I'll let you shatter me with your pain.

by kuromantic

Summary

Most of the pain Akaashi experiences doesn't belong to him. He has experienced heartbreak, despite never being in love. He has experienced a broken arm, without ever injuring himself. He has experienced flu symptoms, while being in the peak of health.

Akaashi Keiji is an empath. Bokuto Koutarou needs him the most.

Notes

Hey hey hi~! This fic exists because a tumblr post of mine gained some attention and I realised I wasn't alone when I wanted to make Bokuto suffer. I hope you guys love some slow burn and suffering, because I sure as hell do! Enjoy and please do come talk to me on my tumblr, @hai-cuties!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Catching my Breath

Most of the pain Akaashi experiences doesn't belong to him. He has experienced heartbreak, despite never being in love. He has experienced a broken arm, without ever injuring himself. He has experienced flu symptoms, while being in the peak of health.

Akaashi Keiji is an empath.

He sits writing down biology notes, waiting for his classmate in front of him to pass the worksheets packed with scientific jargon and minuscule spaces to write the answers in. He’s never been much of a science person, despite those around him thinking that he’s into all subjects known to mankind. Honestly, he thinks that the real science nerd anyone should be paying attention to is Kuroo.

“Here. God, this shit is such a bore. I am going to die,” Suzuki mutters under his breath his usual complaints as he gives Akaashi the dreaded sheet of paper. During the brief moment that their fingers touch, Akaashi feels dull hunger pains in the pit of his stomach. That explains why Suzuki seemed irritated all day, Akaashi thinks. He’s hungry, most likely skipped breakfast.

Akaashi’s perception skills have always been very high due to his rare power. Making assumptions about the various pains he experiences when he touches people is a part of his daily life now, inevitably. He never told anyone about his gift. Akaashi prefers to use his power like he usually conducts his business; quickly, quietly and with everything under control.

Once the tedious lessons are finally done and over with, Akaashi heads down to the club room to get changed for practice. He’s in a less-than-contented mood after having to take care of class duty more or less on his own, due to his partner being absent from catching the flu. He should have expected much; the warning signs were there when he touched him the day before. At times like this, Akaashi’s empath power does little to help him.

Nobody else is in the club room except for Akaashi. They’ve all changed into their volleyball jerseys while Akaashi was wiping the blackboard and checking the cleaning equipment. His irritation softens as he pulls his jersey on; the thought of volleyball always manages to lift his spirits up.

“Hey, Akaashi! What’s up? Did you get held back by the teacher?” Konoha asks, his keen eyes squinting as he grins at the second year. Practice had started, but just barely. Akaashi observes Bokuto helping out Suzumeda and Shirofuku with taking out the volleyballs and setting up the nets, which meant that they had probably only stretched, at most.

Akaashi shakes his head, but Komi interjects before he can say anything. “Nah. He’s not Bokuto! He knows how to get shit done. Isn’t that right, Akaashi?” There’s a sharp “Hey!”, from Bokuto a moment later, which Komi only acknowledges with a snort.

“My partner wasn’t in. I had to finish up the classroom duties on my own,” Akaashi explains, making sure that he didn’t sound like he was complaining. It seems like a trivial issue to be annoyed about once he voices it out. He paces over to the wall to start stretching, and joins the others on the court without delay.

As soon as Akaashi picks up a volleyball and beings to practice his serves, Bokuto approaches him with his usual enthusiasm. “Akaashi! Once we’re all done with the usual menu, toss to me! You’ll do it for me, won’t you?”
Akaashi has learned in the year and a half he’s spent with Bokuto that his powers have never been more useful to him. He’s learned more about Bokuto than he had ever intended to when he first met him. He knows what sauce Bokuto likes on his meat, why he detests wooden gates with a passion, and what color all his stuffed animals are. All the information about Bokuto is filed in a drawer in Akaashi mind, to be used efficiently whenever he sees fit to do so.

It’s easy for Akaashi to focus on his receiving and setting practices, but he can’t help but to glance over at Bokuto, who stares at him with the corner of his lips lifted in anticipation. The captain is probably the most easily excited human Akaashi has ever encountered, with massive ups and downs that the team had dubbed “Bokuto’s emo mode”. Thankfully, Akaashi finds it easy to predict when one of Bokuto’s moods are approaching. After all, he hasn’t been entrusted with taking care of Bokuto for nothing. He’s positive that he knows Bokuto like the back of his hand.

“Akaashi! Come on, I want to spike!” By the time Akaashi finishes the set of practice activities for the day, Bokuto is calling him over with a goofy smile all over his face. The setter obliges with a nod, lifting the net up a small bit to allow himself access to the other side of the court, where Bokuto waits for him not-so-patiently, hopping from one foot to another.

Picking up a volleyball, Akaashi throws it up in the air and shifts to the right, adjusts himself into a comfortable position and tosses it over to Bokuto, who couldn’t look more ready. The ace grinds his teeth together and slams his palm into the volleyball, but Akaashi already notices that it isn’t going to land the way Bokuto wants it to.

Even after being visibly dissatisfied with his spike, Bokuto whips around in determination. One look at his honey eyes, and Akaashi knows that he’s going to ask for more and more until his desire is fulfilled. He doesn’t mind; if he really needs a break, Bokuto will let him take one without complaint. He readies himself and tosses again, higher this time. The ball draws an arch in the air, landing right beside Bokuto who misses his opportunity to get a spike in that feels good against his hand.

“One more, Akaashi!” Bokuto continues relentlessly, even after Sarukui, the last one that had stayed around, leaves them to practice by themselves only. Akaashi feels that there’s something off with the way Bokuto’s expression tightens after each spike, and the way he keeps missing more than usual in the first place. He considers the possibility that Bokuto is feeling sick, or having problems regarding his private life. Bokuto keeps going despite Akaashi’s emo mode predictions. He really wants to prove himself, Akaashi muses. But why?

Akaashi has no time to dwell on his thoughts. The ball is already in the air, and he has to make his decisions without waiting around. He’s confident as he sets the ball that his toss is precise enough for Bokuto, who is already in the air, sweat dripping from his face onto the gymnasium floor. Knowing that it will lift Bokuto’s spirits if he manages to finally get a decent spike in, Akaashi watches intently with his hands clasped together.

As Bokuto’s hand slams into the volleyball, a faint smile forms on Akaashi’s lips. It’s apparent from the way the ball hits the ground and Bokuto’s grin that it’s a spike Bokuto is satisfied with. Akaashi’s own heart is thudding, and he can feel it in his mouth. He’s used to the exhaustion from the practices with Bokuto that leave him lightheaded.

The setter lets a soft laugh escape from his mouth, although Bokuto is too ecstatic to notice. Bokuto’s eyes are gleaming, staring down at his reddened palm. His face is scrunched up, beads of sweat trailing down his cheeks. Moments like these remind Akaashi why he cherishes his time at volleyball practice more than anything.

Letting out a distorted version of Akaashi’s name, Bokuto flings himself onto Akaashi in his
moment of excitement. This is another thing Akaashi is used to, so much so that he’s learned how not to fall over when the taller captain makes it seem like he wants to tackle him. Akaashi spreads his arms expectantly, allowing Bokuto easier access.

It’s too late when Akaashi realises that the hug he receives from Bokuto doesn’t feel right. As soon as the tips of his fingers touch Bokuto’s sweat-soaked jersey, his shoulder feels like it’s smashed through windows. A hot flash travels up his body, and by the time Bokuto’s holding tight, there’s a crushing weight on his chest. Akaashi’s never been in this much pain his whole life.

The physical pain is barely tolerable, but the horrifying amount of mental pain Akaashi’s in forces him to become limp in Bokuto’s arms. A sense of impending doom creeps onto his tightening chest, making him feel like he’s going to die. His breath comes in ragged gasps as he struggles to keep a clear mind. He’s learned to adapt to many situations he’s gotten into because of his power. This is not one of them.

Akaashi’s first impulse is to scream or throw up; neither of those options will ease his suffering, he knows. It’s the only two things he can think of managing. However, before he’s forced to choose between the two, everything goes white in front of his eyes. He’s gratified to finally embrace the release from the pain, to slip into a state that puts a halt to all the unexpected chaos his body is forced to endure.

Soft whispers filled with worry greet Akaashi as soon as he comes to. He’s still shaken up from the completely unexpected event, even though he’s not hurting anymore since he’s not touching Bokuto anymore. He wonders if his powers decided to work the opposite way for a moment, until concern sets in. Frankly, the amount of pain he had experienced was worrying. What was Bokuto going through?

“You’re awake, Akaashi! I’m so sorry, I should have let you rest earlier!” Without sparing another second, Bokuto starts to apologise profusely. Akaashi can recognise the genuine concern in him, and guilt strikes him hard. He doesn’t know what to say to his captain, which isn’t supposed to happen. His powers weren’t meant to cause additional turmoil.

With a gentle shake of the head, Akaashi reassures Bokuto that it’s nothing he should be sorry for. “It’s really nothing, I promise. I was just tired,” he answers, his voice shaking. He doesn’t want to hear Bokuto apologise; he doesn’t know what his captain is going through, but it’s clear that he doesn’t need any more stress to add on top of it.

Bokuto lets out an apprehensive noise, not entirely convinced that it wasn’t his fault that Akaashi had blacked out immediately after practicing with him. “But I forced you to do this! It’s because of me. I know that much, Akaashi!” Bokuto’s voice becomes progressively louder with every word, and he stretches out every syllable of Akaashi’s name. Akaashi feels a stab in his chest at Bokuto’s tone.

“Come on, Bokuto-san. Let’s go home. It’s okay,” Akaashi lifts himself up from the infirmary bed that Bokuto carried him to, slipping back on his indoor shoes and leading the way out of the room. As he paces the halls, Bokuto follows close by, just within touching distance. Akaashi can’t bring himself to touch him again and ensures that he stays a few steps ahead of his captain.

As soon as Akaashi steps outside of the school, everything seems alive again. The evening winds are chilly, more so than the last evening. They bite into Akaashi’s exposed skin and push his messy locks around, but Bokuto marches on with just a t-shirt on. The captain chatters about the latest issue of Shonen Jump and goes on about having to study for his college exams, which Akaashi can barely reply to. He mutters an it’s okay Bokuto-san here and a yes, I’m sure that was entertaining
there, while trying his best not to let Bokuto pick up on his listlessness.

“This is where we part ways, Akaashi!” Bokuto announced, snapping Akaashi out of his trance. They had stopped near the housing estate where Akaashi lived, as they usually did when walking home together. A few robins perched on the stone wall, chirping away beside him.

“Don’t collapse tomorrow, Akaashi!”

“I won’t, Bokuto-san. You.. you take care of yourself, okay?”

“Huh? I always do! Look at my body, it’s fit to be worshipped, isn’t it?”

“I meant health-wise. Drink plenty of water and sleep well, if you want to keep that ‘fit-to-be-worshipped’ body of yours in top condition.”

“I know, I know!”

Bokuto crosses his arms, then waves goodbye as Akaashi starts to make his way back home. “See you tomorrow. Rest well, you’ve been practicing hard today.” He returns Bokuto’s gesture, although in a less wild manner. He only notices how wrong everything feels in the pit of his stomach when the energetic captain is out of sight.

No matter how he put it, Akaashi didn’t know Bokuto nearly as much as he thought. His empath powers assisted him in understanding the rowdy spiker, not his problems. It lingers in his mind as he eats his dinner, which he has to force down because of how tasteless it is. He fidgets in his bed, recalling vividly how the pain made him want to end it all. The last time he had touched Bokuto, it hadn’t been painful. Even if it had been, nothing could compare to what he had just endured.

For the first time, Akaashi reconsiders calling his power a gift.
Chapter Summary

“Keiji-nii, wake up!”

No sooner than Akaashi hears his younger brother’s chirpy voice, the bed dips rather violently. His brother leaps up and down on the bed without mercy, as he usually does when he wakes up earlier than anyone else. Akaashi groans, his stomach growling expectantly. He’d eaten less dinner than usual after the incident with Bokuto that he hasn’t yet wrapped his head around fully, which he now deeply regrets.

“Wake up and go to school! Wake up!” Akaashi rips off his covers with a sigh, knowing that he won’t be getting any more peace with his brother around. A thump sounds, signalling that his brother jumped off the bed. He shuffles over to the wall and turns his light on, before scampering off in fits of giggles.

Akaashi wants to help Bokuto. The captain doesn't react well to his questioning.

Chapter Notes

Heya, I'm not dead. I'm so sorry for abandoning this for over a month, I had a lot of irl stuff with assignments over the break and me dying of writer's block. Hopefully I can get back into the swing of things soon! And thank you to everyone who's reading this who sent me headcanon asks on Tumblr! To everyone who doesn't know, my Tumblr is @hai-cuties so please do send me a headcanon ask of prompt or just a general message, anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Sora, don’t be bothering your brother!” Akaashi’s mother reprimands his brother lightly, while he heads downstairs to join his family at the table. His two other siblings, Mari and Kakeru, are
already sitting down, inhaling their miso soup and rice balls.

Akaashi is still half-asleep when he eats his breakfast, considering that he’s had barely enough sleep to function throughout the day. He hasn’t been able to get Bokuto out of his head, and the heavy, torturous pain wasn’t a sensation that could have been forgotten overnight.

He leaves his home with uneasiness sitting on his throat, but that isn’t going to get in the way of him finding out what was causing Bokuto’s pain. There is hardly enough evidence to pinpoint the exact reason or trigger for it, and unluckily for Akaashi, he would have to touch Bokuto again for the sake of helping him out. As much as Akaashi wants to ease his pain, he’s reluctant to put himself through what made him faint less than a day ago.

No, this isn’t a choice I should dwell on, he concludes. No matter how many times Akaashi touches Bokuto andshares his pain, it will never be the same. All it takes for it to stop hurting Akaashi is if he pulls away from Bokuto, and the discomfort would be over in an instant. He knows he’s going to suck it up for the sake of his captain.

“Is Bokuto-san not here?” The words slip out of Akaashi’s mouth as soon as he scans the noticeably Bokuto-less gymnasium during morning practice. Confused glances meet him, and he realises that everyone else is expecting Bokuto to be with him. Even though he knows he’s almost like Bokuto’s guardian, Akaashi doesn’t know his whereabouts.

With a soft, defeated sigh on his lips, Akaashi heads down to the nets to practice before he can waste any more of his morning. He sets to Washio, Konoha and Sarukui, and although he hears nobody talk about Bokuto, there’s a shared look among his teammates that speaks for itself. Akaashi’s aware that the most disappointed person in the gymnasium is himself.

Morning practice ends without Bokuto turning up at all. Akaashi heads to class concerned, debating on whether he should visit Bokuto’s house if he doesn’t show up for evening practice. As far as he knows, Bokuto’s been sick or injured enough to skip practice exactly three times, including his time as a middle school student. And on all of those occasions, he’s had to be physically dragged away from the court.

Akaashi isn’t used to Bokuto’s behaviours making no sense. He doesn’t like it.

“Who is this?!”

Just as lunch break starts, Akaashi heads down to the canteen, only to be interrupted by a familiar voice. Two palms press against his eyes, obstructing his vision without warning. At the same time, an excruciating pain that Akaashi hasn’t been prepared for erupts in his shoulder, spreading down his arm and around his body.

“Bokuto-san, good afternoon.” Akaashi’s voice is shaky as he involuntarily staggers back, away from Bokuto. The captain laughs heartily at Akaashi’s response, and Akaashi momentarily doubts his powers. He swerves to avoid a playful slap on the back, fear outweighing his guilt.

To Akaashi’s relief, Bokuto isn’t offended. If he is, he’s good at hiding it. “Hey, let’s go eat! The yakisoba bread’s going to be sold out if we don’t buy them in time!” Before Akaashi can get a word in, Bokuto grabs him firmly by the hand and yanks him over to the shop. Akaashi holds back a grimace from the stabbing in his shoulder, exhaling deeply in an attempt to calm the dread in his chest.

Bokuto snatches one yakisoba bread for each of them, slamming down the money on the counter and heading outside to their usual eating spot. By the time they get there, Bokuto’s yakisoba bread
is already mostly eaten, and Akaashi can sense Bokuto’s eager gaze falling onto his own lunch.

“Bokuto-san.”

“Hmm?”

“You can have some of my bread. I brought my own bento box today, too.”

Akaashi holds out his yakisoba bread to Bokuto, who gladly accepts the offer and bends down to bite a chunk off it. “Thanks, Akaashi! Hey, did you watch the new season of-“

“I need to ask you a few questions, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi cuts him off, and the look that crosses Bokuto’s face confirms that he knows Akaashi’s caught onto something. “First off, what happened this morning? You never miss morning practice. Why.. today?”

Bokuto opens his mouth to answer, but it takes him about five seconds before he says anything. “I slept in, and I didn’t arrive in time.” It’s painfully obvious to the both of them that Bokuto made that excuse up on the spot. Akaashi knows Bokuto won’t open up that easily, and moves onto his next question.

He gestures towards Bokuto’s shoulder, remembering clearly how the pain had knocked him out unconscious. If there was any reason Bokuto slept in, it was most likely from his damaged shoulder keeping him awake. “You were practicing very hard yesterday. Does your shoulder feel fine?”

Akaashi reluctantly extends a hand out to touch Bokuto’s shoulder, bracing himself for the pain. Bokuto flinches away before he can do that, holding a hand over his shoulder protectively. That’s all the confirmation Akaashi needs from him. “I’m fine, Akaashi! Don’t worry about me,” he grins, his expression is visibly strained. Once Akaashi casts a “You’re-not-fooling-me” glance, Bokuto finally gives in.

“I- I’m sorry, Akaashi! My shoulder’s been feeling weird since yesterday afternoon, and I didn’t want to skip practice, but I couldn’t sleep, and-!” Bokuto starts rambling with panicked tears in his eyes, and Akaashi’s heart breaks as he sees his Ace crumble right in front of him.

Bokuto’s breathing starts to hitch, and Akaashi’s concern about the captain increases tenfold. He had never seen him so scared and small, and it doesn’t look right at all. “Bokuto-san, you’re going to be okay. Breathe-“ Akaashi moves towards Bokuto in an attempt to help him through something he had clearly never experienced before, which only agitates him further.

“No,” Bokuto shakes his head, scuttling back further. “Akaashi, please, leave. I don’t want you to see me like this. Please,” he sinks down to the ground, pressing his face against his kneecaps. Akaashi knows that he can’t leave him to deal with it on his own, and so he steps over to him, taking care to make his movements gentle.

“It’s all going to get better. I promise,” Akaashi whispers, refraining from touching Bokuto. It frustrates him to witness Bokuto suffering on his own, trying to keep his tears from spilling. He was meant to be his best friend, someone that he could trust sharing his problems with.

After what seemingly feels like hours, Bokuto’s able to regain some of his calm. Akaashi isn’t sure how much time passed exactly. Had the lunch bell already gone? At this point, he doesn’t care if he’s late for class. What’s important is that he stuck with Bokuto, although he isn’t sure if he made him feel better.

Bokuto collapses into Akaashi, who almost staggers into the ground with him from the sudden feeling of exhaustion. “I’m sorry, Akaashi.” He mutters, looking around and realising that
everybody else had already left for class. “We’re gonna both be late for class because of me,”

“Don’t blame yourself. What happened wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t something you wanted to happen,” Akaashi tells him firmly, taking Bokuto’s hand into his own. Bokuto doesn’t flinch away this time, and Akaashi guides him back into the school. “Do you want to go to the nurse’s office?” He whispers, knowing that Bokuto’s probably never had an anxiety attack in his life.

Bokuto shakes his head defiantly. “I’m fine, Akaashi.” Although Akaashi wasn’t convinced, he parts ways with his captain reluctantly. Once he strolls down the second year hall while preparing himself for a lecture, he can’t get the exhausted, terrified feeling that Bokuto had experienced out of his head. The sweet, kind-hearted Bokuto is the last person that deserves to be put through pain.

Thinking about it feels like a stab to Akaashi’s chest, which seems uncomfortably hollow. He hates it all, hates how he could barely help Bokuto, or know what had happened to him. Hates how he can imagine Bokuto getting an earful for being late, because everyone’s going to assume that he was stupid enough to not hear the bell.

Hates how everyone assumes Bokuto’s only emotion is happiness, himself included.

If he wasn’t an empath, as much as he hates to admit, he would have never noticed that something was wrong with Bokuto. His throat becomes constricted, and the tears soon follow. Instead of heading to class like he’s supposed to, Akaashi ends up locking himself in a bathroom stall, choking out angry tears into his sleeve. He can’t be bothered to care if someone does end up finding him in his pathetic state.

“Sorry I’m late.” Akaashi’s already missed an entire class by the time he comes out of the bathroom, and all eyes turn to him in disbelief. They say nothing once they realise how puffy Akaashi’s eyes are, and the tear streaks that Akaashi hadn’t bothered to wipe. He slumps down at his desk, noticing how out of it he is.

Several of Akaashi’s classmates run up to him after the lesson ends, constantly making sure that nothing is bothering him. His teacher calls him back to assure him that he’s always welcome to talk about his problems. Akaashi brushes everyone off with mild annoyance, although he knows that they’re trying to help. He’s not the one who should be fussed over.

When practice rolls around, Akaashi doesn’t want to see Bokuto arrived before him, changing his clothes. As much as Bokuto’s body is worth looking at, he wants to physically drag Bokuto back to his house to get the rest he desperately needs. Still, there’s one thing that Akaashi notices. He’s seen Bokuto walk around almost naked in the club room multiple times, and yet he’s in the corner, as if he has something to hide.

Akaashi’s eyes widens in horror once he turns to take a peek at Bokuto. His back is covered in bruises that weren’t there before.

Chapter End Notes

Comments fuel my soul and I'll love you forever if you leave one.
Practice goes on without anyone asking Bokuto what the bruises were doing on his back. Nobody knows that Bokuto had gone through an anxiety attack just hours earlier, shivering and hyperventilating in the summer heat. Only Akaashi witnessed it all, Bokuto’s most vulnerable state.

Akaashi’s family makes an appearance, and Bokuto gets interrogated.

Hey hi it's me, I finished summer exams and now I'm leaping with joy. I churned out 3.7K words please give me love.

OH. I NEED TO PUT WARNINGS HERE JUST IN CASE.

-Mention of family stuff (really slightly!)
-Vomiting
-Short homophobic moment
-Injuries and stuff

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“Konoha, go for the left!”

The ball goes up, and Konoha lands it cleanly in an open spot just beside Washio’s foot. He makes a satisfied sound, while Sarukui chants “As expected from the Jack-of-all-trades!” Akaashi’s head isn’t completely in the game, but he takes care not to get nailed in the head with a volleyball.

“Shut up, Saru!”

Konoha grumbles under his breath, while Bokuto casts longing glances at Akaashi. *He wants a toss*, Akaashi knows. But whether he’ll give it to him is an entirely different story. Akaashi hesitates about letting the ace spike at all. Bokuto could kick up a fuss if Akaashi refused to toss to him, though. And with no solid explanation from Akaashi, his teammates would side with Bokuto.

Bokuto isn’t even trying to hide his restlessness at this point. His pent-up energy needs releasing, and he’s hopping from one foot to another. Reluctantly, Akaashi decides to let Bokuto have what he wants. “Bokuto-san.” His palms connect with the volleyball, and he pinpoints the toss at Bokuto’s ready hand.
“Nice toss, Akaashi!” Bokuto slams the ball down into the opposite court with a satisfying thwack, spiking past the blocks. “Hey hey, I’m the best! Aren’t I?” Bokuto’s moment of silent glory is gone in an instant as he starts to praise himself enthusiastically, clapping the back of the teammate closest to him. “Give me another, Akaashi! I think today’s going to be a good day!”

Akaashi knows not to burst Bokuto’s bubble when he’s excited. He tosses to the upbeat captain once more, and the spike bounces off Onaga’s fingertips. A part of Akaashi feels glad that he never has to block Bokuto’s spike in an official match, because he’s certain that his fingers would be torn off.

After a few more spike and serve practices that count as receive practices for Komi, Bokuto claps his hands to signal the end of practice. Akaashi internally sighs with relief, but stiffens at the thought of questioning his captain’s bruises. But if nobody else saw them or cared to do something, Akaashi’s taking it upon himself to do the painful work.

“Alright, we’re done here. Get plenty of rest, we have to prepare good for the Spring High! Of course, our aim is to win the whole thing! Dismissed!”

Bokuto’s captain speech at the end of practice is short and straightforward, as usual. The members start to pack up their towels and bottles into their enamelled bags, while Bokuto prepares to write up the club journal. Despite Bokuto being an overall forgetful person with writing to match his personality, he’s never skipped writing the club journal. Akaashi stays with him as usual, while the others disappear to buy an ice cream bar one by one.

“And done! Let’s get a gari-gari kun! Or we could share a papico if you’re low on cash!” Bokuto slaps the club journal down into his bag, zipping it up and slinging it onto his shoulder. As much as Akaashi wants to end the day with an ice cream and nothing else, he takes Bokuto’s arm and makes him sit on the floor.

Immediately, Akaashi feels dread pool in his chest. He withdraws his hand quickly out of fear, while Bokuto makes a funny noise at him. “What’s wrong, Akaashi? Aren’t we going home?” He asks, flapping his t-shirt to cool off. His cheeks are still flushed from the hard evening practice, and beads of sweat travel down his toned skin.

With a sigh, Akaashi prepares himself for a less-than-favourable reaction. “I saw the bruises on your back.” He admits truthfully. Bokuto’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t say anything to explain how they got there. “Who did this to you, Bokuto-san?” He presses further, prepared to rip whoever hurt his captain to shreds.

“Nobody,” Bokuto mumbles, scuttling up against the wall as if to subconsciously protect his back. “It’s fine, Akaashi. Nothing’s broken, and they’ll be gone in a few days.” Akaashi focuses his gaze on Bokuto, waiting for him to say more.

Has he experienced something like this before?

When Bokuto resumes his silence, Akaashi opens his mouth. “The amount of injuries you have are concerning, and you know it. Who did this to you, Bokuto-san?” He presses further, prepared to rip whoever hurt his captain to shreds.

“Nobody,” Bokuto mumbles, scuttling up against the wall as if to subconsciously protect his back. “It’s fine, Akaashi. Nothing’s broken, and they’ll be gone in a few days.” Akaashi knows he’s being uncharacteristically talkative, but he couldn’t care less. Bokuto shakes his head to all of his questions, swallowing thickly.

“When Bokuto resumes his silence, Akaashi opens his mouth. “The amount of injuries you have are concerning, and you know it. Who did this to you? Is it someone from this school? A third year?” Akaashi focuses his gaze on Bokuto, waiting for him to say more.

“ Nobody, ” Bokuto mumbles, scuttling up against the wall as if to subconsciously protect his back. “It’s fine, Akaashi. Nothing’s broken, and they’ll be gone in a few days.” Akaashi knows he’s being uncharacteristically talkative, but he couldn’t care less. Bokuto shakes his head to all of his questions, swallowing thickly.

“Akaashi, nobody did this to me. I fell down the stairs, by accident. It’s my own fault, so please, don’t ask me about it.” Akaashi isn’t a bit convinced, with Bokuto only bringing up that fact after the relentless questioning. The captain looks like he’s about to bawl, and it’s a pitiful sight.

A sudden thought strikes Akaashi. “Bokuto-san, is there something happening at home? Something you can’t tell me?” The flicker of surprise in Bokuto’s honey eyes confirms Akaashi
that he hit the nail on the head. “You don’t have to say what happened, but I don’t want you getting hurt like this again.”

Bokuto lifts his gaze and gives a slight, hesitant nod. Akaashi knew it somewhere in his heart that Bokuto’s home life wasn’t great, but the realisation still felt like a punch to the gut. “But I did fall down the stairs on my own, trust me. It was my fault.” Akaashi isn’t sure if he can trust anything Bokuto says about his safety, but further question won’t yield fruitful results.

“I understand,” Akaashi’s face is as stiff as it could possibly get. “But if someone ever hurts you in any way, you have to tell me. It’s not something you should shoulder on your own.” He holds out a hand and sticks up his pinky finger. “Can you promise me that?”

Bokuto opens his mouth as if to ask something, but silently wraps his finger around Akaashi’s and gives him the pinky promise. Akaashi wants to cry, from both the emotional stress and knowing that he was making Bokuto feel worse. Akaashi knows Bokuto’s weak to pinky promises, and he feels cruel for using it as an advantage.

“I really can’t keep secrets from you, huh?” Bokuto giggles defeatedly, letting his finger uncurl from Akaashi’s longer one. “Damn, ‘kaashi. You should be a detective. Interrogate suspects, make billions.” He extends his arms in a grand manner, picking up his sports bag and placing it on his left shoulder. “Really, it’s nothing serious. I’m pretty sure it’s all over.”

Akaashi’s laugh sounds forced, and he knows it. “It’s nice that you think I’d be good at interrogating people. However, I don’t need to do it on anyone else at this very moment.” He collects his belongings and folds his uniform neatly, following Bokuto out of the club room.

“So… Do you still want to share an ice cream?” Bokuto suggests, jangling loose change in his pocket. Akaashi glances at the convenience store that the Fukurodani students stop by for bread or ice cream after school, and nods in that direction.

As soon as they enter the store, a cold blast of air blows past their face and exposed legs. Goosebumps form on Akaashi’s neck, but Bokuto remains unfazed as he marches to the ice cream section. “Hey, look! Maybe we should get a pear flavour gari-gari kun. It’s on special offer!” Bokuto picks up two packets of ice cream and waves them about. “I can pay for you if you don’t have enough. Think of it as a senpai’s treat!”

Akaashi shakes his head. “I can pay for myself, Bokuto-san.” He ignores Bokuto blowing a raspberry at him, and pays for his own ice cream bar at the counter. Once he’s done shoving the change into his pocket, he catches up with Bokuto who’s already tearing off the wrapper. “Let’s walk home.”

“Actually… I have to go home early today. Later, Akaashi!” Bokuto finishes his ice cream in three bites, and bolts off in the opposite direction before Akaashi can say anything. Akaashi’s concern only grows when he realises that Bokuto is running towards the place where he injured himself, by accident or not. His ice cream drips onto his hands while he's deep in thought, covering them in sticky, sweet syrup.

“Be safe, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi clenches his hands, unable to do anything besides hope that Bokuto really isn’t being exposed to violence at home. He doesn’t know anything about Bokuto’s family, and it could be anyone who’s living with him. His parents, his grandparents, his siblings, maybe extended family.

He'd first discovered what domestic abuse meant when he was six years old, watching television with his family. All he could think of was how cruel someone could be to hurt their own baby,
their own child. The image of his baby sister snoozing in her cot comes back to him, and he remembers how he had promised himself to protect all his younger siblings with his life.

The front door clicks open before he can unlock it. “Welcome home, Keiji! I’ve made you your favourite onigiri, so you can tuck right in!” His mother gives him a warm welcome, and Sora’s footsteps can be heard padding on the hardwood floor. This time, an extra pair of footsteps follow, and Akaashi catches a glimpse of a little girl with glassy, purple accessories in her hair.

“Keiji-nii! I made a friend! Her name Keiko!” Sora lifts his arms up, signalling that he wants to be held. Akaashi smiles at Sora and picks him up with one hand, stroking his hair to make him screech with excitement. “Keiko-chan, my older brother! Isn’t he cool? He can play volleyball, and he can do maths with English in it! And ride a bike without training wheels!” Sora flails about dangerously, and Akaashi has to tighten his grip so that his brother doesn’t go plummeting down.

Keiko stays for dinner, and Sora never stops advertising Akaashi’s “strengths” to his friend. “Hey, come to think of it, our names match.” Keiko points to Akaashi and then to herself shyly. “Keiji and Keiko.” The girl covers her face and giggles, making Akaashi’s heart melt. He isn’t the best at showing it, but he really loves interacting with children.

The next morning, Bokuto is there for morning practice and ready to get through the day, or so it seems at first glance. Akaashi can’t put his finger on what’s happened, but Bokuto’s usual offence style play is nowhere to be seen, and he’s switched from practicing jump serves to float serves. He creeps up to him to ask if he was hurt, but Bokuto shakes his head and starts spiking harder.

Akaashi’s day drags on slowly. His usual upbeat math teacher is on maternity leave, and he has to sit through a lesson about as interesting as counting the amount of bumps on the wall. He can almost feel his brain wandering off to another place, but he forces himself to pay attention and take notes. His head starts to pound from the sheer dullness of it all.

On the way to the shop during lunch break, Akaashi notices a Bokuto who’s noticeably paler than this morning. He approaches the captain uncertainty, unsure whether to give him space or ask what’s bothering him. A sheen of cold sweat drips onto Bokuto’s collar, and he’s rubbing at his chest uncomfortably.

“Hey, what’s up? You don’t look so hot.” Bokuto doesn’t jump at an opportunity to make a corny joke, and it worries Akaashi. He tries to usher Bokuto out of the crowded hallway, and immediately cringes with nausea when his finger brushes against Bokuto’s elbow. “Bokuto-san, please don’t tell me you came to school sick.” He squints at the captain, who shrivels under his stare.

“It’s nothing,” Bokuto retorts, but is all too keen about getting out quickly. “Just… I ate something bad last night and my stomach started really hurting during third period. And—” Bokuto hiccups weakly, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Akaashi’s eyes widen at the thought of a possible disaster, and he hurries over to the bathrooms with Bokuto trailing close behind. He checks on him every few moments, to ensure he’s not falling on his knees.

Bokuto is breathing heavily and coughing into his palm by the time they reach a stall, and the other students make a beeline towards the door once they’re aware of the situation. As much as Akaashi wants to collectively shut them up, he’s grateful for what little privacy Bokuto manages to get.

Not too long after, Akaashi hears vomiting coming from the stall and grimaces in sympathy. As much as he wants to help Bokuto, there are some things he’s not good at handling. Throwing up is one of them. A groan turns into a cough, and Akaashi wants to cover his ears. He can still hear
Bokuto hacking up a lung, which causes a wave of guilt to wash over him.

“You… okay?” Akaashi peers into the stall cautiously, half of his head sticking out from the door. “Come on, let’s get you home.” He marches in once he notices Bokuto unresponsive and slumped against the wall. Dragging Bokuto out is no easy task, but Akaashi hasn’t been training with weights all these months for nothing. Luckily, he doesn’t seem to be running a fever. “Can you stand?”

Bokuto has to grab both of Akaashi’s shoulders to get himself upright, and Akaashi reals with revulsion creeping in his chest. “It’s fine, Akaashi. I feel a lot better now! I don’t need to go home.” He tries to convince Akaashi desperately, but Akaashi’s glacial stare shuts him down.

“And join practice? No, Bokuto-san. I’m not allowing it,” Akaashi becomes stern, rubbing his temples. “You’re heading home, and getting the rest you need.” When Bokuto shakes his head almost timidly, the pieces connect in Akaashi’s head. “Or… maybe you could stay at my house if you’re more comfortable with that.”

“Yeah, I want to stay at your house.”

Bokuto replies truthfully, and Akaashi digs into his pocket for his phone. With a soft huff of anticipation, he dials his mother’s number and waits for her to pick up. It only takes three rings before she answers with a worried tone. “Keiji, what happened? Are you hurt? Sick? Who do I need to punch in the gut?!” Akaashi and Bokuto share a particular look amongst each other.

“Mom, you can relax. I’m not hurt, and there’s nobody you need to fight.” Akaashi starts off with the most important information, so that his mother would actually continue the phone call. “It’s about Bokuto-san, actually.”

“Oh, that bubbly kiddo? The one with the golden eyes? And the… hair, right?” Akaashi can almost see his mother gesticulating in her own particular way. A faint, high-pitched singing voice can be heard over the phone, and Akaashi recognises it immediately. Sora’s singing along to I Wanna Dance with Somebody. He’d become obsessed with Whitney Houston at the tender age of four.

Akaashi stifles a laugh. “Yeah, him. He’s not feeling good, and his parents aren’t home. I was wondering if we can keep him at our house for a bit.” He explains, ignoring the crash of something glass from the other end of the phone.

His mother makes a short “Hmmm,” noise. “Sure. I’ll pick you both up in just a moment, let me just ring up the school. Honestly, schools these days make me call them for every single little crap!” She goes off on a rant of her own, and Akaashi doesn’t have to worry about her declining his plea anymore.

“I’ll be there at the gate in a couple of minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Oh, wait! Do you have any tests today?”

“No, why?”

“Because I’m hauling you home with your friend, Keiji. Are you planning to leave him with a bunch of people he hardly knows? Missing a few classes isn’t going to kill you, and it’s not like you’re a slacker. Just… be there for him, okay?”

Akaashi can’t argue with his mother. “Got it,” he hangs up and turns to Bokuto again, nodding to
let him know that he could stay around for a few hours. Bokuto’s relief becomes apparent immediately, and he knows he’s made the right decision. “It’s okay. You’ve dealt with the worst part.” He runs his fingers through Bokuto’s hair, his parental instincts kicking in.

Bokuto pulls away unexpectedly when the door clicks open, and a third year stares at them with a disgusted look. “If you’re homos, go do it somewhere else.” Before Akaashi can snap back a sarcastic reply, the door slams shut and he can hear the third year informing the other students not to disturb the “lovely couple”. Akaashi’s ears are burning, and his face flushes. His blood starts running backwards.

