? Or a normal conversation for a bit?"

Heiji stared back, chest suddenly too tight, at the face that perfectly mirrored Kudou's. *I just wanted a normal conversation*. A smaller, different voice, but belonging to the same fucking face played back in his head, voice wavering and afraid, and about to die--Fuck. Stop *fucking* thinking about that you *idiot*.

Heiji closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Uh...What are you freaking out about?" Kuroba asked, audibly nervous.

Heiji ran his hands over his face. What a fucking night. "I, just, need you to never say that to me again, alright?"

"...What part?" Asked flippantly in typical Kuroba style.

"The 'normal conversation' part. It's. Just don't."

"Alright. Wanna chat?"



Heiji let out another sigh, frustration still there but bleeding into other emotions now. "Sure. What've you been up to lately?"

"Ha, ha. Yeah, weather's pleasant, it's sun all day every day," Kuroba quipped back. Heiji frowned.

"Still wanna know what the hell is up with the fuckin' lights."

"Secret government facility?"

"Overrun with creep?"

"Maybe it's like an observation area they take notes on."

"You think they're watchin' us and doin' nothin' about it."

"Wouldn't be that off base, would it?"

"...Nah. Still weird though, that's a lotta power to waste. Old generator no one can reach to fix?"

"...Or there's zerg that generate electricity and decided they like the lights on."

"Creep's gotta be conductive..."

"Oh, definitely."

A small silence, Heiji's mind slowly running under a blanket of white noise. He was fucking tired. And stressed. And he wanted to fucking cry, but that sure as hell wasn't happening right now.

"...We've got about two more days before the dehydration's really gonna bite us in the ass."

"At least if we find bottled water it shouldn't matter how old it is, and if we die of thirst down here at least we won't have been ripped to pieces."

Heiji barked out a muted laugh. "Oh yeah, that's *so* much better. Yeesh....Get outta here, I'll fucking sleep." He could see Kazuha shooting him a look from over Ran's shoulder.

Kuroba rolled back towards Hakuba, and Heiji sent an apologetic wave toward the girls. Kazuha rolled her eyes and laid her head back down. At least Ran was still asleep, though one of four wasn't saying much.

He would sleep: the exhaustion was starting to settle in more more tangibly.

Ran and Kazuha were quietly talking now, a few feet away, but it wasn't even that obtrusive, just more sound bleeding into his brain's thoughts as they slowly slid away from reality.

Heiji opened his eyes to see the same hallway he'd been in before: long, fluorescent, and ending in a sharp right turn--but the doors just before that turn were still smooth and intact, and he was alone.

And there was a hell of a lot more creep, he noted in disgust at a large, organic clump bubbling out from the wall just across from him.

Alright. It was a dream, definitely, but why was his brain taking him into the past? That wasn't the usual way things went...

Echoing footsteps cut through the unnatural silence of the dreamspace, and Heiji turned, then immediately felt his skin break into goosebumps.

A kid in familiar clothing, blood running down one leg at the knee, was running toward him. Kudou.

Heiji immediately started moving, then kept pace next to him.

"Kudou!" He knew the dream wouldn't hear him--unless this was just a normal one, and he could maybe keep this illusion of Kudou alive-- "Kudou, where--"

Heiji had to make a sudden backward shift in his momentum when smaller feet turned left before the actual turn in the corridor, in through the doors.

Heiji followed.

The ceiling here was glass, an office space he could clock as swanky even from his position loomed over him-- a solid metal desk, huge monitor, several leather seats, and then a table that also looked solid all suspended in the air a dozen feet over his head. There was a lot of creep in there, too.

He rushed in through the other door just after Kudou, and watched him struggle to close the thing--heavy and metal and--oh, there was something stuck at the top of it.

Kudou slammed his small body into it, and whatever was there gave way with a cracking sound that sent a cold feeling right down his spine. It slammed shut, and glass was crashing into the ground on the other side, loud enough to be thunder.

"Shit," Kudou hissed, backing into the room and looking around him. It wasn't big. There were some pipes, but nothing else a zerg or child could crawl through--just concrete all the way through.

Heiji watched Kudou back himself against one of the walls, then slide to stand in a corner nearest the door, chest heaving.

He felt like his heart was going to fucking crack into pieces.

The sudden shrill notes of a ringtone jarred him back to the reality of the dream, and he watched Kudou take a moment to stare at his phone. That was him. That was the call.

It played back exactly like he remembered it, but horrifyingly there were now sounds of burrowing, screeching metal, and then a barb shot just past Heiji's head and embedded in the wall behind him, and the door was being forced out of the way, and Kudou hung up the phone.

The zerg pushed through the door, cornered him, launched forward--

Heiji lurched forward, screaming at the thing-- and opened his eyes to see the hallway ceiling, one arm raised out toward it. Oh. Fuck.

"Heiji?!" Kazuha's voice among the rest of them, all suddenly awake and coming closer. It was bad that he'd made all that noise, sure.

He knew exactly what he was going to do; reason was not going to stop this one.

That collapsed mess of rebar, concrete and glass was still there, just before the corner, two large holes bored into it. He could fit through that, just had to keep himself from getting cut up.

"What are you doing?" Kazuha's voice was still the loudest as he made his way over to the rubble and pulled out his phone, flashlight illuminating the nastiest parts he needed to avoid: glass as thick as a fist, metal scraps--that desk was going to be a pain to get through, but at least had been occupied by enough zerg before that it was possible.

"I had a dream. He died here," Heiji shot over his shoulder. Just about everyone was crowding around him by the time he started carefully working his way in.

"That looks like a really bad idea," Kud--Kuroba's voice called after him. Yeah, no shit.

"I'm not stayin' long so don't follow," he called back.

Another light illuminated the edges of his vision. Someone was shining a light on his back to keep an eye on him. That was fine. He could just make out some debris and a dark smear in the next room.

Heart pounding in his throat, Heiji took the last few steps in, then stood.

There was some glass and other bits of metal and things strewn into the center of the room from where the door had been forced through. The door itself was a danger to stand close to, metal splaying outwards in sharp points. An old, half dried up cocoon sat in the middle of the room, then that smear of blood, leading into the corner Kudou'd hidden in...

Glasses, surprisingly cracked but otherwise intact, and a red phone were spread a few feet from each other on the floor.

Heiji's mind worked over the information, before he took his phone back out and snapped two pictures, one of the corner, and one of the cocoon.

He pocketed Kudou's phone, and carefully picked up and folded the glasses. Then stopped again to take a long, hard look at the positioning of everything in the room.

He didn't like that at all.

"...Heiji?" Ran's voice this time, less loud, came calling from the other end of the burrowed through room.

"Coming back."

It was a little harder to make his way back when holding the glasses in his hand, but he took his time.

"What the hell were you doing in there?" Kazuha again. Heiji sighed.

"I told you." His face was just about back under the light again as he worked his way free. "I had a dream he died in there."

"*Who?*" She was folding her arms now, face mirroring her father's disappointed look.

He shoved the hand with the glasses out and offered them, palm up, to Ran.

He heard a sharp gasp, and then he finally had a free hand to brace off the floor with and get out of the way of the debris before standing up.

