Summary

In which Kenma is unapologetic and comfortable with who he is, Akaashi learns a lot about himself in a short period of time, Kuroo is wildly in love and an eternal survivor, and Bokuto remembers that love doesn't cure mental illness, but having a support system sure helps a lot.

Or, the one where 4 young men get together, and are helplessly, hopelessly, utterly in love despite everything.
Part 1: Kenma

“I know you don't want to, but we need to talk about it.”

A beat, then, “If you know I don't want to, why are you making me?”

“I'm not even going to bother responding to that.”

“Tch.”

Silence, then-

“I think it would be good.”

Kuroo stops in his tracks, Kenma a half beat behind. He doesn't look up from his game, brain whirring so fast it feels like he'll overheat, but this is. This is important. This is their lives he's talking about, and Kuroo's fears, and too many things wrapped up in one. He's not afraid, not at all. Not when it comes to Kuroo.

Never, ever, when it comes to Kuroo.

“I love you,” Kuroo says, in a helpless sort of way.


Kuroo gently takes his hand, and kisses his knuckles with such reverence that Kenma shivers. It's a warm day, they're in the middle of the way home, and somewhere in the distance he can hear chiming bells and the soft *glack-clack* of a *shishi odonshi*. He looks up to find they've stopped before the steps that lead Kuroo's favorite shrine, the one he goes to whenever things are rough.

Heavy handed symbolism, he thinks, and aches with a quiet sort of love as the wind comes rushing down through the trees, carrying leaves and flower petals with it.

“You,” Kuroo says, deep and meaningful and desperate into the rush of the wind, “are the best thing that has ever happened to me. Maybe the best thing that ever will happen to me.”

Kenma looks up, right to his eyes. No fear here, only that deep ache in his chest that eases at the look Kuroo gives him. He hates eyes following him, but these are ones he'll gladly meet on level ground. Because that's what this is, no matter how you look at it- level ground.

“Come on,” he says. “I'm tired from practice. Let's go home.”

Kuroo nods, and makes to let go of his hand. Instead, Kenma twines their fingers together, and they walk home next to each other as always, hearts closer than ever.

oOo

It had started with Bokuto.

Actually, no. That was wrong.

It had started, really, with Lev. Lev and his big mouth, bounding up to Kenma as everyone was heading home.
“Do you think Bokuto likes me?” he asked, big and bright and cheery. Kenma hadn't bothered to look up from his game, Kuroo a reassuring warmth at his side keeping too much of the outside world from intruding in on them.

“No.”

“Whaaaaa-”

“Not romantically, anyway. Good luck getting him to stop mooning over Akaashi, but you're welcome to try” Kuroo had snickered, leading Kenma out of the way of someone on a bike.

“Awwww.” Lev jumped to the other side of Kuroo, keeping pace like a dog- darting back and forth, always always moving. How does he exist in a state of such endless motion? “Kuroo-senpai, he's your friend right? And Kenma's friend, and he loves you two like, so much! Probably because you're both so pretty and smart.”

“Debatable,” Kenma had muttered.

“Oi!” Kuroo made a face at him, and Kenma hid his smile.

“But he loves you so much,” Lev said wistfully. “And Akaashi-senpai, because Akaashi-senpai is maybe the most beautiful person in the whole world.”

“That's fair,” Kuroo said mildly, and Kenma made a faint noise of agreement. It was just true. Akaashi Keiji, with his heavy-lidded eyes and soft smiles and curls and elegant grace, was far too beautiful to be ignored by anyone. “Akaashi-san is very possibly the most beautiful person to ever exist. We are all mere mortals to his godlike visage.”

“What's a visage?”

“Fancy word for face.” Kuroo gently cuffs Lev about the head, bringing him in line. “Stop dancing around the street, you'll knock someone over. And yes, Bokuto loves us as friends.”

“No!” Lev skipped forward, caught Kuroo's narrowing eyes, and scurried back to his side. “He loves you. He gets all excited when you're there.”

Kuroo cleared his throat, and Kenma glanced out of the corner of his eye to Kuroo. On the surface his face seemed like normal, but there was something in the eyes- an undercurrent of a thought. “Bokuto gets excited whenever anyone ever shows up and says hello to him, Lev. We're good friends, sure but not- not that kind of friends.”

“I bet you could be!” Lev sighed, kicking a rock. “You could be like Kaa-san, and To-san, and Papa.”

Both Kuroo and Kenma stopped short. Lev kept going for a couple steps before looking back.

“What is it?”

“You have three parents?” Kuroo said, and his voice was even, but there- there, again. That thought, fuzzy and indistinct in his eyes. Lev brightened.

“Yeah! Papa met Kaa-san when she was studying in Russia and he just fell right in love with her and gave her flowers and chocolates and did all sorts of stuff to woo her and she brought him home because he wanted to be with her, and then they met To-san when she was pregnant with me and they fell in love with him, too! So they brought him home and got a bigger bed and they all love
each other *so much*, so I have *three* parents! And that's why all my siblings look different, some of them are from To-san!"

A thought, here, in his own mind.

Possibility taking form.

Later- Kuroo, curled up in bed with him, pressed up tight like if he let go Kenma was going to disappear, whispered, “Bokuto doesn't like me, right?”

“I don't see why not,” Kenma said, still playing as Kuroo buried his face against his neck. “If you bite me and leave a mark I'll jab you with my elbow.”

“And if I don't leave a mark?”

“I'll still jab you. Stop avoiding the thought. Bokuto likes you plenty. You're one of his best friends.”

Kuroo nosed against the soft skin behind his ear. “Maybe,” he said, uncertain.

“I like the thought of you together.”

Kuroo jerked, but said nothing.

“You're very pretty,” Kenma said, pressing on, eyes fixed on the game. This one was somewhat repetitive, but threw in changes once in a while to annoy him. He could design better. Perhaps he would, come to that. “And he is too. I think you'd look good together, don't you?”

Kuroo's breathing was a little ragged. “Don't tease, Kenma.”

“I'm not.”

“Because I can't take it, I really can't, I- I liked him for *so fucking* long and Lev had to start talking nonsense when you and I are finally together and I can't take teasing.”

“Are your ears not working? I'm not.” Kenma jabbed him with his elbow after all, and Kuroo promptly bit him. He got a second jab for his troubles and Kuroo let his neck go, groaning and burying his face against his neck and shoulder and nuzzling like the overgrown lazybones cat that he was. Kenma reached up to absently pet his head, and Kuroo's arm tightened around him a little. “It's a thought.”

“Yeah.” Kuroo was still, and Kenma could feel the hurt and confusion swirling around in his head, old wants springing up like flowers from snow. “Just a thought. And we're going to leave it alone.”

“Oh, are we?”

“Yeah.”

Kenma hummed.

And yet that thought had become multiplied and spun through their lives with a careless flame of want attached, and Kenma now finds himself-

here.

In front of Bokuto.
Theoretically trying to block, not like that's going to happen. He doesn't want to lose an arm.

He's just there, suddenly, all before Kenma in bold colors and a big smile as the ball hits the floor just inside on the back, whooping with joy. There he is, and Kenma has a horrible lurching sensation as something clicks inside. He watches as Kuroo, a little less vibrant than usual, chatters insults and jokes back at him as they rotate. He watches Bokuto light up under the attention, gesturing wildly, the faint smile on Akaashi's face. That sheer, simple, boisterous joy. A bit like Hinata, but older- older and with a bit more hurt behind the eyes- no, just a different kind of hurt.

Kenma hates eyes. He sees too much, and so do others.

He looks away, and sets it aside for the moment as they practice further.

The sun sinks down in the sky, and for once he doesn't take off right after practice. Kuroo nearly faints in shock at the sight of him in the gym for further rounds, but Kenma waves him off and settles into a corner with his games. He keeps half an eye on the court- no need to get hit by an unruly ball- but enjoys the familiar sounds of Kuroo's laugh, Bokuto calling jokes and insults, and Akaashi's occasional retort. It's good. Simple.

Stable.

He looks up, and catches Kuroo looking at him.

He's never going to get used to it, he just knows it. The day that Kenma is no longer shaken to the core by how much love Kuroo expresses with the slightest glance is the day he dies.

They take forever to wind up, but when they're done Bokuto all but throws himself down next to Kenma.

“Hi hi! What game is it?”

Ah, the interrogation game, which Bokuto has perfected so that Kenma only needs to give one word answers and won't feel uncomfortable.

How were they not already dating him? It was so obvious now.

Kuroo grins at him, and Kenma gives him a short, unamused look before standing. Bokuto scrambles up beside him, and Kenma lets himself be shuffled out of the room to rapid fire talk and some questions. A quick rinse off and everyone heads home, Akaashi and Bokuto waving them off as they split ways. Akaashi lives close, exactly halfway between Nekoma and Fukurodani, making his house eternally host to some of the volleyball teams going back and forth. Given his parents wealth, the size of their home, and the fact that said parents are always gone, it works out well for everyone.

Kuroo and Kenma walk in comfortable silence, the darkness of Tokyo more welcoming than frightening. They live in a good neighborhood, one of the safest of all the Tokyo wards, and as they pass the shrine Kuroo loves so much Kenma stops.

“Mm?” Kuroo cocks his head, and Kenma takes his hand.

They go up the steps, pass through the torii. The wind wraps around them like a living thing, holding and caressing before flitting away. Kuroo squeezes his hand, tight. The shrine is very old and tiny, and somewhat unkempt, no one person assigned to its care. But what Kenma loves best about it is that it's a cat shrine- well, a shrine where cats congregate in any case. It has no particular spirit type attached as far as he can tell, but always there are cats lounging about the shrine.
Tonight is no different, a tiny calico and a massive black cat curled up together at the base of the little shrine under the eaves, and the wind rustles the hanging shide. They wash their hands with the cold water of the ancient stone basin, the cats watching sleepily. Beside the basin, the shishi-odonshi clacks.

Kenma steps back, lets Kuroo pray for a moment. Watches, as he claps, closes his eyes. Loud, brash Kuroo, always so still and quiet in the shrine. He's a vision, inky in red and black, a rare expression of serenity on his face as he prays. Kenma looks away. Sometimes things are too personal to watch.

Offerings given, Kuroo walks back to him and Kenma takes his hand.

“I thought we could talk here,” he says, soft. “This is your place.”

“It's a shrine, it's hardly mine-”

Kenma gives him a look and Kuroo's eyes widen a little. “I know I don't say it enough.”

“You don't need to,” Kuroo says, clapping his hand a little tighter. “You say it without words every day.”

Kenma looks away, cheeks heating up. “Shut up,” he mutters, hears Kuroo snicker. “I think... I think we should talk to Bokuto.”

“You're sure?”

“I'm sure.”

Between the moonlight and ambient lights of the city, Kenma can see every flash of joy and fear and unabashed love on Kuroo's face before Kuroo leans in to gently kiss his temple.

“I love you,” Kuroo says, so soft it's as if the words have been breathed out of him- as if love were as simple and native to his state of being as breathing itself.

Kenma reaches up with his free hand, touches his cheek.

“Don't cry,” he says, soft.

Kuroo turns his face to kiss his palm, soft and devoted. “Happy tears, Kenma.”

Kenma kisses them off his cheeks.

oOo

Training camp is upon them that next week, and Kenma hides his smile for the most part when Hinata springs out of the bus to come over to him, waving frantically. “Kenma, Kenma! Hi! We made it in one piece but we stopped at a shrine to stretch a little and it was full of cats, and look!” He shoves his phone into Kenma's hands, showing him a picture of an extraordinarily fat calico cat asleep on top of the offering box, and a curious crow looking up at it. “It's us!”

“MY SON!!!”

Hinata shrieks with excitement and bolts over to Bokuto, who holds his hands up in blocking
position for Hinata to jump and high five. “Bokuto-senpaiii!”

Daichi looks less than thrilled with this development, and Kenma snickers before handing Hinata his phone back. Lev barrels past for their usual height discussion, and Kuroo comes down the stairs to shake Daichi's hand. Sugawara, far too pretty as always, shuttles everyone up the stairs like the mother he is, and Kenma finds himself next to Daichi as they walk up.

“Kenma-san.”

Kenma jolts a little, looking over to Karasuno's captain despite his best wishes. “Yes?”

Daichi smiles at him, the usual tension easing from his face. “I know we don't talk much, but it's good to see you. Hinata has missed you very much, but so did the rest of our team. It's good to see our city family.”

Kenma blinks, stunned, and Daichi turns a very fetching shade of red and turns his face away.

“I-I mean-”

“It's okay,” Kuroo drawls, slinging an arm around Daichi. “We miss our country bumpkin family too. Yamamoto wouldn't shut up for all of last week. I wish we were both a little closer, getting out to Miyagi is a pain.”

“Getting to Tokyo is just as much of one,” Daichi retorts.

Kenma lets them bicker, feeling a bit of his heart ease.

*Family.* It's a nice sensation, and one that feels perfectly right. They're a family now, a big complicated family with so much friendship and happiness and love in it that he feels a little overwhelmed at times.

“You look thoughtful,” Kuroo murmurs to him as they reach the gym, Daichi going ahead to chide the first years for not bowing at the door.

Kenma looks up at him, smiles.

Gets on his tip-toes, and kisses him right there in front of everyone.

The gym explodes into noise, Ubugawa's Masaki laughing and hi fiving Shinzen's Ogano and the entire Nekoma team yelling in excitement. Karasuno just cheers outright, Sugawara looking like his entire life has been made, and Bokuto bolts over to hug them both as Fukurodani fails to hold him back.

“I LOVE YOU GUYS.”

“Put me down, Bokuto.”

“Yes Kenma.”

Nekomata-sensei just rolls his eyes, looking fond. Their open secret was now a good deal less secret, but Kenma can't care less. Kuroo grins like an idiot, looking stupidly happy.

“All right, all right,” he yells at the room. “As if you guys didn't know. Let's get moving before Kenma explodes from embarrassment.”

“Kenmaaaaaa!” Hinata's at his side in an instant, beaming at him. “I'm really happy for you guys.”
“You already knew about us.”

“I’m still really happy!”

Kenma can’t quite hide his smile, and Hinata’s eyes go all starry. “So am I.”

“Kenma you're so cool!!!”

-oOo-

Everything stays exactly the same with training, except that Kuroo gets teased a great deal more (no one is foolish enough to try and tease Kenma), and when evening comes Kenma heads back to the team room. He's expecting to have it to himself, but-

Akaashi, of all people, is on his futon. He smiles slightly, gives the tiniest wave, and Kenma joins him on the futon with his game.

“I didn't come to talk about volleyball, if that's what you're wondering,” Akaashi says, his soft voice soothing. “I had a long week and need a night in peace.”

Kenma hands over his DS with a questioning look, and Akaashi smiles.

They've been friends for a long time, it seems. Kuroo and Kenma had both played against him in middle school, and they'd struck up a casual acquaintance since Kuroo was criminally incapable of not making friends with people, it seemed. And then when Akaashi had gone to Fukurodani, they'd truly gotten to know each other. Kenma likes him, likes his quiet ways and his control, how much he cares even though he hides it under mild words. Akaashi is who the team goes to for help, Akaashi is the one who keeps Bokuto's head on straight, Akaashi is beautiful and graceful and-

And Kenma 

likes him.

The kind of likes with faint heat on his skin, sending pleasant shivers down his spine because-well. Well. Akaashi is beautiful, and clever, and Kenma's mouth goes dry when Akaashi looks up at him from under his lashes and says, “Do you have any water left?”

He hands over his water bottle silently.

Ah.

Hm.

This could make things interesting.

Something he needs to talk to Kuroo about in any case, because Kuroo is hopelessly in love with Bokuto, who loves Akaashi, who Kenma also likes. Four of them, instead of three? Squares were very stable, after all. All four of them, together.

“-ma.”

He blinks, looks away from his game. Akaashi is curled up, looking at his own game.

“Hm?”

Akaashi flexes his fingers a couple of times. “I just... I've been thinking.”
“About?”

“A lot of things, really.” Akaashi puts the game down, rolls onto his back to look at the ceiling. “Bokuto says that people who are alike find each other. Like all the same kinds of birds, flocking together. You’ve never apologized for who you are, not once. Even when your senpai were the worst sort of people. Even when Kuroo was nervous around them, you wouldn't stop being yourself. I've been thinking about that a lot. And reading up on some things.”

Kenma waits. Akaashi runs a hand over his face.

“I don't know,” he says at last, softly. “I don't know what I am. Sometimes I like girls, but not that much. Not enough to marry one. Not- not enough to sleep with someone. I don't know. There's just a lot of thoughts in my head right now. I just think it's amazing, how you're always just you. You're a lot like Bokuto that way.”

Kenma made a face despite himself, and Akaashi laughed.

“I know, the comparison is strange.”

“Eh.”

Akaashi sighed, picking the game back up. “Thanks for listening.”

“That’s all the warning he gets before Bokuto pops up beside him, beaming. He's in his uniform, looking- looking very good, honestly, with his forearms exposed from a pushed up blazer and his tie loose. Bokuto looks good all the time, but the blazer softens the thick lines of his muscles,
“Ah,” Kenma manages, shocked at the sight of him.

“It is you! What're you doing here?”

He feels his cheeks heat up and looks back at the map. Bokuto gasps.

“You got the wrong train, didn't you!!”

“Shut up.”

“You did! That's okay, I'm glad you're here. Do you want to go see the owls with me?”

Kenma blinks, turning back to him, not quite daring to look all the way up at him. Bokuto looks excited, but just like with Kuroo there's something else hiding under the happy face. “Owls?”

“Yeah! Ikefukurō-zō, they're these owl statues in the station.” Bokuto points at a sign that does in fact tell them that the owls are that way.

What is his life coming to? “Sure.”

Bokuto brightens. “Thanks Kenma!” He takes his hand, and practically skips through the station until they reach the owls. It's an old pair of statues, one of the Owl himself in normal position, then three baby owls to the side. Kenma doesn't want to admit it, but they are terribly cute. Bokuto coos at them, clearly happy, and Kenma feels that same twist in his heart as when Kuroo gets invested in something.

Well then. Four of them it will have to be.

“Do you want a picture?” he finds himself asking, and Bokuto beams.

Pictures successfully taken, he settles in on Bokuto's left and doesn't try and shrug off the arm that gets slung over his shoulders. It's easier to be curled in under the arm of a friend than face the crowds alone. Bokuto leads them through the crowds to a quieter spot to wait for the train- a good half hour, at the least.

“Bokuto,” he says quietly as they take a seat on the benches. “Why are you here?”

Bokuto's fingers move restlessly. “Oh, you know, I just heard about the owls and I was bored so hey hey, I thought, and I just left!”

Kenma pulled out his phone, pulling up a game. “You're a bad liar, Koutarou.”

Bokuto gasps. “You called me by my name! I've been asking you to for a year!”

“Answer the question, Koutarou.”

He goes quiet and a little more still, but his fingers are still moving restlessly. “It- it's nothing, really. I just... I didn't want to be around lots of people I knew and feeling alone. I mean, I have friends! Some. Not many, but some. But they were busy and practice was over and I didn't do good at it today, you know, I messed up the spikes a lot, and it was my fault! And Akaashi wasn't mad but a few others were because I couldn't get it together and they left and then I was just all alone because Akaashi had to go home and I didn't have anything to do because my homework was done and no one was home and I was really, really sad. And I thought- I thought the owls might make me happy.” Bokuto shifts a little where he sits, and Kenma puts his phone in his pocket. He doesn't
want to think about the consequences, so he doesn't. Just slips Bokuto's hand into his, clasping them together. Bokuto goes perfectly still, and Kenma stares straight ahead, refusing to listen to his racing heart.

Slowly, Bokuto leans into him, and turns his head to press his face into Kenma's hair.

“I don't want to be alone,” he whispers. “I don't want to be alone, ever ever ever again and when I am it's so scary.”

Kenma squeezes his hand and Bokuto trembles a little bit, some old memory making him shake.

“I'm here,” he says simply. “Right here, right now, we're here together.”

Bokuto nods, his hand shaking a little. “We're here,” he echoes quietly.

Kenma's phone buzzes, and he takes it out. A text from Kuroo- where are you?? i'm in our house and i'm gonna eat everything

He texts back quickly. Ikebukuro.

Bokuto rests his head against Kenma's, watching the screen as the message sends.

It takes exactly two seconds after it shows “read!” before Kuroo is calling him. Bokuto snickers, and Kenma rolls his eyes as he answers.

“I'm fine,” he leads with.

“What the fuck are you doing in Ikebukuro?! Were you kidnapped?!” Kuroo demands, his voice tinny on the other end. “What the hell, Kenma!”

“I took the wrong train,” he says, rolling his eyes again. “It's fine, Bokuto's with me. We're waiting for the train back.”

“BOKUTO?! Why is Bokuto in Ikebukuro?! Is he sick? What the fuck is- put him on!”

“Not until you calm down.”

“I AM CALM.”

“Are not.”

“Am too. Pass me to Bokuto.”

Kenma rolls his eyes and passes the phone over. Bokuto takes the phone, a real smile on his face now. “Kuroo!” A pause then, “Yeah, complete accident! I was really excited to see him. There are owl statues here, I made Kenma come with me to take a picture. No, we're heading home. I- what-no, slow- oh. Yeah, definitely. Kuroo, it's fine! We'll be okay! We only have a little while more before the train is here. No- no, no, it's fine! I-I'm fine. Really. I'll see you soon.” He passes the phone back, looking happier than before. “Here.”

Kenma puts it to his ear. “Are you better?”

“I'm still worried about both of you.” Kuroo sounds more subdued now, a little more even tempered. “Is he okay?”

Kenma glances at Bokuto, who's watching the people pass them by. “He will be.”
“Tch. He worries me.”

“Mmm. Keep the bed warm for me.”

Kuroo chuckles, but the sound fades a little. “Take care of him, Kenma. You're the love of my life, but that's my best bro you've got there.”

“I'd threaten to hang up but I unfortunately know you're serious,” Kenma sighs. “Don't worry. I'll be home soon.”

“I love you, you little fluffball.”

“Rude.”

Kenma hangs up sharply, and puts the phone back in his pocket. Bokuto leans against him, gently knocking their heads together.

“Did you really just ride the train to see just the owls?” He asks after a moment.

“No.” Bokuto squeezes his hand. “I, uh. Kuroo likes shrines a lot, and Kishimojindo is so close to here that I thought I might go get him something. It's only a kilometer away from the station. But then I saw you and you- you were right there and you could see me and talk to me and you were much better. There's owl statues at the shrine, too, and I wanted to see those too, but you're much better than statues!”

Kenma turns, looks up at him. Meets his eyes.

There's never the faintest hint of guile in them. Bokuto wears his heart in his eyes, his soul bared for the world to see- for Kenma to see, right now, in this crowded station.

“You could have gotten anything for him, but you wanted to go to a shrine for him,” he says faintly. His heart is beating so hard he can hear it in his ears, an ache of joy settled deep inside.

“Of course! He loves shrines. He likes lots of things but I think he would like the shrine gift the best. It would be personal!”

“Koutarou.”

Bokuto's eyes go wide. “Ye-yes?”

“You're a good person.”

Bokuto stares at him for a long moment, and his eyes well up. He looks away and rubs at his eyes, lips trembling a little, clearly overwhelmed.

“Koutarou,” Kenma says, lifting their hands to press his cheek to the back of Bokuto's hand. “You love him a lot, don't you?”

Bokuto nods, ducking his head. “I'm sorry,” he whispers, and a single fat tear runs down his cheek. “I didn't mean too. I know he's- he's yours, but I love him a lot. And Akaashi a lot. And you a lot. You're all so good to me. Even when you pretend you're mean you're nice and I know you'd never ever really hurt me, or lie to me, or make fun of me in a mean way.” He shakes as Kenma kisses the tips of his fingers. “Please don't be mad.”

“I'm not mad. Not at all.” Kenma smiles a little, and Bokuto watches him like a puppy who's been kicked, waiting to see what'll happen next. “We should bring him to Kishimojindo. Together.”
“Really?”

Kenma reaches up with his free hand, rubbing away any remaining tear tracks. “Really.”

“But... but you two...”

Kenma looks away. “But us two would like to be more than two. We'd like to be three, with you. And one day, four with Akaashi, if he wants.”

Bokuto gasps, soft and excited, and Kenma glances back to see him full of smiles. He is so soft, and so loving. So full of joy. “Really?”

“Really.”

“So- So I would get two boy friends, and my best friend would be one of them?” Bokuto marvels. “And- and you don't mind all-” He gestures vaguely.

“All what?”

“All of my- my head being wrong. And my mood goes everywhere. And how I can't be alone.” Bokuto looks a bit more serious now. “You can say no. I had girlfriends who did.”

Kenma shrugs one shoulder, pulling out his phone again to check the time. “Do you think I'm wrong in the head because I don't like people looking at me?” He asks.

“No! You're perfect!”

“Then stop thinking that I would think you aren't perfect too.”

Bokuto's lips pressing fleeting against his cheek is a pleasant surprise. He smiles to himself, puts the phone away. “Come on. The train will be here shortly.”

“Yes, Kenma!”

The ride home is, as it should be, silent. The evening rush has passed, and they have an entire car to themselves after the third stop. It's gotten very late. Kenma plays on his phone, leaning into Bokuto, who provides commentary on the game here and there.

“We don't have to talk about it right now,” Kenma says softly as he kills another enemy, “but something happened so you can't handle being alone, didn't it?”

Bokuto nods against his head. “I don't like to think about it. But I'll tell you about it one day.”

“That's okay.” He kills another enemy. “Koutarou.”

“Yeah?”

“Stay with us tonight.”
The thing is. Well. The thing is, Kuroo Tetsurou had a shit childhood.

Looking back, he can safely say there were only a few bright spots in the unmitigated disaster that was his life until he turned 12. The fact that he had friends whose houses he was often invited to stay at, and the fact that one of those friends was Kozume Kenma ended the list, actually. One day he knows he'll have to talk to someone about it, but for now- well, for now that shit is behind him. The past is firmly in the past, and he can laugh, be happy, and go forward in life with joy.

Unless Kenma pulls shit like this.

Then the past comes rushing up to swamp him, ghostly hands grabbing him and pulling him deep into the inky black depths of despair.

“Kuro,” Kenma says into his chest, the pet name familiar and soothing. “Kuro, let go of me please. I need to shower.”

Tetsurou is shaking and he knows it, but Kenma is home and safe and firmly encased in his arms where he should be. Tetsurou kisses the top of his head, exhaling shakily.

“You're home,” he says helplessly.

Kenma gently pats his back, and squirms out of his grip. “I'm home. And I'm going to shower.” He slips past him, leaving Bokuto standing in the genkan looking nervous, and Tetsurou flings his arms around him immediately. Bokuto hugs him back tight, and the tightness of his chest eases. Bokuto may be shorter than him, but he has the muscles of a young and powerful god. Tetsurou buries his face against Bokuto's neck, breath coming easier as Bokuto's hand comes up to cup the back of his head.

“Hey hey hey, Kuroo, we're back! It's okay!”

Tetsurou manages a faint noise and clutches him tighter. He doesn't want to let go. Bokuto, for all that he waffles back and forth, is the most dependable person he knows.

Bokuto gently scratches through the hair at the base of his neck, soothing, and Tetsurou finally lifts his head. Bokuto presses their foreheads together once, a gentle knock.

“Kenma made me an offer,” he says, sounding almost nervous. He's so quiet right now, it's strange. Bokuto is all noise and light, not the faint fear that Tetsurou can hear. “To be three, and eventually four! Do you want that too?”

“Yes,” Tetsurou breathes, heart racing. “Yes, yes, definitely, I want to. I mean, if you do, if you don't it's okay and I swear we won't do anything different because you're my best bro, Bo, you
know that and-"

“You're talking really fast,” Bokuto says, and tilts his head just enough to give him warning before kissing him.

The world stills, and Tetsurou's heart slows as he kisses back. This is nothing like kissing Kenma. Kenma is the curl and purr of love and desire twining around his heart, sunk deep into his bones and impossible to extricate. Bokuto is like kissing the sun, fiery desire that licks tiny flames over his skin and burrows deep in his center, finding a place to roost.

Bokuto pulls back first, beaming at him. “Nice.”

“Rude,” Tetsurou says, breathless. “Didn't anyone ever teach you not to interrupt?”

Bokuto just grins, getting hold of his hair and tugging a little. Tetsurou's knees go a bit weak. “Nope.”

“You're a brat.”

“Awwww, Kuroo!”

Tetsurou pulls away, cheeks heated. “We'll stay in the upstairs living room, Kenma's room isn't habitable for humans—”

Bokuto snakes an arm around his waist and reels him back in for another kiss, and Tetsurou melts. He spares a moment to be grateful that the Kozume's aren't home as Bokuto crowds him against a wall, and buries his fingers in Bokuto's soft hair. He could get very used to this. He could get very used to Bokuto's easy, wandering hands, and how he can't help but shake a little under them.

From above them he hears Kenma call, “Kuro, stop kissing in the genkan and be a decent host to our boyfriend.”

Our boyfriend. It has such a nice sound to it.

Bokuto pulls back, surveying him, and looks very pleased by the results.

“I like it when you blush,” he says, and Tetsurou squawks in protest.

The shower starts as Bokuto takes his hand, and Tetsurou takes him upstairs. The Kozume house is spacious- Kenma's family is well off but don't flaunt it. The house is serene, quiet. Lots of white walls and traditional art, even though the building itself is more western styled, and upstairs in the comfortable living room with its built-in bookshelves, couch, and TV Tetsurou breathes the easiest.

Bokuto looks around in interest, bounding over to look at the knick nacks on the shelves.

“Kenma's room is there,” Tetsurou says, pointing at the door. “And the spare bedroom is there- it's basically my bedroom. I have clothes here, I'll get you something to change into.”

“Thanks Kuroo!”

The spare room is- well, it's his room, really.

He spends more time here than anywhere else. His laptop is here, all of his important belongings are here, most of his wardrobe too. Piece by piece the Kozume's have quietly moved him in. At his grandparents house all that really remains are posters on the wall, a bed he last slept in a month ago, and childhood toys that he can't quite part with but wouldn't be upset to lose. The Kozume's
know about him and Kenma, have presumed that he would marry into their household since the
day they walked into the kitchen as Tetsurou was cooking for Kenma and he kissed the top of
Kenma's head out of habit. He doesn't think Sousuke and Saya Kozume really know how much it
means, being offered this home. They are somber and serious people, their marriage one of quiet
contemplation but their child an unexpected joy.

But here he is, fishing out clothes, and then Bokuto's right behind him.

“Here-”

Bokuto kisses him again, slower this time, but with a lot more heat. Tetsurou feels almost faint,
cheeks heating up as he kisses back.

He's very flushed when he pulls back, breath shaky. “Hi,” he says, dizzy with happiness.

“Hi,” Bokuto grins, kissing his cheek, and steals the clothes from his hand. “We're sleeping
together so soon, Kuroo! You move fast.”

“Oi!”

Bokuto laughs and skips out of the way of a smack, winking at him. “Hey, today's turning out good
after all!”

“Obnoxious little owl,” Tetsurou mutters, rolling his eyes. “Get changed, I'm going to finish dinner.
I put it off until you two got here.”

“Can I help?!”

“Absolutely not, you'd eat everything before I could get it finished. Get changed.”

“Awww.”

\[ \text{OoO} \]

His hands aren't shaking as he puts on the apron in the kitchen. It's his apron, as none of the
Kozume's can cook whatsoever. Saya has been known to very literally burn salads on accident
before, Sousuke believes that spices are unnecessary, and Kenma... Kenma can be trusted to run the
rice cooker and only the rice cooker. Cooking eases his mind, and it's a pleasant thing. He makes
most of the food these days, and if he's too exhausted there's always delivery.

Gyudon with a side of yaki onigiri has been his plan, and he'd been half done before Kenma's
unplanned excursion. He sighs, picking up the knives he's set aside and continuing his work.

His hands don't ever shake when he cooks, even when the past does its best to rattle him. Tetsurou
pushes the thought aside and focuses only on the food. It's not a complex recipe, but it requires
attention so nothing is over or under done. He lets himself fall into the familiar rhythm of cooking,
listening with half an ear as the shower turns off. The voices from above are faint, and he tunes
them out, but he does hear Bokuto's surprised squawk.

Kenma fresh from the shower does that to everyone.

He's waiting for everything to finish cooking when arms lace around his waist.

“Sorry for scaring you,” Kenma says, his voice soft.

Tetsurou squeezes his wrist. “I overreacted,” he say, just as soft. “And it turned out okay in the
“I still scared you,” Kenma says, turning his hand so it's pressed flat to Tetsurou's shirt over his stomach. “I'll try to be more careful.”

Tetsurou slumps, letting his hair obscure his eyes a bit. He knows Kenma tries, knows it's never on purpose, but fear is cruel and powerful. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Kenma lets him go after one last squeeze, and goes to fetch the plates and bowls. The house is always quiet in a good way, an island of calm in the bustle of Tokyo. As Kenma sets the table for three, Tetsurou listens to the restless sounds of Bokuto upstairs, and hides a smile as a familiar patter of feet come rapidly down the stairs.

“Kenmaaaaaa, can I help?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Awww-”

“Hush.”

Tetsurou turns just in time to see Kenma duck his head to hide a smile, and Bokuto beaming as he looks between them both.

“You're impossible,” he tells him, and Bokuto bounds over to him, leaning in lightning fast to kiss his cheek. “Hey!”

“You made gyudon! I love gyudon!”

“You love most foods,” Tetsurou says without any heat, and despite the pounding in his chest leans over to kiss him quickly. Bokuto squeaks, putting a hand to his mouth as Tetsurou spins back around, face flaming. “Pour drinks for us, and don't try and juggle the cups.”

“Awww, bro, you know me so well!”

The table is set, drinks are brought, and the food is served with no incident larger than Kenma dropping a pair of chopsticks because Bokuto takes his hand and kisses his knuckles. Tetsurou calls that a win in anyone's book, and they settle down for dinner. Bokuto is quiet for once, clearly savoring the cooking, and once they're done the dishes are swept away, the knives and cutting boards cleaned, and the pans piled for Kenma to do later (Tetsurou cooks, but it's Kenma's job to make sure he has something to cook with), they go back upstairs to the softness of the blankets and futons.

Tetsurou immediately lays claim to the one on the edge closest to the wall, Kenma settling into the middle. Bokuto squishes up against Kenma, looking like he wants to ask about why Tetsurou has his back so firmly to the wall, but decides not to. Kenma sighs, burrowing down, and turns on his side.

“You can be the big spoon,” he says reluctantly.

Bokuto beams and wraps around him, kissing Kenma's neck. Kenma makes a considering noise and tips his head to the side, offering up more neck.

“Leave a mark and you won't be touching me for a month,” he grumbles, with no real teeth behind it. Bokuto takes him seriously though, and Tetsurou leans back into the pile of pillows to watch.
Kenma get more and more flushed at Bokuto's oh-so-careful administrations.

“You going to make a move?” Bokuto teases.

“And disrupt such a pretty scene?”

“Fuck off,” Kenma manages between soft gasps.

Bokuto laughs against the tender skin of Kenma's throat, eyes crinkling at the edges, and Tetsurou's stomach swoops with desire as Bokuto pulls wrecked noises from him.

Kenma apparently tires of this and lightly flicks Bokuto's hair. He backs off, nuzzling against Kenma's head, and coos, “So soft.”

“Hush.”

Tetsurou smirks, and leans in for a soft good night kiss. Kenma kisses him back, and then tugs him closer so that Bokuto can kiss him too.

There's a not inconsiderable amount of tongue, and if Tetsurou weren't so fucking tired and this wasn't so new, the evening might take a more fun turn.

Bokuto seems to catch that and settles down, his smile big and smug. “Two boyfriends,” he mumbles, smiling. “Two.”

Tetsurou pulls both pillows over his ears and settles down. The last thing he sees before sleep claims him is two pairs of golden eyes, reassuring in the darkness.

oOo

He wakes with the remnants of screams in his ears, and it takes him a solid minute before his heart stops pounding. The room is empty, the futons put back against the wall, and he lets go of the pillows. They fall from his head and the world rushes back in. Birds outside, and cars passing and downstairs, Bokuto laughing. The relief hits him like a punch to the chest and if he had been sitting he would have fallen back from how weak it makes him.

The team knows about his nightmares, know not to wake him unexpectedly. The only one allowed to do so is Kenma, who he's so attuned to after so many years there's little chance he'll panic at the surprise.

He gets up slowly, the last bit of leftover adrenaline making him nervous, and once he has himself under control he heads down the stairs.

Saya is at the dining table, seated across from Bokuto and chatting about something to do with Ikebukuro as Kenma plays a game in between eating awful sugary American cereal. She and Kenma are similar in looks, with the same slight build and delicate features. She wears her hair in a mid-length cut, enough to put up but often kept down, and her smile is the same tiny, precious thing as her sons. She looks up as Tetsurou walks in, and gives him a considering look.

Tetsurou is a master of the Kozume Facial Language. He has to be. The whole family will go weeks without exchanging more than two words if given the opportunity.

Are you sure? is all she asks, no judgment. He nods once, and she nods back, satisfied, before turning back to Bokuto.
Tetsurou passes the table, squeezing the back of Bokuto's neck on the way, and slips into the kitchen where Sousuke is heating his food. While Kenma got most of Saya's looks, his eyes are all Sousuke's, golden and full of quiet intelligence. Sousuke is not a tall man, only a few inches taller than Kenma, and has the disposition of a Buddhist monk. He says only exactly what's needed, is utterly unflappable, and loves deeply. He was the one to quietly advocate for Tetsurou to live there, had been the one to go and help him fetch his things bit by bit, and had been the one to hold him when the worst of the news about his family hit. Kozume Sousuke is an undeniably good man.

Sousuke gives him the slightest of smile, eyes fond, and clasps his shoulder lightly. It's practically a glowing commendation wrapped in a monologue, and Tetsurou blinks rapidly to clear his suddenly watering eyes.

"Thank you," he says softly, too soft for anyone to overhear, and Sousuke's smile turns into something soft and fond as he goes out to the dining table with his food. Alone in the kitchen, Tetsurou composes himself and scrubs at his eyes. Sousuke's voice joins the conversation, and Bokuto laughs again. Tetsurou braces himself against the counter, covering his mouth as the relief wells up inside of him. The past is behind him, its ugly black water evaporating in the face of the quiet sun that is the Kozume family, unrelenting in their love. Just like him, they have room for more love- they have room for another child in their house, another stray duckling that loves Kenma too.

Here, in this quiet house, in this quiet neighborhood, in this bustling city, there is so much love it seems as if the house can't contain it all. He wipes his eyes a few more times, gathers food from the refrigerator, and joins everyone at the table.

\[ \text{oOo} \]

He's dressing when Kenma steps into the room, still playing his game, and says, "Wear something other than your gym clothes. We're going back to Ikebukuro today."

"...We are?"

"Yes."

There's a hint of a flush to his cheeks. It's a pretty sight.

"Why are we going to Ikebukuro?"

Bokuto appears behind Kenma, grinning. "It's a date! A surprise date!"

"Is it a surprise if you tell me where we're going?" Tetsurou teases him, and Bokuto makes a face at him.

"I'm not telling you where in Ikebukuro we're going, so it's still a surprise." He sidles in past Kenma, and effortlessly reels Tetsurou in against him for a soft kiss. Tetsurou, half naked and suddenly very aware of it, feels his face go hot. Bokuto grins, broad hand lazily running down his back. "You're as cute as Kenma when you get all red."

"Sh-shut up."

Bokuto kisses his cheek, snickering, and darts away before Tetsurou can grab him.

"Fine, I'll dress decent. Bo, there's clothes in the closet, if anything will fit."

Kenma wanders back out, presumably to dress in his own room, and Tetsurou fishes out clothes.
Blue jeans, black boots, white v-neck, and a simple flannel with a plaid pattern in red and black is plenty dressed up when his usual clothes are shorts and a t-shirt. Bokuto manages to find a t-shirt that fits despite being borderline obscene in how tight it is, and in an incredible turn of events can just fit into Tetsurou's loosest pair of jeans.

Tetsurou heads back out to the main room, absently replying to a picture Taketora has sent of a cat, and looks up as Kenma leaves his room.

“You said to dress nice,” he says dryly. Kenma, in an oversized white sweatshirt, black pants, fucking *Uggs*, and the same goddamn flannel tied to his waist, just gives him a slow blink.

“I just said not gym clothes. *You* said decent.”

“Kenma.”

Kenma just gives him the tiniest smirk, gives Bokuto a very thorough once over, and heads down the stairs.

The two of them stand at the top, and Tetsurou breathes, “That boy is going to be the fucking death of me.”

“Yeah. But in a good way.”

“Fuck.”

“Mmm, that's a bit fast!”

“*Bokuto Koutarou you little shit*—”

They catch the next train out, Kenma making a beeline to the back of the train to sit against the wall and Tetsurou following to sit at his right, as always. Bokuto drops down next to him and slings a casual arm around his shoulders, and Tetsurou's heart warms at how casually proprietary it is. Bokuto likes things that are *his*, collecting the things he loves without regrets or any sort of regard for how others may view him for doing so. His team, his partners, his friends- Bokuto loves and protects them all without any reservations.

It's a Sunday, so the train is less full than usual. Tetsurou relaxes a little, as the three of them are the only ones in their half of the car, and relaxes yet further when Kenma leans against him without looking up from his game. He feels safe, encased away from the world, and jolts as Bokuto's lips graze his temple. He looks over, surprised, but Bokuto just grins. The rest of the train hasn't noticed in the slightest, and Tetsurou steels his nerves and quickly kisses Bokuto's cheek back.

His and Bokuto's phones both buzz, and he pulls it out to find a message from Kenma.

*You two are impossible,* it reads, and Tetsurou leans over to press a kiss to the top of Kenma's head.

It's not a long ride, and they get off in Ikebukuro station with a collective groan.

“*At least it doesn't take long,*” Tetsurou says, stretching. “*So, where are we going?*”

Bokuto takes his hand, tugging him forward. Kenma reluctantly puts his game away and follows along, letting Bokuto lead them through the station to the Seiko exit and into the light of Ikebukuro. It's a bright, sunny day, just a hint of a chill in their to keep them refreshed. “*Look! It's so pretty here!*”
“It's all buildings,” Kenma says dryly, but follows along. “It's a bit of a walk, but not much.”

“A bit of a walk?”

“Maybe 15 minutes. Not far.” Kenma ducks his head and shyly slides his hand into Tetsurou's free one. Tetsurou's heart sings a little, and he squeezes Kenma's hand back. The streets are mostly free of crowds and they make their way down the main street to their mystery destination with no real troubles. They pass all manner of stores and buildings, from a 7-11 to a Soft Bank building, a massage parlor that appears to be actually for massage, a cafe that Tetsurou's mentally notes to take them to later as they have apple pie in the window, book shops and real estate offices, what's definitely a front for yakuza selling shoes, and finally-

He stops dead in his tracks, and looks at his boyfriends, overwhelmed.

Bokuto beams at him, and Kenma hides a smile.

“Kishimojindo?” he says as he reads the sign, helpless.

“Surprise,” Kenma says, soft.

“I was going to walk here and get you something yesterday!” Bokuto tells him. “But then Kenma said it would be great if we all came together!”

The temple sprawls out before them, the trees surrounding it full of vibrant color and light. They're still to the back of it, but the sign is clear. They walk to the entrance, Tetsurou looking at the trees and the ancient beams that hold up the temple, and feeling utterly moved. They walk through the gates, the bright red torii to the side, and Tetsurou stops to take it all in. The trees are just starting to turn, the red maple leaves of the tall trees making the whole place seem awash with color. For all that the temple is on the larger side, it's still serene and tranquil.

“You are the best,” he tells them, moved.

Bokuto bumps their shoulders together, and Kenma leans in against him a little.

They wash their hands at the stone fountain, and Bokuto has them take his picture next to a statue of three little owls- nearly identical to the one in Ikebukuro station, apparently. Tetsurou reads every sign, sits at every bench, and tries not to smile too wide as they stop at the shop for the ema. These ema are particularly lovely, shaped like houses with paintings of pomegranates on them- the symbol of goddess Kishimojin. He gets another ema, this one earthenware and for Myoken Bosatsu, who also has a small shrine on the grounds, and is considering what else to get when Bokuto gasps and holds up some of the little charms.

“These, please!”

He looks over, and swallows hard.

The omamori Bokuto holds are “family love”, four of them, and the brocade is red and brilliant gold.

Perfect.

He blinks rapidly a few more times to clear his eyes, and also buys four of the “happiness” omamori.

Kenma, in classic Kenma fashion, considers all of them and instead buys one for good luck.
They go to the main temple first, and Tetsurou considers what to write as Kenma and Bokuto write their wishes on the *ema* for Kishimojin. His pen hesitates over the board before his heart settles.

*Please bring this new family together, he writes, and please help me to forgive my past.*

They hang the prayer boards, Bokuto's writing large and as boisterous as he is, and Kenma's neat, perfect writing leaving most of the *ema* free. Tetsurou claps twice, rings the bell, and presses his hands together.

*Everything changes, he thinks, breathing slowly out. Everything changes, day by day, but the past is unchangeable. It sits there, hiding, waiting for me every day to slip up, or something to go wrong. I hate thinking about what I was like then. What I dealt with. I am almost out of childhood now, but please. Please, let the child buried in me find some rest.*

He steps back and bows, getting out of the way, and is surprised to see Kenma also quiet in prayer. Bokuto is already done and stands beside him, and once Kenma lifts his head Tetsurou quietly takes his hand again. Around the side of the main temple is the other tiny shrine of Moyken Bosatsu, god of the North Star. This time he knows what to write on the *ema*.

*Please guide him home to us, he writes on the back, surprised to feel an ache in his chest. And please guide us to a peaceful harmony.*

Once they hang the *ema* Tetsurou claps twice and rings the bell before praying again. This time, the words come easier.

*Please guide my heart and my mind, he prays, and let me find the way to a happy home for the rest of my life.*

**OoO**

Bokuto slots into their lives with ease. He slots into Tetsurou's bed even easier, and that....worries him.

Tetsurou is the first to admit he's not exactly comfortable with the whole- well, the whole having of “proper” sex. The idea of letting himself be so utterly at the mercy of another person, or another person at *his* mercy- it's horrific. He loves kissing. He loves having hands on him, loves it when Bokuto takes the time to practically worship his body, loves it when kissing late night in Kenma's bed turns into heated hair grabbing and Kenma riling him up and then soothing him back down. Loves, quite a bit honestly, watching Kenma be driven to distraction by Bokuto in the evenings when they have the house to themselves.

Really, really doesn't love the idea of participating on his own with either of them.

But-

But he likes it, a lot, when Bokuto's hands squeeze just shy of controlling, and when they get worked up enough for Bokuto to bite him, *hard*. Loves the bruises and marks that Kenma leaves as well, the kisses that pepper his ribs while Bokuto marks up his back.

He's not sure how he feels about that bit, and yet when he knows the biting and kissing and outright devotion that Bokuto shows him will go no further than just that- it feels almost safe.

He reflects on these thoughts a month after they visit Kishimojindo, standing at the sink peeling potatoes. It's another week with Saya and Sousuke out of town (Sapporo, this time, and apparently having a great time if the pictures they have sent are any indication). He's covered in marks,
because Bokuto is a little shit who bit fucking wing shaped bruises into his back like the possessive asshole he is. It's alright though, because Kenma returned the favor of his own wings by putting the largest, darkest love bite of all time way too high up for Bokuto to cover on his neck. Tetsurou thinks on the wings on his back, and the heat that runs through him whenever he watches Bokuto kiss Kenma.

“Your mind is going fast.”

Tetsurou doesn't bother to turn.

“Just thinking.”

“As I said.”

Kenma's arms wrap around him, and he pauses in the peeling to look out the window at the passing cars. The neighborhood is quiet, but has its own bustle here and there.

“I love you,” he says quietly. “I say it a lot, I know but... You and our bratty owl. I don't know if I'd have ever found anyone who could take me as I am.”

Kenma rests his head in the center of Tetsurou's bare back. “Is this about sex?”

“A bit.”

“You've been thinking about that a lot lately.”

Tetsurou nods, setting the knife and potato down. “You and me... we have different needs. Always have. We've got different tastes, and ideas, and we're just... different. And people always think it's me that'd be the sex hungry one, and I feel... I feel weird about that.”

“Do you feel weird about sex with me?”

“I feel weird about sex with you.”

He can feel Kenma consider this, no offense taken. “And Koutarou?”

“Him too. But, and here's the strange bit, not if it were the three of us, all at once.”

“Why?”

Tetsurou lowers his arms to cover Kenma's around his waist. “I don't know,” he says simply. “Maybe it's trauma. Maybe it's just who I am. Maybe the trauma made me what I am, and that's the end of it. Maybe it's just hotter that way.”

“Crass.”

“Hush, don't call me out, we're having a moment.”

Kenma kisses one of the wing-bruises, and Tetsurou shivers. “Koutarou is all loud and bossy right up until anything real starts happening,” he says quietly. “When it's just the kissing, and touching and holding, he's perfectly in control. The second it gets serious he wants someone else in control. He's submissive in bed, he needs someone to be in charge. I've been doing some reading about it. I don't want to hurt him just because he likes being lead around.”

“Now who's being crass?”
Kenma promptly bites one of the bruises and Tetsurou yelps as his knees go a little weak.

“Ow, fuck, that's playing dirty.”

“You like it.”

“I do, unfortunately.”

Kenma nuzzles his head against his back again, and they go quiet for a bit. Tetsurou absently strokes his thumb over the back of Kenma's hands, reflecting.

“I don't hate it,” Kenma says at last, against his back. “I like it. A lot more than I thought I ever would. It's a little like- like a game. Like setting, I have to be in control. I know why Akaashi likes setting for him so much now. I get it. It's fun to watch him when he's listening and excited by something.”

Bokuto, on his knees in front of Kenma, Tetsurou in the room with them, waiting and listening with those intense eyes trained on him- there's a thought. There's one hell of a thought. Fuck.

“Huh,” Tetsurou manages. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Kenma sounds half smug. “He's pretty when he's suffering, and sexting is fun. He takes requests very well.”

“You're such a little shit.”

Tetsurou turns in Kenma's arms, leaning back against the sink. Kenma leans forward to rest his head on Tetsurou's chest, and he absently kisses the top of his head.

Kenma sighs softly, and turns to kiss a mark he's left at the edge of Tetsurou's ribcage, just over his heart. “We're not going to have the kind of sex that worries you for a long while, I think,” he says quietly. “Fooling around is fun. Messaging is fun. Hands are fun. But we need to work all of this out before any of us go far with it. If it's going to be the three of us, there's going to be a lot of negotiation. And maybe we should wait until even later. Maybe even after my graduation. We have time. We can wait. We don't have to rush.”

Tetsurou's hand comes up, cards through Kenma's hair.

“I think I told you once,” he says softly, “but it bears repeating. Kozume Kenma, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

Kenma looks up, and smiles, and pulls him down for a slow, easy kiss.

Text from: The Most Beautiful Boy
Kuroo-san, do you have time to speak with me this Sunday?

Text to: The Most Beautiful Boy
i'm free after noon, what's going on???

Text from: The Most Beautiful Boy
I just need someone to talk to to clear my head. You're good with that.

Text to: The Most Beautiful Boy
!! i didn't know you thought that. sure, where at

_Text from: The Most Beautiful Boy_
The cafe by my house?

_Text to: The Most Beautiful Boy_
it's a date.

Chapter End Notes

For a visual guide to Kishimojindo, which is incredibly beautiful, please watch this video by Japan Geographic: https://youtu.be/pizbdJSi1f8
Akaashi Keiji sits in a nicely lit cafe, the glasses he rarely wears perching on his nose, and considers one Kuroo Tetsurou.

“I have a problem,” he says, after taking a drink of coffee. It's scalding and bitter, just as he likes it. Kuroo considers this with his normal half smile, his eyes lazily half-closed, but Keiji knows he's fully awake and alert. It's a mistake people often make with Kuroo, thinking that he's not fully there. Kuroo is much like his teams nickname implies- a cat, lazy some days and racing around the next, but always alert to changes in his sphere of existence. “My problem is this. I like Kenma.”

“That seems like the opposite of a problem,” Kuroo says easily, his smile widening a bit. “As you might have noticed, I like Kenma too and it's working out great.”

Keiji gives him a look over his cup, and Kuroo smiles for real. He is an extraordinarily aesthetically pleasing man. Today even more so than usual. For one thing, he's not in his uniform or gym clothes. Instead he's in a very tasteful black v-neck, a soft scarf, inky black pants and boots, and a red plaid flannel. He looks exceptionally good, and the other patrons keep glancing at them. Keiji ignores the looks sent his way, but Kuroo seems pleased.

“It's precisely because I like Kenma and you do too that I have a problem,” Keiji says shortly. “I thought perhaps if I spoke to you, it might remove this...infatuation. You and Kenma are my friends, and I don't want to upset that.”

Kuroo takes a drink of his hot chocolate, and looks out the window. They're approaching the edge of the city proper, but the cafe is pleasantly half full and they're in the second level of the little building. The street below is churning with people about their day, and just beyond is a park. There are children playing there, a few kites flying. It's very domestic, and Kuroo's profile is elegant and handsome.

“Have you talked to Bokuto much recently?” Kuroo says suddenly. “Really talked to him?”

“What? Not really, no. He's been...”

Bokuto has been odd. Quiet and withdrawn. Watching Keiji when he thinks he isn't looking, as if he's some sort of upsetting puzzle that needs figuring out. He's still a menace on the court, and he's been putting on a good show for everyone, but Keiji knows him better than anyone.

“He's been busy,” Keiji finishes, uncertain the correct word to describe his ace's behavior last few weeks.

Kuroo is still looking out over the street and grounds, his eyes seeing something else. “Life is...messy,” he says at last. “Complicated. The things you think you know can change in an instant. For example, the fact that I can like Kenma, and you can like Kenma, and he can like both of us and I can like both of you, without sacrificing interest in either of you. Or another, for that matter. It's a strange and wonderful existence, this world, and I find it hard to believe that love is confined to just two people.”

Keiji stares. What?

Kuroo looks back at him, his face serious for once. “Your attentions are welcome,” he says quietly. “Kenma likes you too. Believe me when I say you'd be more than welcome with us. But it's not just me and Kenma any more. We've added a third.”
“Bokuto,” Keiji realizes.

“That's right.” The serious face cracks a little, and Keiji sees the slight fear behind all of Kuroo's masks. “Bokuto's been pining for you for years, Akaashi. Since the day he met you. Kenma is more than a little interested. And I've liked you as a person for a long time, and as- as a potential partner for a while now.”

“You're not serious.”

There's a flash of hurt in Kuroo's eyes, immediately hidden away. “Would I joke about something this important?”

No. No, Kuroo never would, but still.

“You- but- how would four people even work?” he finally says.

“I don't know,” Kuroo says, shrugging his shoulder with elegant grace. “But I'd imagine the same way three people do.”

Keiji is not stupid.

Not being stupid is something of a character defining trait of his, actually. He didn't get into Fukurodani on his volleyball skills, or his parents money. He's patient, and careful, and knows how to do research. He hunts until he finds the answer, and right now he needs to put that to good use.

So he does.

There are many benefits to being largely fluent in English, one of them being that he can read a great many Western websites about such exciting things as “polyamory” and know what's going on even if the context is still mind blowing. He spends the better part of five hours doing a great deal of reading, fetches some dinner, and spends another three hours doing yet more reading. When he's done, he turns the computer off and leaves his bedroom to go downstairs and sit in the dining room. The dining room is long, the dining table Western style and incredibly expensive. It can seat most of the team. Brown hardwood, elegant legs, and elegant chairs to match, it's quite a sight in the largely empty otherwise room. A china cabinet and a scroll showcasing his father's exquisite shodo skills are the only two decorations.

A clock ticks on the wall, disturbing the silence.

He gets up from his seat, calmly fetches a wine glass and the bottle he opened earlier that week, and pours himself a hefty amount.

He drinks, and thinks, and when Nobuyuki Kai joins him at the table he's still grappling with the thoughts in his head.

So many of Nekoma and Fukurodani's team stay at his house. Everyone is careful, knowing that the house will be closed to them at the slightest infraction, but Akaashi doesn't mind playing eternal host. It makes the big house feel much less lonely. Five bedrooms is too many in this sparsely decorated house, but his team are all welcome to everything but the master bedroom. His parents have been overseas for almost a year now, with no set return date in sight. He doesn't mind. They love him, and he loves them, and he's essentially an adult now.

“Kai-san,” he says as Kai begins eating his dinner. “What do you think about Kuroo-san and
Kenma?"

Kai raises an eyebrow. “What about them?”

“Their relationship,” Keiji clarifies.

Kai chews his food slowly, reflecting. “Healthy, I think. That's the best way to put it. No- balanced. They've both got their issues, but they rely on each other too well to let them get them down for too long.”

“What if they brought in a third?”

“A third?”

“A third person in their relationship.”

Kai's flash with understanding. “Ah. Is this actually about Bokuto?”

Keiji jolts. “What?”

“They don't hide it. Or the hickeys he leaves on them. Nekoma all knows about it. They seem happy, and honestly it seems pretty ideal.” Kai shrugs. “It's not for me. I get too jealous. But I can see why it works for them. Everyone brings something different to the table. I think...Bokuto makes them both very happy. Kenma smiles more these days.”

“Hmm.”

Keiji drinks the rest of his wine, and goes up to bed.

Kuroo was right. Life is messy.

For the first time in his life, Keiji skips school the next day. He texts some friends, and two of the volleyball club to let them know, and stays resolutely burrowed in his bed. He hates being uncertain about anything, and right now he's so uncertain about everything in his life that he wants to rip it all down and start from scratch. For the first time in his life, he wants, and he hates how it makes him feel.

The thing is, Kenma is who he likes. Pretty, quiet Kenma, who never asks for more than he's given, who is...

who's safe.

Kenma is safe.

There is no risk with Kenma, it seems. No worries about being overshadowed, or worries about miscommunication, or pushing for sex. He's known Kenma for years and he's never felt at all uneasy around him.

He rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling. Bokuto and Kuroo swirl at the edges of his thoughts, and finally he takes a deep breath and allows himself to follow the threads that lead to them. Kuroo, tall and handsome and clever, with his wicked grin and easy laugh- who's been his friend for some time now, even. He's known Kuroo since he started playing volleyball for real, when they were on opposite sides of the court and he was just some tall asshole to take down. He's clever and fast and beautiful, and- and gentle. Kind. Quiet, some days when all the teams are over
in his house, staring off into space while mechanically going through the motions of cooking them dinner. There's something arresting about him, even when he's quiet. He's a good man, always there with advice or jokes, and he can wrangle Bokuto even on days Keiji's temper is too far gone.

Keiji blinks at the ceiling.

Hmm.

He lets his mind wander a bit more. What would dates with Kuroo be like? Dates with Kenma are easy to picture: gaming in his room while Keiji reads, or watches a movie. Very simple. But Kuroo...

Kuroo likes giving attention, not receiving it. He likes showing off his partner, likes fun, likes shrines. He'd probably take them to nice restaurants with good food, walks through the park, arcades maybe, and libraries. He can try and hide it all he wants, but Keiji knows about Kuroo's reading habits, and it puts a lot of the so-called advanced students to shame. Kuroo is *smart*, 4th in his class, and Keiji likes someone with the discipline to study. He's intelligent, a natural leader, kind even when he's supposed to be the enemy-

He hates introspection, but apparently it's going to be necessary, because the realization hits him like a ton of bricks.

*I like him.*

“Damn,” he tells the ceiling, which is utterly unmoved.

At 2 PM he finally gets up after being on his phone for a while, and migrates downstairs to eat some of the leftover food from when Kai decided to go on a cooking spree for his latest girlfriend. This accomplished, he returns back upstairs and sits down at his desk, considering what to do now.

Bokuto is probably having a hard day without him there. For all that he's an ace, he has few true friends. Others think him too wild, too extreme, too devoted to the sport that he's going to make his life, his moods too much to handle. His moods may be erratic at times, but... But Bokuto Koutarou is a true friend, unwavering in his devotion, willing to drop everything to help others. Powerful and competitive, he still wants others to improve so they can play against him even better, and- and he's been pining for Keiji all this time. Even before they really knew each other, it seems. Keiji is *wanted* by someone, three someones even, and Bokuto Koutarou, who endlessly begs for his attention and never stops trying to impress him is one of them. It's both touching and- oh.

“No,” he tells the empty air. “Oh, no, no, no. I can't handle one crush, let alone three.”

The empty air seems very smug.

Keiji gets up, fetched cleaning supplies with grim determination, and spends the next three hours scrubbing the three bathrooms until they're spotless.

He's just finished with the last one when he hears the door bang open downstairs.

“AKAASHI!!!!”

Think of the devil, he thinks to himself in despair, and emerges from the downstairs bathroom to find that Bokuto has let himself in and looks like an absolute wreck. Half of his hair is down, the other half is up, and he's still in his gym clothes and kneepads.

“Bokuto, what-”
Bokuto slumps to the ground, letting out a sound that may be a wail, and may be relief. “You're okay!”

“Of course I'm okay, I just needed a day to myself. What are you doing?”

“You weren't at school! I ran here after practice to check on you, I thought you were dying.”

“Clearly I'm not.”