“Hey, let’s go. If anything happens, I’ll make sure they can fuck right off.” Bokuto snaps Akaashi out of his trance. He’s ashamed to lose his composure, but quickly follows Bokuto out of the bathroom. As much as he wants to follow Bokuto’s advice, he doesn’t lift up his head until he reaches the school gate.

In retrospect, Akaashi’s glad his mother wants to drag him home. His own stomach is doing flops, and he just wants to go home to his family. He leads Bokuto to the cream-coloured car that his mother’s scratched multiple times. “Keiji and Koutarou-kun, come on in. I’m sure you want out of this place.” Akaashi wishes his mother’s statement didn’t ring so true.

“Thank you for letting me stay at your house, Akaashi-san.” Bokuto using honourifics with Akaashi’s surname sounds foreign to him, and all of a sudden Akaashi’s mind is back in the bathroom. If Bokuto’s reputation became tarnished, it would be all because of him. If Bokuto was banned from club activities… If it ruined his mental health even more…

“We’re here!” Akaashi’s relieved that Bokuto didn’t throw up in his mother’s car, but he hadn’t given it thought until after he was in front of his house. “Keiji, go set up a blanket fort on the couch. But don’t make it look too dazzling, otherwise Sora won’t stop diving into it.” His mother commands, and Keiji doesn’t spare a moment before dumping multiple comforters and blankets on the couch.

He isn’t sure if Sora and Bokuto have much difference between them, when the captain jumps onto the couch a little too enthusiastically. Akaashi chooses not to comment on the obvious weight difference between Sora and a powerhouse volleyball team captain. “Akaashi, how do you even make blankets this fluffy? Isn’t it illegal to make people so comfortable they can’t move?” Bokuto chirps, and Akaashi snorts at his comment.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.” Bokuto pats the space beside him on the couch, and Akaashi perches next to him once he gets the message. “But are you sure you’re not running a fever?” He teases him this time, slapping Bokuto’s forehead with his palm lightly. Bokuto lets out a “Geh!”, and the couch dips as both pull away from each other.

Unfortunately, Akaashi’s attempts at building a non-Sora-appealing blanket fort were futile. Four-year-olds seemed to be attracted to anything resembling a vague 3-D shape made of blanket. “Koutarou-niichan!” Sora lets out a squeak of glee and starts to clamber onto Bokuto, who bounces him on his knees and lifts him up under his arms.

“Hey, hey, take it easy. Bokuto-san isn’t well, and-“

“Koutarou is sick?” Sora asks, his eyes becoming teary. “Oh no! What do we do? What should we do?” He starts to pace on the spot, and Akaashi recognises the first signs of a crying session. He decides to take action before the guesses become a worst-case scenario.

“Sora, do you remember what mommy always does when you’re sick?” Akaashi asks calmly,
placing Sora on the sofa beside himself. When the boy makes a “Hmmm” noise, Akaashi pokes him in the side to make him giggle. “Do you?”

Sora wriggles away from Akaashi’s grasp and lands smoothly on two feet onto the hardwood floor. “Oh! Lots of hugs and kisses!” When Akaashi signals him to think again, Sora groans with a hand covering his forehead cheekily, mimicking Akaashi. “Warm barley tea?” He guesses again, and Akaashi nods in approval.

“I have a big job for you, Sora. Do you want to know what it is?” A resounding “Yes!” from Sora is enough for Akaashi to continue. “I want you to go into the kitchen and help mommy make some barley tea. Can you do that?” Sora scampers off without another word, glad that he can help out Akaashi’s friend.

From the kitchen, Sora calls out to Akaashi while making the barley tea. “So that means you have to give Koutarou plenty of hugs and kisses! Do you understand?” Akaashi almost chokes on his own breath, and Bokuto is squawking with laughter. He decides not to respond after recalling all that had happened at school.

“You have a great family, Akaashi.” Bokuto stares at the kitchen entrance almost lovingly, as the voices of Sora and his mother natter enthusiastically. “Especially your little brother Sora! He’s just too cute. I mean, I wish I—” he stops mid-sentence and cuts himself off with a laugh.

Akaashi feels somewhat guilty when Bokuto stops talking, abruptly. “You’re like a part of this family, too. I think Sora would agree if I asked, too.” He assures him, as if it would offer any consolation. He almost wishes Bokuto could live with him, if it would make him smile and ease the pain that Akaashi feels every time their fingers touch.

Bokuto grins widely, the idea satisfying him thoroughly. He twitches and takes Akaashi’s hand into his, not noticing that the setter’s expression changes for a split second. “This might sound weird, but can you do the thing you did in the bathroom again?” He requests shyly, and Akaashi hesitates but places his hands on Bokuto’s head and starts running his fingers through the waxed hair. “I don’t know why, but it’s calming. You’re like… you’re like my personal blanket fort for my head.”

Akaashi doesn’t mind the strange comparison. After all, he feels genuine comfort after touching Bokuto for the first time in days.

Chapter End Notes

Xeqngisew it’s nearly 1am and I’m just so glad this is finally finished. Sorry for the long wait everyone! As always, comments and kudos are so very appreciated! (Talk to me on tumblr @hai-cuties)
Listen, and stay still

Chapter Summary

An uneasiness lingers in Bokuto’s stomach, even as the nausea decreases considerably with time. Akaashi lets him curl up in a comfortable position on the sofa, helping him sip on the warm barley tea that Sora brought. He asks Bokuto periodically how he’s feeling, and the only response he gets is a relaxed whine.

Chapter Notes

Hey, hi, yo! It's me again, with an update featuring Bokuto's side of the story and an unhealthy amount of italics abuse. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An uneasiness lingers in Bokuto’s stomach, even as the nausea decreases considerably with time. Akaashi lets him curl up in a comfortable position on the sofa, helping him sip on the warm barley tea that Sora brought. He asks Bokuto periodically how he’s feeling, and the only response he gets is a relaxed whine.

He really is a good caretaker, Bokuto thinks with a grin spread across his face. Evening rolls around before long, and it’s safe to assume that volleyball practice without the two there is finished. Bokuto usually has to be tackled to the ground and pinned there by five teammates before he would give up going to practice. Today, however, he can’t bring himself to move from the sofa. He’s surprised by his laziness and loss of motivation, but the dread of returning home and heading to school the next day weighs him down and keeps him glued to where he is right now. He isn’t ready to leave the warmth beside him that’s soothing his nerves and making everything all right for a few minutes. He isn’t ready to be alone again.

“Bokuto-san, maybe you should go home.” Akaashi glances at the clock, almost as reluctant as Bokuto in regards to him leaving the house. The safe, friendly place that accommodated Bokuto isn’t somewhere that he can stay forever, or somewhere that he deserves to stay. “Do you need a lift? You’ve been sick, after all. Don’t be pushing yourself if you feel like you can’t take it.” He adds, picking up on his unwillingness to go back home.

“I’m good. I’ll walk back home.” Bokuto answers immediately. “Thanks for the hospitality!” He wiggles off the couch, stumbling on his feet as he steadies himself on the ground. “Don’t look so worried, I really am okay!” Bokuto throws up a peace sign, as if to convince Akaashi that he’s telling the truth. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Akaashi!”

Sora follows Bokuto to the genkan, with Akaashi close by to catch him if he falls. His hasty footsteps come to a sudden halt when Bokuto lifts him off his feet, high enough to come face-to-face with a pair of honey eyes. “So high, Koutarou-niichan!” Sora squeals, letting out a series of excited, shrill cries.
“Bye-bye, Akaashi!” Bokuto waves off a hyper Sora nestling in Akaashi’s arms, leaving the Akaashi residence as he shoves his feet into his worn sneakers. A defeated sigh escapes him once he sets foot on the road, disappearing into the humid air hanging about the place. He can’t help the jealousy welling up in his chest as Sora’s giggly face crosses his mind.

He can’t help but feel jealous of all the students in his year that don’t have to open their front door to hear screaming and something shattering, which is precisely what he just did. He’s jealous of the students that come home to smiling faces, warm dinners.

His escapist fantasy ends abruptly with the crash of something made of glass. They’re at it again, he shakes his head ruefully. He hesitates before clicking the door open and stepping into the house, silencing himself and making his presence scarce. He’s gotten good at that, but not necessarily good enough.

“I’m home.” Bokuto’s voice comes as barely above a whisper. It doesn’t matter, because he won’t be listened to anyway. He could say that there was a man in his fifties asking him out, and he would get the same response: an irritated sigh. Nothing out of the ordinary. His mother’s attention snaps away from him in an instant when his father knocks down a chair.

“They’re arguing about something petty again, Bokuto can tell. An unimportant matter would quickly escalate into a big argument, and finally, they would change the subject to him. He concludes after a moment of listening that they’re in stage two.

Bokuto creeps up the stairs, knowing not to pull the same trick within the space of a few days. His attempts to stop the violent arguments become more extreme each day, and he doesn’t even know if they’re working in his favour. After all, if they worked, he wouldn’t be coming up with new ways to distract his parents each day.

Maybe he shouldn’t go out of his way to break up the fights. It’s a thought that commonly comes to him, but he can’t convince himself to leave his parents angry at each other. The kitchen and living room is ruined enough as it is, and it’s a matter of time before the damage will spread upstairs.

Concern lodges itself into Bokuto’s chest. Concern that whispers to him, reminding him that one might kill the other at some point if they snapped hard enough. The fighting had started when he entered his second year of high school. He can’t recall the exact cause, apart from the fact that it involved bills. Money isn’t the root cause of everything, but Bokuto knows it’s an issue.

“You never listen to me, ever! Soon we’ll be living in a shack, and-“

Crash.

“All you do is nag, nag, nag. Do you ever shut up?!“

Slam.

Bokuto throws himself onto his bed, hand reaching for his headphones sitting beside the pillow. He needs them again, the black and red device that shields his ears from what he doesn’t want to hear. The noise-cancelling feature reduces the yelling to background noise, along with the occasional sound of something collapsing.

“Koutarou is going to end up just like you, useless-“

Stage three, Bokuto stares at his hand with three fingers spread out. Headphones on, muffled yelling, a lump in his throat. It chokes him, cutting off his air supply. Revulsion pools in his stomach.
His uneven breathing is barely recognisable, even to him. He can only feel his chest rising and falling at a rapid speed, which confirms his panicked state. He’s heard by nobody, not even himself. And it doesn’t bother him. Even if he were to be heard, he wouldn’t get any favourable reaction.

A faint buzz reaches Bokuto’s ear, cancelled out by the sound of an object getting knocked over. Hopefully it isn’t the fridge, like last time. It’s pretty beat up already, and he can tell it can’t take much more damage. If the fridge breaks, he has another concern on his hands: food.

Bokuto closes his eyes, as if to shut out the negativity piling onto him. As much as he wants to stay in his comfortable position on the bed, his homework sits in his bag, reminding him of the trouble he’ll be in if he fails to hand it up.

Bokuto gives up his search for sanctuary, instead sliding off the bed to grab his bag. He digs for his homework sitting under his schoolbooks, crinkled and speckled with dust. His phone in the side pocket lets out a lively ding and vibrates, attracting his attention. Four notifications lined up on his lock screen, two from the same person.

5:03 Konoha Gakure

**Heard you went home. Get your ass back to school tomorrow, we need you and Akaashi for practice. You better recover from whatever you have, Bokuto!**

It’s precisely what Konoha would say to him if he’s there by his side, and Bokuto exhales happily. Beneath the tired grins and snarky attitude, Konoha doesn’t ever forget to look out for his teammates. He’s not as observant as Akaashi or Washio, but Bokuto has to give him credit for trying.

6:43 Magical Monkey Sarukui

**Take care.**

Sensing the concern coming from the other end of the screen, Bokuto types an energetic reply for both of his friends. The other two notifications are both from Akaashi, one being a missed call and another being a text message. Both are sent to him within ten minutes of each other, to his surprise.

7:54 Akaashi Keiji

**Is everything okay at home?**

The last message Bokuto receives is the one that twists his guts the wrong way. He knows what he’s meant to say, but his fingers don’t type what he usually types. Akaashi’s harmless message feels like a stab to his stomach, a slap to the face that tells him that none of this is okay.

*I need your help, Akaashi.*

Bokuto’s plea disappears with the repeated press of the backspace key. He can’t do it, and instead formats a response similar to the ones he sent to Konoha and Sarukui. Guilt weighs down his back. He knows he’s turned away an opportunity again.

8:06 Bokuto

**Yep! I’m good! (´▽`)**

Bokuto sends an array of emoticons, as well as the cute owl photo he found online. Locking his
phone, he sets the assignments accumulated at the bottom of his bag onto the table and sorts them in order of how strict the teacher is with overdue work. His stomach growls hungrily, as a reminder of the days he spent without decent food in his system.

The headphones come off, and then back on immediately. Downstairs is still a war zone, and Bokuto isn’t heading into the kitchen full of land mines. He reaches under his bed instead, rifling around until the glass of a peanut butter jar hits his palm.

Contents of the jar decreasing faster than ever before, Bokuto estimates he could get about a few spoonfuls out of it at most. The onigiri he bought from the convenience store is gone too, although efforts to make it last were made. Accessing the fridge in the morning was his top priority, aside from the homework. If he doesn’t wake up early enough, he can accomplish none of that.

One look at the English assignment and Bokuto wants to throw it out the window. He slams his pencil case onto the desk, fishing out a few mechanical pencils and a red pen. The sunlight grows weaker as Bokuto works on his reports, his eyes straining to read the minuscule writing as his room becomes dimmer.

Hunger isn’t an issue for long. Scoop after scoop of peanut butter disappears into Bokuto’s mouth, the chunks of peanut sticking in his teeth as he feeds himself what’s become his dinner for the day. The taste becomes tiring on his tongue after the first few bites, and the sickly-sweet stickiness lingers on the roof of his mouth.

He doesn’t stop consuming the peanut butter at a steady pace, until the jar is completely empty with the remains scraped off. It sits heavy in his stomach and he struggles to keep it down, but he’s determined to let his body digest what little food he consumed.

Night falls as Bokuto continues clicking his mechanical pencil, which leaves indents on his thumb and middle finger. Scribbling down down the results his sloppy, slowed thought process gives him, he fights the urge to sleep as he passes the midnight mark. His writing becomes less legible with every turn of a page, his eyelids almost fully closed by the time his reports are fit to be called done. His head bobs up and down once or twice, then lands splat on his notebook as he goes out like a light.

The curtains are left open, leaving Bokuto vulnerable to the morning sun that attacks his face. Blinding light shines through the window, and his face scrunches up to avoid as much brightness as he can. He groans, knowing his efforts are useless against the sun that seems to scream “The Messiah has arrived!”

Bokuto removes his headphones, setting them on the desk beside his completed assignment. Aside from the ting of bicycle bells and the morning breeze, it’s silent, which isn’t a surprise. Picking up his phone, Bokuto can read the numbers 5:14 on the lock screen featuring a Shonen Jump character.

It’s safe to head downstairs, he thinks. With slippers to protect his otherwise bare feet, he hurriedly heads downstairs and reaches the kitchen. The state it’s left in is horrific in itself, but not particularly surprising. Bokuto would be surprised if it were left in a pristine condition. There’s definitely more glass on the floor than the eye can see, and he’s glad he trusted his gut instinct to wear slippers.

He sweeps away at the floor to clear his path, from the kitchen entrance to his fridge. As soon as he opens it, a wave of dread hits him. It must have gotten unplugged amidst the fighting. Bokuto plugs it back in, but he knows he has to throw out the meat and leftovers. He isn’t taking any
chances, not after what happened the day before with the stir-fry that turned rancid.

The tomatoes in the fridge become Bokuto’s breakfast. His teeth tear into the fleshy tomatoes with ease, and the sweet juices burst into his mouth with every bite. He swallows down three in quick succession, and they’re gone as soon as he found them. He returns to his room afterwards, laying back down to pass the time until it’s a reasonable time to go to school.

Bokuto returns to his room, packs away his assignment and changes into his uniform. The peanut butter jar is discarded at the bottom of the bin, scraped of all its contents. He leaves the house without a word, closing the door carefully but firmly. Once he’s a safe distance away, he starts humming a song from a TV advertisement as he follows his usual route to school.

As soon as he shows up for morning practice, Konoha’s shoulder bumps into his. “Hey, what was yesterday about? Are you feeling fine now?” His hair is sticking up at a strange angle, and a sleepy sigh escapes his lips. It’s a well-known fact that Konoha is not a morning person. He isn’t a night owl, either. He’s more of a permanently exhausted owl.

“Yup! All good!” Bokuto waits for Konoha to get changed, patting the third year’s back in a friendly manner. “I ate some weird stir-fry. I was dying.” He gestures in an overdramatic fashion, twisting his face into an expression of disgust. He’s met with Konoha rolling his eyes at him.

“Bokuto! It’s been a long time!” Komi and Sarukui joins the club room, slapping Bokuto playfully. “We thought you were going to rise up to heaven.” Komi and Bokuto get involved in light banter, while the remaining team members enter and get into their uniforms. When Akaashi pops in with Washio and Onaga, Bokuto waves at him enthusiastically.

Akaashi notices Bokuto’s lack of sleep immediately. “You haven’t been resting well, have you?” He accuses, loud enough for the others to hear. While it’s true that Akaashi’s witnessed Bokuto hitting various low points, he doesn’t get the meaning behind the sudden overprotectiveness. As if to compensate for his parents - the thought crosses his mind, and he groans at its stupidity.

“What?! I’ve slept better than yesterday, and the day before!”

“That doesn’t mean you’ve slept enough.”

“Well, I’m not tired at all! I’ll race you around the gymnasium, if you wanna-“

“No, thank you.”

Akaashi shuts down Bokuto’s suggestion without considering it for a moment. It’s almost unsettling, how Akaashi seems to peer into his physical condition so accurately. A strange part of Bokuto views the setter as somewhat superhuman. “Weh, boring! Whatever, morning practice’s done!” He scampers off in a fake pout, sticking his tongue out at Akaashi.

The fourth class just before lunch rolls around, and it’s the class that Bokuto worked until past midnight for. His heart races for a split second, in the brief moments he’s unsure of whether he brought the assignment with him or not. He unknowingly makes a show of himself, taking out every folder from his desk and flipping through them loudly until he finds what he’s looking for.

“Bokuto,” his teacher’s voice has a hint of disapproval in it. Oh no. Bokuto pales, checking if he had taken out the right reports. The date on it matches the date he started, so that can’t be it. He hastily skims over the pages, and goes from pale to red. “Why are all your paragraphs one section ahead of where they’re meant to be?”

A large sigh escapes him. “I should be the one sighing, not you!” His teacher says snappily,
tapping his index finger onto the sheet and reeling away in disgust. “And why is there peanut butter on this? What were you thinking? Is this assignment just an accompaniment of your snack?” The corner of Bokuto’s mouth lifts as he takes the barrage of sharp comments, but he isn’t all that affected. The first thing that comes to mind is how he’ll be asked to fix it.

“Peanut butter, Bokuto? Really?”

“How hungry are you on a daily basis, anyway?”

His classmates are in fits of giggles, much to the teacher’s ire. Bokuto can’t help but to laugh with them. He prefers an atmosphere that he can smile in, rather than one where he can feel tension in the air.

“Shut up and get back to work, all of you! Bokuto, you’ll be staying with me for lunch until you finish that assignment, properly.”

Bokuto sticks out his lower lip when the teacher isn’t looking. He could have gotten a worse fate, but staying with the middle-aged teacher isn’t appealing in any way. Akaashi can’t toss to him during the break if he’s in a classroom, cooped up with a pencil in his hand.

The lack of sleep hits hard during lunch. Bokuto can feel it in his head and solar plexus, which slows down his writing speed exponentially. His teacher stares at him, disgruntled by his display. “Don’t you have anything in your mind other than volleyball? You’re a third year now, college exams aren’t easy!” Of course he knows. He’s heard every variation of that lecture. He doesn’t respond, focusing on ending the task at hand.

“Bokuto, sports can fail you so easily if you get injured or have a slip-up. You shouldn’t treat it with the same value as your studies. It’s time you start thinking about your future instead of making memories.” Bokuto bites his lip. He knows it’s coming from a good place, but he really doesn’t want to think about the future right now. He’d rather write lines, because he’d at least know what he was doing then.

Are you listening?

Konoha’s face peers into Bokuto’s, his narrow eyes observing the captain. “Come on. Warm-ups.” He starts calling out the counts for each exercise, going around in a full circle until the pair exercises begin. Bokuto’s glance wavers between the gym floor and Akaashi, wondering if he already knows what happened during lunch. He shouldn’t, but he wouldn’t be surprised if he did.

“Nice kill!”

Bokuto lands spike after spike into the court, with a burning desire to prove to Akaashi he doesn’t need to be watched over. He’s almost sure he’s managed to take away any worry Akaashi has for him. “Hey hey, Akaashi!” He holds his hand up for a high-five, and doesn’t miss the split second in which Akaashi draws back after their palms touch.

“Akaashi,” Bokuto starts, shoving his hands in his pockets as he walks home alongside his friend. “Do you not like being touched by me?”

Akaashi makes a choked noise, snapping his head back to Bokuto in mild alarm. “What- no, why? What made you think that?”

“Just wondering.” Bokuto crosses his arms, ending the discussion around that particular subject. Akaashi doesn’t seem to be lying. He shouldn’t have any reason to. “Hey, I’ll see you tomorrow. Give me a good toss, maybe thirty more than today!” He announces, and Akaashi looks like he’s
unsure whether to take him seriously or not.

“Bye-bye!” Akaashi still seems like he wants to say something, but Bokuto turns his back and waves before he can continue. A few seconds later and Bokuto knows he must have given up, as the footsteps that continue to grow quieter tell him. Although he hates to admit it, he can’t handle the lack of Akaashi’s high fives and claps on the back. He misses being able to have that in his life.

Today, it’s about the fridge. Bokuto can hear his parents arguing about the potentially spoiled food, which he threw away before anyone could get Salmonella or E. Coli or whatever was in season at the very moment. It doesn’t matter to him, because he’s already suffered through whatever it was that he had.

“Why did you throw it away without asking me? I could have done something with it instead of you wasting the ingredients!”

“I didn’t throw it away, so you can shut your mouth!”

“Um,” Bokuto slides himself between his parents, holding out a hand as if to shield both from the other. “You guys can stop arguing, because I’m the one who threw it away. It was gone off, anyway.” He admits truthfully, hastily explaining his actions so that he hopefully wouldn’t receive a strict punishment.

His mother stares at him with a “Unbelievable” look. Then she slaps the right side of his head. “You keep out of this! Shut up and do something productive with your time for once!” It stung, both his heart and his head. The rage was directed towards him instead of his father, who stared at him in a way that made it known he agreed with his mother.

“I’m sorry.” Bokuto could barely turn away to hide the look of relief on his face. His parents were agreeing on something for the first time in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

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Just a Disturbance

Chapter Summary

It’s been a concerning amount of time ever since Akaashi’s seen Bokuto’s world start to crumble. Despite being around to comfort Bokuto on multiple occasions and staying with him as much as possible, he hasn’t gotten any leads on what he’s going through. Bokuto doesn’t talk about it, and Akaashi can’t force him to.

Akaashi leaves for school with the hope that Bokuto will open up to him, tell him that he’s not okay, that he needs help. Touching Bokuto comes with a feeling of hopelessness and pain deep in his heart that sits heavy in him, and he isn’t letting anyone know about his situation at home. Akaashi loves Bokuto’s smile, but not when he’s masking his pain.

The moment he steps into the building, everything feels wrong.

Chapter Notes

It's finally done.
I am sorry for the wait.
I have too many lame excuses I won't mention.
Enjoy my bullshit.
Tw homophobic language and yeah general fuckers behaving like that

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The moment he steps into the building, everything feels wrong.

A crowd is formed around class 2-6’s lockers, and Akaashi instantly notices several pairs of eyes staring at him as he advances closer, with the intent of getting out his shoes. That’s when he realises that everyone is gathered at his locker. Some students back away upon seeing him, but the majority of the second years simply turn to stare at him.

“What are you all doing here?”

Akaashi’s question is answered by an unsettling grin, and he sees a page torn from a notebook
stuck to his locker. Something is scrawled on it in rushed handwriting, mostly blocked by the heads of all the students. What Akaashi catches a glimpse of makes something in his stomach rise.

**News flash: Akaashi is a homo. Stay tuned for updates on his relationship with his captain!**

“**Move!”** Akaashi pushes past the onlookers with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Whoever had the clever idea of publicly humiliating him was going to be dealt with later, but this? This had gone way too far. When it involves not just him, but explicitly mentions Bokuto, it can drag the whole volleyball team’s name in the mud. He isn’t allowing that to happen.

He rips the paper from his locker, shoving it into his backpack violently. His copybooks hit against his fingers and leave angry red indents. “Leave Bokuto-san out of this.” He hisses dangerously, rage boiling his body over up to his head. If it weren’t for his rational side, he would already be throwing hands.

Nobody has the courage to speak to Akaashi for a good thirty seconds, and it’s enough time for him to pull out his shoes and slip them on, while throwing his outdoor ones inside his locker. His face is warm, and it spreads all the way to the tips of his hands. He has about seven detailed worst-case scenarios playing out in his head, but the urge to confront whoever dared to pull such a vile stunt overrides every one of them.

“Your obsession with that Bokuto-san is creepy. You’re always sticking to him like glue. Maybe that’s why people think you’re gay.” A student from the class beside him cackles, sauntering over to him. Suspicions immediately rise within Akaashi.

Akaashi clenches his fists and grinds his molars together. They have absolutely no right to talk about his “obsession” when they haven’t seen beyond Bokuto’s goofy exterior. Bruises and anxiety attacks remain hidden to them, and Akaashi’s just a vice captain who loves Bokuto too much. Whether or not Akaashi loved him, it wasn’t an excuse to spread rumours concerning him.

“Maybe I care about my friend and enjoy his company.” Akaashi replies coldly, his voice dripping with venom. He isn’t telling a lie, as far as he’s concerned. Bokuto needs help, and he isn’t getting nearly as much as he should be. “Get out of my way.”

A large backpack slams into Akaashi’s hand as soon as it brushes against the other student’s shirt. “Don’t touch me with your filthy hands. I bet it’s been touching dick all night.” He spits, wiping his hand on the fabric of his jacket. Akaashi tenses at the words, biting the inside of his cheek and concentrating on the pain it’s causing.

“Hey, stop it now! Akaashi’s done nothing bad to you!” A classmate rushes to his defence, shielding him from the backpack. “You don’t get to treat people like shit because you saw a note on their locker. You’re just trying to find an excuse to pick on someone and get away with it!”

“I’ll tell you what,” The student sneers, ignoring the ranting student and pushing a finger into Akaashi’s chest. Hatred was all Akaashi could feel. Hatred for him, the guy who supposedly had a thing for his captain. “I don’t need a disgusting fag in my school. Watch your back, Akaashi Keiji.”

The student disappears after shoving Akaashi’s shoulder violently. Nobody dares stand up for him. Apparently, it’s a lot harder when he’s rumoured to prefer guys. Akaashi swallows hard, marching up the stairs to get to his class. He feels naked, stripped bare until his identity is just a cruel joke.

Rumours matter a lot more when he can’t deny them outright.

A few students give him a look saying *I’ve seen all the shit unfold* when he enters the classroom.
Akaashi’s heart rings noisily in his ears, and he wants to cover himself up with something large. His height and hair suddenly feel out of place, a contributing factor in making him stick out like a sore thumb.

He feigns calmness, knowing it’s over for him if he loses his cool. For a moment, he wonders if the whole thing will be forgotten about. And then the student sitting beside him pulls his desk away from his. Akaashi bites his lip, determined to not let it get to him. He realises Bokuto’s probably waiting for him at morning practice, and a flash of guilt hits him.

*It’s not a confirmation*, he tells himself. He isn’t outed if there’s no proof. But to him, he might as well have been. It’s not like he can come out if he wants to now. Would Bokuto kick him out of the volleyball team? He’s sure it won’t happen, but he can’t help the thought of Bokuto never looking at him the same way.

If that happens, he might as well resign. He’s hidden his complicated feelings that made his heart itch so well. A fleeting high school crush was what it was. Platonic or romantic, he had an affection for Bokuto, one that made his heart swell with pride when Bokuto blasted a spike past three blockers, that broke him into a million pieces when he saw him hurt and scared.

“Akaashi, hey.” Akaashi jumps when his shoulder is tapped with a mechanical pencil. He’s been on high alert mode for all his classes, and the tension is built up in his shoulders. “You’re not actually gay, right? It’s pretty creepy to think you of all people.”

“You think I’m gay because of some idiot plastering something on my locker?” Akaashi squints incredulously. He tears his hair out inside because why does it matter? He shouldn’t be respected less because he likes boys. He doesn’t want to deny a part of his identity. Caring for and admiring Bokuto is a part of him, and it’s not something he wants people to have a giggle over.

He’s met with a shrug. “I don’t know, dude. You seem pretty attracted to Bokuto-senpai. I mean, I wouldn’t say he’d date you, but you’re literally pining.” Akaashi cringes at the last word. He isn’t pining, he can confirm that himself. Apparently it doesn’t seem like that.

“He’s my best friend. It’s obvious that I’d care about him. Maybe your idea of pining is friends being friends.”

“Whatever you say. Just don’t come at my ass.”

Akaashi pulls a disgusted expression. “Do you think I would want your ass, in any way?” He doesn’t care if he comes off as being rude. It’s not his fault his classmate is fearing he’s more attractive than he actually is. If he wants to be so unnecessarily scared, he’ll let him be.

“Akaaaaaaaaaaashi!”

Bokuto leaps onto Akaashi’s back from behind, catching him off guard. Akaashi lets out an ungodly shriek, flailing briefly before regaining his balance. “Let’s eat lunch! I’m hungry! Like, sooooo hungry.” Bokuto draws out his words and slaps Akaashi’s shoulder numerous times, nudging him affectionately.

“Then eat a bigger breakfast. Or buy something from the shop.”

Bokuto blows a raspberry, turning his pockets inside out. “I’m broke! I only have enough to buy a small bento box.” He sighs, ruffling his multicoloured hair.

“Why didn’t you come to morning practice?”
Akaashi almost chokes on his green tea. He looks for a way to make a believable excuse without sounding like a complete idiot or telling the truth. *I almost fought someone for spreading rumours about you and I dating.* No big deal. He knew Bokuto was more perceptive and intelligent than people gave him credit for.

“I was on class duty on my own. I had to run some errands because I was late.” Akaashi lied, hoping that his excuse was good enough to make Bokuto stop asking. Bokuto made a “Hmm” sound, not questioning him any further.

“Akaashi, what happened this morning?”

Akaashi heaves a deep sigh. “I just told you I had class duties. What more do you want to hear?” His voice quivers, and Bokuto doesn’t fail to notice. A sturdy hand wraps around his shoulder, and the throbbing deep inside his chest increases. It’s Bokuto’s pain, overlapping with his own.

“Akaashi,” Bokuto’s voice calling out his name is painfully soft, and his grip tightens. “I want to know why you’re about to cry.”

And Akaashi can’t hold it in anymore. A pressure on his throat chokes him up, and tears well up in his eyes. “Something happened,” he whispers, biting his lip to stop a sob from escaping. Silent tears run down his cheeks, and Bokuto attempts to comfort him in all the ways he can possibly think of.

“Shit, something did happen.” Bokuto sits Akaashi down outside, placing a gentle hand on his back and rubbing circles. Akaashi could go on and on about everything that happened, that he isn’t okay, he needs a hug from his best friend. But he feels disgusting, like he shouldn’t be touched by such a clear, pure soul.

Akaashi’s crying audibly now, the sounds muffled by Bokuto’s shoulder. “Hey, hey. What’s making you upset, Akaashi?” Bokuto tries to pinpoint the cause of Akaashi’s sudden breakdown, but his only response is more ugly sobbing. Akaashi hates the way he cries. The way his eyes become puffy and the way his whole face looks all swollen up, the way his voice cracks. He wants to become invisible.

After crying until no more tears would come out, Akaashi remains absolutely still, with his head resting on Bokuto’s shoulder. “I need to know what’s wrong, Akaashi. I’m worried for you.” Akaashi doesn’t answer, unsure whether he should tell him everything and take away the uneasy racing in his chest.

“I’ll be fine. I’m better.” Akaashi wipes his tear streaks off his violently, realising how much of his composure he had to regain. Bokuto peers into his face worriedly, his hands dangling at his sides. “I promise.” Akaashi pushes his point, and Bokuto draws back reluctantly.

“You’re always working so hard, Akaashi! Don’t hold it all in!” Bokuto ruffles Akaashi’s hair, messing it up further. And Akaashi genuinely does feel better. Bokuto doesn’t have a massive vocabulary, but he knows exactly what to say to cheer him up.

It’s hard not to have a special spot in his heart for him.

Akaashi kicks back in his seat once he gets back to class. His confidence is a lot firmer, although he jumps when someone throws a ball of scrunched-up paper at him. Unwrapping it, he realises it’s not what he’s expected.

*Don’t mind those idiots. We’re on your side, Akaashi!*
He knows it’s not just the one sender when he sees signatures littered across the sheet, ranging from horrible writing to neat, even kanji. Turning around, his classmates nod stealthily at him. Akaashi mouths a thanks, folding it neatly and shoving it in his desk.

He wonders if they would all support him if they knew he was still into boys.

The first time he realised he wasn’t just into girls was when he was in middle school. He was way too young to confirm anything before that, he had told himself. But he couldn’t explain the attraction he had for all the boys that smiled a little brighter and lived a little more colourfully than the others. Although he’d never been told, he’d known it wasn’t normal to like both boys and girls. They never spoke of it as more than a joke.

Even with a supportive family and a definite identity, Akaashi isn’t proud. He can’t be if he wanted to. He wants it to be more than something he felt guilty and uncomfortable about, but he isn’t in a situation where he can be accepted without question.

Word spreads quickly, up into the third years’ floor. Akaashi is pleasantly surprised that not many people are against him as he thought. He isn’t sure what to expect. It’s just a rumour, but he hasn’t attempted to deny it. Maybe he should have. But he can’t act like it’s okay to let the cycle continue.

“Akaashi, hey. You okay?”

Konoha asks as soon as he enters the club room. So Konoha-san knows too, Akaashi muses. He knows about his current situation that he’d been thrown into. Maybe the entire volleyball team knows. They probably would if Bokuto knew, one way or another.

“I’m fine. Are you…” Akaashi bites the inside of his cheek out of nervous habit. He draws a breath, “Are you disgusted?” He doesn’t attempt to explain anything, and heads straight to what’s bothering him the most.

“No! I’m not an asshole, Akaashi. I don’t care if you like girls or boys.” Konoha throws his hands up in a surrender. He pats Akaashi’s shoulder reassuringly, and Akaashi knows he’s telling the truth. “Look, I won’t do anything that’ll get us in trouble, but believe me, I was just about to throw hands.”

Akaashi’s unimpressed stare pierces into Konoha. “Please, Konoha-san. Don’t stoop down to their level.” He doesn’t encourage him in any way, but if it did happen without consequences, he wouldn’t complain. “I don’t want to tarnish the reputation of this club.”

“Everyone else is on your side here too, Akaashi! If they’re not, fuck them. We’ve been through everything for these three years. Bokuto’s emo modes, annoying blocks, frustrating losses. And now we’re going to… Uh, you’d be mad if I said I’d give them hell.”

Konoha quickly shuts himself down, scratching his head sheepishly. Sarukui and Komi join them, while arguing about something with a fuming Bokuto. One glance at the captain and Akaashi knows he’s livid. The last time he’s seen Bokuto this angry was a year ago, when a third year at a rival school had attempted to jump Washio. That had almost ended in violence, if it weren’t for the then-second years stopping Bokuto.

“I’ll give them hell.” Bokuto hisses, his tone low and dripping with animosity. He’s terrifying, with his signature grin completely wiped off. Akaashi isn’t sure if the whole team can stop him, with the way he is now. Someone needs to, before Bokuto rips out the Tokyo Tower with his bare hands.
Konoha is the first to interject. “Bokuto, no-” He runs a hand through his thin hair, panic flashing in his eyes. “I know it’s fucked up, but we can’t do that. Do you want our club to be suspended?” Konoha points out, becoming the voice of reason among them.

“They made Akaashi cry,” Bokuto blurs out before Akaashi can stop him. A look of shock and anger is passed through his teammates, and his fist trembles. “They had no right to. They did something horrible, and I won’t ever forgive them.”

Bokuto says his last sentence with determination, each word accompanied by a dynamic hand movement. “If they ever do anything like that again, you have to tell me.” He whips around, marching towards Akaashi. “They’re lucky I’m not going to punch the living daylights out of them.”

“Bokuto-san. Please don’t. You are not going to ruin yourself and your future because of some idiots. It’s exactly what they want.” Akaashi explains, calmly poking Bokuto’s forehead. He can feel the anger radiating off him even before he touches him, and the amount of rage inside the captain actually scares him.