"W...What did you see in there," Kazuha asked, voice a lot quieter now.

"...I have a bad feeling about that," Heiji said, eyeing the other two. Hakuba was looking at the glasses, expression dark, and Kuroba was looking back at him with raised brows. "...I think he's infested."

Hakuba was the first to respond to that. "...Why?"

"Because there wasn't all that much blood in there, there's an open cocoon, and the size of zerg that burrowed in probably wouldn't have mouths big enough to just eat him whole."

"How fresh is the cocoon?" Kuroba now, voice dire.

"It's kinda old n' dried--here." He fished his phone out of his pocket and pulled up the picture, zooming in to keep the blood smear out of shot.

Kuroba let out a humming sound, eyes narrowed in thought. Hakuba was looking over his shoulder, expression still blank.

"Yeah. At least it isn't fresh...It's a lot older than that body we found, but that doesn't mean they aren't related."

The air around them suddenly felt a lot thinner. Yeah. If Kudou was put in a cocoon, that would probably leave a long enough time for the infestation to take that he'd've come out sometime after the rest of the zerg that had been here left, and then he'd just be wandering around this place, hungry and not himself anymore.

He shuddered. It was bad enough having him dead, this was just torture.

"I think we need to keep going." Heiji wasn't expecting to hear Ran's voice right then. "We haven't seen any more bodies lately, if there's something here it's probably still back where we came from."

Heiji threw the stray thought that popped into his head about persistence hunters into the trash and agreed. If something was hunting them it'd've struck when they were sleeping by now.

# Rationing

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The news that Conan had probably been turned into a buggy killing machine was bad news that could only have been worse if they'd figured this out by witnessing it. The kid was already hellbent on hunting things down, and good at it, as it was. They didn't need that on their tail.

At least no one had wanted to try to get that last two hours of sleep. He definitely wouldn't be able to after waking up to all that.

They were making as decent of progress as you could when having absolutely no clue where you were going, and were far away from the scene of Conan's 'death' by noon.

Even if they couldn't charge their phones (the whole 'powered facility' thing was really freaking him out, but at least they weren't walking through a pitch black facility overrun with creep) Hakuba at least had his pocket watch and a pretty good handle on the progression of time.

And he had a couple flashlights on him, so if they ever ran into that kind of problem they wouldn't be completely helpless.

It would just suck.

They stepped through a doorway and into what could be a cafeteria. Long benches and tables, most toppled over, some broken into pieces, filled the room. This place was too fucking big. What the hell was going on down here before the zerg moved in?

A low creak from the ceiling had Kaito ready to bolt. They made their way across the room. Nothing fell.

"There might be something edible in here..." Heiji spoke up. Kaito was kind of sick of hearing him today, to be honest. This room didn't feel stable.

"--Oh. Let's try through there." Kaito wanted to punch the fucking wall.

"I don't like being in here," he warned, tone lilting. "Something's going to fall on us."

Heiji stopped abruptly and shot him a look. Worried. Oh, that was a good sign.

"But we really need water, and if they have some..." Kazuha wasn't *wrong*.

Damn it. Damn it. She was *right*.

"Okay. Mouri and I'll go, everyone else get through the door and wait for us." Fast reflexes would at least help them not die trying.

"...Are you sure? It feels wrong to split up..." Kazuha added, clearly nervous. Kaito held in the urge to roll his eyes at her.

"Do you want someone to check or not?"

"It'll be okay, Kazuha, we'll be quick," Ran added, brushing an arm into his side as she started toward the door to what looked like it had to be a kitchen.

Oh there'd better not be a trove of zerg gorging themselves back there.

Eyes tracking everything around and above him, Kaito followed her. She looked just as uncomfortable as he felt, and was also scanning the place.

He felt solidly like he'd made the right choice.

The good news was that it was really a kitchen. The bad news was that there wasn't any power inside for some reason. Ran stood almost against his side, tense. He pulled out a flashlight.

The lightbulb was smashed to pieces. Kaito drew in a slow breath, and let his flashlight wander the area.

Stainless steel appliances and dusty countertops. Dead silence. Kaito stepped up onto one of the counters, light trained on the corner of the room he couldn't see before, skin prickling and adrenaline picking up as his eyes met an old sunken, bloody mess.

He wanted to *go* .

There was plenty to check in the room that wasn't on the corpse's side, so he lowered himself back down and silently started to go through the drawers.

The knives were sharp, but didn't have any kind of sheath, so he left them for now.

Rags--he nabbed a couple in case they needed to close a wound, cutlery, plates, bowls--oh hell yes. A pack of water.

He pulled it out. There weren't any labels, so he pulled one off of its plastic holder and screwed the cap off to sniff it.

Smelled fine...

"Cans," he heard Ran whisper excitedly, and he turned his flashlight to where he'd heard the voice with wide eyes--she was across the table from him.

She stood with two armfuls of canned food, and he watched her squint away from the light, toward...

She didn't scream, but absolutely leapt backwards at the thing laying there. She lost most of the cans, which clattered into the table and off the floor, rolling.

"That's good," Kaito kept his voice calm. They didn't need anything else that could attract zerg--the ducts here were too big for comfort. "Just don't look at it. Or think about it. I'll grab some--."

Something in the main room ripped with a sickening grinding sound--and then he heard a distant shout.

Kaito threw the water at the counter and charged out of the room. That sounded like *Saguru*--

Kazuha and Heiji were stepping through the door, faces locked on--

A hole in the floor.

No no no.

A glance at the ceiling told him Saguru at least hadn't been crushed by anything--but that didn't mean the fall was *survivable*--

Shining the flashlight down--the floor had fallen at an angle, shit, fuck.

Kaito put the flashlight in his teeth and jumped in.

He, at least, was able to control the way he went down. It wasn't an even slide--a piece of rebar not notably jutting out and he really fucking hoped not actually as slick as it looked at the glance he'd gotten--and it was far enough to put them down into the next level.

Except, it seemed, judging by all the dirt and moisture, that there wasn't another level under them, and Saguru'd just fallen into a burrow.

Saguru was huddled at the end of it, breathing and conscious and grabbing onto him the moment he was close enough.

Kaito passed the flashlight into a hand. "Are you hurt?"

Saguru let out a shuddering breath--it didn't sound wet. "Yes."

"Where?" An arm wrapped around his side as his hand paused in its search.

"Leg."

The flashlight revealed a dark smear running from Saguru's ankle to just below the knee. Kaito set down the flashlight between his thigh and hip, and pulled out a knife to cut away the fabric obscuring the wound.

It wasn't as terrible of a gash as he'd feared: three inches long and just below the knee.

He used the fabric he already had in his hands to help stem the bleeding. They needed to get him to a hospital--no way he wasn't getting an infection...

"I think that's it, aside from some bruises I'll be getting later. I didn't hit my head."



"I told you to stay out of the room," Kaito ground out.

"I heard something--"

"We found water and cans, and Mouri got spooked and dropped them. What would you have been able to do, anyway? I still have the gun from when I was on watch last night."

Saguru let out a huff. "Apologies for being *worried* about you."