“You've never skipped school in your entire life,” Bokuto says, picking himself up and closing the door again. “Never ever. I tried to call you but you didn't pick up! I got worried.”

Keiji can feel his cheeks heating up. He's left his phone in his room like an idiot. Of course Bokuto was worried, but it's almost embarrassing at how happy it makes him that he's been thought of even when Bokuto has two boyfriends to be thinking of instead. “I'm-I'm fine. You can leave now.”

Oh, that was the wrong thing to say. Bokuto's face falls, clearly hurt, but he puts on a smile. “S-sure.”

Bokuto Koutarou has never tried to fake his emotions around Keiji before. He's never been shy about being upset, or his moods being all upside down again. He's never tried to hide anything from him- except Kenma and Kuroo.

Bokuto is picking himself up when Keiji blurts out, “Why didn't you tell me about them?”

Bokuto freezes, and for the first time Keiji sees real fear on his face. He strides over and Bokuto flinches back, as if expecting to be yelled at, and he hates that this is what they've come to. Hates that he's standing in front of what may very well be his best friend, and they've been lying to each other for almost two months now. Keiji steels his nerves, and gently reaches out to touch Bokuto's arm, the thick bicep flexing a little as Bokuto flinches again.

“I didn't want to change things,” Bokuto says, staring at the ground. His voice is shaking, honest fear there. “I didn't want you to leave me if-if you thought that I had somewhere else to go. Y-you're my best friend and I've liked you a long, long time, and I don't want to lose you.”

“You're not going to lose me,” Keiji tells him quietly. “You're not, please don't cry. I'm just going through some things right now too.”

Bokuto looks up at him from under his lashes, and Keiji swallows hard.

Fuck, he thinks very rationally.

“I... like Kenma. And I think I like Kuroo, too.”

A complicated wash of emotions cross Bokuto's face. “That's good!”

“I talked with Kuroo yesterday,” Keiji continues, stepping in a little closer to rest his head on Bokuto's shoulder. Bokuto leans their heads together, and Keiji sighs, hand tightening on his bicep. “He told me about the three of you. And that...I'd be welcome too. I don't know how to feel.”

Bokuto tentatively reaches up, resting his hand on Keiji's back. “You don't?”

Keiji shakes his head a little. “My whole life, everyone told me that love is just two people. And I've never wanted sex, really, not until Kenma. And Kuroo-san is... he's beautiful.”

“Yeah, he is,” Bokuto agrees, a little subdued.
"He said you've been pining for me."

Bokuto goes so still it's as if he's turned to a statue.

"Is it true?"

Bokuto is quiet for a very long time before whispering, "Yes. Please don't hate me."

Keiji lifts his head, looking Bokuto in the eyes. "I could never hate you, Koutarou," he says quietly, and Bokuto's eyes go very wide at the sound of his given name. "I just don't know what I'm doing, yet. And I don't know yet how you and I fit together. I only worked it out today that we could maybe one day be something together."

Bokuto reaches up, gently brushing a curl out of his eyes. "Then don't decide all at once," he says simply. "Let's be normal."

"What do you mean?"

His smile is full of nerves. "Go on a date with us. Maybe a few dates. See if it works for you."

That... is so simple, and so perfect.

"Sometimes," he tells Bokuto, "you know exactly what to say."

oOo

He calls Kuroo with Bokuto still there rattling around in his kitchen hunting for food, legs up on the couch in the sitting room. It takes three rings before Kuroo answers.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he drawls down the line. Keiji can hear what sounds like a game playing in the background. He must be with Kenma. "You never call, you never write, you leave me on read-"

"I want to go on a date," Keiji says bluntly.

There's a scrambled noise, a faint yelp of 'shit!' and then Kuroo is back. "Sorry, I dropped the phone. I think I misheard you."

"You didn't. A date. I'd like to go on one. With you, and Kenma, and Bokuto-san."

"What."

"Kuroo-san, you know how I feel about repeating myself."

"I know but- really? A date?" He sounds hopeful. Excited even. "That's- I'd like that a lot, personally. I'll talk to the others-"

"Bokuto's already over and said yes for himself," Keiji says, feeling a bit warm in the face.

"Do you have a place in mind?"

"Somewhere Kenma will be comfortable," he says. "No where in particular. And if he doesn't want to come, perhaps we could spend time together at his home, or mine?"

"Yeah, that's... that's perfect, actually. Um. There's an end of year festival in our neighborhood, we go just about every year. How's that sound? It's this coming Saturday evening."
“...Is this an excuse to get me into yukata?”

“It absolutely is.”

“You're not subtle, Kuroo.”

“And your contact name in my phone is “the most beautiful boy” for a damn good reason.”

“Incredible.”

He hangs up without another word, cheeks absolutely burning, and buries his face in his hands. Kuroo is a menace and not to be trusted. He screams a little into his hands and then composes himself again, getting back up off of the couch to find out where Bokuto has gone. The answer is apparently still the kitchen, where he's finishing off the remaining onigiri and immediately looks guilty about it.

Keiji holds up his hand, silencing his worry. “I already said you could have it, don't worry about it. Apparently we're going to go to a festival this Saturday evening.”

“A festival?” Bokuto's eyebrows go up. “Like... with yukata?”

“What is with you two?”

Bokuto laughs, loud and easy, and Keiji's struck by how little he's heard it the past few weeks. He steps in closer, and before he can talk himself out of it he hugs him tight. Bokuto hugs him back, nuzzling against his neck like the overgrown cats he's been hanging around. Keiji licks his lips and has to take a moment before he says quietly, “I'm sorry for how it's been the past few weeks. I've missed you, you know.”

“You did?” Bokuto's voice is muffled against his shoulder, but he doesn't need to see his face to know the worry there.

“I did,” he says softly.

“I missed you too,” Bokuto tells him, with a hitch in his voice. “I missed you so much, 'Kaashi. I'm sorry I didn't tell you.”

Keiji nods, knocking their heads together a little. “It's okay.” He tightens his arms around Bokuto and repeats, softer, “I missed you.”

The next day comes, and goes, and when he gets back home from practice with Bokuto tailing behind him Keiji realizes a small, but important detail of their upcoming date.

“Bokuto.”

Bokuto stops jumping around to look at him, grinning wide. “Yes Akaashi?”

“When's the last time you wore your yukata?”

“Hmmm.... Maybe two years ago now! The last few times we did festivals I was too busy to change before! Oh, no, I bet it doesn't fit anymore! Akaashi, we have to go get me a yukata!”

Akaashi Keiji reflects on the path his life has taken to his arrival at this point in time. What kind and loving god has guided his steps to this path, where he oh-so-tragically has to use his influence
as the only child of two extremely successful business owners to take his best friend and potential partner shopping for traditional, beautiful clothing? What god was so good as to give him a blatant opportunity to look at Bokuto's shoulder-to-waist ratio in both a volleyball uniform and a yukata?

“Akaashi, what's with the Buddha face?!”

Later, when Bokuto is dead asleep in one of the guest rooms, Keiji calls his parents. It's the early afternoon for them in London, and Akaashi Fusazane picks up on the second ring.

“Good evening, Keiji.”

“Good afternoon, Oto-san.” Keiji can't quite help his smile. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nothing that could not stand to be interrupted,” his father says, his voice deep and mellow. “I take it you've called with a purpose.”

“Yes. Two things, in fact. First, I have reached an understanding of my sexuality. Second, is it alright if I purchase a new yukata for both myself and my friend? He's more than outgrown his, and mine has holes. The moths got to it, it seems.” Keiji picks up his former yukata, grimacing at the sight. There are indeed several large holes where moths have eaten through the fine fabric. One sleeve droops sadly.

“That's perfectly fine. As always, the discretionary funds are at your disposal. You've never been anything but careful with your stipend. So far as I know, the only things you've bought much of are food, and the occasional pair of shoes.” Fusazane sounds more than a little amused by this, which Keiji understands. His uncle Hisao seems to believe that Keiji is an alien, with how little he spends, and complains about it regularly to his brother. But Fusazane and Ayumi are both frugal and simple people, their sole flaunting of their wealth in their oversized house in Tokyo while when abroad they live in a small, quiet apartment. “The tailor will bill us appropriately. What have you learned about yourself?”

“I like other men for certain,” he says, “if I've formed a solid emotional connection to them first. Apparently in the West it's called being demi-sexual. I've not formed any true connections with women so I can't say for sure, but I feel I might not like them.”

“Hmm,” Fusazane says. “Good. I'm glad you know where you stand. Do you have romantic prospects?”

“Yes... three of them.”

Fusazane has not survived as a leader in his business by resting on his laurels. He catches the meaning. “Interesting. I suppose it makes sense. Four is a good, stable number. Four legs to a chair or table, four sides to a diamond or square, often four walls to a house. Very poetic.”

Keiji loves his father more than he can express, and swallows down the lump in his throat. “Thank you, Oto-san.”

“Keiji,” Fusazane says, his voice soft and gentle, “you are my only child, the pride and joy of my life. You've known since you were small that your mother likes both men and women, and aunt Ryoko loves women. But it still takes a great amount of strength to reflect inward on yourself, and then tell others your findings. I know it's something you struggle with some days. I am very proud of you.”

“Thank you,” he whispers, feeling the start of tears. “Thank you, Oto-san.”
Keiji bids him a pleasant afternoon and ends the call. He sits in the darkness of his room, feeling hot tears of relief splash down his face.

It's never been a true fear, or so he's thought. Akaashi Fusazane loves his sister more than life itself, and treats his wife like she hung the moon, but still. The nagging, unending worry of what if he hates me is gone. He wants so badly not to be rattling around in this big house by himself.

He gets up, and goes to the next room, opening the door. Bokuto, curled up small on the bed, wakes up quickly. He's a light sleeper, always has been, and his eyes gleam faintly in the light from the moon outside the window.

“Akaashi?”

His hair looks funny when it's down, sprawled all over his face. Keiji crosses the room, and Bokuto looks up at him with innocent concern that turns to slight alarm.

“Akaashi, you've been crying! What's wrong?”

“Can I stay with you tonight?” he says before he can stop himself. “I don't want to be alone.”

Bokuto immediately pulls the covers back for him, and Keiji climbs in. Bokuto wraps a broad, strong arm around him, cuddling up to him and tucking Keiji's head under his chin. “You're not alone,” he says, squeezing him. “I'm here.”

“You're here,” Keiji says quietly, and tentatively drapes an arm over Bokuto's waist to hold him closer. “You're right here.”

“That's right. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere.”

Something settles inside his chest, and in what feels like seconds of being wrapped up safe and warm, Keiji’s asleep.

oOo

Keiji wakes up alone.

It's disorienting, being in the spare room, but when he rolls over he can still faintly feel warmth in the dip where Bokuto must have been sleeping. He gets up slowly, going to his room to change into his uniform, and makes his way down the stairs when he's dressed. Bokuto's things were gone from the room- has he already left? Keiji doesn't want to feel disappointed but, well. He doesn't want to think that Bokuto would leave him, is all.

But his fears are unfounded, because when he walks into the kitchen Bokuto is there, singing under his breath as he cooks for them.

Keiji's brain screeches to a halt. Cooks?

“You can cook?” he blurts out, and Bokuto looks over his shoulder with a big grin.

“Yeah! My step-dad is a chef at a soba place. He taught me. I work in the restaurant on the weekends sometimes!” He flips the omelet onto a waiting plate and hands it over. It's shaped like an owl.

“...you never cease to amaze me,” Keiji says, and Bokuto positively beams.

Keiji looks up at him, and something- something clicks, deep inside. As if the something from the
night before has finally found the perfect place in his chest. He stares at Bokuto, realization hitting him. He's liked Bokuto as a friend and as something pleasing to look at for a long time. He simply is, with his broad shoulders and thick thighs, and handsome face to top it all off. But this time, standing in his own kitchen with Bokuto directing that million watt smile at him, shoulders bunching over a plain white t-shirt, Keiji finally gets what everyone else sees when they look at him.

Bokuto is mindbogglingly hot.

“Thank you for the food,” he manages, and flees to the dining room.

The school day is boring, practice goes smooth despite how much Keiji can't stop staring at Bokuto's thighs, and Keiji drags Bokuto out faster than usual so they can reach the tailor's shop before closing time. It's a tiny shop, but very good, and when they walk through the door the ancient woman at the desk smiles at them.

“Ah, Akaashi-kun. Fusazane-san told me to expect you,” she says, rising. “Now, let us pick fabrics.”

Bokuto looks around in confusion. “I thought we were going yukata shopping?” he says, before drifting over to look at some of the furisode fabric.

“We are,” Keiji says, glancing over his shoulder. “I'm taking this opportunity to have one made for you so I can flaunt it in Kuroo-san's face that I got you to wear fancy clothes. Besides.” He turns away, looking at some of the rich blue cotton. “You were mine first, and he'd do well to remember that.”

Bokuto goes a brilliant shade of red and makes a tiny squeaking noise.

“Bokuto, you're supposed to be looking at fabric?”

“Y-y-y-yes,” Bokuto manages.

Keiji hides a smug and triumphant smile under the mask of a polite one, and carries on. He picks through some of the blues, selecting them to check against others, completely disregards the reds, and pauses when he sees a black cotton with tiny golden diamonds made of four squares with a dot of white in the middle of each square. It's perfect.

“This is it,” he says immediately, and the tailor comes over.

“Ahhh, an excellent choice. Let's find something for the obi, next.”

“Yellow,” he tells her, “very simple. Only the slightest pattern.”

Her smile broadens, and she leads him to the perfect one. He nods approvingly, and she takes it from him to bustle them off to the back. He turns, finding Bokuto still very red and holding a bolt of cloth.

“Akaashi, look!”

“It's perfect,” he breathes. The fabric is predominantly white, checkered with places of thin black lines so the overall appearance stays white. In between some of the checks are yellow designs that look like owls if you tilt your head. “Good choice.”

“We'll match,” Bokuto says, turning even redder. “And it's Fukurodani's colors!”
“Oh god, we're those people,” Keiji mutters, hiding a smile. “Come on, let's pick an obi color.”

“Black! So we coordinate!”

“Perfect.”

They pick a black with ultra thin white stripes down the center, the tailor takes their measurements (her eyes going very wide at the sheer width of Bokuto's shoulders) and then they're free.

“Come tomorrow,” she says pleasantly as they leave. “They'll be done.”

“So soon?!” Bokuto stares. “You're very talented, Ms. Shop-owner!”

She laughs, face crinkling up in a fond smile. “Akaashi-kun, where did you find this wonderfully plain speaking young man? Yes, tomorrow. Yukata are simple to make, and my son and I will have them done in little time.”

“Thank you very much,” Keiji says, bowing.

“Oh hush. On your way, both of you.” She waves them off, and Bokuto falls into step with Keiji as they head towards the house.

It's a quiet, pleasant night, and Keiji sighs happily as they walk.

“That's a cheerful noise, Akaashi!”

“It's been a good day,” Keiji admits. They come to the turning point in the road, and he stops, touching Bokuto's arm. “Come home with me?”

Bokuto's smile lights up the night.
Chapter Notes

Tw for this chapter: Bokuto talking about extremely short lived child abuse, teenagers being cruel about Akaashi and Bokuto's supposed sex life

Text to: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
I'm staying at Akaashis house again
you better be wearing yukata this wknd

Text from: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
absolutely not

Text to: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
!!! why not

Text from: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
traditional clothes are a pain.

Text to: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
But youre so cute in them!!!
And THINK ABOUT KUROOS FACE

Text from: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
what about him

Text to: Kenmaaaa <3 <3 <3!!
Think about his face
when he realizes
I have easy access
for leg bites.

Koutarou giggles helplessly as his phone immediately starts to wring, and answers. “Hiii Kenma.”

“You are a brat,” Kenma says, his voice dry on the other end. “A brat with a fucking fetish.”

“Kenma! Such language.”

“I hate you so much. Fine. Two hours, at the most. No more. That's your window.”

“You're cruel.”

“I'm hanging up now.”

“I love you!”

The call ends with a resolute click, and Koutarou beams at the plain ceiling of Akaashi's spare room. Well, one of the spare rooms. He thinks that it's called spare room #3, which is too many spare rooms in his mind, but it's the one right next to Akaashi's and that's exciting. He's stayed over
at Akaashi's house three times this week, and there's a neatly folded brand new yukata sitting on a simple chest of drawers waiting for him on Saturday. He's going to change at school, and go all out. Geta, tabi, very cute bag with tiny cats on it that he found when at his parents house, the whole nine yards. They're going on a date, and he has to look good next to Akaashi if he stands any chance of keeping eyes on him at all.

Akaashi Keiji is beautiful, so beautiful that it hurts to look at him sometimes when they're playing. His eyebrows scrunch up all tight and annoyed if he gets blocked, and he gets this smug little smile when he does a great dump, and he's just so graceful in it all. He has bigger hands than Koutarou, too, with long pretty fingers and smooth nails.

He's glad they're over the weirdness and that Akaashi might like them all too.

His phone buzzes.

Text from: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   u talked kenma into yukata
   i've never loved u more

Koutarou grins, proud of himself.

Text to: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   I'm GOOD

Text from: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   damn right you are babe

Text to: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   Akaashi bought me a new yukata! I'm going to wear it saturday
   are you excited

Text from: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   fuck yeah i'm excited
   i'm a simple man w simple needs
   and youre all hot

Text to: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   i've gotta sleep
   love you v much

Text from: Kurooooo <3 <3 <3!!
   Love you too

Koutarou sets the phone to the side, his smile gone.

When he told Kuroo about Akaashi, he hadn't told him one small but slightly important detail, one that was weighing on his mind a little. There in the hall, Akaashi all curled up against him, they'd talked and Akaashi had mentioned how he thought Kenma and Kuroo were both pretty, or hot, and Koutarou hadn't made that list. He knows he's... difficult. He tries not to be but it's there anyway, and Akaashi already puts up with a lot from him. But even if he only really likes Kenma and Kuroo, at least Koutarou can spend time with him this way. Even if Akaashi doesn't want him in his bed, he still likes him. As a friend.

He hopes.
Koutarou rolls onto his side and hugs the pillow tight to his chest.

He's never had anyone really, really confess to him but Kenma and Kuroo, and that had been... all sorts of different than normal kinds of confessing. He's dated a bunch of girls who thought they liked him but just liked the boy who plays volleyball. None of them lasted very long, because they didn't want to know the real him. Koutarou's dreamed for years about Akaashi quietly taking him aside, telling him how he feels. Or, if not Akaashi, someone else willing to simply know him.

The past month he's been quieter out of the fear and the loneliness without Akaashi at his side knowing everything, even when he's been putting on a show like he's fine. And some others had noticed. He'd heard whispers, one of the nastier second years of the team muttering how nice it was that something was keeping his noisy mouth shut for once. Loud, loud, loud Bokuto Koutarou, obnoxious Bokuto Koutarou, noisy and big and full of himself. Bokuto Koutarou, who Akaashi has to put up with and manage, what a shame, hah, poor Akaashi!

Koutarou presses his hands over his ears until all he can hear is lava sounds, the internal rumble of his own blood and bones. He presses down hard, squeezes his eyes shut.

"I'm not a shame," he says to the room, mouth and voice box forming the words he can't hear with his hands over his ears, "I'm not a shame, I'm not a shame, I'm not wrong, I'm good and I'm- I'm not a shame, he doesn't hate me."

*Please don't hate me.*

He forces himself to listen to the lava noises, pressing his hands tighter and tighter over his ears until his inner voice is quiet again.

Finally, when his head is still, he takes them away. The world rushes back in, but it doesn't feel like it's screaming at him anymore. He huddles under his blankets, still shaking a little.

The door opens, and he jolts, but it's just Akaashi. He looks tired. He's looked tired every night for the last three nights, and every night he's come to crawl in bed with Koutarou.

Koutarou says nothing, just pulls the blankets back. Akaashi stumbles forward and into the bed, immediately curling up against him.

"What's wrong?" he asks, wrapping his arms around him.

"Nothing," Akaashi says, hand reaching up to gently stroke his hair. "Just- just lonely."

It seems like a lie, but Akaashi is *here* and Koutarou's head has shut up enough that he can sleep.


oOo

He's using the weights in the room off the side of the third gym during his lunch hour when he hears the laughter.

"What, that idiot? No way. Akaashi has him whipped."

He doesn't freeze, because having a bar hanging over your neck with a couple hundred pounds of weight on it means that you have to be careful, and instead racks the bar quietly. The voices are uncomfortably familiar, but not so familiar he can identify them by name.
“He'd do anything for him. No way Bokuto tops. He's probably the bitchiest bottom of all time.”

“You think *Akaashi* would have sex with anyone? I don't think he's ever shown interest in fucking anyone. But if he did, it'd be Bokuto, and he'd make him bottom. Bokuto pretends to be all large and in charge but it's Akaashi that runs the show. Shit, can you imagine Akaashi fucking *anyone* with that stone face of his? That'd be hilarious.”

“I heard Bokuto's with those two from Nekoma. You know, the big middle blocker and that pretty setter?”

“As if, those two are so wrapped up in each other they'd never want someone else. Bokuto's fucking noisy, too, there's no way that setter would put up with him. The sex must be fucking great if Akaashi can.”

That hits like a punch to the gut. Koutarou quietly pulls his uniform shirt back on, slinging his tie into a pocket, and steps out of the weight room. In the hall, three of the first years on the team are eating from bentos, and they look up as the door swings wider open. He spares a moment to be amused at how pale they get.

“Let's be clear,” he says, and gives them the smile he gives the nastiest opponents on the court. “One more word about who Akaashi Keiji does or does not *fuck* and you'll have me to answer to.”

He walks forward, and they have the good sense to scramble upright. He stops in front of the one who looks more red, the one who's clearly the ring leader. He steps, very deliberately, into his lunch, and comes nose to nose with him. They're of a height, but Koutarou has more than a little muscle on his side.

“We were just joking,” the kid mutters, looking away from his eyes.

“Notice how much I'm laughing,” Koutarou says, still smiling. “Notice how I'm laughing because you think my love life is a joke, and by extension, the lives of Kozume Kenma, Kuroo Tetsurou, and of course one Akaashi Keiji are a joke. So very, very funny. Ha. Ha.”

The kid has started to shake a little, and Koutarou leans in close. Bares his teeth a little.

“I don't care who you are or what you can do,” he says, utter venom in his voice. “I don't care if you're the next goddamn Olympic champion, when you three get to practice you bow and you fucking *beg* for Akaashi's forgiveness for speaking his fucking name in such a way. If I ever hear his name on your tongue again, I will take it from your fucking mouth. You will address him as Vice-Captain or not at all, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Captain,” the three whisper.

“You apologize,” he says, pulling his coat on, “and you fucking beg, or I kick you from the team. And since you were clearly wondering so much, ‘that big middle blocker and pretty setter’ are my boyfriends. I'm sure the sex would be great, if we were having any. Which, fun fact, we aren't, because we're not idiot first years who think the whole thing is a fucking joke. We treat it like the serious thing that it is.”

Koutarou turns back to the ringleader, who's now looking at his feet.

“I'll be at practice today,” he says, keeping his voice in the same silky smooth tones of carefully banked fury that Kuroo likes to use. “And I will be waiting. Your apology to Akaashi, or your resignation from the team. You choose.”

The three nod frantically.
He turns to leave, but one of them pipes up, “Captain?”

He raises an eyebrow, his patience already spent.

“D-do you want us to apologize to you in the same way, too?”

Koutarou gives him a long look. The first year starts to sweat.

“People like me don't get apologies,” he says, “because no one respects the end of the joke enough to do so, don't you think?” He waves his hand, turning to walk down the hall. “Your choice, kid. Consider it a learning experience.”

He turns the corner, and immediately stops to listen.

There's silence, then, “We're apologizing.”

“What!?”

“To both of them,” the last first year says. “Did you see his face? That's- fuck, that was so sad. I didn't know he thought of himself like that.”

“He's not wrong about being a joke.”

“You're a piece of shit, Renji.” That's real anger, there. “Captain was right, it was really shitty of us to be joking like that. I don't want anyone talking about me and Momo like that, why would we talk about him like that?”

“Because he a fucking f-”

“Finish that sentence and I'll take your tongue off before Captain can.”

Koutarou leaves.

He skips his next class, going out to sit under the shade of a big tree out by the track, and tosses a volleyball in the air. It's not a shock, really. He's always been something of a walking joke- loud and brassy and obnoxious even as he aces his classes despite struggling to learn how best to make that happen and fights tooth and nail for recognition in volleyball. It's taken him years to reach where he's at. Years to be able to laugh at himself, at some of his failures, to be seen for his hard work. He's the 4th best ace in the whole country. Fourth best, with two for-sure boyfriends and a third maybe-boyfriend, and sure he's happy most of the time but then these days show up sometime, when he crashes from all the fun he's had. These fucking days, where he sits under a tree and wonders if he's being lied to. Wonders if three stupid first years are right and Kuroo and Kenma really don't need him or want him, and he's just taking up space.

His phone buzzes.

**Text from: Sets My Heart**

Where are you.

*Text to: Sets My Heart*

why

**Text from: Sets My Heart**

Akinori just texted me. He says you're not in class. You can see why that might concern me.
Text to: Sets My Heart
i'm fine akaashi
:))}
see it's a smiling face on its side
i'm okay because i'm smiling akaashi
I even sent you my smile

Text from: Sets My Heart
And yet I find myself not believing you. Where are you.

Text to: Sets My Heart
still at school. I'm just outside.

Text from: Sets My Heart
Tell me where you are, Koutarou.

Koutarou's heart clenches tight in his chest. Akaashi is mean, pulling out the given names like that.

Text from: Sets My Heart
under a tree by the track

Text to: Sets My Heart
Stay put.

Koutarou sighs and puts his phone away, picking the volleyball back up. It's impossible to hide from Akaashi when he's on the war path. He's endlessly determined, and he never tires of something until he reaches a resolution. It's why they're such a good pair. He can practice spiking for hours with Akaashi, working out kinks in their pattern until both of them are content with the outcome. Koutarou tosses the ball in the air and catches it again, squeezing it.

“Don't pop it,” Akaashi's voice says from his left. “I'm not getting you another one.”

He turns, and Akaashi is there for real, his face quietly serious and as beautiful as ever.

“Akaaaaashi, did you just up and walk out of class!!”

“I did. It's Onata-sensei, he didn't even notice.” Akaashi sits down next to him, a polite hands width apart. Koutarou hates how proper he is, sometimes. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong,” Koutarou insists. “Not really. It's just my dumb head, you know? I'm stupid about things.”

“Bokuto, you're third in your class and you barely even try,” Akaashi says bluntly. “You're not stupid. You never have been, you never will be. Easily upset, though, you definitely are that. So what's wrong?”

Koutarou loves him so much.

He really does. He's loved Akaashi since the first time their set-and-spike had worked perfectly, and he'd turned and gotten the full force of that brilliant smile. It's so rare and so beautiful, like opals under sunshine. He's loved Akaashi since he was a tiny first year who wasn't afraid to chew the third years out for teasing him, and loved him since Akaashi invited him to eat lunch together. He's loved him since they went star gazing with the team, and Akaashi had made tiny, amazed noise at the shooting meteors. He's loved him since Akaashi spurned the advances of 40 different girls all told, and told him that he was more fun. He's loved him since Akaashi first brought them
over, and Koutarou had asked him to play the piano and he had, spinning music out of the upright piano and making that big empty house swell with noise so beautiful he cried.

He's loved Akaashi from those moments, and every moment on.

“Some first years are going to apologize to you,” he says, rather than telling Akaashi this. “We had a philosophical disagreement.”

“What?”

Koutarou squeezes the volleyball, digs his fingernails in hard. “I don't care what people say about me,” he says, low and bitter, “but they can leave you the fuck out of it.”

Akaashi is still as a statue beside him, and Koutarou carefully puts the ball aside and wraps his arms around his knees.

“What happened?”

“Don't,” Koutarou says flatly. “Don't ask me that. I'm not going to tell you, because it was sick and cruel and wrong, and I will never let anyone talk about you like it again. No one talks about you, or Kenma, or Kuroo like that and gets away with it.”

He looks away, towards the track. The sun is brilliant today, making the white lines on the track seem to glow, and the grass take on a brilliant green sheen.

“Koutarou.”

He can't bare to look back, but Akaashi's arm slides around his shoulder in a hug. Koutarou's mouth trembles, and he buries his face in his arms. It's stupid, so stupid, and here he is heaving wracking sobs because he's just so tired of it all. He wants Kenma and Kuroo. He wants to go and hide and never be seen again in the Kozume house, and Akaashi to hold him like this for the rest of ever, and Kuroo to rest with him and run his hand down his arm like he's still not able to believe Koutarou's really there, and Kenma to be there to surprise him with kisses when he least expects it. He doesn't want to worry about whether his boyfriends really want him, or if Akaashi really will join them, or if he's just fucked up a future team. He wants to never, ever be a joke again, to anyone.

“I'm sorry,” he says through the tears, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to cry like this.”

“Hush,” Akaashi says, and kisses his forehead. “Let it all out.”

When he's all cried out he buries his face in Akaashi's shoulder, and Akaashi pets through his hair.

“That's a lot of tears for nothing wrong,” Akaashi tells him gently.

Koutarou rubs at his eyes, and wraps an arm around Akaashi's waist. “Can I tell you something? I've never even told Kenma or Kuroo or anyone, but I want to tell you.”

“Of course.”

Koutarou curls up, tight against him.

“When I was 6 my parents got divorced,” he says, nestling his head under Akaashi's chin. “I didn't see my dad for over a year, and then he said he wanted to see me for a week over the summer when
I turned 7. I was so happy, because he was my dad and I missed him a lot! He moved up to Hokkaido, the Kato district. His uncle left him this big traditional house, even bigger than yours, and he took it and he was living there. So I went to visit.” His hand tightens on Akaashi’s shirt. “The first night was great. We had a good time, and I went to bed happy. When I woke up, I couldn’t find him. I was 7 and tiny and my dad was somewhere in the house, he had to be. I went all through the house, over and over, but my dad wasn’t there. He was just- just gone. He’d forgotten I was there and he went to town because it was a Sunday, and went drinking with his friends. He just…forgot.”

“Fuck,” Akaashi breathes, stock still under Koutarou’s arm.

“I was so scared. The house was so big, and I’d never been in a traditional house before. I didn't know what to do. The house was dark, and made noises, and I was hungry. I found the kitchen and food, and I slept in there with the lights on because I was so afraid. He didn't have neighbors for kilometers, and I was…I was just alone. He came back Monday morning, and found me. I was so happy to see him, but.” his voice fails him for a moment. “But then I knew he didn't really care. He just forgot all about me. He laughed it off.”

“He what?” Akaashi hisses, going tense.

“He laughed. Said I was 7, so grown up for staying in the house by myself. I was half insane by the time he got back, I thought there were people walking around in the house because I was used to hearing people walking in the apartment next to us.”

“Fucking hell,” Akaashi says, and Koutarou closes his eyes. “No wonder you don't like leaving the city.”

“It's the worst. Training camp is good, because everyone's there, all the time. I never have to worry, and I'm loud so no one ever forgets me again.”

Akaashi tightens his arms around him, fingers digging in hard. “You can be as loud as you want,” he says, his voice low and hard. “And if anyone gives you grief for it, you tell me and I'll eviscerate them.”

Koutarou laughs, but it turns into a sob halfway.

oOo

Two of the first years walk into practice, go into full kneeling bows, and beg for Akaashi Keiji's forgiveness. When he forgives them, they do the same for Koutarou. He forgives them, smiling easily, and ruffles their hair afterwards. Both of them look deadly serious now, and both of them train harder than usual, their faces set. Akaashi watches them thoughtfully, and Bokuto feels a bit pleased with himself.

Aogaki Renji submits his paperwork to leave the club.

Koutarou takes a vicious satisfaction in signing off on it.

oOo

He arrives at the Kozume house after practice to find Kuroo cooking, and Kenma waiting at the door looking like a tiny, angry storm cloud.

“Akaashi texted us,” Kuroo calls from the kitchen. “I already have the futons set up.”
Kenma grabs his shirt front and positively drags him in for a kiss. Koutarou wraps his arms around him, kissing him back with no small amount of relief. He lets himself be backed against a wall, and lets out a weak noise when Kenma decides he's done and abruptly pushes himself away.

“Hi, Kenma!” He says, dazed. “I really missed you too.”

“Go shower and get changed for the evening,” Kenma says, his hands shaking. “And don't even think about not waking me up in the morning before you go.”

“You're upset,” Koutarou realizes.

“Of course I'm upset,” Kenma says, taking his hand and squeezing tight. “The only text you sent me all day just said that you got to school safe, and then half of Fukurodani texted me trying to find out where you were before Akaashi got to you and told me you were suffering. I was scared, Koutarou. Kuroo was ready to leave and go to Fukurodani himself.”

“I very literally had a foot out the door,” Kuroo says cheerfully from the kitchen. “You scared the hell out of us.”

Koutarou swallows around the lump in his throat. “Three of the first years were... saying things. About me and Akaashi. Mocking things, about what—what we would be like having sex. I didn't like it, and I got upset.”

The sounds of chopping vegetables stop, and Kuroo emerges from the kitchen with his apron on, his face as cloudy as Kenma's. “They what?”

Kenma's face is honestly terrifying, and Koutarou looks at the genkan floor. “It's done with now, it's okay! One of them left the team. The other two apologized, and they were dead serious about it. They— they said some other stuff, too, about you guys not really liking me, and that I was too loud to put up with, and it got in my head. But I talked with Akaashi, and now I'm feeling better and—”

Kuroo's long fingers slide under his chin, forcing his head up to look at him.

“Hey,” Kuroo says, so gentle it hurts. “Hey, come here love.”

Koutarou blinks back tears again and obediently toes off his shoes to step into Kuroo's arms, Kenma still holding his hand.

“Listen to me,” Kuroo says, soft and so gentle, “this is not a joke. What we have? This will never be a joke. We love you. Akaashi loves you, in his own way. And you aren't too loud to put up with. Do you know how much fucking joy you bring me? You never, ever stop making me happy. Even when you're sad or whining or being a little shit, I love you. I love playing with you, I love being with you. And I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it until you believe it, too.”

Koutarou's lips quaver.

Kenma squeezes his hand, and he looks to the side to see Kenma give him a tiny, warm smile. “I don't put up with people I don't like,” Kenma says simply. “And I like you, but I love you even more.”

For the second time that day, Koutarou promptly bursts into tears.

This time, at least, they're happy tears.

oOo
When Saturday comes, Koutarou is as close to back to normal as he thinks he'll get.

He fidgets through class, fidgets through lunch with a very amused Akaashi, fidgets through even more classes, and eventually sweet freedom is upon him.

“All RIGHT!” he yells when he bounds into the gym. “Let's have a good practice, guys, and then Akaashi and I are getting out of here!”

The entire team stares at him in shock.

“Hey, Bokuto, you're excited about something other than practice?” Konoha says, shocked.

“That's right! I'm going to a festival, and it's going to be great. LET'S GET RUNNING!”

Practice takes a small eternity, showering seems to take even longer, and then Koutarou is pulling the new yukata out of his bag. It's so beautiful, the fine material soft in his hands, the stiff obi elegant in its simplicity. Dressing takes little time, even if the obi is tricky, and he pulls on the the tabi with a wide grin.

“Bokuto, are you do- oh.”

He looks up from making sure his tabi are well fitted, and oh.

Oh, Akaashi Keiji is a force to be reckoned with.

“Akaashi! Marry me!” he says, falling to his knees. Akaashi, absolutely resplendent in his inky black and brilliant gold, looks deeply unimpressed. He's magnificent, hair in soft waves, yukata hanging perfectly, the tiny gold diamonds gleaming against the black. He's so, so very beautiful.

“Dinner first,” he says, so dry it may as well be sand falling from his mouth. “And a year of courting.”

“Whatever you want, Akaashi!”

Akaashi can't quite hide his smile, and helps him back up. “Come on.”

Bokuto keeps hold of his hand on the train, on the street, on the bus, all the way to the festival.

Akaashi lets him.

oOo

“Truly,” Kuroo says as they approach, eyes flicking between him and Akaashi, “we are blessed this day. Kenma, we've got to make another shrine visit.”

Kenma, eyes focused tightly on his game, makes a vague noise that may be a yes and may be a no.

“Kenma, they're color coordinated.”

Kenma reluctantly looks up, and Koutarou puffs out his chest at the look of sheer surprise on Kenma's face. Akaashi is smirking. Actually smirking. Around them the festival is in full swing-they're hardly the only ones there in yukata- but they are color coordinated. Koutarou grins, leaning an elbow on Akaashi's shoulder.

“We BOTH color coordinated!”
Kenma is in what's quite possibly the cutest yukata of all time, one with red stripes and large black cats that look like they're falling in motion on it, and Kuroo is also in red, his with thick black stripes that look like brush strokes.

“Dear lord, we're both those couples as one giant square,” Akaashi mutters, covering his face before soldiering on. “Alright, let's go. We're on a date, let's do date things.”

“Hey hey hey!”

“Strength test! I saw a strength test over there, Bo, let's go do it!”

Kenma swerves around Kuroo to attach to Akaashi's side. “Go,” he says, when Koutarou and Kuroo hesitate. “Keiji and I will judge whatever prizes you two win.”

Koutarou gasps, delighted. “Does this mean we get to try and win all the prizes?!”

Akaashi grins at him, and Koutarou's heart lurches at how much he likes it. “You're welcome to try.”

This is the best date ever.

The festival is out in the open air, bright and brilliant. The booths are charming, the set up adorable. All the usual sorts of games are there, plus vendors with plenty of food, and the scene is full of color and light. Someone's playing traditional music, the taiko drums in the distance pounding out a wonderful rhythm, and Kuroo laughs as Koutarou tries to eat an entire onigiri at once. Kenma sticks close to Akaashi, looking up only when Koutarou or Kuroo offer him some trinket, and by the time things wind down Akaashi has five new keychains, one mid sized plush dragon, a fan, a fox mask, and very pink cheeks. Kenma escapes with an additional four keychains, two small plushes of Litten, and a very cute pair of clips.

They arrive at the Kozume house and shuck off shoes, and Akaashi whoops in surprise as Koutarou scoops him up.

“What did you think?!” he demands, beaming. “Are we worth it?”

Akaashi is smiling, cheeks still red. “Put me down.”

Koutarou obliges, and Kenma takes his hand.

“Upstairs,” he says mildly, and they migrate upstairs with Kuroo laughing at a joke Akaashi told, and Kenma smiling his real smile. Koutarou gasps in excitement when he sees that the upstairs living room has been turned into a pillow fort.

“Now,” Kenma says, turning back to them all as Akaashi smiles, “I am going to play something, there will be a movie available for watching, and as you can see, Kuroo has arranged for a great deal of cuddling to be had. There may also be dessert foods.”

“There is,” Kuroo says, his smile soft and a little nervous. “I uh. I maybe made a lot of desserts. The apple pie is Kenma's though, and unless you want to lose fingers I wouldn't try to take it.”

Akaashi looks at them all, and Koutarou's heart stutters a little when he says, “You... planned all of this for me?”

“Well not all for you,” Kuroo drawls, sliding an arm around Akaashi. “The pie is Kenma's.”
Kenma looks down at the pile of pillows and futons, game back in his hands though not turned on. “The rest is for you, though.”

Koutarou can't help going over to Akaashi, who reaches out and takes his hand.

“We really like you,” he says, earnest. “We do.”

Akaashi sighs, but it's a happy sort of sigh, and tugs him closer. “Koutarou.”

He's never going to be tired of Akaashi saying his name. “What is it Akaashi?”

“You're still not allowed to call me Keiji at school. And I don't know if this will be forever, but... Let's try.”

Bokuto Koutarou now has three boyfriends.

“This is the best date ever,” he says, and kisses Keiji's cheek. Keiji raises an eyebrow.

“I'm not some shrinking violet, Koutarou. Kiss me like you mean it.”

And so Koutarou does.
Part 2: Akaashi

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It's so... easy.
So easy to breathe, around him.
So easy to relax.
So easy to be.

Keiji wakes up with his head on Koutarou's shoulder, a heavy arm wrapped around him and his own arm draped across Koutarou's chest. Outside he can faintly hear birds, tiny chattering things that are definitely not having as good of a morning as he is, because when he shifts a little Koutarou sighs in his sleep and holds him tighter.

It's been a week, and it's been a toss up as to who's at whose house, but Keiji thinks he might like it best when Koutarou is at his. He likes waking up together. He likes Koutarou making breakfast, and cooed endearments between showers, and being pressed slowly up against the counter and kissed until he's positively wrecked. That had been a particularly exciting morning, honestly. He'd never quite understood the desire for kisses, but Koutarou is... very good.

Koutarou shifts beside him, yawning, and Keiji listens to his heart rate pick up a touch.

“Morning,” he murmurs.

“Hey, Keiiiiji,” Koutarou says, drawing out his name in a yawn. “Been awake long?”

“No. I just woke.”

“Mm.”

Koutarou is either immediately awake or takes several years to fully join the world of the living. The morning, it seems that the first is winning. Keiji rolls over to let him up, but Koutarou just rolls with him, pinning him down and nuzzling against his neck.

“Koutarou-”

“Shh. It's a Sunday, let's enjoy it.”

“We have things to do today.”

Koutarou kisses the junction of jaw and neck, with the tiniest scrape of teeth. “And I have you in bed for a minute,” he purrs.

Keiji is a weak, weak man.

oOo

Bokuto's cooking breakfast, and Keiji sits at the grand dining table of the house and reflects.

“Koutarou,” he says absently, “what's your backup plan? If you can't go pro for some reason?”
There's a faint clatter, and Koutarou comes into the room with their food plated; Omurice, a bit heavy for breakfast but welcome none the less. He's blushing a little, and sits down heavily in the chair next to Keiji's.

“Um. It's nothing fancy,” he says, turning a brilliant shade of red. “It's really kind of boring, actually! But me and Kuroo have thought about it since we met, and I even have a design worked up, but- um. If- if things don't work out, I want to open an izakaya!”

On the list of things Keiji expected, an izakaya was towards the bottom. Slightly above it was an owl cafe, but he didn't dare give Koutarou the idea.

“Really?” he says, surprised as he picks up his chopsticks. “I know you like cooking, but I didn't know you liked the whole restaurant side with it.”

Koutarou fiddles with his chopsticks, still a little red. “It's fun! Choji, my step-dad, he's been showing me how the business is run since I was little. Even when it's difficult I like it a lot. You have to get everything just right, and make sure everything runs smooth so everyone has fun, but gets paid, and all that. Choji's restaurant is pretty big and he doesn't let me help unless they're swamped because he wants me to focus on volleyball. He played through college but he tore his shoulder.”

“I had no idea,” Keiji says softly. “And Kuroo wants to open one too?”

“Yeah. He won't ever tell me why, though.” Koutarou shrugs. “What about you?”

Keiji considers his food as he eats. “I suppose work in my parents business. But…”

“But what?”

Keiji swallows hard. The reflective surface of the dining table stares back at him, impassive, and he mumbles, “I want to teach. And coach.”

“Really!”

He can feel his face getting hot, and he shoves more of the omurice in his mouth so he can compose himself a little. When he's swallowed he says reluctantly, “I've only started thinking about it recently but... I like teaching the first years a lot. And helping with homework. And I'm nearly fluent in English, so I could teach that, or I could go to school and teach math maybe. I haven't talked to Oto-san and Oka-san yet.”

“You think they'd be upset?”

Keiji sighs, still unable to look up. “No. I just don't want to see their hard work go to waste because I wanted something different.” He hesitates before saying, “Both of them were disowned by their parents before they got married. Oto-san took it very hard, I know.”

“Ehhh?!?” Koutarou seems genuinely shocked. “Disowned?!”

Keiji looks up, grimacing a little. “Oka-san's family is very old and very wealthy. The kind of wealthy that comes with an estate and lots of political power. Oto-san's family is not. When he proposed and she said yes, they thought that she'd have him marry into the clan, but she refused and decided to marry into his name instead. The Takazaki disowned her. Oto-san's sister, my aunt Ryoko, came out as a lesbian around that time. The Akaashi family disowned her, and Oto-san took her in so they disowned him as well. I've never met any of my grandparents, but I don't think I'm missing out on much.”
Koutarou's jaw drops. “Your parents are badass.”

Keiji can't help smiling, a little proud. “They really are.” He takes another bite, chews for a bit and swallows. “Well, and Oka-san being bisexual also got her disowned. She dated a girl for a while. I don't know if it was the classism or the homophobia that finally made my idiot grandparents snap.”

“Your mom is bi?!

oOo

After breakfast, a run, a shower, and a short argument about clauses, they're on the bus. Koutarou leans into him, head resting on his shoulder, and Keiji flips through his phone until they reach the stop closest to the Kozume house. It's a short walk there, and Kuroo opens the door for them with a smile.

“Morning,” he drawls, and Koutarou immediately pulls him in for a kiss.

“Morning,” Keiji says with an eyeroll, and shuts the door. Shoes off, he sidles around the pair and heads up the stairs.

Kenma, dressed in his usual mismatched attire, is on the couch and seems disinclined to move. Keiji hesitates before lightly touching his shoulder, and Kenma leans into the touch without looking up. There's a small smile on his face, though, and Keiji steels his nerves and bends down to kiss his forehead.

“Hello, Kenma.”

Kenma makes the tiniest squeaking sound Keiji's ever heard, turns bright red, and buries his face in his hands.

Kuroo laughs as he comes up the stairs. “Aww, Akaashi, you broke him!”

“I didn't mean to,” Keiji says, uncertain, and Kenma looks up at him through his fingers.

“It's okay.” Kuroo wraps an arm around him, kissing his temple. “Forehead kisses kill him every time. He can be riled up and furious and you kiss his forehead and he just does that. It's so cute it just about kills me every time.” Kuroo kisses Keiji's cheek, then turns just enough to kiss the corner of his mouth. Now it's Keiji's turn for his face to get hot. If being directly under Koutarou's attention is breathtaking, being under Kuroo's is like being cooked on a slow heat. Kenma seems to know what he's thinking, because his smile gets wider.

Koutarou sticks his head on Keiji's free shoulder. “Kenmaaaa! Let's go!”

“I just need a power pack,” Kenma says quietly, but Koutarou promptly fishes four of them out of his pocket triumphantly. “...never mind.” He gets up, quickly stands on his toes to kiss Keiji's cheek, squeezes Kuroo's arm, and practically bolts down the stairs.

“He's so cute,” Keiji breathes, cheek tingling. “I'm never going to get over it.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Kuroo grins at him. “You ready?”

“For what?”

“I'm taking you on a date.”

“Oh you are, are you?”
Keiji's heart does some sort of complicated dance move in his chest when Kuroo pulls him in closer and kisses him for real. He's nothing like Koutarou. Koutarou is all give and take, push and pull, molten desire boiled down to its purest and least complicated form. Kuroo kisses like he's prepared to fall on his knees in worship, awe and hope wrapped into one.

It's breathtaking.

Keiji's come to the conclusion that he may, in fact, very much like kissing.

“So,” he says, dizzy and breathless when they finally break apart. “Where are you taking me on this date?”

Kuroo smiles, eyes crinkling up at the edges, and takes his hand. “Somewhere fun, I promise. Or, at least I hope you'll think it's fun. It's not too far, but we do have a train to catch to Chiyoda Ward.”

Keiji's eyebrows raise, but he lets Kuroo tug him out the door.

One train ride later and they're standing in Akaashi Keiji's new favorite place in the world. He squeaks wordlessly and turns around with wide eyes, staring up at Kuroo in absolute delight. Kuroo looks far too pleased with himself, and slings an arm over Keiji's shoulders.

“Welcome to Kanda-Jimbocho,” he says proudly.

Kanda-Jimbocho, or just Jimbocho, is full of books. Endless stacks upon stacks of used books, rare books, new books, picture books, English books, books that haven't seen the light of days in years. It's a whole used book district, and Kuroo has brought him here on a date. People pass them as Kuroo leads them forward, both of them peering in windows and Keiji practically vibrating out of his skin with desire to get everything. Kuroo leads them through the streets to Kandasuzuran-dori, which is full to bursting with shops selling books, little cafes, and people going about their day.

“Well, here's the challenge,” Kuroo says, thumb lightly stroking the edge of Keiji's jaw. “We buy one book for each other, and each others drink and lunch. It can be a joking book or something serious, but we buy it, then we go to a park, have our lunch, and read some or all of what the other person bought. Kind of getting to know you thing.”

Keiji turns to him, face somber. “Tetsurou,” he says, and Kuroo's face goes absolutely crimson. “Were we not in the middle of the street, I would be kissing you so hard right now.”

“Ah- wh- oh.” Kuroo is clearly very flustered but pleased, and clears his throat. “I-I'm glad you like it.”

“I love it.”

He grabs Kuroo's hand and drags him into the nearest shop. The smell of old books hits him and he inhales deeply, fully aware that he's positively beaming. He notes that no one's really looking at them, this shop mostly empty, and he quickly turns to kiss Kuroo hard and fast before bolting towards the back of the shop where he can see some beautifully bound books just waiting for him to open them. He glances back to see that Kuroo is blushing brilliantly, hand over his mouth. He grins at him and promptly goes back to the books.

Keiji practically buries himself in books. There's classics and poetry, thrillers and manga, and so many different things he hasn't read yet. He hurries back and forth through the store, winds up buying three paperback translations of Diana Wynne Jones works, and drags a smiling Kuroo to the next shop. He leaves that one with a practically new omnibus edition of *Ruroni Kenshin*, Kuroo...
buys an extremely beat up copy of something called “The Rubaiyat” that he's apparently been looking for, and they wind up in a coffee shop/book shop next. Now that he's a little more calm, Keiji focuses on finding something for Kuroo. He'd called it a “getting to know you” date, and Keiji wants to give him something that has meaning, something that he can show himself with.

He wanders the shelves, pleased that Kuroo likes to split off so long as they meet back up rather than hovering over him, and runs his fingers over titles. What's something that's touched him deeply? Some book that helps show who he is, as a person? His parents love reading but loathe clutter- they keep e-books instead, while Keiji's eyes hurt to try and read them. He has bookshelves in his room packed with books- out of all of them, which ones does he go to the most?

Ah.

Of course.

He turns and heads into fiction, weaving and checking titles until he finds a copy of what he wants. It's easy to hide it from Kuroo, slipping it into his bag of other books. He finds Kuroo in the cafe, waiting for him, and he smiles fondly.

“Ready?” Kuroo asks, and he nods. “I'll order your food, you order mine.”

“Done.”

Keiji's watched Kuroo cook the past little while. He likes cooking fish, especially mackerel and pike, and he creates subtle dishes full of savory taste. Bokuto's cooking isn't quite so nuanced, though Keiji supposes that might just be lack of experience in comparison. He knows that Kuroo likes savory over sweet, likes things with lots of texture, likes his coffee either completely plain or so loaded down with sugar you can almost stand a spoon in it, and loves fruit juices.

Kuroo is very easy to buy food for.

They meet up back at the entrance, and Kuroo leads them down the street, taking a few turns and leaning him across a few roads to a tiny park that was more of a sitting area with plants. A wall on one side curved and became a small waterfall, with sitting spots in front of it. A glance at the sign proclaims it to be Jimbucho-Aizen park, and they sit and exchange food.

Kuroo makes a delighted noise when he discovers his drink is flavored with pomegranate, and makes an even happier noise when he sees that the food Keiji got him is a panini with a frankly wild kind of selection of meats, greens, and even cheese on it. Keiji can't help grinning at the iced coffee, savory takoyaki, and croissant Kuroo has selected for him.

“I think we both won on the food front,” Kuroo says, drink already halfway gone. “Book swap?”

Keiji digs it out, hiding it behind his back until Kuroo has his out.

He hands over a translated copy of Le Morte d'Arthur by Sir Thomas Mallory, and Kuroo hands him a collection of poems by ee cummings in the original English. Keiji's jaw drops, because the binding is beautiful. It's classical Western in style, dark blue, with golden detailing.

“Bo has bragged about you speaking English for a while,” Kuroo says in English, and Keiji's jaw drops. His accent is extremely thick, but he doesn't seem uncomfortable speaking. “I love this poet, and I think you'll like him too.”

“Holy shit,” Keiji breathes, and Kuroo bursts out laughing at the look on his face. “I had no idea
“My accent is bad but I'm not too bad at it,” Kuroo teases him, and switches back to Japanese. “Kenma isn't as fluent as I am but he can get by.” He taps the book. “I love ee cummings. He experiments with the style of poems- they're like art, but made with words. And...” he goes faintly red, “he's uh. He's good at poems about love and lust. I just really like him.”

“My parents started doing business in the UK when I was 8,” Keiji says, nodding to *Le Morte d'Arthur*. “They'd go out when it was break time for school, and I'd go with them. I didn't know anything about England or the islands, so Oto-san bought me a copy of the Arthurian legends the first time we went. I loved them. Courtly love, knights in shining armor, dragons and Merlin, I thought it was the best thing in the world. They didn't move out there more or less full time until last year, so when I miss them I reread it.” He strokes the fine cover of the poems, smiling shyly before saying in English, “My accent is mostly Welsh because that's where my parents live, so it sounds weird to some people too.”

Kuroo beams at him. “That's adorable.” He reaches over, tangles their fingers together. His eyes are soft and warm. “Want to go home, cuddle in bed, and read these?”

“I absolutely do.”

oOo

They get to the Kozume house with no incident larger than a slightly stubbed toe, and leave their shoes in the genkan. Keiji is growing to love the Kozume house. It's warm and cozy, and he always feels safe here. He follows Kuroo to the room that he insists is technically just a guest room but clearly is just Kuroo's, and lets himself be pulled down onto the bed once they pull off their jackets. Kuroo straddles him, and Keiji's face heats up. This is... a bit more than anticipated. But he likes being pushed a little. He likes the way that Kuroo watches him, knowing Keiji's watching back.

Keiji's hands go to his hips without much thought, and Kuroo bends and braces himself over Keiji. “Shall I read to you?” Kuroo purrs in his ear, nuzzling against his neck.

“If you like,” Keiji murmurs, tipping his head to the side. Neck kisses are *nice*. “This is- ah, this is fun, though.”

Kuroo noses at the soft skin just behind his ear, making Keiji shiver.

“The book's still in the bag,” he mumbles, but his traitor hands are finally finding out just how built Kuroo's torso is. Bokuto is all broad and thick, like some sort of well sculpted tree trunk, but Kuroo is all lean, hard planes, somehow willowy to Bokuto's oak. He wonders what Kenma feels like. Probably a delicate twig with a core of pure iron. That seems like him.

“Lucky you I have some memorized.”

Keiji makes a noise of surprise. “You do?”

“I told you I liked him,” Kuroo says, a little smug. “You're looking a little flushed. Liking the view?”

Keiji puts on his best unaffected face. “It could be better.”

Kuroo raises his eyebrows, grinning, and sits up to ditch his shirt.

Fucking hell, Keiji thinks helplessly, and his traitor, traitor hands feel him over. It's not as though
he's not pretty well muscled himself, or that he's not constantly around athletes who aren't exactly shy about stripping down, but there's something to be said for the idea that this is his. Not that Kuroo belongs to him, but Kuroo is with him. They are, simply put, together, and he has permission to do such exciting things as, for one thing, touch him. He has love bites all over him, too.

Akaashi Keiji is so very, very fucked.

“So,” Kuroo purrs. “Has Bokuto picked a place for you yet?”

“What?”

Kuroo taps one of the bites. “I'm sure you've noticed he's a possessive little shit. He picks a spot and that's his mark. Mine's in the middle of my back, between my shoulder blades. Kenma's is on his hip, because he's a kinky little shit when he wants to be.”

“...He hasn't picked yet,” Keiji mumbles, turning brilliant red, “because I've never let him.”

Kuroo's eyes spark with humor. “Really?”

“He's possessive but so am I,” Keiji retorts. “And he squirms. It's funny.”

“I have to agree with you there.” Kuroo's hand casually runs down his chest. “I don't care if you keep this on, but if you do mine comes back on too.”

Keiji strips off his shirt in a heartbeat, startling a laugh out of Kuroo that turns into a strangled, helpless noise.

“I don't know how to tell you this,” Kuroo says somberly, “but there's no fucking way you're human. No human is this beautiful.”

Keiji makes a face at him. “Woo me, you pain in the ass.”

Kuroo bends down and kisses him, nipping a little at his bottom lip. “I like my body when it is with your body,” he begins, and Keiji shivers as Kuroo's hands run down his chest. “It is so quite new a thing. Muscles better and nerves more.”

Keiji's hands sneak upwards and drag him down, pulling them chest to chest.

“I like your body,” Kuroo continues, dragging kisses along Keiji's neck. “I like what it does, I like its hows. I like to feel the spine of your body and its bones, and the trembling-firm-smooth ness and which I will again,” he kissed him till he was breathless. “And again, and again kiss.”

Keiji shivers and tips his head back, feeling the faint scrape of teeth down his collarbone.

“I like kissing this and that of you, I like...slowly stroking the shocking fuzz of your electric furr,” Kuroo purrs, hands burying themselves in Keiji's hair as Keiji's nails scratch down his back. “And what-is-it comes over parting flesh.”

Poems about lust indeed. Keiji's never felt more flustered and turned on in his life.

“And eyes,” Kuroo quickly kisses the lids of both, “big love-crumbs, and possibly I like the thrill, of under me you so quite new.”

Keiji drags him down to kiss him again, until his lips feel swollen and he's leaving his own bruises on Kuroo's fine skin from holding him so tight.
“Fuck,” he breathes when Kuroo finally pulls back looking very pleased with himself. “That's the only sort of dirty talk you are ever allowed in my presence.”

Kuroo laughs, eyes sparking. “So, you like ee cummings work, then?”

“Get back down here so I can kiss you more.”

Kuroo complies, and they're well on their way to finally putting some marks on him when from nowhere the phone rings. Kuroo sits up, cheeks nearly as flushed as Keiji's, and pulls his phone out of his pocket and flips it open.

“It's 3:28 PM on a Sunday and it's the first day I've had my hands on my boyfriend this week,” he growls, “so this had better be fucking important, Taketora. Sunday is my day off and you damn well know it.”

There's a tinny voice that sounds both scared and apologetic coming out of the phone, and Kuroo runs his fingers through Keiji's hair and pulls just enough to get him to whine and his hips to jerk. The voice stutters faintly, and starts talking faster.

“What, you mean this Saturday?” Kuroo demands, easily catching Keiji's wrists and pinning them over his head when Keiji tries to reach for him.

“I don't know if you've noticed, Tora, but I have things I do on the weekends.”

“Subtle,” Keiji snickers, and yelps when Kuroo uses his free hand to pinch a nipple.

“Yes, I know Monday's a holiday- that's kind of short notice! Did you even talk to Kai about this?”

“Taketora,” Kuroo says in a voice that suggests happy murder will occur shortly, “I know that you're wildly jealous of the fact that I have three boyfriends, but you called me. My vote is for staying home, with my boyfriends and doing sweet fuck all. I'm hanging up now.”

He flips the phone shut and bites the hell out of Keiji's neck. Keiji can't quite help moaning, arching up against him.

“Wh-what was that about?” he manages.

“Potential training games with Karasuno in Miyagi over the weekend,” Kuroo says, tossing his phone to the other side of the room. He lets Keiji loose and Keiji immediately grabs his back, nails pointedly digging into where he's seen the remains of bite-bruises on his back. Kuroo thrashes and whimpers, pupils blowing wide, and Keiji uses a good four years of Judo training go to work and flips them so Kuroo's back is to the bed. “Fuck, that was hot.”

Keiji nips at his lip and greedily goes for more kisses, Kuroo's fingers burying themselves in his hair.
“Just one thing,” he breathes when Kuroo gives him a chance to pull back a little.

“What's that?”

Keiji grins at him. “Everybody knows Kenma’s got a cute little weak spot that lives in Miyagi that he doesn’t get to see much. And that Kenma’s your weak spot.”

Kuroo freezes, then groans. “I’m going to Miyagi, aren’t I?”

“Smart man,” Keiji croons, and kisses him again. “Don’t worry, Bokuto and I will come with. We’ll all have a lovely little countryside jaunt.”

“Where’ll you stay?” Kuroo asks, but he’s a bit distracted.

“An onsen, a hotel, the back of a van. I don’t particularly care.”

Kuroo’s eyes light up at the word “onsen”. Keiji pulls back, considering him.

“Do you have a fetish for traditional clothes?” he demands. “Is that it? What is with you and yukata?”

Kuroo goes positively crimson. “No! It’s just... Um. An easy access thing? A fancy dress thing? You’re hot and you look good in everything but you get this whole “master of the house” thing going on when you’re wearing yukata. It’s like nice fitted suits! It’s just hot, okay?!”

“You are bizarre,” Keiji mutters, pulling back so he can tug Kuroo’s hair and listen to him yelp this time. “I’m surrounded by weird.”

“Yeah, but you like it.”

“Hush your filthy mouth before I gag you.”

“Oooh, promise?”

Keiji yanks on his hair.

oOo

Bokuto is understandably excited to find out about the Miyagi trip.

“Can we take the kids?” he begs Keiji as Keiji puts together his bag. He hates not being packed a week in advance for things, since he almost always manages to forget something important if he does it the day of. “It’d be fun!”

“Don’t call the team children.”

“They’re our children and you know it, Keiji.”