“Come on, Bokuto-san. Let’s practice. I’d like to drop this subject.” Akaashi announces firmly, striding out into the gymnasium. The third years follow, while Bokuto makes a dissatisfied face behind their backs. Onaga trots in after them, slightly late to the party.

Unsurprisingly, Bokuto’s emo mode has kicked in fifteen minutes later. He always goes into one when he’s preoccupied with something else, and he’s been running on rage and spite all day. It’s not a good way for him to carry on, with his spikes becoming erratic and fuelled with raw anger.

“Bokuto, get a spike in!” Sarukui calls out, and the captain leaps up to smack the volleyball down onto the court. He flies in the air for a brief second before crashing down, struggling to get a decent one in. Akaashi physically cringes, witnessing Bokuto’s spike land way off where it was meant to.

After three more tosses that end with Bokuto landing splat on the floor, the coach orders him off the court. He slumps on the benches with his chin resting on the backs of his hands, letting out a low groan of dissatisfaction. Akaashi sets to Onaga instead, teaching the eager first year how to spike the way his upperclassmen do.

“Good job, Onaga. I think you’re improving.” Akaashi states plainly, giving the taller boy an affirmative pat on his shoulder. Onaga glows with pride, grinning from ear to ear before forcing himself to look less goofy. “You can go home. Aren’t you tired?”

“Akaashi-san.” Onaga stares at his fingers, covered in sports tape at the tips. “Are you… okay? I heard something happened, and I know I can’t do much as a first year, but-“ he cuts himself off, chewing on his lip. “I don’t want to just watch it happen.”

Akaashi’s lips curl up into the faintest shadow of a smile. Even his underclassman is worrying over him, trying to help him in any way he could. But he doesn’t need all that. Onaga doesn’t, either. He isn’t getting the whole volleyball team involved into a spiralling mess.

“Thanks. But I’ll be okay. You don’t have to do anything.” Akaashi makes sure to emphasise his words just enough so that Onaga won’t feel guilty over not being able to help. The first year has a disadvantage against the second years, which really isn’t his fault.

The next day turns out worse, in terms of damage. The floor around the lockers of class six is
drenched, and Akaashi manages to avoid slipping after witnessing a classmate reach their tragic fate of falling victim to the slippery floor.

He carefully advances to his locker, which turns out to be the source of the water. Droplets continuously cascade down, like tears. Drip, drip, drip. Akaashi’s breath is stuck in his throat, until he forces himself to calm down.

Somebody had thrown water into his locker. His books are sopping wet, every last one of them. The thinner paperback textbooks are soaked through, and he wonders if they’re possible to save. He’s handling it well, surprising even himself. It was an annoyance, at most. He wasn’t in the mood to spend money on school supplies after second year had well begun.

“Akaashi-kun, you should probably leave it out beside the windows.” Tomoka, his classmate, offers some helpful advice before anything else. “If you’re lucky, they might dry enough for you to use.” She doesn’t show much compassion, but Akaashi can tell she has no malicious intent. He knows one when it’s around him. It’s an aura dripping with poison, that chills him to the bone.

And he feels it, right behind him. “Well, well. Akaashi-chan, what do we have here?” It’s the student from class two, who Akaashi hadn’t bothered remembering the name of. He doesn’t want to humanise someone who’d threatened him for being who he is. Akaashi makes a noise of distaste, standing in front of his locker protectively.

“Maybe you should mind your own business.” Akaashi takes out all of his books, ignoring the streaks of wetness that trail down his clothed arms. The water clings to his cold hands, and his fingers start to grow pale. “If you have the time to be needlessly irritating, I’m sure you can use that to search for a life.” He spits out aggressively, apprehensive even before anything happens.

“Tsuda. He’s right, you know.” Tomoka adds, her stoic demeanour unchanging. With his ego chipped, Tsuda is less than pleased to have Akaashi’s deadpan face in his view. He violently kicks the lockers, attracting the attention of at least twelve other students. Akaashi and Tomoka flinch, disappointed yet unsurprised.

“Listen here, homo.” Tsuda inches closer, and Akaashi instinctively takes a step back to maintain a safe distance. He doesn’t trust Tsuda at all to keep things non-violent. No peaceful student would ever dump water into someone’s locker first thing in the morning. “We don’t want abnormals in here. Take you and your bipolar piece of shit someplace else. Fukurodani isn’t a place for you.”

This time, it’s Akaashi who closes the distance between them. “Bokuto-san has nothing to do with your disgusting assumptions, Tsuda. Don’t you dare insult him.” His uncertainty had faded completely after his captain was degraded unfairly. He wants to destroy the person who could be so cruel to Bokuto, with all his endearing qualities.

“It’s all about protecting your precious Bokuto-san, isn’t it?” Tsuda coos sickeningly, staring at Akaashi’s drenched books with a sense of satisfaction. No words need to be said in order to let Akaashi know. Anything he says will be turned against him, filtered through a different lens. He turns to head to the bathroom, but he isn’t left alone.

“Well, that’s okay. Maybe he’ll know what a disgusting person his vice captain is.” Akaashi forces himself to shut down, to shut it out. It’s not true, so why would he let it hurt him? “I’m sure he’ll be disappointed in his… best friend.”

“Leave it out, Tsuda.” Akaashi snaps back, fumbling to get into a stall. “I don’t care about what you have to say about my best friend. The fact that I have one in the first place says a lot.”
“Listen here, Akaashi Keiji.” Tsuda grabs a fistful of Akaashi’s hair, sending him stumbling forwards. A knee drives up Akaashi’s stomach, and tears of pain rise up in his eyes. “You’re in no position to talk to me like that. Keep your mouth shut, I’m sure its only use is for sucking cock anyway.” Tsuda leaves, but Akaashi doesn’t follow.

Akaashi’s entire midsection throbs with every hot flash that travels through him. It’s not just the pain that bothers him. It’s the pure hate, aimed at him. He’s alone in the bathroom, wanting to throw up and disappear somewhere that’s not where he is now. He tries to make himself as small as he could, rocking back and forth with his face buried into his knees.

He’s a mess, and he knows it.

Bokuto seems to have picked just the right day to cling to him more than ever. He keeps an arm around him as he walks during lunchtime, as if he could protect him from anything. Akaashi can’t bring himself to push him off, instead staring down at his legs and letting his mind wander off to the books that he’d attempted to dry in the sun.

“Akaashi, don’t worry! I can shield you from anything!” Bokuto claims, and Akaashi’s chest aches. He can’t do anything without involving himself dangerously, or making a huge mess one way or another. Akaashi had decided he wasn’t involving Bokuto in any way. He shakes his head, casting away his suggestions.

Bokuto bites into his bread roll messily, getting yakisoba on both sides of his mouth. Akaashi picks at his favourites in his bento box, his appetite completely lost after the confrontation he’d had. “Don’t concern yourself with my problems.” He deflects Bokuto as best as he could, avoiding his craning neck.

“But I am concerned. If you’re having a sad day, I’ll be sad too. We both have to be happy!” Bokuto clasps Akaashi’s hand, rubbing his cheek against the second year’s shoulder. Akaashi can feel Bokuto’s concern surging into him, coming from the third year trying to support him.

Akaashi shakes his head a little harder, pressing Bokuto’s cheeks. “You can’t just get dragged down by other people’s moods,” he doesn’t mention Bokuto’s own less-than-stable mood, or how he’s the one affected the most by how other people feel.

“But you’re not an other-people. You’re my bestest friend!”

“I know I am, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi assures the third year, although he isn’t happy with where Bokuto manages to bring their debates. The trouble with Bokuto isn’t that he goes off in the wrong direction altogether, it is that he’s right in the worst moments possible.

“Then why won’t you even tell me how your morning was? Can you not tell me what happened?”

No, not really, Bokuto-san.

“Someone was being annoying again. It’s nothing you should be worrying your head over.”

Bokuto doesn’t take Akaashi’s vague answer. “What did they do to you?” He pursues further, and Akaashi can’t help himself averting the owlish captain’s powerful gaze. He can’t use all the psychological tactics he’s learned over the years when Bokuto starts behaving like this. It’s futile.

“Some stupid prank over at the locker area.” Akaashi mumbles, keeping his response short and lacking information. He’s chased himself down into a corner, now that he’s revealed part of what actually did happen. He could have lied, but Bokuto would catch him out straight away.
“No. What did they do to you, Akaashi?” Bokuto asks again, firmly. Akaashi shivers from the intensity of his emotions, and he can feel them jumping out at him even before he touches him. He’s angry, or at least partly frustrated. Maybe even murderous.

Akaashi breaks the lock on his mouth at last. “Some idiot in my year poured water in my locker. I was pretty pissed.” He sighs out of exasperation, but Bokuto’s gone way past that stage. He’s angry. Too angry for Akaashi’s liking, but he can’t be stopped now.

“That’s property damage, if you make it sound serious.” Bokuto points out. It was a mystery how he knows something so complicated, but there are many things he knows that Akaashi doesn’t. Writing kanji is not one of them.

“I guess so.”

“Akaashi,” Bokuto nudges him, forcing him to make eye contact. Akaashi can tell Bokuto’s almost as livid as yesterday. “I’m just disappointed you didn’t tell me straight away. Maybe I can’t do much, but you have to follow your own advice.”

“You’re really important to me. As a captain, a friend and a person. Please, just don’t pretend you’re okay all the time. It’s my turn to be a help to you.”

Akaashi opens his mouth to say it’s fine, and closes it. He knows when he’s beaten with words. “Thank you. And so are you, Bokuto-san. You’re great. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” He knows Bokuto does have people telling him otherwise, at an unknown frequency.

Bokuto’s fighters brush against his own. He’s okay again, until the lunch bell sounds and Bokuto’s mood immediately drops. He hasn’t stopped to think about what’s been happening in Bokuto’s side, and now he wishes he has.

If Bokuto isn’t okay with him, he can’t stand it.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and comments fuel my soul.
I love you all
Visit my tumblr
@hai-cuties
I am so happy to write this! I’m just dead sounding because it's nearly midnight,...
The locker incident isn’t the last one that Akaashi has to deal with. He wishes the act of malice was a once-off event he could forget about, but they don’t let him forget. They don’t let him forget that he’s less than everyone else because he’s attracted to men. Even if what separates him from others is his mysterious power, according to his classmates it’s because he’s bisexual.

Akaashi chooses not to explain that not being straight doesn’t automatically equal to homosexuality. People don’t have to choose one gender to fall in love with. In Akaashi’s case, it’s all of them.

Unfortunately, he knows they don’t care. There are only two categories, according to them; normal and abnormal. No matter what Akaashi does, he can’t fit in like he used to. He’s the awkward puzzle piece with bumps jotting out.

They never laid a hand on him. They didn’t have to.

hi.
I was gonna do this yesterday, but I had to finish it up today because going out and stuff.
Hopefully I can update this more often this year!
(I mean, 6 chapters in a year... I’m ashamed of myself.)
Thank you all!

tw: homophobic language and bullying

The locker incident isn’t the last one that Akaashi has to deal with. He wishes the act of malice was a once-off event he could forget about, but they don’t let him forget. They don’t let him forget that he’s less than everyone else because he’s attracted to men. Even if what separates him from others is his mysterious power, according to his classmates it’s because he’s bisexual.

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They never laid a hand on him. They didn’t have to.
One afternoon, his desk is filled with soil and grass. His textbooks that weren’t destroyed from the locker incident are smeared with dirt, although the covers had taken most of the damage. He decides against buying new textbooks. If they get ruined as well, it would be a waste of money to get them in the first place.

He can handle it, he tells himself.

There are insults scribbled in pencil over his desk, that he rubs out every afternoon. It’s in pencil, so he can erase them. They’re not carved into the wood. They say he’s disgusting, vile and below them because he likes guys. If he rubs them out, though, they don’t count. He just needs to rub them out, then. He’s okay.

He won’t let it get to him. He’s above them all, he won’t stoop to their level. After all, nothing can hurt him unless he lets it. If the people he care about accept him for who he is, what more could he ask for?

Lies.

Every time he hears a whisper in the hallway, it stings. Remarks leave him in a low mood, no matter how little he believes in what’s being said. He’s not really upset, just down. He’s more happy than sad, but that doesn’t mean he’s in a good place.

Words matter. If Bokuto were to tell him he loves him, it would stop his heart. If he called him disgusting, he would break into pieces. If he didn’t say anything to him anymore, that would affect him the most. Words, or the absence of them, matter.

Akaashi wonders what affects Bokuto. Words, actions, maybe both. At home, something’s going on. Akaashi doesn’t know what.

If Bokuto’s parents picked up on the rumours, what would they think?

Bokuto doesn’t talk to him much about his family life. Perhaps he doesn’t want to. He likes to talk about Akaashi’s family. His siblings, his mother, even his extended family. Bokuto loves to hang around at the Akaashi residence and browse the family photos, or just appreciate the air of trust and calmness.

Akaashi doesn’t want to pry, but Bokuto doesn’t seem to be getting any better. He still feels sparks of pain in his chest when he high-fives Bokuto. The bruises on his back are long gone, but the pain goes way beyond physical, he can tell.

Bokuto could be crying in his room, even now. Or maybe he was bottling everything up, unable to let it all out. The latter is the painful one. Emotions worsen tenfold when there is no way to express them. If that’s the case, it’s only a matter of time before everything bursts out.

Even though their lives are far from pleasant, there’s something that both of them look forward to every day, while eagerly crossing off the days on their calendars. Akaashi isn’t sure if Bokuto really does that too, but he probably does. After all, what’s coming up is the annual summer training camp at Shinzen.

Akaashi has only participated in it before once, when he was a first year. He had met Kuroo with the godawful hairdo there, who unfortunately was adamant on Bokuto and him being his best buddies through hell and back. Akaashi has already been through hell and back with him, so he qualifies as one, really. Akaashi now has a love-hate friendship with him, a considerable improvement compared to the one in his first year.
He’s also heard that Karasuno has been improving. They had gotten as far as getting into the top sixteen teams in the InterHigh tournament, although they’d lost to Aobajohsai. Bokuto’s been going on about two first years in particular, a genius setter and a spiker that could hit with his eyes closed. The spiker had also become friends with Kenma, a considerable feat that not many could accomplish.

It’s certainly going to be an interesting training camp.

“Bokuto-san, have you gathered up the money?” Akaashi places his hands on his hips, urging Bokuto to quit slacking off and perform his duties as a captain. He needs to hand out the permission slips and collect the money, neither of which he has done. It’s a part of the vice captain’s job to make sure the captain is doing what he’s meant to be doing, although that may be exclusive to Fukurodani High.

Bokuto whips around and sticks out his bottom lip. “I’ll do it tomorrow, I promise! I can do the handouts today though, so you can praise me for that!”

Akaashi thinks his eyes can’t roll back any further. “This is a week overdue. We need to get our duties done before our coach chews us out.” After a short pause, Akaashi resigns himself to his fate. “And if you’re quick about it, I’ll give you my fried chicken pieces next time my mom cooks up a batch of them.”

“Yay! Lucky me!”

Bokuto’s honey eyes widen at the promise of food as a reward. He works best when there’s something to look forward to in the end. “A man like me needs his protein! You’re helping me out a lot, Akaashi!”

“Excessive consumption of protein is not good for your health. To maintain your muscles and healthy body, it is important to have a healthy diet full of vegetables and fruit. I can also share my grilled peppers tomorrow, Bokuto-san.”

Akaashi doesn’t let Bokuto get a word in until he finishes his food lecture. His mother has gone out of her way to teach him the importance of eating right, and he intends to enlighten his captain with the knowledge passed onto him. “Have you been eating decent meals, Bokuto-san? I only see you buying cheap bread at the store. You need to eat right to have a good immune system.”

“I know, I know! Stop bombarding me with facts, Akaashi!”

“So you’re admitting that I’m right.” Akaashi tilts his head slightly, his mouth forming a lopsided grin.

“You’re right, okay?! Dammit! I can never win against you!”

Akaashi lets out a soft chuckle. He ruffles Bokuto’s hair until he lets out a “Gweh!”, but immediately flinches. His shoulder is blasted with a shooting pain, his right shoulder. The one Bokuto uses to spike. Concern sets in.

“Hey, Bokuto-san. Is your shoulder okay?”

Bokuto nods breezily, as if Akaashi had merely asked him about the weather. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why?” He rolls his shoulders around, and Akaashi internally grimaces.

“Say, have you hurt it recently? Or maybe strained it?”
Akaashi squints at Bokuto until he does his nervous, high-pitched laugh while averting his eyes. It’s his trademark giggle he lets out when he knows Akaashi will see right through whatever he says.

“Tell the truth. It’s a lot easier than making up a story right now.” Akaashi adds mercilessly.

“I missed my appointment this week. I was supposed to go for a follow-up examination, but I couldn’t.”

Bokuto isn’t lying, Akaashi can tell. “Appointment? You haven’t told me about this.”

“Yeah, I guess I haven’t.” Bokuto had to have hid it from him consciously, judging from his body language laced with guilt.

As much as Akaashi wants to lecture him, he decides on asking the important questions first. “And what are you being checked up for? Did you twist something in your shoulder, or is it less serious?”

Bokuto starts shifting where he stands, his hands unconsciously playing with each other. “You know when I told you I fell down the stairs a couple of weeks ago?” Akaashi’s eyes widen. It’s been a considerable time ever since he asked him about his bruises, more than enough time for all short-term injuries to heal.

“I kind of fucked up my shoulder when that happened.” Bokuto admits. “I hurt it when I knocked it against the wall, and it’s painful on bad days.”

Bad days. Akaashi attempts to calculate how many of those Bokuto’s had in the past few weeks. When he hasn’t managed to get good spikes in and execute satisfying plays. It wasn’t enough to be noticeable, but Akaashi’s already learned that Bokuto is better at hiding things than he thought.

Akaashi heaves a sigh of frustration. “Why have you been keeping this from everyone? You can’t just play when you have an injury.” It’s nothing new, Bokuto hiding his injuries and sicknesses from the team, but it does disappoint Akaashi. Sharing weaknesses has never been Bokuto’s thing, but Akaashi was his best friend. He wanted to be trusted.

Bokuto shakes his head violently. “It only hurts a bit! It’s gotten better, don’t worry! They said I could play soon if I continue recovering like this.”

Akaashi’s brows knit together tightly. “Play soon?” he repeats, narrowing his eyes. “So you’ve been told you shouldn’t be playing, and yet you’ve been doing exactly that for all these weeks.”

He doesn’t let Bokuto off easy. He can’t, not when nobody manages to understand the seriousness of Bokuto’s situation. He cares for him too much to let it go unnoticed any longer.

“Have you told the coach about this? Or anyone else, for that matter?”

“No…” Bokuto admits truthfully. Akaashi can’t hide the disappointment crossing his face, and Bokuto notices. “But I’ve been resting it!” Bokuto protests weakly.

“How many spikes have you pleaded me for, after I suggested we stop?” Akaashi crosses his arms, giving off his no-nonsense attitude. “I don’t know when you’ve been resting it. Certainly not during practice.” His voice is stern, cutting through the air.

He continues, and Bokuto shrinks under his glacial gaze. “Are you going to be able to go to our training camp in Shinzen like this?” He regrets his words a moment after he utters them. Maybe
he’s gone too far. Bokuto flinches and bows his head instead of launching himself into a passionate rant.

“It’s okay, Bokuto-san. I’m not angry at you.” Akaashi reassures him, noticing the early signs of Bokuto’s dejected mode. He’s meant to be helping him, not fretting him. “Don’t be thinking that. I want you to take better care of yourself, that’s all.”

Akaashi lets his finger brush against Bokuto’s shoulder, ever so slightly. His powers come into good use when he needs to detect lies, although he has his doubts whether it’s the most ethical way of using them. “Is there something that concerns you about the training camp?”

Bokuto shakes his head, but the quickening of his heartbeat tells Akaashi otherwise. “Is there going to be someone you don’t get along with? Or is there something bothering you about going to that particular school?”

No, that’s not it.

“I’m fine, there’s nothing bothering me. It’s okay, really!”

Lies.

Bokuto’s unconsciously squirming, itching to be left alone. Akaashi can’t stop now, not when he’s so close to finding out. “What’s worrying you? If you tell me, I’ll help you in whatever way I can.”

Konoha pops into the club room, and Akaashi feels guilty after wanting to kick him in the shin. “What are you guys doing? Practice is gonna start. Hurry up!” He bangs his fist on the door, rolling his eyes exasperatedly.

“And Bokuto, don’t push all your responsibilities onto Akaashi, ya hear me?”

Bokuto’s face forms a childish pout. Akaashi knows he’s putting on a mask again, hiding the pain he was starting to show moments ago. Cursing his luck, Akaashi steps out into the gymnasium after Bokuto. He looks visibly relieved that Konoha interrupted them.

“Make sure you hand out the leaflets.” He adds, pointing to the club room and catching Bokuto’s jacket as he haphazardly throws it off of himself. “And do not, I repeat, do not hurt yourself today.”

While Bokuto gets immersed into his volleyball practice, Akaashi muses about what could be bothering Bokuto about the training camp. If he’s getting away from his family, there’s really no reason he should be bothered about it. But Akaashi doesn’t know what’s making Bokuto reluctant.

The food? No, Bokuto was capable of inhaling the entire dining hall, table and all. The baths? No, Bokuto had breakdanced around the club room almost completely naked only a few days ago. The beds? Out of the question. Bokuto could sleep on a bed of rocks if he was exhausted enough.

Akaashi has no idea, much to his frustration.

“Hey hey hey~! I’m the best!”

Bokuto loudly praises himself and leaps into the air, arms waving about wildly. Volleyball is what makes him so gleeful all the time, and it’s what brought Akaashi and him together. Bokuto shines the most when he’s playing volleyball. He’s a star, drawing everyone’s attention onto him.

“Akaashi, I want more!” Bokuto demands extra spikes, even after everyone else gets ready to head home. “Come on, just a few more spikes! Please?” He claps his hands together, bowing his head as
if he’s the underclassman. “Ten! Just ten more?”

Akaashi decides against scolding him for disregarding his injured shoulder. Instead he directs his attention to the stacks of paper in the club room, organised and ready to be handed out. “I told you, they need to be given to everyone participating in the training camp.”

“Whip him into shape, Akaashi!” Konoha exclaims, waving his face towel around and smacking Bokuto’s cheek with it.

Bokuto lets out a disgusted shriek, making spitting gestures and wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Gross, dude! I don’t want your sweaty towel in my face!” He screeches, and proceeds to throw his own towel at Konoha after wiping his arm with it.

“You nasty ass bastard!”

Bokuto grabs the permission slips and information leaflets, smacking Konoha’s face with it as he throws them around for everyone to bring home. “Hand them into me by Monday, okay?” He’s met with groans, complaining that he should have handed them out sooner.

Akaashi shakes his head, silently exiting the gymnasium. He hears noisy, uneven footsteps banging on the wooden floor behind him, and a hand slapping his back with the force of an overexcited dog.

“Akaashi, wait for me! Don’t leave me all lonely!” Bokuto clings onto Akaashi, rubbing his forehead onto Akaashi’s shoulder. Akaashi’s body tenses up, and his arms start throbbing. Bokuto has pushed himself too hard. His eyes have lost their usual shine. He needs rest.

“Let’s go home. It’s going to be late. I’m sure you have things you need to be doing.”

“But I’m so lonely, baby! So lonely!” Bokuto dramatically extends his arms towards Akaashi’s face, and for just one moment, Akaashi wants to kiss him.

He freezes up at the unexpected thought that jabs at his heart. Even though he knows he hasn’t voiced it out, his heart’s hammering in his ribcage like crazy. He feels horrible, sick. Wrong. Like all the things that he’s called.

“You okay?”

Bokuto snaps Akaashi out of his trance, shaking him back into his consciousness. He nods, turning away awkwardly. “Come on, we should get going. See you later, Konoha-san.” He leaves the premises, with Bokuto holding his hand and swinging it around.

For a moment, Akaashi forgets that they’re supposed to be best friends. He forgets how the students in his class stare at him. Forgets how bad he is at pretending he doesn’t have a crush on Bokuto.

“Gosh, Akaashi. You really see through everything, huh?” Bokuto balances his enameled bag on his spiked-up hair, his volleyball keychain swinging about in the air. “You’re like a mind reader. You should act as a lie detector and make other people pay for your services.”

Close, Akaashi thinks. He’s just an empath, someone who can understand feelings but can’t view thoughts. He’s often wished for something more, when he fails to understand. He doesn’t get any more. All he can do is share the pain somebody carries with them temporarily. If he wants to find out the reasons behind it, he has to rely on his deduction skills.
Bokuto makes small talk on the way home. His smile reminds Akaashi of his youngest brother, innocent and bubbling with zest. Akaashi wouldn’t know better without his powers. He wants to ask why Bokuto can manage to keep smiling while hiding so much. Secretive is a word he never expected to associate with Bokuto.

“Oh yeah, Akaashi. I gotta apologize for something.”

Bokuto clasps his hands anxiously, and Akaashi’s shoulders stiffen. “What is it, Bokuto-san?” He doesn’t want to play the guessing game, although it probably won’t lead him anywhere. He allows Bokuto to speak, his eyes blinking excessively.

“I… can’t go to the movies with you on Saturday. I know you’re looking forward to seeing the film, but I have to help my mom with something. I’m really sorry.”

Akaashi’s expression softens. “Is that all?” He confirms, and Bokuto nods hesitantly.

“Yeah. But you seemed really happy when you saw the trailer, and I didn’t want to ruin it for you.” Bokuto deflated, more upset than Akaashi was.

“It’s fine. We can always go another time.” Akaashi knew he could go by himself if he really wanted to, but he has no intention of doing that. It’s much more entertaining to watch a movie with Bokuto than by himself. “Were you expecting me to get angry over that?”

When the words leave Akaashi’s mouth, he realizes how true it could be. If Bokuto’s been through a hard time, it shouldn’t be a surprise that he anticipates something worse than what will happen. He’s scared, because of something else.

“I, uhm, Akaashi…”

Bokuto stutters over his words, struggling to find the right thing to say. “I just feel bad. I wanted to have fun with you.”

“So do I, Bokuto-san. But it’s not like we’ll have no more free days after this weekend. Hopefully, the movie will still be on after the training camp.” Akaashi reassures him.

“Oh yeah, training camp! I can’t wait to play Karasuno and Nekoma. It’s been way too long since we faced off with Kuroo on the court!” Bokuto’s enthusiasm is real as he talks about the other teams partaking in the training camps. He’s friends with all of the team captains and vice captains, which isn’t really surprising. His communication skills are through the roof.

“Hopefully Kuroo-san won’t cry when we win against his team.” Akaashi jokes, and Bokuto bursts into peals of laughter. “He’ll certainly need to be consoled by Yaku-san or Kenma.” The same could be said for Bokuto during his emo mode, but Akaashi doesn’t mention that.

“Not just Kuroo.” Bokuto flexes his arms, placing his hands on his hips. “We’ll win against all of the other teams too. Your tosses are the best in this universe, after all!”

A swell of pride erupts in Akaashi’s chest. “Of course, Bokuto-san.” He had dreamt of being the setter for Fukurodani ever since he saw Bokuto as a first year. He was a star player, he could tell that the moment he saw the way he flew in the air. His eyes staring at the court like a bird of prey, glistening like honey.

“See ya tomorrow, Akaashi!”

As Bokuto waves him goodbye, his figure grows smaller and smaller as he heads in his own
separate way. Akaashi turns and heads to his own estate when Bokuto becomes an unidentifiable speck in the distance. He’ll meet him again very soon, and he won’t have to go through the school timetable because it’ll be a Saturday. He can head straight to the gymnasium, away from the horrible people.

“Welcome back home, Keiji. Your dinner is on the table, okay? You don’t need to heat it up, it’s cold somen noodles.” Akaashi’s mother greets him with today’s menu as soon as she opens the door. It’s her way of saying hello to him after he’s back from school, and Akaashi likes it very much.

He sits down at the table, with Sora swinging his short legs beside him. “Haven’t you eaten your dinner?” He asks, and Sora shakes his head proudly.

“Wanted to wait for you, nii-chan!” Sora squeaks, slurping his noodles and getting the broth all over the white table. Akaashi wipes the droplets off with a cloth, pushing the bowl closer to Sora.

“You didn’t have to.” Akaashi points out calmly, dipping the thin white noodles into his cold broth. There are ice cubes inside the cup, cooling the noodle soup down. Tomato, cucumber, ham and egg slices decorate the noodles in the bowl. The cool sensation in his mouth is heavenly.

“But I wanted to! You’d be lonely if you had to eat all by yourself, nii-chan!”

His mother calls after him when he cleans up his plate and places it into the dishwasher. “Keiji, come here.” She places a hand on his shoulder, and Akaashi can sense her concern. “You look tired. Are you feeling sick?”

“What? No. I’m fine.” Akaashi’s slightly taken aback. His mother picks up on a lot of things, even though his expression has been neutral for the whole time he’s been with her. Maybe it’s his neutral face that he needs to work on. “Did I look that tense?”

“If it’s nothing, that’s fine. You’ve been trying so hard at practice lately, I was wondering if your body could keep up with it.” She smiles warmly at him, her cheeks wrinkling with kindness. “Don’t push yourself too hard, alright? You’re my baby, no matter how old you get.”

Akaashi lets out a soft chuckle. “I’m in my late teens, mom. I’m hardly the one that should be getting babied.” He gestures towards Sora, who is currently attempting to redecorate the kitchen table by smearing his food all over it.

“Oh my god. Sora! No! Don’t do that! That’s bad!” His mother rushes over to his youngest brother, yanking him out of his seat to get his hands washed. Sora starts to wail, but she’s been through this with Akaashi and his other siblings. She’s used to it now, and Sora doesn’t stand a chance against her.

Akaashi heads upstairs to his room, his bags hanging from his arm. It’s humid and uncomfortably hot in his room, summer heat crashing into him at full blast. With a groan, Akaashi turns on the air conditioner and waits for it to do its magic.

He pulls out his phone from his bag pocket to text Bokuto. He can’t help but to think about him, and how he has no idea whether anyone looks out for him the way Akaashi’s mother does for him. Akaashi wants to make sure he’s not hurt.

6:43 Akaashi Keiji

Bokuto-san, how are you?
6:46 Bokuto-san

I’m fine.

Despite the straight answer Bokuto gives him, Akaashi can’t help but to feel an ominous vibe coming from the text message. He remembers that Bokuto was supposed to have an appointment to get his shoulder checked out. Somehow, he doubts that Bokuto has had a make-up appointment for it.

6:52 Akaashi Keiji

Did you get your shoulder checked out?

6:54 Bokuto-san

I couldn’t.

6:55 Akaashi Keiji

Well, will you be visiting a doctor anytime soon?

6:57 Bokuto-san

Holy shit how do you type so fast

7:00 Bokuto-san

I can’t really go to any clinics right now.

Bokuto’s phrasing is what strikes Akaashi as odd. There shouldn’t be any reason as to why Bokuto can’t get the medical help he needs. Unless somebody’s actively preventing him.

7:02 Akaashi Keiji

Bokuto-san, if you’re in pain you need to get your shoulder looked at.

7:04 Bokuto Koutarou

It doesn’t hurt anymore! I feel great!

Akaashi heaves a sigh. He wants to believe that there is a small chance that Bokuto is telling the truth, and his shoulder is recovering properly. But from what Akaashi gathers, Bokuto is lying to him again. He certainly isn’t feeling as great as he tells him, but Akaashi’s words don’t make him open up. Maybe actions need to be taken.

Bokuto is there before him the next morning. He waits for Akaashi in the club room, his eyes swimming around as he changes into his uniform. Akaashi feels slightly exposed, but it makes him feel better to think that Bokuto has no shame regarding lack of clothes. It sometimes doesn’t work in Akaashi’s favour, though.

“Bokuto-san, have you gathered the money for the training camp?”

Bokuto jumps, then starts to laugh nervously. “Not yet, actually. Can it be tomorrow?” Akaashi gives him a look that could freeze the equator over. “Aw, come on! It’s a whole day of practice, we
“You’ve brought your money, right?” Akaashi asks, and Bokuto averts his gaze. “You have to be kidding me, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi deadpans. It’s less than a week until they have to send it all in to their coach. “Any chance you can run down and get it from home?”

“My mom will really get mad if I try that.” Bokuto shrivels, and Akaashi’s features harden. “I only brought in three thousand yen. I don’t have enough.”

Something inside Akaashi clicks. “If you want,” he states plainly, “I can lend you the money for today.”

Bokuto lets out a gasp. “I can’t do that, Akaashi! It’s wrong!”

“Why? You can just give it back tomorrow. It’s no big deal.” Akaashi pulls out a thousand yen note before Bokuto answers, and hands it to him. “Besides, it’s more efficient if we gather up all the money for today. There’s less chance of you getting an earful.”

Bokuto begrudgingly accepts the offer. “You use too many complicated words,” he grumbles, as if that was the reason why Akaashi got his offer though to him.

“They’re really not that complicated.”

“Oh, come on Akaashi!” Bokuto throws his jacket behind him, and Akaashi catches it with his arm. “Whatever. Let’s get to practice.”

Thirty minutes into spiking practice, Akaashi notices that Bokuto isn’t spiking in his usual way. He still racks up a fair amount of points, and his emo mode has no sign of appearing. He’s bouncing with energy, but Akaashi’s known him long enough to know that he doesn’t have the same form.

Specifically, Bokuto’s centre of gravity is slightly shifted to the left. Akaashi can still toss to him without many problems, although he has to adjust them a tiny amount. He doesn’t mind, and neither do his other teammates. He decides to keep an eye out on him, still.

“Bokuto-san!”

Akaashi knows Bokuto’s going to aim for a cross spike, and glances at him out the corner of his eye. They widen when he sees what’s under the fluttering t-shirt.

There’s a large purple bruise that has imprinted itself onto his torso, skin swelling painfully. Something has happened again, and Akaashi hadn’t been able to pick up on the signs. He hurriedly falls back into position before a volleyball can pelt him in the face, dread creeping up his throat. He can’t wait for the training camp to commence.

Akaashi wishes that Bokuto had gotten hurt by accident, but a sinister vibe surrounds his upperclassman prone to mystery injuries.

“Akaashi, whatcha lookin’ at?” Bokuto catches him staring. He grins mischievously, swaying his hips in his attempt to look provocative. Instead, it looks absolutely ridiculous. Akaashi cries into his hand. “Are you mesmerized because I look so beautiful?”

Konoha kicks Bokuto’s right leg, just where the kneepad ends. “Stop giving Akaashi grief, for fuck’s sake. You’re not that sexy.”

Akaashi turns away before anybody can see him blushing. He finds Bokuto very attractive, but
there’s a time and place for everything. As Bokuto waves his ass around singing a painful rendition of Anaconda, Akaashi’s brain confirms that now is definitely not the time.

“Bokuto-san, your midsection is bruised. What happened to it?” Akaashi asks Bokuto as soon as he catches him on his own. He knows Bokuto doesn’t like being fussed over when it comes to his actual weaknesses, and Akaashi wants to respect his dignity.

Bokuto responds with a laugh. “I bumped it into my desk when I got up this morning! Don’t worry, I didn’t get beaten up or anything. Nobody hates me that much!”

Akaashi wants to believe that. After all, he can’t understand who could ever truly hate Bokuto. He loves his personality, the way he laughs and claps Akaashi on the back. The way everything lights up when he enters a room. The way he pouts when he can’t get a bite of his favourite food.

“You’re telling me the truth, right?” Akaashi brushes his shoulder against Bokuto’s. He feels guilt.

“Of course I am!”

Lies, lies, lies.

As soon as practice ends and they step outside, Akaashi notices someone staring at them in a way that makes Akaashi’s insides shift. Bokuto is all over him as usual, hugging his shoulder. Akaashi tenses when the student staring at them gives them a look of disgust.

“Are you actually fucking gay, Akaashi?”

Blood rushes to his face, redness reaching the tip of his ears. His stomach is in knots, and he wants to break into a run. He never wanted Bokuto to get caught up into his mess. Now he’s seen and heard it, and Akaashi wants to disappear.

“Hey, hey, hey.”

Akaashi hears his captain’s catchphrase, but it’s less bubbly and much, much more menacing. He can feel the rage in his aura without even having to touch him. Bokuto’s eyes are blazing, his gaze fixating onto the student who just threw Akaashi a comment.

Before Akaashi can urge him to be the bigger person and some other bullshit he was about to make up, Bokuto marches up closer to the second year student and stares at him with an evil, almost predatory eye.

“What sort of shit are you spewing about my setter?”

Bokuto looks like he’s about to throw hands, and Akaashi attempts to stand in between them to stop a fight from taking place. He doesn’t want Bokuto to be banned from his last training camp, or worse, his last Spring High tournament.

“Oh, you’re his captain?” The student sneers, smirking at them both. “You should be careful around him. He might come at your ass. Probably has some sort of disease-“

“The only disease here is you.” Bokuto crosses his arms, his height acting as an advantage. His brows are furrowed, and his bubbly demeanor is nowhere to be seen. Terrified is the only word that can describe how Akaashi is feeling about Bokuto’s raw anger.

“You’re really out here defending this fag?”
Akaashi flinches. “Fuck off.” His voice trembles and he hates it. He hates appearing intimidated. It’s as if he has something shameful to hide, and he starts to wonder if that’s true.