"You don't--" Kaito started, then cut off as his entire body froze. Something brushed against his mind, probing, curious, searching.

He whipped around to shine the light down the burrow. Nothing. Hungry blackness.

"--Kaito?"

He turned back and hoisted Saguru over his shoulder, then propelled the both of them back up the new hole in the ground powered entirely by adrenaline. He pushed past the other three when he made it back to solid ground, and charged through the door before he started feeling his muscles and joints protest the last ten seconds, and he set Saguru down, staring back at the rest of them as they grabbed the food and water Ran must've taken over and also booked it to the newer part of the underground complex.

"What the hell was that?" Heiji hissed, the water over his shoulder.

"Something noticed me."

He couldn't just keep carrying Saguru... He could maybe even walk on his own, but running was another question entirely.

"What do you mean 'something noticed you'? Should we be running?"

"Yeah, Hattori, can you carry him?"

"Kaito," Oh, he knew what that tone meant. "I'm going to slow everyone down."

"Complain later, we're moving now--Hattori?"

"Yeah, here," Hattori said, shoving the water back into his arms.

Kaito waited, all nerves and impatient, as Heiji got Saguru situated as quickly as he could without worsening anything, and then they were off.

They managed a quick pace, Heiji clearly pushing himself. Kaito couldn't complain.

*Please let an exit come up soon...something....stairs up, an elevator, anything.*

They needed something that would put a physical barrier between them and what was now trying to find them--even better would be a branching path--could zerg track by scent? If they got close enough could they just track mental signals?

An elevator sounded really good right now.

Eventually they found a door that led to another dead end--this one with an office setup of some sort, some levers and buttons spread on an array in front of a blank, old fashioned monitor. The door was solid enough noise wasn't going to be too much of a problem, there weren't large ducts like the kitchen had had--or anyone decomposing, win-win-- and there was enough room for all of them to squeeze in. In theory, no one wanted to stop, but in practice they all needed food and water, especially Heiji, who had worked up a sweat.

"...What time is it, anyway?" Kaito asked, systematically opening every drawer he could find. Pencils, eraser, paper, oh wow a toothbrush, staple remover, gum (fossilized)...

"A little after seven PM."

"Mm. Might as well get some rest. I guess. Oh--Who wants a gun?" Once that was out of the drawer he could see a small, red box. "And bullets!"

"Are they the same model as the other one?" Saguru asked from his new home in the office chair.

"Nope! Smaller magazine though, looks like it can take nine at a time, and we've got..." He gave the box a small shake before opening it. "Twenty-three."

"If we get out of this, we're getting arrested," Kazuha muttered. She had no idea how hilariously familiar that sentiment was to him. He shot Saguru a smug look. It didn't really hit him, eyes almost vacant.

Kaito let out a subtle sigh.

"If we can get through this we can avoid a little arrest. That doesn't sound so hard," he quipped. At least they weren't thirsty or hungry anymore...

"...Alright, whoever takes watch tonight gets the new gun, since I have the best aim here. Who's it gonna be?"

"I can keep watch." Kaito heaved a much more audible, exaggerated sigh.

"You need sleep, and so does Hattori, so if one of the ladies here would like to take watch, I'll gladly hand this off."

Instead of answering him, Ran stood, walked to him, and took the pistol and ammo.

...Alright. He clearly wasn't the only one who was tense right now.

After she moved to sit back down he came over and crouched next to her.

"You know how to use it?"

Dark eyes regarded him for a long moment before she responded. "It looks like it works just like the other one."

"The safety's in a different spot."

"Wh--Oh. It's that, right?"

"Yeah, it's off right now."

She nodded, and he moved back and then shuffled over on the ground until he was next to Saguru's legs. He gave the slacks next to him a pat, then started checking on the bandages. He'd really hoped there'd be a med kit of some sort in here, or at least an antiseptic or painkillers, but no, whoever worked here last had preferred gum to painkillers.

He had tweezers on him, at least, and could get rid of some of the grime without reopening the wound.

"...Maybe we should have gone right." Ran said. Kaito turned around to see her and learned that the entire room seemed to be zoning out in his and Saguru's direction.

"What--Are you kidding me?" Kaito started, disbelief strong in his voice as he gestured at Heiji. "This guy just woke up this morning from a reverse-prophetic dream that turned out to be one-hundred percent true. If we went right we would've been eaten days ago."

Ran ran a finger down along the glasses she now had tucked into her shirt, expression introspective.

"Personally, I'd love to find an elevator," he added, turning his eyes back to Saguru's injury. "A working elevator. That goes up. To the surface."

Kazuha let out a low sigh. "Man, an elevator..."

"The things I wouldn't do," Heiji added. "...And a hot meal. And a fuckin' bed."

The room sat in quiet agreement after that.

-

Kaito opened his eyes, blinking. His back was a little stiff, pressed into the wall from his perch on the desk, but Saguru's head was still in his lap, so all in all it was a decent morning so far.

A quick glance around the room, and Kazuha had swapped with Ran for the morning shift of watch, Hattori dead to the world and getting dangerously close to snoring. Food and water had done a lot for them. He idly twisted one of the soft curled bits of hair in his lap around a finger. Was Saguru asleep?

A quiet hum and a small inviting shift of his head to the side, and Saguru was definitely awake. He obligingly ran his fingers down the side of his head, to his neck, and then up again, eliciting a small, contented sigh.

"...Did you sleep?" Kaito kept his voice close to silent.

"A little," Saguru said with equal volume. The head in his lap leaned back until warm brown eyes were staring back at him, brow furrowed, lips pulled in a worry that felt bone deep.

"I know you're opposed, but if I stayed here you'd make double the time easy."

Kaito shifted his shoulders slightly. Of course Saguru was asking for this. Kaito just hated it.

"Imagine," Kaito started, voice still hushed. "I leave you behind, and in, say, four hours we find the exit, then I come back to get you and you're gone. Think about how much guilt I'd feel for that."

Saguru let out a sharp sigh. "You know me too well."

"I'm not leaving you."

"I understand."

Kaito settled back into the only form of people watching that existed right then. At least everyone here knew he wasn't a creep for staring at them in their sleep. Mentally, he was running through a map of the area they'd been in so far. Unless they started making longer right turns, an end had to be coming up in the next day or two. That end just needed to involve some way out.

Kaito felt himself jump slightly when Ran sat bolt upright, then put a hand to her head.

He breathed. Just another nightmare. No one else was reacting to anything.

Kaito leaned in a little closer to Saguru. "...Time?"

"Three AM." Ugh. That was what he got for going to sleep around nine. At least time didn't really matter down here...

He watched Ran stare at the door. Kazuha was in a similar boat, waving a hand at her that didn't get a reply. Man, she was out of it.

She stood. Did...she need to go take a leak?

She just stood there, staring, face drawn up in a look somewhere between heavy concentration, and utter confusion.

Okay, was she still asleep? Something was wrong here...

Heiji even woke up at that point, eyes bleary and lost, and then there was a knock at the door.

Not just one, three steady knocks.

No one moved.