Bokuto may have a point there. Keiji closes his bag after carefully setting his yukata inside. “We’re not taking them. You and I are going to go and have a nice, relaxing trip with our boyfriends children. They’ll be hard enough to corral on their own, we don’t need to bring ours too. Who are you leaving in charge of Monday practice?”

“Konoha,” Bokuto says. “He’ll keep things in order.” He stretches, and Keiji watches the bunching of his muscles. “You’re picking Wataru for Vice-Captain next year, right?”
“No.” Keiji can feel his face scrunch up. “Absolutely not. Wataru's too nice to get things done. He'd be a terrible third-year captain. Wataru's been on the starting team the longest, but Sato is the brains.” He hesitates. “Or... maybe Futagawa.”

Bokuto goes still, his face hardening. “One of the ones I made apologize to you?”

“No.” Keiji runs his finger along the edge of his bag, thinking. “He's changed a lot in this past little bit. Madarame has too, but...I think Futagawa could make a very good leader. He's shown flashes of it. Whatever you told them scared both of them into a better headspace, they've been improving like mad.” He turns, hooking a finger into Bokuto's belt loops to reel him in close. Bokuto goes willingly, arms dropping around Keiji's shoulders. Keiji reaches up, running his fingers through Bokuto's loose hair.

“I'm going to miss you so much,” he whispers, heart suddenly aching. “It'll be hard only seeing you and Kuroo on the weekends.”

“Hey,” Bokuto says, gentle, “we're just going to be at Chuo. We're not even leaving the city! I know we have to do that two-years-in-the-dorms thing, one for me and Kuroo and one for you and Kenma, but after that we'll all be together for real. We can get a place together. And a really big, big bed, and maybe a cat. But in the next two years we'll still see each other. We'll still be together. There'll be kissing, and dates, and maybe sex if we can all get our heads on right about it, and food, and some sadness but a lot of happiness too. And me 'n Kuroo will have gym privileges so you'll have to come toss for me sometimes, okay?”

Keiji leans in and kisses him, because there's no words for how he feels. His heart is eased but still aches, the threat of loneliness still stuck deep in his chest.

“I didn't have many friends until I joined the team and you just about fell over yourself making me get to know everyone,” Keiji tells him, quiet. “I know you've suffered because of people not understanding you, but I suffered too until I met you. I need you to know that, Koutarou.”

Bokuto's lips tremble a little, and he pulls Keiji in for a tight hug. “That's really sad!”

“I know. I was really sad. But now, things are a lot better.” Keiji kisses the side of his head, and the weight in his chest grows lighter. “I've got you.”

The bag falls off the bed at some point, somewhere between frantic kissing and both of them losing their shirts.

Bokuto picks a spot, then, and Keiji lets him. He wakes the next day and touches the mark left behind on the top of his chest near his left shoulder, where he'll feel it every time he lifts his arms to toss.

Chapter End Notes

Kuroo who are you calling a kinky little shit
you are the kinkiest little shit here
Koutarou is very, very lost, and he really does not like it.

It wasn't on purpose, of course. They'd gotten off the shinkansen, taken a bus, and he'd been in the back of the group because of the way everyone shuffled out, and then there was a really cute cat that was in the street, and he'd followed it and followed it because it looked so soft and now-

Now he's very lost, and there's a distinct lack of cats in their usual or tall volleyball playing forms.

So he's all alone in an unfamiliar city (not Karasuno, not Sendai, where is this place?), sitting with his back against a retaining wall made of piled stones because they're in the middle of nowhere, and when he pulls out his phone to check a map he's greeted by a low battery at 8%.

“Oh, no,” he manages right before it promptly dies.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird caws like it's laughing. It certainly feels like he's being laughed at, but he shoves down the fear and tries to figure out what to do. He's clearly on the edge of this little town- beyond the railing of the road, it's a drop off to some beautifully tended fields. Beyond that, forests well up with thick trees, trailing up the tall mountains. His heart slows a bit as he looks at time. He's a city boy like Tanaka jokes about, always has been, but this place is gorgeous. It's different from Hokkaido, no sense-memories try to sneak up on him here, but it's just as beautiful.

There's a faint meow, and he looks down the road to see a different cat than before rubbing up against the legs of a tall, lanky kid maybe a few years younger than him.

“Hi!” he calls, and the kid jumps. The cat he's been petting meows loudly, and the kid picks it up like it's some sort of shield. He's enormously tall, with at least two inches on Koutarou himself, dressed in a white-and-teal track suit reading “Aoba Johsai”, and has the most intense widows peak Koutarou's ever seen. He looks like a very oversized turnip in the best way possible, but Koutarou figures now's probably not the best time to tease him about it.

“H-hi?”

“I'm lost!” Koutarou says cheerfully, getting up and bounding down to him. The kid stares at his hair with a bit of awe. “Do you know where Hanamaki Onsen is? Can you tell me how to get there? My phone's dead.”

“Um. Yes, I can, it's nearby and I should be getting back to my team anyway. We have to go that way to catch our ride.” The kid stares at him, eyebrows furrowing. “Sorry, have we met before?”

“I don't think so? My names Bokuto Koutarou!” He bows quickly. “Nice to meet you!”
“K-kindaichi Yutaro,” the kid stammers, his eyes going very wide as he bows. “Um. Bokuto Koutarou from Fukurodani?”

Koutarou feels a bit of pride at that and swells up a little. “Yeah! How’d you know?”

“There was an article about your team in the magazine I read this month,” Kindaichi tells him, going a very pretty shade of red. “I remembered your hair. I wanted to do something like that to mine but I can't make it work, it just stands straight up, and kaa-san won't let me dye it.” He hugs the cat before setting it back down. “Um c-can I talk to you about volleyball while we're going back? I'm a middle blocker but I'm not that good at much else.”

“Sure!” Koutarou jogs over to him, grinning. “C'mon, let's go. My boyfriends are waiting for me, and Akaashi's going to kill me for getting lost.”

Kindaichi's eyes get big and hopeful. “Boyfriend?”

“Three of them, actually,” Koutarou says as Kindaichi leads him down a different street and off to a main road. “I'm really lucky!”

“I didn't think-” Kindaichi breaks off his sentence, but Koutarou waits expectantly. “I... I didn't think many people would be gay when I started playing. I thought I was going to have to hide who I am all until college, maybe even longer. But my captain and vice-captain are- I dunno if they're dating, really, but they're two people caught up existing with each other, and some of my team are too, and it's all very... unexpected. I thought it was just my team.”

“Let me tell you a secret,” Koutarou says, clapping the kid on the back and accidentally making him stumble. “Turnip-chan, this whole big world is a lot gayer than most people give it credit for being. And people find each other and flock together, because somewhere deep, deep down we all want to be with people like us who love us. And sometimes it's really, really hard, don't get me wrong, but there's a lot of people out there living and loving and never being anything but themselves. I was a big scared kid my first year of high school, but I got lucky too. I had a captain who practically worshiped at the feet of our libero, who never ever stood back and let anyone say anything bad about him because the two of them knew who they were and how they are. And somewhere else there's some more big scared kids, all over the world, who are going to come into clubs or classes or walk onto trains and I refuse to be anything but just like my first captain. I'm going to love my partners out loud, all three of them, because you and me and all those other kids deserve happiness.”

They've stopped walking, Kindaichi looking at him with eyes big and full of hope, and Koutarou beams up at him.

“Make me a promise, Kindaichi,” Koutarou says, holding out his pinky. “That when you get to be a great big third-year you'll do the same thing. And if anyone tries to give you shit, I'll fight them for you myself.”

“You mean it?”

“I do.”

Kindaichi blinks a couple times, and surreptitiously scrubs at his eyes before hooking their pinkies together. “You're the best kind of weird, Bokuto-san.”

“That's what I like to hear!”

Koutarou claps him on the back again, and Kindaichi's smile is big and wide as he leads them
down the street again.

They turn the corner by a very cute little shop selling produce and there's a whole horde of people in the same teal-and-white track suit as Kindaichi. They all turn to look at them, expressions ranging from amused to bored.

“Kindaichi!”

Oh, that's a vice-captain tone if he's ever heard one, pissed off and ready to ground the wayward child. Koutarou grins, waving at the group as a handsome senior stalks up, spiky hair ruffled and his jacket off to show off ridiculous biceps.

“Iwaizumi-san, this is Bokuto Koutarou, Captain of Fukurodani,” Kindaichi squeaks out. “He got lost, he just needs to get to Hanamaki Onsen.”

Iwaizumi-san stops, eyeing Koutarou hard. He grins and waves.

“Hi!”

“...Hello,” Iwaizumi-san says suspiciously. “Kindaichi, you were gone for ten minutes and managed to bring back a whole goddamn owl. Would it kill you to stay with the group?”

“He found me, I just wanted to pet a cat! Please, I can take him to the Onsen-”

A tall brunet comes up, leaning casually on Iwaizumi-san's shoulder. He's got the kind of quick, clever eyes that suggest he's trying to be intimidating.

Cute. Bokuto Koutarou was last intimidated by an angry Kozume Kenma. No one can top that, ever.

“Bokuto Koutarou,” the brunet says, his name being spoken with great and intricate care. “What's Fukurodani doing in Miyagi?”

“Oh, Fukurodani's team isn't here,” Koutarou says, waving his hand. “My boyfriends team came up to visit their rivals for some practice games and I tagged along with them! You're Miyagi, I've sure you've met them. Karasuno? But the characters are weird, everyone thinks it's Torino. My sunshine son and my boyfriend are good friends.”

The Aoba Johsai team seems to need a second to process everything. Koutarou waits patiently.

“Son?” the one with pink hair mutters.

“Boyfriends plural?” one with sleepy eyes like Keiji's says, louder.

“Karasuno?” Tall Brunet says, with a bit of an edge.

“Yeah! Nekoma's their rivals, my vice-captain and I tagged along so we could have onsen time with our boyfriends when they're done playing! And maybe we'll do a couple rounds with them too. Do you know Karasuno well, then?”

“Well enough,” Tall Brunet says. “I'm Oikawa Tooru, captain of Aoba Johsai.”

“OH!” Koutarou beams at him, delighted. “Now I remember, you're the ones that they're fighting with, the ones with the killer serve. I'm glad I finally got to meet you! You're coming to Chuo, right, to be the new first string setter? I saw your name on the email list! I've been wanting to meet you for a while. You're way nicer than obnoxious Ushiwaka, I'm glad he chose Waseda instead so
that I can finally beat his ass. Is he that serious all the time? *Have you ever seen him smile*, this is a vital question.”

Immediately the entire team relaxes, and Oikawa looks very flustered but pleased. “He doesn't smile at all, ever. You know Ushijima?”

“Tragically yes,” Koutarou says, grinning. “I'm ranked 4th, he's ranked 3rd, and he's an ass about it every time. I hate him! How does he keep such a straight face all the time?! I can't even handle *being* straight.”

“That's good enough for me!” Iwaizumi-san says, grinning. “You've got good taste, Bokuto-san.”

The rest of the team introduces themselves, and Koutarou lets himself be buried in the small sea of people next to Kindaichi as they walk to the onsen. Oikawa is bickering with Iwaizumi, who's probably the not-boyfriend Kindaichi mentioned, and the others are laughing and talking together. The one called Kunimi is standing very, very close to Kindaichi, who's watching Iwaizumi with a wistful sort of expression, and oh, that's going to be a mess.

They round the corner and the onsen appears. It's a nice, very traditional building set up against a different edge of town, and has some lovely decorations out front. There's a tiny shrine box out in the front with a black makneki-neko statue beside it. Kuroo must be absolutely thrilled they're staying here.

“My aunt owns it,” Hanamaki-san says, explaining the name. “I wonder if she's got—”

Everyone falls silent, and Koutarou turns to see that Keiji has appeared from the shadows under some trees where a bench was, and is standing in the circle of light from the streetlight above him.

He looks... unearthly, almost. Impossible in his perfect, utter beauty. He's dressed in his yukata, the new one in the Fukurodani colors, leaving it loose around the neck and shoulders to reveal a bit of his collarbone and the smooth line of his throat, Koutarou's mark peeking out from the black fabric. His eyes seem to sparkle in the moonlight, and even the breeze seems to hold its breath as he smiles, slightly, his eyes going soft when they light on Koutarou. His hair is getting longer, the waves dipping down so that he has to push them back to where they should be. Night is falling fast, and in the last vestiges of the golden hour Keiji is beautiful.

“Who is that,” Issei whispers.

Keiji extends a hand, a silent summons, and Koutarou walks forward utterly entranced. He takes Keiji's hand when he reaches him, and Keiji reaches up to gently adjust a stray strand of hair. His face is a composed mask, but his eyes are worried, flicking over to check that Koutarou's all there. Koutarou can't take his eyes off of him, drinking in every tiny detail.

“We were getting worried,” he murmurs, his voice melodic and low. “Kuroo was about to get his shoes to go find you. Did you get lost and your phone died?”

Koutarou nods, tongue tied, and raises Keiji's hands to his lips to gently kiss his long fingers. Someone- probably Kindaichi, honestly- sighs with helpless longing.

“I'm sorry,” he apologizes, still bowed over those beautiful hands. “I should have been with you. I got distracted! I'll do my best to be better.”

Keiji's free hand gently strokes his cheek before he turns to the Aoba Johsai team, cocking his head slightly as he looks them over. “I see you found friends. I can't take you anywhere without you bringing home more of them, can I?”
Koutarou straightens up, as do all of the Aoba Johsai team. They look utterly starstruck, even Oikawa.

“Yes, this is the Aoba Johsai team! The Miyagi rivals, you know? Um, this is Oikawa Tooru, and Iwaizumi Hajime, and Hanamaki Takahiro- his aunt owns the onsen-”

Keiji gently squeezes his hand, and Koutarou gets the hint to be quiet as Keiji approaches them. Koutarou follows, watching him, and bows when he does.

“My name is Akaashi Keiji, and I must thank you,” Keiji says in his deep bow, “for finding and bringing him back to us. I was getting very concerned. I owe you a great debt.”

The whole of Aoba Johsai about fall over themselves trying to say it's not a big deal as Keiji straightens, and Koutarou hides his smile. He forgets, sometimes, that he's had plenty of exposure to Keiji at his most elegant and composed. Keiji is beautiful in even shorts and a t-shirt, but when he's in formal wear he becomes something entirely different, gorgeous and ethereal. It's impossible to be cool in the face of Keiji when he's like this, smooth talking and his eyes heavy-lidded, a young lord in effortless control of the situation.

“Quick question,” Issei says, ignoring the frantic looks from the others. “Is everyone from Tokyo as pretty as you guys? Because if so I've gotta start the paperwork to transfer schools.”

Keiji covers his mouth to hide how wide his smile gets as he laughs, and it looks like Koutarou's going to have to fight the entire Aoba Johsai team for Keiji's hand in marriage. “Flattery will get you nowhere,” he says, but he's still smiling wide. “Three is enough for both of us, I think.”

Koutarou melts, and wraps an arm around him to pull him in to kiss his cheek. “Akaashi.”

From behind them, Kuroo's voice calls, “Bokuto Koutarou you little shit, you scared me half to death!”

“Go,” Keiji murmurs, still smiling, “go reassure them.”

Koutarou kisses his cheek again before turning.

“Oh, now you're in yukata,” he says cheerfully. “Does the two hour rule still apply to Kenma?”

Kuroo makes a face at him as he and Kenma approach, pulling him in for a tight hug. “Don't do that, Bo. You scared me!”

He can faintly hear Yahaba mutter, “Oh my god, what's in the Tokyo water?”

Kuroo kisses his forehead firmly before looking over at the horde of white-and-teal. “Who're they?”

“Aoba Johsai! That's Oikawa, and Iwaizumi, and-”

“Oh my god, Bo. We left you alone for a half hour, tops, and you bring home an entire volleyball team?” Kuroo looks them over, eyes lighting on Iwaizumi. “Or were you just bringing them back to compare deadlifts? Fuck, man, do they make you register those guns out here in the countryside?”

Keiji quietly facepalms as Iwaizumi sputters, and Oikawa looks like he can't decide between laughing and murder.

“Don't be rude to Iwaizumi-san,” Bokuto says, bouncing a little on his toes. “He's nice, and very
called for.”

“I wasn't being rude, look at the guy, dear god.”

Kenma elbows Kuroo firmly. “Leave him be. These are Shoyo's rivals?”

Koutarou nods, moving to Kenma's side to help box in his vision. “Yeah! They brought me back, and I brought Kuroo a middle blocker for another son! Megane-chan is nice but Kuroo needs more kids. There was a cat and I followed it and then I got lost.”

“I did the same thing. It's okay.” Kenma takes his hand, shying against his side before slowly lifting his head to look at Aoba Johsai. He can see Hanamaki and Issei both clutch their hearts, and Yahaba's gone very pink. Kyouken looks like he can't decide if he wants to hug Kenma or strangle him, but that might just be his face. Kunimi looks unimpressed, but Kindaichi is very red. “Thank you,” he says very quietly, and once again everyone falls over themselves to say it's nothing.

“He's so cute,” Issei hisses. “Is it legal to be that cute?”

Keiji hides his smile very poorly, taking a step forward, and all the eyes snap back to him. He's a magnet like that, and Koutarou wraps his arm around Kenma's shoulders in reassurance.

“Please, before you go, might I invite you to tea with us, or a light lunch some time?” Keiji asks. “You did bring home both my captain and one third of my heart.”

Yahaba makes a strangled noise. So does Koutarou, overwhelmed.

Oikawa looks torn for a moment before his eyes spark. “We're headed back to our school tonight,” he says. “We shouldn't miss our ride. But- maybe a game tomorrow? We could come out again tomorrow if you'd be willing to do a few rounds, and Tobio-chan and his team don't throw a fit. Feel free to ask them.”

Keiji cocks his head. “If they do, I will take the brunt of the blame. Kuroo-san?”

“Akaashi, don't stand on ceremony, they know we're involved,” Kuroo says, walking over to kiss his temple. “Kuroo Tetsurou, Captain of Nekoma. Sounds good to me. We're here on more of a social visit than a real training, though, so just know it might be a bit more relaxed than usual. We'll be playing at Karasuno's sports park. Kenma-”

“Gym 4,” Kenma offers, still tight up against Koutarou's side. “I'll call Shoyo and let him know.”

“Thank you,” Kuroo says fondly, and Kenma nods, finding Koutarou's hand. He turns back to Oikawa, grinning. “All else fails, come and play us or Fukurodani in Tokyo. I want to see what I'll be playing with next year.”

Keiji's head turns sharply.

“Aha,” Oikawa says, relaxing. “You're coming to Chuo too? I thought your name sounded familiar. I must have read it on the emails.”

“That's me. Middle blocker. Akaashi, he'll be the new setter.”

Keiji's eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. “I see.”

Holy shit, Koutarou realizes, eyes widening. “Akaaaashi, are you jealous?!”

“Merely curious,” Keiji says, his voice a bit stiff. “We'll see how you two match up.”
Kenma hides a laugh against Koutarou's arm.

Kuroo trades numbers with Oikawa and Iwaizumi, Koutarou makes sure to get Kindaichi's, and by the time they're all set Keiji's ruffled feathers have laid down. He bows again, the very image of a polite young lord, and Aoba Johsai all but fall over as they hurry to bow back.

“Bye Kindaichi!” Koutarou calls. “Thanks for helping me!”

Kindaichi waves, going a little pink when Keiji smiles at him, and the group all head back down another side street.

Keiji walks to him, taking his hand, and leans down to press his face against his shoulder. “Please be careful,” he says, relief clear in his voice. “I really was worried.”

“I'm really sorry,” Koutarou mumbles, and lets them lead him inside.

oOo

Nekoma's team only teases him a little, and by the time he's unpacked it's their turn in the onsen. Karasuno is apparently not thrilled, but are willing to go a few rounds with Aoba Johsai (Or Seijoh, apparently? Nicknames are odd), and Koutarou hides himself down in the water to hide his face.

Keiji and Kenma both spend a polite amount of time in the water before fleeing, presumably to a quieter place, and Kuroo moves over to play with his hair.

“You've got a thinking face on,” he says fondly.

Koutarou reluctantly emerges from the water. “It just hit me that Keiji won't be setting for me,” he admits. “That Oikawa guy will. What if he doesn't like me?! What if I get loud and he hates me and then I get bodily tossed from the team and have to be Keiji's house husband because I turn into a useless lump with no talent?! I don't know how to dust properly!”

“That's a very specific worry to have, bro.”

“Have you seen Keiji's house?! It's spotless! I can't keep up that kind of cleaning!”

“Have I ever told you that you're the light of my life?”

“Kurooooo, don't lie, I know that's Kenma!”

“I can have two lights!”

“What about Keiji?!”

“Keiji isn't the light of my life, Keiji is a golden glimmering beacon of grace and beauty.”

“A beacon is a light, you idiot cat!”

Kuroo promptly shoves him back under the water. Koutarou drags him with.

When they get back to their room (their private room, despite Lev's best efforts and a lot of ribbing from the team), Koutarou curls up next to Kenma, who's playing yet another one of the Monster Hunter games. Kenma rolls over so he can be curled up with his game inside Koutarou's arms, and Koutarou kisses the top of his head as Kuroo goes over to tease Keiji for studying while they could be doing something else. Koutarou, who's attempted the same in the past, mentally wishes him luck in the war that's about to ensue. Keiji likes studying before bed. He says it's relaxing, which is
the biggest lie Koutarou's ever heard, but saying that he likes his alone time to unwind with books is apparently too much like exposing himself for Keiji's liking. He's too cute.

“Sorry for scaring you,” he tells Kenma.

“I wasn't scared,” Kenma says simply. “One of the best things that ever happened to me happened when I was lost in Miyagi. I thought you'd be fine.”

“What happened when you got lost?!”

He can faintly see Kenma's smile as he cuddles closer. “I met Shoyo.”

Kuroo flops down on the other side of Kenma, sprawling out lazily. Keiji has managed to rebuff him with one solid glare. “And none of us ever had any peace again. I like our back-country Miyagi cousins. They're fun, even if Sawamura's a bit... intense, and their team make us all turn into happy go lucky idiots in the best kind of way.”

“Did you honestly just call Sawamura Daichi intense in comparison to the rest of his team?”

“Keiji, I swear to god-”

“You couldn't have said Kageyama? Or even Tanaka? Hinata even?”

“Keiji-”

Kenma snickers from inside Koutarou's arms, and cuddles up tighter against him. Koutarou resists the urge to squish him as the other two squabble, reaching up to gently run his fingers through Kenma's always so soft hair. Kuroo gets up, presumably to go over to harangue Keiji where he can intimidate him with height.

“We haven't had a lot of time together lately,” Kenma says, too quiet for the others to hear. “I've been missing you.”

“Awww!”

“I want to get pie again together. Maybe we could do a movie as well, or something.”

“Sure!” Koutarou tangles their legs together, pleased. “I liked it when we had it on Sunday. Do you like all pies, or just apple ones? I think I'd like lots of different kinds.”

“...There's a cafe in Itabashi that specializes in desserts that I like. We could try a bunch of different kinds.”

“Really?! Promise?!?”

“Promise.”

Koutarou kisses the top of his head again, and Kenma kicks away and rolls over so that he can settle back and they're now spooned tight together. Koutarou can watch the screen now, where the main character is fighting what might be a dog or might be a cow. The graphics aren't the best. Behind them, Kuroo and Keiji's griping has been abruptly cut off with a whine, and Koutarou snickers. Keiji picks up on new concepts fast, and kissing is no exception. Besides, Kuroo is very easy to distract with kisses. He turns into a blushing puddle, especially when teeth get involved.

“They think we're having sex, you know,” Kenma says offhandedly as Kuroo gasps behind them and Keiji makes some very smug noises.
“No fair, Keiji-”

“Since when am I fair, you pain in the ass?!”

“Who, Nekoma?”

Kenma settles back against him tighter, and tangles their legs back together, yukata falling to reveal a tantalizing strip of thigh. “Everyone. Fukurodani, Nekoma, those from Karasuno who've actually figured it out- granted, some of them are maybe not the clearest on our relationship, but still. Kai actually asked me the other day if I wanted him to pick up condoms while he was at the shops, since he was getting them anyway.”

Koutarou bursts out laughing. “He did?! Holy shit, I love Kai.”

“He's a good guy,” Kenma mutters. “He tried to give Kuroo the safe sex talk and Kuroo actually ran out of the gym. It was pretty funny. Does it bother you?”

“Only if people try and make it a mean sort of joke,” Koutarou says, casually sliding his hand in to cup Kenma's waist. “I don't mind. Sex is fun, when everyone's ready.”

“I keep forgetting you've already jumped that particular hurdle of life.”

“Very poetic!” He shrugs, hand absently stroking soft skin. “The first time was weird and uncomfortable and not much to recommend, but once we were on the same page it was fine. Sayori was nice, and very nice about things not working out in the end!”

“She's in your year, right?”

“Yeah, but a different school! So we didn't see each other much. She was struggling with hypersexual issues from some trauma way way back, so I was kind of a means to an end in a good way. She liked me for me mostly, though, which was good! She was the best of the girlfriends I've had. Not that that's really a high bar... We just didn't mesh up right. Once she'd started therapy I think she realized she needed a step back.” Koutarou sighs, heavy. “I think you'd like her, in your own way. But sex with each different person is always going to be a different sort of thing, you know.”

Kenma hums, and puts his game down. “So... you don't mind waiting?”

“Why would I mind?” He gently squeezes Kenma, mindful of how tiny he is in comparison. “I love you. I love Akaashi. I love Kuroo. Pushing you for anything more than what you want to give isn't love, or at least it's not how love is supposed to work! Maybe we'll all do it together, or maybe some of us won't match up with the others, or maybe someone won't ever be ready and someone would be right now. It doesn't matter. We'll work it out, when the time is right.”

Kenma is very still for a moment before squirming out of his arms. He looks up, concerned, and Kenma sits up. He takes Koutarou's hand in his lap and squeezes, tight.

“Kenma?”

“Koutarou,” Kenma says, his voice very small and shaky, “you're a really good person, you know that?”

Koutarou sits up a little, bracing himself with his free hand, and Kenma turns. His face is mostly hidden by the curtain of hair, but his eyes are threatening to spill over as he bends and kisses Koutarou.
Koutarou's heart aches, and when Kenma pulls back he reaches up, gently wiping away a tear that's spilled over.

All Kenma's masks are gone, his eyes wide open for understanding, and Koutarou loves him almost more than he can bear.

“Hey,” he says, soft and gentle and his heart thrashing around inside his chest. “Don't look like that, kitten. It's gonna be okay.”


Koutarou pulls him back down to hold him tight, and Kenma hugs him back, burying his face against his chest.

Behind them, Keiji has apparently emerged victorious, and Kuroo slinks back over to cuddle up behind Kenma and drape his oversized arms over the pair of them. Koutarou tilts his face up, and Kuroo kisses him over Kenma's head.

“You two are looking a little serious,” he says quietly. His cheeks are still flushed a pretty red, his mouth a little swollen. Keiji's almost as bad as Koutarou is for biting at them. “Everything okay?”

“Yep! Everything's good.”

Kuroo runs a hand down Kenma's side in reassurance, kisses his hair, and then gets up to change out of his yukata.

Kuroo is almost always the first one to sleep, pillows as always mashed over his head to block out any possible noise and back to the wall. He always looks stressed before he sleeps, and Koutarou knows that sometimes his nightmares are bad, but it seems like he's less stressed than normal as he burrows down for the night. They change as well, and Koutarou settles down with Keiji's head pillowed on his shoulder as usual, and Kenma curled up against his side like some sort of heat seeking missile and his arm across Koutarou's stomach.

He likes this.

He wishes Kuroo would come over and cuddle with them too, but he likes this and he know Kuroo has issues. He likes Keiji under his arm, Kenma at his side. The past week he's spent more time in Keiji's bed than out of it at night, and it's been so... simple. So easy. They fit together perfectly, Keiji's head pillowed in the exact right spot. He was worried, at first, that when they came he would be nervous and scared in this big traditional building, with its tatami floors and sliding doors, but-

But Kenma is snoring, faintly, and Keiji's hands never stop moving in their sleep like he's making sure the pillow hasn't gone somewhere, and Kuroo sometimes lets out tiny noises that might be words and might be choked back yells.

He's not alone.

Here, in the darkness, soft blankets loose on top of him, he is safe and protected. They will never leave him alone in the dark.

Koutarou closes his eyes, holds Keiji a little tighter, and sinks into the blissful oblivion of sleep.
Shoyo is nice.

He's a lot of heart in a small body, big smiles and quick laughs. Maybe, one day, he'll be a very small version of Bokuto- the one that people look up to, an ace with heart and full of joy. A vision of hope and pride, proof that work can succeed where talent ends. Powerful and unstoppable in his quests, Hinata Shoyo- a tiny giant.

Kenma hopes that's the case.

Seeing Oikawa warm up with the rest of his team, he frowns. Oikawa is undeniably pretty, with a clever tongue and eyes like razor blades on the court. Looking at him brings an understanding, because he can see exactly where Tobio got it. Whatever it is, it's the direct result of being brought up in the same line of setters that gave them Oikawa. Tobio himself is watching with barely concealed longing.

Shoyo has told him, in passing, about what happened to Tobio in middle school. How deeply he's been effected by it, and how in his weaker moments he goes to Oikawa like he's a disinterested parent. Tobio is nearly as bad as Shoyo in his thirst for power and victory, but he thinks the grueling work of progression has helped temper that lust for power. He's going to be dangerous when he hits third year, if this is how he is now. But Oikawa, pretty and popular and smart Oikawa, is still the end goal for Tobio. Kenma isn't sure if Tobio wants to beat him or be him, avoid him at all costs or beg him for his approval.

He's fairly certain Tobio doesn't know either.

Koutarou rests his head on Kenma's shoulder, big arms wrapping around his waist. “What do you think?”

“He's smart,” Kenma says, leaning their heads together just a bit. “He works hard. He'll be a good match for you, I think, but it'll be a while before you mesh up perfectly. You're going to have to work on meshing with him, too. He won't cater to you like Keiji does.”

“Hmm.”

Koutarou is in his best sort of state, restless half-feral energy running around him while his body is perfectly still. Keiji has put him through his paces enough to cool him off, and Kenma knows Kuroo spent some time working him over before Karasuno arrived. He absently reaches up, patting Koutarou's cheek.

“Karasuno's up first,” Kuroo says, coming over to them. “Then us. Their captain wants to switch out with Bokuto for the second set, see if Kageyama can mesh with him.”

“Ehhh? Why?” Koutarou lifts his head and looks over to the bulk that's Karasuno in their black and white practice gear

“Do I look like I understand what goes on in bird brains?”

“Yes,” Koutarou and Kenma say at once, looking up at his hair. Kuroo scowls at them.
“Rude, both of you.”

Both teams line up, and it's a brutal fight. Aoba Johsai (Or Seijoh? Whatever) take the first set, then Karasuno the next with some spectacular setting to Bokuto, and then it's Seijoh's again regardless of Bokuto. Keiji watches from the sidelines, his face a perfect mask as he paces with Kuroo back and forth, and Kenma considers Karasuno. Watching them play and playing against them is two entirely separate things. But it's fun, a little like watching Fukurodani play. They bolt and joke and while they're somber as ever, they're fast and clever. Crows, all of them in their black, swarming and mobbing back and forth in coordinated hits. For once, Shoyo is getting good receives, and he keeps frantically checking to see if Kenma saw it too. Daichi and Kuroo heckle each other while Bokuto whoops and high fives with handsome and eternally nervous Azumane, Tanaka and Tora yell back and forth, and Yaku is hyper-focused on Noya.

It's strange, having so many friends. Strange, and good, and it makes him weirdly happy.

Ugh.

Taketora stretches out next to him. “Seijoh's no slouches. Maybe with the Shiratori-assholes out of the way, we'll see them at Nationals next year.”

“Maybe.” Kenma watches Kindaichi watching Tobio watching Oikawa. “We'll see. It's not like Shiratorizawa isn't still going to be strong.”

“Let me hope, Kenma!”

“Hush, you noisy thing.”

Fukunaga giggles next to them, and Kenma has to hide a smile.

Kuroo's on the other side of the court, walking back and forth and watching curiously, like some oversized and happy cat. He looks pleased with himself for some reason.

“Hey,” Taketora says, very quiet, and Kenma glances back to him. Tora's smile has faded a little, gone a bit sad. “That's going to be you, next year. I'm keeping my number 4. You should wear Kuroo's number 1. I think it'd mean a lot to him.”

Kenma looks back to Kuroo, who's now heckling Koutarou for a missed spike. “I'm not going to be captain, you are.”

“And? Bokuto wears number four too, and he's a captain.”

“Fukurodani has five third years on its first string alone.”

“Kenma, you're wearing number one. No way in hell that Kuroo would have made it as a captain and a leader without you right there next to him. You've earned that 1 just as much as he has.” Tora slaps his back, almost bowling him forward, and Kenma grimaces. He looks to Fukunaga, who grins.

“He's right all night,” Fukunaga says cheerfully. “I'll be number 2!”

Kenma sighs, resigned, and as Seijoh and Karasuno finish up and bow he stands up.

“You're all terrible,” he tells them with no heat, and his friends laugh.

oOo
Playing Seijoh is brutal. Nekoma takes the first set, and Seijoh takes the next two with a deuce at the end. Everyone's exhausted, Kenma loathes third matches, and he flops on the floor and lets Koutarou bodily pick him up and carry him off. What else are those giant muscles good for?

Everyone laughs and jokes while they recover and eat, Seijoh's Kindaichi alternating between watching Tobio and Iwaizumi. Kunimi beside him looks very done with the whole affair. Tobio is quieter than normal, keeping his head down as if to avoid Oikawa's attentions while still obviously wanting them, and Shoyo all but sits on Kenma's lap he's so excited to see him again.

“I don't really get it but I'm so jealous,” he says in excitement. “You never talk about them and I'm so happy they're here because we never get to see you guys it seems and oh! I did so good on my math test the other day I think I told you about it I got a whole 70 percent and Yachi was so proud she made me a cake and Tanaka biffed it SO HARD the other day when going for a spike and ran into the net, it was amazing! I'm really excited about nationals and we'll all be there and Kenma it's gonna be so cool and-”

Kenma lets Shoyo's words wash over him, knowing that Shoyo understands him perfectly. Aside from Kuroo, he's never had anyone just get him so instantly, but Shoyo knows him perfectly and loves him without holding back in the most pure, platonic way he's ever felt.

Good things happen when people get lost in Miyagi.

“Did you get your new game!?”

“I did,” he says, and smiles despite himself. “It's fun. I didn't bring it though.”

“Awww. Do you think you'd like making games? I bet with all the games you play you'd be good at designing fights and things, and since you're a setter you know about directing flow and-”

Kenma blinks.

It's been a half a thought, for some time.

He's been on the college track despite his best efforts, but- hmm. Hmm. He doesn't have the patience to game professionally, but... designing fights.

Oh.

Huh.

“Kenma?” Shoyo tilts his head like a tiny, adorable baby bird. “Your eyes got all far away.”

“I think... I think I'll give it a try,” he says.

“Give what a try?”

“Making games."

Shoyo lights up. “Really?!”

“I mean. We are in Japan. There's nowhere better for it.”

“Cool!”

They do some more games and then Keiji seems to appear directly beside Oikawa and says, “Why don't you try and sync with Bokuto-san?”
From across the gym, Kuroo yells, “Stop standing on ceremony, Akaashi! They know you're dating!”

That gets a laugh despite Keiji glaring at him like he can personally set Kuroo on fire with his mind, and Koutarou bounds up to the net, swinging his arms. “Sure! Let's go!! Tsukki, come block!”

“Absolutely not.”

“I will!”

“No you won't,” Daichi says, grabbing Shoyo before he can run over. “You get to practice receives.”

“Daaaaai-san!”

“Yaku-san,” Daichi says, with a serene smile. “While you're training your long armed lion there, will you work with this?”

Yaku grins wickedly, and Shoyou whimpers.

Kei takes the ball, blinks once, and tosses it perfectly. Koutarou hits it with gusto, teeth bared in a ferocious grin.

“There's no trick to tossing to him,” Kei says. “He'll hit anything you give him. The trick is keeping his mind engaged. How well he does depends entirely on his mood. That is the difficult bit. The perfect match up between you two will take time, though I think less than it did with me.”

“Probably,” Koutarou agrees, leaning on Kei's shoulder. “Kuroo's the fun one, though! He's easy.”

“I resent the implications,” Kuroo says tartly from the sidelines.

Koutarou laughs, big and easy, and makes Oikawa toss for him some more.

Kenma finds Tobio sitting next to him, eyes fixed on Oikawa. “You watch him pretty close,” he says quietly.

“He's good,” Tobio says, barely glancing at him. “I can do good tosses, but he does the right tosses. I've got a long time before I'm anywhere near as good as he is.” He pulls his knees up to his chest, eyes fixed on Oikawa as he harangues Koutarou for not putting his full effort into his last hit. “I hope I can be like that one day.”

Kenma doesn't pity him, but he certainly isn't jealous of his situation.

They go some more rounds, Shoyou proving that he's finally starting to understand receives and
Kuroo laughing and helping out Kindaichi as promised. When the day winds down they go their separate ways, Aoba Johsai waving and some of Karasuno (Tanaka) exchanging manly tears with some of Nekoma (Taketora). Koutarou still has plenty of energy, and baits Kuroo into running with him. Keiji jogs behind them, heckling Kuroo on his form. Kenma watches as the two dart around through the back roads on the way to the onsen, heart at ease.

Tora falls back to walk next to him, watching them.

“You gonna be okay?” he asks, quiet.

“In time,” Kenma says. “It's going to be hard. I've never really been without him.”

Tora slings an arm around him, and Kenma swallows around the lump in his throat as Tora knocks their heads together. “It's gonna be okay,” he says, his voice low and confident. “It's gonna suck for a while, but it'll be okay.”

“If you ever tell anyone else I said this, I'll deny it categorically, but I'm glad you're my friend,” Kenma tells him.

“Right back at you, you jerk.”

Kenma ducks his head to hide his smile, and Tora hugs him just a little bit tighter.

Sato Choji is a big, cheerful man, and Bokuto Retsu has a big smile and a bigger heart. Bokuto's parents live in a nice apartment above the soba restaurant that Choji manages and is a chef in, and their only child flings his arms around them as soon as the four of them walk in the door three days after getting back from Miyagi.

“Hi! I'm home!!!”

Sato Retsu, who has arms almost as buff as Koutarou and hair already gone silver, immediately picks her son up and squeezes him. Considering that she's easily 5’10”, it's not hard. “Welcome home! Ah, here they are! Keiji-kun, I have your jacket washed and ready for you.”

Keiji, the only one who's been to the Sato-Bokuto household before, nods his thanks and already looks like he wants to launch himself directly out the window into the street. Kenma wonders if it's possible to quietly bow out before dinner happens, but Keiji visibly steels himself and it seems they're definitely doing dinner.

“And this tall thing must be Kuroo-kun,” Retsu continues, striding forward. Kuroo visibly stops himself from backing up, body going stiff as a board, but Koutarou quickly intervenes, sliding in between his mother and Kuroo to physically stop her approaching.

“He and Kenma both have a thing about hugging, mom, it makes them uncomfortable! Be gentle with them!”

Gods all bless Bokuto Koutarou.

Kenma shoots him a grateful look as he attaches himself to Kuroo's side. “Thank you for inviting us,” he says, voice a little shaky as he finds Kuroo's hand.

Retsu all but coos at him. “I'm so happy to meet you! Please, come in, and if we make you uncomfortable don't hesitate to say so! I want you to be happy here!”
Koutarou takes after his mother in more ways than one, it seems, and looking at the pair of them together is just weird. Koutarou might have gotten his birth father's height, but everything else is essentially the same as his mothers. She's also a hair stylist as well as hostess to the restaurant, and is the one that dyes Koutarou's hair since he decided at the ripe age of 10 that he wanted to be just like his mom with her silvery hair and golden eyes. They're built the same, thickly muscled and broad shouldered, and Kenma relaxes a little when Koutarou hugs her again and picks her up instead.

Choji is a good few inches shorter than his wife, only a little taller than Kenma, and has a soft, round face and bright eyes. He gently bickers with his wife, ruffles his step-son's hair and hugs him, and after a quick look at Kuroo's rictus of an expression, lowers the volume by several decibels. Kuroo's shoulders lose some of their tension when he and Koutarou are invited to come help with prep for dinner, and Keiji herds Kenma into a comfortable living room with overstuffed chairs, lots of pictures on the walls, and a TV the size of a small planet.

Keiji, apparently highly trained in the art of Bokuto handling, carefully directs the conversation to things like recent television, the news about the 2020 Olympics, how the restaurant is doing, and a book series that they apparently both like and have been reading. Kenma is, in a word, relieved. He puts in a couple words despite how badly his hands shake, because-

Because well.

He wants this to work.

Retsu looks so happy to see them all, and Koutarou looks so happy to have them in his home, and Kuroo is absolutely beaming under Choji's quiet praise in the kitchen for his knife skills.

Kenma wants this to work.

Dinner is an absolute masterpiece of three traditional courses with apple pie for dessert because Koutarou is a firm believer in bribery, and Kenma is incredibly full by the end of it. He gathers the dishes with Keiji, and joins Choji in the kitchen to do the washing up despite Choji's best attempts to dissuade him. Choji heads to the living room where his wife is talking to Kuroo, and Kenma's just started the water for washing when Koutarou slides his arms around him and rests his chin on top of Kenma's head.

“You okay?” His voice is pitched down, quiet enough that only Keiji and Kenma can hear him. “I know I'm a lot and they're a lot too.”

“I'm okay.” Kenma settles back in his arms. He likes Kuroo holding him, with his angles and years of practice so they fit together perfectly, but Koutarou is big and bulky and reassuring. Koutarou could get hit by a tank and wouldn't even flinch. He and Keiji still have yet to work out exactly how much physical contact they like between each other. “I like them. They're... very different, but I like them.”

“Good.” Koutarou kisses the side of his head, then his cheek, then slides his hands down to press hard on the bruise he left on Kenma's hipbone. Kenma hisses, squirming and turning brilliant red.

“Koutarou.”

“I'd say I'm sorry but I'm really not,” Koutarou says blithely, and kisses him again. “Do you love me?”

“Unfortunately.”
“Ouch! Akaaaaashi, do you hear that?!?”

Keiji rolls his eyes, and herds Koutarou back into the living room.

Once everything's cleaned up, Kenma returns to the living room to see Kuroo looking pathetically grateful to see him, and joins him on the big loveseat. Koutarou's been grilled by Keiji about something funny that happened during practice, and Retsu has a photo album out.

Koutarou, wonder of wonders, doesn't seem to mind.

The pictures are incredibly cute. Kenma feels a pang of fondness as he looks through them, pausing on a picture of a tall man with a shaved head next to wide-smiling and much younger Retsu, her hair still ink black. Koutarou's perhaps five in the picture, and they're all sitting on the porch of a traditional house with some other man who looks like he might be related to shaved-head. Koutarou's looking at shaved-head like he's hung the moon, but shaved-head doesn't seem to be noticing. He's in a few more photos here and there, smiling once or twice, but it never quite reaches his eyes.

Kenma hates eyes, and hates this man's eyes in particular. They're so cold, bordering on cruel.

This must be Koutarou's birth father. He wonders what on earth could have inspired happy, cheery Retsu to marry something like that, let alone have a child. A few more pages, including one with a very cute picture of Koutarou playing on a swing set in a park that Kenma recognizes from his own childhood, and there's a picture of them at the traditional house again. The other man is gone, and they're all in formal wear- Koutarou in the tiniest yukata at perhaps age six or seven, Retsu in an inky black kuro-tomesode with a tiny pattern of leaves at its base, and shaved-head in hakama and a severe black haori. Koutarou is smiling, Retsu and shaved-head are not. Retsu has her first strand of silver hair, a clump of it running from halfway down her head.

He stares at the picture, and feels a frisson of unease even as Koutarou laughs.

So, she became unhappy after all.

He turns the page, and there's no more pictures of the house or shaved-head.

There is, however, a close up picture of Koutarou grinning to show off his two missing front teeth, and Kenma almost grabs his chest it's so cute.

They get ready to go after insisting that, yes, they do need to get back, and Kenma hangs back as Kuroo flees in relief to go get his shoes. Kuroo likes Choji and Retsu, it's obvious, but he also does not do well in enclosed spaces with loud people for extended periods of time. Especially if those people are adults.

“Bokuto-san,” he starts, hair swinging in front of his, and Retsu holds up her hand in the corner of his eye.

“Ah, ah, my Koutarou says you don't like honorifics and I hardly think you need to use them,” she says with a big smile. “Just Retsu is fine, Kenma.”

Kenma decides then and there he would die for Bokuto Retsu.

“I just...” he screws up his courage, lifting his head to look at her properly. “I'm glad you have Choji, instead of him.”

Retsu's eyes go wide and a little watery, and Kenma hugs her.
Getting hugged back is not unlike being hugged by Koutarou, absolutely surrounded by strength and warmth.

“Thank you,” she says, for his ears alone. Koutarou is making some godawful racket in the background, and Kenma hides a smile when he hears Keiji scold him for being so noisy.

“I'm glad I got to meet you,” Kenma says, and Retsu quickly wipes her eyes when he pulls back.

“I'm glad you and my Koutarou met,” she says, looking at the three in the genkan. “You and Tetsurou. I love Keiji, I do, but I think all four of you balance each other out very well.”

Kenma ducks his head to hide his blush.

Later, when Keiji walks home with them and they're in the Kozume house with the leftovers in the fridge, when Keiji has gone still and quiet and Kuroo has locked himself in his bedroom to decompress, Kenma rolls over on his bed to look at Keiji.

There's something in his eyes, a tired sort of acceptance, and Kenma reaches out to cup his cheek. Keiji sighs.

“What's going on?” Kenma asks simply.

Keiji leans in, pressing their foreheads together. “Sadness, mostly,” he says. “Sadness, and a lot of missing. Bokuto's been... he's always meant a lot to me. I was lonely, and so was he, and we found each other. And then I found you, and Kuroo. And despite it all I still wish that we could just... speed forward through time, to when we're stable and happy and there's no waking up in the middle of the night to wonder if today's the day I mess it up. If my temper will get out of control, or if I don't see that someone's hurting.” He sighs. Reaches up, gently, cups Kenma's face in return. They lay there, sharing air.

“I don't know how to sleep alone anymore,” Kenma tells him, his voice half a whisper.

“Neither do I.”

Keiji curls up against him, and Kenma leans in and kisses him.

It's slow, and easy, and something in his chest tightens when Keiji puts his arms around him properly to kiss back.

“I don't want them to leave,” Keiji tells him, his voice shaking a little. “What if they decide they're better off without us?”

He doesn't like Keiji putting voice to his fears, but there they are, the words sitting fat in the air around them. The great ‘what if’.

“Then we'll still have each other,” Kenma says, for lack of anything better to say. “But I don't think Koutarou's ever going to stop looking at you like you're the most perfect being to ever walk the earth. If he's made it a full two years and some change from falling in love at first sight, I don't think that's going to change.”

Keiji goes pink. It's honestly very cute.

“Can... can I tell you something?” Kenma asks.

“Of course.”
“I want to make a game.”

Keiji tips his head, looking much like a fluffy owl, and Kenma is so utterly enamored with this beautiful man. “Out of what?”

“Lines of code. A video game, or- or at least a choose-your-own-adventure sort of game. Shoyo gave me the idea.”

“What'll you have it be about?” Keiji settles in, pulling the blankets up over them. Kenma thinks, faintly, that it's a good thing his parents couldn't give less of a damn about the fact that he's actively sleeping with someone. Their sole input on the matter was to remind him to be safe, and to think with his head and no other organs. It had been awkward, but they trusted him and they trusted Kuroo, and figured since they weren't sleeping together yet it was fine if others slept over as well.

“I think a fantasy setting,” Kenma says, rolling onto his back so Keiji can rest his head on his shoulder. He sleeps best like that, and Kenma always feels oddly flattered that Keiji treats sleeping with him like sleeping with Koutarou- as if they're both big and bulky and strong. It's kind of nice. “There'll be a demon king who's the villain. But he wasn't always bad. The heroes are a mixed up sort of group. There's a fighter with a sword, and maybe an archer with issues, and a white mage, and a knight that was the friend of the demon king when they were little. And the demon king has a demon friend that the white mage used to know, and it gets emotional and messy between them.”

“That sounds amazing.”

Kenma starts, surprised. Keiji's looking at him with honest interest.

“You think so?”

“Yes. Tell me more about it.”

So Kenma does, spinning out a whole world and plot to Keiji's attentive ears until both of them fall asleep.

He writes it all down in the morning, and spends the better part of the next days classes writing up character sheets, looking at books on how to do coding, and wondering just how long it would take him to learn how to do art with a tablet so he can clean up the sketches he's been making for the characters. He mentions this to Keiji, off handed.

“There's more?!” Keiji demands, and Kenma rears back in surprise.

“I mean,” he says, “I...doodled some things?”

“Can I see them?”

“Y-yes?”

Keiji takes his sketchbook eagerly. “I didn't know you could draw.”

“Tought myself,” Kenma says as Keiji opens the book. “Kuro liked a girl who was an artist and I got jealous. It was before I realized that I really liked him. I just wanted his attention on me, not her.”

Keiji hides a snort, and Kenma watches his jaw drop as he turns to the first page of sketches. “These are amazing!”
“...Really?”

“You made- oh my god, Hinata-san's so cute as the main character. Look at his hair, it's just like how he looks! You made Oikawa the demon king. Iwaizumi-san is the Knight, I take it- oh, there he is in armor, Kenma. These are so good.” Keiji drinks in every detail, lightly touching the pages but extremely careful to not touch the art itself. Kenma, his face bright red, thinks he may have never loved him more. “Kuroo as the friend- oh, he looks good with demon horns on.”

“He was a devil for Halloween two years ago,” Kenma mutters, trying to get his face to cool off.

“Is that Koutarou and I as tengu? That's incredible, look at that,” Keiji breathes, his eyes going wide.

Kenma gives up, and grabs Keiji's shirt to pull him in for kisses.

Text from: Shoyou
Kenma!!!!! that game you sent me is so good?! I think it's really cool!

Text to: Shoyou
You do? I was just playing with coding. The characters a pretty bare bones right now.

Text from: Shoyou
It's really cool! It's like Final Fantasy, and the sketches for the characters are really cool! I like that you made everyone characters!!!! Even if it is just text right now I like it a lot!!!!! Can I show Tadashi?

Text to: Shoyou
I don't mind.

Text from: Shoyou
Kenma you're really cool! ALSO YOU MADE GREAT KING THE DEMON KING, you guys are the BEST!

Text to: Shoyou
You're very exuberant today.

Text from: Shoyou
?!?!??? YOU MADE ME A MAIN CHARACTER KENMA
THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE

Text to: Shoyou

Nationals comes and goes, in all its terrible and over-the-top glory.

The school year draws to a close.

Kuroo, Yaku, and Kai officially retire from the club, not that they stop going. Yaku is going up north to somewhere in Hokkaido to a school focusing on veterinarian medicine. Kai is staying in Tokyo, going to a much smaller school that specializes in physics. And Kuroo, of course, has been offered a scholarship and recruited to Chuo, which Kenma is quietly very proud of.

There's a lot of tears, Tora having an actual sobbing breakdown when Kuroo gives them his final speech to thank them for everything they've done. He hands off his captaincy to Tora, Kai hands
off Vice-Captaincy to Kenma, Yaku hugs everyone and kicks Lev's knees out so they can hug each other properly, and Nekomata-sensei thanks them for the work that made his dream a reality. He informs them of the former Coach Ukai’s passing then as well, and that sets off a fresh wave of tears from everyone.

And then-

Cherry blossoms on the trees.

Kuroo Tetsurou, Nobuyuki Kai, and Yaku Morisuke graduate properly.

After the ceremony, Kenma takes him to a quiet corner of the school near the trees shedding their brilliant pink flowers, and kisses him one last time for their years in school together. The cherry blossoms get tangled in their hair, and Kuroo's fingers shake as he pushes Kenma's hair back to look at his eyes better.

They say nothing, after the kiss. Just take each others hands and quietly slip away.

It's a short walk to the shrine that Kuroo loves so much. The shishi-ondonshi clacks, the water of its ancient basin is cold as ever, and the trees rustle with wind as Kuroo claps twice. Petals float through the air, and near the offering box the black cat and the calico cat that always seem to be there lay and nap in the shade of the shrine's cover. They stretch and yawn as Kuroo puts offerings in the box, and the little calico stretches out one paw like a little maneki-neko. Kenma listens to the soft bong of the bell, watches Kuroo pray. His face goes soft and gentle, and when he opens his eyes they're shining with water.

“The first day I came here,” Kuroo says out loud, a tear slipping down his cheek, “I begged the gods to let me die. I begged to be put out of my misery. I begged to be brought to someone, anyone who could help, who could make sure I made it through the nightmare I was living in. I had a broken leg, and was missing one of my back molars, and Hana had decided that I didn't really need to be eating so much, it would make me behave better if she had a threat to hold over me. I was seven years old. The next day, I met you.”

Kenma goes to him, wraps his arms around him, and fights down the tightness in his throat. Kuroo clutches him, burying his face against his hair.

“I love you,” Kuroo says, his voice breaking as he starts to cry. “Kozume Kenma, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I love you so much. I don't want to leave.”

Kenma tilts his head up, knowing he's crying too. Kuroo's never been a pretty crier, and Kenma hiccups a little when Kuroo cups his cheek.

“Please don't cry,” Kuroo says, echoing the sentiment of so many months ago.

“Happy tears, Tetsurou,” Kenma says, kissing the palm of his hand.

Kuroo kisses them off his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Here's the playlist for this fic, songs in no particular order:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtlx_8Z_zboXgP4echLSo3Nr3k9DpelIB)
Part 2: Kuroo

Chapter Notes

TW FOR THIS CHAPTER: Explicit discussion of physical and emotional abuse by Kuroo's parents, discussion of past suicide attempts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tetsurou is four years old, his arm breaks for the first time.

His very worried parents tell the hospital he fell from a piece of playground equipment. Kuroo Eisuke and Kuroo Hana are well respected members of the community, owning a moderately sized shop that sells appliances, and Eisuke gives generously to local charities. They have a small but well kept house, show up to all the right functions, and if Hana is a bit quiet nobody comments on it because Eisuke is a large man with a large personality.

When Tetsurou is five years old, his other arm breaks. They've just moved to a new house with two levels and he slipped and fell down the stairs. It explains away the heavy bruising that covers his body.

When he is seven, the other kids at school notice how much he hoards onto food. He laughs and says he just likes to eat, but he's still very thin. He stays over with friends a lot, and never ever changes in front of them. He meets Kozume Kenma, a year younger, who looks at Tetsurou like he's hung the moon and stars when he insists on playing with him and who offers him his bento because there's mackerel in it and he doesn't like them.

When he is eight, and has a black eye from running into a pole, he falls in love with Kenma. Kenma gently touches his eye, and *knows*, and makes sure that Tetsurou is always welcome in their house.

When he is nine, he breaks three fingers on his right hand and gets a split lip. Volleyball, Hana tells the doctor, who works in Central Tokyo and is far too busy to pay close attention to how quiet and well behaved Tetsurou is, how he knows exactly which steps come next. The emergency room is crowded with things like stabbings. One skinny nine-year-old slips through the cracks. The lip heals on its own with only a faint scar. The fingers heal perfectly, and ache in the winter.

When he is ten, he runs away for the first time. He's delivered home not 12 hours later, and Eisuke and Hana thank the officer profusely. He has a cut on his cheek and limps heavily when he next visits Kenma.

When he is eleven, he runs away for the second time. He never, ever tries again. He stays with Kenma for the next month after he's brought back, so he can lick his wounds and heal. Kenma waits until he thinks Tetsurou is asleep to get on the computer, and quietly hack into the store's accounts and his mothers email. Kenma is clever, and holds a grudge harder than anyone Tetsurou's ever known. Tetsurou doesn't ask, doesn't want to know, and never *ever* looks in the neat file that Kenma begins compiling on his desk.

Two days after he turns twelve, Kuroo Hana leaves in the middle of the night, and moves with no warning and no explanation to Australia. Kuroo Eisuke is jailed that same year, on charges not
released to the public, and Kuroo Tetsurou's grandparents arrive to take over the house and charge
of their grandson. They are utterly disinterested in him, more in the house. This is fine with him.

His broken right leg, two broken fingers, and a dislocated shoulder are just starting to heal.

Kozume Sousuke moves Tetsurou's things to the spare bedroom of the Kozume house, and that is
the end of that.

oOo

One week into the break, free before university for a brief moment in time, Tetsurou gets the call.

It's not a huge surprise. His mothers parents were both sickly. The report says they died within
hours of each other, asleep in bed. Their nurse found them, and reported it. Their affairs are
perfectly in order, all the money necessary for their funerals is in place, and the whole affair is
done in less than a week. The pair had two friends who come to see their ashes scattered in Tokyo
Bay, but no one else feels the need to show. They were not particularly likable people. At 18 years
of age, Kuroo Tetsurou is officially free of his parents control, and every choice is his.

Tetsurou inherits everything. The house, the money, the belongings, it all goes to him. There's not
much money, but enough that they officially don't need to be concerned about rent for then next
three years at least.

He's not been inside the house for a full seven months despite living practically next door before
the funeral plans must be made. Now, stepping inside, it's like walking into a den of filth.

“Nasty,” he mutters, looking at the garbage, the magazines, the cigarette butts.

Kozume Sousuke is the one to help him with the walk through. Kenma can't stand to even walk
into the house anymore, hasn't been able to since he was 14 and they brought over what few books
Tetsurou has had. He flatly refuses to let Keiji or Koutarou ever step foot in the cursed place, but
they stay at the Kozume house through it all, always there when he needs them. And oh, gods does
he need them. Tetsurou moves through the place as if in a trance. Here is the dent where he was
thrown. Here is his own fucking blood, flecks of it stained into the woodwork. Here is where he
broke his hand the fifth time. Here is a bokken, and a jo from when Eisuke practiced some form of
martial art, and here they are with yet more flecks embedded in the wood. Here- her- he- h-

He vomits violently several times as they do the walk-through, and when it's done he forces
himself to make his choices.

Tetsurou takes three things from the house- his grandfathers excellent and expensive kitchen knife
set, his mothers jewelry box to pawn or keep, and an ancient katana from when the Kuroo family
had been worth something. He hires a junk removal service, and tells them to take the rest. Sell
what they can, and what they can't, burn it to ash. They clean it down to the bare bones of the
house, taking every plate, knife, fork, couch cushion, and shirt. Nothing remains by the time they're
done but walls and cupboards. They even take the showerhead.

Kenma walks with him when the house is cleaned, his eyes dark.

“What do you want to do?” he asks, standing in Tetsurou's empty old bedroom. Even empty, the
house feels oppressive. Ghosts seem to linger in the walls, and the hall never seems to be quite
bright enough. Tetsurou's nightmares have been going haywire with old memories and fresh fears.
He's woken up with a jaw locked tight to keep from screaming a few different times now.

Tetsurou sits on the ground, and Kenma joins him, taking his hand.
“I want to burn it to the ground,” he says quietly. “But I think instead I'll sell it. Take the money and save for a house for us all, or put it towards the restaurant.” He looks up at the ceiling, plain white. “I don't want anyone to live in this house ever again. Good thing it's old enough it'll be torn down. Maybe we can find a nice gay couple to sell to. I'm going to take the katana to a shrine, have them cleanse the shit out of it, and keep it to remind myself that I can remake my family name into something good again.”

Kenma leans against his shoulder. “You can ask me,” he says quietly.

Tetsurou can't bear to look at him.

“Did you do it?” he asks.

“Yes,” Kenma says, plain and simple. “I blackmailed Hana. I gave the police everything they needed to indict Eisuke in a nice little bow. I know that Hana was the one to beat you after Eisuke beat her. I know that Eisuke liked it when he broke you. I know that I did the right thing, breaking the law, and I know that fraud is easy to make happen and blackmail is even easier. I know that I'd do it all over again without a question. And I know if Eisuke ever gets out of prison how to make sure he never sees you again. He will never, ever see you again. He will never see me. He will never see Koutarou. He will never see Keiji.”

Tetsurou lays on the floor, and Kenma curls up beside him, still holding his hand.

“Thank you,” he says simply.

There are no tears.

Kuroo Tetsurou is free.

oOo

The Akaashi family arrives back in Tokyo on a brisk spring day five days before University is due to begin its session, flying in Economy on the cheapest airline possible and traveling with exactly two backpacks no bigger than the Nekoma gym bags. Their son's three partners are invited to dinner the second day they're back, and at 5 pm Tetsurou finds himself ringing the doorbell to the house he has a key to.

“You don't need to ring the bell,” Keiji murmurs when he lets them in, kissing each of them quickly as they remove their shoes.

“I'm nervous,” Koutarou hisses, hands actually shaking.

“We're all nervous,” Kenma mutters, and Tetsurou whines a little in the back of his throat. This meeting the parents thing is the worst.

They step out of the genkan as the Akaashi's come down the stairs.