“Akaashi is my best friend. I’m not just going to stand around while you talk shit about him.”

“Or,” the student pauses, sizing up Bokuto. It’s ironic, considering the height and build of the captain. “Is it that you guys are a couple?”

Akaashi’s ears burn, and his cheeks flush with humiliation. “No. Leave him out of this.” His words give him the opposite of what he’s looking for: more unwanted attention. Everything he says is turned against him, just because they can.

“Tell me, does Akaashi like it in the ass?”

His vision starts to blur. He can’t cry now. He needs to hold it in, if he doesn’t want to provide them with more ammunition. But the tears threaten to spill, the more he thinks about it. He keeps his eyes fixed on everyone’s shoes, biting his trembling lip.

“Do you always spend your time assuming that guys with best friends are gay, or is Akaashi somehow a special case? Why can’t you leave him the fuck alone?”

A warm, heavy arm suddenly rests on Akaashi’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s go somewhere else.” Bokuto turns on his heels and starts walking in the opposite direction. Akaashi follows him, not paying attention to where they’re walking off to. Hopefully Bokuto knows where he’s going.

“Hey, you okay?”

After a few minutes of strolling around, Bokuto had deemed that it was safe to start talking. “I’m sorry you had to go through that, Akaashi. You know they’re just spouting bullshit, right?”

Akaashi nods. He knows, but it doesn’t lessen the dread in his chest every time he gets stared at and insulted. “I’m sorry you had to see that, Bokuto-san. I didn’t want you involved in this.”

They’ve reached some sort of park, and Bokuto plops onto the grass with an ‘oomf’. Akaashi sinks down beside him with a drawn-out sigh. His attention shifts to the other people in the park, enjoying their weekend outside.

Children and their parents have picnic sheets spread out under them as they eat rice balls and octopus-shaped sausages. Some of the children are playing in the sand pit with their plastic buckets, laughing as they make sand castles. One toddler trips over the wooden enclosure and starts to wail.

“Akaashi, you have to tell someone about this. It’s- it’s not something that should be happening. Maybe you don’t wanna make a big deal out of this, I dunno- but I can’t stand it. They’re horrible to you.”

Bokuto is genuinely upset. Akaashi wraps his arms around him uncertainly, and he feels like crying. No, he is crying. He can’t swallow the lump in his throat, swelling up until he has to let his emotions out.

He isn’t supposed to be crying. He’s already broken down once in front of Bokuto, he doesn’t need to do it again. This was why he couldn’t ever help Bokuto. He was being a burden instead of a best friend. He was a horrible-

A thumb smaller than his own brushes against the corner of his eye, wiping off a tear. “It’s okay.
Don’t worry about anything. You haven’t done anything wrong, you know?” Akaashi hiccups, pressing his eyes against Bokuto’s shoulder.

“I’m sick of it,” Akaashi whispers, “I’m sick of being told I’m disgusting. As if I don’t get enough of that everywhere I look. It’s just tiring, every day.”

“But you’re not disgusting! You’re one of the best people I’ve ever been lucky enough to meet. I don’t have a big enough vocabulary to explain it, but you’re really important to me!”

Akaashi bites the inside of his cheek. “Even if…” he hesitates, fearing for the worst. “Even if it’s true? Even if I’m really attracted to guys?”

Bokuto blinks at him, seemingly pondering over what Akaashi is implying. “Akaashi, my opinion on you won’t change based on who you’re attracted to. Unless it’s the prime minister or something, then I’d be kinda concerned. There’s nothing wrong with being gay!”

“I’m bi, but thank you.” Akaashi’s lips break into a smile. He wipes his tears hastily, not wanting to be seen crying any longer. “It makes me glad to know that.”

“Wait, Akaashi, you know I’m gay, right?”

Akaashi’s eyes rounded so much they stung. “No. Well, now I do.” He has trouble processing the information that’s hit him like an asteroid, but really, it makes him happy. He’s not the only one. Statistically, he knows that already, but it doesn’t feel like that anymore.

He elbows Bokuto’s arm lightly but repeatedly. “You really could have told me that a few moments earlier,” he mumbles, turning away. He’s turning noticeably red, much to his dismay. “But thank you for sharing that.”

“I thought you knew. Sorry!” Bokuto presses his palms together, grinning sheepishly. “But you’re bi? That’s cool! You like guys and girls! You have a lot of people to choose from! I think it’s great!”

Akaashi gently shushes Bokuto, whose voice is starting to rise up to a crescendo. “Thank you, Bokuto-san. Your sentiment is much appreciated, but you have a rather loud way of expressing it.”

He’s so excited he can barely breathe, but he doesn’t show that. Instead, he listens to Bokuto rambling about ‘having all the fishies in the sea’ and whatnot, fondness kindling inside his heart. He’s hopelessly in love, he’ll admit that to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Love you all, please comment!
Comment!
COMMENT
please?? ;^^


Melting Golden Ray

Chapter Summary

Bokuto can almost imagine it. The warm, soothing embrace that always calmed him as an upset child. The hands that caressed his untamable hair. He wants it, from the one person he’ll never get it from.

So he pretends. His arms aren’t his own. They’re someone else’s, whispering to him that everything will be all right. They give him the comfort he can’t provide for himself.

Chapter Notes

2 updates in 2019? Someone murder my clone.
Nah jk, I promised myself to be more productive, it's working.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bokuto’s shoulder throbs to his heartbeat. His doctor had suggested painkillers to help cope with the pain, but it’s not working for him. He’s been losing sleep, falling behind on assignments from the constant pain distracting him. His eyes burn as he fixes his gaze on the ceiling, counting the seconds that pass and calculating how much sleep he can get if he falls asleep right that second.

He knows not to bother his parents. His tactic of injuring himself under the guise of clumsiness only worked when he was in middle school, when they would immediately stop fighting and rush to treat him. But now, they’re low on money and don’t care about him much.

It’s a fact that hurts his heart, but a fact he’s been trying to accept nonetheless. His father often spends money unwisely and takes out his frustration on him by berating him. His mother picks both of them apart for everything they do, often screaming that they’re no good and breaking household objects.

The warmth that used to surround his family is no more.

So Bokuto waits until the incessant complaints about money finally dwindles. He knows being in pain for weeks isn’t normal, but he can’t confirm anything if he can’t visit a doctor. It’s an evening without his father, who is off on a business trip. He hasn’t heard any screaming so far.

“Mom, I want to go to the appointment. My shoulder hurts.” Bokuto mumbles. He’s already missed two appointments, and nothing has gotten better. “I’ll help you with anything. Please,”

His mother stares at him with a piercing glare, and he flinches. “Don’t you know we’re low on money right now, Koutarou? Doctor appointments are costly. Do you have any idea how much stress I’m under right now?”

Shit, he thinks. This wasn’t a good time, he realises too late. “I understand. I’m sorry,” he murmurs.
“I just—”

“You’re already in third year. Don’t you ever think about helping yourself on your own for a change?” Bokuto bites his lip, anticipating another lecture. “This is your problem. You don’t think about the burden you place on this family.”

_Burden._

Bokuto can feel himself crumble. He wasn’t valuable to her anymore, he could tell. He would have done something, anything, if it would repair the bond between his family. But he didn’t have a clue. A few years ago, Bokuto would greet his mother with a hug every time he came home, tossing his bag aside in the hallway. Now, he focused on not being heard when he opened the front door.

“This is what happens when you’re too dependent. You can’t survive on your own.”

Bokuto wants to prove her wrong. He could survive without his parents, if he tried a little harder. If he had the right opportunities and a well-paid job. He could do it. But really, he can’t prove her wrong. He needs to rely on his parents to survive. He’s no good without the people around him.

He slinks off, and heads to his room when he’s not called back. The wave of helplessness that he’d swallowed back washes over him. He’s alone, inside his home. He’s invisible.

The thoughts that form inside Bokuto can’t be articulated. An intangible mass sits in his chest, eating away at the positive demeanour he struggles to put on. He wants to cry it out. Tears, washing away that dirty, fake layer. Exposing his tender core that he refuses to let anyone go near.

His arms curl around his middle, enveloping him in a hug. He tries to imagine someone there with him. Reassuring him that it’s okay to cry. That he won’t be judged for showing his emotions. That it wasn’t his fault his family was splitting apart.

“Mom.”

_Koutarou._

Bokuto can almost imagine it. The warm, soothing embrace that always calmed him as an upset child. The hands that caressed his untamable hair. He wants it, from the one person he’ll never get it from.

So he pretends. His arms aren’t his own. They’re someone else’s, whispering to him that everything will be all right. They give him the comfort he can’t provide for himself.

Hours pass as he stays absolutely still, only breathing and contemplating. Bokuto’s head pounds, as if he’s been crying. He wishes that were the case. He would feel more normal, and less like a disease. If only he had the power to lift himself up.

The next day, Bokuto gets mercilessly questioned by Akaashi. Of course Akaashi has to always notice what’s wrong with him. He seems to always know when he’s upset. Bokuto had even spilled the details of his appointments, despite himself.

He’s sure his demeanour is perfectly bubbly, but Akaashi is the personification of a lie detector. It’s almost scary, how he can see right through his blinding exterior. But he can’t possibly actually read minds, Bokuto assures himself. He’s never been a believer of superpowers, and if he were a mind reader, they would have won nationals last year.
I… can’t go to the movies with you on Saturday. I know you’re looking forward to seeing the film, but I have to help my mom with something. I’m really sorry.

Akaashi didn’t get angry at him, even though he cancelled his plans like an irresponsible idiot. He’d forget dates, tests and even his jobs as a captain, but he never forgets anything Akaashi-related. Maybe he’s being selective, but he isn’t trying to be that way. He only wants the best for his setter.

Then, why does his father take him apart?

“You’re incredibly careless. Why do you make things harder for us at such a hard time? I’m the one who gets the worst of your mother. Don’t make it hard for me to love you, too.”

If Bokuto’s father teaches him only one thing, it’s that he’s a difficult child. Scatterbrained, lazy, would lose his head if it weren’t attached to him. Always wants and never gives back. Ungrateful for the privileges he’s given.

“I’m trying the best I can.” Bokuto grips his hands into fists, indignation filling his eyes. “I really am. I’ll help you guys with anything, I promise.”

His father’s glacial stare shuts him down. “I don’t like that look you’re giving me. If you really want to help us, then why don’t you get a job instead of focusing on that pathetic volleyball club?”

Bokuto swallows down his emotions, desperately struggling to keep a neutral face. “Volleyball is important to me, dad. I’ll get a sport scholarship if I try. I’ll repay everything once I get into college.”

The thought of college is daunting. He doesn’t have a clue what he wants to do besides volleyball, if his only plan fails. He’s not good at retaining information and throwing it back up onto a piece of paper. The right words don’t come to him when he needs to write up a report.

“Volleyball costs money. Especially training camps. I’ve heard you have one coming up soon.”

His father reaches into his pocket, taking out his wallet. “Don’t ever forget that we’re the ones who pay for all this, Koutarou. I think you need to be more grateful with what you have.”

“I know.” Bokuto can’t argue with his father. Everything will get turned against him, he’s known that for quite some time now. “It’s the last one, I promise. I just need the money for it.”

He’s met with the shake of a head. “You need to stop thinking with your emotions. You have no control over them. You’re almost as bad as your mother.”

“Don’t say that about mom!” Bokuto blinks back the tears in his eyes. Something grows inside his chest, rage threatening to spill out any moment. His parents don’t love each other anymore, but he hates it coming out of their mouths. She was still his mother, who he’d said “I love you,” to, countless times.

“Shut up, you bipolar piece of shit!”

Raised voice. Bokuto flinches, but his father isn’t like his mother. He doesn’t throw things or hit him. But the wound is carved deep inside his stomach. Whether it’s noticeable on the outside or not, it doesn’t matter.

He’s choking. He’ll spill if he opens his mouth. No crying in his household. He’ll be in trouble because he’s a nuisance, and he’s a nuisance because he can’t ever control himself. Tremors rattle him, fear twisting his expression. The floorboards are spinning.
When something presses against his palm, Bokuto jumps. “Take it. And know your place.” He doesn’t dare look down at his hand until his father leaves. There are a couple of thousand yen notes, crumpled into his sweating palm.

He hadn’t thanked him. *Ungrateful.* The word echoes in his head like a cursed chime. It wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t help it. He was just scared of the consequences. He repeats to himself over and over again, convincing his mind to stop blaming him.

Bokuto counts how much he has, as soon as he retreats to his room. Dread rushes into him at once. It’s not enough. He needs a whole one thousand yen more to pay for the training camp. He can’t ask for more. He needs to be grateful for what he gets. Others have it so much worse than him. He’s one of the lucky ones.

But he can’t delay it any longer, or else Akaashi will be disappointed. He’s meant to be the responsible third year captain. He can’t be the one dragging everyone down because he can’t pay his expenses.

He’s stuck, but there’s another problem on his mind now.

A hungry groan rises from the pit of his stomach. His appetite begging to be satisfied, Bokuto reluctantly heads back into the kitchen. It’s relatively quiet, and he can’t sense the air of conflict around him. He pokes his head in, looks around a bit and nods. Safe.

He reaches for a tupperware container full of fried noodles, then stops. If that’s his parents’ food, he would risk getting into more trouble for eating their food without permission. Heaving a sigh, he settles for a cup of instant noodles instead.

It’s the third time this week. Bokuto reaches for the kettle and boils some water, already knowing he’s chipping away at his health. He’s consumed so much artificial flavourings and fats that he may as well be forcing his own stomach to digest its own lining.

There is a leek and some frozen vegetables in the kitchen. It won’t do much, but it’ll be a lot less of an unhealthy dinner if he adds some vitamin-rich foods and throws away the broth. He chops up the leek and thaws the frozen vegetable mix, assembling some instant vegetable ramen for himself.

As Bokuto pours the noodles and vegetables into a large patterned bowl, he fans himself as the scalding hot steam blows into his face. The air conditioner in the room beside him is off, and for a good reason. He’s the only one around, and there’s no reason to pile on the electricity bill.

Admittedly, the noodles taste good. They squish under his teeth and slide down his throat, soaked with thinned soy sauce-based broth. The leeks and carrots turn soft and melt in his mouth from sitting in the steamy bowl. It’s filling too, and he feels comfortably full. His upset is replaced with a pleasant warmth.

Bokuto’s gaze shifts to a purse on the table when he finishes eating. It looks like his mother’s, judging from the feminine design and colour. He’s sure there’s at least one thousand yen in there. Depending on how much money there was, he wouldn’t get caught if he decided to take just a small amount.

He shuts down the horrible thought. No matter how desperate he is, stealing from his parents is something he can never do. It’s morally wrong, ungrateful. But at the same time, he’s curious. He won’t take anything. Just a glance, to see if his mother might lend him some.

His hand extends towards the purse slowly.
He opens his ears for footsteps, and hears none. He reaches for the zipper without daring to breathe. The curiosity is too much for him to not take the opportunity. *Just open it*, he hisses mentally to himself. *It’s not like you’re stealing anything.*

He can’t do it. His hand draws back, reluctance taking over his decision. It knocks into something, and a splash follows.

When Bokuto realises it’s the ramen bowl that he knocked over, he pales. *Shit, shit, shit.* Panic takes him unexpectedly, and he scrambles for a rag to clean up the mess. The leftover broth spills all over the table, drenching the newspaper and his mother’s purse.

His mother’s purse. It doesn’t look waterproof, and he can imagine the soy sauce leaving a brown stain on the white material. He opens up the zip hastily, taking out all of the paper bills. Luckily, most of them are completely unharmed. He notes that there’s definitely more than a thousand yen, but he has other priorities now.

“Koutarou, what are you doing with that?”

Bokuto glances at his mother fearfully, and then down at himself. “I spilled the ramen onto your purse. It wasn’t on purpose, I swear!” He knows it looks like something else, but doesn’t defend himself before he’s accused. He’s in an incredibly misleading position.

His mother snatches the bills out of his hand, counting them as she moves her purse out of harm’s way. “You stop lying. You always disappoint me, Koutarou. I can’t ever trust you with anything!”

She grabs him roughly by the collar, her voice trembling. Bokuto’s side slams against the table from the force. He winces, pain spreading through his abdomen. It’s a widespread ache, but not deep inside him. It’s only going to bruise, and fade after some days.

Bokuto knows all of that in his head. He knows he doesn’t have anything to cry about, but his throat burns with unexpressed tears. He isn’t a liar, he isn’t. “I didn’t take any money. I swear, I didn’t!” He protests his innocence loudly, but his cries fall onto deaf ears.

“Empty out your pockets.”

As soon as Bokuto’s hands roam down to turn his pockets inside out, his stomach drops. The money his father had given him is still in there. He’s going to be punished. He needs his father to prove that he’s not a disgusting thief.

“Well?” His mother demands impatiently. As Bokuto shakily opens his palms to reveal a couple of notes, she grabs his wrist and digs her fingers into his skin. Her nails scratch against him, drawing out a hiss from him. “Obviously, you’re lying. You’re a failure, stealing money from your parent.”

“I got these from dad! You can even ask him!” Bokuto argues back, gripping the money tighter. He knows his father can back him up. After all, he’s the one who put it into his hand. “It’s not a lie! I’m not lying, mom! I would never lie to you!”

“Can’t both of you ever give me peace?”

It was his father. He stood at the doorway, glaring at the arguing mother and son. “Stop making so much noise. You’re both a disturbance.”

“Dad!” Bokuto scuttled up to him, thrusting the money into his face. “You gave this to me, right? Tell her I’m not lying!” He swung his head back at his mother indignantly, his chest swelling with relief.
“I gave him that money. Now shut up, both of you. I gave Koutarou five thousand.” He stated, turning on his back to get out of the dispute.

Bokuto counted the notes in his hand nervously. He had been gripping six thousand yen, but he could swear that he hadn’t taken any from his mother. “Dad, you gave me six thousand. Remember?” He’d counted multiple times in his room. The trip to Shinzen costed seven thousand, and he had one thousand less than what he needed.

“Nobody cares. If I gave you that much, then I did. Stop involving me in all this shit.”

“You’re a liar. Get out of my sight, Koutarou.”

Bokuto obliges wordlessly, not bothering to claim that he didn’t steal anything. He knows it won’t do anything good for him. It burns his chest, the unfairness of it all. He feels childish. He marches up the stairs, imagining himself throwing himself onto the floor and screaming his lungs out.

He would cry about how much he wanted his old family back. How much he wanted to be believed. How much he wanted to be loved by his parents and told that he was their everything.

But he isn’t seven anymore. He isn’t allowed to cry over something so trivial. A voice inside his heart cruelly reminds him that he did think about opening his mother’s purse. There’s no guarantee that he wouldn’t have taken any money, apart from his own self insisting that he wasn’t that low.

Perhaps he did get what was coming to him. It has to be his fault. If it isn’t, he figures he would be getting yelled at way less.

His fault. His fault. His fault.

He doesn’t sleep much that night. He doesn’t remember everything that his mother said, but he distinctly remembers what his father called him. Bipolar. He isn’t even sure what it means exactly, but he knows it shouldn’t be said to anyone.

Bokuto is abnormal. He can’t behave correctly like everyone else he knows. He’s too obnoxious, too stupid to understand what he needs to change about himself. He wishes he were more like Akaashi.

Akaashi puts up with him, puts up with his mood swings, emo modes and everything else that would drive a setter away. He sticks with him after practice till he’s heaving over a sink with exhaustion. And somehow, he’s best friends with him.

Thinking about Akaashi comforts Bokuto. He doesn’t like to think about the possibilities of Akaashi secretly being fed up with him, so he focuses on the positive. He closes his eyes, pictures himself on the court with Akaashi. His hand slams into the volleyball Akaashi set for him, and blasts right past three blockers.

He hears the Fukurodani students screaming and cheering at the number on his back. He’s the ace, bursting through every wall and leading his teammates to victory. His palm slaps against Akaashi’s, and everything feels so right, and-

It’s morning, shining through his curtains and attacking his eyelids. A dream or an elaborate fantasy created by himself, he can’t tell. His body is refreshed from the deep sleep. He can feel the energy in his bones, replenished from the amount of sleep he had. If only his heart were as light as his body.

A Saturday means a lie-in for some, but for Bokuto, it means an entire day of practice. It’s the best
way he can imagine spending the day, bantering with his teammates and spiking Akaashi’s tosses. If there’s something he’ll enjoy more than that, he doesn’t know its existence.

Practice rolls around, and Akaashi ends up lending him money and noticing his bruise from slamming into the table within a few hours. He’d arrived earlier on purpose to have the club room to himself, so nobody would see his skin exposed when he changed clothes. It’s as if Akaashi has been there with him yesterday, only because he’d wished for his presence so greatly.

His own problems are cast aside, when he hears somebody insult Akaashi. He hates the way Akaashi’s voice cracks as he holds back his tears. He would have loved to strangle the student who dared to make Akaashi cry, but his self-control overruled his instincts. Really, he had decided that being there for Akaashi was more important than throwing hands and acting irresponsibly.

Bokuto also learns that Akaashi is bisexual. He’s attracted to guys, just like him.

“Does being bi mean you’re half gay and half straight, or is it an uneven mix?”

Akaashi snorts at his question. “It depends on the individual, Bokuto-san. Attraction isn’t a mathematical equation. You can’t split it in half.”

Bokuto scratches at the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, sorry. That was a stupid question.” He takes a mental note to research more about it when he gets home. He’s surprised by how little he knows about the LGBT community, despite being in it.

“It’s fine. I wouldn’t know much either if I weren’t bi.” Akaashi shrugs. “We don’t learn this at school.”

“Well, we should. It’d save a lot of confusion for us poor, non-straight students.”

“You know,” Akaashi says. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. They might start comparing us to magnets or plants.”

Bokuto bursts into laughter at Akaashi’s witty comment. “Dude, they’d just start going all ‘You can be attracted to the N pole or the S pole.’ It’d be the worst comparison ever.”

“They should use the periodic table. As well as gallium yttrium, there’s bismuth.” Akaashi points out, and it takes some time before Bokuto catches onto his joke and starts to chuckle. Bokuto loves Akaashi’s sense of humour. Quick, sarcastic and intelligent, just like him. His heart swells with pride when he reminds himself that Akaashi is his best friend.

Bokuto doesn’t pay attention to his mother’s cutting words or the arguments going on downstairs that night. He’s too excited to care for whatever they’re screaming over. Akaashi is like him. He can barely breathe with his heart humming in his throat. Although he longs to rant about everything that happened to Kuroo, he resists the urge to pick up his phone and dial his number. It’s Akaashi’s privacy, after all. He knows to respect it.

But it won’t be long before he and Kuroo will start to chant “One of us, one of us,” while circling around Akaashi.

Although it isn’t easy, Bokuto manages to gather a thousand yen to give back Akaashi. He’d resorted to pleading his father for lunch money, which he never spent and kept aside until he scraped together enough of it. Hunger pains attack his midsection by the time the week ends, but it’s worth it.
“Alright, get some sleep on the bus. You’re in for a long day.”

As the Fukurodani volleyball club members are ushered onto the bus, Bokuto yawns and straightens his posture to prevent himself from passing out. He hasn’t slept well, from the mixture of hunger and exhaustion. He wishes the bus ride to Saitama were longer, so he could actually get a good few hours of rest.

“Bokuto! Catch this!”

Konoha throws pocky at Bokuto, and it splits unevenly when he tries to catch it. “Here, Akaashi! You can have half!” He offers the short biscuit end to Akaashi, giggling maniacally.

“Bokuto-san, how very kind of you.” Akaashi deadpans, but he takes the pocky stick anyway. Bokuto grins and eats his longer piece bit by bit, and Konoha hurls the empty pocky box at Bokuto’s head.

“Gah!”

As Konoha shoves the remainder of the pocky into his mouth and cackles, Bokuto’s head tilts to the side so that he can lean against Akaashi’s shoulder. “Konoha is being mean to me,” he pouts, sticking out his lower lip.

Akaashi tuts, shaking his head with a wry smirk. “Konoha-san, I do not condone this type of violent behaviour. Perhaps a few deep breaths will help you.”

Bokuto’s laugh explodes out of him as Konoha lets out an incredulous “Oi! Watch what you say, Akaashi!” He knows it’s all in good humour, and he treasures the atmosphere that lets them all act like teenagers, without the weird senpai-kouhai hierarchy.

“Perhaps you should get some rest, Bokuto. You look tired.” Washio points out, noticing the lack of sparkle in Bokuto’s eyes. Akaashi nods in agreement, nudging him with his shoulder to coax him into quietening down.

“Nooo! I want to talk to you guys! Bus rides are one of the best parts of training camps!”

Akaashi rolls his eyes, rubbing his temple with his fingers. “You can talk as much as you want before we go to sleep. How about we enjoy the ride in silence for now?”

Bokuto lets out a whine of protest, but everyone around him closes their eyes and Akaashi silently pressures Bokuto to do the same. With a defeated huff, Bokuto curls into Akaashi and starts to doze off with his face pressed against his shoulder.

A peaceful atmosphere surrounds them, as the bus is driven slowly on the road. There aren’t many twists and turns, and it’s a comfortable ride aside from the occasional bump that nobody minds. The quiet hum of the engine is enough to lull the students into a state of rest.

However, the easy, gentle part of the ride ends as soon as the bus avoids the motorway and takes the alternative hilly route. Bokuto feels like he’s being tossed around in a blender, the bus jolting and speeding up every few seconds. Even then, some of his teammates are still sleeping. He can’t believe it.

Now that he’s awake and uncomfortably alert, he’s quick to realise that he doesn’t like the way the paths twist and drop. He lets out a groan, hugging his midsection and shifting closer to Akaashi. He wants the comfort of his best friend.
“Bokuto-san.” Akaashi notices him squirming and fidgeting, trying to get his mind off the persistent discomfort in him. “Are you alright? You look pale.” Akaashi cocks an eyebrow, his hand reaching out to grab Bokuto’s. Bokuto frowns when his fidgeting is forcibly stopped, forcing him to meet Akaashi’s gaze.

“The ride’s making me feel weird and I don’t like it,” Bokuto whines, squeezing Akaashi’s hand tightly. He hates feeling motion sick. It’s not supposed to happen. He attempts to distract himself by thinking about training camp, but the added clutter in his brain worsens his state of misery.

Akaashi tuts. “You’re feeling sick from the bumpy ride,” he states plainly, handing Bokuto a bottle of water. “You need to hydrate yourself. How much have you been sleeping lately?”

“Less.” Bokuto answers truthfully before he can even register the question. Akaashi pinpoints everything that’s bothering him, squeezing information out of him whether he likes it or not.

“Any particular reason why?” Akaashi takes the bottle from Bokuto and uncaps it, moving one of his arms around Bokuto.

Bokuto takes a few careful sips of water. He can feel the rush of liquid spilling down to his stomach, and he drinks more hoping for relief. “I was busy lately. Exams.”

He’d studied for his exams this time, seeing as he was a third year. There was no time for him to be slacking off. He stayed up until the next day to skim over notes and solve questions from his textbooks. But despite everything, he’d failed math.

It hadn’t been easy convincing his parents and teachers that he could still go to the training camp. With some tutoring from Washio and Kozue, Bokuto had passed his make-up exams before he was left behind by his teammates. He’s lucky enough to be able to be on the bus to Saitama, but not lucky enough to have a comfortable journey.

“Try to rest now, then. We still have time before we arrive at our destination, Bokuto-san.”

The exams weren’t the only reason why Bokuto has had a rough sleep schedule. He doesn’t feel safe when he closes his eyes. His ears tune into everything around him when he’s enveloped in darkness. He hears things that he doesn’t want to, until his own thoughts are loud enough to drown them out.

“Yeah.”

He’s safe with Akaashi. His shoulder is a comfortable spot for him to lay his head onto, and the rhythmic pats on his back reminds him of his heartbeat. He’s wrapped in warmth, like a blanket shielding him from everything unpleasant. Akaashi will keep him safe.

Bokuto drops off to sleep peacefully, growing limp in his seat. Akaashi holds him to his heart’s content, free from stares. They haven’t cuddled like this in so long, and it reminds them how dear to each other they are. Bokuto could just float away with him, melting into the summer heat. It’s a moment of tranquility just between them, right before the rowdiness of a training camp.

Chapter End Notes

Heyo. I wanted to highlight that abuse isn't always physical or verbal in this chapter,
especially because some behaviour is incredibly hard to notice. Thanks for reading.

Until next time.
The Saitama heat burns us

Chapter Summary

Akaashi is woken up by Bokuto’s yelling, and his teammates creating a racket in the bus. Rubbing his temple, Akaashi realises that they’re not moving anymore. He catches sight of Shinzen high school, their destination. His teammates are already jostling at each other to get off the bus, and Bokuto is tugging on Akaashi’s arm expectantly.

“Come on, Akaashi! Training camp, training camp!”

It's the sound of summertime training camp commencing.

Chapter Notes

hi guys!
It's me again. I hope you guys are still here!
First off, I wanna apologize. This chapter has some canon events going on, so it may be a little predictable, but I promise it'll get more entertaining soon! Have fun, and don't forget to leave a comment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akaashi is woken up by Bokuto’s yelling, and his teammates creating a racket in the bus. Rubbing his temple, Akaashi realises that they’re not moving anymore. He catches sight of Shinzen high school, their destination. His teammates are already jostling at each other to get off the bus, and Bokuto is tugging on Akaashi’s arm expectantly.

“Come on, Akaashi! Training camp, training camp!”

Bokuto bounces around, the spitting image of Sora after he’s had too much cola. Akaashi can’t help the fond smile that tugs at his lips. He gazes at his captain, who he compares his baby brother with. He has the same protective urge he gets around his siblings, as well as a dash of adoration and romantic sparks.

“Hinata! Hey hey!”

Bokuto grabs the Karasuno first year by his hips, swinging him around like Akaashi’s dad used to do to him. “Bokuto-san! It’s been a while!” Hinata lets out an enthusiastic giggle, thoroughly enjoying getting tossed around like a sack of potatoes.

“Hard to believe you were motion sick twenty minutes ago, Bokuto.” Konoha remarks, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

Bokuto responds by blowing a raspberry at him, making a childish face that shows his teeth. “Shut up! I’m fine now!”
“Bokuto-san, you get motion sick too? I’ve vomited on Tanaka-san’s lap before!” Hinata chimes in, a little too eager to overshare. Bokuto makes fake retching noises, and the rest of the team pulls disgusted faces at him in response.

Akaashi stifles a laugh into his palm. “Bokuto-san, please refrain from making such crude noises.” He swats him on the back of his head lightly, eliciting a silly noise from him. “You’re the captain, after all. You should be setting an example.”

“Nooooo! You’re the setter here! You set an example!” Bokuto groans, deepening his voice excessively. He imitates The Scream by placing his hands on his cheeks and opening his eyes wide, looking quite foolish in the process. Akaashi snorts at the horrible pun and huffs, making his way over to the school building.

Kuroo grabs Akaashi from behind, before he senses his presence. “Who do we have here? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” He chuckles, his awful bedhead as unruly as ever. “You’ve grown so much, haven’t you?”

Akaashi rolls his eyes in response to Kuroo, who acts like an old man who has known him since he was in diapers. “You’re like an annoying uncle at this point, Kuroo-san.” Kuroo grins at him, his lips like a cheshire cat. “Though… You’ve recently proven yourself tolerable.”

“Bro!”

Bokuto squeals as soon as he catches sight of Kuroo, dashing up to him and engulfing him in a bear hug. Kuroo lets out a guttural screech, Bokuto’s muscular frame squeezing him so hard he’s choking.

“Hey, asshead. I’m trying to breathe over here.” Kuroo groans, but there’s no malice in his voice. He ruffles Bokuto’s owl-hair, bumping shoulders lightly with him. “Haven’t seen you in forever. Looking hyper as ever, huh?”

“We need to move our stuff. We’ll beat you soon.” Akaashi jabs at Kuroo before he gently pries Bokuto away from him, flashing him a lopsided grin. “Shall we go, Bokuto-san?”


"Please kindly don't use that word in my presence, ever again." Akaashi grimaces, and Kuroo blows him a kiss. “Pain-in-the-ass feral cat.”

Once all their bags are placed in the bedroom, the matches finally commence. Bokuto is bouncing off the walls, completely recovered from his mini-slump in the bus. Akaashi breathes a sigh of relief, catching Bokuto’s jacket when he chucks it haphazardly.

“We’re aiming for no penalties! Let’s do this!”

Bokuto radiates energy, spreading throughout the entire court. He draws everyone’s attention when he spikes, whether he intends to or not. He’s even more excited, now that Hinata and Kageyama are there from the start.

“No penalties? I don’t know about that.” Akaashi shrugs, but when he’s with Bokuto, it almost seems possible. He’s his star, after all. He hasn’t been following him all this time just for fun.

“Bring it on! Hey hey hey!”

Bokuto’s hand slams into the volleyball over and over again. Akaashi worries about his shoulder,
but Bokuto doesn’t show any signs of pain or discomfort. He spikes and spikes, each yell of glee louder than the last.

“Hey, Akaashi. Have you seen Karasuno today?”

They lay on the grass, heads resting on their palms. The quiet scent of night air floats between them, softly blowing through their hair.

“Yeah. They were a little uncoordinated. The libero was attempting a toss, but he didn’t succeed. And Kageyama’s tosses weren’t the best. The weirdo quick duo weren’t in top form, either.” Akaashi comments. “But I guess it’s because they’re still assembling themselves.”

Bokuto gives a hearty laugh. “They did lose all their matches. Felt bad for them, actually. Glasses guy seemed like he was going to pass out towards the end.”

“Glasses guy?” Akaashi recalls. “He’s the tall one, right?”

Bokuto nods. “He’ll get good. I guarantee it.” His grin widens, and he lifts himself off the grass by swinging his body upwards. “He just needs to find his volleyball passion!”

“Volleyball passion.” Akaashi had found that in his third year of middle school. He’d played it safe all the time, picking up volleyball simply because it intrigued him. It was interesting enough for him to keep at it, but he didn’t believe he had the potential to get anywhere close to nationals.

That was until he saw Bokuto Koutarou.

His breath had been stolen as soon as he saw Bokuto soar for the first time. He was a star, destined to shine in the middle of the galaxy. Akaashi immediately knew where he wanted to go for high school. Fukurodani Academy, to get closer to the glittering spiker. Even if he only got to toss to him during practice after school.

Now, he’s best friends with the spiker he once regarded as unreachable. It makes all the days of collapsing from exhaustion worth it. He was Bokuto's setter, his partner on the court. His chest stings when he reminds himself it's just for another few months.

“He’ll find it soon! I know it!”

When Bokuto says that, Akaashi can't help thinking that he's right. “I’m sure of it, Bokuto-san. Would you like to head over to the third gym?”

Bokuto visibly lights up at Akaashi's suggestion. “Yeah! I want Kuroo to block for me!” He drags Akaashi up by the arm, ushering him over to the main buildings. “Come on, let’s go!”

Giggles erupted from Bokuto like fireworks. Akaashi was in love with the way he glowed excitement, and jogged behind him as he raced to the gymnasium. Night began to fall, but the day was far from over.

“Hey hey hey! We’re here!”

Bokuto threw open the gymnasium doors, adding dramatic flair to his actions. When Akaashi peers inside, he notices Lev flopped on the floor and Kuroo elbowing him on the shoulder. It’s the aftermath of Nekoma’s demonic receive practices.

“Kuroo-san, have mercy on me! I’ve already done two hundred!” Lev wails, his face pressed onto
“Too bad! Get up and keep at it!” Kuroo yanks Lev up by his sweaty arm, turning to Akaashi and Bokuto. “Oh hey, it’s you guys. What, did your team give up on Bokuto’s stamina already?”

“They’ve all run away to Okinawa. I have no idea when they will come back,” Akaashi deadpans, picking up a volleyball and tossing it between his hands. “Should we get started, then?”

Kuroo extends a hand in front of Akaashi, shushing him. “Wait a moment. Is that the Karasuno glasses guy I see?”

Akaashi peeks outside, and sure enough, it’s him. He doesn’t seem to be heading towards any gymnasium, which is unsurprising. His lack of enthusiasm leads Akaashi to believe that he’s probably going to take a bath and sleep.

“I’m gonna go invite him.” Kuroo whispers.

“What? Tonight? He won’t-”

“Do it, bro!” Bokuto chimes in, sneaking behind Kuroo.

Kuroo’s grin widens, and Akaashi completely gives up on stopping him. “Watch me,” he saunters out of the gymnasium, calling out to Tsukishima. “Hey, you, Karasuno guy! Glasses!”

Tsukishima halts, glancing at Kuroo and Bokuto. He looks somewhat unimpressed, but can’t say anything too snarky to a third year he hardly knows. So Kuroo goes ahead with his offer.

“Can you jump some blocks for us?” Kuroo beckons with a hand, and Tsukishima’s brows tighten. He isn’t keen on hopping in to practice at night with a bunch of Tokyo high school students.

Tsukishima cracks a smile, purely for the sake of politeness. “I’m actually done for tonight,” he nods his head in their general direction, “if you’ll excuse me.”