No one was down here. The only other people were corpses--but this was an office that someone had clearly been using before--but then why knock?

Ran finally moved, turning her head to look around the room, that same expression on her face.

She walked toward the door. Kaito pulled out the pistol he still had from the last time he was on watch, and waited.

The door opened. Kaito had a clear view through it.

Half obscured by the doorframe, was Edoagawa Conan.

He leveled the gun with the eye he could see, fear bubbling up in a wave. There was no way he was just fine.

"Ran...?" A small, coarse voice asked through the dead silence, sending a cold shiver down Kaito's spine.

Ran held out a hand. Conan reached a dark, gnarled, clawed arm and hand up to hold hers. He watched her flinch back, then extend her hand out again, and then a smile broke out on Conan's face, and he moved, and Kaito saw that that small part of his face was where the familiar Conan ended, and the multiple eyes and armored plates began.

She picked him up; he wrapped a wide, rounded tail around her side, mismatched limbs around her back in a hug. What--

Infested lost their minds--they ripped people apart.

Two dull eyes, set in a row, locked on him.

"Kudou-- Yer in there!?"

The attention on him broke as Conan turned to look at Heiji.

There was a long silence before Heiji responded to what Kaito had to assume was some unspoken conversation with, "Fuck--", before he reached a hand over to touch the infested child's back.

Was...Was everything really just fine? It didn't *look* fine.

"Okay," Kaito started, turning the safety on for now. "How is he conscious?"

"He--Oh you didn't hear that. He woke up before he was supposed to I guess? He doesn't know."

"Heiji--" Kazuha butted in, confused. "What do you mean, 'Kudou'--that's Conan--are they related, or...?"

"No, me. It. Is me." That same small, cracking voice came from Ran's arms. "Can. Show you."

Apparently on cue, Ran set Conan down.

Kaito watched in horror as the compact and dangerous predator on the floor just. Grew. Until he was almost the same height as the rest of them and probably the weight of a car or a horse or something, that nasty looking tail barb as long as his head, now. And that was a really bad mental image he needed out of his head.

Apparently. Conan had been Shin'ichi the whole time. That was great news; now the guy who'd stolen a cop's gun during a heist was a clawed. Armored. Killing machine in this very small room with them.

"How--What--And you knew?!" Kazuha's shrill voice filled the room. "Ran was so worried, and you *knew*?"

"I...kind of figured...but...Shin'ichi?" Three eyes turned back on Ran.

"Does that...hurt?"

"No. Not since. Old Hive."

"--There's a new hive?" Kaito needed to know what that meant. One of the eyes in Shin'ichi's scalp blinked at him.

"No, not like. That. Just. Stragglers. Lonely."

"E--K--Kudou...kun..." Saguru's voice brought Kaito's attention back immediately. "Do you know how to get out of here?"

Kudou went from almost standing vertically, to dropped on all fours in Saguru's direction, and Kaito clicked the safety back off.

"Yes."

"Great, how far is it?" Kaito asked. This guy was looking *really* thin. It hadn't been clear when he was smaller, but there was a definite gauntness to him.

The mouth opened, sharp teeth suddenly very visible, and then something stalled, eyes just to Kaito's side. He didn't take his eyes off him.

"...Are you thirsty?" Ran's voice, before she moved in and took one of the bottles of water from their pack. If that would help sate whatever was missing from his diet, Kaito had zero objections.

He didn't really like the way the bottle just...disappeared into his mouth. That was disturbing.

Shin'ichi sat back onto his haunches for a moment, something mandible-like working at the inhuman side of his face. It stopped at once, and then his eyes focused just below Kaito.

"Exit's burrowed. Can show."

"--There's no normal exit? People work here, don't they? The lights are still on..."

Kaito petered off when he watched the small bumps along the back of Shin'ichi's carapace lengthen into points, tail raising just barely off the ground.

"No. They're. Bad. Hive is safe."

Kaito stared. Clearly the infestation hadn't completely missed his brain, but he wasn't openly attacking them, so...

It was really the best shot they had, wasn't it?

"Okay, but how far away is it?" He asked, eyeing the still lengthened pointes on Shinichi's natural armor.

The mandible twitched in response. He'd really appreciate if it didn't

"Runs almost overhead. Should be safe to cross burrow with new one."

"--And you can just do that? From anywhere?"

"No--and no. I'm not made to dig. There's a good spot for it in hallway."

"...If you can't dig then how exactly are we going to make a new burrow out?"

"Hive."

Kaito fell silent, an uncomfortable feeling running down his spine. "...How many more are there?"

"Three. Outside."

"And they aren't going to eat us."

"No. Never."

"On whose orders?" Zerg apparently always followed orders.

"Mine."

Kaito took a deep breath. The exception to that rule was, of course, whoever was in charge. It didn't exactly feel strange of Conan or Shin'ichi to be in command, since even grown men--cops--listened to what the guy had to say, but he was definitely still part human. Could he actually have real say over them? Well...He hoped so.

Three actual, full blooded Zerg were right behind that door though. Yikes.

"--Were you guys like, mentally talking or somethin'?" Kazuha asked. Kaito turned his attention back to Saguru when Shin'ichi turned to look at her.

"Think you can walk today?" The other two human occupants started in on exactly the explanation he'd expected. 'Yes, he's in their heads and not speaking so much as sending a big

flood of unorganized information.' He felt it yesterday when he was down in that pit. Though, they were describing something a lot more coherent than he'd felt.

"Yes, Kaito. I can walk. If there's an infection it hasn't started interfering yet."

And the likelihood of infection was only going to worsen the longer they stayed down here.

"...This is insane."

"This entire journey has been unorthodox, and this is certainly the most bizarre part. It genuinely feels like the best course of action, and if the four of them wanted us dead I sense we would have been made aware by now."

Kaito hummed in response. That sounded right.

Gods, he wanted to go home--Maybe, if they did make it out of this, he'd treat himself to some hang gliding. Or, maybe just give himself some quality time laying on the roof of a skyscraper with a good view.

Shin'ichi backed up toward the door, then pushed himself back into a mostly upright position again. Kaito's eyes landed on the sharp, two foot long scythe blades tucked against his sides.

Fucking figured he had those.

Shin'ichi's animal-looking hand pressed dexterously down on the door's handle, and he disappeared behind it, apparently holding it open for them.

"Alright. Might as well be happening," he muttered, sliding off the table and waiting for Saguru to stand. It wasn't long before he was filing out the door after Kazuha, Saguru the last out the door.

There were definitely three other Zerg: two of the short, squat, foot soldier types, and the last was tall, snake-like, and teeming with small, too long limbs, the bigger of them ending in even longer, and more wickedly curved claws than the rest.

The worst part might've been the free swinging split lower jaw, though.

Kazuha was firmly attached to Ran's side, and both she and Heiji were keeping Shin'ichi between them and the rest of the Zerg.

Nothing lunged at them. Kaito watched them shift, limbs occasionally twitching.

He'd never actually seen any up close, and he hadn't ever wanted to, but he was especially glad now that he was that they didn't seem intent to kill anyone here.

"It's after the turn down there," Shin'ichi said, gesturing down the way they'd come from.