Akaashi Fusazane is almost as beautiful as his son, but Ayumi surpasses them both. Kuroo wants to bolt so badly it hurts, because this impossibly tall man with his carefully styled hair (black, back swept curls, one thick silver line in it) and perfectly fitted suit looks far too much like his past packaged back up and deposited directly in front of him. But Fusazane is soft where Eisuke was harsh, actively shy where Eisuke was loud and outgoing. He all but hides behind his beautiful wife when she introduces them, and his big eyes have a faint look of panic hiding behind a placid exterior. Koutarou is gentle with him, dropping his volume much like Choji had and being extra careful with his strength. Kenma immediately looks at Ayumi like she's the moon and stars when
she gasps out loud at his (admittedly very cute) Monster Hunter character phone charm and asks him if he has the new game.

Fusazane and Tetsurou exchange looks, and that's all it takes.

Tetsurou knows what it looks like when someone dealt with the same problems once upon a lifetime ago.

Dinner is happy and cheerful, with gifts from England exchanged and Ayumi exclaiming over Keiji’s “charming, talented partners”. There’s actual conversation that involves Kenma, Koutarou’s jokes are well received, and all told it’s pleasant evening where they chat and laugh. Ayumi thinks that Kenma’s the best thing in the world and Fusazane keeps looking at his wife like she’s a goddess that happens to be in his dining room. Koutarou is brought in several times and tells them enthusiastically about the business management degree both he and Tetsurou are doing, Tetsurou gets asked extensively about his plans for the izakaya (damn Keiji for telling them), and the food is frankly wonderful. He learns that the pair are minimalists, which explains the house and their lifestyle choices, that they have a cat named Tater-tot in England, that Fusazane actually grew up in Miyagi and has been to the Hanamaki Onsen, and Ayumi grew up in Saga Prefecture and was actually banned from playing volleyball in gym class because her depth perception is so bad.

They're wonderful.

Tetsurou begs off joining everyone in the sitting room (dear gods, he keeps forgetting that the living room and sitting room are two different things in this monster of a house) after dinner in order to calm down a bit.

Fusazane joins him in the kitchen once everyone's left the dining room, dressed down into a sweatshirt that wouldn't look out of place in Koutarou's closet and jeans. Apparently he feels safe enough to be out of the suit. Tetsurou knows armor when he sees it.

He silently starts helping Tetsurou with dishes, pushing up the sleeves, and Tetsurou looks at his newly bare arms. Long, long scars stretch from his wrists to his elbows on both sides, deep white with age. Other scars, some plain white lines and others perfect round circles, litter up and down his forearms. Tetsurou has a few like that from having cigarettes put out on his body. His are mostly faded now thanks to good genetics and a special cream that Kenma insisted on getting him, but there's one extremely bad one on his left shoulder.

“I was eighteen,” Fusazane says, his voice soft and mellow. No attempt at small talk, right to the core of the issue. He's so like Kieji it hurts. “I tried very, very hard to give up. It didn't take. And then Ryoko- Keiji's aunt- came out, and I had to be the strong one. I got out, and so did she. They disowned us and I was never happier.”

“I got away when I was 12,” Tetsurou says, the very idea of making it to 18 like that insane. “He's in jail. She fled the country. Kenma made sure it happened. They're never, ever going to see me again, or anyone else. My grandparents didn't give a damn, and now they're gone and I'm free. Is that bad? Is it bad that I'm glad about never seeing them again?”

“Not in the least,” Fusazane says, shutting the water off and looking at the soft skin of his forearms. “I look at these every day and offer weekly prayers of gratitude that my parents are dead and that Keiji never met them. I keep a shrine in our apartment to give offerings to the gods every time I think about how I almost didn't make it out. I will never, ever forgive them, and that's okay. Some things are unforgivable.”

Tetsurou braces his arms on the sink, bowing his head. In the other room, he can hear Kenma's
voice raise with enthusiasm over a game he's trying his hand at designing, Keiji laughing with Koutarou at the description of the main characters journey. His eyes prickle with tears. Standing here in the half darkness, he can almost remember what it's like to have hope again.

“I don't want to tell Keiji,” he whispers. “I don't want him to- to see me as that kid.”

“Keiji knows some about my past,” Fusazane says, leaning against the counter beside him. “I told him when he was young what the long scars meant. He is... sheltered, in a way. I have kept the worst of this world away from him. But if you think he'll see you as anything but the survivor you clearly are, you're very wrong. Why do you think we chose to build this huge house? It was always designed to be a refuge, for friends and for family who may one day have need of it. And from what Keiji's told me, it's served its purpose very well. I can't say I expected him to adopt all four of the Fukurodani Group volleyball teams, and some upstarts out of Miyagi who by all accounts are utterly delightful, but I'm glad.”

“You should be really proud of him,” Tetsurou says, wiping at his eyes. “He's so- he's such a good man. Has been since the day I met him. He's never anything but amazing.”

Fusazane looks over at him, his eyes soft. He looks so much like Keiji, with his soft eyes and tussled hair and fine cheekbones. “Good,” he says, and his voice cracks a little. “I'm very glad you and Keiji found each other, Tetsurou.”

Tetsurou's lips tremble, and he practically flings himself into Fusazane's open arms.

“While I think the Kozume family may already have quite a claim to you,” Fusazane says, hugging him tight, “no matter what happens with your relationship with Keiji, you are always welcome here in this home or any other I possess.”

Tetsurou really doesn't want to cry, but he's going to be really close to it super fast. Fusazane is gentle as he hugs him, but he's as solid and reassuring as Koutarou.

“Thank you,” he manages, blinking hard a couple times to clear his eyes.

“If you wanted,” Fusazane says, and coughs awkwardly, rubbing through his hair. It falls in waves just like Keiji's. “If you want, I- I don't mind if you refer to us as family. Or even just with given names-”

“Thank you, Oto-san.”

Fusazane swallows hard and has to rub his own eyes. They exchange helpless sorts of smiles, and Tetsurou is so glad he got to meet him.

Fusazane walks with him back to the sitting room, where Ayumi is showing Kenma a game on her phone and Koutarou is sprawled out with Keiji's arms around him. Tetsurou wipes away the last of the tears, but Koutarou jumps up regardless to go to him, eyes searching his face as his arm wraps around his waist.

“Kuroo?”

Tetsurou smiles, really smiles for the first time since his grandparents died, and lets his head be pillowed in Koutarou's shoulder.

He's home.

They don't bother to even leave that night. Koutarou and Keiji can barely sleep without each other
there now, which is going to be a problem in the coming weeks when they have to wean
themselves off of that constant comfort of each other. But tonight-

“Keiji, would you stay with me tonight instead?” Tetsurou asks when everyone is getting ready for
bed. Surprised, Keiji nods.

They take the first spare room, the one farthest from everyone else, and Kuroo waits until Keiji's in
his pajamas (ones that Koutarou bought him that have little owls on them, extremely cute) before
he sits down in bed with him.

“There's some things we need to talk about,” he begins, swallowing hard. “This- this isn't a break
up speech or anything, but you ought to know about this. Oto-san and I talked a bit in the kitchen,
and I'm taking his advice and talking to you now.” He turns a little, showing Keiji the biggest of
the white circle scars. “Do you know what this is?”

“Oto-san has them,” Keiji says warily. “I...I thought they might be acne scars.”

“You get these when someone puts a cigarette out on your skin,” Tetsurou says gently, seeing
Keiji's eyes go wide. “I got this one when I was 10.” He holds out his hands, spreading his fingers.
Keiji looks down at them, and his eyes focus exactly where Tetsurou knew they would, on the
bends where they're not quite perfectly straight. “My fingers have been broken five times. My
pinky never did fully set right, so it's more bent than the others. My legs and arms were broken a
bunch, too. Eisuke was the one who beat me with objects, but Hana was the one to hit me with
fists. Kenma blackmailed her into leaving the country, and made sure Eisuke went to jail.”

Keiji takes his hands, his face a pale mask. “Tetsurou.”

“When my grandparents died, I was officially free of all of them,” Tetsurou continues, his voice
shaking. “We don't ever have to worry about them again.”

“That's why you didn't want us in the house,” Keiji says, his voice gone soft and pained. “Because-
because of what they did to you there?”

“That's right.”

Keiji bows his head, pressing Tetsurou's hands to his forehead. Tetsurou waits. He's had 18 years
to understand what's happened to him, Keiji's had 30 seconds.

“Promise me,” Keiji says, his voice shaky, “promise me that when you have time, you're going to
go and see a therapist.”

“I-”

“Please,” Keiji begs, looking back up at him, his eyes wide and afraid. “Tetsu, Oto-san's told me
about his suicide attempts, even if he never said what brought them on. I cannot stand the thought
of you not getting help to find- to find some sort of closure, if not peace. I can't live wondering if
I'm going to wake up and the trauma's become too much for you one day and you're dead. Promise
me you will talk to someone. If you don't have the money, I do, and I will make sure you see
someone good.”

Tetsurou pulls him in for a hug, holding him very tight. Keiji wraps his arms around him and digs
his fingers in, as if Tetsurou's about to evaporate into thin air.

“I will,” he promises. “I promise I'll find someone.”
He's surprised to find he actually wants to, and for the first time in over ten years, he falls asleep without pillows covering his ears.

He still wakes up with bedhead, though.

oOo

Their dorm room is. Well.

It's a shitty room, for a place that's going to be his home for the whole next year. Tetsurou is already counting down the days until they can escape. They're a full hour away from Kenma now, and even further from Keiji, with trains, a bus, and some walking to do. Tetsurou is not excited to be so far from Kenma for the first time in his life.

But it's not the worst thing in the world.

For example, he has Koutarou as a roommate. Things could have been much, much worse.

“It's not too bad,” Koutarou says cheerfully, looking at the room. It's very close quarters, with bunk beds against the right wall, closets directly across, two desks pressed up against a window, and two floating shelves above them. “I'll take top, you take bottom?”

“Absolutely.”

“When we share, do we want to share yours or mine?”

“Play it by ear.”

“Sounds good!”

The door opens and Oikawa pokes his head in, looking frazzled. “Oh, good, you're in. Please let me hide here.”

Tetsurou leans against the chair, raising his eyebrows. “Do you need to hide already? Who'd you piss off so fast, oh Great King?”

“Don't try and be cute, you're too pretty for it to work. My roommate wants to go drinking and I really don't want to show up to the gym still hungover after move in day.” Oikawa slips in and shuts the door, shivering. “I'm taller than him but he's about seven times more intense! Ugh.”

Oh, gods. Sousuke and Saya don't drink, never have. It's a personal preference of theirs, and Tetsurou's taken it for granted. Keiji only ever drinks wine because he's weird and actually likes the taste, Kenma thinks alcohol as an entire concept is just bizarre and can't fathom why anyone would want to loosen their inhibitions, but Koutarou is definitely not going to share the same ideals here. He's the textbook definition of an up and coming party animal and what if he's a violent drunk-

“Kuroo, take your stress face off! We're going to get unpacked and then I'm taking Kuroo to a shrine!” Koutarou says cheerfully. “Do you want to help me get my clothes in order?”

“We're going to a shrine?” Tetsurou chokes out. Oikawa's eyes flick to him, curious.

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“Of course!” Koutarou grins at him, eyes crinkling up. “Maybe one day when you're comfortable we'll go party but I think it'd be nice to go to a quieter place with you. There's a kumano shrine that isn't very far from here! I looked on the map to see which one was closest so I could take you as
soon as possible.”

“I love you,” Tetsurou tells him without a hint of shame, and Oikawa grins at them.

Unpacking takes little time. Gear goes on the shelves, clothes and shoes in the closet, books in stacks on the desk, and a small but clearly well tended orchid appears on Koutarou's desk. Laptops set up and ready to go, chairs pushed in, and sheets on the bed, the place looks downright excellent. Koutarou's final touch is to hang the miniature court flags they'd been given upon graduation on the wall where they can see them, the brilliant red and black of Nekoma contrasting nicely with the white and yellow of Fukurodani.

“I was expecting something much... louder,” Oikawa says, looking around their room. “Do you care if I'm a third wheel on this date, or would you rather go alone?”

Tetsurou looks to Koutarou, who simply shrugs.

“You're free to come with,” he says, “though I'll warn you, I take forever at shrines.”

“Mattsun and Makki once argued for four hours in a park about which kind of tree was at the center, I think I'll be okay.”

“Your team is wild.”

“It's been said.”

The shine is a short walk away, a little over a kilometer, sandwiched between houses and fields. Trees loom up behind it, and Koutarou holds his hand as they approach. There are _shide_ everywhere, and numerous tiny shrines inside the main one. The _torii_ gate is brilliant red, freshly repainted, with white lantern boxes to each side of it. Tetsurou shuffles them over to wash their hands before going to look at the other, smaller shrines inside. There's plenty of tiny statues, and in the center of the grounds is an enormous tree that stretches up to the sky as if reaching for it.

Tetsurou's heart eases, and he breathes a little easier when he walks up to the red fence around the tree. A rope with _shide_ runs around it, marking it as sacred. He turns to go up to the main section of the shrine, but something stops him, turns him, and he reaches out to touch it.

Sensation _blooms_ within him, and he closes his eyes in bliss.

The place feels ancient in the best way, and the wind wraps around him, tugging at his clothes and hair. The whole world seems to fall away as he stands there, hand on the ancient tree, and when he opens his eyes again his heart feels as if it's been realigned. The tree is the real, living, breathing heart of the shrine, regardless of who is enshrined here, and it's welcomed him in.

Koutarou and Oikawa are at the main shrine, and he joins them there feeling as though he's been cleansed.

He claps twice, bows his head, and thinks, _thank you for welcoming me to my new home. Please guide me safely through these next few years._

The leaves rustle, and the whole place seems to shake as the branches of the forest around them sway and bend. The wind whips down the hillside, Oikawa and Koutarou yelping as leaves and a few twigs go flying by, but Tetsurou tips his face up and breathes it all in.

He thinks he's going to be happy here.

_oOo_
They wake up early, have their first classes (Introduction to Accounting and Business English, respectively), and get back by 3 PM. Tetsurou gets his gear on with little issue. Koutarou kisses him in between pulling off shirts and pulling on shorts, and pins him against the wall to freshen up the bruise that eternally lingers between his shoulder blades- a reminder, pointed and sharp, that he is *taken*. It's more reassuring than Tetsurou wants to admit, Koutarou's hands like hot brands against his hips. It feels *safe*.

“All right,” he says, his mind fuzzy with fear static.

“All right,” Koutarou echoes, reaching out and taking his hand.

They walk into the gym together.

Chapter End Notes

Kuroo's new local shrine can be found here: https://goo.gl/maps/8iMX8HAXuN62

That "city of tokyo as guest star" tag is not just for show.
Interlude: Lev, Taketora, Kai, Tadashi

Chapter Summary

No man is an island.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lev

Lev loves Kenma.

Kenma is maybe quite possibly one of the coolest people ever, and Lev doesn't stand a chance with him because Kuroo is one of the OTHER coolest people ever and loves him even more, so. There's that. But it's okay, because Lev hasn't ever had friends who really really like him before, and even when Kenma's being sharp he's never really mean. That's a nice change. Nobody makes fun of him for his height or his name, they just want him to calm down when he's at practice. But for the first time, he has friends, real friends, who laugh with him and go eat with him and find him at lunch so they can talk. He doesn't know that he's ever been so happy before.

Besides the nice friends, he gets to play against other teams, who also have super tall people and who like to try and get around his blocking and hitting. It's fun being good at something, like Bokuto-senpai says, and Lev basks under the attention of someone who's not family or a teacher helping him learn. Kuroo has a soft spot for him, and Lev is entirely one big squishy soft spot for Kenma and Kuroo. Everyone's so nice.

He watches Bokuto watching Kuroo watching Kenma, and Bokuto watching Akaashi watching Kenma, and Kuroo watching Bokuto when he's watching Akaashi. It's all very complicated and familiar.

He tells Papa about it when he gets home after practice, helping to make food. His Papa is a tall man, standing at a solid 6'5”, built like a brick with a pleasant smile and a ferociously thick beard. He's an artist and a master with a brush, doing specialty portraits is his life's work. Papa kisses the top of To-san's head as he passes, and then kaa-san's.

"Should I say something?" Lev asks him as he helps set the table and scoops 8 year old Nika up before she can go grab Tolstoty, their big black Labrador. Tolstoy, for his part, equally wants to be hugged by Nika and waits patiently at Lev's feet. “To Kenma I mean. I don't think he knows.”

"If you'd like," Papa says, snagging To-san to kiss him soundly on the cheek. To-san squeaks, turns red, and kisses his cheek in return. Lev beams.

To-san is like Kenma, very much so. Attention flusters him.

"I think you should," Kaa-san says as she comes in the room carrying dinner. “You never know where it could lead. Where's Kana?”

Kana, 13 years old and already deeply invested in her existential angst, emerges from her room, steals a roll, and immediately returns to it. Kaa-san lifts her eyes up, hands Lev two plates, and
sends him to eat with her. Lev does, because he loves all his siblings more than life itself but Kana is absolutely his favorite. Kana is cool and Lev doesn't feel bad admiring that fact because eventually he'll figure out what cool is and be it too.

“So,” Kana says as they eat on the floor, “you're going to tell them?”

“I think so,” Lev says, trading her his roll for her peas. “I think they should be happy. And they can be happy now, but they'd be even happier with him!”

Kana leans against him, half his size, and smiles. Her black hair is cut into a very anime style, and Lev likes seeing how she spikes it a little on the end. “You really want them to be happy, huh?”

“Of course,” Lev says, a little confused. “They helped me learn how to be happy too, why wouldn't I want them to be happy.”

Kana looks up at him, her dark eyes a little sad. Lev blinks down at her, and watches as she smiles a little, as if there's something in her that's both hurting and happy. “You're really liking volleyball, huh?”

“Yeah! It's great!”

“I'm glad,” she says, and hugs him. “I'm really glad you're happy, Lev.”

Taketora

Yamamoto Taketora sits in Hanamaki onsen with one of his best friends, and wonders.

Kenma is half asleep in the warm water, dozing against the rocks. Akaashi, Bokuto, and Kuroo have already escaped to go and do whatever it is they do- be noisy, he supposes- and Kenma is resting in contentment. They're alone, then, Lev having been dragged out by Yaku and Fukunaga giving him a knowing look as he was the last to go.

“Kenma?”

“Hm?”

Kenma barely slits open his eyes.

“There's a lot of shit in my life I haven't told you about,” Tora says, dragging his fingers through the water and watching the ripples follow. “And I know it's not something that we talk about a lot, but I'm glad you joined us and I got to meet you. You changed my mind about a lot of the shit I was dealing with when I joined up, and you still keep me on my toes. It's good. Makes me think.”

Kenma cocks an eyebrow, face still half in the water.

“Hey,” Tora says, fighting back a grin. “I'm not trying to be emotional at you. Not too much anyway. Just a thank you.”

“Sure,” Kenma says suspiciously.

Tora leans back against the warm rocks and closes his eyes, feeling the worst aches of the day starting to slip away. There's a benefit to Kenma having a crazy wealthy boyfriend, it seems. He breathes in deep, exhales deeper.

“Are you going to keep your hair blond this next year?”
He glances over, Kenma still not looking at him.

“Yeah, I think so. It's nice. Catchy.”

Kenma licks his lips, and looks over to him at last, his eyes bright with laughter he won't share outside. “Think we can get Fukunaga to do a thin stripe in his so we all match?”

Tora laughs, and Kenma hides his face under the water to hide his smile.

“Tora?”

His turn to raise an eyebrow in question. Kenma sits up, looks at him properly.

“You could have been awful about me and Kuroo, or me and Bokuto and Akaashi,” he says, his voice quiet. “You could have been just like the 3rd years our first year and made life hell for us. Thanks. For getting past it. I know it weirded you out at first.”

Tora looks down at the water, watches the ripples glide across to mix and cancel out the ripples from Kenma's breathing. “I've always been a contrary little shit. I saw what those bastards were like and decided if I was going to throw my lot in with someone, it was gonna be with some scrawny little guy who didn't want to work but who'd fight me soon as breathing and didn't give a fuck what the 3rd years thought, or at least acted like it, no matter what he liked in bed or out of it. And...” he can't bear to look up, can't look at Kenma's face to say this. “I don't think there could ever be anything wrong with the way Kuroo looks at you when you're not looking back, or Bokuto or Akaashi. Love like that could never, ever be wrong. Simple as that.”

His eyes sting a little, and he swallows down the lump in his throat. “Anyway. I don't want to ever be a single thing like those assholes. We'll show them. We're a team, no matter what, and I won't stand for that sort of bullshit anymore.”

“Yeah.” Kenma's voice creaks, and Tora doesn't dare look at him.

They climb out and get dressed in silence, but Kenma grabs his arm before he goes.

“Thanks,” he says simply, and Tora just nods.

He texts his sister when he gets back to the room, ignoring Lev and Inuoka's pillow fight.

_text to: Akaachan_
Hey. You ever decide you like girls i'll beat up anyone who's mean about it, okay?

About a minute later, he gets a text back.

_text from: Akaachan_
Sometimes you're really cool, Tora.

Good enough for him.

Taketora closes his phone, and joins in on the pillow fight.

_Kai_

Nobuyuki's spent the better part of several years getting to know Akaashi Keiji, which is something of an exercise in futility, but he's at least aware that it is. Akaashi Keiji is a closed book, a tightly bound volume of secrets to things like beautiful hair and being built in the image of at least a few
different gods. Akaashi Keiji is also a very closed book on any subject that is not something he brings up. Talking to him is like talking to a wall that happens to nod occasionally and offer input on what the statistic likelihood of Japan's national team winning in the Olympics. But Akaashi is a stalwart friend who has a very lovely kitchen and a lust for homecooked meals, and Kai Nobuyuki is a man with a stress baking habit and an on-again-off-again girlfriend who he half wants to dump and half wants to propose to.

“Again?” Akaashi says as he lets him in.

“Again,” Nobuyuki says grimly. “Do you want pie or brownies first?”

“Mm. Brownies. I could use the chocolate.”

He's got a face like a thundercloud today, and while Kai sets up in the masterpiece of engineering that is the Akaashi household kitchen, Akaashi disappears into the upper levels of the house. He does this most of the time. It's easy to lure him back with the promise of cookies if needed.

Nobuyuki is halfway through making brownies from scratch when Akaashi reappears and sits on one of the stools around the kitchen island, propping his chin on his hand.

“Something wrong?” Nobuyuki asks without looking up from his measuring. He likes using American recipes, which require flat measurements rather than weighing everything, but it's important to get things even.

“What's sex like?”

Nobuyuki sets down his measuring cups, and counts to three in his head before turning to look at Akaashi.

He's blushing furiously and refusing to look at Nobuyuki.

“Really?” he asks, deadpan. “Right here, in front of my brownies?”

Akaashi makes a face at him, as expected. He's so incredibly proper. Nobuyuki likes riling him up, it's fun.

Nobuyuki sighs, and pours in the ingredients. “I don't know what you want me to tell you. Good? A pleasant experience? Something I wholeheartedly enjoy?” He begins pouring the liquid ingredients. “Are you looking for basic instructions?”

“Ew, absolutely not,” Akaashi says, making a face almost identical to Kenma's infamous lemon face. Nobuyuki narrowly avoids laughing. “I just... Bokuto-san-”

“Akaashi, please.”

“Fine, Koutarou's had sex before and has stated a few different times that, when ready, he would not be opposed to sex with me. You're in a somewhat stable relationship in which sex is had fairly often, and aren't shy about talking about it. You have a very... healthy, sexual relationship. The rest of the relationship might not be the best, but at least the sex is.” Akaashi seems like he wants to both bolt and stay seated, resulting in constant shifting around. “Kuroo is... deeply uncomfortable with sex. Kenma is about as comfortable as physically possible for a human. Koutarou is all for it. I just... I don't know how much I am.”

Nobuyuki begins mixing, considering. “Sex can be awful,” he says simply. “And it can be the best thing in the world. No getting around that. Sometimes it's fun, and there's laughing at jokes.
Sometimes it's desperate and a little bit awful. Sex is the full range of human emotion boiled down into having a physical reaction with someone. Or in your case, perhaps multiple someones.”

Akaashi considers this, and nods slowly. “That... helps a little.”

“Good.” Nobuyuki hesitates, then sets the bowl aside for a moment. “Keiji. You don't ever have to have sex if you don't want to. A lot of people act like it's a natural progression in a relationship, but it doesn't have to be. Sex is fun, and I'm glad I have it, but for Yaku the kind of relationship I'm in would be the worst thing in the world. Everybody's got different kinds of sexual needs. Some people can't get off without being choked, some people can't get off if there's so much as a hand on their shoulder, some people don't want to get off and would rather just help their partner get off, or they don't want to have sex at all. Everybody's different. The only bad way to have sex is if it's forced or coerced. You understand?”

Akaashi nods, looking down at the island. “Yes.”

“Good. If any of those three put any pressure on you about it, I'll kick their asses.”

Akaashi's smile is blinding, always has been, and Nobuyuki is as heterosexual as they come but goddamn Akaashi Keiji is the kind of beautiful you write poetry about.

“You're a good friend, Kai.”

And he steals the mixing spoon.

Yamaguchi

The big Nekoma captain that's decided he's friends with Tsukki is terrifying. But Yamaguchi Tadashi is on a mission, and he's not going to back down now because if he does, he's going to look really really weird.

“Ah,” Kuroo-san says, as Yamaguchi practically skids out of the gym following him. “You going to help me carry stuff?”

“Y-yes!”

Nekoma's come out for one last play game despite the third years having retired, and everyone's emotional. Kuroo-san offered to go pick up drinks from Sakanoshita Store, and Yamaguchi was not going to miss this opportunity to get him alone at last. Which, granted, sounded skeevy and awful but fuck it, he needed to talk to the guy. They walk through the front gates and Tadashi screws up his courage.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You already have,” Kuroo-san says, smirking.

Tadashi's heard that a million times from Tsukki. No wonder these two get along. “Can I ask you something about you and Kenma?”

“Sure.” Kuroo-san shoves his hands in his pockets, looking like he's heard a particularly funny joke, but Tadashi doesn't dare read into that.

“Hinata says that you've been friends for a really long time. How'd you... keep being friends, but then be more than friends?”
Kuroo-san's smile is actually nice. His smirk is intimidating, but when he really smiles it's a whole other thing. He looks like the kind of person who you could trust after all. “Ah, getting up the nerve to talk to Megane-kun, hmm? Good. Between the two of you it's hard to say who's more smitten. Here.” He motions to the bench for the bus stop, and sits. “Sit with me a minute, freckles.”

Tadashi sits down, and together they look out over the hillside down over the valley.

“It's a beautiful place, here,” Kuroo-san says, his voice going a little soft. “A nice sort of place. Tranquil, when your wild beasts aren't running around yelling. But even then, it's nice in its own way. There's a lot of life here. A lot of potential.” He drapes his arms over the back of the bench, and Tadashi looks at him. There's something so profoundly sad in his expression, despite how peaceful he looks. “I had a shitty childhood. I think it's safe to say that. It wasn't the worst out of every childhood in the world, but damn if it didn't feel like it some days. Kenma was there for me when nobody else was. He kept me alive, very literally. I worshipped him. I still worship him, let's be honest.” Kuroo-san lets out a heavy sigh, and gives him a look out the side of his eye. “Freckles, when it comes to this story, I'm you, okay? Tsukishima is absolutely Kenma.”

Tadashi goes pink. Tall, muscled, too good looking to be true Kuroo-san is he in this story?

“I fell in love with Kenma when I was seven and had no idea what love even was. But oh, man I loved him. I loved like I needed air to breathe, and everything I gave he gave me back. Just quieter. Gentler. With a little more shyness, a little more polite propriety when he so desired. The day I told him wasn't anything special. I was in my last year of middle school, it was a boring Wednesday afternoon. We were walking home, and I just stopped, and turned, and told him in plain language exactly how I felt. And he looked back at me, looked me right in the eyes, and said, “I love you too.” And that was the end of it.” Kuroo-san looks pensive. “We got home and he proceeded to turn me into a pile of mush because kissing happened, but that's not important.”

Tadashi would like to politely disagree with that last bit. Kissing sounds great.

“Point is,” Kuroo-san says, “that it wasn't a big deal. If it were a big deal, it wouldn't be us. You have to find what makes your friendship what it is, and let that guide you. Okay? Akaashi and I like to bicker and mess with each other and get each other riled up. Kenma and I are all gooey sappy idiocy. Me and Bokuto, though, we're friends who rag on each other and laugh and joke. We were friends before we started kissing. We're friends after too. There's just a lot of other stuff happening. But at the core, we're friends. Does that all make sense?”

“Yeah.” Tadashi's heart feels easier, and he smiles shyly. “Um. Thanks for looking out for Tsukki at camp, too. I know he's, uh. He's something.”

“That's one way to put it,” Kuroo-san cackles. “He's a good guy. He's like a cactus, all spiny on the outside but squishy on the inside once you get past the spikes.”

“I met him because he called people bullying me pathetic,” Tadashi tells him.

“No shit? What'd he do after?”

“He walked off, but the bullies were so upset they left me alone,” Tadashi says, and Kuroo-san laughs that funny wheezing laugh again. “I kept following him around until we became friends and now nothing's getting rid of me.”

Kuroo-san smiles at him, bright and a little bit proud. “Good. Alright, come on. Let's go get those drinks.”
Three weeks later, a message pops up on his phone.

**Text from: unknown number**

got your contact info from kenma who got it from chibi-chan so blame him lol. Lmk if you need help again.
Go get em freckles

**Text to: Kuroo-san**
Thank you!!! I will!!!

Tadashi closes his phone as they walk down the hill to the store, Tsukishima tall and resolute beside him. “Summer break's almost here, huh,” he says absently.

“Yeah.” Tsukishima glances at him. “What was that about?”

“Just a friend,” Tadashi says, and looks over to him to meet his eyes head on. “Kei.”

Tsukishima stumbles, stops. “Um. Yes?”

Tadashi smiles. “It's been a really good year.”

Tsukishima nods, and catches back up to each other. Their hands swing side by side, just brushing, and Tsukishima links their pinkies together.

“Do you want me to say it first?” Tadashi says, looking straight ahead.

“You don't need to say it all,” Kei mutters. Tadashi knows he must be bright red.

“Too bad, I'm saying it anyway.”

And so Tadashi does.

Kissing, as it turns out, is exactly as much fun as advertised.

Chapter End Notes

Get it, Tadashi.
Part 3: Bokuto

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After surviving high school, university is pretty damn easy.

They fall into a pattern quickly. Koutarou wakes up first, putting around the room and getting ready. He wakes up Kuroo in the Approved Fashion: namely, carefully poking him with a volleyball as it wasn't sharp and round things weren't construed as “bad” by his brain. Kuroo lays in bed for exactly four minutes, then climbs out from his nest in the bottom bunk, makes both of their beds perfectly, and pins Koutarou against the wall to cuddle against him like he's a handy statue that happens to be able to hug back.

Clothes are put on, laptops put in bags, and they leave at precisely 9:35. Food is picked up from the cafe down the street, Kuroo drinks the nastiest black coffee that Koutarou's ever seen, and they arrive in class at 10:20 on the dot most days, take seats in the middle left, and spend the entire class ignoring each other. Class lets out, they leave, they eat lunch at approximately 11:45 at a tiny cafe a few blocks from campus that looks like it might be a yakuza front but makes excellent food, and they return for their next class at a precise 1:30.

By 3:00 they're back in the dorm, Koutarou takes his own sweet time pulling on his kneepads while watching Kuroo stretch out his shoulders a little and seeing the bruise in the middle of his back, and then they're in the gym by 3:35, where Oikawa is already waiting and definitely pissing off the upperclassmen by outshining them all and not being shy about it. Koutarou likes someone who takes pride in their work, and likes playing with him and Kuroo against the upperclassmen. They outclass them easily, and it makes him very happy.

Practice goes til 7 or 8 depending on the day, Kuroo barks at Oikawa to be careful of his knee because he's a great parent and half forces him off the court, and they're back in the room where it's safe and quiet and Kuroo isn't jumping at every loud noise by 9 at the absolute latest, usually 8:30. They're in bed by 12:30 like old men, and homework gets done with minimal effort. Apparently, those college prep classes were good for something. Wild.

It's a good routine. Simple. Concise.

Koutarou punctuates it here and there with unexpected new friends saying hi, sometimes taking a break to literally stop to smell the flowers, or to make Oikawa come sit with them so he doesn't get too utterly wrapped up in practice or classes or getting dragged around by his tiny, terrifying roommate to questionable parties. Iwaizumi-san, who is both three times more terrifying than expected and also an absolute sap, routinely comes over from the other side of Tokyo to study with them on Saturday mornings before they leave or the other two arrive.

They switch off where they go on weekends. Kenma and Keiji come to them the first weekend, then they go to the Kozume house, and it's a pretty easy back and forth.

Koutarou loves the routine. He loves how it calms his mind, having Kuroo with him, who laughs and jokes and gives him soft-eyes and kisses like he's been starved his whole life of them. Life is good. Life is really, really good.

Which is why, when he wakes up one morning approximately two months into the school year and finds it hard to move, he feels the dread sink in.
Everything is gray.

He knows, rationally, under the blanket of depression that's sunk into his head like a fog, that this was coming and he should have been expecting it. He's been well behaved at baseline until just recently, when a bit of mania started to kick in. Apparently, he's crashed.

No, he wants to scream, the part of his mind that's aware of what's happening practically thrashing, trying to break out. No, no, no, not now! Don't make me do this to him!

He can't move.

Vaguely, he knows his body is struggling to panic, but the fog is so dense and heavy it's more as if he's just...not fully conscious. He's existing just slightly to the right of his head, it seems, dazed and unable to move. Everything just seems so sluggish.

He stops trying to fight it, and everything sort of settles within him. The fog sets in for good, setting up shop and deciding how it likes the furniture.

He doesn't want to get up.

But he does, because his body runs on autopilot. His head is nothing but gray fog as he gets dressed, nothing but gray as he wakes Kuroo up, nothing but gray as he avoids Kuroo's reach and heads to the bathroom instead, refusing to look at Kuroo's hurt expression.

It'll pass soon, he thinks as he splashes his face with water.

It doesn't.

oOo

“I want you to come to therapy with me,” Kuroo says out of nowhere during their homework time 15 days into the gray time. Koutarou, who's been staring blankly at his books and not absorbing a damn thing about tax law, takes a second to catch up. It's been a long two weeks.

“Why?” he asks, because honestly it's kind of an odd question. Kuroo is very tight lipped about therapy. He goes every other Saturday when they stay with Kenma and Keiji, but he doesn't talk about it.

Kuroo is staring out the window, his jaw tight and his fingers moving spasmodically around his pencil. “My therapist...she um. She suggested it might be good if you guys came and were with me for some sessions. So we could work on- on me and my issues all together. Kenma won't go. Keiji isn't really excited about the idea, but uh. But he said he would if I insist. I thought I'd ask you too. If you don't want to go that's just fine, but I think it'd be good. I don't- I uh.” He huffs out a breath. “I have a lot of shit going on up in this head of mine. I want you to come with so you know what's happening to me.”

Koutarou wants to reach out and hold him, but he doesn't dare. “I'll go.”

“Thanks.” Kuroo still isn't looking at him, eyes fixed on the window. His jaw clenches and loosens again. The pencil spins in his fingers then goes still. “Kenma and I had a fight about it. He said it was hard enough to watch me live through it the first time and he can't do it again. I don't blame him but he's the only reason I got through it the first time. It hurts.”

“I'm sorry babe.” Koutarou does hug him then, despite the gray in his head insisting that it doesn't matter. He hates the gray more than anything. He kisses Kuroo's cheek, and Kuroo leans their
heads together.

“I'll be okay,” Kuroo says to himself, and Koutarou hugs him a little harder.

*I'll be okay too,* he tells himself, because he will be, in time. And because Kuroo needs that from him. Kuroo needs him to be strong.

They meet up with Keiji outside the therapists office on Saturday. Keiji looks amazing, in worn jeans and a long black coat. Koutarou hugs him and holds him tight, and the grey recedes a little bit towards the back of his mind. Keiji pulls back and cups his cheek, and Koutarou loves that he can just see him. Keiji is beautiful, but that's not why he loves him. It's that Keiji sees straight through him, always has.

“It's bad, isn't it?” Keiji murmurs.

“Yeah.” He leans into Keiji's hand. “Been worse though.”

*A lie.*

Keiji makes a small noise but gently takes his hand as they follow Kuroo in.

The therapist is a tiny, tiny woman, not even as tall as Kenma, and has hair dyed to a muted brown that could almost be considered pink. She looks like she could be related to Hanamaki, and her smile is bright when she sees them. “Ah, Kuroo-san, you did bring some of them!”

“Kenma couldn't,” Kuroo says, and waves them forward.

“Akaashi Keiji,” Keiji says with a perfect full bow. “Thank you for taking care of Kuroo-san for us.”

“Bokuto Koutarou,” Koutarou says, bowing as well. “Thank you.”

The therapist smiles brightly. “Nakamura Akiko. It's a pleasure to meet you both. Please, come in.”

They're about to walk into the room when the door to the foyer opens, and Kenma walks in looking absolutely terrified. Koutarou's heart leaps, and Kenma's eyes flick over them several times before fixing on Kuroo. Kuroo's face is clear as a book, a mixture of relief and fear. Kenma strides up, bows stiffly.

“Sorry I'm late,” he says, his voice tiny. “K-kozume, Kenma.”

Nakamura reintroduces herself with a soft smile, and Kenma looks like he desperately wants to run but takes Koutarou's hand as they walk into Nakamura's working office.

The office is a pleasant sort of room, with a big couch that looks like it'd be a joy to nap on, chairs, a beanbag that looks to be made of some very welcoming fabric, and large numbers of plants. It's an airy, open room, warm and inviting. Kuroo immediately goes to the beanbag, settling on it like some giant cat, and Keiji hides his smile as he takes a spot on the couch, Kenma sitting down practically on top of him and pulling his feet up to make himself as small as possible and tight against Keiji's side. Koutarou hesitates a moment before settling between them on the floor, within reach of Kuroo and just under the other's hands. Kenma's fingers brush through the ends of his hair before a tiny notebook and pencil comes out and he stares intently at it.

“Kuroo,” Nakamura says softly, carefully not glancing at Kenma, “We can do this a couple different ways. We can have a normal session, and they can stay silent and listen in. We could also
have it more of a group session to work on issues collectively. Or we can just start a session and see where it leads.”

“Let's do the last,” Kuroo says, looking at the other three. “I dunno how this is going to go.”

“Alright.” Nakamura smiles at them all, and Kenma seems to relax a tiny bit. He's still tense, Koutarou can feel it, but he doesn't see her as quite so much of a threat anymore.

“This week's been...difficult,” Kuroo says, his voice subdued.

“Why's that?”

Kuroo stares at the floor, intent on Nakamura's shoes. She doesn't seem to mind. “I was...I was really nervous to bring up coming to everyone. Kenma knows everything. He's seen me at my worst and when I was all beat up. I didn't want to expose Bo' and Akaashi to that- that sort of awful. Bo especially.” Kuroo picks at the bag. “I don't want to ever make him feel like I felt. I feel like I've gotta protect him from this.”

Koutarou frowns. “I didn't know that.”

Kuroo looks to him, his smile watery. “I don't want you to be hurt because of my past,” he says. “You've got a lot going on. I don't want to put pressure on you to- to try and help me, when I can't even help you when you're struggling too.”

Weak, his mind hisses, and he lowers his head to look at the ground. Weak, you're weak, you can't even help someone else while you sit there and ROT in your own fucking head-

Kenma's hand touches the back of his neck.

“Stop,” he says, his voice simple and clean, a precise and unsympathetic blade cutting straight to the heart.

And his brain does. That voice is always the one in charge, and while Keiji is reliable and wonderful and good, Kenma is cruel in the kindest of ways and Koutarou loves him for it.

He reaches back to take Kenma's hand, and breathes a little easier when their fingers intertwine.

“Bokuto?” Nakamura says softly.

“I'm okay,” he says, lifting his head. “Sorry. I get caught in my head sometimes.”

“How have you been handling Kuroo's sessions?” she asks, her voice gentle and soothing.

He licks his lips, looking to Kuroo, who's looking on with no judgment or pity. He wants to know, for real. “He... he doesn't talk about them. But I know he gets stressed. Sometimes he starts crying in his sleep, and I always want to wake him up but- but for this past little bit my heads been gray. And I've been trying to snap out of it, it's not like the, the normal mood swings I get where I'm really proud and then just sad because my head is screaming at me, this is way worse. And I don't know what to do but sit there and help him when he tells me how because I don't know how to fix everything and Akaashi isn't there every second of the day to fix me and make sure I don't fall apart for good and Kenma isn't there to make my head stop yelling. They're both really good at that, because Akaashi put in the time and now we're so in sync it's crazy to think he thinks I'm worth it, and Kenma just looks past everything and makes my head stop. And Kuroo makes me so happy when I can feel right. He's mean and snarky and so sweet it just about kills me, and I love them all and I just feel so alone and dead and it's never been this bad before.”
The words finally stop pouring out of his mouth and he clamps his free hand over it, horrified. *No, no, no,* this was supposed to be about Kuroo and now he's messed it up.

“I'm sorry,” he says, taking his hand away, desperate and scared. “I'm- I'm sorry, this-”

Kuroo gets up from his bean bag and slides over so they're tight against each other, and wraps an arm around him. “S'okay, Kou,” he says, his voice low and steady. “This is about *us,* not me. And you're a part of that us.”

Kenma's hand is tight on his, solid and grounding, and Keiji is here.

Keiji's seen him at his absolute worst and hasn't left. So he can talk about this, because even if Kuroo and Kenma leave, Keiji has never given up on him.

“Can you tell me about how long you've felt like this?” Nakamura asks.

“18 days now,” Koutarou whispers, and Kuroo wraps an arm around him.

“Has this happened many times before?”

“All the time. Never this bad.” He wants to die, right then and there. He wants to bury himself in the ground and die.

Keiji clears his throat, his voice a little hoarse as he says, “He has somewhat extreme mood swings. Has since he was young. They're not always tied to success or failure, but those aggravate it either direction. I've done my best to keep him even.”

Koutarou's eyes prickle with tears.

“You've suffered through a lot, haven't you?” Nakamura says, very gentle. He doesn't think she can be anything else. No wonder Kuroo goes to her, with how scared he is of adults being loud and intimidating. He can't say that he likes her, but then, maybe he doesn't need to. “When did this first start happening?”

“I-” he hesitates. “I um. It was happening when I was really small, but it got worse after my parents divorced and- and-” he turns, looks helplessly at Keiji. “Can you?”

“Do you want me to?” Keiji asks, reaching out to gently touch his hair. Koutarou nods, breathing a little easier. He doesn't want to say it again. Better if Keiji does.

Keiji tells them about the house in Hokkaido. About the empty, vast halls, his mind playing tricks on him. About his unending terror that one night, his birth father's laughter and brushing it off. How after that he got louder and louder so he can't be ignored. Koutarou buries his face in his arms. It's hard to say if it's better or worse to hear Keiji tell it, because Keiji's normally steady voice has an undercurrent of pure hatred.

It scares him, and reassures him.

“What the fuck,” Kuroo whispers when Keiji's mouth clicks shut. “What the *fuck.*”

Kenma's stopped doodling, his fingers very still but so tight on Koutarou's hand it feels like he might loose circulation.

“Babe,” Kuroo says, and Koutarou leans into his chest. “Koutarou, fucking hell, that's awful.”

Kenma says nothing, but Koutarou can feel his hand trembling with rage.
“I've never had to see him again,” Koutarou says, the gray receding a little. “No one made me, and he's never tried. The mood swings got worse after that, but they were happening before.”

“Have you ever tried medication to help even them out?”

He physically tries to recoil and instead just presses harder into the couch. “No.”

“Will you try?”

He leaves feeling utterly drained, the slip of paper in his hand wrinkling with how tight he holds it and another three appointments booked. He does not want to look at it, or think about it, or so much as breathe in the general direction of the paper in his hand, because it contains large numbers that Keiji had paid for without blinking, and medication notes with even longer, complicated names. Kuroo holds his hand on the train, and they tumble into the futons of the Kozume house in the upstairs rather than go to Keiji's. The others don't pressure him at all, and Koutarou sleeps a little easier with three more warm and sturdy bodies around him that night. He wakes up to Kenma curled up tight in his arms, and it eases the gray back a little.

Not a lot, but a little.

oOo

He has the prescription filled that Monday, because Kuroo threatens to make Keiji skip practice to take him and make him do it if he doesn't. So he gets it filled, carries about his day, goes to practice. Everything is ordinary.

Everything is gray.

Oikawa catches him in their room, staring at the pill bottle.

“Hey,” Oikawa says as he comes in, dressed casually and looking tired. “Asshole roommate puked in our room again.”

Koutarou nods faintly, and Oikawa shuts the door and takes Kuroo's chair so they're sitting together. It's evening, and Kuroo's helping with some group project that someone on their floor got stuck doing because he's a sap. Moonlight is streaming through the windows onto the desks, and Koutarou's orchid has shed its last flowers before it needs to regrow its stem. Oikawa looks at the pills in Koutarou's hands, and then back up at him.

“Want to talk about it?”

Koutarou rolls the bottle around in his hands. “I'm weak.”

“Oh?”

“I shouldn't need these. I should be better. I shouldn't have to take this to feel like a normal person. Mom doesn't need them even after everything my bio-dad did. Kuroo doesn't need them. Eisuke beat him over and over and over and broke so many of his bones and he doesn't need fucking pills to cope.” Koutarou's hand is tight around the bottle. He's angry and frustrated and feels hopelessly humiliated.

“I take them.”

Koutarou freezes before looking up at Oikawa, who blinks at him and pulls gum out of a pack and pops it in his mouth. He looks exhausted, bags under his eyes, but they're still bright and intense.
Sometimes Koutarou looks at him and he sees Shoyo, with his ferocious hunger and drive, not that he'll ever tell Oikawa that. He doesn't want to get yelled at for three hours straight. Handsome Oikawa, with his scholarship and pristine hair and brutal power on the court, Oikawa who is staring him down without shame or pity, Oikawa takes things too.

“What?” he croaks out.

“I don't talk about it much,” Oikawa says, shrugging. “Iwa-chan made me go to the doctor as soon as we were out from under my parents roof. They didn't get it. There are whole days I get so anxious and worried I don't eat, or I stay awake all night because sleeping means terrible things might happen when I'm not there to stop them or see them. I laugh and I joke and I'm petty and ruthless and I know it, but the point stands. I have anxiety so severe that I've been hospitalized twice for freezing and thinking I'm literally dying, and still my stupid parents told me it was just in my head. I know it is. But my brain doesn't process things like most people. Just like your brain doesn't process emotions like most people. It's not a bad thing, it just makes life a little bit harder.”

Oikawa plucks the bottle out of his hands, setting it on the desk.

“Do you want to tell me, to my face, that I'm broken and shouldn't take them?” he asks, and his smile is all sharp teeth.

“No,” Koutarou says, because fuck, no, no one should suffer through that.

He shouldn't suffer through that, either.

“These?” Oikawa taps the bottle. “These don't fix you. You aren't broken. Just different. These level the playing field with everyone else.”

Koutarou's throat is starting to swell, and his eyes are starting to sting. He furiously scrubs at them before tears can form.

“You mean it?” he asks, when he can talk again.

Oikawa blows a bubble, and it pops in the air leaving the smell of artificial strawberry behind. “I mean it.”

Koutarou nods, looking at the water bottle on his desk. “What if it's got terrible side effects?”

“They all do,” Oikawa says. “You just have to find the ones with the side effects you can live with.” He taps his face, smiling wryly. “I have really wild lucid dreams now. And basically no libido except on rare occasions when it gets really intense.”

Koutarou knows he goes red, because Oikawa laughs and pushes the bottle over to him.

“Isn't that... bad?” Koutarou asks nervously, uncapping the bottle of water. “I mean, you and Iwaizumi...”

“Oh, we still have sex. It's just very, very different now, and not in a bad way. You think Kuroo's got the monopoly on sexual hang ups?” Oikawa grins at him, but his eyes are softer now. “Iwa-chan's known exactly who he is and what he likes from day one. No gay crisis for him, he basically took one look at men and decided he was all for them. I'm still getting over myself. Internalized homophobia's a hell of a thing, even if Seijoh was good for me and we slept together for most of our third year. We didn't get together for real until just after school.”

Koutarou opens the pill bottle and shakes one out, taking a deep breath.
“I don't want them to leave me because of this,” he says, staring at the pills. “What's the worst that could happen if I don't take them?”

“Would you like that list itemized or alphabetical?”

Koutarou looks up at him again, but Oikawa simply cocks his head to the side, and blows another bubble. His hoodie reads “THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE”, in brilliant black on white. Koutarou stares at the words for a moment, and accepts it. Fine. The universe is sending him a sign.

Koutarou knocks the pill back with water, and closes it back up as he swallows. Oikawa doesn't applaud, just smiles, and hands him a stick of gum.

“I'm glad Kindaichi likes cats so much,” Koutarou tells him, and has to look away when Oikawa's eyes get a little shinier.

“Yeah,” Oikawa says, his voice strangled, and Koutarou pops the gum in his mouth.

It isn't a magic cure. But the depression lifts to the point of baseline again in two days, and Koutarou spends a long afternoon spiking with Oikawa when it does, finally feeling back to normal. Stress lines he didn't even recognize as there ease on Kuroo's face, and for the first time in three weeks when they get back to the room Kuroo drags him onto the bottom bunk. They spend a very nice evening ignoring their homework, and Koutarou breathes easy for the first time in weeks with Kuroo's mouth on his skin.

It isn't a magic cure.

Koutarou isn't a huge fan of taking the pills, but he knows if he's not careful that he's going to crash or fly too high. He hates them and loves them in equal measure, but the look of sheer relief on Kuroo's face the day he'd crowed out how pleased he was with his spike after the gray days keeps him going. The faint look of pride in Oikawa's eyes doesn't hurt, because the two of them are going places, and Koutarou's going to be the weapon Oikawa uses to destroy Ushijima. It's the least he can do.

The first pills cause brutal nightmares and night terrors, to the point that Kuroo is willing to crawl into bed with him just so he'll have something safe to wake up to. The second ones destroy his appetite, turning everything inedible and impossible. The third ones make him relentlessly horny, which makes for a lot of fun with Kenma long distance but not so much fun with Kuroo being a jittery, anxious mess because sex and Kuroo is complicated. Finally, the fourth try works right, just making him lethargic in the evenings and making it so that literally anything with any sort of passion fruit in it turns his stomach. It's the best he's got. He'll take it.

He'll take it, all of it, because when he spends time with Keiji and sees Keiji slowly relax and that smile of happy surprise cross his face when something goes awry but it doesn't bother him, he'd do anything. Because Keiji has spent years cataloging his every expression, his weaknesses, his strengths. Because Keiji has always kept him level, has always been willing to listen and pay attention, has treated him not like a problem that needs solving but a person who needs help to show their full potential. And they know each other so intimately now that Koutarou doesn't feel ashamed, because Keiji has put up with so much of him and loved him anyway, cracks and flaws and all.

“I'm still going to fall, some days,” he says while Kenma and Kuroo are in the kitchen talking about the rice cookers mysterious malfunction. (The malfunction was Kenma, who called Koutarou
in a panic trying to figure out what to do with it when it started smoking. Koutarou has wisely not
told Kuroo, who loves that rice cooker like it's his only child.) “I'm still going to need you to pick
me up when I get all messed up in my head. That's never going to change.”

“I know,” Keiji says, taking his hand.

“I'm not ever going to really be better,” he says.

“I know,” Keiji says, and kisses his cheek.

“I'm always going to have mood swings, they just come a little bit slower now,” he says.

“I know,” Keiji says, and kisses his forehead.

“I love you so much,” he says, because he needs to.

Keiji kisses him, slow and sweet, and Koutarou melts.

“I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, my name is Heather (or Vinn), and I have Bipolar disorder.

Some fun facts about bipolar disorder: The base treatment for all mood disorders is a
solid, regular sleep schedule. Anti-depressants can turn you into a rage monster if
you're bipolar, rather than fixing that whole “being depressed” issue, which makes life
a living hell for about a solid month if you don't figure out what's going on. And
despite going through years of only mood swings that happen really rapidly, that can
change in an instant when you start to hit about 18-20 and you can get hit with extreme
mania or depression.

While Bokuto in this fic doesn't explicitly have Bipolar Disorder, just a mood disorder
in general (which can happen, like my darling second-youngest-sister has), that whole
“everything getting worse” when you turn older happens more or less across the board.
For me, it was just after I'd turned 20 that everything took a spectacular nosedive. I
suffered for a full year and a half through shitty doctors until I figured out what was
wrong on my own, got on mood stabilizers, and got to a better place. I'm not cured- it's
a disorder, not a disease. But I'm more balanced.

Bokuto is getting the shitty end of the stick in this fic, getting hit with the beginning of
severe symptoms when he's just hit 18, but I wish I had had the reckless confidence to
go after medication and treatment at 18 and saved myself several years of suffering.
To anyone out there who's seriously relating right now: please, go be an absolute bully
to your doctor if they try and write you off and make them listen to your concerns.
Find a local clinic, or go to your university, or do whatever you need to do to get it
under control because my god, life changes for so much the better when you find
something that will work for you whether it's medication, therapy, or even that
godforsaken stretchy thing they call yoga with the other two on top of it just to piss off
the soccer moms who act like you only need one. (I have the flexibility of an oak.
Yoga is not my friend.)
Advocate for your health. Punch your lying brain in the head whenever you get a good day, and get help.

I believe in you.
Keiji doesn't cry the day that Koutarou and Kuroo move into the dorms.

He wants to. He wants to cry, very badly, because he's scared and nervous and desperately afraid of what will happen when Koutarou inevitably breaks down, but he trusts Kuroo. He doesn't cry, but he doesn't want to be alone in the big, empty house, so he goes to the Kozume house where Kenma is curled up in his bed also very pointedly not crying.

He curls up with him, the big spoon tight around Kenma's smaller body, and hates feeling so scared.

“*I miss them already,*” he mumbles into Kenma's hair. Kenma adjusts his game so that Keiji can watch.

“*Me too,*” Kenma says, and they spend the rest of the evening quiet and still together.

There's still a week before school starts for them when Keiji decides to ask him about the token. He's been trying to think of how to be a better captain than last year (not that he was actually captain, but Bokuto had left most of the serious decision making to him and followed his orders without question), and he's found something he wants to do.

“*Kenma,*” Keiji says as Kenma glares at the water temple on the screen. “I want to ask you about something when you're done there. Nothing serious.”

Kenma hums, and completes the level fairly quickly. Once it's done he sets the controller to the side and picks up his phone to fiddle with, not looking Keiji in the eyes. He doesn't mind. Kenma sees so much when he looks into peoples eyes- he doesn't want to overwhelm him with whatever he sees when he looks into Keiji's.

“If you'd be willing, I'd like... I'd like a token, to carry. For you.”

Kenma pauses whatever he's doing. “*A token?*”

“Like... I don't know, a scarf. Or a keychain. Something I could carry so that I can think of you when I have it on me.”

For some reason, Kenma is going red.

“*Kenma?*” Keiji's not certain what he's said to make Kenma look so flustered, and jumps a little when Kenma gets up and goes to his bookshelf in the corner. He pulls out a book, and opens the cover to reveal it's actually a box disguised. There are a few small things inside- a thumb drive, a ring that looks like it came out of a gachapon, what looks like an old SD card, a bunch of printed pictures of a very young Kuroo, and an omamori. He takes the omamori out, and comes to stand in front of Keiji, still red.

“Before we got together,” Kenma says, his voice very soft, “Koutarou, Kuroo, and I went to a shrine. Koutarou got 'family love' omamori, Kuroo got ones for happiness, and I bought this one. It's for good luck. I wanted us to be lucky enough to- to have you in our lives.”

Keiji's eyes go wide as Kenma shoves it at him.

“*Kenma...*”
“It was for you,” Kenma says, incredibly red. “It always was. So take it.”

Keiji does, looking at it. The brocade is so soft, brilliant red on black and gold. Nekoma and Fukurodani colors mixed, he realizes, and now he's the one going red.

“Thank you,” he says, helpless, and looks up at Kenma.

Kenma's face contorts into a wild variety before he gives in, straddling Keiji's lap on the bed, and kisses him. It starts out slow but heated, and then, somehow, Keiji's losing his shirt and Kenma's sinking his teeth into his neck and oh. Yeah. That's right.

Kenma is so goddamn hot.

There's a reason that Keiji's sexual awakening was Kozume fucking Kenma, and it has everything to do with those razor sharp eyes and strong hands and how he can play him like he's a damn instrument in Kenma's hands- because Kenma is small but he's tough, absolutely ready to throw down at any given second if he's mad, powerful in his own way and wickedly intelligent. And he's a setter, with strong hands and clever fingers, and Keiji wishes so much that he could wear his nails long because Kenma's fingers are raking down his back and damn, it'd be nice to show that off.

“I fucking love you,” he gasps, when Kenma lets him breathe, his hair a mess and his mouth swollen with kisses.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Kenma says tartly to make him laugh, and Keiji just about screams when Kenma finds some of the nastier bruises from the last time Kuroo got handsy and presses down hard.

It's a good evening even if Keiji spends a bit of time in the shower and isn't exactly quiet about it. The Kozume's aren't home, and Kenma knows what he's done.

It's fun to see Kenma's smug smile, and really fun to fall asleep next to him with his fingers pressing on the new mark on his neck.

oOo

It's a hard year. Keiji works hard at his studies and club, beating the new team into something amazing with the help of Futagawa, his new vice-captain. Futagawa takes no shit, gets hit, and hits back a couple times and makes sure a couple homophobic assholes get kicked out of the club before Keiji can even get wind of them. He doesn't tell Bokuto, but Futagawa is strong and proud and accepts no bullshit, and Keiji is so proud of him.

He spends time with Kenma, as much as possible, and enjoys the weekends. He suffers through missing Kuroo and Bokuto like they're limbs, takes to sleeping at the Kozume house despite the long commute because sleeping alone is hell. He goes to therapy with Bokuto and Kuroo sometimes, or sometimes they all go together. He works hard, sleeps hard, and makes sure that Koutarou refreshes up his mark at least once a month. It never heals up completely, nor does he want it to. Feeling the familiar ache of that muscle as he tosses is a relief- a reminder that he's not alone. He carries the collections of ee cummings poems with him always, using Kenma's omamori as a bookmark or keeping it in his pocket.

He is never truly alone, not when he has them.

Kuroo and Bokuto play in games sometimes, for Chuo, and he and Kenma always go sit in the stands with Iwaizumi-san. Iwaizumi-san never misses a game in Tokyo, and often travels to watch just in case. Kenma is nervous around him for exactly ten minutes when they meet up the first
time, because Iwaizumi notices that Kenma's playing a Godzilla themed game and is beyond excited to talk about it. Keiji did not expect Kenma to make friends with someone who could bench press him four times over, but then, Kenma's friends with Taketora. The three of them get along well, and often go have lunch together to sit in complete silence and eat. It's wonderful. Keiji wholeheartedly approves of Iwaizumi, and makes a point of telling this to Oikawa to watch him blush.

Oikawa has figured out how to match up well with Bokuto at last, and the day that Chuo beats Waseda and therefore Ushijima Keiji loses his voice cheering.

The year drags on, and on. Kenma's birthday comes and goes, complete with a whole surprise party that involves dragging Karasuno's now second years down to stay in Keiji's house (a nightmare, but a fun one), and a very large apple pie that's just for him. Kenma does not cry, because he's not that kind of person, but he does hug Shoyo for a very long time.

Once again, it's Fukurodani and Nekoma with Itachiyama that make it to Nationals. In an incredible turn of events, after Seijoh takes the first of the Interhigh in the fall finally beating Shiratorizawa and managing a very acceptable 6th place nationally, it's Seijoh against Karasuno for the Spring High Nationals position. Karasuno squeaks through on yet another brutal deuce. There's no Battle of the Trash Heap in this years nationals, sadly. Nekoma gets knocked out in the third round, Karasuno as well.

But Fukurodani is the one that takes out the team that beat Nekoma.

Fukurodani takes on Itachiyama for the final round. Keiji can't even think to be worried, his mind whirring with calculations and plans and every tiny muscle twinge from the past few days culminating into a hellish exhaustion but he is not backing down now.

And then-

There it is.

Done.

Fukurodani, lead by one Akaashi Keiji, stands tall as the winners of the Spring High Championships, Itachiyama fallen at their feet.

Koutarou's on his feet, running to the edge of the stands, and Keiji turns.

The world seems to fade away as Kuroo and Kenma step up beside him, Keiji on the floor in his brilliant whites, looking up at the stands. Their eyes meet, even through all the distance, despite the team screaming. His hair is thick with sweat, the curls more pronounced, but Keiji walks to the edge of the court, eyes fixed on them, and touches the place Koutarou first marked him nearly a year previous. Top left of his chest, right by his arm, feeling it every time he tosses.

That moment, right there, Keiji's eyes fixed on the three of them, that's just for them, for Kenma beaming and Kuroo and Koutarou screaming.

The team sweeps him up as Keiji feels fat tears start to roll down his face, the world rushing back in.

It's over and done. Their last official game, the final link severed, and Akaashi Keiji is the Captain who took the championship for them all. He's never been so proud in his entire life.