“Come on! I can’t spike if there’s no one to block!” Bokuto joins in the conversation, his tone almost begging.

“Can’t it be someone from Fukurodani?”

Akaashi knows that’s not an option. “Bokuto-san doesn’t have a limit when it comes to practicing, so they’ve all escaped,” he explains, as Kuroo and Lev bicker about the latter’s crappy receives and how he won’t be Nekoma’s ace anytime soon.

“But perhaps not the top three?” Tsukishima points out, and Akaashi internally begs to differ. If he were in a good mood and had less slumps in the middle of a match, he could definitely give Ushijima or Kiryuu a run for their money.

Kuroo flashes a taunting grin at Tsukishima. “If you’re a middle blocker, maybe you should start practicing your blocks more, eh?”

Believe it or not, it works. Tsukishima marches up to them and into the gymnasium, and Bokuto flashes a thumbs up at Kuroo. Akaashi takes out the volleyballs from the crate, knowing full well
that Bokuto’s palms will slam into all of them.

“Another!”

Akaashi’s positive he’s heard that phrase come from Bokuto’s mouth more than anyone else. He sets ball after ball to him as he slams past Tsukishima’s blocks, and Akaashi admits it looks slightly unfair. Tsukishima has the height, but that’s about it. His arms are thin compared to Bokuto, and he doesn’t have much stamina.

“You’re only winning against one blocker, Bokuto-san.”

“Shut up! Don’t burst my bubble, Akaashi!” Bokuto pouts.

Kuroo hops under the net, joining Tsukishima’s side. “Two now,” he snickers. “Bring it on, beef boy.”

Akaashi sets the ball to Bokuto, who promptly gets his spike read and blocked mercilessly. Kuroo had moved his arms to the right in a split second, predicting Bokuto’s course.

“God dammit!”

Tsukishima and Kuroo let out a short laugh at Bokuto’s anguish. Akaashi saw that one coming, so he isn’t surprised. Kuroo is a master at read blocking, and he’s been practicing with Bokuto for ages. He knows him well.

“Ya know, your blocks are kinda frail. I think I’m gonna break your arm sometime.” Bokuto comments offhandedly, and Tsukishima’s irritation becomes apparent. “You can read, but you don’t have any power in your blocks!”

“I’m still growing,” Tsukishima huffs, smirking at Bokuto. “My height and blocks are under development.”

Kuroo provokes him a little further. “If you keep saying stuff like that, chibi-chan’s gonna take all your glory.”

Instead of a snarky reply, Kuroo receives silence. After a few seconds of standing around awkwardly, Tsukishima gives him a resigned smile. “That can’t be helped, I guess. Hinata and I have a different level of talent.”

Nobody speaks, until Inuoka comes marching in and breaks the tension. “Are you guys practicing too? Can I join?” Yaku comes trailing in after him, his glance immediately shifting to Lev, lying in a pool of his own sweat.

“Oi, Lev! Stop rolling around and get up!”

“Geh, Yaku-san…”

Tsukishima exits the gymnasium without another word, brushing against Akaashi along the way. Akaashi knows Kuroo has prodded him in a place he probably shouldn’t have. Conflict is what he felt, swirling around his chest.

“I think you stepped on a mine there.”

They wrap up practice soon after. Akaashi grabs his towel while Bokuto and Kuroo whip each other with theirs, swordfighting with the towels like children. Akaashi isn’t sure if there will be no
accidents during their bath time.

“Akaashi! Let’s get into the bath! You have nothing to be embarrassed about, we have a captain-setter relationship! And it’s a good one!”

Bokuto is already shirtless and flexing, and Kuroo is joining in on his antics. “Bro, you can totally make your pecs dance someday. Like that guy in the video I sent you.”

Akaashi throws off his clothes under his towel, folding them neatly and placing them in a neat pile. “Come on. You guys are going to catch a cold, if you continue to parade around half naked.”

“Parade around? How rude!” Kuroo scoffs in mock anger, stepping into the bathroom. Bokuto follows after him, this time parading around fully naked. Akaashi averts his gaze, sitting down on one of the shower chairs to wash himself.

Bokuto and Kuroo are splashing each other with the shower heads, aiming at each other’s faces. “My eyes!” Bokuto screeches, waddling around like a chicken with its head cut off. “My eyes! You have blinded me, scoundrel!”

“Silence, infidel!”

Bokuto collapses into Akaashi, who is shampooing himself while ignoring the commotion. “Aghaashi, Kuroo’s bullying me! Help!” Akaashi’s eyes start to sting from contact with Bokuto. He gently pushes Bokuto off him and scoops a bit of shampoo from his own hair, placing a dollop of it into Bokuto’s palms.

“En guarde, demon cat!”

Bokuto lets out a battle cry, slapping his soapy hands into Kuroo’s face. Kuroo lets out a strangled scream of agony, tears streaming down his face. “You- I actually hate you right now! My eyes are burning so bad!”

“You would have to hate me, then.” Akaashi shrugs, washing the suds off his skin. The hot water feels delicious against his back. “I’m the one who gave him the shampoo,” he admits, hopping into the tub before Kuroo can chuck a basin full of water at him.

Bokuto leaps into the tub after him, swimming around excitedly. “Ah, man. Sinking into the tub after practice is the best.” He lets out a pleased whine, running a hand through his flattened hair. Akaashi can’t help but to stare at the droplets running down his neck.

“Kuroo-san,” Akaashi wades through the water towards Kuroo, who has a face towel resting on his head. “Can I share something with you?”

“Well, is it food? Can I eat it?”

Akaashi rolls his eyes. “I’m bisexual. I figured it’s about time I tell you, too.”

“Oh, cool. I had a feeling. Thanks for coming out.” Kuroo pats Akaashi’s back, and Akaashi becomes visibly confused by how nonchalant he is. “You’re one of us.”

“Kuroo’s gay. And he has great gaydar.” Bokuto explains.

Akaashi nods with uncertainty. “I… see.” He had certainly not expected it, but the more he thought about it, it made sense. “It’s nice to have someone else I can talk to. I only knew about Bokuto.”
“Glasses guy is totally gay too.” Kuroo mentions casually, sinking neck-deep into the water. “Just you wait. I’ll prove myself right, because I’m always right.”

Akaashi raises an eyebrow. “And how are you so sure? What evidence do you have to back up your claim?”

Kuroo chuckles at Akaashi and raises his brows, earning a look of pure exasperation from him. “Gaydar,” he says smugly, tapping the middle of his forehead. Akaashi wonders if Kuroo would implant a microchip in his head, for that sole purpose.

Bokuto leans on the edge of the bathtub, his arms resting on either side. “Some people were being really nasty to Akaashi and spreading rumours about him. They’re horrible.”

“It’s no big deal. If I ignore it, the whole thing will eventually blow over.” Akaashi says, but he isn’t too sure. He doesn’t want to think about what might happen.

Kuroo squints at Bokuto, who is stuck in his own thought. He doesn’t realise Kuroo is staring at him until the bathroom falls silent. “What’s up?”

“Bokuto, what happened there?” Kuroo points to a bruise on his side, more noticeable with the soap washed off his skin. “That looks pretty painful.”

Kuroo splashes his way over to Bokuto, and Akaashi swallows. “That does seem like a nasty bruise, Bokuto-san.” He’s only noticed it now, because of its size. It’s a small purple bruise, resembling an indent that hadn’t faded.

“Oh, this? Bumped into a table.” Bokuto says hastily. Akaashi doesn’t buy it. Bokuto is averting his gaze, which is a telltale sign that he isn’t telling the full truth. Kuroo and Akaashi don’t add to that, prompting Bokuto to explain further. “I tripped in the kitchen.”

“There’s some on your back, Bokuto. You’re not getting hurt by someone, are you?” Kuroo asks him. Mist fills the air around them, heating up their faces.

Bokuto shakes his head, backing up against the side of the bath. “No one’s hurting me, Kuroo. I’m fine.” He laughs, with a strain in his voice. “I just keep bumping into things.”

“You can tell us, you know. Is everything all right at home?” Akaashi scoots closer to Bokuto, until their elbows touch. He knows Bokuto’s hiding something from him.

“Well, maybe not everything,” Bokuto admits, and Kuroo’s eyes widen. “My parents fight sometimes. I can’t do much about it, but I try to stop them. I don’t like seeing them angry at each other.”

Kuroo puts an arm around Bokuto’s shoulder. “That sounds real shitty. They don’t hurt you, do they?”

“No.” Bokuto mumbles. “They don’t do it on purpose. That doesn’t count, right?” His eyes are almost pleading, and Akaashi feels his heart crushing under the weight of Bokuto’s stare. “They still love me!”

Akaashi and Kuroo exchange glances. There’s something wrong with Bokuto’s life outside school, but he isn’t acknowledging it. “People who love you can still do bad things, Bokuto-san.”

“Like my mom. She was a good person and a horrible parent.” Kuroo mentions casually. “She used to yell too much and sometimes slap me. My parents separated when I was six, haven’t heard from
Bokuto’s eyes widen incredulously, and even Akaashi can’t hide his astonishment. “She hit you? That’s horrible, Kuroo! You couldn’t have done anything that bad, you were six!”

“If your parents hurt you, whether they do it on accident or on purpose, you’re entitled to a damn apology. No matter what kind of shit you did. The power dynamic is uneven by default.” Kuroo’s mouth doesn’t stop running. “You need to talk to someone about this.”

“They don’t hurt me, Kuroo. There’s nothing to talk about.” Bokuto sulks, slinking against Akaashi. He’s visibly distressed, and Akaashi feels compelled to rest his hand on his arm.

Bokuto is feeling disoriented, uncomfortable. Lost. Akaashi’s heart rate elevates as Bokuto’s surge of emotions crash into him like a bus. “We’ll drop this subject. What was that character on your new keyring called, Bokuto-san?”

Kuroo scowls at Akaashi when Bokuto isn’t looking, but Akaashi shakes his head solemnly. He knows nothing else will come out of the discussion, and Bokuto’s eyes are getting bleary.

“You mean Gudetama?” Bokuto mumbles. “He’s cute, isn’t he? I bought it a few days ago.” He laughs, and Kuroo plays along just to keep his mood lifted. Akaashi heaves a sigh of relief when Kuroo and Bokuto start bantering again.

“Oi, Akaashi.”

Kuroo beckons to him once they’re out of the bath and Bokuto’s sight.

“How long have you known about Bokuto’s situation? You’re smart, Akaashi. Why didn’t you step in?” Kuroo crosses his arms, chewing on his lip.

Akaashi pinches the bridge of his nose. “He wouldn’t tell me anything if I asked. It would have made matters worse if I tried to intervene, without knowing the extent of what was going on.”

Kuroo squints at him, but sighs in defeat. “Look. I know you’ve been having an awful time recently. But you’re his best friend. If he won’t open up to you, who else is he gonna talk to?”

“If I force him, he’ll be uncomfortable. What do you think is the best way to handle it, then?” Akaashi asks, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t like seeing him hurt either, Kuroo-san.”

“Getting hurt by your family fucking sucks. I don’t want him to go through the same shit I did, Akaashi. You gotta do something. Involve a grown-up. Whatever you need to do, do it.” Kuroo pleads, the glimmer in his eyes almost pitiful. “Please, Akaashi.”

Akaashi can only manage a sympathetic nod.

When Akaashi heads to the bedroom, he finds Bokuto already curled up inside his futon. He slips inside his covers, shuffling over to the Bokuto-shaped lump beside him.

“Bokuto-san, are you feeling all right?” Akaashi peels the covers off Bokuto’s face, and notices that he isn’t smiling. His eyes aren’t red, and Akaashi knows he hasn’t been crying. But when Akaashi’s hand brushes against Bokuto’s shoulder, he immediately realises that Bokuto isn’t feeling better.

Bokuto reaches over to Akaashi, encircling his torso with his arms. His skin lays flat against Akaashi’s t-shirt, and he pressed his forehead against his chest muscles. “I want to stay like this for
a little while.” He breathes into Akaashi, eyelids fluttering shut.

Akaashi winces. His entire body is weighed down with Bokuto’s insecurity, and he can tell that he’s upset about what happened earlier. Akaashi is filled with anger, directed at the people who hurt Bokuto to that point.

“Of course you can, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto snuggles into Akaashi, completely under his covers. He’s abandoned his own futon. “Akaashi,” his name comes out as a quiet whine, “I’m good enough, right?”

Akaashi’s eyes burn. “Yes,” he pats Bokuto’s back, like his mother used to do when he was an anxious child. “You’re good enough, Bokuto-san. You’re more than good enough.”

The next day, it’s as if their exchange never happened. Bokuto’s limbs are not tangled against him, and his arms are a little too empty. Akaashi will only admit to himself that he misses cuddling Bokuto.

“Get up, Akaashi. Rise and shine.” Sarukui nudges his cheek, and Akaashi gets ready to start the second day of training camp. It’ll be another day filled with exertion, sweat and Bokuto’s “Hey hey hey!” echoing in the humid gymnasium.

“I’m getting up,” Akaashi grumbles, stretching his arms out and knocking over someone’s phone. He needs to get changed first, and have breakfast. He hopes he can get a large portion of rice.

Practice is the same as yesterday. Bokuto is screaming with glee, and Karasuno gets the most of the penalty dashes. But just as Akaashi begins to get exhausted, an unexpected happiness catches him off guard.

“The parents of the Shinzen High students have brought watermelons!”

The managers hold out plates with watermelon slices piled on them, juicy and inviting. “Thanks,” Akaashi picks a slice and bites into it, sitting himself on the warm grass. As he chews on the fleshy fruit, he sees Bokuto chatting to Washio and Komi.

“Watch! I’ll spit this seed so far, it’ll reach the path!”

Bokuto makes obnoxious blowing noises, his mouth seemingly full of seeds. “I can’t even see where that went, Bokuto!” Komi guffaws, attempting to get his own seeds to fly across the grass.

“Bokuto, are you not going to eat that? It still has red bits left.” Washio points to Bokuto’s half-eaten watermelon slice, which is still reasonably red and eatable. Bokuto’s mouth is covered with watermelon bits, dripping onto his t-shirt.

“It doesn’t taste like anything anymore. I’m gonna chuck it out.” Bokuto shrugs. “It tastes like cucumbers now.”

Akaashi tosses him a small container of salt. “It’ll taste better if you sprinkle some salt on it. We shouldn’t waste the food offered to us.” Bokuto makes a face at him, but takes the salt from him and dumps it on his slice anyway.

“I guess it’s marginally better.” Bokuto eats the rest of the watermelon, until the red bits are almost gone. “Did I use that word correctly?”
Akaashi suppresses a giggle at Bokuto’s curious question. “Yes, you did. Quite impressive, Bokuto-san.”

“I’m your upperclassman, after all!”

Bokuto’s heart-warming laugh rings through the summer heat. Akaashi wishes it weren’t the last summer he would be spending with him.

When evening rolls around, Bokuto catches sight of Tsukishima, much to the latter’s annoyance. He grabs Tsukishima by the shoulders before Akaashi can stop him, intent on making him join practice with him.

“Hey hey, Tsukki, let’s practice!”

“No, thank you.” Tsukishima barely acknowledges Bokuto, making his way over to the gymnasium doors.

Bokuto pouts, showing the whites of his eyes. “Eeh? Boring!” He doesn’t hide his disappointment, but transfers his attention to Kuroo in a heartbeat. “Kuroo!”

Kuroo merely answers with a groan, resigning himself to his fate.

“I haven’t even said anything yet!”

Akaashi heads over to the crate of volleyballs, tossing the balls out two at a time. Kuroo silently offers to help, but it’s an excuse for him to sneak up beside Akaashi. “We need to make sure Bokuto’s all right. We’ll stick close to him as much as we can, sounds good?”

Akaashi hums in response. He hurls one of the balls in Bokuto’s direction, and Bokuto catches it. “Akaashi, Kuroo, come on! We don’t have all night!”

Akaashi and Kuroo exchange sheepish grins.

To their surprise, Tsukishima comes back into the third gym just as they start to wrap up practice. “I’d like to ask you guys something.” Akaashi senses something about him that’s different. He’s not the same Tsukishima that refused to practice with them.

“Sure thing!” Kuroo and Bokuto chant in unison. “We welcome your questions with open arms!”

“You guys are somewhat from powerhouse schools, right? You could go to nationals all right, but winning would be an entirely different story.”

“But not impossible!” Bokuto pipes up, indignant.

Tsukishima doesn’t roll his eyes, so Akaashi does it for him.

“How do you guys stay so passionate? Volleyball is just a club. They only thing you can do with it is write on your resume that you tried hard.”

Somehow, Bokuto and Kuroo find a way to derail the conversation by making a person’s name out of “Just a club”. Nobukatsu-kun this and that, Akaashi’s head spins. He can’t keep up with their strange antics, and decides to give up. “Just leave them to their own devices. No need to try and understand what they’re saying.”

“Hey, four-eyes!” Bokuto exclaims.
“It’s Tsukishima.”

“Yeah, Tsukishima-kun. Is volleyball fun to you?”

Tsukishima stares at him with a deadpan expression. “No, not particularly.”

“Well, maybe that’s because you suck!”

Tsukishima stiffens, but doesn’t say anything in his defense.

“I’ve been to nationals before, but I’ve only started to enjoy volleyball recently.” Bokuto starts to monologue proudly. “Ever since I used straight spikes, my cross spikes got stopped in matches. And that was frustrating as hell, so I practiced the hell out of my straight spikes!”

“And the next time I faced off against that team in a match, the same blockers couldn’t touch my spike. That felt amazing, like, ‘My time has finally come!’” Bokuto laughs heartily.

“It’s whether you have a moment like that, or not.”

Akaashi remembers Bokuto’s moment that got him into volleyball. They had embraced on the court, not caring about how sweaty and exhausted they were. At that moment, the world consisted of only them. Bokuto was the star that outshone everything else Akaashi had ever seen.

“Forget about the future or your next match. The satisfaction of squashing your opponents right in front of you, and yanking out 120% of your potential is what matters the most!”

Tsukishima’s eyes widen, taken aback. Akaashi had anticipated one of Bokuto’s inspirational speeches. Despite not knowing what he’s doing and being a hot mess most of the time, Bokuto is one of Akaashi’s heroes. And he’s sure he would become Tsukishima’s, too.

“If that moment comes to you, that’s the moment you’ll get hooked onto volleyball.”

Bokuto claps his hands, and his inspirational monologue comes to an end. “Okay, now that I’ve answered your question, you gotta block for us!” He adds, slinging an arm around Tsukishima.

“That night, Bokuto is out like a light as soon as his head hits the pillow. He’s the first one to pass out, and Akaashi has full view of his face. He’s snoozing like a baby, drool glimmering on the corner of his mouth. He mumbles something unintelligible about Kuroo eating charred toast in his sleep.

Knowing that Bokuto is sleeping easy tonight, Akaashi can close his eyes and slip into his dreams in peace.

The third day is when it all starts to get tiring. Fukurodani gets four penalty runs, and Akaashi has stopped bothering to count Karasuno’s dashes. Sweat drips onto the gymnasium floor, players struggle to catch their breath. They cling to their water bottles like a drowning man with straws.

So he’s slightly taken aback when both Hinata and Tsukishima turn up to practice in the third gym.

“You have someone with you today, Tsukki?”

Tsukishima shook his head, grimacing at the newcomer. It’s Hinata, the short but enthusiastic
“Please let me join practice!” Two voices chant in unison, instead of one. The other one is Lev, who has presumably escaped Yaku’s receiving practices to do his own thing. He’s tall, energetic and hard to miss.

“Yaku is totally gonna kick your ass, Lev. You ran away, didn’t you?” Kuroo sees through Lev in an instant, and the strained expression and shoulder twitch Lev does confirms it.

Lev turns slightly blue. “He let me off early because I was competent!” Kuroo only laughs in response. It’s glaringly obvious that he made it up on the spot.

“Well, whatever. We have the right number. Let’s do a three-on-three.” Kuroo suggests, his hands on his hips. Lev and Hinata let out an excited screech, while Tsukishima rolls his eyes. “Let’s do something we don’t normally get to do.”

Akaashi isn’t opposed to Kuroo’s suggestion. In fact, he was looking forward to practicing with him and the first years. However, Kuroo had split them according to height. Whether it was on purpose or not, Akaashi’s team’s tallest member was shorter than the shortest member on the tall team.

“Um… This is horribly unbalanced, don’t you think?”

Kuroo grins lopsidedly. “You’re the only one who thinks that.” He nudges in the direction of Bokuto and Hinata with his chin. The hyper balls of energy are running around in circles, yelling with excitement.

Bokuto is in top form. He spikes past Tsukishima and Lev’s blocks, and doesn’t let Kuroo touch the ball. “Don’t jump too far to the sides!” Kuroo barks out as he picks himself off the ground.

Hinata is surprisingly easy to team up with. Akaashi knows he doesn’t have the abilities and precision Kageyama has, but it’s just like setting to a smaller Bokuto.

“Bring it on! Hey hey hey!” Bokuto prepares for another spike, but the ball never flies into his palm. Akaashi has stopped in his tracks, his gaze shifted to Shirofuku and Suzumeda.

“If you guys don’t finish up soon, the canteen will close and you guys won’t have any dinner.” Kuroo shrugs, following them out of the gymnasium. “We’ll continue this tomorrow.”

It’s the captains’ meeting on night three. The team captains and their vice captains gather in one classroom to discuss penalties and precautions for the rest of the week. Bokuto is unsure on many details, but Akaashi has anticipated that and has everything covered. He prides himself on his ability to predict and prevent.

“So, please be wary of dehydration and take regular breaks during practice. Thank you.” Akaashi straightens his notes, closing his copybook filled with neat handwriting. “This is meant to be the captain’s job, originally,” he whispers to Bokuto.

But Bokuto has other priorities. “I brought a deck of cards! Let’s play old maid!” He opens up the pack, tossing out the cards to the others haphazardly.
“Sounds fun. I’m in,” Kuroo says, as if any of them have a choice. The way they’re sitting, Akaashi ends up being the one to take a card from Bokuto. A sole card sticks out above all of them, and there’s a glimmer in Bokuto’s golden eyes. He has the joker.

It’s too obvious. It doesn’t take an empath to put two and two together. Akaashi attempts to take a card from the edge, but it doesn’t budge. Bokuto is holding them down with sheer finger strength. Akaashi realises he isn’t been given a choice.

Akaashi heaves a sigh and takes the joker. It goes around in a circle until it’s Bokuto’s turn to take a card from Sugawara. “Eenie-menie-miney mo…” Bokuto mutters obnoxiously, swiping one card after stalling way too much. “Gaaaaaaah! No pairs!”

Akaashi and Sugawara end up being the last two. “It’s… this one.” Sugawara picks the seven of hearts, and leaps with joy soon after. Akaashi silently throws his loser’s token on the pile of disorganized cards. He’s lost. He can thank Bokuto for that one. “I guess we’ll wrap it up now. It’s getting late.”

His words are overshadowed by Bokuto’s. “Man, I’m so glad I didn’t come last! I can’t imagine losing old maid. It’s so embarrassing, I’d never be able to show my face in public again!!” He lets out a laugh, not even glancing in Akaashi’s direction.

If that’s the game Bokuto is going to play, Akaashi will gladly join. And win. His eyes sharpen.

“Now, shall we have another match?”

The next match, Bokuto makes pair after pair until there are only two cards left in his hand. “Whoa, look! I think I might win this one!” He announces proudly, and proceeds to make another pair after taking a card from Sugawara.

“I only have one card left!” Bokuto pushes his single card towards Akaashi, and his face falls all of a sudden. “Wait, does that mean this is the end for me, after you take my card?”

“Yes, Bokuto-san. Congratulations.”

Bokuto frowned, scrunching his face. “That’s so boring! I don’t like scoring twenty-four points with a service ace! If I don’t get a joker, there’s no thrill and excitement in this!”

Says the one who made him pick the joker, Akaashi thinks. “I’m sorry. Our captain is a bit, uh, childish.”

“All right!” Bokuto stands up, his chair clattering against the classroom floor. “Whoever loses this round has to massage my hips! You guys better appreciate it!”

Akaashi knows he has a battle he can’t afford to lose.

Akaashi is in trouble. He has the joker, and from the way he reacted, everyone else knows about that too. The others are putting on acts and little mindfucks that Akaashi stops bothering to analyse. It’s Kai’s turn to take from him, and he decides to mess it up a little.

He makes one card stick out in the middle, just like Bokuto did earlier. “Please, take this one. I can’t lose this round.” He pleads Kai, who is visibly shaken.

“Interesting! Interesting!” Kuroo chimes in from beside them, but Akaashi doesn’t care. He only needs to win.
“Mmm, how nice! It feels amazing! A little to the right!”

It’s Kai who is massaging Bokuto’s hips. Bokuto is sprawled out on the floor, letting Kai take over completely. Kai had ended up pulling Akaashi’s joker out of pity, which led to his loss. He doesn’t seem annoyed about giving Bokuto a massage, and it doesn’t look like it’s his first time giving someone one.

“You’re really tense over here. How about this spot?”

As soon as Kai places more pressure in his fingers, Bokuto lets out a yelp. “What? Ow! Ow! Ooooooww! Oh my god, stop! Don’t do thaaaat!”

He screams at the unexpected pressure point, rolling around on the floor and letting out animalistic noises. Kai doesn’t bat an eye, and mumbles, “Would any of you guys also like a massage?”

Akaashi definitely learns a lesson. Never get on Kai’s bad side.

“I think I’ll leave now. I need to check up on the first and second years.” Sugawara says. “You gonna come with me, Daichi?”

“No. I’ll stick around for a little longer.”

And so begins a round four, a round five. Kai leaves once he comes out victorious, leaving the three captains in an intense battle of wits and deception. Akaashi sticks around to keep an eye on Bokuto, but passes out after a few more rounds. He snoozes on the floor, out cold.

“Alright! Let’s bet Akaashi’s soul on this game!”

Akaashi stirs. Bokuto is trying to bet him in a card game, while he’s meant to be fast asleep. He lets out a groan, curling in on himself on the classroom. He slips in and out of sleep, until he hears a faint scream and some footsteps.

Still, he doesn’t wake up fully until Bokuto shakes him gently. “Oi, Akaashi, wake up.”

“Ngh?” Akaashi lets out a choked snore, rubbing his eyes with his fists. “What was that, Bokuto-san?”

“Hinata kind of saw us playing and freaked out. I recall him screaming ‘Demon!’ and bolting the hell out of here.” Daichi explains, without a shred of fatigue in his voice. Akaashi snorts. They must have had their intimidating, volleyball-match aura surrounding them.

Bokuto picks Akaashi off the floor and squeezes under him, positioning himself into a semi-carry. “Let’s go. Gotta sleep for tomorrow!” He hoists Akaashi up, using his own back as his support.

“I’m already sleeping,” Akaashi murmurs, letting Bokuto haul him to the Fukurodani bedroom. Bokuto is a warm radiator, glowing like all things nice. His heartbeat overlaps with his own, echoing inside his ribcage. Akaashi is fulfilled, wishing that their moment could be their eternity. Bokuto deserves nothing other than what he’s feeling right now.

Chapter End Notes

The card thing is actually canon! It’s in the light novel volume three. I love those
dorks.
Until then!
On the last day of training camp, Karasuno’s puzzle pieces fit into place.

“Yesss!”

Bokuto fist pumps and screams with glee, trotting up to Akaashi like an excited puppy. “Did you see that?! Did you see that, Akaashi? Aren’t I awesome?!” He jumps around, eyes wide with enthusiasm.

“Yes. That was… impressive, Bokuto-san.”

Chapter Notes

heya!! sorry it’s been a little over a month, I was busy with my other requests n stuff. btw, on a more relevant note, this chapter will touch on hospitals, illness and vomiting. if you guys want markers for that, just pop into my inbox! and heads up, this.... will get worse. very.

enjoy the chapter!

On the last day of training camp, Karasuno’s puzzle pieces fit into place.

Akaashi finds that out when Fukurodani face off against Karasuno, who had just received the thrilling promise of a barbecue and performed their meat worshipping dance. Their uncoordinated attacks and strategies began working in their favour, slotting into each other like cogs.

“Bokuto-san, here!”

Akaashi yells out Bokuto’s name, tossing to him with a wide distance between them. He’s worried Bokuto won’t make it, but he often betrays Akaashi’s expectations in the best ways possible.

As soon as Bokuto’s hand connects with the volleyball, everything seems to slow down. Three blockers, one spiker. Bokuto slams as hard as he can, and the ball blasts straight past Karasuno’s Number Three, landing towards the edge of the court.

“Yesss!”

Bokuto fist pumps and screams with glee, trotting up to Akaashi like an excited puppy. “Did you see that?! Did you see that, Akaashi? Aren’t I awesome?!” He jumps around, eyes wide with enthusiasm.

“Yes. That was… impressive, Bokuto-san.”
Akaashi nods, giving the affirmation Bokuto desperately craves. He knows cut shots are quite hard on the shoulders, and it’s not the best thing Bokuto can do to his shoulder right now. Still, he earned them a point, and deserves praise for that.

“I wanna try that again, Akaashi!”

“They’re going to predict your spike, now that you’ve said it.”

“Gah! Crap!” Bokuto exclaims, body language overdramatic as usual. “Okay, maybe I’ll go for a straight spike! Then they can’t predict me! Ha!”

Akaashi decides against bursting Bokuto’s bubble, by pointing out that he just screamed his thoughts out loud again.

Hinata gets a feint in. Akaashi is taken aback, but his train of thought is interrupted by Bokuto shouting, “The little shrimpy did a feint!”

“She should I remind you who taught him that?” Akaashi points out. Bokuto gets a blazing glare from the other third years, and laughs nervously.

“Don’t worry, you guys! We’re not letting them get any more points, not even one more!”

Akaashi stares at Bokuto’s broad back with a deadpan expression. “I don’t think that would be possible, Bokuto-san.”

“Akaashi, back me up for once, will ya?!”

Karasuno doesn’t falter. The libero attempts a toss to the ace, and almost succeeds. They also utilize their synchronized attack and manage to score a point from it, shooting past Fukurodani’s blockers. They block Bokuto quite a few times, refusing to let him get a good spike in.

Akaashi notices Bokuto’s mouth transform into a tight frown, as he gulps down his drink. Bokuto puckers his lips childishly, squinting at what seems like his own nose. Akaashi realises he needs to deliver the pep talk a captain would normally be giving.

“Let’s all stay calm. We’re not going to let Karasuno’s various attacks stun us.” Akaashi glances at Bokuto, who seems to be strangling his bottle with both hands. “Bokuto-san, are you listening to me?”

“Huh? Yeah, I was listening!” Bokuto grumbles, handing Yukie his half-empty bottle. “Let’s do this already!”

Bokuto marches onto the court with all the grace and poise of a mountain gorilla. There it is, Akaashi muses. The first signs of Bokuto’s emo mode. He needs to yank out the weeds by the roots before they grow more and more.

It’s Bokuto’s turn to serve, much to Akaashi’s inconvenience. He’s not in a good headspace, and just as Akaashi predicted, he serves the ball straight into the net.

“Dammit! I’m sorry!”

Bokuto falls to his knees, his face contorted with frustration. “Don’t worry about it,” Akaashi adds, sighing internally.

The ball is up again, on his side of the court. He’s at good setting distance from Bokuto, who is
slightly too heated up in the moment.

“Akaashi, give it to me!”

Akaashi has less than a second to contemplate his options. He could give it to him, he spikes, and there’s no problem. Or he could miss and lose his psyche. But if he doesn’t toss to him, he could sulk.

Sulking was, by far, the least favourable outcome.

“Bokuto-san!”

Bokuto spikes. There are three blockers, and the ball bounces off their fingertips. “One more time, Akaashi!” Bokuto demands, and Akaashi knows he can’t refuse after tossing to him once.

Akaashi tosses to him again. “Here, Bokuto-san!” He prays for a good spike, but the ball bounces at the tip of the net, ending up on their side of the court.

“Geh.”

Bokuto stands still, silent. His shoulders rise and fall as he takes in laboured breaths. The rest of his team stands around him, a few steps away. They’ve all caught onto what’s happened.

“Akaashi.” Bokuto extends his arm backwards, palm facing Akaashi. “Don’t toss to me anymore today!”

*There it is, Bokuto’s emo mode.*

“All right.” Bokuto twitches visibly at Akaashi’s answer. “Then, please calm down while I don’t spike to you.”

Ignoring Bokuto’s dazed expression, Akaashi sets to Sarukui. He scores, and they exchange high-fives. He’s used to Bokuto’s slumps, and so is the rest of the team.

Akaashi carries on setting to his other teammates, and scores himself with a dump. Even without Bokuto’s spikes, they can rack up points. They start widening the gap between their score and Karasuno’s. Bokuto waddles with a blank look in his eyes, itching for a toss.

It’s match point, and Karasuno’s ace chooses to play it safe with his serve. Komi receives it cleanly, and Akaashi is in a good position to set. Bokuto is itching for a spike, eyes darting around and following the ball.

Akaashi sets across the court, and Bokuto leaps into the air. He’s soaring, and the background becomes a blur around them. It’s just Bokuto, and his toned arm cutting through the air.

The spike blows past the blockers, landing on the opposite court. Tsukishima glances at him with annoyance-filled eyes, and Akaashi grins right back at him. He’s seen not only what type of player Bokuto is, but what Fukurodani is capable of.

Akaashi nods at the third years, and they immediately know what to do.

“Whoo! Ace!”

“So cool!”

“The Ace prevails in the end!”
Sarukui, Konoha and Komi rush in with their words of praise, and the managers compliment Bokuto on his owlishness.

Bokuto soaks it all up like a giant sponge. He lets out a chuckle, which evolves into bird-like cackles as he places his proud arms on his hips. Akaashi knows he’s bumped up his self-esteem.

“I am the strongest after all! Hey hey hey!”

He punches the air repeatedly, arms raised above his head. Akaashi walks past the lot of them, while the third years echo a less energetic “Hey hey hey.” They’re all back on normal mode.

Akaashi isn’t left alone for long. Bokuto is slapping his back a little too hard—“Aren’t I amazing after all, Akaashi?”—and the other third years observe him from safe distance.

He’s relieved to have all the practice matches over and done with. After all, Akaashi knows there’s very little that beats a hearty meal after volleyball. His stomach gurgles at the prospect of a barbecue.

“All right! It’s barbecue time!”

Bokuto grabs a plate, eagerly awaiting the coaches’ permission to start scarfing down meat. Akaashi isn’t in a hurry, and decides to chat with Komi about their strategies and practice menus.

“I guess even Bokuto-san has his bad days.” Tsukishima stands beside them, seemingly unenthusiastic about getting food for himself.

“Yeah. Well, he self-destructs at the randomest of times.” Akaashi glances at Bokuto, who doesn’t even notice that he’s drooling. He’s too busy naming every type of meat to conquer the barbecue. “But he doesn’t falter when there’s strong opponents, so it’s all right for the most part. He’s always energetic when everyone else is about to lose hope, so he’s actually really reliable.”

“Bokuto-san! I won’t lose next time!” Hinata challenges Bokuto, who makes a muscle and nods eagerly.

“Bring it on, shrimpy! But first, it’s gonna be a meat war!”

As soon as the OK sign is given, the entirety of the training camp participants leap into action. Bokuto makes a mad dash for the hot plate with the most meat, while Akaashi sticks to the one just beside him. There’s many vegetables sizzling on the plate, a fresh aroma mingling together with the soy sauce-based meat sauce.

Akaashi dips a piece of sirloin into his sauce, taking a bite out of it. It tastes heavenly. The meat is as juicy as it can get, flavour bursting in his mouth and mixing with the sweet tang of the sauce. He munches on a piece of green pepper after, enjoying the wide variety of different tastes.

“Oi! Bokuto! Don’t you dare take my meat, bastard!”

Akaashi hears Kuroo screech at Bokuto, and Bokuto guffawing in response. Bokuto takes the opportunity to hang out with the captains from the other school, and to piss off Tsukki in general. Akaashi was almost going to stop him from being too forward. Almost.

“I’m one of the top five aces of Japan, you know!”

Lev and Hinata gasp around Bokuto as he goes on a proud rant about himself. Kuroo bursts his bubble by reminding him that he isn’t in the top three, but Akaashi knows Bokuto could beat
Shiratorizawa and Mujinazaka if he’s in top form.

“Akaashi! Aren’t I the strongest? Right?”

Akaashi huffs, turns to Bokuto, and ruffles his hair. “Yes, Bokuto-san. Of course you are.”

The training camp is over at last, and Akaashi knows he’s going to miss Tsukishima and Kuroo. The week was filled with grueling hours of practice and matches, and with the Tokyo Prelims nearing at a fast pace, Akaashi won’t be catching any breaks soon.

“Bye-bye, Hinata!” Bokuto picks up Hinata and swings him around, enveloping him into a bone-crushing hug. “Meet us at nationals! We’ll be waiting for you there!”

“It’s not like we’re guaranteed to go to nationals though. We still need to beat Seijoh, and we lost to them last time…”

“Stop being negative, Asahi! We’re going to see you guys in the nationals court, just you wait and see!” Suga slaps Asahi’s shoulder, as if to smack the negativity out of him.