They moved forward in a line, Heiji coming up to stand close to Kazuha's other side, and Kaito taking the end for his own peace of mind. Having Saguru not at the end of the line would give him at least some peace of mind.



Supposedly, hopefully, this was going to be the final stretch, and after they turned this corner they could kiss this damn place goodbye forever and never come back.

It didn't feel real. He didn't know what he expected to happen, but getting to the surface didn't feel like it.

One of the smaller two--zerglings Kazuha had called them--was getting its face too close to Saguru for comfort. Kaito kicked its head out of the way, and magically didn't lose a foot doing it.

Four Zerg, all in varying states of starvation, probably, and five fleshy young humans. Damn. They should have thought to offer some of the canned food. He'd feel a little better if they had. Zerg could digest just about anything right? They'd've appreciated it.

Kaito looked down at a quick movement to see that same zergling back again, swooping in, mandibles spread.

*Fuck --*

He turned his body this time to plant a carefully aimed kick to the thing's cranium. It let out a croaking sound, and then a low, chittering sound brought Kaito's attention behind him.

Shin'ichi was down on all fours again, tail raised high over his head, and two curved plates at his upper back moving in a blur and making the noise Kaito'd heard--his mouth was open menacingly, the mandible was lined with small sharp rows on its underside, and his two Zerg eyes were glowing.

Kaito slammed into Saguru to push him out of the way just as a high pitched shriek left Shin'ichi's lungs and he lunged forward, landing just in front of the zergling that had made a move for Saguru's leg.

The entire group backed several more feet away, the rest of the Zerg standing still.

The zergling lunged forward, driving its scythe arms into the ground as Shin'ichi ducked to the side and made a cut with his own, matching limb.

The zergling stumbled back, then slunk away toward the far wall, still emitting the same ear splitting noise Shin'ichi was. A thud from next to him sent Kaito's head whipping to the side. Kazuha was on the ground with her hands over her ears.

A loud sound brought Kaito's eyes back to the fight. Shin'ichi's tail was lowering to the ground, smooth at the end except for a hole where the barb should have been. The Zergling was slowly flexing its limbs, now splayed on the floor, a boney nub that had to be the missing barb embedded almost completely into its side, just behind the front leg.

The screeching had stopped. The room was utterly silent.

Then the remaining two Zerg lunged forward, tearing into the wounded one's body.

Shin'ichi turned and came toward them, looking the group over and lingering on Kazuha.

"I'm sorry. That. That should sate for now. No more problems."

"What about you?" Kaito imagined the four of them had been in similar states of hungry, and that meant Shin'ichi was technically starved enough to act desperately. That gnawing hunger he'd felt earlier was a pretty good clue, at least.

Shin'ichi looked at him, a slight frown on his face. "Catch rats on the surface after getting you out, maybe."

"We can. We can bring you food, Shin'ichi," Ran said, now crouching next to Kazuha, who still looked shell shocked, hands still cupping her ears.

"Dangerous. Don't," He said with a shake of his head. "Less attention at entrance is best. Is she...Okay?"

Ran sighed. "No."

Shin'ichi's tail rolled in under itself, and he suddenly looked a lot less intimidating.

"...Almost out. Soon. I'm sorry."

"You--You can't just live like this forever right? You're starvin', aren't you?" Kaito didn't like where Heiji seemed to be going with this.

Shin'ichi turned uncomfortable eyes on Heiji, who continued: "Wouldn't it make sense for us ta' take you back? We could smuggle you in somewhere."

"That isn't your house," Kaito shot back, a bad feeling rising in his brain. "Don't invite people into someone else's home."

"If Kazuha was alright with living with Saguru-kun, then I think it might be fine if we took him to my house, but..." Ran ran a hand over Kazuha's hair. "If I came back tomorrow night, or the night after, would you come out to see me?"

Shin'ichi's face contorted, and if there was an answer to that question, it wasn't verbal.

Heiji was standing near Kazuha as well, now. Kaito turned back to Saguru.

"You live with Hattori, do you know if there's a reason she's so..."

Saguru nodded, eyes fixed on the Zerg feast wrapping up across the hall from them. "She was in the direct impact area of the invasion in Osaka when it happened. I don't know many specifics, but I feel that's enough of an answer."

Oh. Fuck. The concept of hiding from a legion of those things--

Nope. He didn't want to think about it.

why is conan/shinichi back in the place it started? >:3c We'll get there

## Ousted

They wound up sitting on the floor in a group to wait while the burrow was dug, Heiji eventually leaving with Kaito to pick up more water for them from last night's safe room. They had a while to wait still: digging the new tunnel was going to take some time.

Especially because they were down the one that had been so hungry it had tried to attack Saguru. Ran got the impression from Shin'ichi that the process would've been much simpler otherwise. But, as it was, all three of them were working through the tunnel in a line, the zergling leading the way, the huge one making it something they could fit through, and Shin'ichi in the middle. It felt like he was helping direct the way it was built, keeping them from digging too close to pipes or other man made obstacles that could unbalance the tunnel.

The larger, creepier one had also been the one to start the process by carving out a section of wall in the small room the three of them were now sitting, huddled together in. The sound had been terrible, and only made Kazuha shrink into her side further.

Gentle fingers ran through Kazuha's hair, messy and let down at the moment-- The thought of a hot bath, giving Kazuha a scalp massage and helping her wash her hair, laying down in bed with her, clean, finally comfortable...

That thought carried her through the next few minutes in a wistful haze.

Shin'ichi wasn't actively 'talking' to her anymore, but there was definitely still the sense that he was there, even as he moved further above them in the burrow.

"We're almost out." She couldn't do much for Kazuha while the zerg were physically between them and the surface, but she could at least be as soothing as possible.

Her response was a shaky breath, and a little less pressure on her shoulder as Kazuha adjusted the way she was sitting.

Saguru seemed to be doing his best to stay inobtrusive, staring away from them at the wall or the gaping hole of the new burrow.

"...Ran-chan?"

"Hm?"

"Is he in yer head, right now?"

"No, it's mostly quiet at the moment." Having some space from them was definitely helping, if Kazuha was feeling comfortable enough to start a conversation.

"What's that mean: mostly?"

"Well, I can tell he's there," she said, pointing to a place a little over their heads. "But that's mostly it. He stopped talking a little while ago."

Kazuha made a sound of affirmation, and Saguru took a quick glance over at them, a thoughtful look on his face before he turned to look up in the direction she'd pointed.

"That's gotta be weird, right? Having somethin' in yer head like that? Are you sure yer okay?"

"I mean, it's definitely Shin'ichi, so it's not completely strange."

"Is it? Shin'ichi couldn't get in yer head before, could he? It can't be comfortable."

"It," Ran paused, frowning. It wasn't exactly unfamiliar. She could tell it was Shin'ichi the moment she felt it. So...

"And you said yourself it's not just clear thoughts; ain't it all, you know, alien?"