Keiji's torn away from looking up at Koutarou, Kenma, and Kuroo, dragged into hugs and sobbing.
“Everyone cool down as best you can,” the Coach says, but he's got tears on his face as well.
“Akaashi.”
“Yes?”
Coach smiles, and claps his shoulder. “Well done.”

Keiji takes that in the spirit it's offered. His head is still spinning, still reeling, and he quickly showers off and changes into his track suit. He pauses before putting on the jacket, looking at it. FUKURODANI is emblazoned on the back, the gold letters proud and tall. He fights back a few tears, straightening up and pulling it on for one last time to stand on the podium as Captain.

“All right,” he says, picking up the book that had been sitting on the bench with them. “Everyone ready?”

There's a bunch of nodding, and he looks over his team.

“Let's go.”

The ceremony is a blur. The medal around his neck is heavy.

The Coach says a few words to the media, answers a few questions, and then says, “Akaashi Keiji, Captain of the team, has a few words he'd like to say on behalf of our team.”

Keiji steps up to the microphones, his face perfectly composed. Koutarou, Kenma, and Kuroo are there right at the edge of the seats, clutching the railing over the Fukurodani flag. He looks up at all the people, all those eyes upon him, and bares his soul to those watching.

“When I was eight years old,” he begins, the words coming with ease, “my parents began doing business in the United Kingdom and gave me a book of English myths, namely the stories of King Arthur and his knights. At the beginning of this year, I requested that each member of Fukurodani's team, whether they were guaranteed first string third years or just starting to learn first years, find a token to carry with them through the year from a loved one. Like King Arthur's knights, who carried the favors of their loved ones into battle, I wished for them to do the same. I wanted them to have something tangible, something to see and feel and smell for when the most brutal of days came down upon them, to remind them what keeps us all moving forward.” He looks over the crowd, and can see the tears streaming down Koutarou's face, sees him start to sink to his knees and Kenma wrap his arm around him. “No one man walks onto any court. In this great sport, it is impossible to win alone. And it is impossible to win without a drive to do so. Some of our number chose objects that meant something to loved ones who have passed on. Parents, grandparents, siblings who have died- we carried them with us. Living relatives or partners, girlfriends or childhood friends, each of us brought a favor from them onto the court this day, because this win was for them.”

He can hear Fukugawa sniffling behind him. On his arm is tied a scarf that belonged to his sister, brilliant blue. Kotoru has his fathers wedding ring on a chain, Ma is carrying his mothers old seal with the red ink still stained on it, and Ishigaki wears his boyfriends prayer beads on his wrist.

“We carry those who have died in our hearts, along with those who still live that we love,” Keiji continues, looking up at Kuroo. “We did not win this for ourselves, or for Fukurodani. That is merely a bonus to each choice we have made. We won this in the name of love, in that most sacred name of that which cannot be destroyed. Familial, romantic, platonic, the games we have played
and the time we have sacrificed has been to prove to them and to others that we are worthy of this title, and we offer it to them. To the late Fukugawa Miyasaki, the late Kotoru Sosuke, Bokuto Koutarou, Kuroo Tetsurou, Kozume Kenma, Itari Nomu, the late Wataru Katsuki, the late Ma Huitan, and to all the rest whose names and love have stood behind us, we offer our deepest thanks and dedicate this win to them. Lastly, I wish to close this with the immortal words of one ee cummings.

Kenma's hand is over his mouth, and now it's Kuroo is barely upright, clinging to Koutarou as both of them sob.

Without looking away, Keiji fixes his eyes on the three of them. His voice rings out, echoing in the stadium, booming and rolling through the stands. “I carry your heart with me, I carry it in my heart. I am never without it. Anywhere I go you go, my dear; and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling.” His voice catches, and he swallows hard as tears prick the corner of his eyes. “I fear no fate, for you are my fate, my sweet. I want no world, for beautiful you are the world, my true. And it's you are whatever a moon has always meant, and whatever a sun will always sing is you.”

A tear escapes, but half the reporters are wiping away tears of their own and the team is too. People in the stands are actively crying. Kuroo is sobbing, tears rolling down his face, and Nekoma in their reds mixed in with Fukurodani's cheering section is brilliant and magnificent.

“Here is the deepest secret no one knows,” Keiji continues, letting the tears fall. “Here is the root of the root, and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide. And this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart.”

He reaches into his jacket, fishing out Kenma's good luck omamori, pressing it to his chest over Koutarou's mark. “I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart.”

He steps to the side and bows, his team following suit. The stadium explodes into noise, screaming and wailing and above all clapping and cheering.

I carry your heart, he thinks, touching his left shoulder as he straightens, looking straight at his boyfriends, face wet with tears. I carry it in my heart.

oOo

His parents return to Japan for his graduation, of course. It's a long ceremony, and Keiji gives a speech to the school to say goodbye properly as a Captain before he leaves. They have dinner together at a tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant that Ayumi and Fusazane used to go to when they were courting, just the three of them, and when they get home for the evening Fusazane brings him into the sitting room.

“There's something we need to tell you, something important,” Ayumi says, perching on the arm of the couch as Keiji sits in one of the comfortable chairs. “Something of a gift and a burden.”

“You have a choice to make,” Fusazane says, gentle. “We've decided to officially move to England full time, and give everything away but the section that is your inheritance. We're going to be cutting our salaries, giving the rest to our workers to even out the income disparity that we discovered our HR department was running. The rest of our wealth is going to be distributed throughout Japan to places that help people like Tetsurou and I find help and combat suicide, and some organizations that are fighting for gay rights here in Japan. We'll be left with a sizable nest egg for our retirement, but until then we'll live on a more modest income of 100,000 pounds a year combined- which, admittedly, is still an incredibly high number but will be far, far lower than it
was before, as it should be. However, there's the matter of this house. We'd like to gift it to you, so that it's in your name and officially belongs to you.”

“You want to give me a multi million dollar home in Tokyo,” Keiji says, stunned. “To do with as I wish.”

“Yes. You could sell it, and take the money and find or build a new home suited to you and your partners needs. You could keep it and renovate it, or make it into apartments. You could simply stay and live in it,” Ayumi says, holding Fusazane's hand. “Keiji, we’ve taught you since you were a small child that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. We've spent the past five years slowly shucking off the trappings of wealth, and we're moving to a better life for us. The kind of money we have, no one pair of people needs. That's why we're giving it away. But this house...” She looks around at it, smiling a little. “This house has been yours for quite some time. You've been doing the work and upkeep in it since you were 14. You've made it a home for your friends and your partners. This house has been yours since they day we went to England.”

Keiji sits back in his chair, mind spinning.

“I can hardly say no,” he says, the very idea of being given an entire house absolutely insane. The largest gift he'd ever received from his parents otherwise had been a box set of the illustrated Chronicles of Narnia in the original English. “And- there's an inheritance besides?”

“In a sense,” Fusazane says, shrugging one elegant shoulder. It's a very European gesture. “It's in a trust. You'll have access to it when you turn 25, we decided.”

“That's more than fair,” Keiji says faintly. “I don't want to know how much is in it.”

“It's enough to live comfortably on for a long time,” Ayumi says, her voice serene and gentle. “Insurance, in the event that either of us died young, or something went wrong.”

Insurance, in the event that the Takazaki decided their wayward daughter and her husband needed to be disposed of. Keiji is no fool.

“Now, consider it insurance in case of any of your partners being injured and unable to work. In any case,” Fusazane says, “the house is yours. It's not so far from Chuo that a commute would be bad. And if you decide not to go after all, that's just fine.”

“Thank you,” he tells them, sincere. “I mean it.”

Ayumi hugs him tight when he stands, smiling.

“We are very, very proud of you and the man you've become,” she tells him, warm and sweet, and he buries his face in her shoulder to hide his tears.

oOo

Of course, now that they're properly graduated adults and Keiji has a whole fucking house in his name after some complicated paperwork, his parents make a pointed suggestion.

“A what,” Kenma says, horrified.

“A dinner party,” Keiji repeats, the words curdling in his mouth. “To meet everyone's parents together.”

“That sounds like the opposite of a good time.”
Keiji's sprawled on Kenma's bed, and can hear Kuroo cooking downstairs, prepping the Kozume families meals for the week as, surprise surprise, none of them magically became able to cook upon Kuroo leaving for college. Koutarou's out for the day, doing something with Oikawa and Iwaizumi in Central Tokyo.

“But,” he says reluctantly, “I think we should do it.”

“Ugh.”

“I know.”

“Ugh.”

“I know.”

Kenma put the controller down, and crawls across the bed to flop on top of Keiji. Keiji doesn't so much as twitch. This is about normal for them at this point. Honestly, Keiji kind of loves it.

“When are your parents leaving?” Kenma asks with a heavy, defeated sigh. “What's our time frame for this mess?”

And so, four days later, with Kuroo and Bokuto having cooked an absolute masterpiece of a dinner and Kai having been bribed with the promise of being allowed to use a blowtorch to make the dessert, Keiji opens the door to his house to greet Bokuto Retsu and Sato Choji. Retsu's hair is in an elaborate braid, and Choji looks like he's been quietly basking in love the whole way there. To be fair, Choji looks like that most of the time. He and Retsu love each other without restraints.

“Keiji-kun,” Retsu practically sings, pulling him into a hug. “Oh, it's so good to see you! Koutarou told us all about the Spring High, you must be so very proud.”

“Hello, Retsu-san, Choji-san,” he squeaks out, carefully hugging her back. “I'm very proud, yes.”

Ayumi sticks her head out from the sitting room and immediately hurries down the hall to them. “Ah! You must be the Bokuto’s.”

“Just one Bokuto here!” Retsu smiles at her, big and wide. She's so like her son that it makes Keiji happy every time he sees her smile. “Bokuto Retsu, and this is my husband, Sato Choji!”

“It's a pleasure to meet you both. Akaashi Ayumi. Please, please, we have tea in the sitting room! Fusazane is very excited to meet you.”

Fusazane is a bundle of nerves and probably wanted to hide so badly it was killing him, but Keiji and Ayumi weren't going to rain on that particular parade.

Kenma arrives with the Kozume's next, who smile at him in their soft way and step inside with soft feet. Kenma winces as he hears Retsu laugh, and takes a deep breath as he takes his shoes off. Sousuke and Saya both look down the hall, curious.

“Retsu's very boisterous,” he tells his parents. “She doesn't mean anything by it, it's just how she is. She's just like Koutarou.”

Sousuke nods, adjusting his shirt sleeves, and cocks an eyebrow at Keiji. Keiji, who's also becoming fluent in Kozume Facial Language thanks to spending so much time with them, takes a
second.

“My mother’s lively but very polite,” he says quietly, taking Saya’s coat. “My father is very, very nervous about tonight, and has led a life similar to Kuroo-san. I think he would be reassured to have you near. Please don’t be surprised if Kuroo-san refers to my father as Oto-san as well, they’ve grown close over the last year.”

Sousuke nods, and Saya gently touches Keiji’s shoulder, which is as good as a hug. Keiji leads them down the hall as Kenma disappears to help set the table for ten, and Keiji prepares to put his Bokuto handling skills to work. But Choji and Fusazane seem to be getting along, Ayumi and Retsu are cooing over baby pictures, and Keiji is clearly not needed here. He escapes to the kitchen, where Kuroo is carefully plating up food.

“Almost ready?”

“About five more minutes,” he says, using massive chopsticks with tiny pointed ends to delicately arrange a small flower shape. “I’m trying to impress everyone, here.”

“You impress me,” Keiji tells him, kissing his cheek, and goes to fetch the wine.

He wishes he could drink as well, but while his parents have politely looked the other way about his drinking habits and the missing wine bottles he’s not quite willing to push his luck. “What would pair best with dinner?” he calls as he prepares to head to the basement.

“White wine,” Kuroo calls back, adjusting a flower made out of some sort of very fancy plant. Koutarou's just finished dishing out the soup. “We're having fish, so white wine's best.”

“I have a couple bottles of Koshu?”

“I don't know what that is, babe.”

“White wine made from koshu grapes. Very crisp and clean.”

“Perfect.” Kuroo moves to the next plate. “Sousuke and Saya don't drink, do you have sparkling water or something?”

“I have sparkling cider, also a white.”

“That'll work, bring that up too. Bo, I need one more plate.”

Dinner is served with three carefully and intricately cooked and plated courses, the massive dining table for once useful with ten people to fill it. There's miso soup to start, followed by chirashi sushi that's so beautifully prepared and set out that more than one person grabs their phone to take pictures, followed by an exquisite miso glazed cod with Keiji’s favorite nanohana no karashiae on the side. And finally, to top it all off, Kai created an absolute masterpiece of crème brulee with decorative strawberries on top before he made off with a very nice wine from the storeroom.

It was perfect.

Saya and Retsu got along like a house on fire, Choji had gone to school with Fusazane's brother Hisao, Sousuke and Ayumi happened to share a birthday. Koutarou was clearly enjoying himself, laughing and joking with his mom and the others, Kuroo was practically glowing from all the praise that was being heaped on him, Kenma was coaxed into sharing about the game that he was finishing up the development for, and Keiji was so very, very happy.
The house felt good. It feels like a home.

He's never resented his parents for moving to England. They loved it there, and he loved Japan. He's happiest in Tokyo, with her grand skylines and shimmering waters, her parks and tall buildings, yukata and shrines and festivals and loud signs. He's missed them, of course, but it's been good to be by himself. He's happiest in easy silence, in the quiet joy and contentment of being loved.

But this is good.

It's good to see Koutarou and Retsu challenge each other to an arm wrestling competition while Saya laughs, to watch Ayumi and Kenma talk about the newest game that's come out and show each other the new charms, to see Choji with Fusazane and Kuroo in the kitchen talking about this and that, and it's good to sit with Sousuke in the living room and read quietly.

"Does it bother you, that Kuroo calls him Oto-san and not you?" Keiji asks quietly as he exchanges sections of the evening newspaper with Sousuke.

Sousuke shakes his head, smiling a little. "Why should it?" His voice is soft, like Kenma's, but a little deeper. "Even Kenma calls me by my name. Kuroo has always been my son, in name or not. Just as you are."

Keiji smiles, settling back in his chair. "I'm glad.

Sousuke pauses a moment before setting the newspaper aside. "I'm glad you've put this together," he says quietly. "It's good to meet the people who brought up my sons partners."

Keiji watches as Retsu crows her victory, high-fiving Saya.

"My parents were both disowned by my grandparents," he tells him. "They made sure I was never, ever hurt."

"Good." There's a flash of relief over Sousuke's face. "And Bokuto-kun?"

"His birth father was a pile of trash, but he was out of Bokuto-san's life and has been ever since he turned eight," Keiji says quietly. "Retsu-san has dealt with a lot, but she and Choji love Bokuto-san very deeply."

"Good," Sousuke says again, and tension eases from his shoulders as Kuroo laughs over something Choji's said and Fusazane joins in. "You've done very well for yourself, Keiji. I'm proud of what you and they have accomplished together."

"Thank you," Keiji says sincerely. It means a lot, coming from Sousuke.

Sousuke gives him a smile, and Keiji goes back to the newspaper.

Life is good.
Part 3: Kenma

Chapter Notes

TW for this chapter: Kenma suffers from a type of survivors guilt, and talks with Kuroo pretty frankly about the abuse he suffered while at therapy with Kuroo.

The first year of university level classes is hellish, but mostly because dorm living is a requirement. Kenma hates the dorms, almost as much as Keiji does. They last exactly four days before they buy sound muffling foam pieces and cover the walls in them, and Keiji takes every opportunity possible to take them home to where Kuroo and Bokuto are tending the house. Their house.

Kenma now officially lives in a multi-million dollar, five bedroom three bathroom house, with his partners.

Life is bizarre.

They get through the first year by the skin of their teeth, nestling together on the bottom bunk and blocking out the world. The less said about the whole damn year the better. By the time they can flee back to the Akaashi house, Kenma is half crazy with relief to get out of the horrible press of bodies.

Year two starts out with Keiji, Kuroo, and Bokuto on campus at disgustingly early hours for volleyball, and Kenma riding along because Kuroo's bought a piece of shit car to feel "more independent", whatever that means. Kenma's a bit proud of him, though. He's been taking a lot of steps on things for himself lately, things like the car and buying flowers once a week, going to the movies on his own, and picking up a part time job at nights in the izakaya closest to them to learn a few tricks of the trade. Despite how much he hates being there, he does go with Kuroo to therapy some days, on the days where they try to work on Kuroo's emotions about Eisuke being in jail but Hana being free, or the guilt Kuroo feels about having to be saved. Kenma's discomfort with Nakamura has eased some after she quietly pulls him aside to thank him for what he's done to keep Kuroo safe and alive.

It's reassuring to be in the gym even if he's not playing, and after exactly one instance of some first year trying to hassle him and Koutarou just about taking said guys face off for it, no one dares try to bother him. The sound of gym shoes and yelling is familiar and soothing in its own way, Kuroo and Koutarou ganging up to aggravate Keiji until he sasses them back bringing a smile to his face. Keiji's the back up to Oikawa now, though he's said he'll only play through college. He's good at what he does, an excellent setter, but Kenma knows how much he likes teaching, likes bringing out the best in students rather than on the court. Education will be good to him.

But in the meantime, he has code to work on.

Kenma leaves the gym when practice starts in earnest and he needs a better internet connection, finds a quiet table in the open air, and starts working on yet another play through of Final Quest. It's almost done, nearly two years of solid work to make it as good as he can, and he's proud of what he's achieved. The art's improved and changed so he's no longer working off his friends.
identities, the story is more complex and in depth, and it's a beast in size and scope. But it's his work, no one else's, and he's honestly pretty proud of it. He's shown the battles and some of the games inner workings to a couple kind-of-friends from his course, but it's nearing completion for good and he wants to make sure everything's perfect with it, no bugs or snags or dialogue mistakes.

The chair beside him gets pulled out, and he almost freezes as a skinny man about his age drops down next to him, blonde hair in an undercut and a wicked smile suggesting he's about to be introduced to someone he doesn't want to be. His eyes are bright and mischievous, and have a bit of glitter on the edges.

“Hey there,” the guy says, and Kenma catches a flash of a tongue piercing. “You're cute. Want to go out sometime?”

Kenma stares at him, and his face must show the panic welling up because the guy pulls back, his expression going serious, and holds his hands up.

“Sorry,” he says, and he sounds like he genuinely means it. “I didn't mean to scare you. I'll leave.” And he does, before Kenma can even find the words to say anything.

He puts it out of his mind and keeps on working, a little rattled, but he has his face well under control by the time the other three are free from morning practice and heading out to their own classes. He takes his normal seat among his cohort, who all ignore him as is proper, and gets out his laptop for this lecture. It'll be a long one, this one not on coding or anything interesting, just on ethics in games.

“Aw, hell.”

He looks up to see the man from earlier grimacing. He blinks.

“I didn't know!” The guy says, holding up his hands. “Serious! I just transferred here from up in Miyagi, I didn't know you were part of the program.”

Kenma has no idea what to say, but there's a seat next to him and the guy backed off quick, and... Miyagi.

Good things happen with people from Miyagi.

“You can sit by me,” he says, surprising himself, and looks back at his laptop. The guy does, plopping down in the seat.

“I'm Terushima Yuuji,” Terushima says, holding out a hand with lots of rings on it. His nails are painted, black and a sort of mustard yellow to coordinate with his hair. He has pierced ears too, Kenma notices, with small gauges. He's also completely ignoring the looks from some of Kenma's more... traditional classmates, and he's dressed like he woke up after a night of clubbing and was too hurried to do anything more than throw on a t-shirt over his mesh long sleeved top. There's the remnants of body glitter on his collarbone. His pants look painted on, and on closer inspection his shirt reads in English “HERE, QUEER, KNOW NO FEAR” in eye popping neon green over white.

Subtle does not seem to be a word he knows.

“...Kozume Kenma,” Kenma says, gingerly shaking it. “No honorifics, please.”

“Cool, works for me. Sorry again about earlier,” Terushima says earnestly. “I've got a bad habit of thinking before I speak.” His tongue stud flashes as he talks, and Kenma wonders what it must be
like to talk with a mouth of metal. Probably very interesting.

“It's okay,” he says, and finds that it is. He looks to the side of Terushima. “You just surprised me. And... sorry, I'm taken.”

“Awww,” Terushima pouts, but there's not real meaning behind it. He doesn't try to force eye contact. “I shouldn't be surprised. Who's the lucky person?”

*Person, not girl or boy. Smooth, Terushima*, Kenma thinks to himself. Out loud, he says, “Three of them. Kuroo, Bokuto, and Akaashi. All men.”

Terushima gapes at him. “Holy shit, Matcha, you're a fuckin' hardcore. Get it.”

“...Matcha?”

“Yeah!” Terushima's grin turns a little bit devious. “Kenma, Ma, Macchan, Matcha!”

“That seems like it's a stretch,” Kenma says dubiously.

Terushima kicks back in his chair as everyone finishes filing in. His grin is all sorts of dangerous fun. “I think it fits you perfectly. On account of how you're classy and got a little bit of bite under all those manners.”

It seems that Kenma has once again made a friend.

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“What,” Keiji says tightly, his hands on his coffee mug going white, “is this.”

“This is Yuuji,” Kenma says, and Terushima gives his boyfriend a finger wave from where he's leaning on Kenma's shoulder. What is it with Miyagi people just immediately being comfortable within his personal space? “He specializes in two-person games.”

“Matcha, I'm so jealous,” Terushima whines. “*Three* boyfriends, and they're all this good looking? Leave some for the rest of us starving gays.”

“You're bisexual, Yuuji.”

“Don't be purposefully obtuse.”

Keiji stares. “Matcha?”

---

Terushima Yuuji, blatant bisexual party animal, is not the most popular in the game design program. But he is clever, very intelligent, and one hell of a brawler. Kenma wants to say he's surprised when Terushima struts into Ethics with his fingers bandaged, a cut on his lip, and a nasty black eye. He wants to, but he's not.

Terushima drops into the chair next to him and grins, wicked and feral.

“What win?” Kenma asks.

“Hell yeah,” Terushima says, smug, and winks at him. “And I got his number after.”

“You're a disaster,” Kenma says, and turns back to his work.
News like Terushima gets around fast. Kenma ignores most of the gossip, but passes on the more ridiculous things he hears to make Terushima laugh. He half expects Terushima to start leaving him alone after others come out of the woodwork to say hi or tell him good job for beating up some asshole, but Terushima doesn't leave. He eats lunch with them, plays games with Kenma over Skype at all hours, whines incessantly over midterms but still gets incredible grades, and doesn't once make another pass at him. Once Keiji gets over the bluntness of him they get to be good friends, and Kuroo and Bokuto drag him in for their shenanigans as well. But he makes it clear he's Kenma's friend first in little ways, and Kenma tries not to feel too happy about it. And because he's Terushima's friend, and Terushima has that same dogged determination that seems endemic to Miyagi-bred men, Kenma starts making other friends in the program and out of it as well. Other gay or bi kids, the social outcasts and the rejects, the ones who don't quite fit but still have a place. He lets none of them be as close as Terushima, but once again, he has friends in his teammates in the program.

And yet, somehow, Terushima never really talks about his past even when others do. He avoids Oikawa in such a way that Kenma's really the only one to notice they never manage to meet up, laughs off questions about his past year in the game program at Sendai, watches Keiji toss to Koutarou in their little back yard with longing when he's over but never lets them see. He's so very, very careful to reveal so very, very little. It's all so very familiar, and Kenma hates it.

He waits until they're eating breakfast together while the others train before saying quietly, “You played volleyball, didn't you?”

Terushima freezes for a second before relaxing. “Sure. Up to my last year in high school. Johzenji is where I went, Sendai area like Aoba Johsai.”

“You don't talk about it,” Kenma says, pulling out his PSP. “Even when the others are. And you don't ever let Oikawa see you.”

Terushima gives him a long look. Kenma steels his nerves, and looks back.

After a beat, Terushima sighs, leaning back in his chair. “I know you've got friends at Karasuno,” he says, his voice going a little soft. “Those four kids who just graduated, Mini Spiderman and that setter with the wicked quick and the blondie and freckles guy. They all came out and took the world by storm, but they were lucky. Aoba Johsai was lucky too. I had a boyfriend my senior year at Johzenji. He was on the team with me. We weren't so lucky. The team had my back but the school didn't. I was Captain, but they made me quit. The whole team quit with me, to protest. The coach tried to appeal to the school, but they were mad by that point and banned me for good from any sports. We got in a lot of trouble for it, I got outted to my parents. Shit got ugly.” He shrugs, takes a drink. His eyes are a little dead. “Not everyone gets lucky. Oikawa... he did damage control. Flirted with girls, dated around, even if the only one he really has eyes for is that ace of his. But I was stupid in love, and I wouldn't toe the line because I thought he was the one, even if I am bi. I graduated by the skin of my teeth because the teachers tore me apart. I stayed in Sendai for school but eventually... it was just way too much.”

He shakes his head, his smile a little grim. “But I'm here now, and I'm going to have a good life.”

Kenma nods, finishing off his far too sweet cinnamon roll. “Good,” he says.

Terushima laughs, throwing his head back. “That's what I like about you, Matcha. You don't mince words.”

Kenma thinks, *Shit got ugly.*
Kenma thinks, *Johzenji*.

Kenma thinks, *Eisuke and Hana*.

Kenma sits at his computer, and wonders what it would be like to destroy some lives all over again. He's not like Terushima, he can't fight anyone. He's gotten better over the years, but he's still shy and anxious, worried about what he looks like in the eyes of others. And yet he has some skill. Hacking is just coding with a bit of difficulty thrown in, and he took down Eisuke with very little issue.

But-

But.

Terushima Yuuji is proud, and stubborn, and has made his own way. Terushima Yuuji didn't need a savior- he got out on his own. Terushima Yuuji would not thank him for this kind of destruction.

Kenma deletes the file he's made with little notes about some of the more interesting things he's found out about Johzenji's administration, and goes to find Koutarou. He's up in their bedroom, the big comfortable master bedroom with its two beds and walk in closet and huge attached bathroom and sitting area. Keiji spared no expense in the makeover. Koutarou's sprawled out on the four-poster, beautifully naked with his hair down, reading something that looks like it might be one of Kuroo's favorite poetry books. The light comes in from the wall of windows along the far side, bathing Koutarou in golden light, and Kenma climbs onto the bed to curl up along him. Kenma likes just being able to marvel at Koutarou's exquisite form in its simplest form even without sex. Sex is a thing happening regularly now that Keiji's taken the leap of faith for them all (except Kuroo, still), and now Koutarou likes to exist in the nude. No one minds this.

“Hey,” Koutarou croons, setting the book aside. (It's the collected works of Byron, who Kuroo loves to eviscerate in writing. Kenma loves Kuroo so much it hurts him, sometimes.) “What's up?”

Kenma traces absent patterns in the faint hairs on Koutarou's chest. “Sometimes I can't help.”

Koutarou listens, his attention fixed on Kenma.

“I don't know how to help,” Kenma corrects, because it's true. “I was very lucky growing up, even if I was very lonely. I never worried about my parents not wanting me after Kuroo and I got together. They just... are. And what they are is loving.”

Koutarou reaches up to gently stroke through his hair. It's gotten long enough to pull back. He's never redyed it, so it's still ombre to blond, just quite long now; down past his shoulders, enough to go up in a bun or ponytail. Koutarou *loves* his hair, and treats it with such reverent delight that Kenma makes it part of their week and their time together for Koutarou to wash it. He closes his eyes, lets Koutarou stroke through it.

“Yuuji didn't get lucky like us,” he says, and his voice is falling to almost a whisper. “I don't like it.”

Koutarou rolls over, and presses a kiss to the top of his head. Kenma sighs into it, feeling a bit more at ease.

“Do you know what I think?” Koutarou says, very quiet. Kenma looks up at him, at his gentle smile and warm eyes. “I think we were very lucky. I think we were so, so lucky, to be able to have a good and enormous house, that our parents all like each other, that we found each other. I think we were very, very lucky. And I think we should pay that sort of luck forwards. And maybe
paying that sort of luck forward is just by being a good friend and helping people move on.”

Kenma tucks his head under Koutarou's chin, closing his eyes. “You're a good man,” he says.

Koutarou makes the same little hitch-in-the-throat noise that he always makes when Kenma tells him that, and wraps him up in strong arms.

He thinks about what Koutarou's said to him when he meets Terushima for breakfast the next time. Terushima's dressed in white jeans, a strange sort of reflective jacket, pink tinted round fake glasses, and a crop top with “no hetero” written on it in cheery pink, blue, and purple. Kenma's in jeans and a sweatshirt. They make an interesting pair.

“I want to show you something,” Kenma says after they have their food read and they've both inhaled about two cups of coffee.

Terushima makes an interested noise.

“A game.”


Kenma hands him the thumb drive with Final Quest on it. “This is Final Quest. The title's just a working one. It's almost complete,” he says. “But it's ready for beta.”

“What's it about?”

Kenma looks at two years of work, of love. He thinks about Keiji's eyes lighting up that first night, Shouyou so excited to be a main character, Oikawa reading over his notes about the Knight and the Demon King's reunion and struggles to find peace despite everything, thinks of Kuroo watching him code and cooing over the art. Thinks about how he never had a dream, or a hope past data entry at some faceless company. Thinks of Shouyou sitting on a floor with him, telling how he'd be good at designing battles.

“Hope,” he says. “It's about hope.”

oOo

The next time Kuroo goes to therapy, Kenma comes with of his own volition. Kuroo doesn't ask him about why, just opens the car door for him and drives them there. Kuroo is a good driver, careful and patient, especially when any of them are in the car with him.

They arrive at Nakamura's office and go in, and Kenma curls up into a ball on the couch like normal and Kuroo burrows into his beanbag.

Nakamura has learned just how much Kenma hates being welcomed in her office, so she skips the formality of it. He's grateful.

“Since you're here, I presume that you maybe have something you want to talk to Kuroo about and need some help,” she says without delay, and Kenma fiddles with his pencil. No phones allowed, no games allowed, but at least he can scribble things. Something to keep his face away from those eyes that see too much.

“I feel like a failure,” he says to the paper. The paper doesn't look back. It doesn't have eyes to look. “I feel like I should have done more. And I feel like I should be able to find a way to help
Terushima in a more real way. Bokuto says that- that sometimes you can't do anything about the past but have to help someone just move forward. And I hate that. I'm so angry that Eisuke and Hana got away with it for so long. I'm angry that we were lucky but other people aren't. I'm angry that no one in real power did anything to help Terushima, I'm angry that I wasn't there, I didn't know, because I could have done something. I want to make them pay, and I hate that all of these feelings are there in me and there's nothing I can do.” He grips the pencil tighter, the paper wrinkling under his hand. “I'm so ashamed, because I forget. I forget that there are people out there who hate us. We're surrounded by good people who would do anything to keep us safe. And Terushima didn't get that kind of luck.”

Kenma scrubs at his eyes, wiping away half formed tears. “There'll always be more kids out there who don't have someone to save them. There'll always be people like Kuroo and Fusazane, who get broken bones and black eyes, and people like Terushima who should have made it out fine but get beaten at the very last minute. And I don't know what to do.”

The paper tears, and he tears the page out of his notebook and shoves it in his pocket instead.

“You were eleven years old when you saved Kuroo,” Nakamura says, her soft voice firm as iron. “You weren't even a teenager when you decided to rescue him and you made it happen.”

“I should have done more,” Kenma says, pencil running in angry circles over the page. “I should have done it sooner, I should have pushed harder. I should have saved him faster. Sometimes I look at him and all I can see is every broken bone that's my fault.”

“I don't blame you for any of that,” Kuroo says from the bean bag. “I never would, I never will.”

Kenma bites his lip, hard. “But I blame me. For not being faster.”

“Why?” Kuroo says, far too patient. “Did you give Eisuke a stick to beat me with? Did you tell Hana to starve me?”

“No, but-”

“But nothing. You fed me. Healed me. Gave me your bed, your hands, your heart. You saved my life,” Kuroo says, and Kenma sneaks a look at him. His face is soft and patient. “Even Sousuke didn't know what to do, remember? He tried to get me away but he couldn't. You outsmarted them all and you made them pay for hurting me, and you brought me home. You gave me everything. I've never once wished you were faster, because what if you were? What if you got caught? What if he found out about how much I loved you? What if in your rush you got sloppy- what if in your rush to frame him, you led a trail back to yourself?”

Kenma still has nightmares about that. Dreams, sometimes, and wakes in a cold sweat at the thought of Kuroo Eisuke being let free on a technicality.

His heart isn't pounding quite so hard now.

“Kenma,” Kuroo says, with so much heart in it. “I wouldn't change a thing that you did for me.”

Kenma swallows hard.

“What you're feeling is a type of survivors guilt,” Nakamura says, and he reluctantly looks up in her general direction without actually looking at her. It's easiest like that. “It's not uncommon to feel helpless during times like that, especially where you were so very young when you freed him. How long have you been feeling like this?”
Kenma fiddles with his pencil. “Since around the time we broke for summer break,” he admits, “and I moved in with Keiji back to the house. I... don't like change. Even good change. It's difficult. And now that Terushima and I are friends it's gotten complicated as well. I want to help him, but I don't know how. I don't even know why.”

“Maybe because he's your friend,” Nakamura says, “and for all you deflect, you love your friends very much and never want to see them hurt. And to know that he was hurt in a way similar to Kuroo, it's bringing back all of those old memories and thoughts to the forefront. When you were working on framing Eisuke- and, I'll remind you all that this is a place where you are safe by doctor and patient confidentiality- did you spend almost all of your waking hours consumed with making sure it was perfect?”

Kenma nods, sketching a round shape and scribbling it out. “All the time,” he admits, his voice nearly failing. “I never stopped thinking about it.”

“Then is it so surprising that your mind, when remembering that time, is trying to find a way to cope with those emotions it brings up?”

Kenma sighs, staring at the mess of black on his page.

“I think you should talk to Terushima,” Nakamura says, and Kenma bites his lip. “You don't need to tell him about Eisuke if you don't want to, or Kuroo doesn't want you too. But you should see what he thinks about you wanting to help him deal with those who hurt him. I won't pretend to be impartial here, I've worked with Kuroo too long to be anything but glad that Eisuke is in prison where he belongs, even for something he did not commit. But Terushima's life and situation is fundamentally different from Kuroo's. Everyone's life is their own. And maybe he's already extracted all the revenge he wishes.”

Kenma thinks on that as they go home, and he skips dinner in favor of going up to bed. He burrows under the covers of the bed that Kuroo normally sleeps in, inhaling the familiar smell of skin-and-sweat-and-cologne that's all Kuroo. He surrounds himself in the knowledge that Kuroo is there and safe, and when Kuroo comes up to bed he curls up with him and sleeps with Kuroo's arm holding him as well as the second pillow.

He wakes up with bedhead, but it's worth it.

“Do you want revenge?” Kenma asks Terushima first thing in the morning when they meet up for breakfast on Monday. Terushima is surprisingly subdued for the day, in pastel pink pants and a black tank top with a jacket on top, still brilliant in the early fall weather.

Terushima snorts as he picks up their coffee and Kenma grabs their scones, going to their normal table in the back corner so they're out of view of everyone else and Kenma's eyes don't get overwhelmed trying to catalog everything going on. Terushima had taken exactly three days of them knowing each other before he figured out about what made Kenma the most anxious, and Kenma wonders if it's just a Miyagi thing to know so much so fast. What is it with people from Miyagi butting into his life?

“I don't want revenge, not really,” Terushima says as they eat. “What'd be the point, now? I'm out. I'm proud. I'm loud. I'm living my best life, got friends who like me, get fucked regularly, and I'm doing amazing in school. As far as I know, I won because I beat them at their own game of making me hate myself.” He shrugs, the flaky croissant leaving little pieces on his fingers. “All I ever wanted was to have fun, and here I am, having fun. Yeah, I got a few black eyes along the way, and yeah I've got some hang ups, but I'm happy now. The past is the past. I can't go back- I'm not going that way.”
Kenma nods, thoughtful, and takes a bite of his croissant. The bread seems to melt in his mouth, soft and savory, and they eat quietly for a minute. He's still unsettled. He's never met anyone else who needed saving, and now that he has he's so unhappy that he couldn't help then that his mind wants so badly to help now. But Terushima doesn't want revenge. He doesn't need to be saved now. What's he supposed to do, to ease this?

“Hey,” Terushima says, breaking him out of his reverie. “What're you going to do with the Quest game?”

Kenma blinks. “I... don't know. I've just been working on it for a long time. It's just been a project.”

“You could sell copies,” Terushima says, stirring his coffee. “On Steam. I think you should. Or upload it and let it be free.”

Kenma stares at him. “Why?”

“Because it's amazing,” Terushima says, dead serious for once. He looks back over, and smiles at him when he sees Kenma staring. “No joke, I cried when I did the friendship quests for the white mage. And the Demon King and the Knight storyline... shit, Matcha, you don't pull your punches. Those hurt, in a really good way. It's a really good romance, and it's a really good moral. Gave me a lot to think about, you know? It's like you said, it's really about hope. Seeing people like you on the screen, you know?”

Kenma's mind screeches to a halt.

“Hope,” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” Terushima says, and takes a drink of his coffee. “The whole story's built around it. Hope that you can reach the end, hope that someone can reason with the Demon King or his friend, hope that the White Mage and the normal Demon can become what they used to be before it fell apart, hope that people can be redeemed... and I guess hope that one day you can have a sweeping sort of romance like that. I sure want one. I want someone to go through hell for me, not because they have to, but because they're willing to. And it was really good to see that kind of love between guys that wasn't all BL sorta stuff. Not that I don't like that, fuck yeah those are fun even if they're nasty as shit sometimes, but it's... really good, to see something simple.”

Kenma is suddenly feeling his eyes prickling. He ignores it.

“I didn't mean to write it as a romance,” he says instead.

Terushima shrugs, sipping through a straw. “Doesn't mean it isn't one. But you're the writer. You could leave it be. Or...”

“Or?”

Terushima's smile is full of hope. “Or, you could make it pretty damn blatant, and give us all a love to cheer for.”

oOo

Quest of Hope goes on sale on Steam four months later. A few small lets-players, people that Terushima knows from Sendai or from his gallivanting around Tokyo, have played it during its beta stage and it's been well received. He cross releases it with an English translation, done by Keiji, who all but salivated over getting to do translation work instead of worksheets on education. It has a surprising amount of interest around it upon drop, and it sells for a very polite 1000 yen.
Kenma makes it live, quietly pleased with the “Apple Pie Creations” logo he's thrown together, and leaves for class.

By the time he gets back, the reviews are coming in, and everyone is wondering intensely about the Apple Pie Creations team. There's a message in his inbox from an actual news website that wants to interview him. He doesn't have any social media attached to the game, or anything. He didn't want the hassle of them. He's going into design, not into management after all.

Kenma stares at the screen as the reviews keep updating.

A lot of them are in English.

Like. A lot.

“Keiji?” he calls, his voice bordering on panicked, and Keiji appears in the doorway to the bedroom they've mostly converted to Kenma's den and office space. The room is packed with games, three tv's, several gaming systems, and Kenma's monster desk with its three monitors.

“What's wrong?”

Kenma points at the screen. “The thumbs says it's good but I don't know how to translate all of these.”

Keiji leans over. And stops. And stares.

He translates all of them for Kenma. Tells him all the names of all of the people who are so happy to see love there, all the stories they share about their relationships, all the sadness they feel easing as they work through the game. He reads every single comment. Kuroo and Koutarou trickle in and listen, Koutarou making happy little noises as he kneels by Kenma's chair and Kuroo flops on the little couch they keep there.

“I cried so hard when it was done,” Keiji reads, “no spoilers, but the dedication at the end with the credits just made me cry harder. Great job! You should be very proud, Apple Pie, because you've made something amazing.” Keiji looks over at him. “What did the dedication say? I don't remember translating a dedication.”

Kenma, who's not sure if he wants to blush or cry, pulls up the files and the dedication screen. “I made Yamaguchi do it,” he mumbles. “It was embarrassing.”

Keiji leans in, and reads it out loud out of habit from the last hour of reading. “Quest for Hope is dedicated to those who hope, who dream, and who wish for a better tomorrow. I made it with love, with the help of my love, and for those I love. Don't look back- you're not going that way. Special thanks to the crows, the cats, the owls, and the blue tower for making this possible. Most of all-” Keiji’s voice breaks, and Kuroo and Koutarou lean over his shoulders.

“Oh most of all,” Kuroo finishes, “thank you to my partners. I love you very much.”

Koutarou bursts into tears.

oOo

Terushima catches up to him the next day with a little box, and beams as he hands it over.

“Why?” Kenma asks, confused.
“A congratulation pie, for releasing your first game!” Tersushima laughs, metal flashing in his mouth. “Good job, Matcha!”

Kenma opens the box, looking at it. It's a bit squished from traveling, but there's a one-person apple pie inside. “Thank you, Yuuji.”

“Hey.”

He looks up, sees that big smile, clever eyes.

“You don't have to save everyone,” Terushima says, and Kenma grimaces. Has he been so easy to read? “No one can save everyone. But you gave a lot of people the framework to go save themselves.”

Kenma looks back at the pie in his hands, a little beat up but still whole and delicious.

“I think I know what I want to do now,” he says, and Terushima throws an arm around him as they walk towards their building together. “I want to make more like that.”

“You know what they say,” Terushima trills out, popping a sucker in his mouth and smirking wide. Today his shirt reads “MAYBE TOMORROW SATAN” in rainbow letters, an image of Baphomet doing some sort of kick on a skateboard beneath it. “The greatest gift of all is Hope.”

“Who says that.”

“Me!”

“Don't think that counts.”

“Come on, Kenmaaaa.”

Kenma smiles, and takes the pie out to eat. It's sweet, and still a bit warm, and the apples are tart-sweet and burst with flavor on his tongue. It tastes a little bit like a future.

“Yuuji.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know where I can get my tongue pierced?”

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted Kenma to turn and face his own demons. By part 3 he's a little older, a little more stable and a little more in control of his own life, but he's the one who was witness to all of Kuroo's trauma, and that leaves one hell of a mark.

I also really wanted to write Bisexual Party Animal Terushima Yuuji.
Part 3: Kuroo

Chapter Notes

In the flush of loves light, we dare to be brave. And suddenly we see that love costs all we are, and will ever be. Yet it is only love which makes us free.- Maya Angelou

Tetsurou has never had any real doubts about his career path, and so it surprises him when others have questions.

“What?” Rinka says, as she pops some sort of sugary thing into her mouth. “You want to open a restaurant?”

“Yeah.”

They're studying out in the open today on the soft grass in a corner of Chuo. He can see Bokuto off running around chasing a butterfly to try and get a picture for Shouyou, and Tetsurou smiles as he watches Bokuto leap in the air with his phone outstretched. Rinka's a decent friend, another person in their cohort, and they get along well enough. Rinka knows about the four of them and doesn't give a damn, so he's fine with her, and she's fun to hang out with.

“You've never said anything about it,” Rinka says, watching as Bokuto creeps up on the butterfly. “So that's why you're going into business management?”

“Yeah. I figured I'd want to know the most I could before opening things up.” Kuroo shrugs. “I like to cook, a lot. I spent most of my teens cooking for my family and my team, and all of them ate like crazy so I was basically a personal chef anyway. I like feeding people, having a good time, I like all of the laughing and stuff that goes on in an izakaya. If shit doesn't work out with him going pro, Bo's going to be cooking along with me. He likes it too, his step-dad's a chef in a soba place.”

“Aren't restaurant ventures like, super risky?”

“Yeah.” Tetsurou watches as Bokuto leaps through the air, landing on a bench by some startled freshman. “Everything's got a bit of risk, right? Gotta be brave and take the plunge. All else fails I've got a good degree.”

Rinka nods thoughtfully as Bokuto screeches his triumph, holding his phone up in the air. “That sounds really nice, actually.”

“Hell yeah it is,” Tetsurou says, and smiles as Bokuto comes sprinting back to him.

“I got it!” Bokuto screeches and all but pile drives into him.

Tetsurou loves him.

oOo

The Karasuno Four, as Hinata, Kageyama, Tsukishima, and Yamaguchi have come to be known, arrive in Tokyo on a blustery autumn day and Kuroo meets them at the train station with his little car and a big smile. They've grown up a lot since he first saw them, and Hinata's lost any fear of
him as he shrieks almost as loud as Bo and wraps Kuroo in a hug. He's still barely 5'6”, but built sturdy and strong now. Yamaguchi's got a ton of piercings and an undercut, Tsukishima topped out at 6'4” and wound up looking like a fucking model, and Kageyama now looks like some sort of lean, graceful killer with how smooth he moves and how steady his eyes are.

“Kuroo!!! I'm so happy to see you!” Hinata says when he steps back, beaming. Kuroo grins, looking them over. Four openly gay kids who took the risk of outting themselves on national television when they won their last Spring High just to prove a point smile back at him, without a care in the world. They're first years now at Tohoku, all of them starters and all of them kicking ass on the court. Even Tsukishima's happy to see him. It warms his shriveled little heart. “We saw your last game against Waseda!”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah! It was so cool.” and Hinata starts babbling. Some things don't change.

They get their luggage in the trunk of the car, Hinata gets squished in the back with Yamaguchi and Kageyama, with Tsukishima folding his long legs in up front, and off they go. It's become tradition for them to come down to celebrate Kenma's birthday, but this year the actual day of celebration is in the middle of the week, so they're there for the weekend before it. Tsukishima and Kageyama stopped pretending they didn't want to be there after the second trip they took.

Hinata tells him all about their new team, how Yamaguchi scares everyone because he's got That Captain Look down perfect and how Kageyama keeps pissing off their official setter, what the coach is like and the food and the housing and how Tsukishima keeps outclassing their blockers. Yamaguchi interjects here and there, Tsukishima puts on his headphones and goes to sleep, and Kageyama argues just about every point Hinata makes. Kuroo feels like a fond dad. They arrive at the house with little fanfare, and Hinata all but explodes out of the car when he sees Kenma waiting on the stoop.

“KENMAAA!!!”

Kenma jolts but smiles, big and happy.

The door bangs open and Koutarou launches himself out. Hinata shrieks again and launches himself at Koutarou to be caught and spun around.

“I saw you play against Niitaidai!” Bokuto crows, proud. “Look at you! I'm so proud!”

“Bokuto, please put Hinata down,” Keiji says as he comes to the door, but he's smiling. Hinata laughs joyfully, and Kageyama bows to Keiji before coming through the gate to go to the door. Tsukishima just gives a lazy nod, and everyone migrates inside once the luggage has been hauled from the car.

Yamaguchi waits until everyone's been distracted with things before he comes into the kitchen, smiling shyly as he washes his hands and starts to do the prep work that Tetsurou nods to. This is one of his favorite parts of Kenma's birthday. While he and Tsukishima have a great friendship based on mutual snark and judicious amounts of salt, Tetsurou and Yamaguchi have a bond that runs deep now. Yamaguchi's a little more subtle with it, but he's just as snarky as his boyfriend, and Tetsurou's fond of him.

They work in silence, prepping rice and noodles, setting up the plates and the drinks. It's an easy kind of silence, the kind that comes from no need to talk.
Yamaguchi breaks the silence as they're cleaning up the worst of the mess in the kitchen.

“Kuroo?”

“Hmm?”

“I just wanted to say thank you,” Yamaguchi says, taking a deep breath. “For everything you've done over the years for us. Thanks for giving us the kind of hope we needed to come out. We wanted to make a big statement, but it was a lot easier knowing that even if everyone turned their backs and we never played again, the people we looked up to the most were still proud. I never got a chance to thank you for that.”

Tetsurou goes still for a moment, stunned. Yamaguchi smiles at him, and Tetsurou gives in and pulls him into a hug. Yamaguchi hugs him back tight. He's grown up strong, and that nervous kid who came running after him all those years ago is far behind him. Yamaguchi Tadashi's grown up into a capable young man, with a good heart and a strong mind. Tetsurou squeezes him tight before letting him go, and Yamaguchi smiles at him with so much happiness it makes his eyes prickle a little with tears.

Tetsurou's heart aches, and he gently presses a familial kiss to the top of Yamaguchi's head. “You guys grew up way too fast,” he says. “And I'm proud of who you became. Every last one of us are. And I'm very proud of that you were willing to risk it all so that other people would know that they're not alone.”

Yamaguchi had followed in Keiji's footsteps at the last game, giving a speech on the podium about what drove them there, openly announcing that every one of their third years weren't straight and not about to apologize for it. It had caused a massive stir, both in Miyagi and in the rest of Japan, and the Karasuno Four had all had their scholarships dropped for various reasons. Except for Tohoku, where one Sawamura Daichi ruled as captain of the team, Waseda due to Ushiwaka's sheer refusal to acknowledge homophobia when there was power to be gained, Chuo as Oikawa and the others pitched the mother of all fits at the coach, and Toudai where Iwaizumi Hajime stood like a rock against the system and refused to back down. The volleyball sons of Miyagi had refused to stand down, and the world sat up and listened. The Four had gone to Tohoku and were absolutely decimating their opponents, to no ones surprise, but their bravery had made some changes come about. Minds set in stone were starting to think.

“I am so very, very proud of you,” Tetsurou repeats, and Tadashi's eyes get a little watery.

“Thanks,” Yamaguchi says, choked up, and scrubs at his eyes. “It means a lot from you.”

“C'mon,” Tetsurou says, slinging an arm over his shoulders. “Let's get those guys for dinner.”

oOo

The house is crowded with people the next day, and Kuroo feels happy and accomplished. Terushima has finally been trapped in the same room as Iwaizumi which has resulted in them arm wrestling and Iwaizumi destroying him, Oikawa is giving Kageyama grief, Lev and Hinata are practically vibrating as they talk with Inuoka and Shibayama. Kai and his new wife are with Akaashi, laughing about something, and Konoha looks like he's trying to work up the nerve to go talk to Terushima while Kenma cuddles in Koutarou's arms on the couch and plays Mario Cart against Taketora. Fukunaga and Tsukishima are standing together in companionable silence, and Yaku stalks his way into Kuroo's kitchen looking very overwhelmed.

“Lot of people this time,” he says, and Kuroo nods, passing him a beer.
“It was a surprise. A lot of them are going to be gone for my birthday and Akaashi’s, so we figured we’d just have a big party this year.” Kuroo clinks his bottle against Yaku’s. His is just lemonade, plain and simple.

“Still not drinking?” Yaku asks, raising his bottle in acknowledgment before drinking.

“Nah. Probably never will.” Kuroo shrugs. “Too much fear about turning into something I’m not.”

“Fair.” Yaku looks out over the crowd. He looks tired. Older. Weighed down, in his own ways. Kuroo says nothing as he watches Yaku’s eyes fix on Lev.

“He followed me, you know,” Yaku says abruptly. “To Hokkaido. The sister school to mine, for sports medicine. He lives not that far away from me. We go to the same grocery store, the same parks, the same gym. He's just there, always laughing and smiling and coaxing me to do this or that. Two whole years of only talking once in maybe a month and he still came chasing after me.”

Kuroo looks at Lev. He's grown up well, even if he does look like a beanpole still. “And that bothers you?”

“It bothers me that I'm happy he did.” Yaku takes another drink, and sighs. “It bothers me that I want to take the risk. It bothers me that he dated around, and he still came running to me.”

Lev looks over at them, smiles. Waves. His hair is different now, cut not unlike Terushima's and slightly spiky.

Kuroo waves back as Yaku just nods.

“Hey, Yakkun,” Kuroo says.

“What?”

“Life's all about taking a few risks.”

Yaku gives him a long look. Tetsurou gives him a mocking toast and drinks more of his lemonade, watching him with a bit of a smile.

“Fuck it,” Yaku says, and hands Tetsurou his beer. “Hold that.”

“Get it, Morisuke.”

“Shut up.”

Yaku strides across the room to the four, kicks out Lev's knees, and grabs his face to kiss him. A cheer goes up, and Tetsurou laughs as Hinata shrieks, whipping out his phone to take a picture as Lev's hands come up to hold Yaku there.

All told, it's a good party.

The others fall asleep in the early hours of the morning, Kageyama and Hinata curling up in Kenma's den on the futon while Yamaguchi and Tsukishima take one of the guest rooms. Terushima leaves with Konoha, Iwaizumi and Oikawa had begged off another round of drinks around 11 like old men, Lev and Yaku had caught a cab back to the Haiba house where they were staying, and everyone else had simply trickled out.

Kuroo is awake at 1 AM, washing dishes and thinking about bravery.
He knows, logically, in his heart and in his mind, that he has been brave his whole life. Brave to survive, brave not to kill himself, brave to risk speaking to a therapist, brave to reach out and grasp Akaashi and Bokuto as well as Kenma- he has been brave. He's been out for a long time now, he makes no secret of it. That in and of itself is being brave. Standing up and refusing to let himself or Kenma be made a joke, that was bravery too.

But he didn't stand on the national stage and declare it to the world, either.

“Kuro?”

He doesn't jump, because he hears Kenma's footsteps before he speaks, but his heart jolts a little regardless. Sturdy arms wrap around his waist, and a face presses against his back.

“Hey,” he says quietly, putting a dish in the drying rack.

“Come to bed,” Kenma says, sounding drowsy. “C'mon, I'm tired.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Tetsurou turns in Kenma's arms, and presses a kiss to his forehead. “I'm just... thinking.”

Kenma looks up at him. “About what?”

“Being brave,” Tetsurou says, gently tucking Kenma's hair behind his ear. “About Kei and Tadashi holding hands in front of the whole country and refusing to back down. About Shouyou and Kageyama who don't consider themselves a couple but who'll be partners for life. About Bokuto's first captain, the one who was with their libero. About you and me, and Lev being brave enough to tell us about his parents, and Yaku finally taking a risk because life's too short. About Terushima, who gave up something he loved so much for a boy who left him later and doesn't regret it because as far as he's concerned he did the right thing even if it cost him his parents. And I'm just wondering if maybe we should have done more.”

Kenma gives him a long, slow look, golden eyes reflecting in the darkness.

“Like what?”

“I don't know,” Tetsurou says, sighing.

Kenma leans forward, turning his head to rest his cheek on Tetsurou's chest. “You know what I think?”

“Hmm.”

“I think you're maybe the bravest person I've ever met.”

Tetsurou's breath hitches, a lump growing in his throat.

“I think that we did everything we could,” Kenma continues. “I think that I wouldn't have made it to where we are no without you being brave every single day. Without you sticking up for me even when I was scared and afraid, without you tackling the 3rd years as best you could, without you telling me that you loved me one boring Wednesday afternoon, because I would never have said it first. I don't want to stand on a rooftop and scream that I love you to the world. Because everyone who's important within my world already knows, since you were brave enough to say something about it.”

Tetsurou slides his hands around Kenma's cheeks, and Kenma looks up at him. His face is a little
red, but in the moonlight streaming through the kitchen window, Tetsurou bends to kiss him.

It takes a different kind of bravery.

oOo

Four years to the day they first went, Kuroo Tetsurou gets on a train alone and rides to Ikebukuro.

He leaves early in the morning, the wind chill brisk off of the bay. He wears a familiar old flannel, one that's been worn to near silken softness, his old Nekoma jacket, black pants, and a black shirt. He arrives in Ikebukuro, checks the map on his phone to make sure he doesn't go out the wrong exit, and walks out of the station. Little has changed in Ikebukuro since their visit last year. The shops have changed a little, the Soft-bank building has moved. He walks slowly, the trek familiar, and breathes in the air of Tokyo. The city is awash with noise and people, cars passing and cyclists rushing to work. Families are out and about, and he passes a park where some small children are shrieking with laughter. One of them has a volleyball.

He reaches Kishimojin-do as the sun officially can be counted as risen, the light from it passing down through the skyscrapers and down to where the shrine sits. The ancient trees rustle in the wind as he walks to wash his hands in ice cold water, rinsing his mouth as well. The shide around the trees rustle back and forth, and the red torii gates are freshly repainted. Tetsurou purchases the ema boards for Kishimojin and Myoken Bosatsu, and sits down on one of the benches with a pen in hand.

Tetsurou is never speechless before the gods, not truly. He has the words, somewhere, hidden deep down, but it requires time to pull them free from his mind. Now, four years since he, Kenma, and Koutarou had first come here, he finds the words to come easier. He'd wanted to come alone this time- he needed the space to breathe.

He writes, Please keep our family safe, and let me continue to heal the child I was and accept what has happened to me.

Tetsurou does not ask to forgive his past, this time. It's taken a long time for him to recognize that there's nothing that needs to be forgiven but his own guilt over his inability to act.

He hangs the board where it's meant to go, claps his hands twice, tugs the rope, and prays.

Thank you for leading me to the place I needed to be, he thinks, eyes closed and head bowed. Please keep me on the path to heal the child that lives within me.

He steps back, exhaling heavily. It feels as if some of the weight has lifted off of his shoulders. Tetsurou steps to the side, and walks over to where Myoken Bosatsu's shrine is located. He pulls out the earthenware ema and his pen, and writes Please guide my path to where I need to be, and where I need to bring my new found family and love. He hangs it, claps twice and rings the bell, and offers a quick prayer of thanks before the shrine.

Thank you for guiding Keiji to me, and please keep guiding me so that we can grow and become better together, Tetsurou prays. He steps away after, and heads over to the little shop. There's the usual omamori, and he picks up one for “family love”. He also picks out a bunch of little candies, and pops one in his mouth as he tucks the omamori in his pocket. He heads towards the entrance, but he's not quite willing to leave yet, and spots a bench between the trees facing the torii gates. He sits there, sighing as the wind rustles the leaves on the trees. He's always been fond of them, the great red beams pushing up, beautiful in their simplicity. The candy is sweet in his mouth, dissolving quickly, and he takes a moment to appreciate the simple joy of its taste. Footsteps catch
his attention, and he stands when he sees a woman, heavily pregnant and clearly tired, walking towards the exit.

“Would you care to rest a moment?” he asks, concerned, and she smiles. She's quite tall, very beautiful, and she takes his seat gratefully. Her long hair is loose down to her shoulders, thick and shining.

“Thank you,” she says, and he's about to offer to go get her water when she pats the seat beside her. “Please, sit with me.”

Tetsurou does, and she smiles at him. Her eyes are kind, and she seems young- perhaps mid to late twenties at a stretch. She's dressed simply, in a straightforward yellow dress and black flats, and she smiles as she holds her belly.

“It's a beautiful day, isn't it?” She says, looking up at the trees. Tetsurou follows her eyes, looking at the red leaves scattered through the greenery.

“It is,” he agrees. “Nice weather, and the leaves are starting to change. I like autumn, it's a good time of year.”

“I have to agree,” she says, smiling, and reaches into her large black purse. She pulls out a red fruit and a little knife, and begins making cuts around the top of it. “It's nice to come here in the autumn, too. It's not so busy as when it's children's day, or New Years time. Though it's still quite nice then, granted. I like this shrine. It's very nice. Quiet. The kind of place that lets you be alone with your thoughts, but doesn't let you be swallowed by them.”

“Exactly,” Tetsurou says, smiling. Wind makes the red leaves of the maples rustle, and the shide wrapped around the tree across from them dance. “Big shrines are nice, but I like ones like this. The little ones that people miss when they're not looking are always the best.”

The red fruit is a pomegranate, and the woman expertly scores along its sides. Tetsurou watches as she pops the top off, and pulls the sides apart so that the soft, sweet fruit inside can be reached. She offers a section to him, and he takes it gratefully.

“It won't be long before I have my baby,” she tells him. “I thought it would be best to come here. Be filled with a bit of hope and faith. Are you going to become a parent soon as well?”

“Oh, no,” he says, shaking his head as he plucks some of the red seeds free. “If I ever have children I'd like to bring them here one day, but, well. I think any children that I might have are ones that aren't mine for good. Adoptive children, younger teammates and such that I took under my wings, I think they're the only ones I'll ever get to consider my children. I don't know that I could ever have children of my own, with... with how my situation is, and what my better side thinks.”

She hums, plucking out a few seeds of her own. “So why come here?”

Tetsurou looks up at the red leaves. “This place... it's special to me. It was the beginning of something important. A couple things, really. I think this is where I started to heal after a long time of trouble, and where I realized that I could be brave enough to have something I'd been denying myself. I asked Kishinomjin to help me to overcome my childhood, and Myoken Bosatsu to guide my path and that of someone I loved so that we could find our family safely together. Maybe the gods don't listen, maybe it's just history and superstition and wishful thinking, but... I feel like I was given the answer I needed. I feel like I was guided to the right place for me, and to a new family-one that was bigger and better than my old one. I guess you could say after visiting here I became a
child again because I was brought into that new family.”

“That's very beautiful,” the woman says, her smile gentle and warm. Tetsurou smiles back, heart at ease. “You know, I always find it interesting that Kishimojin is shown as a two-fold goddess and demon. On one hand, she's there to guide children into the world and help them as they grow. On the other, she's a demon of vengeance who strikes down cruel parents and unruly children. I like the former the best, but perhaps there's a purpose to the latter. A warning to all those parents who abused their charges.”

“I didn't know about the second aspect,” Tetsurou says, interested.

“It's not so common to hear that side of the story anymore,” she says, and hands him another piece of the pomegranate. “But I think it’s still important.” She stands up carefully, brushing down her dress. “Perhaps I’ll see you again, cheerful young man with your iron shod soul. Travel safely home.”

“I will.” He bows, and she inclines her head with another soft smile. Tetsurou watches her leave, two pieces of pomegranate in his hands, and breathes in the fall air.