“Thank you for this week, Bokuto-san and Akaashi-san.” Tsukishima bows lightly, although they’ve gotten a little closer to him that he doesn’t treat them with solely the politeness of an underclassman.

Bokuto puts his hands on his hips and cackles, pulling Tsukishima into a playful headlock. “You’re welcome, Tsukki! We care about you, after all!”

Kuroo hides a fake sob behind his palm. “Our boy has grown so much. I’m so proud of him.”

“I don’t ever recall being your son,” Tsukishima bites back, but Kuroo only smirks and slaps his back. “Ouch. I’m suing you for harassment.” He deadpans.

“See ya guys! It was nice playing matches with all of you!”

Bokuto waves off Karasuno’s bus, and Hinata flaps his arms at him so much that he hits Kageyama in the head. The last thing Bokuto sees is Kageyama grabbing Hinata by the collar, before the bus fades into the distance.

“Guess it’s time for us to part ways, huh?” Kuroo glances at Bokuto melodramatically, staring into the distance.

Bokuto lets out a wail, latching himself onto Kuroo. “Bro! I’m gonna miss you so much!”

“We live in the same prefecture, you big dork.” Kuroo pats Bokuto on the back, hugging him affectionately. “We’ll see each other again soon, yeah?”

“Yeah! I love you, Kuroo! Maybe a little bit homo!”

“Big gay.” Kuroo nudges him, and Bokuto giggles. Akaashi realises who really is the big gay out of them.

“Come along, Bokuto-san. We’ll be late.”

Kuroo wiggles his brows to Akaashi, who wrinkles his nose in distaste. It’s as if Kuroo has caught on already, and he doesn’t appreciate it. Bokuto is just a fleeting high school crush, that he needs to get over.
When Akaashi steps into the bus, he feels an overwhelming sense of fatigue wash over him. It’s been a tough week, there’s no denying that. He leans his head on his seat, shutting his eyes.

“Akaashi! You tired? Are you gonna sleep?”

Akaashi nods, and Bokuto’s eyes turn wide and round. “You can switch seats if you want to. I probably won’t be much to talk to.”

“Nope.” Bokuto shakes his head. “I wanna sit with you, Akaashi! My best friend!”

Akaashi only tries for a few moments to hide his delight. “Best friend,” he repeats to himself, leaning his head onto Bokuto. “I’m going to sleep. Wake me up if you need anything, all right?”

He starts to doze off as the bus rocks him into a comfortable trance. It’s not that long of a ride from Saitama to Tokyo, so he hopes to milk as much of the precious sleeping time before he has to head home.

The food he’s eaten sits in his stomach, and he hears someone snoring softly from behind him. Sarukui? No, he’s pretty sure that’s Konoha.

Akaashi cracks an eye open to check on Bokuto. He seems rather drowsy himself, and Akaashi assumes he’ll be asleep just like the rest of them in a few minutes. Maybe if he’s lucky, he’ll get to see Bokuto’s goofy sleeping face.

With no noise to distract him aside from the low hum of the engine, Akaashi slips into unconsciousness in a matter of minutes. His curls fall in front of his eyes as he sleeps, creating a curtain of sorts. His cheeks turn slightly red from the lingering heat of the sun.

Abruptly, Akaashi’s eyes snap open.

His nap has ended, and he can tell it’s for a good reason. Bokuto taps him again, and Akaashi notices an unpleasant shift in his upper stomach.

“Bokuto-san, is there something wrong?” Akaashi peers into him, and Bokuto’s frown deepens. “What’s the matter?”

Bokuto’s skin is waxy-looking, and his eyes are losing their golden luster. “Akaashi,” he sounds like he’s pleading, and it’s almost pitiful. “Something’s messing with my body.”

“Are you feeling carsick?”

Akaashi has come prepared. He whips out some chewable tablets designed to alleviate sickness and discomfort during rides, which Bokuto reluctantly takes.

“I don’t know. I feel warm, and my upper stomach feels all weird.” Bokuto rests his hand on his stomach, slowly chewing on the pasty white tablet.

Akaashi sweeps up his fringe and feels his forehead. He instantly notices that the pain and discomfort isn’t the same as when Bokuto was motion sick before the camp. His face seems more flushed, but no vigor is in his eyes. He’s warm as well, even by Bokuto standards.

“Do you think you can go back to sleep? It might be better if you rest your body a little.”

Bokuto blinks. “I don’t know,” he huffs, curling into himself. “It’s been hurting on and off.”

A stab of alarm hits Akaashi. This is the first time Bokuto has admitted the pain, and he probably
hasn’t told anyone else, either. “Can you tell me what kind of pain it is? Has it been worsening?”

“Yeah.” Bokuto pitches forward as a wave of pain hits him, arms wrapped tightly around his midsection. “I thought I just ate too much or something, but it hurts around here now.” He gestures around his lower stomach, wincing periodically and letting out shaky exhales.

Akaashi looks around the bus for help, eyes locking onto Konoha. “Konoha-san, excuse me.” He shakes his upperclassman awake, and Konoha cracks his eyes open with a groan.

“What is it, Akaashi?” Konoha whispers, taking care not to wake Komi up beside him.

“Bokuto-san isn’t feeling well. He told me his stomach’s been hurting.”

Konoha wriggles out of his seat, leaning over the backrest to check on Bokuto. “What’s wrong? Are you carsick?”

Bokuto shakes his head miserably. “No, it’s not that. I don’t know what’s happening, Konoha. It just hurts.”

“We’ll move to the back of the bus. Perhaps lying down might help.” Akaashi suggests, and Bokuto nods feebly. “Bokuto-san, can you stand?”

Akaashi takes one of Bokuto’s trembling hands into his own. A jolt of pain runs down to his lower right side as he helps Bokuto to his feet, sickness bubbling in his stomach. Bokuto grips Akaashi’s hand tightly, and Akaashi feels dizzy. He has a fever, another worrying sign.

“Lay down here, okay? What’ll make it better?” Konoha and Akaashi support Bokuto as he climbs onto the seats at the very back, laying on his side with his knees bent. Akaashi keeps a concerned hand on Bokuto’s back, rubbing gentle circles and keeping an eye on the pain levels.

“Konoha-san, can you grab a plastic bag in case he feels sick?” Akaashi adds hastily when he notices that Bokuto’s feeling nauseous. “And let the coach know what’s happening. We might have to stop, worst case scenario.”

Konoha cocks up a skeptical eyebrow. “Look out the window, Akaashi. Traffic’s shit. I don’t think we can pull over anytime soon.”

Akaashi swears under his breath. Konoha’s right; one glance out on the road and he can see cars jam-packed for miles ahead. “Tell him anyway. It’s better than just us.”

Bokuto twitches underneath his touch, sweat and tears forming droplets on his face. “Akaashi, I really don’t feel good,” he chokes out, hands balling into fists. “Something’s stabbing my stomach.”

“I know. Just wait a few more minutes, all right? We’ll get you help as soon as we can.”

Truthfully, Akaashi is beyond afraid. Bokuto’s pain only worsens with each second, waves of intense pain coming and going. The calm periods in between the sharp twists in his gut only shorten, and Bokuto is actually about to cry.

As Konoha jogs up to the coach to grab his attention, Bokuto makes a noise that’s in between a hiccup and a sob. Akaashi’s eyes widen in horror, as Bokuto’s fill with dread. “I think I’m gonna be sick.” His eyes dart around in terror.

“Konoha-san,” Akaashi calls for his upperclassman, and panic immediately settles in his eyes.
“Bokuto-san needs help.”

Konoha grabs an empty plastic bag and hands it to Akaashi, exchanging glances with him. It doesn’t take long before Bokuto needs to use it desperately, swallowing down the urge to throw up.

“Akaashi—”

Bokuto grabs Akaashi’s hand in a panic, shoulders rising and falling rapidly. Akaashi’s eyes water from Bokuto’s nausea, but he keeps a straight face as he rubs Bokuto’s knuckles.

“I’m sorry this is happening to you, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi whispers, holding his trembling body. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Bokuto shakes his head, as if to say it really isn’t. It’s not like he can speak, when he's swallowing the warmth in his mouth every few seconds.

“It hurts bad,” Bokuto somehow manages to slur, “Make it stop, please—”

Bokuto cuts himself off with a heave, heat rushing to his cheeks. He vomits violently into the plastic bag, whimpering with every cough and retch. He can barely breathe in between the throwing up, cloudy eyes focusing on nothing.

“Shit, Akaashi. We need to get him somewhere else.” Konoha grabs the hand towels from his enamelled bag, laying them out onto the seats. “I don’t know what’s up, but this isn’t normal.”

Akaashi feels like he’s about to faint. His fingers tremble, and Bokuto’s suffering travels straight to him. “I know. Where’s the nearest service area?” He continues tapping his palm on Bokuto’s back, in a futile attempt to ease his pain.

“We won’t reach there for another twenty-five minutes.” Another voice joins them, but it isn’t to add something hopeful. “This isn’t good. Vomiting leads to dehydration.” Washio lifts himself from his seat, advancing towards his concerned teammates.

Akaashi turns to Bokuto, whose breathing is becoming increasingly laboured. “Do you think you can last for twenty-five minutes?”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know,” he sobs, tears and saliva dripping down his face, “I want to go home.”

“I know. I know it hurts. Just hang on a little more.” Konoha reassures him, tying the plastic bag closed. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“This is ridiculous,” Akaashi mutters. Bokuto’s obviously sick, and they can’t even get out of the traffic jam. “I’m going to go talk to the coach. There has to be some way to solve this.”

“Akaashi.” Bokuto grips Akaashi’s arm with surprising strength. Akaashi immediately stops in his tracks, both from the burst of pain in his lower abdomen and shock. “No. Don’t go, please. Akaashi.”

“I’ll get him.” Washio marches down the aisle, ignoring the drowsy groans of his fellow teammates. Akaashi can’t hear what he’s saying, but it’s enough for the coach to head over hurriedly.

“Bokuto, I need you to tell me what’s happening. Does it hurt anywhere other than your stomach?” Coach asks, pressing his hand to Bokuto’s neck. “He needs rest. His body temperature is way too
high.”

“I feel really dizzy. And sick.” Bokuto presses his sweaty brow onto the coarse seat, hands resting protectively on his shirt. “Oh, oh god, it hurts.”

“Where does it hurt the most?” Akaashi attempts to uncurl Bokuto unsuccessfully. He can barely speak without crying out, and his face has turned ashen. “Over here?” He reaches towards Bokuto’s stomach, and Bokuto tries to scramble away.

“Akaashi, please don’t touch it, it makes it worse.” Bokuto pleads with him, and Akaashi can only mumble hushed apologies as he places his fingers on Bokuto’s stomach and presses lightly.

Bokuto screams as soon as Akaashi makes contact, and the twist of pain akin to being stabbed was enough for him to be sure of his assumptions. “We need to get him to hospital as soon as possible. I think it’s his appendix.”

“Shit, shit, shit. It hurts- fuck, it hurts so fucking much, Akaashi.” Bokuto hisses through gritted teeth, tears flowing down his cheeks without ever stopping. “Make it stop, please, I don’t care how. Just make it stop!”

Bokuto doesn’t suppress his cries this time. Or rather, he can’t. Knives keep digging into his stomach, stabbing at his organs. Akaashi can only hold his hand and bear the pain with him, whispering comforting words that are barely heard.

“Help me, please. It’s so bad. I can’t do this any longer. It’s killing me.” Bokuto reels, his stomach contracting painfully without any warning. His weak attempts at holding it down proves meaningless; he’s vomiting again, shivers racking his abused stomach as he gags.

“Fuck! We need to pull over, now!” Konoha is on the verge of tears himself, exchanging alarmed glances with Akaashi. He extends a hand towards Bokuto, who only looks in his direction with watery eyes.

“Just hold on for a little longer, Bokuto-san. We’re out of the traffic jam. It’s all right.”

Akaashi isn’t sure if Bokuto even heard him, until Bokuto whimpers weakly. “It’s not all right, Akaashi. It hurts so bad…” He lets out a prolonged whimper, too exhausted to even scream.

“All right, I’ll call an ambulance. He’s clearly in a lot of pain.”

The bus skids to a halt as soon as they came to a cleared, open area. Akaashi runs his fingers across Bokuto’s fringe, desperately praying for Bokuto to stay awake. “Help is on its way, Bokuto-san. You’re going to feel better soon. Just a little more. You’re so strong.”

By the time the medics arrive, Bokuto is sobbing silently, every shudder sending sparks of pain to his stomach. It takes multiple of them to uncurl him from his fetal position and carry him out. He cries out sharply as he’s being lifted. His insides are being carved with a meat cleaver.

“Does he have a health insurance card?” One of the medics ask, and Akaashi digs into Bokuto’s bags to look for it. He’d reminded Bokuto countless times before the training camp to not forget it, in case of an emergency. Which clearly is the case right now.

Akaashi hands the card over. “Here it is. I know some of his medical history. Should I board with him?” Bokuto is in no condition to be questioned mercilessly, and he’s fairly certain all he’ll be able for is answering in groans.
“Alright. I’m sure he can do with a comforting presence beside him, too. Come along.”

Akaashi nods, hopping onto the ambulance. He holds Bokuto’s hand, and Bokuto sobs as he tightens his grip. “It hurts, Akaashi. It really hurts,” he murmurs over and over, in between harsh gasps and weak whimpers.

“What do you know his name, age and birthdate?”

“Bokuto Koutarou. He’s seventeen, and his birthday is the twentieth of September.”

Akaashi answers the medic’s questions one by one, while comforting Bokuto as best as he can. “I’m going to need to touch his stomach.” Bokuto recoils at the statement, shaking his head at Akaashi with tear-filled eyes.

“No, no, no. Please don’t touch it, please, no!” Bokuto protests weakly, fresh tears spilling from his eyes. Akaashi exhales, patting his arm sympathetically. He knows more than anyone how much pain he’s in, but refusing isn’t an option.

“You can grip my hand if it’s too much, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi’s hand is already squeezed so tight he thinks it’s going numb, but Bokuto somehow clenches harder, grinding his teeth together.

As soon as the medic lifts his t-shirt and presses lightly onto the affected area, Bokuto lets out a series of screams that sound nothing like Akaashi has ever heard before. The pain is like nothing he’s ever known, like a knife carving at his organs from the inside.

Bokuto’s nails leave a mark on Akaashi’s hand, but the pain is too much for him to care. He almost wants to let go, to free himself from the excruciating pains, but he keeps Bokuto’s hand in his. He can’t do anything aside from letting him share his pain. Bokuto can’t opt out of it like he can.

“We’re going to need his parents’ contacts. Appendicitis is highly suspected, and we need to perform a minor surgery to take it out.” The medic explains, and Akaashi takes out Bokuto’s student ID card to check for his contact information. He hands it to him and turns to Bokuto, who seems paler than ever.

“Is the surgery scaring you?” Akaashi asks, and Bokuto nods. “It’s going to take away the pain. You can go to sleep, and you’ll feel better when you wake up.”

Bokuto doesn’t let go of Akaashi’s hand, even after the ride ends. “Please don’t go, Akaashi,” he whispers, voice hoarse from the screaming. “I don’t want to be alone. It hurts.”

“I won’t be gone long, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi shushes him, but it doesn’t comfort Bokuto. He has to pry off Bokuto’s hand for him to get taken away, and Bokuto lets go after briefly holding on. Akaashi can’t help thinking he’s done something he should be ashamed of.

He doesn’t recognise where he is, until he glances at the sofas beside the reception. He’s been here a few times with his mother, when he got chest infections as a kid. Which reminds him that he needs to call his mother to pick him up.

“Hey, Keiji.”

Akaashi’s mother picks up after three rings. He can hear Mari and Kakeru play some sort of fighting video game in the distance, and Sora begging to join them.

“Hey. I’m at Murakami Hospital right now-”
“Are you okay?! Did you hurt yourself?” She immediately jumps to the conclusion that he’s there because of a volleyball injury, even though he’s never had anything worse than a sprain.

“No, mom. I’m fine. I’m just here because of Bokuto-san.”

“Oh, god. Is he all right? Is he hurt?”

Akaashi is half convinced that his mother thinks Bokuto is her son too. “He wasn’t feeling well in the bus, and he was having really bad stomach pains, so we called an ambulance. I’m pretty sure it’s his appendix.”

“The poor thing. Is he going to be all right?”

“He’s getting it taken out now. He’s pretty tough, I’m sure he’ll be all right.”

“I’ll come over now. Kakeru, keep an eye on Sora!”

She hangs up, and Akaashi shoves his phone back in his pocket. Akaashi is forced to confront his own racing thoughts. He knows the statistics of a minor surgery going wrong, but his heart still pumps cold blood around his body. Bokuto wasn’t the same powerful captain he knew in the ambulance, when he was sobbing and throwing up from the pain.

“Keiji! Is he all right?”

Akaashi’s mother arrives after fifteen minutes. She paces around the hallway before plopping down beside Akaashi, shooting prolonged glances at the operating rooms.

“He should be out in a couple of hours.” Akaashi replies. It’s been almost an hour, and he can imagine Bokuto on the operating table, completely at the mercy of the surgeons. The thought makes him shiver.

“You helped him out, didn’t you?” His mother cracks a smile. “I’m proud of you both. I’m proud of my son, Keiji.”

Akaashi shrugs. “I knew about him the best, so I guess I felt like I needed to hop on. Also, I hated seeing him crying like that. He would have been more uncomfortable and upset alone. I doubt he’s used to hospitals.”

“You were very considerate of him. I’m sure he’ll pull through just fine.” She ruffles his hair, grinning fondly. And then she stops to ask another question. “Are his parents here? I haven’t seen them. I should probably say hello.”

Akaashi feels his guts shift. “No, I haven’t seen them.” He debates mentioning the bruises on Bokuto’s skin, but concludes that now isn’t the best time.

“We’ll wait until they come. I don’t want the kid to wake up with nobody there beside him.”

His mother has a point, and he nods. “I hope he feels better.”

The surgery is finished sooner than he expects, and neither of Bokuto’s parents are there. Akaashi was initially refused when he asked to see Bokuto, until Bokuto made it clear that he wanted someone he knew with him.

“How are you feeling, Bokuto-san?”

Bokuto’s eyes goggily focus on Akaashi. “I’m sleepy,” his voice is scratchy as he speaks, “I feel
kinda sick, but ‘m okay…”

Akaashi strokes Bokuto’s hair, unwaxed and floppy. “It’s from the anaesthetic, Bokuto-san. You’ll feel better shortly. The surgery went very well.”

“Surgery? I had… surgery?” Bokuto’s eyes widen, but he’s too shaky to do anything else. “Was it for the stomachache?”

Akaashi lets out a small laugh. “It was your appendix. It’s been taken out from your stomach. I’m sure they’ll let you see it before you go home.”

Bokuto snorts, then winces from his surgical wound throbbing. “No wonder it hurt like a bitch.”

“Koutarou, there you are.”

Bokuto’s grin drops immediately, causing Akaashi to turn around. He can only think of a few people who the voice could possibly belong to.

“You’re awake.”

It’s his mother.

Chapter End Notes

be sure to please leave a comment it's 12am what am I doing
Shards

Chapter Summary

“Actually, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to be beside you for tonight.” Akaashi pipes up. “It’s not an inconvenience. And wouldn’t it be more comfortable for you, if you weren’t on your own?”

Bokuto blinks. “Yeah, I suppose. Then, it’s a sleepover!” He pumps his fist, hospital gown sliding down his sleeve. “I… don’t think that’s the way to think of it.”

“Akaashi, back me up for once, will ya?!” Bokuto whines.

Akaashi’s mother nods in agreement. “Exactly, Keiji! The guy just had his appendix nipped, back him up!”

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I was.... busy... and stuck....
Anyways. This chapter is evil and I'm sorry Bokuto.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey, mom.”

Bokuto instinctively tightens his features, fingers grasping at the bedsheets. He hadn’t thought of what would happen after his surgery, while he was caught up with the pain. But now, realization crashes into him, as if icy water has been poured over his head. He’s burdened his family with extra medical costs, when they were already in a tough spot financially.

Akaashi must have noticed the shift in his expression, as he moves closer to Bokuto almost protectively. He reaches under the covers to grip Bokuto’s hand, the one without the tube attached to it, and massages his palms tenderly. It’s his silent way of telling him that he’s there for him.

“You’ve gotten your appendix taken out, I’ve heard.”

Her tone is neutral, at least from Bokuto’s perspective. Akaashi glances at him, almost worriedly. A naive part of him wonders if she’s actually sympathetic to what he’s gone through; perhaps she’s gotten her appendix out, too. Bokuto had learned about genetics and the likelihood of catching certain diseases depending on parents’ genes. Maybe it was that. His family genes had a weak spot for appendicitis.

“I did. I’m fine now! I feel so much better!” Bokuto punctuates each sentence with a grin, emphasizing his last point with an energetic nod. Akaashi rubs his knuckles fondly, and Bokuto’s heart rate quickens.
His mother blinks at him. “You’ll be discharged tomorrow, the doctors said.”

She doesn’t say any more before she leaves. Akaashi isn’t even acknowledged, but he can’t imagine the two of them holding a conversation, so he leaves it at that. “Man, I can’t wait to get out of this place. I’m so hungry for meat!”

Akaashi hides a laugh behind his fist. “I’m sure you’ll be able to eat as much meat as you want, once you get home. You can endure it until then.”

“Is it all right if I come in?”

It’s another feminine voice, softer and one Bokuto is less accustomed to.

“It’s my mom. Would you mind if she came in? She was worried about you, and I promise I won’t let her make you uncomfortable.” Akaashi explains, and Bokuto nods. He likes Akaashi’s mother. Strong, tough, and sweet towards children.

Akaashi’s mother steps into the room, hopping over to the both of them. “Koutarou-kun, sweetheart, are you feeling better?” She ruffles his hair gently, taking the utmost care not to agitate his pain. “It must have been painful, getting appendicitis. Well, better out than in! Rest up, all right?”

Bokuto lets out a lighthearted chuckle. Akaashi’s mother is much more talkative than Akaashi, but he sees the similarity between them. The same dark, observant eyes, hair with bouncing curls, and posture so straight it could rival a ruler. Akaashi’s mother is noticeably shorter and rounder, and has a soft smile Bokuto always sees her with.

“I’m okay now, but thank you for caring! I’m sorry for the trouble.” Bokuto bows lightly, and Akaashi’s mother gives him a light squeeze.

“It’s no problem at all. I hope my Keiji was of help.” She smacks Akaashi’s back in good humour. “Would you like him to stick around? I know it’s lonely being in a hospital alone, especially after surgery.”

Bokuto laughs nervously. “That’d be too much trouble, Akaashi-san. It’ll be fine, really! I’ll just go to sleep, and I won’t even have to remember anything.”

“Actually, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to be beside you for tonight.” Akaashi pipes up. “It’s not an inconvenience. And wouldn’t it be more comfortable for you, if you weren’t on your own?”

Bokuto blinks. “Yeah, I suppose. Then, it’s a sleepover!” He pumps his fist, hospital gown sliding down his sleeve.

“I… don’t think that’s the way to think of it.”

“Akaashi, back me up for once, will ya?!” Bokuto whines.

Akaashi’s mother nods in agreement. “Exactly, Keiji! The guy just had his appendix nipped, back him up!”

Akaashi’s eyes roll into the back of his head. Bokuto finds even that endearing, but fatigue hits him fast. He leans into his pillow, exhaling weakly.

“Bokuto-san, you should go to sleep. You’re worn out from being sick.”
Bokuto pulls a face. “I’ve just been to sleep! That’s boring, Akaashi!” He barely manages to finish his sentence, yawning into his palm.

Akaashi raises his brows at him, having proved his own point without even doing anything. “Getting knocked out for surgery and getting sleep are two different things, Bokuto-san.”

“He’s right, you know.” Akaashi’s mother nods.

“I thought you were on my side!” Bokuto wails, and Akaashi chuckles. “But thank you both, for caring about me.”

Akaashi sweeps Bokuto’s fringe in a swift gesture. “Of course we care. You’re my-”

And Bokuto is out like a light, before he can hear the end of his sentence. He wakes up, and remembers none of the exchange.

He only knows of the softness of Akaashi’s hand, that’s there when he wakes up. Akaashi pulls away once he notices his eyes crack open. He sticks his bottom lip out, and Akaashi’s fingers wrap around his hand again.

He is discharged earlier than he expected. His surgical wound has healed up nicely, and apart from his fatigue, he isn’t feeling too unwell. His parents drive him home by car. The ride is silent, and Bokuto resists the urge to pick at his surgical wound already.

“How expensive your medical bill was?”

Of course, it has to come. Bokuto shakes his head. He can barely walk up the stairs, and lies down on the sofa. He doesn’t know if it’s the car ride, or the aftereffects of surgery, but his body is weighed down like a dead weight and he feels sick to his stomach.

His mother throws the bill into his face. It slides onto the floor pitifully, as Bokuto curls in on himself. “I didn’t mean to get sick,” he murmurs groggily.

“Don’t you dare try and act smart with me. Don’t you realise that you’re being a burden?” She yanks Bokuto’s ear sharply when he doesn’t respond. “You’re a waste of money!”

Bokuto doesn’t have the energy to apologize. His eyes flutter shut again, until he’s grabbed and shoved violently off the sofa. The side of his head slams into the floor, eliciting a pained groan out of him.

“Get up and go to your room. You’re lazy, and you know it.”

She says something Bokuto doesn’t catch, and he gets up off the ground and leaves, before he faces another violent outburst.

Bokuto climbs up the stairs and collapses into his bedroom. Fatigue washes over him like a wave pool, but he’s too tired to even sleep. He presses his face into the pillow, pretending that it’s good to be home.

His peace of mind doesn’t last long. He jolts out of his trance when he hears a loud rapping on his door, almost slipping off the bed and slamming into the ground. “Koutarou, get over here!” He’s called outside his room by his father. He doesn’t want to move a muscle, but he knows he’ll be hit with verbal onslaught.

“I’m coming,” Bokuto murmurs, trudging out of his room. “What do you need me for?”
His father stares at him, saying nothing, as if to emphasise himself. “You’ve been costing us a lot these past few weeks. We gave you money for your training camp, and that isn’t cheap. And now, we’ve had to pay for your medical bills.”

Bokuto wants to argue that he didn’t choose to be sick, but he knows he’ll be shut down. He’s the one who hurts his family and breaks them apart.

“So I’m going to tell you this now. Don’t try and sneak food. Don’t bother us with your dramatics. Don’t forget that we’re the ones putting a roof over your head.” His mind flashes to the jar of peanut butter he nicked weeks ago, and then to the packets of instant noodles he’s taken for himself. He says nothing about either food item.

“I won’t bother you guys.” Bokuto replies feebly, not meeting his father’s gaze.

“You understand, don’t you?” Bokuto’s father stares at him with a piercing glare, and Bokuto can feel it, prickling against his skin. “Well, answer me, you ungrateful fucker. Don’t you know how to use your mouth? Are you that stupid?”

“I understand.” Bokuto says louder.

“I don’t want to see your face anymore. Get back into your room.”

Bokuto doesn’t understand. He can’t predict when his father will raise his voice at him. He doesn’t know what’s making him so angry. Bills? His mother? Himself?

He doesn’t argue, and slips back into his room. He sinks into a pile of blankets, wondering what he got wrong this time. He didn’t speak in his overly enthusiastic manner that gave everyone a headache. He stayed quiet and obedient. He didn’t complain about pain or hunger.

A slew of messages pop up on his phone, but he’s too exhausted to read any, never mind reply. He knows they’re mostly from Akaashi. Akaashi, his amazing, organized best friend. Akaashi, who stuck with him in the ambulance. Akaashi, who was there by his side when he woke up from surgery.

Bokuto passes out, wakes up, and passes out again. He panics after the second time waking up, then loosens up when he realises it’s still summer vacation.

His wound is healing nicely. He takes a photo of it and sends it to his teammates, as a collective response to their messages of concern and sympathy. He has messages from Kuroo too, and even Daichi. News travels fast when one has a wide social circle, he muses.

19:23 Konoha Gakure

Bokuto, you okay?

19:23 Konoha Gakure

Answer me if you see my texts. Or answer anyone, we just want to know if you’re okay

19:55 Monkey S. Yamato

Bokuto, does your stomach feel better? How are you feeling??

23:12 Kuroo Twinkie
Hey, I heard you just got surgery?? What the fuck Bokuto are you okay????

23:22 Daichi

Take care of yourself, and don’t rush into practice! Get well soon!

Bokuto answers all the messages hastily. He doesn’t like stewing in his room, but he knows Daichi is right. If he goes to practice today, Akaashi will practically throw him out of the court and back home.

Akaashi sends more messages to him than anyone else. Bokuto needs to text him, before he gets worried. Akaashi is one of the biggest worrywarts he’s ever come to known, although his worrying and double-checking has admittedly saved his ass, on numerous occasions.

So, really, he can’t tell him not to worry.

“Hey, Akaashi!”

Bokuto gives him a call instead of texting. He’s always preferred talking to people rather than tapping out messages. Besides, his fingers are too thick, and typos would be rampant in his messages.

“I always tell you to warn me before calling,” Akaashi huffs, but Bokuto can tell he’s happy he can hear him. “So, how are you feeling? No pain? No nausea?”

“I’m just tired.” Bokuto cuts himself off with a yawn.

He can almost see Akaashi shrug. “It’s to be expected, Bokuto-san. You’re actually doing well, considering you just had surgery a few days ago.”

Bokuto snorts. “You know more about this than I do, obviously. What, you got your appendix removed, or something?”

“No,” Akaashi says, “but my younger brother did.”

“Sora? The weeny little guy?”

“Kakeru,” Akaashi corrects him. “Back when I was in middle school. He was feverish and throwing up, and he had the classic pain in his lower right side. It’s not the first time I’ve seen it happen, so it was relatively easy to notice.”

Bokuto’s eyes widen with awe. “Wow, Akaashi! You’re an expert now!” He continues, before Akaashi can interject with a I’m really not, Bokuto-san. “So, am I meant to thank you, or your brother? I mean, if he didn’t get sick in the first place, you might not have saved my life!”

“I guess you could call it the Butterfly Effect, Bokuto-san. Although it isn’t much of a large effect.”

Bokuto doesn’t understand. Images of butterflies fly around his head, but confusion was the only effect it had on him. “I’m not as smart as you, Akaashi! You gotta explain what that is!”

“A Butterfly flapping its wings here may cause a hurricane in America.” Akaashi says, only furthering his confusion. “One small action can affect something on a much larger scale, and we won’t even know it.”
“Oooh, I think I get it.” Bokuto nods. “So, if your brother hadn’t gotten sick, I could have been totally f*cked.”

“If I hadn’t seen you play two years ago, we wouldn’t be on the same team.”

Bokuto hears a tiny gasp from the other end of the phone. “Wait, two years ago? When I was in first year?” Somehow, he feels like he wasn’t supposed to catch that.

“I know it’s useless to tell you to forget about it, so I’ll tell you.” Akaashi sighs, resigned. “I decided to come to Fukurodani after I saw you spike.”

“Wow.” Bokuto grins from ear to ear. “That’s awesome. I drew you in like a magnet, huh?”

“I suppose so,” Akaashi said, “you influence a lot more things than you realise.”

Bokuto lights up as he remembers something. “Hey, Akaashi! How about we go see that movie you said you wanted to watch? I kinda feel bad for having to cancel, and it’s been a while since we’ve gone out, just the two of us.”

“That would be amazing, Bokuto-san. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Bokuto hears footsteps come upstairs, and quickly shoves his phone under his pillow. “I gotta go, sorry Akaashi! I’ll text you later!” He ends the call, eyes darting around for something he can look productive with.

He grabs a study guidebook for math, flipping through it aimlessly. He stares intensely at a page with the formulae masterlist, hoping that his studious act is convincing. Oftentimes he’s been told it’s not.

His heart hammers in his chest as he curls up in a corner of his bed, listening intently for the footsteps coming closer. They step into his parent’s room- well, mostly his mother’s room now, since his father often sleeps in the guest room- and head back out, away from his room.

He heaves a sigh once he’s sure the footsteps are heading downstairs. He’s safe, for now. He pulls his phone out from under his pillow, slightly annoyed at having to end his call with Akaashi so unexpectedly.

18:23 Akaashi

Are you all right? Did something happen?

18:24 Bokuto!!

Yeah! Just had to get food. I’m full now!

Bokuto’s stomach groans under his touch. He doesn’t know why he chose that lie, out of everything else. Now he has hunger to worry about, too. He isn’t sure why he’s lying to Akaashi. He’s his best friend.

Both of his parents go out at seven, for one reason or another. He’s memorized it, using the time wisely to grab food and shove some into his drawer. He’d spilled soup all over his t-shirts once, but that was months ago. He wouldn’t make that same mistake again.

They don’t even say anything to him before heading out. He only knows they’ve gone out by the click of the front door. But it’s better no words than harsh words, so he isn’t complaining.
Bokuto’s stomach groans as he heads downstairs. He hasn’t eaten all day. He’s just been told not to sneak food, and he doubts expressing his hunger would go well. Still, if they weren’t there, and he only took a little bit, they couldn’t possibly know.

He rifles through the fridge for something, anything he can eat without leaving traces of evidence. There’s barely enough food for a full meal. His parents often eat outside the house, and he can’t remember the last time they’ve sat down for dinner together.

There are a few grapes that won’t be missed, and Bokuto pops them into his mouth. There isn’t much more, unfortunately. There are plates of leftovers that aren’t his, and he’s not risking those.

Bokuto reaches down to open the cupboard, hoping to get some sort of nourishment. There are condiments and alcoholic beverages inside, and he looks through them, picking out ones he can eat.

There’s a bottle of ketchup and mayonnaise, but even in his situation, he’s turned off by the prospect of drinking those condiments down. He sees a kettle sitting on the floor, and an idea flashes into his head.

He boils some water while keeping an eye outside, staying alert. Once the kettle beeps, he pours the water into a bowl, and squirts a decent amount of ketchup inside.

It doesn't look very appetizing, but it’s edible. Bokuto grabs a spoon and stirs the makeshift tomato soup, if it’s fit to be called one. He blows onto it and scoops a spoonful into his mouth.

There isn’t much taste to it, but the scalding hot temperature of the soup prevents him from being repulsed or delighted. He drinks up the soup, and it burns its way down, but he likes the sensation. He’s having a hot meal, at last.

Once Bokuto’s finished eating, he chops the dish into the sink and washes it, leaving no trace of his existence behind. He hopes it’s enough to keep him going for the evening, until he falls asleep. His parents’ car pulls into the driveway, and he makes a run for it, back into his room.

For a while, there isn’t any yelling or fighting. Bokuto lays down on his sheets and grins, feeling accomplished and proud of himself for coming up with a new recipe on the spot. He’s sure he won’t enjoy mayonnaise or mustard soup, but he’s sure he can find creative uses for the other condiments, too.

The smell of delicious, empty-calorie food wafts upstairs, and Bokuto realises that he can definitely accommodate some more food into his stomach. “Welcome home!” he exclaims, hopping downstairs excitedly.

“Oh, Koutarou. Have you already eaten something?” His mother asks him, and Bokuto hesitates. His eyes drop onto the tupperware containers in the brown paper bags, and his mouth starts to water.

There are meat dishes, noodles and fried vegetables, right in front of him. He finds it hard to resist them, and he stops himself from drooling. “Not much. Do you guys have any leftovers for me?”

“Well, I thought you’d already eaten. What’s wrong with what we have?” She sets down the food onto the kitchen table. “Are you that hungry?”

Bokuto stops to think. “I had some soup, but I got kinda hungry when I saw… those.” He points to the plastic containers with a sheepish grin. “I won’t take too much. I promise.”
“Soup? Did you take food from the fridge without permission?”

Bokuto shakes his head profusely. “No! I just used some ketchup. I didn’t take anything I wasn’t supposed to!”

“You ate ketchup? That’s disgusting. What is wrong with you? It’s like I’m starving you. You’re not going to die without one meal.” She starts stuffing the containers of food into the fridge, and waves at him to shoo him off.

Bokuto’s lost the chance to have some delicious food. He retreats back to his room, defeated. Maybe his mother is right after all. He should be satisfied with what he has, instead of being ungrateful. He isn’t starving, he eats every day.

But he can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong about all this. He can hardly call a bowl of ketchup and boiling water his dinner.

“Bokuto-san, are you all right to meet me at the cinema tomorrow?” Akaashi asks, wiping sweat off his brow. “I was thinking of watching the horror movie that came out a few weeks ago.”

Bokuto nods, tossing the volleyballs strewn about into the crate. “Yeah! But Akaashi… Since when were you a horror fan?”

Akaashi smirks, and Bokuto isn’t sure if he’s mesmerized or terrified. “Oh, I love horror, Bokuto-san. I can handle anything.” He catches Bokuto’s jersey when it’s tossed into the air. “Unless, of course, you’re scared. But what’s a haunted doll got against you, Bokuto-san?”

“Nothing! I’m the ace, after all!” Bokuto states boldly, unaware that he’s locked himself into the situation completely.

“I see. Then I trust that you’ll be fine.” Akaashi pats Bokuto on the shoulder lightly, throwing his jacket over him.