"...As weird as it sounds, I think it used to happen, sometimes, rarely. But...yeah, it's definitely different now," she stopped for a moment to bite her lip. Honestly noticing the difference had dredged up much older memories, running around Shin'ichi's house and knowing when he'd caught her in a game of hide and seek before he said anything. More than anything, the contrast between how it felt then versus now was making her heart sink with worry over how Shin'ichi was holding up, how he'd changed, if it was possible for him to be alright. "But it doesn't feel...bad, or too invasive."

"...How would you describe the difference?" Saguru's voice, subdued but clearly interested if he was breaking his apparent rule not interact with her and Kazuha without being invited to.

"It's... Well, before it would almost be like normal conversation, just more private--or maybe implicit? Like, it almost felt like reading body language, or just, knowing, without really talking, exactly. This is... This isn't like talking either, but if it was in a language before it really isn't now. It's also a lot louder? Like I can 'hear' it really clearly, and I know what most of it means, but it's all scrambled up and happening at once, and some of it feels like body language, and I can kind of...see? feel? from his point of view? I feel like if I really tried he could let me see what he's seeing right now, and if that's true I could probably do the same. Which is weird. But the Shin'ichi part is the same. Does that make any sense?"

Kazuha was staring back at her, clearly wrapping her head around the description, a slight hint of worry tugging at her brow and mouth.

Saguru nodded, eyes not exactly focused on anything in the room.

"It sounds like he must think differently now, and it would make sense from a strategic standpoint for Zerg to be able to process and pass large amounts of information on, especially in a spacial sense, since they seem to be so coordinated in things like combat. Maybe the fact that he could already do something similar before the infestation is what made it possible for him to keep his faculties."

Before Ran could respond, the door to the room opened, and Kaito and Heiji were stepping in with the rest of the water and cans, Kaito's voice cutting in as soon as she turned to look.

"Great, the gremlin was psychic the whole time. That explains a *lot*, actually. Since the dig crew's so hungry these two cans are our breakfast and the other three are for them, to keep them off our backs," he said, setting what he was carrying down in the middle of the floor and sitting roughly on the ground. "...literally."

"You didn't even know him," Kazuha shot back at Kaito. Ran looked down at the cans. Technically most of the zerg had eaten recently, but...

"Eh, heard enough about him from Saguru, been to heists, et cetera." She shot him a look. Kazuha was possibly the only one here who didn't know he was Kaitou Kid--unless Heiji was also out of the loop, but that seemed unlikely.

"Shinichi needs them more than the other two do."

"Yeah, I don't wanna piss off a couple murder machines by telling them the food isn't for them."

"Were you guys eavesdropping?" Kazuha said chidingly. She was definitely feeling a little better.

"No, I read your mind, obviously," Kaito grumbled. Ran gave him a light knock on the shoulder.

Everyone was starting to feel a little closer to okay.

-

"Hey Mouri, can you ask how much longer it's gonna take?" Kaito asked as he picked up the last three cans and threw one in the air, then another, and then he was juggling them.

"Yeah, I can--"

"I just did, they're just about out; finding the best spot to come through, apparently," Heiji supplied.

The cans each came to a stop in Kaito's hands.

"Oh, good. So, it isn't like you're all in the same chat room, I take it."

"*Hah* ?--Oh. No. Not right now anyway. I think it kinda was earlier, though."

"Yeah," Ran said with a nod. She'd seemed to be hearing things at the same time Heiji was, then.

"*Fun* ." Kaito's voice was dry. "So--what are your plans? I'm taking this guy to a hospital the moment we're out."

"Well," Saguru's voice sounded from the other side of Kaito, sweet with a humor she hadn't heard from him in days. "I, for one, am planning on going to a hospital."

Ran let out a huff of air, the closest thing to a laugh she could manage right now.

Bits of concrete mingling with the dirt, tile scraping on claws that weren't hers--for sure--she didn't even think they were Shin'ichi's, they were the wrong shape--and then there was the telltale sound of ceramic pieces clattering in an open space, and fresh air, and relief.

She sat upright at the same time as Heiji, Kaito's head whipping over to the tunnel's entrance.

"...That's really fucked up," Kaito said, tense.

"--What is?" Kazuha's hand tightened on hers.

"I believe the rest of us experienced something you didn't, then, Touyama-san," Saguru started, "Just now the tunnel's termination was made."

"And he can send point of view feedback to multiple people at once, apparently," Kaito said, then stopped, focus leaving his eyes as he zoned out at a wall.

"Oh, Saguru, you saw it too?"

"Yes--Kaito?"

"Ah. The guy's a little self conscious about it. Anyway, what are you three doing once we're out?"

And apparently Kaito could carry one on one conversations with Shin'ichi, even. Why Kazuha was out of the loop was beyond her.

Ran glanced at her. "I'm going home and having a long bath."

"Hell, yeah, me too," Heiji said, running a hand through his hair. "And then probably checkin' in on how yer leg is if y'arn't back by then."

"I don't imagine I'll be staying overnight, unless there is a bad infection, but it's possible I'll need a few stitches."

"Yeah, let's hope it's just the stitches," Kaito grumbled.

A moment of silence came over their group. It still didn't really feel like they were actually all that close to leaving, though that flash Shin'ichi'd sent was making it feel a tiny bit tangible.

"--Oh, Sonoko has got to be so worried," she registered all at once. They'd planned on hanging out together--what--two days ago?

"...There *used* to be cell service down here. Probably was the Zerg, though. Place seems too 'secret facility' ta let that happen on purpose."

"--Oh, right, because you called Conan, back then."

"Yeah. Still wondering why the lights are on."

"Well. I'm sure as hell happy to try to forget the place exists once we're out of here," Kaito added.

Eventually there was the sound of dirt sliding away, and Ran pulled Kazuha into a hug so she didn't have to watch the long, serpentine one come out of the hole, all jaws and teeth and knives. She loosened her hold once Shin'ichi and the zerg were all accounted for, and Kazuha tentatively pulled away to stare the less human things down.

"--We brought the rest of the food," Heiji said, pushing the cans closer to them.

Shin'ichi immediately crawled over to them, threw one behind his back where it was caught mid-air by the big one, and then started biting into the cans like the metal was an edible wrapper.

A glance over at Kazuha told Ran she was staring, but didn't seem all that shaken--mostly a little dumbfounded.

She had to agree, it wasn't something she'd ever seen before, and something about it being canned food made the situation so much more palatable than it could be otherwise, probably.

"Thanks," Shin'ichi said after licking his lips. He definitely had at least one row of even, pointed teeth. How those could cut through metal but not break the skin on his tongue, she didn't know.

His voice was sounding even less hoarse now, and Ran was starting to think that had more to do with dehydration than anything else.

"So...How are we doing this? Those things aren't squeezing in there with us are they?" Kaito asked as he moved to stand up.

"I am front, then Hive. You. And them at end."

"--Oh hell no, I'm not climbing in that dark hole with two Zerg following behind me."

"Yeah," Kazuha added, sounding tired.

Shin'ichi's mandible drew a few circles at the corner of his mouth. "If it collapses, and just us, then. Suffocation. They can dig. It's safer. Will not hurt you."

" *Will* they though?" Kaito gestured to Saguru, who was also standing now.