He eats lunch at a little cafe and catches the train to the station closest to the Kozume house. It's a short walk from there to his childhood shrine, and he climbs up the steps to find that someone has recently cut the grass and cleaned the tiny wooden honden. He washes his hands once more, rinses his mouth, and approaches the shrine.

He gives his offering, claps twice, and is about to pray when a high pitched mewl interrupts him. Tetsurou looks down, and sees a tiny kitten just to the side of the box. It's still young but old enough to be away from its mother, in the fuzzy furred stage before its coat really settles, with big green eyes and a coat that's mostly black but speckled with with and tan- a tortoiseshell cat, with a high voice.

Tetsurou looks at the shrine.

“Really?” he asks the empty air. Wind rustles through the trees, as if laughing, and he bends down to pick the kitten up. It shrieks at him happily, and promptly starts purring like a jet engine, butting up against his chin and curling up close to his face. Tetsurou gently strokes the tiny head, and something deep in his heart eases. He keeps hold of the kitten as he checks around the shrine. There are no other cats to be seen, not even the usual black one and the calico that tend to be there whenever he is. There's no signs of any other kittens, no other meowing, and he looks down at the little purring bundle in his arms.

He thinks of how he once prayed for a friend at this shrine.

The universe is not that subtle, it seems.

He pulls out his phone.

Text to Groupchat: The Baes
I found a kitten with no family at the shrine, it's coming home with me.

Almost immediately there's a response.

Text from: Koutarou <3
A BABY
**Text from: The Most Beautiful Boy**
Pictures immediately please and I will start looking into the nearest vet

**Text from: Kenma <3**
I'm with Yuuji, we'll go get supplies.
Also pictures please right now

Tetsurou beams, opening his front facing camera. The kitten sits up in his arms, and reaches up just as he takes the picture. It looks like it's both smiling and waving, and Tetsurou melts as he looks between the picture to the kitten in his arms, who's now trying to climb into his shirt.

**Text from: Koutarou <3**
MANEKI NEKO KITTY BABY I'M SO EXCITED TO MEET THEM

**Text from: Kenma <3**
are we naming it after fukunaga

**Text from: The Most Beautiful Boy**
How did you accidentally pick up a maneki neko from a shrine, Kuroo.
How do you keep having things like this happen.
I guess we have a lucky cat now.
I would die for that kitten.

Tetsurou tucks the kitten into his shirt, says a quick prayer of thanks, and leaves with the kitten tucked away. He gets interested looks the whole train ride home, but no one says anything, and he smiles as the kittens purrs rumble through his chest.

It isn't until he's on the train home, the taste of pomegranate still somehow lingering sweet in his mouth, that he remembers he never gave the woman in Kishimojin-do his name.
Keiji gets the call in between classes his third year of college. It's a short call. Ten minutes, all told, and when it ends he stands in the center of the sidewalk with his heart in his throat.

He gets back to the house to find little Fukuko waiting for him by the door. She yells at him, and he bends down to pick her up as he takes off his shoes. Their cat aggressively headbutts him, screaming in his face the whole time, and he buries his face in her soft fur as the news starts to sink in. The house is fairly quiet, but he can hear faint voices upstairs, carrying slightly down to him. He climbs them to the third floor, and finds Kenma and Kuroo on the four-poster bed. Kenma's sprawled out in one of Keiji's shirts and nothing else playing on a Gameboy, while Kuroo looks like he's debating the finer points of Kenma's thighs while wearing only a pair of very tight boxer briefs that leave exactly nothing to the imagination. Keiji can't blame him. Where he's so small and prefers baggy clothes, Kenma's looks are deceptive. His thighs are built from so many hours of volleyball still, and all the walking he does around campus. They're entrancing.

“I have some news,” Keiji says as Fukuko screams in his ear again upon seeing Kuroo.

“Good news?”

“Neutral,” Keiji replies to Kuroo. “But it's something that concerns both of you, in a way.”

He sits on the bed, and Fukuko makes a beeline to her father. Kuroo coos happily as she climbs onto his chest and starts purring. Kenma puts his game down, raising an eyebrow and yawning. The end of the semester is awful for the game design students. Keiji feels a tiny spike of heat, as always, seeing the still new metal in Kenma's tongue. Terushima is a terrible, terrible influence and Keiji really needs to remember to thank him when he sees him next because dear god Kenma looks good with his tongue pierced.

“I got a call today,” Keiji begins, forcing himself to ignore Kenma's jewelry. “A job offer.”

“Shit,” Kuroo says, stunned, and sits up. Fukuko migrates to wrap around his shoulders. “I mean, I know Bokkun and I are almost graduated and it's the end of your third year, but a job offer already?”

“Nekomata-sensei is going back into retirement. Naoi-sensei wants me to come and be the secondary coach for Nekoma.”

Dead silence reigns as Kuroo's jaw drops. Keiji looks down at his lap, feeling his face flush.

“Nekomata-sensei is going back into retirement. Naoi-sensei wants me to come and be the secondary coach for Nekoma.”

“Nekomata teaches biology- my emphasis is in English teaching, but I can switch or take more classes with no issue to teach it. It was my second choice of emphasis anyway, you know I like the sciences. They want to interview me in four days. Nekomata-sensei requested me specifically.” Keiji twists his hands together, unable to bear looking up and seeing their faces. “I... I sent him a thank you letter after Nationals my last year, for everything he did to keep the group alive and bringing in Karasuno. It felt like the right thing to do, for all he did to make people like us feel welcome and safe in his care. I told him about my plans for the future, how I wanted to teach because of him and Yamiji-sensei. There are other people selected for interviews as well, but I'm their first choice. There would be things to iron out, but they-” his voice wobbles with nerves. “Naoi-sensei wants me to be just a coach for the first year while I finish my schooling and then go directly into both teaching and coaching.”
Kuroo's hands find his, and Keiji looks up at last. Kuroo is smiling, his eyes soft and proud.

“You didn't know how we'd feel if you took over our old school, huh?”

“It's yours,” Keiji says honestly. “I don't know how I'd feel if, say, Lev came to coach at Fukurodani.”

“Keiji,” Kuroo says, lowering his head to press gentle kisses to Keiji's knuckles, “please take care of our kouhai. You're going to be an amazing teacher, and you're going to be a kickass coach.”

Keiji sighs, and looks to Kenma. Kenma smiles slightly, shrugging.

“I'd rather they be with you than someone who wouldn't care about them,” Kenma says simply. “You should do it.”

“You're sure?” Keiji presses.

“Yes,” Kuroo and Kenma say at the same time, both sounding a bit exasperated and amused. Keiji huffs out a laugh, and lays down so he's settled nicely between the two of them. Kenma scoots in closer, and kisses him lightly before going back to his game. Keiji leans in for another kiss, and Kenma gives in and kisses him again. Keiji all but whimpers at the feel of the ball at the end of the short barbell between them. Maybe he ought to give Terushima a cake.

“Koutarou's going to either be very excited or very disappointed,” Kuroo says thoughtfully as Fukuko makes herself comfortable on the pillows and Kenma pulls back with a bit of a smug smile. “Excited because it's a big honor to be a first pick and not even graduated yet, disappointed because it's not Fukurodani.”

“I would love to be coach at Fukurodani,” Keiji admits, catching his breath, “but Nekoma has a special place in my heart too.”

Kuroo spoons up behind him and throws an arm over his waist, bending to kiss his neck lightly. “You're beautiful, you know that?”

“Mmm. You may have mentioned it a few times.”

Keiji sighs as Kuroo's hands slide under his shirt, and Kenma's eyes flick over to them with a good deal more interest than he'd shown just moments ago.

“Kuroo...”

Kuroo's sturdy hands spread over his stomach. “Keiji.”

“Now? Really?”

“Please?”

Keiji accepts defeat with how delightful the heat pooling in his hips feels, and sits up to strip his shirt off. Kuroo's libido and comfort with sex is so fickle it's best to take advantage of it whenever it appears. Keiji's still the only one who can have penetrative sex with him, not that Kuroo doesn't have a delightful time watching or participating when it's the four of them all together. Kenma puts his game on the bedside table to watch, and Kuroo beams as Keiji pointedly flicks him in the forehead before hopping off of the bed to ditch the rest of his clothes. Kuroo looks so pleased, eyes drinking him in, and Keiji pauses.
“What?” Kuroo asks.

“Fukuko goes.”

“I was really enjoying watching you strip though-”

“The cat is not watching us have sex,” Keiji says dryly. “There's a line, Tetsurou.”

“Spoilsport.”

Koutarou finds them all in bed later, Keiji positively soaked in sweat and sex-filthy, Kuroo delightfully sated, and Kenma acting as if he'd had nothing to do with any of it.

Walking onto Nekoma's campus is strange. He's been there so many times before, over and over for training camps or to pick up people to come home with him. He's walked the halls a million times, slept in their training rooms, knows the congestion of human traffic gets the worst by the third floor around lunch and that no one ever really looks in the storage closet of Gym 4 (thanks, Kenma). He's been here in his school uniform, in street clothes, in a yukata, in his volleyball uniform, in shorts and a plain t-shirt. But he's here in a nice suit and simple gray tie this day, and makes his way to the interview room.

The principal and vice-principal are there, as well as Nekomata and Naoi-sensei. Nekomata's smile when he steps inside is reassuring, and he bows perhaps a little deeper than needed before he's invited to sit. Naoi looks borderline smug.

“This is very unusual,” the principal says after the pleasantries are exchanged, “but we were convinced by both Nekomata-sensei and Naoi-sensei to entertain you as our first potential candidate. And...” The principal looks a little overwhelmed. “In all honesty, your achievements when it comes to volleyball are quite impressive. Six nationals tournaments, a nationals win as Captain, a Chuo student and a member of their team there as well, vice-captain during your second year at a school with a truly stupendous program... I have followed our own volleyball program for a long time. I have to say, I'm quite surprised that you didn't go on to be a professional player.”

“I considered it,” Keiji admits. “That was my initial plan. However, in my second year when I was given vice-captaincy, I discovered how much I loved to teach the first years, and how much joy it brought me to watch the team as a whole excel under training rather than my own improvements. It was in part because of Nekomata-sensei that I wanted to teach.”

“So, tell me about...”

The interview goes for a full half hour, and Keiji is a little pleased with how easy it is to speak to them all. Naoi is obviously on his side, his smile growing steadily more proud. Things are wrapping up nicely when the principal coughs slightly, his cheeks going pink. He's smack in the center of middle age, somewhere around 40 but with a kind face and gentle smile.

“Nekomata-sensei has also informed us of, ah, your unique romantic situation before you arrived.”

Keiji would like nothing more than to sink into the ground and die, horror filling him. This man, this wonderfully nice man, knows about his romantic life? And what it therefore entails regarding sex? His life briefly flashes before his eyes.

“Oh,” he manages, eyes flicking to Nekomata in mild panic. Nekomata just grins at him, eyes crinkling up at the edges.
“It's fine,” he says, a bit of a laugh in his voice. “We're in the middle of Tokyo, and there's three others in a similar situation. Not with as many people, mind.”

Keiji winces, and Nekomata laughs again.

“What the principal is trying to say is that it won't be an issue,” the vice-principal says with a smile. “Nekomata-sensei's legacy of making sure people like us are safe lives on strong and healthy. The principal here just gets flustered so easily, it's funny.”

Well, that's a relief.

“I'm glad to hear it,” Keiji says, bowing a little. “I'm grateful you were willing to address it.”

“Of course. So! You'll hear back from us once we've concluded all of the interviews,” the principal says, standing up, and Keiji does as well. “It's been a pleasure, Akaashi-san.”

*Holy shit*, Keiji thinks as he bows politely, keeping his face serene. Not -kun, but -san. They're taking him seriously. He's 21, still in college, and they're actually taking him seriously.

He goes home in a daze, and finds Koutarou waiting for him in the living room, Fukuko on his lap and ice on his shoulder. Keiji curls up on the couch next to him, and Koutarou slings an arm around him, smiling brightly.

“How'd it go?!”

“Well.” Keiji smiles, pillowing his head on Koutarou's ice-free shoulder. “Really, really well. It's not a guarantee I'll get it, but I think they liked me. Naoi-sensei and Nekomata-sensei certainly did. What happened to your shoulder?”

“Ah, just strained it a little. No big deal. Oikawa's making me learn some different kind of jumps to see if we can improve my vertical.”

“Good,” Keiji says, pleased. He leans up, and kisses Koutarou's cheek. “You know that I'm proud of you, yes?”

Koutarou squeaks, and Keiji smiles as his head is tipped up for a passionate kiss. Koutarou's hand finds his, squeezing, and Keiji smiles against his lips before he pulls back.

“If I get the job I'm going to have to quit the Chuo team,” he says quietly. Koutarou nods, his face twisting. “Are you okay with that?”

“I'll be sad not going to Chuo games to cheer for you as a first line setter! But it's okay,” Koutarou says, and his eyes are so gentle as he says it. “Because you've always been super smart and going places, and I always knew you'd get to do bigger and better things when it came to be the right time! You're so smart, Keiji, and you're such a good teacher and leader and everything. If you don't get the job that'd be fine, but I think I'd be even happier if you do! Because there's probably going to be more kids like me out there who need an Akaashi to help them find their way too.”

Keiji's eyes sting, and he rests his head on Koutarou's shoulder again. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you too, Akaashi. Even if you get turned into a cat.”

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Graduation for Bokuto, Oikawa, and Kuroo comes far too soon, and in late March with the cherry
blossoms in full and exquisite bloom the group matriculates. Keiji, his father's son through and through, makes sure that his partners are dressed to the nines in exquisite new hakama with a new family kamon on the back, and feels a smug possessive pride when the four of them go out wearing them and others see the kamon. It's a diamond made of smaller diamonds inside a circle, with dots inside the east and west diamond that make it look like eyes. Kenma designed it for them, and Keiji is very pleased with it, and his partners. Kuroo lands a job as a manager at a very high end izakaya in the downtown area in preparations for opening his own, and Bokuto is scouted and snagged by F.C. Tokyo along with Oikawa. Keiji does his absolute best to not feel jealous watching them sign, and exchanges looks with Iwaizumi that tells him Tooru's former ace is feeling much the same.

Terushima takes him and Iwaizumi out for the night, Kenma politely declining, and Keiji gets horrifically shitfaced and doesn't feel bad about it at all because it does actually help to complain about the could-have-beens. Iwaizumi takes a position in the city at an editing company, extremely well paid. April is upon them in a heartbeat, and with it, classes and work.

Keiji is officially gainfully employed as the newest member of Toritsu Nekoma Koko and begins work as the secondary coach on the sixth of April. It's a bit of a rush to do everything, and he hates that he's had to give up being the secondary setter on Chuo's team, but he now has a team of his own to wrangle. He has school in the morning, classes finishing about 1 in the afternoon, and then he catches a ride on a train from Chuo to downtown, catches another bus, and gets off at the Nekoma stop by 3:00. At least this will qualify for his student teaching, he reflects as he hurries into the Gym.

It's a pretty mixed bag of kids straggling in. The captain this year is a cheerful guy with a round face and a grin identical to Inuoka Sou's, and Akaashi's fears are confirmed when he learns this is Inuoka Shisou. Inuoka's baby brother is a good captain though, corralling the near 30 kids into a semblance of order.

Naoi grins as he watches Shisou chide someone, leaning against the wall.

"He's a good guy," he tells Akaashi. "Inuoka was damn proud of him for making captain after him. It's popular choice when it comes to captains, here. How did Fukurodani do it?"

"Choice from the last captain," Keiji says, watching as what definitely looks like the team mom, a tremendously short boy with spiky hair and an "ick" face that could put Kenma's to shame organizes the new first years. He immediately feels a stab of companionship. Team mom is an important job, and he still keeps in touch with the others who'd taken up the position. "Same with Vice-captain. The vice-captain before me by rights should have chosen Konoha-san but he picked me instead because he wanted me to be in a position to lead as fast as possible since he knew that Bokuto-san and I would be working together closely."

"Smart guy," Naoi says, and Keiji nods.

"I picked a second year as well for my vice-captain. I think it was wise."

They're about to get started with introductions when Keiji is startled as girl stalks into the gym, with her hair cut tight to her head and piercings up and down each ear, heavy eyeliner lining dark eyes. She's pretty, and looks like a punk rocker that missed the tour bus. Something about her looks familiar too, and Keiji braces himself. Who else from Nekoma's old team has siblings?

"Kana!" Everyone shrieks, and she waves a dramatic hand with rings on it. Her nails are painted black.

"Chill," she commands as the third years all but fall over themselves to line up. "How many?"
“Eight!” Shisou says proudly, thrusting a triumphant fist in the air.

“Well shit, that's nice,” Kana says, and turns to beam at Akaashi. She's changed out of her uniform top and blazer to a black shirt that reads certified badass in English on it, and she's wearing tights like Kiyoko-san preferred under her uniform skirt. “Hi! I'm Haiba Kana, the manager! Nice to meet you, Coach-sensei!”

“Oh god,” Keiji says before he can think. “There's more of them.”

Naoi bursts out laughing next to him.

Haiba Kana laughs too, big and happy, and yes, the family resemblance is very strong. “You're Akaashi-sensei, right? Lev's friend?”

“That's me,” Keiji says, his mind stuck on more Haiba's.

“Awesome. I'm going to lord this over him forever.” She crosses her arms, looking over the clearly awed first years. Keiji knows how they feel. He's been free of the sheer ridiculous charisma and power of the Haiba family long enough that his tolerance to it is lower. “Shisou! Let's get this lazy heap moving!”

“Roger!”

The first years all introduce themselves, Akaashi is introduced to them, and he learns that Haiba Kana is a second year and damn proud of her boys. The team practically worships at her feet when she praises them, and runs to correct themselves when she scolds. Keiji officially likes her, and resolves to tell Lev that he should be very proud of his little sister the next time Kenma skypes with him. Akaashi hits sets for people, watches, learns, is pleasantly surprised at just how well everything is going. Naoi looks very proud of the team, and the team clearly is proud to be showing off for their newcomers.

The first day goes well, and he doesn't hesitate to accept when Naoi offers to take him for a drink. They go to a quiet izakaya not far from the Kozume house, and Keiji all but collapses with relief once they're inside.

“Not too bad for your first day,” Naoi says proudly, passing him the sake. “You did good, Akaashi-kun.”

“Thank you, Naoi-san,” Keiji says, toasting him.

“Please, Manabu or just Naoi is fine, don't stand on ceremony,” Naoi says, waving him off. “So, did you like your first taste of the job?”

Keiji can't quite help the smile that spreads over his face, and Naoi looks proud as Keiji says, “I loved every second of it.”

Naoi laughs. “I'm glad! It'll be a lot of work, but I think this'll be a good match for you.” He drinks, and then says, “We picked you for a reason, you know. Nekomata wanted someone he knew would be proud to carry on Nekoma's legacy, and someone who'd be a good leader and teacher. You've had a lot of experience wrangling difficult situations to your liking, and honestly if you could sync up with Bokuto-kun and have him listen to you, we knew you'd be a good fit.”

“It helped that he was in love with me,” Keiji says dryly, but he's smiling. “I am proud to be part of Nekoma, now. It was a second home for me, my partners came together there, and some of my
closest friends grew up with you and Nekomata-sensei watching over them. I want to continue that tradition.”

“I was such a little shit when I came to Nekoma,” Naoi tells him. “Shitty family situation, you know, and I was trying to take it out on everyone and everything I could think of. Volleyball gave me a chance to turn it around. So when Nekomata-sensei retired the first time, I jumped at the chance to go back. I really wasn't ready. The year just above Kuroo's were a bunch of nasty little shits, and I was out of my league trying to handle them alone. That's why I asked Nekomata-sensei to come back, just for one year after my confidence was shattered. He stayed a good bit longer than that. Made sure my feet were securely under me.” Naoi smiles, his eyes going a little soft. “I'm glad someone as sturdy and resolute as you will be here with me too.”

“I hope to live up to your expectations,” Keiji says, feeling his cheeks heat up.

“I'm certain you will.” Naoi reaches into his bag and pulls out a slim box. “Here. Welcome to Nekoma, Akaashi Keiji.”

Keiji opens it, curious, lifting the lid to find a Nekoma tracksuit inside. There's a coach patch on it as well.

Keiji blames the alcohol for how his eyes are starting to water.

Golden week is upon them in practically seconds, and he finds himself aboard the shinkansen to Miyagi early in the morning, with 10 excited teenage boys and Haiba Kana and her girlfriend, who wanted to come along for the ride to visit her brother at Tohoku. Yamamoto Akane has grown up splendidly, is taller than Kana by a good ten centimeters, and wears her dyed blond hair in a ponytail that bounces when she walks. They're a sweet couple, and Keiji catches himself smiling as he watches the two snoozing together across from Inuoka Shisou.

“They're a fun couple,” Naoi says, chuckling as he looks over at them. “They're good together. There was a running bet on how long it'd take them to get together over the break. Apparently Akane-chan asked first, and Kana just about fainted.”

“Cute,” Keiji says, his heart soft. “Then again, she is Yamamoto-kun's sister, I'm not surprised she took the initiative.”

Naoi snorts laughter in agreement, looking out the window of the train. “You've been to visit Karasuno before?”

“Just once, my second year. I wanted to go with Nekoma and Kenma my third, but the timing didn't work out for us.” Keiji watches as the mountains flash by them. “I liked Miyagi. It's a good place. Peaceful, but lively, if that makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.”

The first few days are good. They have practice matches with a bunch of different teams while they're there, including Aoba Johsai's team. They're strong, clever, and powerful, and Keiji sees echoes of Oikawa and Iwaizumi's legacy in them. Tokonami doesn't do too poorly for themselves either, same with Datekou, but Nekoma is itching to get into action. They're excellent receivers, and while their setter isn't Kenma he's no slouch. And then they get to Karasuno, driving out to the school itself for once, and Keiji catches his breath as they crest the top of the hill. The school is small especially in comparison to Fukurodani and Nekoma, but the valley it looks out over is
absolutely gorgeous.

He takes a moment to appreciate the view, watching as the town unfolds below him. The sunshine is bright and bathes everything in golden light.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

He about jumps out of his skin when none other than Yamaguchi Tadashi steps up next to him, grinning.

“Tadashi-kun,” he says, when he no longer feels like he's about to collapse from shock. “This is a surprise.”

“I came to help out,” Yamaguchi says with a lazy shrug. He has his hair pulled up into a short ponytail, and his piercings have been taken out for once. “The university training camp was last week since the captain wanted the week off so everyone could actually rest for once. Come on, I'll show you around!”

Karasuno is good. They're an offensive based team, as ever, but Nekoma's plenty a match for them. They have a healthy rivalry, it's clear, but Inouka Shisou also shrieks in excitement to see their captain and pulls him in to hug him tight and spin him around- their friendships are as strong as ever. Kana fistbumps their manager, the liberos immediately get into a heated debate, and the vice-captains chat happily together. Ukai's looking on, smiling fondly. He's wearing a ring on a chain around his neck, and Keiji hides his smile when he sees an identical one on Takeda-sensei's neck.

“Look at you,” Ukai says, grinning at him when he comes over. “All decked out in official Nekoma red, and you're only what, 21? Good job, kid, you earned it.”

“Thank you very much,” Keiji says with a polite bow. “It's an honor.”

Ukai claps his back, hard, and laughs. “C'mon Akaashi-sensei, let's get this show on the road!”

It's a fun bunch of games, and everybody goes out to dinner after at the Karasuno diner where the eldest Tanaka is working with-

“Is that Tsukishima-kun's brother?” Keiji asks Yamaguchi, who nods with a big smile.

“Akiteru-nii helps her on the weekends! They got married a couple months ago. It's super cute. Tanaka-senpai is still wailing about how Tsukki's his brother now and can't seem to decide if he wants to bond or pretend they've never met.” Yamaguchi sidesteps a pair of giggling Karasuno kids, grabbing their food from the counter. “C'mon, let's sit out on the patio.”

The patio is comfortable, with big tables and string lights above them, lighting up the evening sky. Keiji sits with Yamaguchi and sighs happily as he digs into the ramen. He's been craving it the whole week for some reason.

“I'm surprised to see you here alone,” he says. “I expected perhaps Hinata or Kageyama.”

“Ah,” Yamaguchi laughs. “They're having a romance week. They're not exactly normal partners, but once a year they have a whole week where they get all the “romantic shit” out of the way as Kageyama says. Lots of restaurants, ridiculous sappy dates, the whole thing. And then they're back to normal for the rest of the year. They're basically dedicated roommates who happen to sleep together. It's sweet. I think today they were doing paddle boats at a lake.”

“Incredible.”
“It's hilarious.” Yamaguchi pulls out his phone to show him a picture of the two together at what looks like an amusement park. Hinata's kissing Kageyama's cheek, and Kageyama looks like he's going to explode if he blushes any harder. “It's so cute, it kills me.”

“How are you and Tsukishima-kun?” Keiji asks, slurping his noodles.

He's expecting a happy smile, but Yamaguchi bites his lip as he smiles.

“You have to promise me you won't tell Kuroo before I get to,” Yamaguchi says, and Keiji's eyes go very wide as Yamaguchi reaches under his shirt to put out a necklace. There's a ring on it, one with a diamond. Keiji drops his chopsticks in pure, delighted shock.

“When?!”

“A week ago,” Yamaguchi says, beaming. “We're keeping quiet about it for a little bit, until we can come down to Tokyo and make the announcement for real. After graduation we're moving to Tokyo, so we think we're going to get married for real.”

Keiji gets up. “Stand. I need to hug you, immediately. I'm so happy for you, Tadashi-kun.”

Yamaguchi laughs, getting up as ordered, and practically flings himself into Keiji's arms.

They leave the next day, and Keiji has never been happier to walk through the doors to his house to find his boyfriends waiting for him. Koutarou shrieks, wrapping him in a hug as soon as the door opens, Kuroo wraps his arms around both of them, and Kenma slides over to stand on tip-toes and kiss his cheek. Keiji sighs, resting his head on Koutarou's shoulder and letting himself be held.

“This is the longest he's actively been away from them in years now, and he's missed them so much it hurts. Koutarou squeezes him, reading his mind, and Kuroo nuzzles against him.

“I missed you all,” Keiji says, and Koutarou coos at him. “Koutarou, I'm losing feeling in my arms.”

“Sorry Keiji!”

“It's not necessarily a bad thing.”

“Awww.”

Keiji settles in closer, and Kenma finds his hand to hold. He squeezes, and sighs happily.

“It's good to be home,” he says, and means it with all his heart.

They have dinner, Kuroo puts on some sort of awful movie, Kenma falls asleep slumped on Koutarou's chest like the kitten Kuroo jokes he is, and Keiji sprawls out on top of Kuroo's long body on the couch. He rests his head on Kuroo's chest, feeling soft and happy with his arm around him.

“Hey,” Kuroo murmurs after Koutarou takes Kenma upstairs in his arms. “You have a good time in Miyagi?”

“I did.” Keiji leans up to kiss jaw. “I like it there. It's a beautiful place. It was good to see the new Karasuno- they're just as lively as ever, and just as good of friends with Nekoma. Yamaguchi-kun came by to help with practice as well, I was happy to see him. He says hello.”

“Aww, I like that kid.” Kuroo smiles, his fingers coming up to play with Keiji's hair. He goes
boneless, practically melting into Kuroo. “I'm glad you picked Nekoma.”

“Why?”

“Well for one thing, it gets me all hot and bothered seeing you in red like that—"

“Kuroo—”

“But,” Kuroo presses on, “it makes me happy that you found a place that you can just be you. Just Akaashi Keiji the coach and teacher, no hiding that we're in love, no shame or disgrace. Just a teacher who happens to love three stupid men who love him back with all their hearts. Akaashi Keiji gets to live the dream, and I'm proud that it's Nekoma that you're going to because that means that kids who were like Kenma and me will have someone there to look out for them. All the trans kids, the ones who don't quite fit in, the ones whose brains turn against them, the gay kids and the ones who just need a break from the rest of the world... You'll be right there to teach them.”

Keiji swallows hard past the lump in his throat. “Kuroo, are you trying to make me cry?”

“No,” Kuroo says, and Keiji can hear the smile in his voice. “Just reminding you, beautiful boy, that here is the secret no one knows but us. You are the root of the root, and the bud of the bud, and the sky of the sky of a tree called life, which grows higher in me than soul can hope or mind can hide. You are the wonder that is keeping the stars apart.”

Keiji sits up, and finds Kuroo's eyes so warm on his, so proud.

“I carry your heart,” Keiji says, and kisses him so softly, so sweetly, that Kuroo's eyes are a little shiny with tears when he pulls back. “I carry it in my heart.”
“WHAT ARE WE WITHOUT HOPE”- An interview with Apple Pie Creations!

Apple Pie Creations is considered one of the great mysteries of the Indie Gaming scene. Bursting in with an unexpected and barely promoted game “Quest for Hope”, Apple Pie Creations is based out of Japan and is the creator of one of the best games of the past five years. “Quest for Hope” is considered by many to be an absolute masterpiece of storytelling and is being nominated for several awards this year, but Apple Pie Creations has said little about it. There is now an official Twitter and Tumblr that reblogs fanart that others have made for the game, but other than that the game maker has been near completely silent. Until now! We successfully reached out to Apple Pie Games, who spoke to us through a translator, regarding the game and the impact it’s had.

And boy, this is a doozy of an interview.

Joshua McKellan: So nice to get to speak with you! The gaming world has been thrown into quite a shock since the release for Quest for Hope, and I’m so glad we finally got a chance to speak to the person who made it possible. Can you introduce yourself and the company?

Apple Pie Games: Ah. I’m a fourth year student in a Game Design program in Japan, at a very good school. I'm in a good relationship, have a very loud cat named Fukuko (translators note: literally “Lucky child” in Japanese), and I'm hoping to be picked up by a good game company this coming year after graduating. The company and I are one and the same- I made Quest for Hope by myself over a span of three years.

McKellan: Completely by yourself?!

APG: I'm self taught on coding, art, everything. I started development on the project my second year of high school after a friend suggested I might be good at it, so I took the leap and decided to try. I wrote, did art design, did the music, and everything but the English translation myself. The English translation was done by my partner, except for the dedication, which I had a friend translate because I was too embarrassed to let my partner translate it.

McKellan: That's absolutely incredible. It's always been thought that Apple Pie Creations was a team, not one person. One thing that Quest for Hope has been especially praised for is its wonderful romance plot between the Demon King and the Knight. Can you tell us a bit about the creation of that plot?

APG: The Demon King and his Knight are based off of two of my friends, who love each other very much but had a very complicated relationship around the time that I was starting to write the story. Their story was originally just one of friendship since they've been friends since they were children, but as the years progressed I made another friend who changed my view on the whole thing around the same time that the real life King and Knight got together properly. Here in Japan,
BL games are relatively popular but not my speed, and I didn't want this love, which has always been so very pure, to become like that. My friend- we'll call him Ji- suffered a great deal with homophobia here in Japan causing him to be disowned, and told me that it'd be good to have that kind of love to cheer for.

McKellan: That's incredibly sweet. How are the real life Demon King and Knight doing now? Do they know about their inspiration?

APG: They do know, and they're doing well. The Demon King was flattered that I made him the big bad, the Knight was mostly just confused as to why he didn't get better gear right from the start because he'd never go to war so unprepared. They're planning on getting married soon, actually- they live in a part of Japan that allows it.

McKellan: Are any of the other characters based off of real people?

APG: All of them were initially designed around the images of my friends, though as time went on they became their own characters. The White Mage and Demon were based around myself and one of my partners initially, the main character around my best friend, and so forth. The White Mage underwent the most amount of developmental change character wise, the Archer had the most game play change, but the Demon's design stayed fairly close to the original inspiration, with the least changes of all the characters.

McKellan: How did the name come about?

APG: The working title for several years was “Final Quest”, since in the original story the main characters die at the end having saved everything but sacrificed everything as well. That changed after I finished the first rough draft, since I liked the characters too much and my partner actually cried when he read it and I couldn't handle that. Ji and I became friends after I had changed it to more or less the plotline that we see today, and after I gave it to him to play we had a long talk about what the game itself stood for. The game is built around the concept of “hope”, and so it changed from “Final Quest”, to “Quest for Hope”.

McKellan: If you're willing to talk about it, could you tell us a bit about the meaning of the dedication? It's widely presumed that you're either gay or in a relationship with a man, and the dedication seems to support that.

APG: I am in a relationship with a man. Three of them, in fact. I'm in a stable, polyamorous relationship, and have been since before I began writing Quest for Hope. We're approaching our sixth anniversary as partners. One of them has a job that keeps him in the public spotlight, the other runs a restaurant, and another works as a teacher. We're fairly open about our relationship, and so far we've all been lucky enough to avoid severe homophobia. The worst I dealt with was my first year in high school, when the third-year senpai were very cruel and took every opportunity to make my life miserable. Our parents are all very supportive and loving, and have accepted us as we are wholeheartedly.

McKellan: That's absolutely amazing. Polyamory is rarely discussed in public in the states, let alone Japan- you seem like you've been incredibly lucky to dodge any extreme reactions.

APG: We have been. Ji suffered tremendously after being forcibly outed to his family. It's part of why I wanted to write the story I did, once we spoke about it- I wanted to show that love is love, no matter what. My partners and I have been so lucky. Paying that luck forward, as one of my partners said, is just one way to repay the luck we've been given.

McKellan: I'm gay myself, and I was very moved playing this game. It felt like it healed something
in me I didn't know was hurting, so thank you for that as well! Do you currently have another game in the works?

APG: Sort of. Right now I'm trying to finish everything up in time for graduation. My thesis is nearly complete, it just needs a bit of polishing. I might release it for the public after it's done, but it's a somewhat personal project and I'm not sure I'm willing to show it to the world right now. After that, I might work on a visual novel that I've been playing with, or possibly something else depending on my work load after graduation. I want to make games that help others to feel a little better about themselves. Healthy representation now is hard to come by, and I'd like to make something about polyamory when I get the chance to show people that it can be done so long as communication is key in the relationship.

McKellan: I can't wait to see what you put out next. Do you feel like people came away from Quest for Hope with the message you intended to give?

APG: I was shocked by the response to the game. I had wondered if people would catch all the nuance- I knew it was there in Japanese, but I'm not the best at English. My partner, the one who translated, is completely fluent in English and while I trusted him, I had no expectations that so many people in English speaking countries would love it so much and find as much meaning as they did. Seeing the art that's come from people, the discussion, the reviews, it was all very overwhelming. I feel like people maybe needed this a little, and I feel like I needed to make it to accept some things about myself, too. In the dedication, I thanked all my friends who made this possible, but Ji especially. “Don't look back, you're not going that way” is his motto, and it was something that I so badly needed about the time that Quest for Hope came out. The past is the past- it is unchanging. The most we can do is heal from it, and keep moving forward with hope in our hearts. That's the best we can do.

McKellan: One of the driving themes of Quest for Hope is “what makes us human”, and I don't think I'm alone in saying the scene between the Demon King and the Archer where it's revealed that the Demon King's jealousy over the Archer turned him into what he is, might be one of the saddest I've ever seen.

APG: Oh, that was a hard scene to write. Of all the things that make us human, jealousy and despair are right next to love and devotion. The Archer hadn't ever quite given up hope that he'd be able to get the Demon King's forgiveness, even though he'd in all honesty done nothing wrong- he considered him the closest thing to a parental figure he had, and he just wanted so badly for that approval while the Demon King- then just the Mage- was swallowed by fear that he'd no longer be worth anything to those he loved. I think that's something that lives in all of us. We want approval from those around us, we want love, we crave company. Humans are social creatures, even introverts. The Archer's story is one of the most painful, I think, because there's no chance for a true happy ending when it comes to the Demon King. The Demon King has to accept that it was his own flaws that drove him to his state, and the Archer has to face that he can't rely on the approval of others for his own self worth. The Demon King and the Knight find their happy ending, but we see that the Archer's still struggling with that at the end of the game.

McKellan: And what's your belief of what happens to the Archer after?

APG: I want him happy. The real life Archer got his happy ending- I want mine to have one too. I left it open ending for a reason as to the Archer's partner, but so far as I'm concerned he ended up very happy with his own partner.

McKellan: If you do a sequel, who would you want to focus on?

APG: I think the story wraps up pretty well as a complete story, but if I did a sequel I'd say I'd use
the Monk for the central character. We see him quietly pining over the Swordsman, so I think it'd be good to see him get his own real story.

McKellan: If there's anything that you could say to the fans of your game, what would it be?

APG: Please, never give up your hope. You may not have the power right now, but you'll find a way. I believe in you. I believe that you'll escape the bad in your life. You are human, just as human and flawed and wonderful as everyone else, so keep your hope. What are we without hope?

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Yuuki graduates magnum cum laude, Kenma somehow graduates cum laude, and Yuuki laughs about it for a full week after graduation because he's secretly still twelve. Akaashi hides his smile every time Yuuki snickers, Kuroo joining in to joke about it while they enjoy the break before their work starts, and goes back to working on his lesson plans with gusto. Bokuto, bursting with pride, hangs all four of their degrees up on the wall in the master bedroom in a perfectly even square, and Kenma kisses him when it's done.

Chuo students almost always get snapped up immediately after graduation, if not before, and Kenma's no exception. He has four interviews the week of his graduation, all with tempting offers. Yuuki has six, four of them with the same companies, and Kenma chooses a well known but not too big company. The building is nice, the commute not too bad, and the people seem nice enough when he speaks to them. A bit impersonal, but he prefers that. Yuuki follows him to the company, smirking when Kenma gives him a look after he announces his decision, and they start a month after graduation.

It's boring, grueling work at first, but no worse than university. Kenma's cubicle is one on the end that has high walls to keep everything away from his sight, and it's reassuring and soothing. The work is repetitive, and it grows easier over the first month. Yuuki makes friends, which means Kenma also reluctantly makes friends, and he grows accustomed to izakaya nights out where he and Yuuki practice the fine art of misdirection to keep from drinking. Kenma doesn't want to, and Yuuki is far too paranoid to drink unless it's in his own house.

Things continue as normal as they can for three months, until suddenly, everything turns upside down.

It's a normal day in the office, just after lunch. Kenma, Yuuki, and his closest desk mate, Mitsuki, are working on an issue that makes the music unplayable. The code should be right, but something's clearly wrong. Kenma glares at the lines on the screen, Mitsuki cursing under his breath as the two of them try and adjust something. The music starts playing, but a character starts spinning in circles.

"Motherf**k," Mitsuki growls. "What in the name of a tanuki's left testicle did they do to this shit?"

"Beats me," Yuuki snaps, trying something else. The entire screen starts spinning. "Fucking hell—"

An intern rushes onto the floor, hurrying over to them. "Tersuhima-san! Th-they want you in the board room as soon as possible!"
“Hey, Kono-chan.” Yuuji stands up, pulling his suit jacket on and straightening his tie. “Who's they?”

“The marketing team.”

Mitsuki raises an eyebrow. “Marketing?”

Konohito, a nice young man, looks very panicked. Kenma's too tired of dealing with this code to feel anything more than a vague annoyance at the concept of panic. “They just grabbed me! They asked for him by name! I'm sorry!” He bows, and Kenma grimaces.

“Whoa, hey, kid, slow down a bit,” Mitsuki says, laughing. “It's okay! Oi, Terushima, we'll see if we can't figure out how to fix this thing. I'll fix it with Kozume.”

“I told you, Kenma's fine.”

“Sure, Kozume.”

Kenma makes a face at him, and Mitsuki grins, wide and easygoing. He's nice. Kind. Kenma doesn't dislike him. He's been a good cubicle neighbor.

Yuuji gives them both a wave and follows the still anxious Konohito back to the elevators.

“I wonder what they want,” Kenma muses.

“Dunno. Maybe to use that handsome face of his to sell shit? He's a good lookin' dude.”

Kenma bobs his head. “You're not wrong.”

They delve back into the code, and a full hour passes before they manage to get the character to stop spinning and the music to play at the same time. It's good, feeling so successful, and Kenma sighs in relief once they have it fixed. Mitsuki woops, hands up for a high five, and Kenma obliges out of years of volleyball conditioning him to immediately do so. Mitsuki grins.

“Nice kill.”

“Oh god, another one,” Kenma mutters, and Mitsuki laughs.

The elevator doors open and Yuuji steps out of them, face set and hard. His eyes meet Kenma's across the room, and he turns away, headed to the bathroom. Kenma's stomach feels as though someone's suddenly lined it with lead.

“I'll be right back,” he says to Mitsuki, who nods and rolls back to his own space. Kenma gets up, ducking through the lines of cubicles and into the little bathroom, and pulls the door shut behind him when he sees that Yuuji's there and no one else is inside the room.

“What's wrong?” Kenma asks as soon as the door is fully closed. Yuuji is pale, and he walks to the sink. He turns it on as Kenma locks the door.

“I've been asked to show around the new investors,” Yuuji says, his voice low. His fingers keep moving restlessly, as though looking for something to hold onto. “The ones from overseas. My English is really good, but more importantly, I'm bi.”

Kenma's pulse feels oddly fast. Something is wrong, something is very wrong, and he doesn't like it. “I don't understand.”
“I'm being moved to the sales team until the investors are gone, and they're going to give me a really nice fake office. Apparently someone outted me while they were looking around Chuo and told them about my reputation,” Yuuji says flatly, washing his hands. He scrubs hard, as if the soap will take the words away. “They want me to woo the investors by any means necessary.”

“Say the word and I'll destroy them from the inside out,” Kenma says, numb and furious.

Yuuji shakes his head, bracing his arms on the counter. “They're not asking for anything than any woman hasn't had to deal with,” he says, his voice going a little bitter. “I'll be fine. I've just... I've just gotta explain things to Kyou.”

“They're using you,” Kenma hisses, sick to his stomach.

“So?” Yuuji straightens up, splashing water on his face. “Look, I know what I look like. What I act like. It's like escorting, but all I have to do this time is flirt, look cute, and act drunk while not actually drinking anything. I go to clubs, show them a good time, act like I'm arm candy at dinners. When they're gone, I can go back to real work. It's practically a vacation, just one where I have to woo someone.”

Yuuji's hands are shaking. Kenma stares at them, his heart in his throat. He's never seen Yuuji scared before.

He didn't know that Yuuji was scared of anything.

“What- what if that's not all they want,” Kenma asks, his voice shaking almost as bad as Yuuji's hands. Yuuji goes still, the tremors in his hands disappearing.

“It's nothing I haven't done before,” he says, but Kenma can hear the worry hidden behind the laid back tone.

“You're a game developer,” Kenma says, almost pleading. Yuuji gnaws at his lip, looking up at Kenma in the mirror. His eyes have the beginnings of dark circles under them from late nights, same as Kenma, but as Kenma looks at him his lip bleeds a little. The red is lurid against his skin. “You were hired to make games. I know you did sex work in Sendai but you're not a sex worker struggling not to starve, not anymore, you already have a job that you spent a lot of money and time learning how to do. You're good at it, you're a good designer. And you know they'll blame you if you don't get the funding. Yuuji, I'm scared.”

Yuuji shakes his head, leaning against the counter. “There's nothing I can do, Matcha. I refuse, I'm fired. We haven't even been here six months, can you imagine what that would look like on my resume? I could get blacklisted.”

“There's still time to quit, find a new job with a company that isn't going to- to do this.”

“To whore me out, you mean?”

Kenma glares at him, hard, and Yuuji recoils. “Don't put words in my mouth, Yuuji, especially not ones that are cruel to you. You're my friend, and I take that seriously.”

Yuuji looks almost relieved to hear it, but his eyes fall back to the floor.

“I can do it. I can, I just dunno what to tell Kyou.”

“I'll find a way out of this for you,” Kenma insists. “I will-”
“Kenma,” Yuuji says, looking back up. His brown eyes are hard, intense. “You don't have to save everybody.”

“That doesn't mean I'm not going to try. Not when it means something. Not when it's important.”

Yuuji keeps those eyes on him for a long moment before nodding sharply. “Give me 14 days to see if I can get out of it. Then you can make plans.”

“Five days,” Kenma counters.

“Ten days, Matcha.” Yuuji straightens up, pushing his hair back into place, and takes a deep breath. “Don’t... Don’t tell Kuroo about this. Or Akaashi. Bokuto will understand, if you tell him, but the other two are idealists. Bokuto may bounce around and joke but he's sacrificed more than anyone else for what he does. If you want to tell him, that'd be okay.”

Kenma lets Yuuji brush past him and out the door, and stares at the scuffed white tile of the bathroom floor.

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Kenma walks into the Kozume house and finds his parents reading in the main room. Saya looks up and smiles, patting the seat between them, and Kenma sighs with relief as he climbs onto it and pulls out his game. It's a weight off of him, being with people who understand him so well. He lets himself fall into the game as Sousuke turns the pages of a novel, and Saya reads about the economics of Viking times. Their Sundays were almost always like this when his parents were home from their work- reading on the couch together, while Kuroo napped in front of the heater or spent hours pouring over recipe books on the floor. Kuroo is working today, but otherwise it feels just the same.

When his father closes the novel, Kenma sets his game down.

“Can I ask you something?”

His parents both look at him and blink. It's practically a monologue of concern for them. Emboldened, he carries on.

“Do you think it’s right to do anything the company demands?”

Sousuke shakes his head immediately. “No.”

“Absolutely not,” Saya says. Her slender hands, so similar to Kenma's own, gently reach up to adjust his hair so it can limit his view better. He loves his mother so much for never questioning that part of him, even if he feels more comfortable with them than maybe anywhere else in the world. “People come first.”

“Terushima's been asked to do something, something terrible,” Kenma says. “I don't know how to help. I don't know if I can help.”

Sousuke and Saya wait for him, concern on their faces. Kenma tugs at the strings on his pants, toes twitching with restless energy.

“I think,” Sousuke says after a beat, “that it's easy to see what is wrong, and what is right, when it's laid out in front of you and you aren't the one to face the consequences. You can see both sides, the good and the bad, but acting on those is the complicated part. While you might know what the right thing is, getting to the right thing requires action. And all action has an equal and opposite
reaction.”

Saya nods, gently touching Kenma's arm. “Kenma, nothing in this world is cut and dry. All things have ripple effects. Reflect on the butterfly of chaos theory before you make any attempts to help, especially if there are great consequences for doing so— for good, or for ill.”

“Thank you,” Kenma says, still troubled, but his mind clear. “I will.”

Saya kisses the top of his head, Sousuke squeezes his hand in reassurance, and Kenma curls up on the couch as Saya selects another novel from the shelf and begins to read it aloud.

“It befell in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king of all England, and so reigned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall that held war against him, long time...”

Kenma's relationship with Koutarou is something he finds near sacred in its innocence.

They aren't innocent by any stretch of the imagination, not in the traditional sense. They do, in fact, have more sex than the other two on a regular basis. (Kinky, blatantly filthy sex at that. Kenma thinks that first-year high school him would be very red to see what they're like, now.) They're adults, have seen the world, aren't blind to its horrors and flaws.

But every week when Koutarou so gently runs his fingers through Kenma's hair to wash it with the care and devotion of a monk in prayer, Kenma finds that a bit of innocence remains in their lives. To be cared for in such a way, with no strings attached to that devotion... it moves him to tears when no one is looking. He's grown his hair out for Koutarou's enjoyment, even dyed it blond again because he liked it so much. It hangs a good few inches past his shoulders now, soft as silk, with shorter pieces in front at his jawline so he can keep his range of vision cut down and put the rest up in a tail or bun. Koutarou treats it with care, buying sweet smelling things and spending hours brushing and braiding it up for him to keep it free from tangles. He learns careful, intricate braids, twists, and picks up little decorative clips and sticks for his hair. Kenma likes his hair played with, and likes that Koutarou does it for him. Far too much effort to do himself.

It's during one such hair washing, three days after Yuuji's been moved upstairs to a different office and his desk sits forlorn, that Kenma tells him.

Koutarou listens to it all spill out in silence, using a fine toothed comb to work the conditioner all the way through Kenma's thick hair. When it's all out, he gently runs his hand over Kenma's back, sturdy and reassuring. They stand in silence for a while, and Kenma doesn't try to force the issue. Koutarou is loud and charming and bright, but sometimes he does need a bit to think things through, to internalize what's been said. He's wise, despite what others think when they first look at him. Koutarou has always been a fountain of good ideas. Well. When it counted.

The Chair Incident was really not to be mentioned.

“That's really awful,” Koutarou says at last, his voice surprisingly quiet. Kenma doesn't turn to look at him, closing his eyes as Koutarou has him tip his head back to rinse the conditioner out. Some of his tension fades as thick fingers massage his scalp, releasing stress he didn't even realize he's been holding. “I think you should quit.”

Kenma jerks, surprised.

“Really?”
“Really.”

Koutarou smooths his hand over Kenma's hair, rinsing out any more suds. Kenma doesn't know what to say, so he just waits.

“Oikawa and me... we're lucky. F.C. Tokyo already had gay players on the team, Chuo was about as gay as it gets, and we got to be out with the team. But when it comes to public, I can't be out. Not right now. Not while we're still new.” Koutarou's voice is a little tighter than normal as he fetches body wash and kneels at Kenma's feet to wash his legs. Kenma reaches out, resting a hand on his shoulder. Koutarou leans into it as the soap lathers up. “Oikawa's got a little more leeway. People know him, he's pretty, and he's so smart, y'know. And he and Iwaizumi are gonna get married, eventually, and be beautiful and ridiculous together. But I can't tell the public that I've got the three most amazing boyfriends in the world. We don't share a last name. We don't have rings, or matching tattoos or something. So I have to deflect, sometimes. If people get pushy I just say I'm in a relationship and leave it at that.”

Kenma bites his lip, hurt to his core at the resignation in Koutarou's voice.

“But,” Koutarou continues. “But, if they ever told me that it was deny you guys and flirt with someone else for the greater good? I'd quit volleyball right there. I'd swear to never touch a ball again, never step on a court, never say another word about it. I'd leave right then, because you're that much more important.”

He leans over, pressing the eternal mark on Kenma's hip. Kenma closes his eyes. They feel hot with unshed tears.

“Yuuji's had bad luck,” Koutarou says. “But he's the one who has to make the real choice.”

Kenma blinks, shocked, and Koutarou stands up to gather him in his arms. The water is warm, Koutarou even warmer, and Kenma rests his head over Koutarou's heart.

“You don't have to save everybody,” Koutarou tells him, one hand cupping the back of his head. “You'll go crazy if you try to, or if you torture yourself with the what-if's. Sometimes it's important to be the one to save yourself.”

Kenma nods, and tips his head up for a kiss. Koutarou kisses him back, soft and sweet and kinder than Kenma ever feels he deserves.

He thinks about Koutarou's words when he goes into work the next day, his hair up in a regal twist with a stick holding it in place with carvings of owls on it. Mitsuki waves at him when he comes in, they do their work on autopilot, and Kenma's just debating if he's going to decompress outside the building for lunch when Konohito rushes out of the elevator and skids to a stop beside him.

“T-t-terushima-san wants to know if you'll have lunch with him in his office,” Konohito wheezes. “He said you didn't get his text.”

“T-t-terushima-san wants to know if you'll have lunch with him in his office,” Konohito wheezes. “He said you didn't get his text.”

“My phone's off in the office,” Kenma says with a sigh. “I'll go. No- don't run to tell him, he can wait the two minutes it'll take to go upstairs.”

It takes almost exactly two minutes, and then Kenma's standing on the marketing departments floor and wishing he was literally anywhere else. It's uncomfortable here, all silver chrome and sleek chairs. He goes to Yuuji's new office, and freezes by the window when he sees there's a handsome and very definitely American man in the room with him, perched on Yuuji's desk and in his space. He's handsome enough, tall and bulky, with hair so blond it's almost white and perfect teeth. His
suit is well made, his eyes the same watered down grey as a stormcloud, and he looks like he wants to take Yuuji's suit off with his teeth.

Yuuji's smiling, pretty and coy, though it doesn't quite meet his eyes. He keeps cutting his eyes away, tracing patterns on the desk, and looking up through his lashes. It's a move Kuroo sometimes employs if he's feeling particularly like riling up Akaashi.

Kenma hasn't felt this sick since the last day that he saw Eisuke hit Tetsurou.

The American gets up from the desk with one last look over Yuuji, and leaves. Kenma waits until he's turned the corner of the hall to walk in and immediately shut Yuuji's blinds.

Yuuji looks exhausted, no trace of a smile on his face anymore as he hides his face in his hands.

“Yuuji,” Kenma chokes out, and Yuuji pushes away from the desk to go over and hug him, tight. Kenma hugs him back, heart pounding with nerves. Yuuji is shaking.

“I hate this,” Yuuji says in his ear, and Kenma can hear the tears in his voice. “I can do it, but I hate it, I hate it so much. I never used to. I was good at this, once. The fuck is wrong with me, Matcha?”

Kenma holds him as tight as he can, as if he could protect Yuuji from the world.

He knows the answer, even if Yuuji's not ready to hear it. Love, friendship, safety- and most of all, the fact that the methods that once kept him well no longer serve him as they once did. Yuuji isn't the same terrified 18 year old walking the streets of Sendai he once was.

That night he has the worst nightmares he's had in years. He wakes up screaming for Tetsurou, screaming for Eisuke and Hana to stop, to let him up. He doesn't stop screaming until Kuroo's in front of him, not 10 years old and bloody but closing in on 23 years old and sturdy as a rock. Kenma hyperventilates, and doesn't sleep the entire rest of the night. Kuroo stays curled up with him on the couch, and Kenma watches the clock tick through to when he's due to wake up with his ear pressed to Kuroo's chest so he can listen to his heart. He only saw Eisuke beat him twice, Hana just the once, but it's something he's never forgotten.

He can't do it again. He can't watch someone paste on a smile when they're being tortured ever again.

It's a strange thing to realize, that Eisuke broke him just as effectively as he broke Tetsurou all those years ago.

That day when he comes home, he's shaking like a leaf. He opens the door, running through the house without even taking off his shoes. Koutarou is home in the back yard, tossing a ball into the air. Kenma crashes into Koutarou, clinging to him. He almost falls, but Koutarou pulls him up with ease and wraps him in those sturdy arms.

“I put in my two weeks,” he says, his voice breaking. “I can't- I can't watch it happen again, I can't-Koutarou.”

“It's okay,” Koutarou says, pressing kiss after kiss to his face. “It's okay. It's good enough.”

oOo

Keiji and Kuroo take it well when he says he doesn't want to talk about it. Kuroo sees something in his eyes, and holds him for a long time that night. Kenma doesn't try to even pretend to want to
push him off, just holds him tight, and falls asleep buried in a pile of partners. It's a relief, waking up to Kuroo beside him healthy and whole, years beyond Eisuke's last actions against him.

It takes him exactly one day to do all the work assigned for the next few weeks. He gives Mitsuki the solid run down on every piece of code he ever worked on, tells Konohito he's a good person and deserves better than an internship and to apply to a better company. Mitsuki gives him a long look after he says that, and Kenma can see him put two and two together when he looks over at Yuuji's desk and his eyes narrow thoughtfully.

At the end of the day, Kenma goes up to Marketing one last time, where Yuuji is sitting in the new office.

He looks exhausted and haunted, typing code into the computer rather than even pretending to be doing anything marketing related. Kenma can smell the stink of bourbon on his breath when he stands up, looking relieved.

“I quit,” Kenma says, swallowing down the fear and bile in his throat. “I can't- I can't watch this happen again. It'll tear me apart.”

He doesn't think that's an exaggeration.

“So you're leaving me?” Yuuji asks, eyes flashing with a bit of panic.

“Not you,” Kenma says. “The company. You're my friend first and always- companies come and go, jobs change and adapt. You're more important than the bottom line.”

Yuuji sits down hard in the fancy chair, staring blankly at the computer screen. Behind him, windows show the city beyond. Kenma thinks that people must work their entire lives just to have a view like this. But what's the point? Working himself to death for people who would turn his friend into nothing more than a prize to dangle in front of powerful and cruel men? He'll pass.

“I don't know what to say,” Yuuji says, his voice lacking real inflection.

“Leave,” Kenma begs. “You've done it before, do it again. Save yourself, if you won't let me do it. Before they make you cross a line you don't want to.”

Yuuji takes a shuddering breath, shivering violently. “You're talking about something you don't know, Matcha.”

“Maybe,” Kenma says, “but it's the right thing to do.”

He leaves the building for the last time, no box for his things. He never brought any. He looks up at the tower, noting the light on the floor for Marketing. Yuuji's, likely. He walks to the cafe across the street, and watches it until it goes out.

oOo

Kenma decides not to apply for jobs right away. His mind is too focused on the fresh horror to try and face it, and he goes with Kuroo to talk to Dr. Nakamura a couple of times that week just to get it all out. Kuroo is bound by the same rules as Nakamura when in the office- officially, it's as if Kenma has never said a thing about Yuuji. But at this point, he can't keep his promise when it rips him apart. His nightmares are easing from discussion, but they remain.

There's a knock on the den door on the tenth day from Yuuji's move to marketing, three days after a terse text from his friend telling him not to do anything rash. Kenma turns in his chair. Keiji
opens the door, his face troubled.

“Yuuji’s here,” he says, and he looks concerned. “He wants to see you.”

Kenma nods, and Keiji passes him the bottle of hard lemonade he'd asked for. Kenma's trying to find out if there's any alcohol that he actually likes, and so far the answer seems to be sugar, with minimal actual alcohol. “Thanks. Do you want me to come down?”

“I'll send him up,” Keiji says, hesitating a moment before stepping into the den and walking over to Kenma. Kenma tips his head up as Keiji gently runs his hands through his hair, bending to kiss him soft and sweet. Kenma leans into it, sighing against his soft mouth, and takes Keiji’s hand when he pulls back. Keiji looks tired, as he always does around time for grading. “You did the right thing, Kenma. Leaving. I know we haven't talked about it and that you don't want to, but... any company like that is one that would chew you up and spit you out. And you mean far too much to me for me to be comfortable with that.”

“Thanks, Keiji.” Kenma kisses his hand, and Keiji squeezes it once before slipping back out the door.

Kenma waits, watching the door, and hears Yuuji's footsteps up the stairs. He walks in, and Kenma's heart wrenches in his chest. There's a cut on his lip, and he's got an ugly black eye. Kenma silently hands him the bottle, and Yuuji pops the top of it off before taking a long drink and grimacing.

“You were right about what they wanted. I quit today,” he says flatly, dropping onto the couch. “And then I got into a bar fight to feel better. Didn't work. Kyoutani yelled at me, and then he hugged me, and I just. I couldn't take it. So here I am.”

Kenma hands him a controller, picking up the other one, and sits down on the couch next to him. Yuuji leans against him, closing his eyes, and Kenma sees his lips tremble.

“Shit,” Yuuji whispers, with feeling. “No one's going to hire me once word gets out about this. They'll twist it. You're supposed to do anything for the company, you know? And I didn't. I failed. They didn't fire me, but shit, we weren't even there a whole year. What's that going to look like on a resume?”

Kenma leans their heads together, and looks up at the poster that Yuuji made him for Quest for Hope.

Don't look back, fancy script along the bottom reads. You're not going that way.

Kenma grips his controller a little tighter.

“Hey,” he says. Yuuji looks up, eyes a little red. “Want to start a really, really gay gaming company?”

oOo

Kenma has enough from Quest for Hope's profits and his own work to license the company properly. A friend of Kyoutani’s points them to office space in a questionable part of town with extremely cheap rent, and they move into an office building that's definitely owned by the yakuza. Their next door office neighbors officially do software design. They don't have a single computer in the room. But Yuuji smiles and charms them, and it turns out that one of the totally-not-yakuza members got his nipples pierced by the same person who did Kenma's tongue, so they make friends and quietly scream when they get back into their office.
No one is ever stupid enough to try and rob them, which is great, because Kenma's Mac is worth more than a small house at this point with all the information on it.

They set up the company, pay themselves pittance wages, and get to work on a dating sim. They put out a couple short visual novels with Yuuji doing the writing, Kenma doing the art. They sell well, well enough that they breathe a little easier and start planning another long game in the style of Quest for Hope while putting out some simpler ones as well. Koutarou decides out of nowhere to help, and bounds in every afternoon after practice to take over their social media and put his degree to use. He's very good at it, and twice a week runs the F.C. Tokyo accounts as well. They're booming with interest, and so are the Apple Pie accounts. Yuuji and Kenma exchange baffled looks, and decide not to question it. Koutarou enjoys the work, takes lots of fun pictures around the office, knows exactly how much to tease interest and when to post short videos of Yuuji screaming when the code goes wrong or cute pictures of Fukuko lounging in the office with them. He's good at what he does.

Koutarou also makes friends with the yakuza, which explains why on the first day of the teams month long break, Kenma walks into the office to find Koutarou shirtless on the massive couch they have in the event of all nighters, with bars in his nipples and a very pleased smile on his face.

“Oh my god,” Yuuji complains, running into Kenma. “Matcha, don't just stop in the door. Come on, keep walk- holy shit.”

Koutarou beams at Kenma. “You like them? I went with Yokkun from next door and got them done this morning. Surprise!”

Kenma makes a strangled noise, staring at the bars. “How- how did you know-”

“Awww, did you think you were being subtle?” Koutarou is fiendishly delighted, and Kenma goes bright red, turning around and pushing Yuuji back out the door. Yuuji cackles, craning his head to get a better look.