Bokuto feels something spark inside his chest at that. “Thanks for practicing with me, Akaashi! See ya tomorrow!”

He excitedly scrapes together his allowance in his room, shoving it into his wallet. He’s going out with Akaashi, at last. Between study and volleyball, there isn’t much time for them to hang out outside of a school setting. Bokuto still has fun, but he isn’t sure if Akaashi feels the same.

When Bokuto arrives at the cinema, Akaashi is already there. He’s wearing a blue t-shirt with kanji printed on it, and Bokuto can’t help but to notice how much it draws out his features. He swallows, glancing at his smooth arms.

“Bokuto-san. Are you sure about this?” Akaashi raises an eyebrow. “Washio and Komi watched it. I heard their goosebumps didn’t calm down for hours.”

Bokuto is so caught up with the fact that Akaashi is in his own clothes, that he almost forgets to respond. “Of course I am! Come on, Akaashi! Let’s go buy some snacks!”

“The butter in one bag of popcorn would be enough to clog my arteries before I finish the film,” Akaashi chuckles, “but I’ll be all right. What would you like, Bokuto-san?”

“We could share a bucket of strawberry popcorn! Is that okay?”

Akaashi hums in agreement, purchasing one large bucket of pink-tinted popcorn. Bokuto reaches in
for one and throws it in his mouth, scrunching his face up in bliss. “This is really good, Akaashi!”

“Let’s grab our seats.” Akaashi leads the way into the theatre, navigating his way through the aisles. It’s already darkened inside, a deep blue glow marking where the steps are.

Bokuto almost grabs another piece of popcorn, but he knows Akaashi is both a big eater and the type of person who won’t eat until the actual movie starts, so he resists the temptation. He sits through the trailers until the typical cinema etiquette animation starts to play, and Akaashi reaches over to the popcorn bucket.

“It’s starting.” Akaashi says, munching on the strawberry popcorn. Bokuto directs his full attention to the screen, completely forgetting that he’s watching a horror movie. That is, until the movie title displays itself in a bloodied font.

Bokuto casts an unsure look towards Akaashi, who shrugs at him. He’s in for it now, and he realises that all the more, when a close-up shot of a Victorian doll is shown using the entire screen.

He reaches for the popcorn, crunching away as he waits for the scary scenes to play. The scene switches over to a mother and father scolding who he assumes is their daughter. Bokuto wonders what the child has done to be shouted at, not noticing the doll in her hands.

The movie has surprisingly few jump scares. It’s more of a psychological horror, the kind that digs at the audience’s insides. The only paranormal aspect of it is the demonic possession, but that’s not the scariest part. The humans are the characters that really scare Bokuto.

“We don’t want you anymore!”

Bokuto’s head snaps upwards. He feels horribly bad for the protagonist, bullied by the people she considers family. It’s one of the few times he roots for the antagonist- the possessed doll never hits her.

The ending leaves a slightly bad aftertaste in his mouth, and there’s no more strawberry popcorn to wash it out. He stares at the credits with a tight frown.

“Bokuto-san, let’s go.” Akaashi yanks him back to reality.

“Huh? Oh, sure!” Bokuto picks up the empty bag of popcorn, splotched with grease spots. He crunches it up in his hand, tossing it into the nearby bin.

“It was a pretty crazy film, huh Akaashi? I’m getting goosebumps for a totally different reason.”

Akaashi nods, seemingly unaffected by the ending of the film. “I guess this is the type of film where it goes, ‘Humans are scary, after all’.”

“Yeah, exactly! You know exactly what I want to say, Akaashi!”

“Are you free this afternoon, Bokuto-san? My mother is making some cold somen noodles, and we think it’d be nice to have you with us.” Akaashi invites him to his house out of the blue, and Bokuto nods before he thinks.

“Is that okay? Can I come over?” Bokuto lights up. He knows his parents won’t care much, since their mood seems to directly correlate to the amount of time he’s at home. He also loves Akaashi’s mother and siblings very much.

“Sure. Come on, the food’s waiting for us.”
As soon as Akaashi unlocks the front door to his house, Bokuto is tackled into a rough hug by Sora. “Koutarou-niichan!” He latches himself around Bokuto’s waist, refusing to let go until his mother physically pries him off.

“Welcome to our household, Koutarou-kun!” Akaashi’s mother beckons him into the house, and Bokuto takes off his shoes as he welcomes himself in. “Be gentle with him, Sora. He had surgery not too long ago.”

“Can I see?” Mari pops into the hallway and asks. She’s in her fourth year of elementary school, and developing a fixation on all things medical. “I wanna know what the scar looks like.”

“Be polite, now, Mari.” Akaashi’s mother reprimands her lightly, but Bokuto nods and lifts up his t-shirt to show her his surgical scar.

Mari stares at it hard, poking about his stomach. “That’s cool. I wish I could have seen what the appendix looked like.” She grinned, patting him lightly. “Thanks for showing me!”

“Come along, now. We have lots of noodles, and the vegetables have been chilled, too.” Akaashi’s mother calls out, and Mari darts into the kitchen, followed closely by Bokuto.

Akaashi’s younger brother, Kakeru, is in the kitchen, helping his mother put the thinly sliced egg omelettes and cucumbers into a bowl. Whole, raw tomatoes sit on a plate at the centre of the table. There are even chikuwa pieces and sliced ham.

“Oh, hey Koutarou! What’s up?” Kakeru bumps shoulders with Bokuto instead of hugging him, taking into consideration that he has tomato goo on his fingers. “How was the movie?”

“It was so disturbing! There was this possessed doll, and the girl’s parents-”

“Don’t spoil it all! I’m gonna watch it next week with my friends.” Kakeru sits down at the table, and his mother brings a large plastic bottle of chilled green tea. “Eat up, Koutarou! You’re a guest in our home!” He pushes a bowl of noodle broth and somen noodles on a bamboo basket towards Bokuto.

There are ice cubes scattered onto the noodles, and Bokuto’s mouth waters. “Really? I can have all this?”

“Yeah? Why would we put food in front of you and tell you not to eat it?” Kakeru jokes.

“You have a point.”

Bokuto picks up the chopsticks and dips the noodles in broth, slurping it up. Even after he’s told the food is his, it doesn’t feel right to be the only ones eating. As if he’s doing something he’ll get in trouble for.

“Bokuto-san, aren’t you going to put any toppings on the noodles?” Akaashi asks, and Bokuto realises he looks rather silly, eating plain noodles. “There’s no need to hesitate. There’s plenty of food to go around.”

Sora plops onto the wooden chair, designed to keep a toddler from falling out of it. “I want tomatoes! A lot of tomatoes!” He exclaims, hands making grabbing motions at the plastic bowl just out of his reach.

“I’ll cut it up. You’re still small, you can’t use a knife yet.” Mari takes a fleshy tomato and begins to chop it into pieces, sprinkling them on top of Sora’s noodles.
“Not small!”

Sora sticks out his lower lip in a pout. Akaashi and Bokuto glance at each other and snicker amongst themselves. Bokuto wonders if Akaashi had moments like that when he was a kid. Or maybe he was a stoic toddler, with the same deadpan expression he wears when Bokuto tries to twerk against the volleyball nets.

“You’re all small. And small children need food to grow. Eat as much as you want.” Akaashi’s mother smiles warmly at Bokuto, encouraging him to eat.

Akaashi places various toppings on both Bokuto’s and his own noodles. “Thanks for the meal,” he says, inhaling his food so fast that his noodles are nowhere to be seen within seconds.

“Akaashi, you’re so fast! Did you drink the noodles?!”

“If you choke, I’m gonna have to do the Heimlich Manoeuvre on you.” Mari’s eyes glint.

“And why do you seem so eager?” Bokuto laughs.

Kakeru blinks, expression blank. “What the hell is the… whatever you just said?”

“I can give you a demonstration, nii-chan.” Mari hops off her chair and rolls up her sleeves.

“Nope. No thanks. Don’t want noodles coming out my nose.” Kakeru holds his hands up to stop her. “Besides, Keiji is the one with no noodles left.”

Bokuto slurps his own noodles, until he’s cleaned his plate. Akaashi’s mother immediately asks him if he wants a refill, and he nods. She pours more soup base into his bowl, and dumps a large portion of noodles onto his plate.

“Eat up, Koutarou! Teenagers need their calories!”

“Thank you.” Bokuto picks at the food politely. He’s been given the food to eat, but that doesn’t mean he can eat like an uncivilized pig. He’ll get kicked out if he doesn’t abide by their rules, even though he knows Akaashi’s mother is kind and welcoming.

“Mama! I want ice pops! Ice pops!” Sora bangs his tiny hands onto the table, pleading for ice candy. “I want to eat!”

“Well,” Akaashi’s mother shrugs. “I suppose it’s ice cream weather today. All right, kids. You can pick one and help yourselves to it.”

Akaashi’s siblings crowd around the freezer, excitedly picking out an ice pop each and bickering over the superior flavour. “Bokuto-san, would you like some too?”

Bokuto’s mouth waters. “Can I?” He glances at the box of ice pops in the freezer, and reaches in for a grape flavour ice pop. “I’ll have this one then!”

As soon as he starts to suck on the sweet, juicy ice pop, Sora clambers into his lap. “Koutarou! Green tongue!” He squeals, sticking out his tongue dyed by the melon ice pop.

“Whoa, it’s so green! Like a froggy!” Bokuto laughs, bouncing Sora playfully. “Wanna see mine, too?” He displays his own purpling tongue, slightly numb from the cold treat.

“Koutarou’s purple! Ahaha!”
Akaashi bites straight into his ice pop, and Bokuto winces. “Akaashi, what is wrong with you? Are your pain receptors muted or something?”

Akaashi shrugs, chomping into the icy strawberry flavoured pop. “What, you can’t bite into ice pops? I can’t relate, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto pouts indignant. “I can do that too!” He lets competitiveness win against his common sense, and sinks his teeth into the purple ice pop. A cold, stinging sensation creeps into his front teeth, along with regret in his veins. He lets out a whine of anguish.

“I guess not even Bokuto-san can win against ice cream.”

“Shut up, Akaashi.” Bokuto groans, chewing on the wood of his ice pop stick. He knows when he’s beaten.

Bokuto gathers his belongings once the afternoon turns into evening. He needs to get home before his parents start getting angry at him for leaving the house too long. He doesn’t think they’ll come looking for him, though.

“Thanks for having me over!” Bokuto bows, almost reluctant to leave. “It was a lot of fun hanging out with you guys!”

“Thanks for playing with Sora!”

“Your surgery scar was pretty cool.”

“Love you, Koutarou!”

Sora blows a kiss towards Bokuto with both palms, and Akaashi lets out a choked laugh. “Thanks for giving me your time today, Bokuto-san.”

“Anytime! I love your home, Akaashi!” Bokuto extends his arms and envelops Akaashi into a hug with his entire frame. He’s warm, and he can feel his temperature against his skin. He smells of home.

“You’re always welcome here, Koutarou-kun.” Akaashi’s mother pats him. “Come over anytime you want.”

Bokuto realises, as he’s walking home, that he’s never invited Akaashi over to stay at his house before.

And he’s reminded that it’s for the best, when he enters the kitchen without thinking.

“What were you doing until this hour?! Have you even opened a book today?” His mother welcomes him home with a lecture. “Do you think I raised you so that you could slack off and be a failure?”

“I was with Akaashi at the movies. I told you before I left.”

“And you come home at this hour?! What is wrong with you?” His mother angrily sets down the bowls of rice on the table. “Do you think you’ll graduate high school like this?”

Bokuto’s lip trembles. “Look, I’m trying. I won’t fail my classes just because I went out for one day. Can you please not scream at me today?”

He doesn’t know what prompted him to talk back to his mother. He’s going to get it now, surely.
But he’s had a good day, and he isn’t going to ruin it by taking everything thrown at him.

“You can’t do anything on your own! Until you learn how to become independent, I don’t want to hear any backtalk from you.” Her tone is biting, and Bokuto flinches. “I shouldn’t have been so soft to you. You deserve worse.”

Bokuto shakes his head. It’s not true. He shouldn’t be treated worse. He’d done everything he’d been asked to. He doesn’t deserve to be punished for going out with his friend.

“I feed and clothe you, and this is what I get in return?! I didn’t ask for a failure in my house, using up resources like they’re cheap! You’re always so ungrateful for everything we give you!”

“I won’t eat dinner, then.” Bokuto stares at the floor, the smell of cooked rice filling the atmosphere. “If I’m burdening you guys that much. I ate at Akaashi’s, anyway.”

Something flashes in the corner of Bokuto’s eye, and hits him on the side of his face. The sudden shock and pain is followed by a sharp \textit{crash}, and a shatter of ceramic onto the floor.

He cries out, and the small bowl of rice is broken to pieces beside him. “It hurts,” he retorts, picking up the shards of the shattered bowl. He doesn’t understand why he gets a bowl thrown at him. He isn’t burdening them.

“Stop acting like we’re trying to kill you! They’re going to think I’m \textit{starving} you! Have you no shame? Walking into someone’s house and acting like a disgusting pig!”

Bokuto turns away, biting his lip. He continues to pick up the broken fragments, gathering the rice in his hands. He’s wasted perfectly good food, like the waste of space he is.

“Well? Aren’t you going to clean up the rice?” His mother yells, and he quickens his pace. “Do you want to pick up another bowl from the floor?!”

“I’m sorry,” Bokuto apologizes, making himself smaller on the floor. He carries the shards to the rubbish bin, disposing of them swiftly. He sweeps the rice on the floor with his palm, intending to throw it out as well.

“Then eat the rice you wasted. Words don’t mean anything unless you show it.”

Bokuto’s eyes widen in disbelief. “What?” She can’t be serious. “This?”

He waits a few moments, and realises that she’s completely expecting him to do it. He’s disgusted. He doesn’t want to do it. He shouldn’t have to do something so humiliating, so degrading.

With a deep inhale, Bokuto forces his eyes closed and shoves a handful of rice onto his mouth. \textit{Don’t think}, he repeats to himself like a mantra. He focuses on swallowing the mouthful, but no sooner than he attempts to push the rice to the back of his throat, he feels something sharp inside his mouth.

He coughs out the rice and tiny specks of ceramic from his mouth, flecked with blood. A bitter metallic taste fills his mouth underneath his tongue, from where the shard cut him inside his mouth. It stings, and he presses his palm to his mouth.

“Can’t you ever do anything right? You’re always making a mess, it’s disgusting!”

Bokuto expects another violent outburst, instinctively covering his face with his arms. He catches sight of a mug in his mother’s hand, with a vaguely familiar design. It’s splattered with cheap paint,
crude illustrations and the wonky letters “Mom” drawn onto it.

It’s the mug he decorated for her in kindergarten, for Mother’s Day.

“No!”

Bokuto doesn’t stop himself from leaping towards it, before the memories are in pieces on the floor. He grabs the mug, ripping it from her hands. He doesn’t care about the consequences of his actions. It’s his mug, filled with happiness.

“Who do you think you are?! Stop acting like a rude brat, this instant!”

A sharp-sounding slap is delivered to his right cheek. He only grips the mug tighter, holding it towards his chest. “Not this, please! Anything but this!” He’s hit, again and again. He doesn’t care.

Dull pain. It’s in his shoulder, his face, his side. He clutches his mug desperately, like a drowning man would grip a buoyancy aid. The violence eventually dies down, and he inspects the mug to make sure it’s doing fine.

He takes the mug up to his room, placing it carefully into his clothes drawer. He knows it’ll never be used again.

Bokuto’s throat constricts, and his eyes start burning. He climbs onto his bed, lip wobbling, and presses his face into his pillow. That way, he almost doesn’t notice that he’s crying.

He whimpers, sobbing angrily at the unfairness of it all. He’s humiliated, disgusted, violated. He shouldn’t be bleeding from trying to make up for his mistakes. None of this should be happening. Somebody should be appalled. Somebody should help him.

Bokuto is good at muffling his cries. He isn’t allowed to do that. He shouldn’t be heard. He’s overdramatic. He bothers everyone around him. Even Akaashi.

His thoughts spiral out of control, leaving him in the centre of a hurricane full of bitter emotions. His shoulders heave violently, leaving him breathless and his pillow stained with tears.

Bokuto wonders if Akaashi’s family would hate him too, if they knew him for the annoying, ungrateful vermin that he was. If his own parents think so lowly of him, surely everyone else would share their views.

He knows he’s difficult to love, with his rowdy, obnoxious personality. His parents are neither of those things. He must be defective, an inconvenience. But he finds it hard not to cry, not to pity himself.

He’s upset, and it’s one of the few things that can’t be taken away from him. No matter how unloveable he is.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment u dick bagels
Don't Touch Where It Stings

Chapter Summary

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi reaches around Bokuto to pat his back gently. “Please tell me what’s upsetting you. I might not be able to make it go away, but I’ll always be on your side.”

“What do you mean? I’m not upset! I’m really happy to see you again!” Bokuto tells a blatant lie. His voice cracks, unable to carry his pain any longer. “I’m fine, Akaashi. Really, it’s nothing.”

Chapter Notes

I UPDATED WITHIN THE ONE MONTH FRAME!! PRAISE ME!!
also its 12am I have to be up in like 6 hours so dont count on me to have perfect grammar rn OKAYBIE ENJOYYY!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akaashi understands that Bokuto isn’t his usual self, when he comes into school with sunken, puffy eyes and shaking hands.

“Akaashi!”

Bokuto lifts both hands to wave at him, grinning from ear to ear. He has glossy eyes and endearing dimples when he smiles, but it’s not happiness. It’s deception.

“Summer vacation went so fast! God, I really don’t wanna go back to class…” Bokuto groans, but Akaashi knows he’s saying less than he wants to. Which is unusual. He usually talks about more things than he’s asked.

Akaashi blinks, staring hard at Bokuto. “Bokuto-san, is there something you want to tell me?”

Bokuto feigns confusion, raising his brows quizzically and frowning. “What do you mean? Oh, I get it! Hug!” He breaks into a grin, spreading his arms open and wrapping Akaashi into a tight embrace. “I missed ya, Akaashi! We can finally go to school together again.”

The string is about to snap. Bokuto is begging for help, for silent comfort. He wants to let something out, but there’s a reason he’s stopping himself. He’s been holding it in, for longer than he can bear.

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi reaches around Bokuto to pat his back gently. “Please tell me what’s upsetting you. I might not be able to make it go away, but I’ll always be on your side.”

“What do you mean? I’m not upset! I’m really happy to see you again!” Bokuto tells a blatant lie. His voice cracks, unable to carry his pain any longer. “I’m fine, Akaashi. Really, it’s nothing.”
Akaashi rubs his fingers across his face. “You don’t have to tell me, if it’s something private. But don’t pretend everything’s okay, when it’s not. It’ll hurt you, and I don’t want that.”

Bokuto presses his eyes into Akaashi’s shoulder, and Akaashi picks up on a small sob escaping his mouth. He doesn’t say anything, but Akaashi can feel the choked emotions rising in his chest, bubbles of raw pain forming in his eyes.

Short, soft whimpers come out of him one after the other. His fingers tremble and grip Akaashi’s shirt. The exhales evolve into vocal cries, and soon after, Bokuto is sobbing uncontrollably.

“I know, Bokuto-san. It’s all right.” Akaashi rubs up and down Bokuto’s back with his palm, and it only breaks the dam further. “You don’t have to hold it in. Let it all out.”

Bokuto doesn’t stop himself this time. His cries are loud, capturing Akaashi’s attention. The attention he was in need of, given to by nobody. Unspoken words twisting into pained screams. Crying and blubbering, in his language of pain.

Tears drip from his eyes, rolling like beads of honey. Akaashi whispers hushed reassurances, his shoulder growing wetter with each passing second. “Would you like to go someplace else?”

Bokuto lifts his face and nods. His eyes are swollen, and his face is drenched, tear streaks marking his cheeks. Akaashi takes his hand and walks over to behind the bike sheds, sitting him down on the grass.

Bokuto stares at the ground and sniffs, hiccuping miserably through tears. “So,” Akaashi wipes at his eyes with his long fingers, “are you ready to talk about what happened?”

“Akaashi, I…” Bokuto cuts himself off with a wail, tears dripping onto the grass.

Akaashi lays a hand onto Bokuto’s, as if to suck out his pain. “Slowly. I’ve got you. You don’t have to cry alone anymore.”

Bokuto doesn’t stop sobbing convulsively, shoulders heaving with every breath. His way of crying is like a young baby, distressed and forceful. Akaashi is glad he’s doing it in front of him, at least. He can hear him, that way. He’s muffled his cries with his pillow enough times.

“I don’t… Maybe…” Bokuto vocalizes something Akaashi doesn’t get, and shakes his head. “I don’t know for real, but… I don’t think I’m good enough.”

Akaashi’s eyes widen in horror. “What do you mean by that, Bokuto-san?” He sees Bokuto smiling uncertainly, eyes watery with tears. “You’re good enough. Look at yourself. You’re the ace.”

“I know. It’s not like that. I know I’m good enough, but… I’m not.” Bokuto wipes his cheeks. “I’m not good enough for them.” He emphasizes.

“Who’s them?” Akaashi gasps in a moment of clarity. Someone, someone with power over his mental state, is telling him he isn’t worth anything. Akaashi isn’t going to stand for any of that. “Is someone telling you that? Who is it, Bokuto-san?” He questions him, not relenting. He needs to know, as his best friend and a decent human being.

Bokuto curls into himself, like he doesn’t want to believe it. “My mom… and dad. They don’t like me, I think.” His face sinks into his knees, and Akaashi puts an arm around him in sympathy.

The sight of Bokuto upset is unbearable. “Bokuto-san, that’s horrible. How long has this been going on for? Have they hurt you in any way? Are you comfortable talking about this?”
Kuroo was right. Akaashi should have intervened sooner, and Bokuto’s paying for it. He doesn’t know the details of Kuroo’s abuse, but someone had to have noticed and helped him. Otherwise, he would be in a completely different situation.

Bokuto shakes his head, but appreciates Akaashi’s contact. He leans into his arm and soaks up his warmth. “I don’t know. They liked me in middle school! I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.” His eyes are desperate, dependent. “I broke a bowl. Maybe that’s why. Or because I failed my math exam.”

Akaashi nods, stroking Bokuto’s hair. He doesn’t interrupt, listening to what Bokuto needs to say. He’s been silenced for way too long.

“I think they see me as a failure. And lazy. I also got sick after training camp, and that cost money.” Bokuto continues, “I eat their food without permission, so that makes them angry too.”

“That’s no excuse,” Akaashi murmurs, grabbing Bokuto’s shoulders. “That’s no excuse for you to be hurt. You’re not getting beaten up, are you? I’m worried for you.”

Bokuto shrugs, almost defeatedly. “I guess. But I’m not getting beaten up, Akaashi! The worst that’s happened is just curry being thrown on me. And it wasn’t even that warm!” He rolls up his sleeve, and a slightly reddened patch on his skin catches Akaashi’s eye. “See? It’s not that bad!”

“Why?”

Akaashi can only ask one question. He can’t imagine it, the reason behind the unfair violence. He wants to ask them himself, why they think hurting him in such a way is acceptable to them. Why they choose to hurt the angel they’ve received.

Bokuto flashes another smile at Akaashi. “I’m okay. Really! Don’t look so worried, Akaashi!”

“Do your parents give you enough to eat?”

It’s clear that Bokuto isn’t fine, and it’s worrying how many questions Bokuto has unclear answers to. He shouldn’t be debating on how many different ways his parents hurt him in.

“I make my own food, most of the time. I think my cooking got better, because of that!” Bokuto explains lightheartedly. “And honestly, it’s better if I cook for myself. There’s less arguments that way.”

“Like when they threw curry at you? What happened afterwards?” Akaashi tries to draw more information out of him. There has to be more to the story.

Bokuto huffs. “They just sent me to my room. They didn’t want to see me after that.” He doesn’t change his expression, clearly underestimating how big of a deal his family issues are.

Akaashi refuses to believe Bokuto’s parents are normal. They aren’t. No matter what excuse Bokuto uses to justify it, he’s sure he’s in the right. “And what if you needed the bathroom?”

“I don’t know. It never happened.”

Akaashi’s blood is boiling. He can’t take Bokuto away from his parents immediately. His injuries aren’t life-threatening, or even noticeable on his skin, but that shouldn’t matter. He’s being humiliated and mistreated. That should be enough for someone to step in.

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi’s voice trembles with rage, “this is serious. This isn’t normal. This is
abuse.” He says adamantly.

“It’s not!” Bokuto shakes his head, his volume rivalling Akaashi’s. “I’m not being abused! Abuse is what happened to Kuroo. It’s not the same as…”

“Listen. Just because someone had it worse, that doesn’t mean your experience is less painful.” Akaashi holds Bokuto’s hand, gripping it tight. “You need to tell someone about this. An adult.”

Bokuto’s head snaps up. “No! Don’t tell anyone, Akaashi! I don’t want volleyball to be taken from me!”

He starts to tear up again, and Akaashi pats his shoulder. “We need to do something. If your parents are hurting you for no good reason, that needs to stop.” Bokuto wipes his tears, gaze shifting downwards.

“But I love them. They’re still my parents. I don’t want to be separated from them. Where else am I meant to go?”

Akaashi can tell that Bokuto genuinely loves his parents, however horrible they are. He’s an only child, without any siblings to lean on. He’s also never talked about his relatives to Akaashi before, which really says something.

“We’ll think about that together. For now, we need to tell someone.”

Bokuto still looks unsure, but nods hesitantly. “I’ll try to do that. But don’t tell anyone without me, Akaashi. I don’t want people talking about it when I’m not there.”

“I understand that. But the one thing I won’t be doing is sitting here and watching you suffer.” He reaches in for a hug, and Bokuto rubs his nose against his shirt. Akaashi, for once, doesn’t mind Bokuto staining his clothes with his tears. “Just remember that I’m always here for you, Bokuto-san. You can trust me.”

Akaashi stares at his classical Japanese textbook. He honest to god wishes the board of education would wake up, and abolish the outdated subjects. He’s been writing answers in little boxes for an hour now, and it’s already eleven in the night.

Frankly, he doesn’t care about the poetic thoughts some old man or woman in the Heian Era had, or how to read entire blocks of text in kanji with unreadable captions that don’t even help. The Genji Tales would have perhaps interested him, if the Japanese was actually understandable to a high school student living in the twenty-first century.

The only thing he can relate to is how beauty is described. Centuries back, there seems to be different words for ‘beautiful’ depending on what kind of beauty it is. Delicate, elegant, pure. They all fit him.

Maybe he’ll never understand how amazing classical literature is, but there are words to describe Bokuto that he’s never heard of before, and he appreciates that. If the folks back in the era of The Pillow Book saw Bokuto, they’d surely use all of those words that don’t exist anymore to describe him.

Thinking about Bokuto makes Akaashi sleepy. He’s his morning and night, daydreams and worst nightmares. Bokuto Koutarou is that kind of presence, to him. It’s not a high school crush, or infatuation. He’s falling deep into the lake, every inch increasing the longing.
It’s not dramatic, like an adolescent romance manga. It isn’t what’s seen as normal, like a boy and a girl developing love for each other. But it’s how his life works, and like every teen around him, he dislikes being lonely. Bokuto fills the longing in him, only to stray away further, leaving him wanting more.

If anyone’s dependent on Bokuto, it’s him. Bokuto can manage just fine without him. He’s had so much in his field of vision, even before Akaashi came into it. He always looks forward, for new ways to be fulfilled. Akaashi, on the other hand, has had Bokuto on centre stage ever since he first saw him in middle school.

Akaashi doesn’t believe in destiny, but he thinks he’s come as close as humanly possible to it.

Just when he’s about to pass out, his phone rings beside his head. He groans, knowing only one person who would call him this late. It has to be important, if he’s calling at midnight. He presses the accept call button.

“Hello, Bokuto-san?” To his surprise, Akaashi hears sobbing coming from the other end of the phone. “Are you all right? Did they do something to you?” He doesn’t get a response, only choked cries and sniffing.

“Kenma?”

Akaashi freezes. He isn’t talking to Bokuto, he only realises then. He glances at his phone screen. The name displayed is **Kuroo Tetsurou.** “This is Akaashi. Is everything all right, Kuroo-san?”

“Shit. Um, I really didn’t mean to call you. Sorry.” Kuroo apologizes, his voice strained. “I’ll hang up. It’s late.” He’s still crying, and Akaashi doesn’t have the heart to end the call right there.

“If it’s all right with you, I’ll listen.” Akashi reassures him. Kuroo doesn’t hang up on him, and mumbles something through tears. He calms down enough to talk, after a few minutes of crying into his phone.

“I had a nightmare.”

Akaashi is taken aback. “A nightmare?” he repeats, aware that he sounds clueless. He’d expected something like the loss of a family member, or the pressure of third year exams.

“Yeah. It sounds kind of dumb, I know.” Kuroo chuckles, and blows his nose. “It happens sometimes. Nothing new, it’s a thing that’s been going on for like, a decade.”

“A decade?” Akaashi’s eyes widen with disbelief. “Have you gotten help for it? Is there something causing it, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Through the phone, Akaashi almost feels Kuroo’s smile against his cheek. He seems rather nonchalant, after recovering from his crying fit. It’s the Kuroo he always sees, constructed carefully for acquaintances like Akaashi.

“Mm-hm. I should probably tell you, anyway.” Kuroo says, and Akaashi wonders what would have happened if he hadn’t picked up the phone. “So, remember when I told you that my mom used to… well, treat me bad?”

The information constructs inside Akaashi’s head. “Was the nightmare about that?”

“Yeah.” Kuroo admits. “I was dreaming of it. The stuff she said, and the way she used to hit me where nobody would see. I couldn’t really tell anyone about it, since I was pretty young and dumb.
You might not know, but I used to be like that too."

Akaashi can’t bring himself to shoot a wisecrack at him. “Are you all right now, Kuroo-san? I mean… are you safer? You’re not getting hurt anymore, are you?”

“My parents separated back when I was eight.” Kuroo laughs. “I mean, it did take a broken wrist to make that happen.”

“She broke your wrist??” Akaashi yells, momentarily forgetting that he’s in the middle of the night.

Kuroo lets out a low hum. “Well, I did let it happen. It shouldn’t have happened, but I thought…. Maybe, someone would help me, if something that bad happened. Ya know? I thought, that’ll teach her to be more careful before she hits me.”

Akaashi listens to him, a strange horror dwelling in his chest. Kuroo doesn’t seem to notice how much he’s sharing, with someone he barely speaks to outside of Bokuto. But he lets him continue, without a word.

“Well, it turns out that breaking a kid’s wrist is pretty serious stuff. My dad cried a lot. I didn’t plan that far ahead, but he moved back in with his parents, and I met Kenma.”

Kuroo finishes speaking, and Akaashi swallows the urge to swear. “I… didn’t know. That shouldn’t have happened, Kuroo-san. That’s just horrible.”

“Well, you’ve heard the worst parts. There aren’t much more interesting bits, sadly. You just unlocked Kuroo Tetsurou’s Tragic Past, Akaashi. Consider that as an achievement.”

For someone who called Akaashi crying in the middle of the night, Kuroo seems rather casual about the horrifying abuse he’s suffered through. “Are you feeling better?” He asks, for a lack of better things to say.

Kuroo laughs again. “Oh, definitely. My wrist is doing fine, and I think you can see that I’m not emotionally unstable anymore. And it’s been, like, ten fucking years. I can laugh about this shit now. Tell that to eight-year-old Tetsurou.”

“But… does this still happen frequently? Are you holding up all right?”

Akaashi feels like he’s speaking like a therapist, but he can’t help it. He feels Kuroo’s pain, almost as if he’s touching him. Something about his demeanour keeps him from maintaining his pokerface attitude.

“I used to wake up screaming and crying a lot back in elementary school. But it’s gone from every night, to once a week, to maybe twice a year. I guess you could say I’ve… improved.” Kuroo sighs. “But it always hurts the same.”

Akaashi wants to reach out to Kuroo and hug him. He needs one, more than any time else. “It’s all right, Kuroo-san. You’re not going to be hurt anymore. You’re safe.” He repeats, comforting him the best he can. “Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“Yeah. Nobody should be abused by their parents, Akaashi. It just… sucks.”

Akaashi frowns. “This isn’t about you anymore, is it?” He remembers what Kuroo said to him in the baths during the Shinzen training camp.
"Maybe." Kuroo mutters mysteriously. "I want to help him too. We need to get him somewhere safe, before it’s too late."

"But it’ll be hard. It’s not… the kind of violence people expect in these cases. And he’s begging me not to tell anyone without his consent," Akaashi says, "I want to respect his wishes, but I don’t want to see him upset anymore. I’m stuck on what to do."

"I’ll call Bokuto and talk to him. It’s not your job only to make sure he’s all right."

With Kuroo on his side, Akaashi suddenly feels more confident about extending a hand to Bokuto. He has someone with the same goal as him now, to help his best friend.

"All right, I gotta go and sleep now. Goodnight."

Kuroo ends the call, and Akaashi locks his phone. He yawns, climbing into his bed and snuggling under the covers. The sleepiness overflows all of a sudden, and he falls asleep, comforted by Kuroo’s presence.

"Bokuto, go spike!"

Akaashi tosses, and Bokuto hits with all his might. The ball lands on the opposite side of the court, right at the edge. The whistle is blown, and the linesman signals that the spike is within the lines.

"Hell yeah! Hey hey hey!" Bokuto shouts his catchphrase, fist pumping the air. "I’m the strongest!"

It’s one of Bokuto’s good days, and the team is tasked with keeping it that way. When Bokuto is at his best, he’s truly unstoppable. Everyone admits that, and know exactly what to do.

"Cool as always, owl head!"

"You’re amazing, Bokuto!"

"President of the world!"

Bokuto nods enthusiastically, waving his hands as if he’s giving love to an imaginary crowd. "I’m the world’s ace!" He praises himself, lifting himself to a grander scale each time. "Follow me, everyone!"

As over-the-top as it seems, Akaashi likes it that way. It’s infinitely better than when Bokuto used to dab after each spike. "Bokuto-san, get another one in." He tosses again, to Bokuto’s spot.

To his surprise, the ball plops onto the floor, bouncing once and rolling off. His teammates on the other side of the net cheer, considering it a lucky toss miss. But Akaashi notices the look of disbelief on Bokuto’s face.

Bokuto clenches and unclenches his hand, as if to test something. Akaashi winces when he tries to pull him aside. Pain shoots into his shoulder, travelling up to his neck. It burns sharply, like a sudden cramp. "Bokuto-san, are you all right?"

"Akaashi." Bokuto attempts to move his arm, only to let out a groan and put it back down. "I can’t lift my arm."

"What?"
A crowd begins to form beside them, and the coach and managers head over to them with a box full of medical equipment. “Did you hurt it spiking? What happened to it?” Bokuto flinches when hands are on his shoulder, tears of anguish forming in the corners of his eyes.

“It started hurting out of nowhere,” Bokuto says, as Shirofuku applies a cold sheet to his shoulder. “It just doesn’t go up. I can’t spike like this. What am I going to do, if I can’t spike?!”

Bokuto’s breathing starts to become uneven. His mood is rapidly descending into rock bottom, and panic sets in. “What if I can’t spike anymore? What’ll happen if I can’t?” He desperately cries out, rubbing his numbed shoulder.

“Bokuto-san, please take a deep breath. Getting worked up won’t make anything better.” Akaashi guides him through his panic, holding his non-dominant hand. “You could have just strained something. Don’t try and test it out, it’ll hurt worse.”

Bokuto swallows, words silent on his tongue. “You… you’re right, Akaashi.” He grins wearily, giving Akaashi a one-armed hug. “I’ll be responsible and go home. I’m sure I’ll be fine tomorrow!”

Konoha ruffles Bokuto’s hair. “Yeah. Rest up and come back as our ace, Bokuto!” His words seem to have a positive impact on him, and Bokuto attempts to wave at the team with an ‘owch!’.

“Be careful, Bokuto! Make sure to get plenty of rest!” The coach calls after him, as Bokuto hops out of the gymnasium. Uneasiness still sits within Akaashi, and he makes a run for it outside, but Bokuto is already nowhere to be found.

Sarukui pats his back sympathetically, tossing a ball over to him. “He’ll be fine, Akaashi. He’s our ace! We have to believe in him. He’s strong.”

Akaashi nods hesitantly. Though Sarukui isn’t wrong- Bokuto’s strength is acknowledged by teammates and opponents alike- nobody can keep the strength up for an absurd amount of time. He can bench press the weights Akaashi struggles to pick up. But he can’t hold it there forever.

So he texts him, once practice is over. Truthfully, Akaashi doesn’t want Bokuto to go home early. The less time he spends in his toxic home, the better. He should have told him to come to his place. But then, how would he explain that to his teammates? And…

“Oh, hello there, Akaashi-chan.”

Just as he finishes sending Bokuto a text out of concern, Akaashi hears a disturbingly familiar voice breathing against his neck. His eyes widen as his head snaps back, and a group of students stand menacingly behind him.

He recognizes one of them. Tsuda. Also known to him as the homophobic jackass.