Shin'ichi stuck his tongue out just a bit through his teeth, mouth hanging slightly open such that she could see them. He was agitated, that much she knew from the mind against hers, so she had to assume it was an attempt to hold himself back from making a more intimidating expression.

"Fed. Won't kill." He said, then pushed himself off the ground into a standing position, tail curling underneath him until he was standing up completely straight. He actually looked a



little smaller like that. His shoulders were slimmer than she'd expected--and honestly, most of him was looking too slight in a way that suggested he could and should be heavier.

He'd really been starving...

Shin'ichi took a deep breath, ribs expanding enough she could start counting them for a moment through the softer skin running down his middle. "I lost control of. One. One is gone. Everyone is fed, now." He paused, swallowing. "We will not. Eat. You. To get home, please, let...me. Make sure. You. Don't die trying."

"...I think we should." The other Zerg really had eaten, and the longer they stayed and talked about it the longer it would take to finally get out.

"Me too," Heiji spoke up just as Saguru added his own consent.

Kaito looked around the group, eyes landing on Kazuha for a moment. She leaned into Ran's side.

"--I wanna go home." Kazuha finally said after a long silence.

Kaito sighed, nodding. "Yeah, alright. Let's go."

-

Breathing in the fresh air was utterly different than feeling something else do it. They were in a run down building--a restaurant probably--and though the kitchen was eerie, and dark, there was a small window over a countertop, and deep twilight blue was casting its colors over the room. The sky. It was the *sky* .

A melancholy relief settled into her mind, as she turned to help Heiji out of the burrow. This was hopefully their last one.

She turned to look at Shin'ichi, crouched down low to the ground and slowly circling closer to the hole, now that they were all out of it.

Her heart was aching, dully, watching him. They could leave, but Shin'ichi had to go back down that burrow. He'd always been the one who was leaving her behind, she'd never really been on this end of it before. Surely it hadn't felt this bad for him--the situation was different anyway--or he wouldn't have kept doing it. Why was he always cutting her out--

She ended the line of thought off before it got any 'louder,' and crouched down near Shin'ichi.

He stopped, wide eyes turning to look at her. There was no doubt he was the source of the melancholy feeling.

"Hey, Shin'ichi."

He stared back, then slowly drew himself in to a half crouching, half sitting position, still staying low to the ground.

"I need to rest tonight, but I'll come back in a couple days, okay?"

Shin'ichi opened his mouth, then stopped, looking down at his hand before he returned his attention to her.

"You don't have to."

She bit at her lip, fighting off a slew of emotions.

"I will, okay? I'll see you again soon. I'm going to come back."

He nodded, movement slow. He looked...sad.

She leaned forward and pulled him into a hug. A couple seconds later and there were more arms brushing into hers from the other side--and she opened her eyes to see Heiji behind Shin'ichi's back, arms also wrapped around him.

Wide blue and dark eyes stared back at her and then glanced over his shoulder, and then Ran felt him relax into her, just a little.

After a while, Ran heard footsteps that probably belonged to Kazuha come in close, and she looked up in time to see her crouching down too, a hand lightly landing on her head, and another on Heiji's.

She looked at the two of them pleadingly.

"Okay," Ran breathed, "Shin'ichi, we need to go. Stay safe, okay?"

She got a nod in response, then stood and stepped back. Heiji took a little longer, apparently drawing out or at least closing off a mental conversation.

It didn't take long for Shin'ichi to crawl back down the hole, using his tail to slide a large piece of debris most of the way over the burrow. Heiji pushed it the rest of the way over.

They picked their way through the building still bearing the familiar scars from invasion--long tears, divets in the walls and even cuts in the glass from Zerg claws, and made their way through doors and into the street.

The street was quiet, but less torn apart than the building they'd left. Long, deep breaths: they were out. They were really *out*.

Dawn was starting to turn the sky grey and orange behind the next row of buildings. Kazuha's fingers slid into place between hers, and she squeezed her hand, then turned to her, a smile breaking across her face.

They were *out*.

-

The walk home felt unreal.

Kazuha's hand was still in hers, the sun had started cresting over the city an hour ago and they were almost back, but everything else; the familiar streets, the other people, her phone buzzing in her pocket, felt dreamed.

Had she really been gone? What if she got home and her dad just asked what was for dinner, completely unassuming, the same day as the one she'd last left home on like a fairy tale--the kind Saguru would sometimes recite, the ones where people were stolen out of time.

The fact that those halls had been so endless and so well lit only made the connection she was drawing stronger. Maybe she'd wake up soon, too: no Conan, no Shin'ichi, infested were still mindless and there were no exceptions for the people she cared about.

She didn't wake up, Kazuha was still holding her hand, and she was still exhausted, and sore, and filthy.

She stopped at the base of the stairs outside of Poirot, mind a sluggish crawl as she tried to understand what had made her stop.

If this was real she'd walk in to a sudden fervor, her dad having worried about her for days.

If it was a dream, maybe she'd wake up.

Kazuha squeezed her hand, then took a step around her to push some of the hair out of her eyes, gentle.

"Just a few more steps, right? We were really prayin' for stairs yesterday..."

Ran let out a long breath, pressing her forehead into Kazuha's for a moment of equilibrium. The support was so appreciated, and needed, and she wasn't even paying attention to how Kazuha had been holding up the entire walk here.

She breathed out again, trying to push off the feeling of guilt and responsibility that came with that realization.

"Okay. Okay, I'm good. Thank you."

Kazuha's hand's moved to hold her by the shoulders, secure. "...You wanna hug before we go in?"

"After," her voice cracked a little when she said it. She had a feeling if she did, she'd lose what little composure she had left.

Ran didn't want to walk in already sobbing.

Kazuha, eyes bright and serious, gave her a sharp nod, and stepped back to her side, hand comfortably returning to its previous place.

They walked the last few flights of stairs, stairs she could run up blindfolded, stairs she'd grown up with, and she pulled the house key out of her pocket, and unlocked the door.

The first thing she heard was the sound of a chair's legs screeching against the floor.

"I swear if you kids think you--"

Her dad stood, eyes wide and suddenly frozen in place; a couple days' worth of stubble and dark circles under his eyes.

Ran stared back, not sure what to do.

She didn't wind up needing to figure that out, her dad suddenly breaking out of his daze and charging towards her.

"Ran!" And suddenly she was being held like she was a kid, but tighter, like that time she'd come home after her teacher had been arrested.

She closed her eyes, and let him take her weight for a moment. She wanted to cry...She was *home* ...

-

It turned out one of the reasons her phone had been buzzing so much wasn't just the flood of worried messages and missed calls, but also Saguru sending her a briefing on what their story was going to be for the police, which wound up being imminently necessary, since they'd all been reported as missing persons, and the police were very quick to respond to her dad's phone call--though at least it was Satou who made the drive over. Familiar faces were easier right now.

The story she gave wasn't completely separated from reality--mostly it just cut Shin'ichi, but there were several things she was reminded not to mention: the room where Conan...was changed, any details of places that weren't hallways--in particular the last room they stayed in--, and the location of the burrow they'd left through. It was just a 'blur,' 'too traumatizing to remember clearly, really,' 'hard to think about--there were corpses down there and maybe something else.'