“Use protection, kids!” He teases, and Kenma locks the door behind him.

Koutarou's grin has taken on a very devious side, and Kenma stalks over to the couch. Koutarou's sprawled out in comfortable looking black sweats, eyes smug, and Kenma straddles his lap and runs his fingers into Koutarou's hair.

“So you like them?” Koutarou says, grin still firmly in place.

Kenma knows his face is hot, so he kisses him hard instead of doing anything else.

“I like them,” he growls when Koutarou's mouth is kiss-swollen and his pupils blown wide. “Shut up.”

“Make me,” Koutarou teases, eyes flashing with delight, and Kenma does.

They do, in fact, have sex on the couch on a Monday afternoon, and Kenma is never ever going to live it down when Kuroo finds out and laughs hysterically for nearly an hour.

A few days later as they're eating soba for dinner in a shop with a television turned to the news, Kenma watches as a handsome reporter announces that an anonymous source revealed to police that the marketing director of their former company has been using low ranked members of the company as illegal prostitutes to help garner money for the company. After months of searching, information has been uncovered to prove it. Kenma looks over to Yuuji, slurping his noodles.
Yuuji winks.

“So,” Kenma says, staring at him. “You really can save yourself.”

Yuuji’s grin is wide and victorious.

oOo

And then, suddenly, he wakes up one morning to realize that it’s been a year since graduation.

Keiji’s arm is thrown over his chest, Kuroo is curled up to his side, and Koutarou's hand is somehow in his hair. He shifts a little in their bed, stretching out as best he can, and stares at the canopy above them. It’s the same soft white sheer that goes on the sides of the bed, the stuff that moves so softly and gracefully in the breeze that comes from the open windows. Kenma watches as it floats in the air.

Keiji stirs from where he’s been pressed against Kenma's side, and Kenma watches as his sleepy eyes open.

“Mm,” Keiji yawns, and nuzzles at his jaw. “G’morning, darling.”

Kenma's face goes hot. Keiji's never one for endearments unless it's early in the morning and his mind isn't fully awake yet.

“Morning,” Kenma says, rather than trying to rationalize away the blush. It just grows deeper as Keiji stretches, sighing a little as his joints pop. His hands find Kenma's hair, and Kenma can't quite help his squeak when Keiji starts kissing him with languid desire.

Their movements wake Koutarou, whose fingers tighten in Kenma's hair before relaxing, and Kenma shudders when golden eyes focus on him with razor sharp interest.

“Good morning,” Keiji purrs, and Kuroo comes away with a wide yawn, rolling over to look at them.

“Oh,” he says, his voice scratchy with sleep. “Is it appreciate Kenma morning?”

“It can be,” Keiji drawls, his voice rough and heady. “Every morning should be an appreciate Kenma morning.”

Kenma makes a noise somewhere between a squeak and a snort, and lets himself be loved.

There's time enough for the rest of the world. Time enough to face dilemmas, moral or financial. Time enough to get better, get worse, and get better again. Time enough for change, that eternal unending struggle. It's been a year of struggle and trouble, a whole year of learning and growing, of choices good or bad. It's been a year.

Kozume Kenma lets himself be wrapped in those he loves, loved and adored in return, and lets the year fall away.

There is time enough for this.

Chapter End Notes
Shout out to all the sex workers out there, current or past. You're amazing, keep on doing your best.

This chapter was inspired by real events, unfortunately. Yuuji is finally in a good and safe place, though, and safe for good now.
The Olympic representatives show up halfway through morning practice.

Koutarou doesn't notice them at first—he and the second string setter are trying to match up better, which is no easy feat, and they've been at it long enough to be fully in the zone. They've almost got it right when the coach calls him away, and he jogs over to find Oikawa looking like he's barely holding in some screams. He blinks, confused, and Oikawa tilts his head ever so slightly towards two men in black suits that look incredibly official.

“What's up?” he asks, looking around.

“These gentlemen would like to speak with you and Oikawa-san,” the coach says, fiddling with the zipper of his jacket. “Nemuri-san, I can take you to a meeting room-”

Nemuri-san, tall and thin with heavy-lidded eyes like Akaashi's, simply waves a hand. “It's no trouble. I'm certain they can lead the way to one.”

“Of course,” Oikawa says with his best smile on. “Please, if you'll follow me?”

The go to one of the little side rooms, boring white walls and a plastic table and chairs. It's the one that they usually use for storage, or for short term meetings with some of the older team members. Nemuri introduces his companion, Yamazawa, who's big and bulky and has the look of a former ace. Oikawa and Koutarou sit on the other side of the table, and Koutarou's stomach does flips as Yamazawa blinks slowly at him once before pulling out papers from his bag.

“We would like to offer you both a position on the Olympic team for the 2020 Olympics,” Nemuri says without preamble. “Out of all of the non-national team members, we have chosen a select few to add. You are among them. You may, of course, decline.”

“Why us?” Oikawa says before Koutarou can blurt out his agreement. “I'm very good at what I do, I have no illusions about that, but there are others who are very good as well.”

“You have a unique talent,” Yamazawa says, his voice a bass rumble that Koutarou feels in his bones. It's melodic, what Keiji would call an “operatic bass”, and soothing to listen to. “One that has been highly cultivated. You can mesh with anyone. Geniuses, we have. Monsters, we have. We need one extraordinary, but ultimately human man to run the show. You are a strong setter, one that brings out the best of his team while staying grounded in reality. That is what we need.”

Oikawa looks poleaxed.

“As for Bokuto-san,” Nemuri says, and Koutarou's heart leaps into his throat, “he's a powerhouse on the court, and an inspiring figure for the team. He's popular with the crowds, and brings up
moral in the way that you bring out talent. The pair of you have taken F.C. Tokyo from the worst to the second best in the series in less than three years, and you've been playing together since college. You're extremely well adapted to each other now. We considered others as well, but out of the top four aces of the time you graduated only two were available. Sakusa-san is out for the next year at least to recover from surgery and repair his health, and Kiryu-san declined in order to spend time with his father before he passes.”

“So Ushijima-san accepted,” Oikawa says, his voice tight.

“Yes,” Nemuri says. “As did his... partner.”

“Oh, god,” Oikawa mutters, taking a deep breath.

“You don't mean Tendou?” Koutarou asks, and the pair nod. “Oh, man, that'll be a riot and a half.”

“Our secondary choice for setter,” Nemuri continues, “is Miya Atsumu.”

Oikawa doesn't make a face, though Koutarou knows he wants to. The pair of them are explosive together when meeting up for matches, Miya playing for the Osaka Blazers. Miya is handsome, strong, and a genius setter- and something that Oikawa fears deep down. He's what Kageyama could have been, and Oikawa knows it. Powerful and proud, charming and clever, wickedly intelligent and implicitly trusted, there's no doubt anywhere in his soul and he plays with that same drive. If Kageyama was a little bit more well socialized, a little less obsessive, they would have had another Atsumu on their hands.

Atsumu, Oikawa can accept. But Ushijima?

He's spent the past six years playing catch up to him, dragging Tokyo's volleyball team to Ushijima's level for the sake of his own pride- the pride that he could make a change.

“I accept,” Oikawa says, and there's steel in his voice. Koutarou grins, leaning back in his chair.

“Me too. This'll be fun.”

Koutarou had played Shiratorizawa a couple of different times. Ushiwaka had always been a monster on the court, right up there with Sakusa, but he was a specific brand of monster. Cold and callous to his opponents, seeking only victory, he was a demon to deal with. Tendou had been fun. Keiji had taken one look at him, decided that he was making all the calls from then on out when up against Shiratorizawa, and thus made guess blocking from Tendou nigh unto impossible. Keiji had a great poker face.

“It's owl boy! Bokutooooo!”

“Ayyyyyyyy! Tendou!”

Koutarou can practically hear Oikawa grinding his teeth as he exchanges a high five with Tendou.

“Good to have you on our side this time!” Koutarou laughs, smiling at him. Tendou grins back, red hair as tall as ever. He finally grew into his long limbs, and while he'll never be considered classically handsome he's far from hard on the eyes. He and Ushijima are a study in contrasts, Ushijima in plain black and white with Tendou in a lime green shirt and hot pink shorts. “Welcome to Tokyo!”
“Glad to be here!”

It’s an early morning, people still straggling in from delayed flights or getting lost in the city. Miya Atsumu has yet to show, but half of the National team has popped up and is gossiping in the corner. Ushijima looks perfectly awake and refreshed as ever, while Oikawa already has on his knee and ankle braces. His expression is murderous at best as Ushijima approaches him, and Tendou rests a bony arm on Koutarou's shoulder.

“Flight was boring,” Tendou says, immediately diving right into conversation. “I don't even know why we flew, we could have taken the shinkansen and it would've barely taken any time but Wakatoshi wanted to fly, booo. So we did! Flying is weird.”

“Right?” Koutarou demands, lighting up. Finally, someone gets it. “Like, you get in a tube and whoosh! Suddenly you're just in the sky being held there by physics!”

“So cool but so freaky. How's that pretty setter from Chuo doing?”

“Oh, he works for Nekoma now!” Koutarou's chest puffs up with pride. “He's taking them to Nationals this year, I'm so proud of him. Oh, hold up.”

Ushijima and Oikawa are having a tense conversation, but Koutarou pulls out his phone. The easiest way to diffuse Oikawa is to distract him, and he's practically conditioned the entire F.C. Tokyo team to freeze and look cute when they see a camera at this point.

“Tooru!” He yells to be sure Oikawa will turn. Oikawa jolts, sees the phone, and immediately throws up a peace sign and wink. Perfect. “Thaanank you!”

It's a great picture of him, the lighting nice and Ushijima looking slightly startled behind him, and Koutarou hums as he pulls up Instagram. Tendou peers over his shoulder, whistling when he pulls up the F.C. Tokyo account. “Do you run this account?”

“Oh, Thursday and Saturday,” Koutarou says, flipping through a few filters and adjusting it until it's perfect. “And Twitter on Tuesday and Friday. It's a side job, but I do it for my partner, too! What do you think, should I tag this with Tokyo City or should I tag it with the Olympic gym? Probably the gym. Naaah, we'd probably get in trouble for that. Tokyo City it is.” He throws together a quick caption (@Oikawa_Tooru ready for action!!! Who's ready for the #2020olympics in #Tokyo?! We're almost there!), tags everything he can think that they might like on there, and posts it. Immediately the likes start racking up. The F.C. Tokyo account is something he's quite proud of- he's taken it from nothing to extremely popular in less than a year.

“That's... a lot of followers,” Tendou says, wide eyed.

“Oh, yeah,” Koutarou says absently, replying to a few fast comments. “I've worked really hard on it, you should see the numbers on my cat's account.”

“You have an account for your cat? That's the best.”

“It's fukuko_the_cat,” Koutarou says, grinning when he sees Iwaizumi like the photo, and Oikawa himself not much after.

Tendou lets out a noise that's a little inhuman, and Koutarou looks up at him, confused. Tendou's mouth is open, and he's swaying where he stands.

“Oh my god,” Tendou practically shrieks, and Ushijima looks over with concern. “Like, like the Apple Pie Games Fukuko the cat? That's your cat?! Are you dating the Apple Pie Games creator?
Can you get me an autograph?!

“Sure,” Koutarou says, grinning. “Which game's your favorite?”

“Ohmygod.” Tendou bounds over to grab Ushijima's arm. Ushijima doesn't so much a blink, apparently used to being manhandled and climbed on like a jungle gym. “Wakachin, Bokuto's dating the Apple Pie Games guy! He can get me an autograph!”

This time Ushijima does blink, and his dark eyes focus with laser precision onto Koutarou. “You are?”

“Yeah,” Koutarou says, beaming. “Do you like the games too?”

“I enjoy them very much,” Ushijima says with the solemnity of a priest. “After Satori cried for four hours he made me play Quest for Hope. I was extremely moved. I was very happy when more of them were released, even if they are much shorter games. They are well made even when in simplistic styles. I enjoy the romances.”

Behind Ushijima, Oikawa chokes on his water. Koutarou grins.

“So, you like Quest for Hope?”

“Quest for Hope is amazing,” Tendou gushes. “I think my favorite is Within the Abyss though, it's so good and it's got puzzles and everything's all cool and the art is badass and like. Wow. Wakachin replays The Golden Gates at least once a month.”

“It is somehow different every time,” Ushijima says, still somber. “It is moving and eloquent.”

Koutarou pulls out his phone. “Here, tell you what, I'll record everything you want to say to the guy and send it to him and ask him to sign something for you and bring it tomorrow.”

Tendou shrieks.

Their liberos are Nishinoya Yuu and Motoya Komori, who arrive together later in the day on a flight from a libero specific training in Okinawa. Nishinoya is popular with professional players no matter what team they're on, Motoya equally well known and well liked, and the team all pauses in their work to say hi and help them get settled in. The coach doesn't seem to mind, the same has happened with all the players who've trickled in. It's the first day, after all. Koutarou grabs Oikawa from where he's been looking over the training regimen he's been given with Miya Atsumu, who arrived just before Nishinoya and Motoya. Oikawa sighs as the newcomers wave.

“What is this, a Miyagi Volleyball reunion?” he mutters, and Koutarou elbows him. “Ow! Koucchan!”

“C'mon,” Koutarou says, slinging an arm around Oikawa's shoulders. “You can be mad about high school later! We're going to the Olympics and you're captaining a team! This is way too cool to spend the whole time being mad about things that happened when you were a teenager. You've gotta let that go.”

Oikawa sighs again, but does smile when Nishinoya zooms over to them and yells, “OH SHIT, IT'S THE OWL AND THE GRAND KING!”

The team all head out to eat together at a place called Soba Kamiyama when the practice is done, and Koutarou sits next to Miya Atsumu as the place fills up with hungry volleyball players. Atsumu nods at him, picking up his drink.
“Bokuto,” Atsumu says, giving a mocking toast with his cup. “Been a bit since we talked, yeah?”

“It has!” Koutarou grins, knocking their shoulders together. “You look good.”

“Course I look good, what'chu take me for, Osamu?” Atsumu grins back, and Koutarou sees his shoulders relax. “How the fuck are you so bulky and so fast, huh? What d'they feed you Tokyo boys?”

Koutarou snickers, propping his elbows on the table. At the other end, Oikawa is going red as Nishinoya and Motoya gang up on him to tease him about Iwaizumi. He looks trapped, but happy about it, and Koutarou decides not to intervene. It's good for Oikawa to make friends- he puts on a good show but he's an intensely private person in reality, rarely letting people in to see the real him. Koutarou hopes that will change or ease as they practice with their new team.

“How is Osamu?” he asks, because he's curious.

Atsumu rolls his eyes. ‘Fine. Little shit's up to his fuckin' neck in grad school prep. Thinks he wants to go into law, believe that?’

“Law?”

“I know, fuckin' weirdo. Bet he's gonna do somethin' way different though, like literature or some shit like that. Kita-senpai's running an onsen and happy as a clam, so. How's your boy?”

“Boys,” Koutarou corrects, and Atsumu whistles, wiggling his eyebrows to make Koutarou laugh. “They're so good! Akaashi's teaching, Kuroo's working at a restaurant so he knows how to start his own, and Kenma's running his own business. It's real cool.”

“Sounds busy,” Atsumu says, sympathetic. “You get to see them much?”

“In the evenings, mostly,” Koutarou groans, flopping out on the table. “Sometimes in the morning I can ride the train with Akaashi, and I was working with Kenma in the afternoons after practice but now I dunno how much I'll get to now, and Kuroo's shifts change all the time so it's always a pain.”

“That sucks ass,” Atsumu says, sighing. “I had a girl for a bit but it didn't work out. She was always gone, we just couldn't match up.” He shrugs. “Oh well. You've been with them for a while?”

“Years, now. Since high school.”

“Shit, man. That's a long time.” Atsumu toasts him again. “Good on you.”

“Thanks!”

Atsumu groans, stretching a little, and yawns wide. “I fuckin' hate flying into Tokyo. The airport's a mess, took ages to get in just from Osaka. Weather was shit flying out, too. Turbulence like crazy. Glad I wasn't on the Hokkaido flight though, they got stuck in a storm and had to turn around, did y'hear? I gotta have you show me how to get around this crazy town, I dunno half of what people are talking about when they show me all this weird shit with the trains.”

“Will do!” Koutarou grins at him, and Atsumu grins back. The years have tempered the arrogance into confidence, the condescension into understanding, and the fine looks into graceful maturity. They've both grown up a lot. “It's really good to see you, Atsumu-kun.”

“Right back atcha.”
As promised, Koutarou gets Tendou and Ushijima their autographs on shikishi board, and Tendou just about cries. Practice starts in earnest, the team coming together slowly but surely. Oikawa is announced as Captain with no complaints from anyone, and selects Koutarou as his vice-captain under the logic that Koutarou's boundless energy will keep him up to speed on everything. Koutarou gleefully sets up calendars, phone lists, a groupchat that immediately devolves into memes and teasing pictures of Atsumu and Oikawa looking ridiculous, and a schedule of team dinners. Atsumu and Oikawa butt heads, as expected, but Oikawa brings him to heel with some judicious application of snark and sharp smiles. Koutarou smiles as he watches the team come together under Oikawa's careful command, a little smug.

“He's good,” Tendou says after a practice game with the national team. “I mean, I knew he was. But he wraps us all up like marionettes while letting us dance on our own. Cree-epy.”

“Nah,” Koutarou says, grinning at his friend as he fusses over Nishinoya's bruised elbow and Nishinoya insists he can go back out. “He's just that good. His pride demands no less.”

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Text from: Lucky Boy
How was practice?

Text to: Lucky Boy
!!!! SO GOOD KUROO
I'm so happy
it went super good and i’m really happy
are you still at the restaurant?!

Text from: Lucky Boy
There's a mess in the back we have to fix.
Itsuku sends his congratulations, and says he's going to every game
also that he wants to have soba with you next week
And Kouki wants to know if his son can use you as a reference for Fukurodani

Text to: Lucky Boy
??!!!? NIKOKUN IS GOING TO FUKURODANI?!

Text from: Lucky Boy
Well hes trying to.
What should I tell him?

Text to: Lucky Boy
TELL HIM YESSSSSS

Text from: Lucky Boy
K
I should be home about one

Text to: Lucky Boy
I'm gonna stay up and wait for you

Text from: Lucky Boy
You have morning practice

Text to: Lucky Boy
I can tell you're depressed tetsu!
You only text like this if you're sad
I wanna hug my boyfriend

Text from: Lucky Boy
Koutarou.

Text to: Lucky Boy
????

Text from: Lucky Boy
I love you. So much.

Text to: Lucky Boy
!!!! I love you too Tetsurou

Koutarou does stay up, and when Kuroo comes home he's waiting in the front sitting room with Fukuko. The taxi drops him off, and Koutarou stays on the couch as he watches Kuroo walk up from the window. The door opens and closes, Kuroo kicks off his shoes, and Koutarou smiles as he stalks into the sitting room and makes a bee-line to the couch. Kuroo joins him there, climbing into his lap and flopping out his long legs. Koutarou strokes his hair as Kuroo sighs in relief.

“I missed you today,” Kuroo mumbles into his chest, and Koutarou tucks his chin on top of Kuroo's head. “I hate waking up without you here.”

“Awww.”

Kuroo's arms snake around him, and he presses a kiss to Koutarou's throat. “As much as I want you there all the time, I'm very proud of you and want you to be dedicated to this,” Kuroo mumbles. “Even if I don't get to see you as much, this is worth it.”

Koutarou blinks back sudden tears. “Nah,” he says. “Anything that costs me you isn't worth it.”

Kuroo sits up from his chest, his eyes soft.

“You wonderful man,” he says fondly, and kisses him. Koutarou wraps his arms around him to hold him there, feeling something in his chest ease.

“We should get you to bed,” Koutarou says when they pull back, and Kuroo sighs.

“Yeah, probably.”

“What, you wanna do something else?”

Kuroo flushes a little, one sturdy hand stroking his chest. “Maybe.”

Koutarou grins at him, pulling him down for another kiss. After six years, Kuroo can finally handle being alone with each of them, not just Keiji, and it feels like a triumph against the past every time that Koutarou presses kisses to his skin. “You really did miss me,” he teases gently. “C'mon, we'll sleep down here tonight.”

Later, when they're sex flushed and curled together, Kuroo kisses his cheek and pulls him in close.

“I love you,” Kuroo says, his golden eyes soft in the moonlight streaming in from the window, and Koutarou freezes the moment within his heart to strengthen him in the coming months as he leans
in to whisper adoration along his beloved partners skin.

oOo

The Iwaizumi-Oikawa residence is a modest but comfortable apartment in a surprisingly quiet area of Tokyo straddling the line between Minato and Shibuya. Iwaizumi, as an editor, could afford a much better place, but it's near to a park and a rail line, and they claim they both like it. Three months after the Olympic team begins its training, Koutarou steps inside it using his key after a text requesting he come over.

Koutarou kicks off his shoes in the genkan with a call of, “Pardon the intrusion!” and steps inside. It's two bedrooms, one bathroom, with a living room, dining room, and kitchen. He finds Iwaizumi on the couch in the living room, a cold towel draped over his eyes and Oikawa curled up against him. The house is spotless, victim to Oikawa's compulsions if he misses his medication, and always looks like it's been staged for showing to a magazine. It's ultra minimal and elegant, with lots of clean white and mid-tone wood, plants here and there to fill the space and soothe the hard edges of things. A single scroll hangs on the wall above an ikebana arrangement of orchid blossoms, the calligraphy on it reading the four kanji idiom *itadoshin* - perfect harmony between two minds. Oikawa's in his glasses and soft pants, and his fingers are tapping a restless rhythm with one hand while he smooths Iwaizumi's hair with the other.

“*Iwa-chan's been felled by a migraine,*” Oikawa says quietly, kissing Iwaizumi's forehead. His boyfriend groans but doesn't so much as twitch- it must be bad. “*Can you-*”

“Yeah!” Koutarou keeps his voice down as best he can, and Oikawa looks relieved. “*Gimme a half hour.*”

He makes his way to the kitchen, pulling out the cutting boards and knives, and sets to work.

It's easy, soothing work, cooking in Oikawa's kitchen. Everything is in a reasonable place, all the food is fresh and neatly sorted, soft lighting and a good view from the kitchen window bathes the whole scene in a dreamlike state. There's two plants on the counter, a cobra lily and a venus fly trap, and as he works on cutting up the soft tofu. It's harder to cook than hard tofu, a bit of a challenge, but Iwaizumi likes it better that way and Oikawa rarely asks him to cook. This quiet, serene apartment is a fortress against the world, and Koutarou knows how much trust it must take to be allowed inside.

Agedashi tofu is a favorite at izakaya's. It's been on Kuroo's menu no matter how many times he's changed it, and as Koutarou heats the oil he finds himself thinking about Oikawa, silent in the living room.

They've been friends ever since that trip so long ago, and he feels... almost indebted to him. Oikawa has never looked down on him for his moods, even when he's at his worst. He's praised him, chided him, tossed him into the fires and fished him back out more refined. And for all of that... for all of that, Koutarou's been his weapon and his shield. He's a spear to be thrown, a sword to be wielded, a shield to protect, and in return Oikawa treats him with honor and care. He's not Oikawa's wing spiker, he never will be- Oikawa's ace is Iwaizumi, no matter what changes in life. But Koutarou- loud, easygoing, carefree, Koutarou is easy to hide behind. He's a good decoy when Oikawa's self doubt rises, and a better defense against the probing questions that have started to surface after the press got pictures of Iwaizumi and Oikawa together.

While F.C. Tokyo doesn't care that Oikawa loves a man, Tokyo city might. They aren't so well established and popular that they can risk so much- at least, not right now. Oikawa's pride in his position is not something that would take such a hit well- not yet, at least. Later, maybe, they'll risk
it for real. All the same, Iwaizumi has proposed. They have matching rings- Oikawa wears his as a necklace, Iwaizumi wearing his on his hand. They're engaged, but the rule is that they can't start planning a wedding until Oikawa asks him back.

Koutarou hopes he does soon.

Oikawa emerges from the other room, and Koutarou steps away from the stove to open his arms. Oikawa bites his lips and all but falls onto him, head dropping onto his shoulder.

“Hard day?” Koutarou says, barely above a whisper.

“Really bad.”

Oikawa doesn't move, hands fisting tight on the back of his shirt to hold him there. Koutarou cradles his head, as if he were a small child whose head needs supporting. Oikawa lets out a shuddering breath, some of the tension easing.

It gets easier, Koutarou's learned. To live with mental illness, their respective disorders, it gets easier, but it never truly goes away. It never will. He'll always have manic episodes, swing high and low on a mind and body that doesn't process things right. Oikawa will always fear the unknown, will always be caught up and tangled in a web of a deceptive mind and uncontrollable fate. But it gets easier, in time, as long as you stay in practice of watching out for it.

It's an exhausting existence.

But it's a better existence than the ones they've left behind.

Oikawa finally pulls back when Koutarou has to return to paying attention to the stove, but holds onto his shirt like a child afraid of him leaving. Koutarou doesn't mind, working with his shadow as he has many times over the years. He makes the agedashi tofu with familiar movements, treating it with the same care for plating that he would when preparing a meal for his in-laws-that-aren't-actually-in-laws, arranging it delicately and pouring the broth with care. Once it's finally done, he hands the bowl to Oikawa with a slight bow.

“I'll make some food for you, too,” he says quietly, and Oikawa nods his thanks. He leaves with the bowl for Iwaizumi, and Koutarou can hear murmured conversation as they eat.

The house that the world sees has little to show for personality, and never has. Akaaashi likes the downstairs kept that way too. No secrets can be gleaned from this pristine home, nothing to show that in this serene and carefully hidden away oasis lives an editor who thinks the original Godzilla was the peak of Japanese film and a professional volleyball player who graduated from no less than Chuo magnum cum laude with a degree in physics and science and a love for all things alien related. Except for the plants on the counter, this apartment could belong to anyone.

Koutarou cooks gyoudon and thinks how lonely it must be, this isolated island away from the world.

He's lost in thought when Iwaizumi sits across from him, looking better.

“Thanks,” he says, his voice rough. “Comfort food is great.”

“No problem.” Koutarou grins at him, but Iwaizumi's eyes narrow.

“What's up? You look thoughtful.”
Koutarou stirs the pot, biting his lip as he thinks about it, and then gives up trying to be tactful. “Your house looks like a hotel. Why doesn't it look like a house instead? Your house?”

Iwaizumi blinks, then sighs.

“My mom's an interior designer,” he says, grabbing an apple from the bowl. “Nothing in my parents house was ever meant to have a long life. It was always, always changing. Set decoration, you know? Your house is the image you project to the world. I... hmm. How to put this? I don't feel safe anywhere but my bedroom. Not really, anyway. No matter what I liked when I was little, if it didn't fit with everything else it was ripped away from me. So the things in the rest of the house, they're all replaceable by what they look like. But I've picked simple things that'll last a long time and look good, so I won't feel obsessed with changing them. My mom likes rich, luxe items. I like them simple and straightforward, with multiple uses so that I can use them again and again until they fall apart from wear. I don't... I don't own many decorative things that have meaning. And Oikawa's family, um.”

“When they found out that we really were together, not just pretending, they threw away everything I didn't take with me,” Oikawa says as he walks back into the room. He looks no less dangerous with his glasses on- his soft edges still have knives underneath. “I sort of gave up collecting anything again. I lost a lot of sentimental childhood things after high school graduation, since there wasn't space to take them to the dorms.”

He stands behind Iwaizumi, wrapping his arms around him, and Iwaizumi reaches up to squeeze his arm. Oikawa sighs, heavily. The pair of them look so tired, so beaten down, and Koutarou can't take it.

“Stay right here,” Koutarou orders, pulling the apron off and flinging it onto a chair. “I mean, stir the pot, it still has a bit to go, but stay here.”

“O-okay?”

Koutarou bolts out the door, shoving his shoes and coat on as he goes, and runs until he finds what he wants.

He runs all the way back as well nearly an hour later, bag in his hand, and is careful not to slam the door open. “I'm back!”

Iwaizumi looks around the wall that encloses the kitchen. “Welcome back...?”

Koutarou pulls his coat and shoes back off, and marches into the kitchen. Oikawa is sitting at the table, scrolling through his phone, and Koutarou reaches into the bag.

“Here!”

The axolotl plush is blush pink, with a happy face and incredibly soft fabric that's soothing to hold. Oikawa stares at it as Koutarou pulls out a sturdy Godzilla figurine nearly a foot and a half tall and big enough to be proudly displayed, and hands it to Iwaizumi. Iwaizumi pales as he looks at the detailing on it.

“This is-”

“Don't think about the price tag, I have a very rich boyfriend who doesn't know what to do with his money,” Koutarou says, stopping that train of thought right there. “Look! You can put him in the living room! And the axolotl can be on the couch too, because he's really soft and cuddly and-”
And Oikawa is crying, fat tears rolling down his cheeks as he clings to the axolotl.

“I love him,” Oikawa says through his tears. Koutarou throws his arms around him as Oikawa starts to sob for real, burying his face against his shoulder.

“It's okay!” Koutarou promises, hugging him tight. “I know how terrible it is, losing all your childhood stuff! My biodad threw all of my things away before he left, every single one, and everyone needs something soft to hug.”

Oikawa sniffs into his shoulder. “I'm gonna call him Akarui.”

Cheerful.

“That's a good name,” Koutarou tells him, and Oikawa pulls back to wipe at his eyes.

“Oh, no, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, with a helpless sort of laugh. “You too?”

Koutarou turns to see that Iwaizumi's still holding the Godzilla statue, and there's tears running silently down his face. “I'm gonna hug you too, you know.”

Iwaizumi nods, unable to speak, and gently sets Godzilla down on the counter so Koutarou can throw his arms around him. Iwaizumui's not lost any of his muscle over the years; it's like hugging a brick.

“It's okay, you know,” Koutarou says, leaning their heads together. “To be sad, and to let people in. It's okay.”

Iwaizumi makes a hitched sound in the back of his throat, and Oikawa joins the hug.

They eat dinner at the dining room table together, Akarui and Godzilla sitting on the table to watch them eat, and Koutarou makes sure to text his partners that he loves them before he gets dragged into the living room to watch Godzilla with statue-Godzilla and Akarui.

It is, he thinks, a good evening.

oOo

Days turn to weeks, weeks to months. He trains. He watches games. He plays against the national team, and visiting national teams from other countries. He works, and works, and works. He eats dinner with his team. They visit the zoo together. He goes shopping with Tendou and Ushijima one day and visits their apartment, and leaves with a cat-safe plant named Chihiro that Ushijima somberly gifts him. He watches as Oikawa flourishes and makes friends with Atsumu, the pair of them bickering and joking and laughing real laughter together. He spends his afternoons with Kenma when he can, goes to Kuroo's izakaya when he works just so that he can hold his hand when he comes out to personally take his order, helps Keiji with the new Fukurodani group camp at Nekoma and kisses him when they get a moment to hide away from the world together.

The anniversary of Keiji and Kenma's graduation comes and goes with little fanfare, and Koutarou finds himself looking at his partners one year later with pride. Kenma, free of the constraints of a corporate world and flourishing- Keiji, happy and delighted as he teaches the joys of science and English and volleyball. He's proud of Kuroo, running a restaurant essentially on his own and doing amazing, working on designs and menus for the restaurant that he'll one day own himself.

He's proud of them.
Every single day he sees the Olympic rings on his practice jacket, he's proud of himself too.

And then suddenly, it's upon them.

oOo

Koutarou has the time of his life at the opening ceremonies for the Olympics. It's magnificent and moving, fun and exciting, and he's keyed up past words by the time they return to the Olympic housing where they'll spend the week. He and Oikawa are sharing a room with Motoya, who's well acquainted with chivvying people into bed at a reasonable hour, and who rolls his eyes when Oikawa flops into bed with Koutarou instead of the third bed in the room.

“You two are hopeless,” Motoya says, but he's smiling. After nearly a year of training, their friendship is well documented.

Koutarou yawns, throwing an arm over Oikawa's chest. “I haven't slept alone in six years!”

“Same!” Oikawa peers over his glasses imperiously, the effect somewhat ruined with how he's practically burrowing into the blankets. Motoya's mouth twitches as he tries to hide his smile. “We have to be at the top of our game, Komori-kun!”

“You're adorable,” he tells them, and Koutarou is asleep in seconds.

He wakes up to Oikawa's alarm, as familiar from traveling games as his own, and shoves his bed partner until Oikawa growls and punches him in the stomach. Content that Oikawa's awake, Koutarou bounds out of bed and gets ready for the day. They'll have games starting soon, none seeded. Motoya gets up with great reluctance, hanging on his shoulder as they brush their teeth together, and yawns as Oikawa appears in the doorway with wild bedhead.

“Every time, Koucchan,” Oikawa says accusingly. “Every time, you do this. Stop sticking your face in my hair!”

“You're Kuroo sized,” Koutarou protests, “I can't help it!”

“Stoooop,” Oikawa whines, Motoya snickering beside him.

Ushijima opens their door, sticking his head into the bathroom. “We are heading down to the cafeteria for breakfast,” he says serenely. Tendou pokes his head around Ushijima and howls with laughter at Oikawa's hair.

Breakfast is full of the buzz of excitement, and the Japanese volleyball team winds up sitting next to the UK team, who are just as interested in them as they are back. Koutarou stumbles through introductions, whipping out his phone to help translate some of the words while their wing spikers pull out phones and dictionaries to help. He discovers that they like the weather, that it's so bright outside compared to England, that they're excited about eating real sushi after games, and that all of them thing the city is “super cool”. He's having a great time with his twenty new best friends when a hush falls over the room, and the wing spiker across from him drops his dictionary.

“Pardon the intrusion,” says a familiar voice, and Koutarou whips around to see Akaashi in the doorway. He looks magnificent as ever, dressed in a fine black yukata with a golden haori in exquisite gleaming silk over it. His face is covered by a fabric mask in white, the same fabric as the obi. He stands up as Akaashi walks in, his feet silent in tabi-clad feet. His yukata hangs slightly loose, just enough to expose the sleek lines of his throat and collarbones, Koutarou's mark just barely visible. The haori is new and gleams as if it's spun from true gold. It sparkles in the sunlight, and he can see there's tiny silver threads gleaming in the yukata as well. The obi is white, with a
faint pattern of feathers.

Akaashi bows, and half the room gets to their feet to bow back. He sees a few cameras whip out, a couple of people whispering to each other.

Tendou whistles slightly as a rustle of low voices start, every eye in the room on Akaashi as he approaches with the dignity of a prince in his own palace. The crowds part before him as if he were holding a sword, eyes following him as he strides through the room. Koutarou scrambles out of his seat, hurrying over to meet him in the middle of the room. Akaashi holds out his hand with a soft smile, and Koutarou takes it. Rather than just holding it, he bows his head to gently kiss the back of it and press it to his forehead. The murmuring gets louder.

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi says, his voice low and melodic. “You're being dramatic.”

“You're worth it,” Koutarou says, lifting his head. Akaashi looks pleased, his eyes sparkling with appreciation for the gesture. “Can't I greet my boyfriend like the prince he is?”

Akaashi’s eyes practically gleam with pleasure, a flash of pride in them before its squashed.

“I can hardly stop you,” he says. It looks as though he's severe and unsmiling, but Koutarou's close enough to see the crinkles by his eyes above the mask.

“What's the meaning of this awesome surprise?” Koutarou asks, leading him to the table with a hand on his back.

“I wanted to wish you luck before your match,” Akaashi says, leaning into his hand. “I spoke to Nekomata-sensei and he pulled some strings for me. Kuroo was unable to get away in time, and Kenma was trapped in traffic.”

Oikawa gets up from his seat, bowing politely, and Akaashi bows back with perfect grace. The UK team looks like they don't know whether or not to get up and bow or not, but when Akaashi turns his eyes to them, dark lashes fluttering slightly, they all hurry to their feet and bow awkwardly. Akaashi bows back, not so deep as they do, and takes Koutarou's offered seat.


“But of course.” Akaashi removes his mask, and half the room sucks in a breath. The captain goes bright red.

“You're... Welsh?!” One of them asks, shocked, and Akaashi laughs. Koutarou's pretty sure one of the Canadian fencers just fainted. He can definitely see a couple people taking pictures.

“My parents live and work in Cardiff, and have since I was young. I visited them quite a bit.”

Akaashi pauses a moment, and then says with a noticeably different accent, “But I make for a decent Londoner as well.”

“Oh damn,” one of them mutters, turning red, and Akaashi looks slightly smug before turning his attention back to the Japanese team.

“While I came specifically to wish my friends and my partner good luck, I hope that on the court you all find victory,” Akaashi tells the team, reaching up to gently touch Koutarou's hand where it rests on his shoulder. He knows they must make a sight together. “There are many, in this city and
outside of it, who are looking to you all as inspirations. They're looking for heroes that stand tall and proud on the world stage, no matter who they are. Give it to them. Stand with pride for our country, and for our people. Good luck to all of you.”

Everyone thanks him, Nishinoya shooting up in his seat to swear to achieve victory.

Koutarou offers him his hand, and Akaashi rests his fingers gracefully in Koutarou's palm to be helped up. He bows to the Japanese team, full and deep, and rises once more with a serene expression. He exchanges cheek kisses with Oikawa for the look of the thing, replaces his mask, and takes Koutarou's offered arm. Koutarou leads him back out of the room and down the hall to the main doors, kissing his hand once more as he slips his shoes on in the giant genkan.

“You're beautiful, Akaashi!” He sighs, reaching up to gently smooth Akaashi's hair back. “I love you so much.”

Akaashi does his equivalent of beaming, stepping forward to gently squeeze his arm. “I love you too, Koutarou.”

Koutarou kisses his forehead, letting his lips linger there, and Akaashi sighs happily, swaying into him.

“We're with you every step of the way,” Akaashi promises, reaching up to touch Koutarou's shoulder socket in the same place Koutarou leaves his marks. “We always are.”

He returns to the cafeteria to whistles from the UK team and nudging from his own, and blushes bright as he finishes his food. People disperse as needed, all heading for their own events, and eventually the volleyball teams leave as well.

Koutarou's walking past some swimmers when he hears one of them mutter to another, and he's trying to work out the unfamiliar English in his head when one of the swimmers for Australia gets to his feet and slams his tray on the table. The Japanese swimmer next to him rolls his eyes and puts down his chopsticks in resignation, pushing up his sleeves. The Australia swimmer picking fights is apparently routine.

“Say it again, asshole,” the swimmer says. He's Japanese as well, red haired and furious. The first guy (one of the UK divers, maybe?) goes pale. His seatmate (another diver, maybe from Sweden? Koutarou can't remember) immediately jumps up and beats a hasty retreat.

“Hey now-”

“Apoloize or I take your teeth out,” the swimmer snaps, eyes flashing. The diver bristles.

“Oh boy,” Tendou mutters, looking between the two. Oikawa casually reaches into his pocket and pulls out his lanyard, wrapping it around his knuckles. Ushijima catches Oikawa's hand, shaking his head slightly, and steps forward.

At a monstrous 6'3 and 190 pounds of solid, implacable muscle, Ushijima cuts an imposing figure. Koutarou watches the diver shrink back a little as Ushijima leans in slightly, his eyes fixing on him.

“Excuse me,” Ushijima says in flawless, unaccented English, “I believe you were insulting us? Please, repeat your words to my face. I couldn't quite hear you. I didn't quite catch which slurs it was, and I'd like to know what precisely you used so that when I destroy you, I'll have the right motivation.”

Ohhh. Right.
Homophobia is just so boring.

Koutarou crosses his arms, making the muscles bulge, and Tendou leans an arm on his shoulder and smirks. Oikawa examines his nails, and then cocks his head as he watches the scene unfold. They all look intimidating as hell.

“Are you threatening me?” The diver demands, eyes going wide, and the red-headed swimmer grins with sharp teeth.

“Nah, he's stating a fact,” the swimmer says. “And I'm happy to throw down for my bro's honor over here. Apologize or we take this out back.”

The diver looks around at them all, all of them staring down at him. He goes even paler. “Sorry.”

“A real apology,” the swimmer snaps, crossing sturdy arms.

“I'm sorry for my statement, it was rude,” the diver says stiffly. Ushijima looks at the others, who nod. Tendou bounces over, plucking the man's lanyard up to see his name.

“Colton Devro,” he reads out, and grins as the guy goes pale. He lets it go and wraps an arm around Ushijima's waist, smirking. “I'll remember it. Wakacchi, can we go now?”

The Australian swimmer bows to them, his friend nodding as well, and Oikawa gives them a finger wave as they leave.

They play against the Australian volleyball team next and destroy them. Australia is followed by the US team, then Italy, then Sweden. Koutarou gets used to hearing the muttered insults, the hissed slurs in different languages. It doesn't matter, because when he steps onto the court with his team he knows he's the best there. He fuels himself with the rage of it all, taking down Russia and China's teams, win after win. With him paired with Ushijima and Oikawa, Nishinoya or Motoya on the court for receives, they're nigh unto unstoppable. He takes his joy where he can, but the whole week it's as if he's floating- detached from his body, steering it where it needs to go but rarely inhabiting it. This is volleyball on a whole new level, and he relishes it. Every successful spike is a reason for celebration.

The week passes in an exhausting blur. Plenty of people get knocked out the first day, but the volleyball teams themselves often come to watch the games even after losses.

At last, it's the night before the finals. Japan takes down Russia 3-2 after a brutal final deuce, leaving Russia and China to battle it out for Bronze while Brazil waits for them tomorrow at the fight for gold. Koutarou nearly loses his voice yelling in excitement, and Nishinoya all but climbs him like a ladder to scream his victory.

It doesn't hit him until they're in the bus on the way back, half asleep and exhausted. Oikawa's staring out the window, chin propped on his hand, and Koutarou flops against him.

“We did it,” he says faintly.

“We did,” Oikawa agrees, smiling. The ring on its chain around his neck is outside his shirt. Koutarou can see the tiny stag beetle engraved on the inside of the band. “We did it, Koucchan.”

“The whole world's gonna watch us tomorrow,” Koutarou marvels. “Two kids from Miyagi and Tokyo, taking on the world with 20 of their very best friends.”

Oikawa smiles, draping an arm around him and hugging him tight. Koutarou knocks their heads
together, sighing happily. Oikawa is a good friend.

“Thank you,” Oikawa says, very quietly. “For everything.”

Koutarou leans into him, settling more comfortably. “We’ve been through a lot, huh.”

“Yeah,” Oikawa says. He looks back out the window. “It’s been a long time since that first time we met, hasn’t it? Lots of things have happened since Kindaichi brought you into my life. I wonder what else is going to happen?”

“You finally make friends with Ushijima?”

Oikawa makes a face, and Koutarou grins. “I think we’re good as acquaintances.”

“You showed him after all,” Koutarou points out, watching the city move by. “You did it your way, still on the same stage.”

Oikawa’s arm tightens around him.

“So this is the result of that worthless pride,” he says quietly, lips curving into a sharp smile. “I’ll have to be sure to tell him that before he goes back to Sapporo.”

Koutarou’s heart clenches a little.

“It’s almost done,” he says, fingers curling on his thighs. “We’re almost done being a team. Atsumu’s going back to Osaka, Tendou and Ushijima to Sapporo, Nishinoya and Motoya have that Libero camp again and then they’re back with their teams. And we’re here in Tokyo, or we’ll get grabbed for the National team for real, and we’re never going to get to play as a team again. There’s something really sad about that, don’t you think? Like graduation all over again.”

Oikawa nods, knocking their heads together again. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “It is sad.”

The rest of the ride to the housing is nearly silent.

They have their last meeting, going over what they can for Brazil besides “pray for the best”, and everyone scatters to do their evening routine. Koutarou gets the worst of the sweat off with Tendou in companionable silence in the public bath, does yoga with Atsumu and Komori to loosen his hips in the gym area, forces Oikawa to eat something while he sits in the common area with headphones on and his eyes glued to his phone watching the matches Brazil played earlier in the week, checks in with Yuuri and Take-chan, breaks up an argument between Nobu, Akaribara, and some Nigerian runners over a communication issue, congratulates the Swimming-For-Australia-But-Japanese redhead on his medal and his quiet Japanese friend on his medal as well, tells the UK volleyball team they did amazing when he runs into them, and then-

He sits alone in the three-bed room, staring blankly at the dark TV.

The entire world is watching, all that weight and all that pressure, all of it dragging him down. He’s put out a thousand small fires just to keep his mind off of it, but here he is with no more excuses. He has to think about it. If he fails now, in front of the whole world, what’s he going to do? Will he retire? He could retire. Maybe he should, after this. Maybe he should retire, and take a year, and then work with Kuroo to get the izakaya underway.

They have a good team, but they’re up against Brazil. Brazil.

Koutarou and Ushijima are each monstrous aces in their own right, but it’s Koutarou as vice-
captain and the official #4 that they're looking to. He's the crowd pleaser, the mood maker on the court, the one who has to be upbeat and ferocious. Ushijima carries weight like Atlas, resolute no matter what happens. Koutarou takes it like juggling- barely holding each piece, but keeping it in the air to distract-distract-distract until it all falls apart.

And what if it falls?

There's a knock on the door, and it opens to reveal Ushijima looking serene as ever.

“Bokuto-san,” Ushijima says in his low voice, “one of your partners has requested to see you.”

Koutarou looks up, surprised. “Really? Which one?”

Somehow, he's not surprised when he walks out into the rooftop garden to find Kenma sitting on a bench and looking at the tiny shrine. It's an Inari shrine, fox statues and all, and someone's lit incense. He sits next to Kenma, too run down to run to him, and wraps an arm around him for a quick hug.

“How'd you sneak up here?” Koutarou asks.

Kenma leans into him. “Tooru helped me. I blackmailed him with pictures of Iwaizumi in a tuxedo from that event I went to that he missed.”

Koutarou laughs, kissing his temple, because of course Kenma would. Kenma turns, kissing him lightly, and his face grows serious.

“I wanted to talk to you, before tomorrow, since I don't know that we'd get a chance before the game.”

Koutarou's insides curdle with fear. He's breaking up with me- no, no, he wouldn't. Not right now. Kenma looks up at him as his mind wars with itself, his eyes passive, and waits for him to calm.

“What did you want to talk about?” Koutarou croaks out.


“Eh?”

Kenma smiles, just a bit. The wind ruffles his long hair, and Koutarou aches to run his fingers through it. “Shouyou told me everything about the first time they went to Nationals. He admires you so much, you know. He has since the first time he saw you. He wanted so badly to be you, to learn from you, and I don't think he's ever going to get over that hero worship. And I don't think I've ever thanked you for making my best friend so happy, because you didn't blow him off, you just went with it and taught him and loved him right back.” Kenma reaches into his bag, and pulls out a bundle of soft blue fabric. “He told me to bring this to you- he wants it back, of course, but he wants you to carry it to the court. All of the Karasuno Four do. You mean a lot to every single one of them.”

THE WISDOM OF THE ACE stands out from the blue fabric in faded black letters, and Koutarou feels silent tears start to stream down his face.

“Tomorrow,” Kenma says, holding the shirt with the reverence he reserves only for that which Kuroo considers sacred, “you're not just standing on that stage with your team. You're standing there as a symbol, just like Shouyou did all those years ago. You're standing on the Olympic stage, openly in a relationship with men, and you're doing the same thing that you did before. You're
holding up the banner of Japan, this time, but it's more than that. This time, when you step out onto
the court, you carry the hopes and dreams of every single one of us who didn't fit in—every single
kid playing volleyball who needs a hero that's just like them will be able to look up at Bokuto
Koutarou. Every single one of those like Shouyou, and Kindaichi, and Lev, and Akaashi, and
Onaga, and Tadashi. Because you're living proof that it can be done. You can be gay, or asexual, or
bisexual, or anything, and you still have a place with the champions.”

Koutarou presses his hand to his mouth to hold back the sound that's trying to come out of his
mouth.

Kenma unfolds the shirt, draping it over his lap.

“Firstly,” Kenma reads, “the figure of the ace is one that inspires his allies. Secondly, he should
shatter any wall. Thirdly, he should hit the ball to his utmost ability.”

Koutarou nearly bends in half, the wracking sobs finally escaping for good. Kenma pulls him into
his arms, holding him close, and Koutarou clutches the shirt to his chest.

“Bokuto Koutarou,” Kenma says, his voice shaking a little as well. “No matter what happens out
there tomorrow, you have inspired. You have shattered the barriers for so many people. And I
never have to worry that you'll do anything but be the best you can be.”

Oikawa is expecting him to be a bundle of nerves, he knows, but he's perfectly calm when they
prepare to leave in the morning. His team is spooked as he eats, quiet and controlled, and stares up
at the sky as they leave the building to wait for their bus. The sun is bright, the weather is perfect,
and he feels on top of his game in a way he never has before.

“Bokuto?” Oikawa says, sounding a little nervous. “What's going on?”

“You should propose to Iwaizumi,” Koutarou tells him. Oikawa drops his bag.

“I- what-”

“I think you should do it,” Koutarou continues, contemplative. “Take a chance. Love yourself. He'll
say yes to you too when you ask him.”

“What is up with you today?” Nishinoya says, staring. His hair is even taller than normal
somehow, and the new yellow lightning streaks along the side are magnificent. “You feeling okay,
Bokuto?”

Koutarou looks over at him, and smiles. “I can't let anyone down today. I don't think I'm able to.”
He feels as if someone's bottled lightning inside of him, and he bares his teeth in a grin that makes
Oikawa take a step back and Nishinoya jolt. Ushijima looks over and gives a double take,
Motoya's eyes going wide beside him. Miya Atsumu's eyes are fixed on him, entranced. “We're
going to win. The whole world's watching today, and we're going to win. We're going to win, and
throw it in everyone's face because they were wrong to think we're lesser, we're weak, we're
anything other than the ones who deserve to be on the podium. We're going to win because we
have the most to lose and the most to gain.”

The waiting area has gone still and quiet. He looks around at everyone, and his smile gets bigger.
All those eyes stare back at him, intense and focused. He can feel them on him, filling him, turning
him into the weapon they need. He looks at Oikawa and sees a frustrated young Kageyama looking
back from his eyes, just as he saw Shouyou in his own in the morning. They have a duty to those
who came after- and those who have gone on leaps and bounds ahead. He knows that Oikawa can feel it too.

“C'mon,” he says, stretching out his arms and looking up at the sky. “You've heard what the others call us. All the nasty names, the ugly looks, the jokes because over half of us like men and the other half don't care that we do. We're better than them. And we're going to win, because we have the most to lose if we don't. We're not just playing today. We're showing the country that we're just as worthy.”

He looks back at the group. So many of them are around his age- so many talented, powerful players. He smiles, wide and proud.

“They can't touch us,” Bokuto Koutarou says. “Today belongs to us, and us alone. Let's go prove it.”

It does belong to them.

Japan takes gold in mens volleyball, officially captained by Oikawa Tooru with Bokuto Koutarou acting as vice-captain, 3-2 against Brazil. It's a shocking turn around. They stand on the podium, accept the medals. Nishinoya beams through his tears, Oikawa barely keeps himself under control, and Koutarou looks up at the stands where his partners are standing at the edge of the bars and touches his left shoulder socket, his right hip, and reaches around to touch his back.

There are a number of things that happen with the media. Oikawa answers for them, Bokuto does his best as well. The whole thing is a whirlwind, and they barely have time to comprehend that they've done it before it's time for the closing ceremony. He's walking on air the entire time, stunned into disbelief. And then...

It's done.

The 2020 Summer Olympics conclude, and Bokuto rides a train home alone, his bag on his back and a medal on his neck under his jacket.

Fukuko wraps around his ankles when he walks through the door. Oikawa and Iwaizumi, Ushijima and Tendou, and Nishinoya are following him there to spend the night at the Akaashi residence before they all have to go and start the press circuit. Oikawa had insisted.

The house is quiet, close to midnight. Keiji has work in the morning, classes to teach and a volleyball team on the rise to work with. Kenma has work that needs doing, backgrounds for their new game and sprites to animate. Kuroo's been working himself to the bone at the restaurant he's now head manager and a chef at, the izakaya always full to the brim with people with so many tourists in town. They must be exhausted, all of them, likely already asleep. It had taken forever to get out of the ceremony.

He bends down and scoops up Fukuko, pressing his face into her soft fur. She purrs like a jet engine, loud and happy, shoving her face against his and rubbing against his cheeks.

“I won today, lucky girl,” he whispers to her, his smile wide. “I showed everybody. The crowd screamed so loud, and Oikawa cried, and I was so happy. Look!” He fishes the medal out, showing it to her. She sniffs it, curious. “It's a pretty big deal.”

Fukuko licks his nose, making him giggle. He hugs her, careful of her slight body, and kisses the soft top of her head.
“You're happy I'm home, huh?” He smiles as she purrs even louder. “I am too.”

He walks into the side room, the first little sitting area, and finds that Kuroo has already left a few offerings at the little statue of Kishimojin on the table, and Myoken Bosatsu as well. They need to get a kamidana, but for now this will do. He takes out two fresh sticks of incense, gently setting Fukuko down, and lights them with the nearby matches. He quietly claps, bowing his head.

“Thanks for looking out for them while I'm gone,” he whispers to the goddess. For a moment, the incense seems to glow gold, but it might just have been a trick of his eyes. He carefully walks through the house, quiet as he can be, and turns into the dining room.

The lights flick on, and there's a huge yell of “Congratulations!”

Everyone is packed into the room. All of his teammates from Fukurodani, Nekoma's whole team, the Karasuno Four, most of Aoba Johsai's old team, Masaki and Ogano from Ubugawa and Shinzen, Lev's kid sister and older sister and Taketora's sister, Yachi from Karasuno standing with Daichi, Sugawara, and Asahi, but most importantly...

Most importantly Kuroo, Kenma, and Akaashi are all there. Right in front. Akaashi's smiling so wide it looks painful, Kuroo is actually crying, and Kenma...

Kenma steps forward, and tugs him down to kiss his forehead.

“Good job, ace.”

Koutarou sinks to his knees, tears welling up, and clutches Kenma tight around the waist as the room cheers. Kuroo flings himself against Koutarou's side, still crying, and Akaashi kneels to press kisses and heap praise on him as he cries with happiness.

Hinata can't even speak through his tears when he practically slams himself into Koutarou's chest to hug him once he's let up, and Koutarou hugs him back tight. He's so strong and sturdy, and his smile is like the sunshine he's named for when he pulls back. Koutarou beams at him, reaching into his bag and pulling out the shirt.

“You better be on the court next time!” He says, handing Hinata the Wisdom of the Ace, and Hinata's eyes fill with tears.

“BOKUTO-SENSPAAAAAAIIIII!”

The other five find them eventually, in the throes of partying, and another cheer goes up with wild joy when Iwaizumi throws his and Oikawa's hands in the air to show off their rings. Oikawa goes bright red.

“He finally asked me back! Wedding's on Tuesday before he can panic and back out of it!” Iwaizumi calls over the excited yells. “Yoyogi Hachimangu Shrine in Shibuya, I expect all of you to be there and we're having barbecue afterwards! Even you, Ushijima and Tendou.”

Koutarou all but tackles Oikawa in a hug. “You asked him!”

“Yes, I did!” Oikawa squawks, but he's beaming. “Get off, you overgrown owl.”

Koutarou squeezes him tight, not letting go, and finally Oikawa hugs him back, burying his face in Koutarou's shoulder.

“I'm so proud of you,” Koutarou says, quiet enough that only Oikawa can hear it. “I'm so proud,
Tooru.

Oikawa shakes in his arms, and Koutarou feels his shoulder growing wet.

The lights from cameras are flashing as he and Oikawa bow before taking their seats at the table for questions about the last game one week later. Oikawa's ring gleams on his finger from the lights, and he seems lit from within.

Koutarou feels light and full of hope, even as fear darts around in his stomach.

They answer questions about the match, laughing and smiling as needed. Koutarou wonders when he got good at being charming. Maybe it's a side effect of being friends with Oikawa. Maybe he's just gotten old. Grown up. He feels different, these days.

Then, it finally comes down to the questions they know have been coming.

"Bokuto-san," a woman in front asks, “what can you tell us about the rumors that you and several of your teammates are gay?”

Koutarou leans in to the microphone, looking around the room. “There's something I'd like to say about that,” he says, and somehow, the words come easily. “There's something that needs to be said, actually, not just something I want to say.” He takes a breath, and squares his shoulders. The room waits in anticipation.

“Who cares?”

The reporters all stare at him, and he smiles.

“Seriously,” he continues, looking around the room. “Who are the people who care? Why is it important to know? The answer, by the way, is yes. There are people who are gay on the team. I'm bisexual- I've been in relationships with men and women, and my long term partners have all been men. I've been in a happy relationship since my high school days! For people out there who are listening, ask yourself why it matters to you? But I can tell you why it's important for me.”

Koutarou smiles, relaxing back in his chair. “Because no matter what, there's some kid out there who's hearing these words. There's someone who's scared, and alone, and afraid that they're going to be rejected by their family or friends, but they can look up to people like me and my team, and know they aren't alone. Who cares that there are gay people on our team? I care. I care, because this whole wide world is full of incredible people! Children, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and politicians and athletes and priests, and they aren't all just straight people! Japan's men's volleyball took gold- not because of or in spite of a bunch of us liking guys. Just because we're that good. And no one can take that from us.”

He beams at the reporters, then leans in. “Also, like, I love my partners so much, they're the best and I love them and I want the whole world to know that.”

There's an awww from the crowd.

“I think Bokuto-san has said what needs to be said about that,” Oikawa says cheerfully, “but I also married my childhood sweetheart on Tuesday, so I'm still walking on air. He's supported me since we were tiny, and I love him more than words can express!”

The crowd goes wild with curiosity, and Koutarou beams as Oikawa seems to light up with happiness as he gets to talk about his husband.
Koutarou wraps his arms around Kuroo's waist as Kuroo steps back to view the newly framed jersey on the wall to the side of their degrees. It's signed, all of his team's signatures around the 4 standing proud in the center. His medal sits in a box below it on the stand with their accomplishments,


“I still can't really believe it's real.”

Kuroo kisses him again, lips lingering on his cheek, and Koutarou melts. “I'm so proud of you, Bo. So proud.”

Koutarou turns around in his arms, looping his around Kuroo's neck to pull him in for a kiss. It's so good to finally be home to rest, so good to finally have Kuroo there and present, safe in his arms and so very loved.

“I missed you so much,” he says, peppering kisses over Kuroo's cheeks to make him smile. “I missed you so, so much, Kuroo.”

Kuroo's fingers tangle in his hair, soft and sweet, and Koutarou feels a lump in his throat as he smiles. “I put the TV on and locked the channel so I could watch all of your games,” Kuroo says, soft and fond. “Every single one. Even if I couldn't be there in the stadium, I was watching you. But I'm glad I got to watch you for real, in the stadium. All the lights and the action and the drama. You were amazing, Bo. Absolutely amazing. I love you so much. I wish I could have been right there with you.”

Koutarou cups Kuroo's cheeks in his hands, leaning in to kiss him.

“You were,” he says, dotting kisses over his cheeks and lips and forehead. “Just like Keiji always says. Anywhere I go, you go my dear; and whatever is done only by me is your doing, my darling. You're right here. I carry your heart- I carry it in my heart.”

Kuroo pulls him in tight, and kisses him like he's made of gold.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter. Oh, this chapter.

I always knew I was sending Bokuto to the Olympics. I didn't quite know who I was going to send with him. I could write another thousand words on how I struggled with this chapter, the choices I made that lead to the story told here. I underestimated just how much of my heart I was going to put into this. I don't regret a single word.
He comes across the little shop on his evening run.

It's a small thing, apartments above a shop space on the bottom, pleasant sized and situated nicely within the area around it. Okusawa neighborhood is a pleasant place, and the building is situated on the edge between Jiyugaoka and Okusawa, making it a nice breather between Tokyo's Little Europe and the more traditional city around it. There's a number listed on a sign out front that informs him 'Shop Space for Sale'. He's not passed it before, taking a longer and more circuituous route through parts of the city he rarely visits. It's down a little side street, quiet but comfortable in its location.

Tetsurou calls the next day with Keiji holding his hand, heart in his throat, and goes to a meeting.

oOo

Kuroo Tetsurou is one month away from turning 25 when he purchases a shop in Okusawa, Setagaya ward, Tokyo.

Koutarou walks through it with him, the pair of them looking it over the evening that Koutarou and Oikawa signed to join the National team for the next three years. It was a restaurant in a previous life as well, and the owners then have left cookware, stoves, sinks, the whole deal. There are even plates and bowls. The previous owners, an elderly couple, were absolutely delighted that Tetsurou wanted to keep it a restaurant and he got an incredible deal on the place.

"It's gonna be a bit before I can really start it," Tetsurou says, looking over the place. The main restaurant itself has sturdy tile floors, and the raised and half-enclosed by a false wall area that holds the bar section has wood floor in excellent condition. The bathrooms look fine, though one sink definitely needs to be replaced, and the pantry and kitchen area are in fine shape. "But it doesn't look like it'll take too much before it's functional again. I want to do a lot of redecorating."

"What're you thinking?" Koutarou asks, looping an arm around his waist and pulling him over. Tetsurou settles against him, hip to hip, feeling loved.

"I think... Traditional. But different. Lots of bamboo, maybe a water feature. I want it to feel like a shrine. Definitely going to put up a kamidana in here." He kisses Koutarou's temple. "At least it's big enough for a couple of teams to fit in."

"Yeah!"

The restaurant can comfortably seat 40, 50 if everyone wants to get intimate at the bar. Tetsurou likes it, a lot, and smiles happily. Koutarou nuzzles against his cheek, beaming, and drags him off to go and look at the expansive and comfortable kitchen again.

He feels good about this. He feels very good.

oOo

Life, as it tends to do, gets complicated.
There are kitchen sets to choose from, piles of paperwork to fill out, late nights training his replacement at the restaurant he currently works at and laws to double check on. Tetsurou devolves into a being possessed by nothing so much as logistics, the world a nightmare of font choices on menus and calling to arrange shipments for food.

Fusazane and Ayumi, wonderful people that they are, fly in on brisk afternoon with their usual one-backpack-apiece mentality and book themselves into a hotel for a month rather than intrude on their sons. Tetsurou hugs them both as tight as he can when they show up, cooks them a lavish dinner, and braces himself as Fusazane hauls out a binder full of business cards for everybody in every business he's ever met in Tokyo with a gleam in his eye. Keiji flees the house before he can be suckered into helping call around with the other two in tow, presumably to hide in Kenma's office. Terushima, however, shows up with Yahaba and his boyfriend Kyoutani, cracks his knuckles, and sets to it.

Kyoutani wins the bid for the actual carpentry, on account of the fact that he's one of the best in the business (if not the whole country) at shrine repairs. Tetsurou likes him, and the fact that he's getting a discount.

The other interior designer/contractor that Tetsurou hires with the last of his money from his grandparents is a young man from Tottori. He's a charming, if somewhat flirtatious man, with hair dyed even brighter pink than Oikawa's friend Hanamaki. Kuroo steps aside for the most part to let him handle things, and is utterly delighted with the results. The entryway is especially beautiful. The walls are covered with bamboo cut in half and flattened, cunningly set up to hide the storage closet. Tall false trees and a miniature and working shishi-odonshi off to the side along the open entry are charming, and the floor itself on the walkway proper has wide, flat stepping stones. Surrounding the stones are river rocks, kept in place by poured resin that makes it look like one's walking through water, and two bamboo benches for waiting are placed in the entry as well. Scrolls are hung along the wall that backs up against the kitchen so that they're the first things seen upon walking in, a set of beautiful noh masks make for an interesting attention grabber beside the scrolls, and a little table below the masks hosts the menu and a bowl of flowers.

The rest of the restaurant remains largely the same as before, but Kisumi and Kyoutani put up staggered tan wood panels to give it more openness and depth, and adds interesting wall sconces as well. The rice paper on the half-enclosed wall blocking off the bar is replaced with white fabric, and hanging curtains embossed with Kuroo, Kenma, Akaashi, and Bokuto's new kamon are hung for a bit of flare as well.

Fusazane pitches in during the feverish five days of building and working, hanging up panels and generally being wherever anyone needs him. Kuroo stays busy in the kitchen, cooking for Kisumi's crew and getting used to the place. Ayumi appears on day three to lend her plumbing expertise to the new sinks in the bathroom, Retsu and Choji pop in with hand-me-down knives of good quality and one hundred other tiny things Tetsurou hasn't realized he'll need. Sousuke and Saya drift in on the fourth day bearing all the trappings for a kamidana, which delights Tetsurou to no end.

There's a small area in the restaurant that doesn't quite fit much of anything else. He installs a beautifully made kamidana there (courtesy of Kyoutani), has a small table with fresh flowers placed below it to keep anyone from sitting below it, and is very pleased.

On the sixth day, Ikikaeru Izakaya is almost open for business.

There's just some things that Tetsurou needs to do first.

He sits alone in his restaurant, quietly writing out his list of things that have to be done for the week. It's a late evening, the night already closing in, and he wants to go home. Keiji is certainly
already there, and Koutarou is on break so he'll be wandering about the house looking for mischief. Kenma is likely still at the office, but even he might be going home.

Tetsurou's week does not look pleasant. There's a number of things to do- for one thing, he needs to pick up a kamidana for the house. He needs the ofuda, the charms that go within the kamidana, which will take time to get and set up within it. There are interviews to do, training to oversee, a date with Keiji scheduled nearly six months in advance for just the two of them that he refuses to miss, dinner with Kai and his wife, and most importantly, the dinner that he's hosting at the restaurant for his in-laws at the end of the week. He'll be opening in three weeks time, and while Yuuji has been drumming up interest and posting fliers at bars and clubs that he frequents, passing things along by word of mouth, it's still a toss up as to what the reception will be.

It's going to be a long week.

Groaning, he stands up and pulls his coat on. There's nothing for it, he's just going to have to take it one day at a time.

He locks up and begins a slow walk up the street. He has no particular destination in mind, pacing aimlessly towards the hospital. The evening lights of most shops are dimmed. The Lawsons is quiet, the neighborhood dull with the breath of evening. He walks past apartment buildings, hands shoved in his pockets, and is debating about turning around to fetch the car and head home when he spots an old, stone wall. It runs tight along the street, and, curious, he crosses to look at it. He follows it along a full block, when he reaches an intersection and the entrance to a shrine.

Tetsurou stares, awed and amazed.

The torii gate of this shrine is old stone, and massive green trees sprout up behind the wall. There are lantern statues before the gate, very lovely, but what catches his eye is the dragon that's staring down at him from where it hangs over the gate.

It's made of straw, it seems, and is draped victorious over the gate. Its eyes are black on white, and seem to stare into his soul.

The wind picks up, rustling the trees and pushing him forward. Tetsurou steps closer, looking up at the dragon. The wind ruffles its long whiskers, making it look as though it breathes, and with his skin prickling he tears his eyes away to look within the grounds of the shrine. It's dark within, and he sees komainu, guardian shrine dog statues, forever fiercely growling at him. He thinks it would be well shaded even in the daytime, but at night it's near pitch black within the trees.

But something tugs him in, and he walks through the gate, under the dragon, into the shrine grounds.

It's quiet inside, the kind of quiet he thinks of as comfortable. It's as if the world has exhaled and calmed, leaving him alone with his thoughts, the watchful eyes of the dragon no longer upon him. He makes his way to rinse his mouth and hands, and once that's done he walks deeper into the shrine. His eyes adjust to the dark in little time. It's beautiful, even in the depths of the darkness. The trees and plants are lush and rich green, healthy and well tended. The stone pathways are clear and swept, the shrines buildings themselves in good repair and well loved. He pauses in front of the main building, looking at the majestic sweeps of its roof and the bells before it, and as his head turns he sees a small stone path running along the building. Curious, he follows it.

Up against the back wall is a small cave of stone, with another place to cleanse his hands. He pulls out his phone and turns on the flashlight to read the inscription, and finds that this is the cave of the dragon.
“Huh,” he says, fascinated. Straightening up, he claps twice and bows his head.

*Please help me find a home in this new neighborhood,* he prays, and the wind picks up to ruffle his hair. He keeps his eyes closed, heart thudding within his chest. It feels as though he is being watched, examined- and then it passes, leaving a faint feeling of approval and welcome behind. Tetsurou lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding, and resolves to get an *ofuda* from this shrine as well for the restaurant.

He turns to leave, flashlight still on, and sees a body at the base of a tree.

He's a little impressed that he doesn't scream, but he does fumble his phone out of his hands, where it falls onto the ground. Once his heart has stopped hammering, he picks it up with shaking hands.

“Holy shit,” Tetsurou breathes, scrambling towards the body laying there. It's facing away from him, and with his heart in his throat he rolls them onto their back. The flashlight reveals that it's just a teenage boy, and he's breathing. He's gaunt and thin, with hollow cheeks and a stick figure frame. His hair is scruffy and too long, his jaw sharp enough to cut, and he stirs as Tetsurou shakes him.

“Whassgoinon?” His voice is faint and thready, but he sits up unassisted.

“Hey,” Tetsurou says, keeping a hand on his shoulder. He's young, his uniform telling Tetsurou he's a high school student. “Are you okay? What are you doing here?”

The kid rubs his forehead, swaying. “Must've... must've passed out... Came here to pray...”

Tetsurou thanks every god he can think of, especially Kishimojin, that he'd had his flashlight on. Otherwise he never would have seen the boy, who looks like he's in need of several hot meals and a week of sleep. “Do you live near here?”

“Kinda...”

“C'mon. I run a restaurant nearby, let's get some food and liquids in you and if needed, take you to the hospital.”

There's a flash of panic in the kid's eyes, and he grabs Tetsurou's arm with a weak grip. “No hospital. Please.”

Tetsurou hesitates, but nods. “Fine. I'm going to look you over when we get to the restaurant though, head trauma's serious shit. C'mon, up you get.” He scoops the kids arm over his shoulder, helping him to his feet, and together they walk the blocks back to the restaurant. Tetsurou fumbles the door open, the kid having grown more steady on his feet as they moved along, and leads him inside. He flicks on the lights, nodding him to the bar, and goes into the space behind it to start cooking. He doesn't have much in the way of ingredients, just some things leftover from a few experiments, but it'll have to do. He's made it work with less.

“I don't have money,” the kid tells him. His missing a couple teeth, and there's a scar on his jaw that looks new. He's in dire need of a haircut.

“Couldn't take it anyway,” Tetsurou says, pulling on his apron. “We aren't open yet. You like miso?”

“Yeah.” Big eyes watch as he walks through the kitchen, and look up to the little rainbow flag hanging from the ceiling in the cook space behind the bar. Tetsurou starts chopping things up as he stares at it, and waits patiently for the inevitable. “You're gay?”
“For a certain value of gay, yeah. Probably closer to being bi or pansexual, dunno for sure. I've never been too fussed about it,” Tetsurou tells him as he preps the broth. “I have three boyfriends, though. The four of us are happy together, and I'm proud of us. I wanted something to show that good old community pride, so. Flag it is. How about you?”

The kid looks down at the counter. “I'm gay.”

“Nice.”

Tetsurou hands him some bread and he tears into it. By the time he's done with it, Tetsurou is dishing him a bowl of miso soup and passes it over. The kid practically inhales it, the faint tremors in his hands fading to stillness as his energy is refreshed a bit.

“So,” Tetsurou says, “what's your name?”

“Yukimura Hotaka,” the kid mumbles around his food.

“Hotaka, hmm? I like that name,” Tetsurou says, passing him another bowl. He looks starved, his eyes fat in his head and his cheeks gaunt. Kuroo's familiar with the look. “Want a job, Yukimura Hotaka?”

Hotaka jerks, looking up at him. “Wha?”

Tetsurou shrugs. “I need kitchen help, you seem like you need work.”


“Yeah. We can iron out the details later. Do you have a place, or are you homeless right now?”

Hotaka looks down at the bar, twisting his napkin. “I have a place. My aunt signed for me, but I pay the rent. I just managed on the last of it last month. You really want me to work here? You don't know anything about me. I could have killed someone!”

“Did you?” Tetsurou asks, grinning. Hotaka flushes.

“Well, no.”

Tetsurou nods, straightening up the counter space. “Well, that's good. As for the why...” He shrugs, not looking up. “I wasn't ever in your shoes, exactly, but something close. I guess I just don't want someone to suffer when I can give them a boost to get their lives together.”

Hotaka's eyes are big and swimming with happiness when Tetsurou can bring himself to meet them. They share smiles, and Tetsurou hands him yet another bowl of miso soup. Once he's eaten it, Tetsurou checks him over for head trauma. There's no tenderness, his pupils are right, he knows the dates and all the basic questions. Kenma's run him through tests a thousand times over, Tetsurou has the routine memorized.

Hotaka watches him clean up, looking much better than he had. “You know a lot about medical stuff.”

Tetsurou hesitates, then nods. “Yeah. I didn't have the best childhood. I spent a lot of time getting fixed up in hospitals, or my friend would look me over and fix what he could.”

Hotaka looks down at the wooden bar. “My parents kicked me out, but they didn't- they didn't ever hurt me.”
Tetsurou gives him a long look. He's so young. Tetsurou wonders if he ever looked this young, this fragile. His childhood had been stolen away from him, but surely even at the tender age of 17 someone could still see the frightened kid in him, just like he can see it in Hotaka now. He wonders if this is what Sousuke saw, day in and day out until he started to heal. Fear, trepidation, patiently waiting for the other shoe to finally drop and thrown off when it never does.

“People don't have to hit you to hurt you,” Tetsurou tells him. “Words can cut deeper than knives, and bleed you out all the same.”

He pulls his apron off, not able to meet Hotaka's wide eyes.

“Come on. Let's get you home.”

Koutarou is still up when he comes through the door an hour later. He's reading in the sitting room, comfortably installed on the couch with Fukuko on his chest and a manga in his hands. Tetsurou flops onto the couch with a glance at the title. It's not one he recognizes, but the cover is extremely cute. Koutarou staying up isn't too odd, but it's closing in on 2 AM.

“You're back late!” Koutarou puts the manga aside, careful not to disturb the cat. “I waited for you. I was worried but thought you might be having thinking time so I thought I'd wait to text you.”

Tetsurou loves this man more than he can say. “I hired someone today. A kid—well, a teenager. I found him passed out at Okusawa shrine.”

Koutarou's eyes go wide. “A homeless runaway?”

“No, he's got a place. He didn't run away, he got kicked out on account of being gay. I didn't ask too many questions, but. Guess I've got my first employee.” Tetsurou sighs, rubbing his forehead. “Fuck, Bo. I don't know what to do about this. I didn't think I'd ever be in this kind of position. I feel responsible for him.”

Koutarou cocks his head to the side, smiling. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Tetsurou keels over to lay on his legs, pouting at him. “I took him home and made sure he got in safe, and fed him, and I'm going to make him get a hair cut this week.”

“You're turning into a dad,” Koutarou says, a little gleeful. “I love it.”

“You know,” Tetsurou says, “I kind of do too. I'm going to be the best role model I can be for a healthy life after shitty parents, and give him lots of food, and be the closest thing to a dad without overstepping my boundaries as a boss that I can be.”

“Yeah!”

There's footsteps on the stairs, and Keiji appears with wild bedhead to glare at them. Tetsurou is admittedly distracted from the glare on account of Keiji's exquisite legs, which are on near full display from tiny red shorts. Tetsurou knows that they read “ARE YOU NASTY” on the back and is stupidly turned on every time his partner wears them.

“You have five minutes to come up to bed,” Keiji says, his voice frosty. “I'm tired.”

“Tetsu adopted a son,” Koutarou says.

“Fantastic. He can tell me all about it in the morning. You have practice at 7 in the morning, and I have to leave by 6. Either come to bed or sleep on the couch, but be quiet about it.”
They meekly get up, following Keiji to the bedroom, and both have an excellent night's rest. Tetsuru's in the middle of a very pleasant dream about riding a log flume with soba when Keiji shakes him awake, eyes wild.

“Wait, what did Koutarou mean, you adopted a son!?”

oOo

Tetsurou finds himself walking the now very familiar route to Kishimojin-do in the middle of the day several days later, when he finally has the time to go. Hotaka is a hard worker, he's learned, and picks things up quickly. He's also very definitely a teenager in trouble, and Tetsurou could use all the divine intervention he could get. He doesn't have the faintest clue what he's doing.

The temple is familiar and welcoming, and he spends far too long in front of it in prayer. This time when he writes on the *ema* board, he puts down, *Please help me to be a strength and guide for the child that has come into my life, and bless him with wisdom.* He hangs it and prays to Myoken Bosatsu to illuminate Hotaka's path before returning to the *honden* to get the *ofuda*. Once it's collected and placed in the bag he's brought, he checks his phone for the time and is pleased to find it's not long after 1 o'clock. He could still make it to the restaurant on time to do some cleaning if he hurried-

“How do you accidentally adopt a child?”

Tetsurou tells her everything, spilling out the whole story as he holds Asagao and listens to her make happy baby noises at passing butterflies. The cherry blossoms above them are still in bloom, slowly fading out, and he feels a sense of peace once he's let it all out. The woman laughs, reaching into her bag to offer him a pomegranate once again.

“That's quite the story,” she says, smiling as she begins cutting it apart. “You've gotten yourself into quite the situation.”

“I know.” Tetsurou grins, heart soft. “But I like it. We won't ever have kids of our own, not really, but... I like this. I like caring for people, and guiding them. My partner teaches at a school and sometimes brings his kids to eat at my place too. It's good to see him with them, he loves teaching so much.” He sighs, rubbing Asagao's back. “I just... Hotaka-kun reminds me of me. What I could have been, if someone hadn't helped me. He's been struggling to survive, so it's good to see him
finding his own feet now.”

She smiles, watching as he bounces Asagao in his arms to make her smile.

“I'm glad,” she says. “And I'm glad that you've reached a place in your life where you can help others.”

“Me too,” he says quietly. Asagao waves her tiny hands at him, squealing. “She's so tiny.”

“Isn't she?” The woman smiles, leaning down to kiss her tiny head. Asagao beams at her, eyes big and bright with happiness as she looks at her mother. “The others are older now, she's the baby still and getting very spoiled.”

“As she should,” Tetsurou coos, and Asagao laughs happily.

The woman exchanges a child for a pomegranate, and Tetsurou enjoys the sweet taste on his tongue as the blossoms curl through the air.

“I think you have an interesting life ahead of you, Kuroo Tetsurou,” the woman says, and smiles when he starts. “I never forget a name or a face.”

“And yet I find that I can never remember yours,” Tetsurou says, pomegranate taste heavy on his tongue. The woman smiles, her round face soft and eyes crinkling at the corners.

“That's because I've never given it, cheerful boy with your iron-shod soul.” She rises, smiling down at him, Asagao bright and cheerful in her arms. “I look forward to seeing where the future leads you. We'll meet again, I think. Maybe not soon, but we will. Sometimes life just works like that. Take care of yourself and your new child.”

“I will,” Tetsurou promises, and Asagao waves tiny arms at him in goodbye.

When he arrives home that evening, ofuda for Kishimojin and Myoken Bosatsu in hand, he takes extra time setting up the kamidana and giving offerings. Kenma joins him, watching as he lights the incense and takes a moment to pray. He's chosen pomegranate and sandalwood, and they pair well together from where he's stuck them in the bowl. When he's done praying, Kenma wraps him in a hug.

“What am I doing, kitten?” Tetsurou whispers, resting his head on top of Kenma's. “I don't know anything about guiding kids, not really. I can't be a real parent for him, just someone who can help him out of the hole he's in.”

“I dunno why that's a bad thing,” Kenma says, his voice quiet. “He needs help, and you're giving it. You're going to be great for him. You raised a whole team of volleyball players and you've got six parents who can give you advice. Well, seven really.”

“Seven?”

“Sawamura has been a dad since he was born.”

That gets a laugh out of him, and Tetsurou holds his oldest partner close. There's something tremendously comforting holding Kenma. Holding all of his partners is wonderful, but Kenma is the smallest and Tetsurou always feels a surge of happiness holding his oldest and dearest friend. “What would I do without you, Kenma?”

“Hmm. Crash and burn.”
“Very true.”

Kenma leans up to kiss him, and Tetsurou sighs against his lips.

“Kuro,” Kenma says when they break apart. “We've been together for a really long time. And I...” He sighs. “I love you.”

Tetsurou's eyes water. “I love you too, Kenma.”

Fukuko cries at their feet, and Kenma picks her up to hand her to him. He holds her close, burying his face in her soft fur, and wraps one arm around Kenma to hold him close. Kenma curls into his chest, sturdy and comforting, and Tetsurou finds he can breathe easier than he has in a week.

“I love you,” he says again, because he needs to. He feels Kenma's smile more than sees it.

“I love you too.”

oOo

It's quiet in the restaurant as Tetsurou makes the dinner. It's done with care and attention, each dish specific and well crafted. The drinks are chosen with care, the plates set down gently, the lighting soft and low. He cleans the dishes as his in-laws laugh and joke together, smiling all the while. He likes that his in-laws are friends. They talk regularly, meet up when they can. Saya goes to Retsu for haircuts now, Sousuke plays long distance shogi with Fusazane, Ayumi and Choji send endless cat videos to each other. His parents are warm, happy people.

Five of them leave to head home, one staying behind.

Tetsurou walks out of the kitchen with two last dishes. Chocolate cake, perfectly plated, is set before his last remaining guest.

He sits next to Sousuke and they eat in silence, the restaurant still and quiet.

“Do you remember the first time you took me to eat at a restaurant?” Tetsurou asks quietly. “I was nine. I had a black eye and bruised ribs, and you took me to an izakaya that was full of laughter and noise. There were people joking and talking, and it was just us. I ate so much food, and you had agedashi tofu and water, and made me try a super rich chocolate cake. It was just us, no Kenma, and we didn't say a word the whole time.”

“I remember,” Sousuke says, spearing the cake. “You were all skin and bones and gangly limbs, then.”

“It meant the world to me,” Tetsurou says, chocolate sweet on his tongue. “It meant so much, sitting there together in that noise and confusion, because it was a happy memory with the only person who was really a parent in my life. Just us. It's maybe the best memory of that whole time. That's why I opened this place. So other people can make memories like that.”

Sousuke clears his throat, setting his fork down.

“I knew from the moment you came through our door, with a big smile on your face and asking for Kenma, that you were going to be part of our lives,” Sousuke says, and clasps his hands in front of him. “When I realized what was going on in your parents house, I was determined to make ours a home for you, to give you parents where yours failed. And when Saya and I saw you and Kenma together, falling into each others orbit-” His voice cracks, and Tetsurou rubs his eyes as tears start to form. “When we saw you together, we were so happy. You've always been my son, never
Kenma's brother, and I am so happy you've found a family of your own.”

“Thank you,” Tetsurou says, his voice breaking. “Thank you, for loving Bokuto and Akaashi too. I know it was strange, and probably confusing, but I can't imagine a life without them now.”

“It was strange,” Sousuke agrees, reaching over to ruffle his hair, “but how could I question something that made you smile like that?”

Tetsurou smiles at him, wide and real, and Sousuke smiles back. They eat their cake in silence, wash up together, and Tetsurou locks the doors.

Together, they walk out into the night. Just another father and son, heading home from dinner.

oOo

Opening night goes off with only a few hitches. And the next night goes well, and then the next, and the next and suddenly, Tetsurou is a respectable business owner with a well liked restaurant that's popular with everyone from office workers to queer icons from Harajuku who come to eat his agedashi tofu and take fancy pictures for Instagram. Queer teens gravitate to it, some shyly bringing flags for him to hang up as well, and he thanks them and hangs them with pride. Hotaka graduates by the skin of his teeth and begins working full time, taking a year off from university to get his life together. Inuoka Shisou comes to work for him as well, and it's all of a month before the two of them are hopelessly smitten with each other.

Tetsurou likes it. He likes the work, the time he spends in the kitchen and the control he has over a much smaller place. Koutarou joins him in the kitchens some days to de-stress after a difficult practice, the two of them working in sync together at the stoves as the hustle and bustle of the izakaya. He keeps his prices low but still makes quite a lot of money, and after a lot of talking with Fusazane, begins setting aside money to give to different charities and activist groups.

It's a good life.

Tetsurou falls into bed with his wonderful men each night and marvels at how far they've come. Their lives have become so simple, and so complex, settled into the rhythm of work. They're still trying to find the balance between home and work each day, but that's fine. As Fukuko falls asleep on Koutarou's broad chest, Tetsurou smiles. He wouldn't change it for the world.

Before he knows it, Golden Week is upon them and Keiji's running around like a chicken with his head cut off trying to finish all the preparations needed for the new Karasuno team to come down. Tetsurou helps with the paperwork where he can, makes bentos and does the shopping, carries on with life as best he can as everyone get sucked up into the rush of life. Koutarou gets flown out of the country for games the same time that Kenma and Terushima get asked to speak at a convention in Los Angeles, and Tetsurou winds up in the house alone for most of Golden Week itself.

It's a little depressing, but it's not so bad. He keeps busy, calls them every night, and sleeps with their pillows.

By sheer coincidence, everyone flies back into Haneda on Saturday afternoon. Iwaizumi and Tetsurou meet them at the airport, Iwaizumi bolting to Oikawa as soon as they appear. It's very sweet, watching Oikawa all but launch himself into his husbands arms, and the National team all get a good smile and laugh as the two hold each other. Bokuto and Tetsurou aren't much better, admittedly, running into each others arms. Tetsurou picks him up to swing him around, startling a laugh out of his boyfriend, and kisses him firmly.
“God, I missed you,” Tetsurou tells him, and kisses him another four or five times for good measure. Bokuto goes very pink and buries his face in Tetsurou's chest.

They wait for Terushima and Kenma to arrive before leaving, Kenma getting the same treatment of kisses and hugs from Bokuto and Tetsurou despite his token protests, and they all drive back to the restaurant for dinner. Tetsurou takes the reins from his secondary manager, ruffles Hotaka's hair and adjusts Touka's apron, gets the information on what's running low from Shisou, and lets himself fall into his happy place. Iwaizumi, Oikawa, Terushima, and Kenma get settled at the bar to exchange stories about their week as Bokuto pulls on his "Owl I Need Is You" apron from its hook and settles in next to Tetsurou. The stresses of the week float away as Bokuto steals kisses and carrots in equal measure, the kitchen filling with laughter when Tetsurou chases him around and demands payment in the form of yet more kisses. Hotaka laughs as Tetsurou tries to hide behind his 5'7” frame and is captured.

The atmosphere is relaxed, the music is good, and Tetsurou is so happy his best friends are home to hold him again.

The Karasuno and Nekoma team descend like vultures on his restaurant around 6:30, a horde of black and red clad teenagers all desperately hungry. Kenma smiles when he sees them, his eyes soft, and Terushima chuckles as they find seats and take a look around. They're a rowdy, noisy bunch, as high school students tend to be. It fills Tetsurou's heart with happiness.

“Oh wow!”

Tetsurou looks up from cutting up yet more carrots, as does Bokuto beside him. The kids have found the pictures on the wall.

“Look!” One of the ones from Karasuno, definitely a first year, points enthusiastically at the picture of Bokuto and Oikawa at the bar with Iwaizumi, Oikawa giving a peace sign as Iwaizumi rolls his eyes and Bokuto with his hands in the air. “Oikawa Tooru and Bokuto Koutarou! And that's Oikawa-san's husband next to them! They're the best. I want to get their jerseys signed when I can, they're so cool.”

Oikawa freezes with his hand halfway to his mouth, and Iwaizumi chokes on his drink as Bokuto beams with pride. Tetsurou narrowly saves the soup from spilling to the floor.

“Fusa-chan,” one of Karasuno's third years whines as his partner looks at the pictures, “C'mon, babe, I want soba.”

“You always want soba,” Fusa-chan replies, reaching down to grasp his hand. “Jeez Hiro, you whine so much.”

“Fusa-chaaan-”

“Oh my god, you brat.” Fusa-chan, tall and bulky and dyed blond, leans over to kiss his brunet partners forehead. “Why do I love you so much, you big baby?”

Tetsurou watches as Iwaizumi's eyes get misty, and Oikawa reaches over to take his hand as Hiro lights up and kisses his cheek in return. It's like looking at a reflection, seeing the past repeat. Hiro's smile is an echo of Oikawa's own, charming to a fault, while his Fusa-chan looks exasperated and delighted in turn.

“I'm going to be the best, one day,” Hiro says firmly, “that's why you love me. Because that's gonna be us.”
“I know, babe.”

“We went to Kitagawa Daiichi too! Maker of champions!” Hiro shoves his hand in the air, dramatic as can be, and Iwaizumi clamps a hand over his mouth as a tear rolls down his cheek. Oikawa's obviously biting his lip as his own tears slip out. Tetsurou leans into Bokuto, who wraps an arm around his waist to hold him tight against him. “We'll do the Olympics too!”

“Hell yeah we will.” Fusa-chan smiles at him like he's the sun.

“Here's the Karasuno Four!” One of Karasuno's gasps, and Karasuno's team all presses in. “There's Tsukishima-san and Yama-chan! And Hinata-senpai and Kageyama-san! Wow, did Yama-chan get even more piercings since we saw him in March?”

It's a good picture of them, Hinata and Kageyama both trying to strangle each other while Yamaguchi and Tsukishima laugh across the table during Kenma's birthday party. The picture beside them is from that same night, and Nekoma's manager gasps as she sees it. Kenma and Terushima are sitting side by side, Terushima throwing up double peace signs and Kenma half hidden but clearly smiling behind his phone.

“Apple Pie Games! And look, look, it's even signed! I want hair like Terushima's, undercuts are awesome.”

“Sakura-chan, literally everybody knows you're a lesbian, I don't think you need to advertise on top of it.”

“Okay first of all fuck you, Takeru-”

“Have you played the new one?!”

“Oh man, I cried so hard when I finished it. That breakup was just like me and Toshi, you know? I felt so much better after, I love those games.”

Tetsurou looks over to where Terushima and Kenma sit at the end of the bar, Terushima pressing a hand to his mouth as Kenma ducks his head so his hair hides his face.

“Look!” One of Nekoma's kids points at the picture at the very top left. “It's Akaashi-sensei! And... Oh my god. That- that's...”

Akaashi takes that moment to open the door, and the kids all turn as he steps inside. Bokuto kisses Tetsurou's forehead, and bounds down from the bar area with a cry of, “Akaaaaaashi!”

Akaashi beams at him, wide and easy, and opens his arms for Bokuto to fling his arms around him. Tetsurou smiles as gasps ring out through the restaurant and Akaashi kisses their boyfriend firmly.

“I missed you,” Bokuto exclaims when he pulls back, beaming.

“You saw me three hours ago, Bokuto-san.” The honorific is practically an endearment

“And I missed you every moment!”

Fusa-chan and Hiro are gaping at Bokuto and Oikawa clears his throat once he's wiped his eyes. The crowd turns, and Hiro's jaw drops.

“Kitagawa Daiichi, huh?” Iwaizumi says, taking Oikawa's hand. “That's a good choice for middle school. Should've gone to Aoba Johsai, though.”
Fusa-chan actually squeaks.

“AKAASHI-SENSEI,” a tiny first year shrieks. “T-t-that's-”

Akaashi smiles, looping his arm around Bokuto's waist and resting his head on his shoulder. Bokuto beams with pride, puffing out his chest. “My partner, yes.”

Terushima pokes his head around the half wall, and grins. “I hear we have fans?”

Nekoma's manager's eyes look like they're about to fall out of her head.

The door opens again, Takeda and Ukai strolling in with Naoi. Bokuto presses a kiss to Akaashi's forehead before bounding back into the kitchen to tackle the sauce. Akaashi follows him, pulling on an apron as he goes and kissing Tetsurou's cheek before getting started on chopping vegetables. Everyone gets settled, Terushima dragging Kenma over to join a table with a rapt audience and Oikawa and Iwaizumi talk with Karasuno's extremely married Fusa and Hiro at the bar as the servers go about their business.

Tetsurou's working on serving up soba for table 3 when someone clears their throat.

He looks up, and there's a tall, lanky kid with black hair that doesn't seem like it wants to obey the laws of physics. He's lean but sturdy, decked out in Nekoma red and an earring in his right ear. His eyes are gold and lit with inner fire, his mouth stubborn, early laugh lines forming by his eyes. It's like looking into a mirror and seeing himself, 8 years younger.

“You're Kuroo, aren't you?” he says, his eyes fixing on him. “Nekoma's captain, once. I've seen your pictures hanging up.”

“You've got me,” Tetsurou says, smiling.

“I'm the captain, now,” the kid says. He's handsome and his nose is proud, a strong arch.

“Youshimoto Aki. I want to thank you.”

Tetsurou blinks, setting his stirring spoon down. “For what?”

Youshimoto swallows hard. “You were the one who laid the framework that made it safe for people like me to be ourselves. Thank you for being the one that everyone thinks they need to measure up to. You might never get to see it, but you made us a family, over and over, with every single choice we make. All of us, every single one of us, we've all looked up to you. Going to Nationals was really cool, and I know it meant a lot to Nekomata-sensei and Naoi-sensei, but that's not what we look up to. Thank you for not letting resentment fester and building something better. You're the stick every captain has to measure up to. Thank you.”

He bows, and quickly walks away.

Tetsurou can't seem to catch his breath. He slips through the kitchen mostly unseen, out the back doors, and buries his face in his hands to try and get it back together.

He's never had any grand illusions about his status in the world. He's not like his partners, never expected to be recognized and admired. Bokuto stands on the world stage, lights on him and proudly defiant of anyone who thinks he can't handle it. Kenma makes games that bring people hope and love. Akaashi defends his old team, giving them a future and teaching the next generation what it means to have hope, leading under the eyes of so many.

And he gives these kids hope too. These tiny, tiny lives, still sitting in the fragile shell of high
school, balancing between childhood and adulthood, he's still giving them hope.

It means more than he thought it would.

The sobs rip out of his throat without his permission, tears rolling down his cheeks and dripping to the road. His shoulders heave with the force of them, because this. This was all he wanted. A legacy to leave behind, one that people would fight to protect. A legacy of acceptance, and determination, and laughter. He'd wanted that legacy to endure, the happiness of Nekoma's team to remain intact once he was gone, and it had. He's succeeded, and now it was sitting in his restaurant.

The door to the kitchen opens up, and Keiji steps out.

“Kuroo?”

Tetsurou scrub's at his face, drying his tears. “I- just a moment, love.”

Keiji closes the door, walking to him and taking his face in his hands. His hands are strong still, but he holds him like precious glass.

“What's wrong?” he asks, those beautiful teal eyes fixed on him, and Tetsurou pulls him into a hug. Keiji hugs him back, holding him as he cries. “Kuroo, are you alright?”

Tetsurou buries his face against his shoulder, gulping in air once the tears dry up. He pulls back, cupping Keiji's face in his hands and gently stroking his cheeks. Keiji looks up at him, concerned and consternated, his default expression. Tetsurou laughs brokenly, kissing him lightly.

“You're something amazing, you know that?” he says, a few last tears falling. “My beautiful, wonderful partner, you are so good and so kind, even when you're being an asshole. You're raising those kids so well. They're going to be stars, every last one of them, and I'm so happy you went to Nekoma.”

Keiji leans into his hand, his eyes softening. “Kuroo...”

“I mean it,” Tetsurou insists. “Thank you. Thank you, because these kids can know they have a legacy to protect and you keep it alive. Mine, and Kenma's, and Yaku and Lev and Akane and everybody else. That year, that last impossible year- it's burned out and gone but the memories of what we made that year live on and you get to protect it. Thank you. I can't build them a castle with words, or train them. The best I can offer them is a place to eat and laugh and joke and be children for a little while left. And I've never been happier, seeing what we've made together.”

He's crying again, emotions running far too high.

Keiji's eyes are a little wet too, and he reaches up to wipe Tetsurou's tears away as his hands fall back to his sides.

“This is part of a team, too,” he says, and his own tear slips out. “Remember? The food together, the laughing and joking. You’ll never be rid of them, now.”

“I never want to be,” Tetsurou tells him, “not as long as I can help them make good memories together.”

Keiji kisses him, soft and sweet, and Tetsurou holds him there until they're both breathless. His waves are a mess, as ever, and Tetsurou runs his fingers through them.

“Come on, pain-in-the-ass boyfriend of mine,” Keiji says, tangling their fingers together. “Let's go
feed our children some happy memories.”

And Tetsurou goes.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote and rewrote this chapter many times over. There was a different point to it each time, but in the end, it’s the overarching true theme of part four that won out: Legacy. What we leave behind in the wake of our actions, what emotions we stir in the hearts of others- truly, the legacy we leave is one of the most moving things.
Chapter Summary

How do you measure a year?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We are shaped and fashioned by what we love.” - Goethe

oOo

Winter

Their flight to Hokkaido is first class despite Keiji's disapproval at the expense. Bokuto just wants to show off for once, so he lets him, and he sleeps on his shoulder most of the way to the Sapporo airport. Kuroo, who takes to flying about as well as a turtle, spends the entire hour and forty minutes holding onto the seat like it's personally wronged him, while Kenma doesn't seem to care and plays on his PSP the whole way. They touch down in Sapporo with no incidents, and Kuroo practically launches himself out of the airplane as fast as possible.

“So,” Kenma says in a deadpan voice as they wait for their luggage, “who wants to ride back with Kuroo on the train?”

Kuroo actually whimpers and clings to Bokuto, who kisses his cheek.

“Aww, babe.”

“Please don't make me do that again,” he says weakly, and Keiji just sighs, pulling out his phone to check how expensive it will be.

“I'll ride with him,” he says, noting ticket prices. It won't be too bad.

Kuroo detaches from Koutarou to cling to him instead, clutching him tight. Keiji wraps an arm around his waist as Kai strolls up with his wife, having sat in economy. Kai snickers at the look of pure terror on Kuroo's face, and claps him on the shoulder.

“You were that scared, hmm?”

“Flying is the worst,” Kuroo whines, and buries his face in Keiji's hair. For nearly 175 pounds of solid muscled, 6’1”, 26 year old ex-athlete restaurateur, Kuroo is doing his level best to be a child. But Keiji's just relieved they got there in one piece, and directs Koutarou to fetch their luggage.

Kai's wife hides her smile as Kuroo nuzzles Keiji's neck, and Keiji sighs.

They stay in a modest hotel towards the edge of Sapporo, one that thankfully has a gym that Keiji can unleash Koutarou on. Koutarou's used to a regimen that's near double what some of the other players do thanks to his sheer overwhelming energy and physical ability. Keiji and Kuroo switch off the days that they go to the gym with him, so that neither of them are run ragged, and Keiji is delighted that it's Kuroo's day. He's exhausted from even the slight amount of traveling they've
done, and Kuroo could stand to work off the rest of that nervous energy.

Besides, if he's lucky Koutarou will be back in charge of the national team account, which means gym selfies.

He curls up against Kenma in their room, and Kenma rolls over onto his back so Keiji can cuddle up and rest his head on Kenma's chest over his heart. Kenma's in his favorite sleepwear, one of Kuroo's ancient t-shirts and the softest pair of sweatpants Keiji's ever seen. It's comforting to be with him, familiar and easy, despite the strange surroundings and different smells and lack of Tokyo sounds. Keiji buries his face against Kenma's chest and indulges himself in a whine of discontent until Kenma starts stroking his back to soothe him.

“You travel even worse than Tsukishima does,” Kenma says, running his fingers through Keiji's hair.

“I like our bed and our house and my routine,” Keiji mumbles, clutching him. “It's worse when I have to go without all of you. First year of Chuo would have been a nightmare if I didn't have you with me. I would have lost my mind that first week.”

Kenma gives a silent, breathy laugh, gently tugging Keiji's hair to get him to move to a more comfortable place on his chest. Keiji obliges, listening to the soft, steady beat of his heart. It helps more than he'd like to admit. “That first year was awful.”

“It really was.”

Keiji drifts as Kenma plays with his hair, any residual tension fleeing as he all but melts into his partner. Kenma is such a steady, grounding weight in his life. Quiet, anxious, eternally grumpy, and utterly wonderful- Keiji loves him deeply.

“What would you change?” Kenma asks abruptly. “If you could go back and change anything in your life?”

Keiji hums, tilting his head so Kenma can scratch at a spot on his scalp. “I don't know. I don't think I'd change anything, actually. Maybe tell my parents I love them even more. I've been lucky. I've had a quiet life, and been loved and cared for all through it. I thought for quite some time about how different my life would have been if I went with them to England, but I don't regret staying in Japan at all. It was lonely sometimes, but I always had a house full of people, I talked to them all the time, and it... it was good. In the long run. Besides, if I changed something, who's to say we'd even be here now.”

Kenma sighs, fingers going still. “It's not my fault,” he says to the open room. Keiji knows what he's talking about immediately, and wraps his arm around his waist.

“It's not.”

“I did everything I could.”

“You did.”

“I didn't fail, I'm not a bad person, and I'm not responsible for others actions.”

“That's right.”

Kenma falls silent, fingers still in Keiji's hair unmoving. Keiji waits, patient. Some days are better than others for Kenma and Kuroo. Some days are better than others, even now. It's been over half
their lifetimes now, since Kuroo and Kenma fell into each other's lives, but the scars from that time will only fade. They won't ever disappear completely. He's reminded of that every time his fingers brush over Kuroo's scars, or Kenma wakes screaming from a nightmare.

“It's the anniversary of Eisuke's arrest,” Kenma says at last. “It feels like it's been forever.”


“Is it?”

“Yes,” Keiji says simply, sitting up so he can press a kiss to the tip of his nose. “It's a very happy anniversary. Thank you, Kenma.”

Kenma pulls him down in a hug.

When Koutarou and Kuroo return, they're already fast asleep together, safe in each others arms.

They get dressed together the next morning in their nicest hakama and haori, Keiji fussing with each piece as they go. They opt for the traditional black on black rather than going with the fancier haori that Keiji usually wears. Koutarou puts Kenma's hair up into a sleek and elegant twist to keep it off of his neck. Once Keiji's pleased, they leave and catch a cab to their destination.

Soma Shrine is a decent distance out of the city, and a somewhat strange place for a wedding, but the shrine itself is beautiful and the people there just as much so. Both grooms are there, waiting to welcome their guests, and there's a cry of delight from both of them as the four climb out of the car and hurry up the path to them. The snow is bright and brilliant, the red torii gates striking.

Lev looks magnificent, resplendent in a brilliant white coat with gold detailing and buttons that looks extremely Russian. His boots are black leather, polished til they shine, his high-collared shirt has intricate red embroider on it, and his coat on closer inspection is actually white brocade with a faint pattern. He practically glows next to Yaku, who's in an ultra traditional montsuki-hakama in inky black, a new kamon shaped like a curled cat inside a diamond on the silk.

Kuroo's started crying, and Kenma's mouth is quivering as he tries to hold in his emotions.

“Oh no,” Yaku says, eyes going wide. “Don't you guys start, I'll never be able to stop.”

“You look amazing, Yaku-san,” Keiji says with a warm smile. “And so do you, Lev-kun.”

Bokuto bursts into tears and rushes them, actually picking Lev up with the force of his hug and spinning him around.

The wedding is a mix of Japanese and Russian traditions. Kuroo and Kenma cry the whole way through the ceremony, Kuroo weeping on Bokuto’s shoulder as Bokuto sobs into Kuroo’s hair. Keiji does shed a few tears, and is more than happy to join in the festivities as they arise. It’s a beautiful, perfect evening.

Lev and Yaku fly out for a honeymoon in Okinawa the next morning. Keiji stays in bed with Tetsurou as Koutarou and Kenma gather their things and kiss them goodbye to catch their own flight back to Tokyo. The door closes, and Keiji sighs as he stares at the ceiling. His head doesn't hurt too much, but he wasn't the one who'd done five shots of vodka in a row and somehow done a perfect waltz after. How Koutarou's walking, he'll never know.

Tetsurou rolls over so they can look each other in the eyes, one hand coming to twine their fingers together. His eyes are soft and patient, and Keiji leans in to press a lingering kiss to his forehead.
“We could, you know,” Tetsurou says quietly.

Keiji knows what he means. They could pair off and marry, have one ceremony all together. Cake and fine suits, lots of photos and a proper show of intent, all the things that make a wedding.

“I don't want that,” Keiji says, and finds that he means it. “I don't want to marry one of you and not the other two. I like... I like what we have.”

Tetsurou lets out a sigh of relief, collapsing back on the bed. “Oh, thank god.”

Keiji raises his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“I don't want to get married,” Tetsurou says, looking over at him. “A ceremony of intent, maybe. With just us and our closest friends and family, but I don't want to pair off just for legality. Maybe that'll change, but not right now. Besides, who would marry who? I think Akaashi Tetsurou sounds nice, but so does Kozume Keiji. We couldn't even have me and Koutarou get married, then adopt you two, because the Koseki laws won't allow gay marriage adoption yet.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Keiji says thoughtfully, absently trailing his fingers over Tetsurou's chest.

Tetsurou catches his hand, lifting it up to kiss his fingers. “I never wanted to. Get married, I mean. I don't like the idea of being physically tied to someone. I thought, maybe Kenma, when I was younger. But even now I don't think I ever really want that. And I don’t think Kenma wants the fuss of a wedding or a marriage.”

“Koutarou would be upset if we weren’t all equals. Okay,” Keiji says, and kisses his forehead. “No marriage.”

Tetsurou sighs, content. “Thank you, love.”

Together, they climb aboard the shinkansen in Sapporo, luggage stowed safely together. They settle in seats beside each other, settled. The train rushes along out of the station, and Kuroo nestles against Keiji's side.

“What do you think?” he asks, quietly.

Keiji hums faintly, reaching up to absently stroke through Kuroo's hair. “I think I quite love you.”

The shinkansen rushes through the country, and Akaashi Keiji settles down to sleep with his heart at ease.

Spring

It's Kenma who sees the rings.

They're in a shop window, sitting there serene as can be, identical plain bands with a sign in front of them that reads “Free Engraving With Purchase!!!!!!” and he stares at them for an inordinate amount of time. Yuuji doubles back from where he's walked ahead, coming back to Kenma's side, and examines the rings through the window with him.

“You look like you're thinking real hard about something,” he teases, popping a sucker in his mouth and rattling it around behind his teeth. They're as oddly matched a pair as ever, Yuuji in sweats and a crop top that reads “Nobody Knows I'm Bisexual” and Kenma looking like he's just walked out of a randomized character selection screen. “I wonder what it is...”
“Hush,” Kenma says, without looking away from the rings.

“It's a good sale.”

“Nn.”

“Four different metals.”

“Yuuji.”

Yuuji shrugs lazily, pulling out his phone and thumbing through Twitter. “I'm just saying... You have the money, and the men, and it'd be real cute if you got them something nice, wouldn't it?”

It would. Kenma knows it would. He's been thinking about this from the first day that he saw Hajime wearing his ring and Oikawa showed them the little beetle carved on the inside of his. He's been thinking about this when he goes to his parents, when he video chats with Akaa-san, as Ayumi likes to be called, when Choji sings cheerfully in the Bokuto-Sato kitchen on holidays. He wants. He didn't know that it was possible for him to want like this, but oh, he wants. He's never been good about giving up his possessions.

“Fuck it,” he says, Yuuji gasping in delight, and pushes the door to the ring shop open.

There are certain benefits to being relatively well off, and one of them is that he leaves with four boxes and four nice chains in a discrete black bag. Yuuji leaves with a handsome and sleek gold chain for his boyfriend as well, looking very smug.

Kenma’s never been much for holding onto gifts for “the opportune moment”. Keiji likes to wait, likes to savor the anticipation, but the rest of them can hardly hold out for birthdays. He leaves the bag in the sitting room with the intention of giving them to his partners that night and heads to the kitchen to help Kuroo with dinner.

Koutarou gets back from practice and kisses him and Kuroo, Keiji gets back and immediately heads up to soak in the bath until the food is done. Kuroo sings off key in the kitchen to some popular pop sing, and Kenma loves his boyfriends. It’s a thoroughly normal evening.

They finally manage to gather up for a hearty dinner of curry, and when they’ve all finished eating Kenma clears his throat.

“I um. I have something to tell you all.”

“Oooh,” Kuroo says, eyes brightening. “What is it? Something exciting?”

“I thought,” he says hesitantly, looking at all of them, “that I could get you some gifts.”

“Oooh, gifts!” Koutarou perks up immediately. “Can we open them right now?”

“Patience, Koutarou,” Keiji chides, but also looks plenty interested. Kenma rolls his eyes, going to the sitting room to fetch the sleek black boxes. They’re long and thin for the necklace chains inside, and he sets one in front of each of his partners after a quick check to be sure he knows which is which.

“Before you open them,” he says, Kuroo’s fingers twitching greedily, “I um. This isn’t meant to be anything more than a gift, something we could share. That’s it.”

“Can we?” Keiji asks, and Kenma nods.
They all open the boxes, and Kuroo lets out a strangled gasp as Keiji’s eyes go wide and Koutarou gapes.

Kuroo’s ring is black titanium, as strong and unbreakable as he is. All of them hang from sterling silver chains, but Kuroo’s looks especially striking as he pulls it out. Keiji has platinum, rich and sleek, as classic as he is. Keiji immediately drapes the chain over his neck, eyes shining. Koutarou, of course, is yellow gold. It gleams warm and inviting, gold for his gold medalist, and he holds it reverently. Kenma’s is rose gold, shifting in tone as the light catches it. He pulls it over his head, letting it rest on his chest.

“All of us do so much work with our hands I thought necklaces would be a better choice,” Kenma says. “If you want to get them sized you can, I just had to guess on sizes and I don’t think they’ll fit right. On the inside, all equally apart are, um, are our first names. So even if we were apart we can kind of all be together?”

Kouta scrambles up and around the table to fling his arms around him. Keiji is right after, and Kuroo flings himself on the pile moments later despite Kenma's protests.

He manages to get them off and flees with his dishes to the kitchen, bright red.

Once the dishes are done the other three wind up out in the yard, Keiji tossing for Koutarou to hit. Kenma leans on the door frame, smiling. He runs his fingers around the inside of the band, feeling the slight dip of each kanji against his fingers. There’s something soothing about it, spinning the names around his fingers as he watches his boyfriend's scamper around the back lawn, Keiji laughing as Koutarou urges him to toss higher.

He loves them more than words.

Kuroo catches him in the hallway on his way out the door, sliding his fingers under his chin to bend and gently, so gently kiss his lips.

“Hey, kitten,” he says quietly, and Kenma huffs as Fukuko comes to wind around their ankles and scream up at her father. Kuroo ignores her in favor of kissing Kenma again, and Kenma steps in to press closer to him. Kuroo smiles against his mouth.

“You’re so terribly sweet, you know,” Kuroo says when he pulls back. “Sweet as can be, even when you’re being a little shit. And I love you for it, more than I’ve even got any words for. You really are just like a cat, pretending that you’re above it all and spiky as it gets right up until you turn into the softest ball of fluff.”

“I do not,” Kenma huffs.

“Oh, but you do,” Kuroo smirks, and kisses him again. “Thank you, kitten.”

Kenma huffs again, pushing him away and nodding at the door. “Out. Go play so you’re not underfoot.”

Kuroo laughs, running out the door with a wink thrown behind for show. Kenma walks to the door to watch as he piles into an irate Keiji, and Koutarou launches into all of them to turn them into a lanky pile of bodies. Kenma smiles, reaching up to touch the ring around his neck as Fukuko rubs on his legs and purrs like a jet engine.

Kozume Kenma is happy. And that is more than enough.
Summer in Tokyo is on them before they know what hit them. Koutarou doesn’t really care for the
heat, but the heat means festivals, and that’s definitely something he’s excited about. Festivals
mean yukata, and games with Kuroo, and prizes, and mochi, and glowing lanterns. And Koutarou
loves all of those things.

“Keiiijii!” he calls as he digs through their boxes at the bottom of Kuroo’s office closet. Mostly
he’s only finding paperwork, but he did also find a cute little seahorse figurine. “Keiji! Did you
move my yukata?”

“No, Koutarou,” Keiji’s voice floats back to him. “Have you checked the bedroom closet?”

“Twice, Keiji!”

“And the linen closet in the hall?”

That, he hasn’t checked! Koutarou hops up, running to the linen closet and pulling the door open.
Inside are three stacked boxes, and he whoops with relief as he grabs them out. “Found them!”

Keiji steps out of the bedroom doorway, already dressed in his sleek yukata and a fan in his hand.
He looks so terribly handsome, and Koutarou stumbles a little on the stairs as he stares up at him.
“Keiji, you’re beautiful.”

Keiji’s face goes pink, and he immediately pulls the fan up to cover his face. “Koutarou.”

“You look like a prince! Keiji-sama,” Koutarou croons, reaching the last of the stairs and wrapping
an arm around Keiji to pull him in tight. Keiji squeaks a little, which is cuter than it has any right to
be, and Koutarou peppers kisses over his face and one on the fan. “Keiji-dono, will you come with
me to the festival? Will you come with me while you’re all princely in that pretty white and gold,
and will you cheer for me so I can win you things?!”

“Koutarou, you’re making me blush,” Keiji says, obviously flustered, and Koutarou beams at him.

“Good! I wanted to! You’re so cute, Keiji.”

Keiji shoos him into the bedroom to dress, blushing even as he does. He’s so charming and cute
when he blushes.

Koutarou gets in his yukata and bursts back out of the bedroom, clattering down the stairs to go
and find his geta. Keiji’s waiting in the genkan, patient as ever, and Koutarou swoops in to kiss his
cheek.

“I love you,” he says, and Keiji turns pink again.

“Put your geta on,” he says tartly, but he’s trying to hide a smile and failing.

The festival is in Okusawa, not too far from the restaurant. Koutarou whoops as he spots the start
of the festivities on a broad street near a park, thrusting his arms in the air. Akaashi ducks on
instinct, long since used to his happiness. Lanterns are strung up by the entrance and up in the
trees, big globes bright and cheerful. The stalls are full of games and food, people milling around
in yukata and comfortable clothes. Music, a koto, is coming from somewhere, and children laugh as
they chase each other around.

Kenma’s not hard to find, standing near the front with Terushima and his boyfriend, Kyouutani.
Terushima’s in fine form, in neon green shorts and a baseball-type shirt in white and pink reading
“Don’t Look Back” in bright letters, a hat shoved on his head and dripping bracelets and rings.
Kyoutani’s much more subdued in a simple yukata, and is rolling his eyes at something Terushima’s laughing at while Kenma fiddles with a game, not looking up.

Koutarou pounces, Terushima laughing like a hyena as Kenma yelps.

He laughs as Koutarou spins him around, and presses a quick kiss to his cheek. It's a beautiful sound. “Bokuto, put me down.”

“Kenma!” Koutarou laughs, setting him back down and taking his hand. “Will you come with me? I want to get mochi! They have the strawberry kind over by the yakiniku.”

Kenma smiles, squeezing his hand, and lets Koutarou drag him along to the mochi, waving to the grinning Terushima and Kyoutani. Kuroo finds them eventually, hair wild as ever and still in his work clothes. Kenma parks himself by Akaashi as Koutarou and Kuroo immediately get competitive. Koutarou wins the strong man competition, Kuroo wipes the table at the ring toss, neither of them are any good at the water shooting game, and Kenma surprises everyone by being absolutely lethal at the balloon popping. Akaashi forbids any of them from trying the goldfish game, for fear of Fukuko eating them before they could get a proper tank.

They eat dinner in the park, watching the sun set and the lanterns light up. The sounds of the city wash over them, the chatter and laughter of happy people. Kenma leans on Koutarou, playing a Monster Hunter game as Kuroo teases Akaashi until Akaashi lunges for him, the pair of them chasing each other around the park while Koutarou laughs at their antics.

When he gets back up Akaashi’s there almost instantly, catching his hand. Akaashi spins him around into his arms, pulling him into a kiss, and Koutarou melts. He’s just so beautiful, so perfectly beautiful, and his smile is like the sunrise. Kenma gets his own kiss from Kuroo and goes very pink.

“Let’s go home,” Akaashi says, smiling. “I’m ready for bed.”

“Okay!”

It seems like he blinks, and then…

Koutatou wakes up to the start of the rest of his life.

He does every morning. One day he won't, but that'll be far in the future. He's living until he's 120, just like he told Keiji so long ago.

Kenma is soft and quiet in his arms, Akaashi pressed up tight against his back and Kuroo buried under his pillows on Akaashi's other side. The room is still and peaceful, Sunday sunlight streaming in through the windows. There is nowhere to go, no reason to wake. Time is slow, caramelizing in the air.

Koutatou settles back down.

They have plenty of time to rush around with their busy lives.

There is time enough for this.

Bokuto Koutarou closes his eyes, and lets the years roll over him.
Kuroo Tetsurou wakes up on his 27th birthday alive and stares blankly at the ceiling in the silent bedroom. When he feels awake enough, he reluctantly turns his head to look at the clock on the bedside table. The clock informs him that he’s slept late, and that it’s 10:42 AM. Groaning, he throws his arm over his face. While he’s arranged to have the day off, leaving his managers in charge of the shop, there are still things that need doing. Meal prep for his partners for the next week, for one thing. He should probably do some of the laundry as well- the others have work, but he’ll see them in the evening. It’s growing to be crunch time on Kenma’s newest game, Keiji has tests to grade, and Koutarou has a game abroad coming up.

He’s 27. The same age as his parents were when they had him.

Tetsurou looks up at the unchanged ceiling a lump in his throat. It’s going to be a difficult day.

He climbs out of bed slowly, the weight of the day already pressing on him, and takes the ring on its chain from where it sits on the bedside table and loops it over his neck. The engraved kanji on the inside is soothing to the eye, the names a perfect thing to settle his soul. He plays with it for a moment before getting up properly, stretching as he heads to the door.

He opens it, and is heading down the stairs when he hears a clatter and the sound of voices from the kitchen. For a moment he stands frozen, the idea of burglars running through his head, but the sudden string of curses he hears is definitely Keiji. Who should be at work. He continues down the stars, both curious and concerned.

When he reaches the main level, he walks into the dining room and stares at the chaos in the kitchen. Koutarou’s making pancakes, a massive pile of rejects already off to one side, while Keiji and Kenma have a video on Kenma’s phone playing that appears to be about how to plate food in elegant ways. There’s a stack of pancakes on a plate and tray, with a nice assortment of blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries on top.

“Uh,” he says blankly, and the trio all jump, whirling around to look at him. “What’re you doing here?”

“Nooo!” Koutarou wails. “We were gonna surprise you!”

Tetsurou stares at them, baffled. “Huh?”

“With breakfast! And a day out!” Koutarou pouts, but Keiji just smiles, setting down his things and walking over to gently kiss Tetsurou’s forehead.

“Happy birthday, Kuroo,” he says, and Tetsurou’s heart stutters.

Breakfast is delicious. He’s plied with gifts, books from Keiji and a new knife set from Koutarou and Kenma. They leave without the car, walking to the train and heading to Ikebukuro.

It’s not a surprise when they lead him on the walk to Kishimojin-do, but it makes Kuroo smile anyway.

The temple is broad and bright as ever. The torii gates are freshly painted. Far above, the trees have their fall foliage in brilliant colors. They take their ema boards, write their prayers. From the corner of his eye, he sees a woman with long black hair and a little child with a smile that reminds him of morning glory flowers standing together. She smiles at him, Asagao waving before they walk around the corner of the honden and disappear.

He smiles.
It is an easy day, a happy day. They eat at the restaurant, the employees popping out of the woodwork to wish him a happy birthday. And when that's done, they walk hand in hand to the station.

All piled together, the four of them sitting together on the train as it rattles its way through the vast sprawl of the city in the growing darkness feels soothing. Tetsurou leans back in his seat, Koutarou’s solid arm around him and Keiji’s bag on his lap, Kenma’s leg pressed up against his.

Yeah. Yeah, he’s alright with a lifetime of this. A simple life, full of happiness.

Kuroo Tetsurou closes his eyes, and smiles as the train rushes him away into the night.

oOo

There are plenty of ways that stories end. With death, with tragedy, with triumphs and glory, a whisper, a bang, a thousand other potentials.

But in a small corner of Miyagi prefecture, a gym is full of raucous noise, a small man with flaming orange hair leaping to hit a ball with a pure and happy smile on his face to demonstrate for children. His partner doesn’t smile, but his blue eyes are bright with joy. Two men wearing matching wedding rings toss and block, another two calling out encouragement from the sidelines in red and green. A husband and wife joke in a restaurant, stealing kisses from each other as they hang pictures up.

In Tokyo a man calls out to his husband, laughing as he begs for a kiss and tugs at the ring around his neck, nicknames familiar and sweet on their lips from a lifetime together. A high school student hugs her girlfriend as they look at pictures from past teams, their manager uniforms red-black and white-gold. In a restaurant a shy young man holds his girlfriend's hand as she wears a new dress and nail polish for the first time, safe under cheerful, colorful flags and the waiters and cooks gentle eyes. In an office downtown a burly man shoves his feet in his game developer boyfriend's lap, heckling him as he writes dramatic dialogue and both of them utterly happy.

There are no neat endings, no strings to be tied up in little bows. There are only lives, living and loving and crying when they need to, full of that greatest of all gifts, hope.

Perhaps that is the truth. There is no end to such a story, not really. Each life reaches out, touching and connecting with the next, intricately linked in a fine golden chain of relationships to affect each other. A legacy that carries on, each lived and shared experience bleeding into the next.

In a comfortable home in Tokyo, four men live quiet, happy lives of laughter and joy.

It is enough, and it is everything.

oOo

“In three words I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life: It goes on.” - Robert Frost

Chapter End Notes

Gretchen, my dear friend, I am so grateful to know you. I am so happy to know I'm your friend, I am so grateful to you for your kindness, your support, your wit and grace. I am so proud of you, and all you've built and accomplished. Onward, my dear
friend. Don't look back- you're not going that way.

ooo

If you would like a print version of this, please check @HeronVinn on twitter for details. "Sun Comes Up" is also be available to those over 18.

Thank you so much for coming on this journey with me. To everyone who has read this, and will yet read this, thank you so much for your kindness and support, the kudo's, bookmarks, and comments have not been mere numbers. Just seeing that anyone has read this fills me with such joy. It has been an incredibly emotional journey, and I consider Feel Like Gold the most important thing I have ever written. (The irony that it took me a full year from the last update to write the epilogue is not lost on me, either.) This is perhaps my most personal work, and I am so happy to have been able to share it with you all. I would love to hear your thoughts, please do leave a comment if you're inclined.

Once more, thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!