She had to be glad Saguru and Kaito were worried about Shin'ichi's safety, and able to think clearly enough right now to send this to everyone.

-

There wasn't much to make the transition back into normal life smoother--or smooth at all. Neither of them were sleeping easily, especially Kazuha. Ran was at least in her own house, room, bed, not to mention the other things making Kazuha's life harder right now.

Any sudden noises from the street, calls at odd hours, or even her father snoring was enough to jar the two of them.

Her dad didn't really get it, but he was at least trying, and for now mostly sober. She'd almost forgotten that he could be perceptive when he was trying to. She'd spotted something dark come over his eyes when he noticed her hands shaking during dinner last night, and now he

was insisting that she and Kazuha couldn't go out. Like they were just going to fall into every ditch and crack in Tokyo.

"Dad, we're just going to visit our friends, we'll be *fine*."

"...You can go *if* I take you there and make sure you make it there safely."

It was so hard not to want to throttle him when he started acting like she was a fragile little girl. "No, that's absurd," she ground out. "We--"

"As your father--" He started, voice raising. She slammed her hand on the table to cut him off.

"As your daughter? I'll call you when I get there, okay? The invasion didn't happen yesterday, I probably know better than *you* how to tell when there's a burrow under me, and I've literally walked there before and been fine. Okay?"

She knew he'd been through a painful couple of days once he'd realized she was gone. She knew he was just scared of losing her. She felt for him. But, they needed to be able to have an open conversation, and he didn't have the full story. Not yet.

He muttered to himself across the table, "Jeez, fine, if you're gonna be a bitch about it. Any surprises to spring on me while you're at it?"

"Well," She was going to have to see how everyone felt, but there was a chance she would, very soon. "...I might bring Shin'ichi over, if he needs a place." *If Kazuha and Saguru were okay with the way arrangements were going to work.*

"--Shin'ichi?" The mopiness drained from him pretty quickly. "I.." She watched him take a moment to look between them. "I thought he didn't make it. Did you see him down there or something?"

"He's been through a lot," she didn't answer his question. "So if he does come here I need you to promise me you'll let him stay."

He was silent for a moment, looking her over, definitely trying to figure out what she meant by 'a lot' and why or if she was avoiding his question.

Finally, he let out a sigh. "If you stay out of trouble, yeah. He's usually trouble, that kid," he said with a nod, and a hum of agreement with himself. "...I want to see how he's holding up too, anyway."

Not great, was the answer. Not great in a really horrible way.

She and Kazuha managed to start the walk to Saguru's house without any more fuss.

-

"How's the leg?"

Saguru lifted the limb slightly, clearly bandaged.

“It seems to be healing alright. I’m on antibiotics, and can walk with some care.”

“That’s a relief!”

“And how have you been holding up, Touyama-san, Ran-kun?”

“Fine, there’s not much to say,” Kazuha responded. Ran nodded.

“Well, I hope the last couple days have been a pleasant quiet for you, at least.”

Ran nodded again, eyes turning to look at Kaito, face solidly in a placid middle ground, and Heiji, who was glancing between everyone like he was waiting for someone to draw a weapon.

She kept her eyes on him until he turned his attention back onto her, shooting him a concerned, but stern look.

He sighed, a small frown pulling at his lips and tempering his agitation a small fraction. She’d take it. If Shin’ichi wasn’t staying at her house, they’d figure something else out. She wasn’t about to leave him down there and neither was Heiji.

The room grew quiet.

“Well, hey guys, we made it; we lived through a fucked up nightmare or three.” Kaito sounded a lot better than the last time she’d seen him. “I feel like we could all be having a nice time right now if we didn’t have a logistics thing to work out, so, anyone want to get that over with while we’re ahead?”

Ran leaned forward a little. “Okay. I know Heiji and I are going to do something about Shin’ichi’s situation, but I need to know how everyone else feels about the options we have.”

Kaito raised a hand and added, “He’s not staying here.”

“That’s fine, we can either try my house or figure out another place; my house would be more secure, probably, unless someone has another idea, but it would also mean a few things would need to change.”

“What, exactly?” Heiji asked.

“There isn’t really room for more people, and I don’t think my dad would be comfortable sleeping in the same room as him.”

“He could sleep in the agency part,” Heiji added. Kaito shot a look between them.

“...Do Zerg even sleep?”

“He’s part human, so we should just assume so,” was Heiji’s response.

--Either way, if he lives at my house, Kazuha would need somewhere else to stay, and she'd need to be comfortable with making that change, otherwise I think we should find a way for Heiji to stay with him." She turned a look in Kaito's direction. "...That isn't here. Obviously"

"Mmm apartments aren't too easy to get right now, are they..." Kaito trailed off, thinking.

Kazuha shifted. "There were a lotta places in Osaka that were damaged cosmetically, or that had a bunch of deaths, where the rent was real cheap cause no one wanted 'em and it felt wrong to charge so much when everything was so fucked. Maybe there's some places around here like that?"

Ran watched Heiji pull his phone out and start typing something.

"If there are, that would be a decent approach, but I wouldn't bank on it," Kaito continued, glancing over his shoulder at the phone activity, before turning to his other side. "Saguru?"

"If Touyama-san decides she wants to stay here, it would not be a burden on me. There are plenty of rooms and my father can hardly argue, what with the state of things"

"I...I dunno...Heiji?"

He didn't look up from his phone. "I'm lookin'."

"Do you two have any ideas for a third option, should it be necessary?" Despite looking so much less tired than the last time she'd seen him, Saguru still had a weary look behind his eyes. Ran was willing to bet the subject was a large part of why. Smuggling someone infested into the city wasn't something that sounded like it would end well.

She glanced at Heiji. "...I could try talking to Agasa and Ai-chan, but don't think it would be a good idea to keep him there." Something about the fact that the kids would be there half the time and his old house would be right there, not to mention she didn't think it would be fair to do without Ai-chan's consent...

Heiji let out a low growl. "I'm not seein' much, so apartment's gonna take at least a day or two," he turned his eyes onto Ran's, pausing. "Could we use *his* house?"

She shook her head. "No, it's in bad shape and his parents are paying for professionals to come in and work on repairs."

"Shit."

"...I don't think there are that many other options, outside of the really stupid ones like 'take him to the woods and dump him,' cause I'm pretty sure that's dangerous for literally everyone and completely misses the part where he's in a better situation." Kaito looked around the group. "But maybe you can kinda juggle who has him until something stable comes up? And if there's a close call, get him out of the city and come back for him later?"

"...I'll get an apartment. Dunno how long that'll take, though."

“I think the main time constraint you have depends on how long Kazuha here is willing to stay.”

Ran frowned. She didn't want to *force* her to leave. It felt like they could agree on a time for her to move, together, and it would be a lot less painful.

She spoke up before anyone else had a chance to. “Kazuha and I can talk when we're home and figure out if or for how long that might work. I think we should stop for now and let her think...Saguru-kun?”

Warm brown eyes turned onto her, a fraction less tired.

“What did you say you were planning on cooking, again?”



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