“Leave me alone.” Akaashi snaps a biting remark at them, turning his heels. He doesn’t have the time or patience to deal with them, especially when he’s trying to help Bokuto.

But it isn’t as simple as that. His phone is ripped from his fingers, and it’s unlocked. “What do we have here? Some sweet messages for your boyfriend?”

Akaashi attempts to snatch the phone from Tsuda’s hands, but his reflexes aren’t as polished as a libero’s, and his arm flails pathetically in the air. “Give it back! What’s your problem?!”

“What’s your problem?” Another student mimics him, treating him as if he’s an infant. “I think it’s
that you like being fucked by gay dudes. I bet you want your nice Bokuto-senpai to pound your ass."

“Fuck off, and give that back!” Akaashi’s cheeks burn, and he repeatedly tells himself that he shouldn’t let it get to him. They’re looking for a reaction. He shouldn’t give them the satisfaction. Still, it’s humiliating.

Two arms drag him back against the wall, preventing him from reaching for his phone again. “Bokuto-san, are you all right? Have you been resting well? I’m good, Akaashi! You’re the best!” Tsuda starts to read out his messages, and Akaashi’s blood boils. “Ugh, disgusting. It makes me want to throw up.”

“Then don’t read it. It’s my privacy.” Akaashi kicks against his holds, but he isn’t nearly strong enough. If only he’d trained harder with the weights during training camp.

Akaashi hopes that he hasn’t said anything about being gay or bisexual within the past few days. If Bokuto is outed, he doesn’t know how he’ll ever gain his trust back again. It’s the last thing he needs right now, on top of everything else.

“If you’re really gay, does that mean you’d get off on dudes touching you?” Before anyone even lays a hand on him, Akaashi twists violently, but is subdued with a strong pinch to his chest. “Well? Aren’t you going to prove to us that you’re a little slut?”

Akaashi is close to tears, but he swallows them back down with sheer force of rage. “You’re disgusting. What’s wrong with you, so interested in another guy’s relationships? That’s about as gay as anyone can be.”

Apparently, being called the very thing he’s trying so hard to insult doesn’t make Tsuda happy. “Shut your mouth, faggot! I could do anything to you right now, and put your favourite Bokuto-san on video call.”

Before Akaashi can retort, he’s knocked to the ground with a fist to his shoulder. His entire body aches with the force of the landing, and the hard asphalt bruises his skin. He’s in a horrible predicament, one that Bokuto won’t be able to pull him out of. He’d shoo him off if he came anywhere near him. His shoulder is injured, and it doesn’t need to be damaged even further.

But he’s scared. He wants someone to come and get him. Everything hurts, and his heart is beating into his throat. He stays still, glaring at the pebbles on the asphalt, and a sharp pain stabs his back. A heel is digging into his back, stepping on him mercilessly.

Akaashi winces, letting out an audible gasp. “Maybe that’ll teach you not to argue with us.” A voice sneers above him, and his phone is inches from his face. “Why don’t you say hello to the camera?”

“Get off me!”

In less than a second, Akaashi’s hand is grabbed roughly, while he’s pinned to the ground. “Akaashi, I heard you’re a setter.” The voice is in his ear, sticky like honey. “Your fingers are really important, aren’t they?”

Akaashi writhes in horror. “Don’t!” His fingers are exactly what he needs, to become the setter Bokuto needs. He can’t afford to even clip his nails the wrong way, never mind getting injured.

He squeezes his eyes shut, trembling. His breathing quickens. His fingers, they can’t be broken. Not before the Spring High. There’s nothing he can do, overpowered by multiple people. It’s
unfair. He doesn’t deserve this.

“Oh, Akaashi! Are you all right?!”

Tears fill Akaashi’s eyes, when he recognizes the familiar voice as Sarukui’s. He gazes above his line of vision, and he can see multiple pairs of legs dashing towards him. Judging by their footwear, they’re all third years. Relief floods into him, as the force pinning him to the ground falters.

Akaashi doesn’t miss his chance. He wriggles out of the uncomfortable position, dashing past the group of students and over to his teammates. “Konoha-san?” He stares above at Konoha, who smiles at him to tell him everything’s all right.

“Yup. We came to pick you up. Everything’s gonna be okay, Akaashi.” Konoha and Sarukui push Akaashi behind them, shielding him from further harm.

Washio marches up to the group of students, who were attacking Akaashi moments ago. The team know how warm-hearted he is, but to a bunch of unsuspecting students, Washio can be intimidating. An angry Washio is a force to be reckoned with.

Without a word, Washio grabs Akaashi’s phone from Tsuda’s hands. He murmurs something Akaashi doesn’t hear, and hands the phone back to him. “Komi,” he calls the libero over to him, “Get an adult. This isn’t something we can solve ourselves.”

Komi nods, and scampers off to find a teacher. “I’ll meet you guys at the infirmary.” Akaashi blinks in confusion, until he stares down at himself. His knees are bruised and banged up, blood oozing out and coating the skin. Pain stabs his back when he tries to adjust his posture.

“Come on. You don’t look too good.” Konoha wraps an arm around Akaashi’s shoulder. Akaashi winces, the pain kicking in all at once as his heart rate slows. “Hey, you okay? Is anything broken?”

Akaashi manages to shake his head no. “I don’t think so… Thank you.” He drags his feet as they walk to the infirmary, tears drying up in his eyes. “I thought I was done for.”

They arrive to an empty room, full of supplies. The nurse has already gone home, and it was just three male high school students. Akaashi sat on the bed, staring at the first aid box.

“Are you hurting anywhere?” Sarukui asks, dipping a clean piece of gauze into water and cleaning the dirt around Akaashi’s wounds on his legs. “Those guys were a bunch of assholes. I’m glad we found you before anything worse happened.”

Akaashi rolls up his t-shirt at the back, and both Sarukui and Konoha’s faces contort. “Wow, that’s a really nasty bruise you got there. We should probably put something cold onto it.”

Konoha finds a packet of large cold compress sheets, and presses them onto Akaashi’s skin. Akaashi tenses, but relaxes soon after. The chill that soothes his skin is unbelievably pleasing, and a soft sigh comes out of his mouth.

“Akaashi, if you don’t mind us asking a few questions…”

Konoha and Sarukui tower over him, and Akaashi feels an entirely different chill run down his spine. He’s extremely grateful that Washio and Komi aren’t there to intimidate him, too.

“This isn’t the first time, is it?” Sarukui crosses his arms menacingly. His usual smile- or neutral
expression, he doesn’t know- is there on his face, but his eyes aren’t laughing, at all.

Akaashi averts his gaze guiltily. “I… It was never this bad.” He curses himself for not being able to explain himself properly. He’s trapped himself in his own grave. “I didn’t think this would happen.”

Konoha doesn’t look the slightest bit amused. “You’re both hiding something from us, you and Bokuto. Do you think we didn’t notice?” He sighs. “Can you not trust us enough to tell us?”

“I-” Akaashi bites his lip. “Sorry.”

“We don’t want to hear apologies, you idiot!” Sarukui exclaims, raising his voice. He never does. Akaashi is in deep, deep shit. “We want you to rely on us, Akaashi. We’re your teammates! You shouldn’t feel bad about asking for help! Would you have told us about this, if we didn’t see it happen?”

Akaashi doesn’t even know how to answer him. He’s completely right. Akaashi had been so adamant on helping Bokuto, he’d been forgetting his growing concerns, casting them to the side to worry about later.

“It’s okay, Akaashi. We’re always going to be here for you.”

Konoha and Sarukui both wrap an arm around Akaashi’s shoulder, on each side of him. Love blossoms inside Akaashi’s chest. He’d forgotten how warm his team was, how everyone always cared for each other. He’d missed it, too.

“Thank you.” Akaashi wipes his eyes. “Thank you both. I’m glad I have teammates like you.” He’s truly glad he came to Fukurodani, after that fated day. His second family sits with him now, carrying him through it all. He’s truly blessed, just like that.

Chapter End Notes

COMMENT PLEASE OK
DICKBAGEL.....
Swim, across the boundary

Chapter Summary

“Akaashi, hold on! I’ll be there soon!”
He slips on his shoes and slams the door behind him. His steps are light and his strides are large. He runs, bolts, exhausts his lung capacity.

***
The rumours. Akaashi had been receiving numerous threats and insults, just because someone spread the rumour that he was into guys. That he was into Bokuto. And he never showed how much it affected him. He was strong, nonchalant, the whole time. Bokuto didn’t see it coming.
“I’m sorry,” Bokuto whispers, “I couldn’t help you when you needed it.”

Chapter Notes

um, idk how i wrote 8k but take my suffering, thanks.
warning, triggering content!!!!!!!
there’s a lot of hurt and mental unwellness!
stay safe, okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few hours after he gets home, Bokuto’s shoulder pain gradually lessens. He hates having to stay off practice. He’s made to fly, not to sit in his room sad that he can’t. He pulls on a t-shirt, wincing at the twist of pain it brings.

Rolling his shoulder hurts. He eases it into movement, slowly moving it up and down. He’ll be fine by tomorrow, and head back to practice. He can’t afford to slack off, right before his last Spring High.

His phone vibrates under his pillow. It’s from Sarukui.

7:23pm Saru

Bokuto, Akaashi’s hurt. He’s at home now.

Bokuto shoves his phone in his pocket, swinging off his bed in a hurry. He cringes and rubs at his shoulder, but doesn’t slow down in his movements. Akaashi is hurt. He’ll never forgive himself if he isn’t there for him.

“I have to go!” Bokuto yells through the house, thundering down the stairs two steps at a time. He leaps from the fifth step straight to the ground, softening the landing with his uninjured arm.

“Akaashi, hold on! I’ll be there soon!”
He slips on his shoes and slams the door behind him. His steps are light and his strides are large.
He runs, bolts, exhausts his lung capacity.

When he reaches Akaashi’s house, he knocks as quietly as he can, in his adrenaline-pumped state. “Akaashi-san? Excuse me for intruding, it’s Bokuto!” His voice is shaky, strained from exhaustion. His mouth is dry and he tastes blood. He feels like needles are slowly pushing into his back, prodding at his nerves.

“Koutarou?”

It’s Akaashi’s younger brother, Kakeru, who answers the door for him.

“I heard- Akaashi, he’s hurt-” Bokuto explains, panting. “I wanted to see that he’s okay.”

“Oh, sure. Come on in.” Kakeru opens the door for him, and Bokuto glances around inside, looking for Akaashi. “Nii-chan’s in the living room.”

Bokuto nods a thank you, kicking off his shoes and hastily heading towards Akaashi. “Koutarou-kun, is that you?” He hears Akaashi’s mother walk down the hallway.

“Is Akaashi all right?”

Akaashi’s mother nods. “He said someone just… just did it to him, for no reason. If you have any idea what happened-”

Bokuto shakes his head. “I went home early, so I didn’t know… I wish I hadn’t.”

He enters the sitting room, and Akaashi stares at him as he walks through the door. “Bokuto-san? Why are you here? Is your shoulder-”

There are band aids on his face and knees, as well as streaks of mud and blood. Bokuto’s chest hurts from seeing Akaashi like that. “Hey, who did this to you? Are you all right? You haven’t broken any bones, right?”

Akaashi nods. “I’m fine, Bokuto-san. Is your shoulder fine?”

“Who did this to you, Akaashi?” Bokuto trembles with rage. “I’ll ask Sarukui or Konoha if I need to. You have to tell me who did this.”

Akaashi frowns, as Bokuto sits beside him on the light green sofa. “You have to promise me not to start any fights. You were ready to throw hands last time.”

“Well, my best friend got hurt! Of course I’ll be mad!” Bokuto exclaims. “But I won’t try and beat them up, I promise.”

Akaashi places an arm around Bokuto’s shoulder, and Bokuto leans into him, unable to return the gesture from the shoulder pain. “The ones spreading the rumours decided to beat me up. But the third years helped me before anything happened.”

The rumours. Akaashi had been receiving numerous threats and insults, just because someone spread the rumour that he was into guys. That he was into Bokuto. And he never showed how much it affected him. He was strong, nonchalant, the whole time. Bokuto didn’t see it coming.

“I’m sorry,” Bokuto whispers, “I couldn’t help you when you needed it.”

“Not your fault, Bokuto-san. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”
But tears gather in Bokuto’s eyes. He wanted to protect Akaashi. He wanted to prevent it all from happening. He hates how they’ve already hit Akaashi. He would have never let them do that, if only he were there. If only his shoulder wasn’t smashed up.

“Sorry.” Bokuto hugs Akaashi, laying his hand on his knee. “Sorry, Akaashi.”

Akaashi is the one most dear to him, even more than his parents. He’s the one he tells everything to, and trusts with his life. He’s hurt, because he wasn’t there when he needed him.

“No, please don’t. Please don’t apologize.”

Bokuto nods, gripping Akaashi tighter. They’re together, inseparable. Bokuto will never let it happen again, he swears on the wounds Akaashi has on his face and knees, like scratches on a statue.

He’s something beautiful, that should never be tainted.

Akaashi is something of an art, done with a paintbrush. He moves and breathes, like a carved marble human with life breathed into him.

“Hey, don’t cry. Nii-chan’s fine now. I’m sure mom will give the school absolute hell, too.”

It’s Kakeru, who allows himself to hop onto the couch beside Bokuto and pull him out of his self-blaming trance. He wipes off Bokuto’s tears with his thumbs, patting his shoulder.

“She cried too.” Kakeru whispers to Bokuto and Akaashi. “I didn’t, but Sora did as well. Everyone’s sad about what happened. The bullies are just horrible.”

“Koutarou, I’m glad you came today.”

Akaashi’s mother hands him a cup of warmed-up tea, which Bokuto accepts with gratitude. She seems sad, but she smiles at him, in a way that’s motherly and caring and so many other things all at once.

“There won’t be a next time. But if there is…” Akaashi’s mother leans into Bokuto’s face. She’s dead serious. “We’re going to make sure they never see the light of day. You and me both.”

Akaashi heaves a sigh. “Mom, you can’t just recommend that we use violence.”

She shrugs. Her resolve is strong, unbreakable. “You never know, it might work. I used to play the saxophone in band.”

“That… Really isn’t relevant at all.”

Bokuto grins. It’s a warm family bonding moment. He wishes he were a part of it, really. He’s out of place, like a cuckoo’s child, but he feels at home, with Akaashi’s mother and siblings.

“Koutarou-niichan! Hi!”

Sora, just awake from his nap, clambers onto Bokuto’s lap enthusiastically, bouncing excitedly. Bokuto ruffles Sora’s hair, blowing him a kiss with a hearty laugh. “Heya, Sora! You had a good nap? Hm?”

“Yeah!” Sora flails around excitedly, almost slamming his head into Bokuto’s chin. Akaashi mumbles “Easy, now,” but his energy levels keep rising. “Koutarou! Keiji-nii’s prince!”
Akaashi muffles his laughter into his palm. “Prince? I think you’re overestimating Bokuto-san, here.”

“Meanie!”

The front door clicks open. “I’m home,” Mari says, placing her tote bag onto the floor as she takes off her shoes. “Hey, do we have a guest?”

“Hi, Mari! I’m intruding in your home, sorry!” Bokuto waves at her, lifting Sora off his knees with a “hup”.

Mari’s expression melts into a cool smile. “It’s always nice to have you over.”

Bokuto glances at the clock nervously. It’s almost nine, and it’s been nearly an hour since he’s been engaging in idle chatter with Akaashi’s family. “I… probably need to go. My parents are gonna be worried.”

Akaashi’s mother’s eyes widen. “Oh, gosh. Have you told them you’re here? Do I need to give them a phone call?” She yanks out her phone, before Bokuto can stop her. “They must be worried.”

“No!” Bokuto protests, a little too loudly. He shakes his head. It’s the last thing he wants to happen. “No, it’s fine. I’ve told them. They just expect me back before half nine.”

Although Akaashi’s mother looks slightly unconvinced, she places her phone back into her hoodie pocket and nods. “All right. Make sure to get home before then, all right? Don’t make them worry.”

Bokuto shines a toothy grin. It’s a close call, but Akaashi’s mother hopefully won’t be encountering his parents anytime soon. He can’t imagine what his mother would say, especially if she found out about everything going on at school.

“Bye! Thanks for having me!”

Bokuto hops out of the house, shoving his feet into his shoes and walking with the heels squashed. He’s reluctant to go home, especially after what’s happened within the past few weeks. He’s being punished for many strange reasons, and he can’t question any of it, if he doesn’t want to suffer a worse fate.

A daily routine of hiding under the covers until the screaming passes, and curling up against the wall until the shoving dies down. There’s nothing bad he can think of that he did. He hasn’t been bothering anyone. He’s kept quiet. He hasn’t stolen food.

His parents are waiting outside the door for him. That’s a first, he thinks. Usually, he gets into the house, and his parents are in their room or sitting on the couch. They don’t acknowledge him, which usually lets him head to his room in peace.

“Koutarou, where were you until this hour?”

Bokuto’s mother glares at him. The beating in his heart quickens, noticeably. “I was at Akaashi’s. I said I had to go. He was injured.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just leave whenever you please. Who do you think you are, always doing whatever you please? Have you no sense of shame?”
Bokuto blinks. Disbelief and confusion wash over him. “Huh?” He opens the door and takes off his shoes, almost bumping into his father as he towers over him. “I’m home,” he murmurs.

“Who gave you the right to wander off on your own?”

“I was at Akaashi’s because he was injured. I wanted to help him.”

Bokuto’s father grabs at his collar. He almost stumbles on the step as he’s pulled inside. “And do you think he needed your help? You really think that someone like you-” A finger is pressed into his chest. “-can help other people?”

Bokuto swallows hard. “I just wanted to see if he was okay.” Akaashi’s his best friend. He doesn’t want to be the one that only checks in on him with a text message. His feelings for him are sincere.

“If you want to leave the house so much, leave. And don’t come back until you stop acting like a bitch in heat.” As soon as the words leave his mouth, Bokuto sees red.

“Why are you mad at me?!” Bokuto loses it, at last. He’s had it, pushed over the edge multiple times. “I didn’t do anything wrong! What was I meant to do? What do you get out of screaming at me?”

One moment, he’s talking back to his father. A few seconds later, he’s on the cold hardwood floor, face pressed flat against the ground.

“Don’t answer back!” The force holding him against the floor grows stronger, burning the skin on his cheek. “You’re a disappointment. You can’t help anyone, not even yourself. Don’t even think you’re half as good as anyone.”

Bokuto vaguely registers the stinging in his eyes. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand why you’re mad at me.”

His father grabs his hair with so much force that he feels the hairs being plucked out of his scalp. “You’re an idiot. You’re so incapable, you’ll die of stupidity. Do you think you’re ever going to survive on your own?” Bokuto’s face is inches away from his father’s temper.

Bokuto blinks out the tears from his eyes, as they fall freely down his cheeks. “I’m trying the best I can!”

“You’re never good enough! You deserve to be beaten. You should be thankful you don’t have it worse than other kids your age.”

He gives up.

Saying nothing is the best thing he can do right now. He lays on the floor helplessly, seeking whatever comfort he can find on the cold, solid surface. If he gets out of it alive, it’s another day for him. If it finally breaks him, that’s something he had coming to him.

He cries, tears dripping onto the floor beneath him. Maybe if he’s loud enough, someone will hear him, and save him. Like Akaashi, the only one who he trusts enough to cry in front of.

But he doesn’t get any of the attention he needs. “Shut up and stop crying! You’re pissing me off, always annoying me! Do you need to be hit until you learn your lesson?!”

Bokuto’s entire face is a mess of various bodily fluids. He doesn’t hate his parents. He doesn’t understand why they suddenly stopped loving him. He hasn’t done anything to anger them.
“I’ll give you something to cry about, if you don’t stop acting like a little baby.”

He’s dragged upstairs by the hood of his jacket. It tightens around his neck. It’s suffocating. Blood rushes to his face, reddening his cheeks. And then, he’s thrown into his room. Away from everything.

“It’s not fair,” Bokuto murmurs, alone. Or maybe… it is. He’s done plenty of stupid things—spilling food, taking what’s not his, speaking too loudly. If he fixes his habits, his parents won’t hate him anymore, and they’ll stop fighting.

If he learns how to deal with them, everything will be normal again.

The next day, Akaashi is sitting at the bench beside the school, face in his hands.

“Uh… You okay, Akaashi?”

Bokuto prods his shoulder, and Akaashi responds with a sigh. “My mom lost it when she found out about the whole homophobic bullying thing. I was standing outside the building and I could hear her.” He shudders. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so angry in my entire life.”

“Whoa. She doesn’t mind that you might be gay?”

Akaashi nods. “She told me that my dating life was my business. We left it at that.”

Bokuto would give anything for a mother like Akaashi’s. Accepting of who he is, and always there to defend him. “I’m glad she understands. I don’t think I’d be able to handle it if she didn’t like gay people.”

“Do your parents…” Akaashi trails off. They both know what he wants to say.

Bokuto shrugs. He’s learned to live off assumptions in his own house. “I don’t know. We don’t talk about stuff like that.” Rather safe than sorry. If he gets kicked out of his own home, that means serious trouble.

Akaashi seems to understand what he wants to say. “How have you been feeling as of lately?” He changes the subject into something broader.

“Pretty good, why?”

He’s not doing pretty good. At least, that’s what it looks like during volleyball.

Bokuto flubs most of his receives, and his serves are either out of bounds or bouncing against the net. As he yells “Shit!” after a missed spike, Akaashi glances at him, urging him to collect himself.

He knows it. He knows he needs to calm himself down. He isn’t the ace, if he can’t even set an example for his teammates. He needs to work himself through the burn in his lungs, the ache in his shoulders.

But none of the spikes work out, and Bokuto feels like crying. They’ll blame his shoulder, his fucking useless body that fails him at the worst times, costs his parents money. And they’ll send him home to get yelled at even more.

“Hmph! I don’t care anymore! I hate myself and I hate cross spikes! Don’t toss to me anymore, Akaashi!”
Bokuto’s teammates collectively roll their eyes at him. They’re already used to his emo modes, and know how to handle it.

“All right, then. Calm yourself down over there.”

Konoha points to the desk outside the court. It’s Bokuto’s emo mode desk, designed especially for him to sulk under. It makes him feel like a toddler in time-out, but really, sulking does help when he’s frustrated. He’ll stew in his own misery for a few minutes, and come out because he’s bored.

When Bokuto glances at Akaashi, his expression takes him by surprise. Akaashi’s eyes are widened, and he seems somewhat heartbroken. He’s probably upset that his ace can’t even stabilize himself. That has to be it.

Bokuto slides under the desk, and Shirofuku approaches him with his water bottle. “Bokuto, your game’s completely thrown off today. What’s happened? Did you get a bad score on one of your tests?”

“It’s nothing.” Bokuto creates a boundary between his teammates and himself, as if to push them all away.

Shirofuku realises that she isn’t going to get anything out of him, and leaves after handing Bokuto his drink. Yet again, he’s made someone’s life harder. His parents are right. He’s a burden.

“Bokuto-san, please come here a second.”

Akaashi calls him over after practice. Bokuto really doesn’t want to talk to him, but to his surprise, Akaashi isn’t there to scold him or give him a pep talk.

“Follow me.”

Without questioning his intentions, Bokuto follows him out of the club room. They head over to the main school building, onto the first floor. The first years stare at them, whether it’s because of their height or Bokuto’s hair.

“Uh, where are we going?” Bokuto dares to ask Akaashi.

“Calm down. We’re almost there.”

Akaashi walks into the room furthest down the hallway, and Bokuto realises where they’ve been heading to. It’s the music room.

There are posters of famous composers up on the wall. Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart. The rest, he’s forgotten the names of. A grand piano is seated beside the window. Music sheets are propped up on the rack, pencil marks scratched onto it.

Bokuto presses a key on the piano, and jumps when it makes a sound. “Sorry to break your bubble, but I can’t play the piano, Akaashi.”

“That’s fine,” Akaashi says plainly. “I’ll play for you.”

The only thing Bokuto can focus on is how slender and long his fingers are.

“I want to play you something. I want to do something for you, if it’ll make you feel better.”

They play a tune Bokuto’s never heard of. Akaashi sits on the mahogany-coloured chair, facing the piano. He presses his fingers into the keys, music at his fingertips. A serene rhythm bounces into
the air.

Akaashi looks truly happy when he plays the piano. The sounds that are made because of him, popping out like little stars in a galaxy. Bokuto watches, listens. Akaashi is beautiful.

“What’s that song called?” Bokuto asks, after Akaashi’s stopped playing.

“It’s called River Flows in You. I played it for an exam when I was in elementary.” Akaashi explains to him. “I used to go to piano lessons until middle school. We still have an electronic keyboard at home.”

Bokuto grins, holding Akaashi’s hand into his own. “Your hands are really pretty. They fit the piano.”

Akaashi turns away. “Thank you. But I haven’t really been playing lately. I just like volleyball the most, I guess.” He mumbles, reddening.

“Well, your hands are suited for volleyball too! Your tosses are the best, Akaashi!” Bokuto praises him without restraint. Those are the hands that could have been playing the piano instead of setting to him. But volleyball, being a setter, is what makes him happy.

“Akaashi…” Bokuto lets go of his large hands. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t be the spiker you needed.”

Akaashi huffs. He’s not mad at him, and he pats his head softly. “You haven’t done anything bad. You don’t have to be sorry.” He tells him, like he always does. But apologizing isn’t enough. Nothing seems to be enough.

That night, as Bokuto sits in his room listening to the song Akaashi played for him, his phone starts vibrating to a different song.

“Hey, Kuroo?”

Kuroo had given him a phone call out of the blue. They haven’t talked properly, ever since Bokuto had the minor surgery for his appendix. It’s slightly unusual for Kuroo to call him, out of the blue.

“Yo. I take it that you’re still alive.” Kuroo laughs at his own statement, and he’s not groaned at, for the first time in weeks. It’s Bokuto, who laughs with him without even knowing what they’re laughing for.

“Yeah! How about you, Kuroo? How are ya doing? It’s been a while since you called me!”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Kuroo says, “is everything good at home?”

Bokuto pauses. He wants to tell him yes. If he deals with whatever happens to him, everything will be fine. “I guess. I’m fine, I think? What do you mean?”

Kuroo sighs. He becomes silent for a few moments, before answering. “Your parents aren’t hitting you, are they?”

Bokuto tries to remember if he’s been hit by them. He knows his mother sometimes throws things at him, but he hasn’t been really hit recently. That doesn’t count, hopefully. “No, why?”

“You need to tell someone if they hit you. Or even if they call you bad things. All right?”

“Bad things?” He does get called names on occasion, but that’s because he’s done something
wrong. “I don’t think that’s what’s happening.”

He doesn’t understand why Akaashi and Kuroo are asking him about his family life, all of a sudden. “Well, what do you think is happening? Do you really think everything’s okay?”

“Yeah.” Bokuto answers, although unsure. “I’m okay. I promise.” He only says so, just to keep his doubts at bay. Maybe Kuroo knows that, but he doesn’t ask him about it. “Are you gonna hang up now?”

Kuroo huffs. “Well, would you like me to? Or should I tell you about how I got Tsukki’s number?”

“Oh, glasses guy? What, did you blackmail Karasuno’s captain or something?”

Kuroo lets out a guffaw, poorly masking it with an “Oi, rude!” Tsukishima, the blocker from Karasuno. The one that hasn’t found his moment of volleyball yet. “Well, I asked him nicely. That’s not blackmail.”

Bokuto rolls his eyes. “Well, how’s the conversation going? Are the responses dry?” Tsukishima looks like the kind of person who would leave people on read and laugh about it, in all honesty.

Kuroo makes a noise that reminds Bokuto of Santa Claus. It’s hilariously out of season. “I’m asking him open-ended questions. Smart, isn’t it?”

Bokuto shrugs. “Well, if he hasn’t blocked you already, I’d say the conversation is going well.”

“I’m the one who taught him how to block. If he blocks me, that’s the epitome of pathetic.”

Kuroo jokes, and Bokuto snorts into his phone. “Okay, now I need to get Tsukki’s phone number because that is a hilarious idea.”

On the other end of the phone, Kuroo furiously protests the idea. “Don’t you dare, you fuck! I’ll stuff you and put you in the British Museum, you hairy ass owl!”

Bokuto wheezes with laughter, rolling on his bed and flailing his legs. “Oh my god. Bro, you’re totally at my mercy right now!” His breath his almost gone, and his stomach cramps as he tries to get his laughing under control.

“You’re too fucking loud! I’ll come up there and shut you up myself, if I have to!”

A voice comes from downstairs, loud enough to freeze Bokuto’s blood. He doesn’t say anything in response. Staying quiet is the better option. Hopefully, he’s pressed a blanket to his phone fast enough. Kuroo hearing, and at the worst moment… More than five excuses a day becomes close to impossible.

“Hey, Bokuto, what was that?”

Kuroo had heard.

“Nothing!” Bokuto almost screams, before remembering to keep his voice down. “I think they turned up the TV downstairs. My mom’s watching some soap opera.”

It’s nothing glamorous or dramatic like a soap opera. There’s no protagonist with a happy ending at the end of all struggles. There’s no love, or the push and pull of fate’s red string. Only an owl with clipped wings.
“Bokuto, are you safe? You can tell me.”

But if he does, he’ll ruin his family structure, and everything will be taken from him. His parents, his friends, volleyball. All because he’s selfish enough to think his needs come above everything else.

“Yeah.”

He ends the call. Kuroo immediately sends him several message bubbles. Bokuto responds dryly, ignoring most of them.

Night falls. Although he hasn’t had a hard day of practice, he still feels uncomfortable without a shower. He grabs some spare clothes before heading outside his room to pick up a towel.

His mother grabs his arm before he can get one. “You don’t need to use up the water we have. It’s wasteful.”

“It’s just a shower. I won’t be long.” Bokuto picks up the towel with his other arm, expecting the conversation to end there. “I need one. I’ve been practicing today.”

“Well, you don’t need one every day. Deal with it.” His mother doesn’t seem to care. She doesn’t want him to take a shower, for whatever reason. It’s as much bizarre as it’s frustrating.

Bokuto groans, considering his options. “But I need one today-”

That seems to have been a bad idea. “Nobody cares, so stop talking! And get that look off your face! I don’t want to see it!”

If only he could get out of the suffocating environment already. All the time, something happens, and he catches the blame.

He heads back later with a smaller towel. He wets it under the tap and wipes his skin as best as he can. It’s not the same, but better than nothing.

The next day, there’s no practice. A day off is a blessing to most, but for Bokuto, his muscles itch and he needs to feel the satisfying, choked-up feeling in his chest he gets from exertion.

So, he kicks on his shoes and hops out of his neighbourhood. The city park is his destination. He lets the sun cook his limbs as he runs. It’s a suitable running distance, and he can rest a while and come back afterwards.

September is almost there, but the summer heat still lingers. Many children are playing around the area, riding their bikes with dolls and plushies in the front baskets.

“Mama! We need to get more water!”

Inside the park, there’s a huge mound of sand that the children often play with. Bokuto himself recalls his childhood days, when he tried to climb the sand mountain and scraped his knees, each and every time. And his mother would tell him that it was all right, sticking plasters onto him and praising him for not crying, like a big boy.

It’s useless reminiscing about the past. What used to be his everything is now a faded artifact, in his memories.

“Ah!”
Something bumps into his hip— or rather, someone. Someone small, about the size of a four or five-year-old.

“I’m sorry… Are you okay?” Bokuto glances down at the kid, whose face immediately lights up into a smile when he sees him.

“It’s Koutarou-niichan!” Sora squeaks, clambering up onto Bokuto’s torso. “Put me up on your shoulders!” He pleads, and Bokuto hauls him up with a grin.

“Heya, Sora! What are you doing on this very fine afternoon?”

Bokuto lets Sora sit on his shoulders, holding him carefully as he jogs up and down beside the mountain of sand. Sora laughs and squeals right next to his ear, and Akaashi’s mother spots them.

“Oh, Koutarou-kun! Have you been looking after Sora?” She says, and Sora waves at her from above. “Look at you, so high up! Koutarou-niichan’s so nice, isn’t he?”

“Yeah!!” Sora giggles, and Bokuto places him down on the ground gently. “Aww… I want more!”

Akaashi’s mother pats Sora’s head lightly. “Come on, why don’t we play at the sand mountain? And maybe Koutarou-kun can join us, if he’s not busy,”

“Yes.” Bokuto nods, and Sora claps his hands. “So, what do you want to do?”

Sora points to a bunch of mud balls, sitting beside the bench in a neat row. “We’re making some muddy dumplings! Koutarou, you make one too!”

Bokuto sits on his heels, taking a chunk out of the sand mountain and rounding the dirt in his palms. “How does this look?” He shows Sora his mud ball, and Sora hums, as if he’s a professor of archaeology, reviewing artifacts under a magnifying glass.

“Needs more water. And more… dirt.” Sora points to the tap a few steps away. “Get some.”

Bokuto laughs heartily at the cute little critic in front of him. “All right, all right. The bigger the better?”

Sora nods. “Bigger the better.” He states proudly, patting his own mud balls.

Bokuto fills a plastic bucket with water, dipping his hands in and shaping his little rounded mud balls. He polishes them like he did when he was a kid, making the surface smooth and shiny.

“Here, Sora. You can have this one.” Bokuto hands the largest one to Sora, who thanks him gleefully. “You wanna make an even bigger one?”

“Yeah!” Sora doesn’t miss a beat before grabbing a handful of sand, slapping it onto the ground in front of him. “We need a lot! Koutarou, help!”

They both scoop out copious amounts of sand from the mountain, making a large wet mud ball and covering their hands with dirt. When the ball starts resembling a sphere at last, Sora already has something else in mind.

“Koutarou-niichan, watch this!”

Before Bokuto has a chance to smile and encourage Sora, he takes off with a running start, straight at the mountain of sand. Bokuto bites back a curse, eyes widening at the prospect of possible— no, imminent disaster.
“Sora, no! No cannonballing into the sand mountain!”

Bokuto leaps into action. His arms outstretched, grabbing at air as he attempts to stop the little munchkin from plummeting straight into the dirt. Akaashi’s mother notices, but she’s not at a distance where she can do anything. The fate of Sora rests in Bokuto’s hands.

A split second. It’s as if he’s on the court, aiming for a receive. Close to the boundary lines, reaching for the ball and diving straight into the floor. His arms catch the toddler in front of him, and everything is relaxed and slow, for a moment.

Then, he realises that he’s put on too much momentum. He’s collapsing forward, with Sora in his arms, staring at him innocently. He doesn’t seem to know what’ll happen to him.

“Gaaaah!”

Bokuto collides with the sand mountain head-on, particles showering him from head to toe. He screams as he’s temporarily blinded by the sand, and spits out the dirt gathering in his mouth.

“Gyyyyaaaaaah! Gross!” Sora screeches, thankfully unharmed but thoroughly covered in sand and mud. He squirms in Bokuto’s arms, and Bokuto sets him down onto the ground. “There’s sand everywhere! Dirty!”

Akaashi’s mother blinks at the two of them, and Bokuto’s lip quivers, watching her expression. He’s covered Sora in mud, surely she has to be angry.

“Sora, what did you do? You and Koutarou-kun are both like sand monsters!” She laughs, wheezing as she pats Sora down. “Look at you! You’re covered in mud! We need to get you into the shower!”

Sora screeches. “No shower!” He shakes his head defiantly.

“Koutarou-kun, would you like a shower as well? I don’t want to send you home like this. You got covered in sand because you tried to save him, in the first place.”

“But-” Bokuto tries to refuse.

“Please. If it’s not an inconvenience to you. It’s the least I can do to thank you.”

Bokuto finally gives in. “If that’s okay, then.” Truthfully, his face is smeared with dirt and there’s sand in between his clothes and skin. He feels itchy and gross.

“Nii-chan shower time too!” Sora squeals, apparently over his mini defiant mode already. He walks between his mother and Bokuto on the way home. He hangs from one arm each as he’s whooshed into the air, legs kicking upwards.

When Akaashi’s mother opens the front door, Sora runs into the hallway, leaving a trail of sand behind him. “Koutarou-niichan here! Keiji-nii’s Bokuto-san is here!”

Bokuto laughs, taking care not to make a mess on Akaashi’s house’s floorboards. “Thanks for inviting me here.”

“...Bokuto-san? What are you doing here?”

Akaashi squints at him, and Bokuto laughs. “I was playing with Sora at the park. I tried to catch him before he jumped into the huge mountain of sand.” He explains, dusting himself off tidily.
“Oh… Thank you, for looking after him.” Akaashi nods lightly.

“All good! Now, Sora, you and I are going to take a shower, and there’s nothing you can do about it!” Bokuto cackles, catching Sora in his arms and hauling him over to the bathroom. He ignores him flailing about and giggling.

Akaashi’s mother trusts Sora in his care. “Koutarou! I need shirt off!” Sora pipes up, wobbling around with his t-shirt covering his head. Bokuto helps him yank it off with a huff, folding his own clothes neatly in a corner.

“Whoa, these sure are dusty.” Bokuto comments as he dusts off his and Sora’s clothes into the sink. Sora pokes at his leg curiously as he steps into the bathroom. “You want something, kiddo?”

Sora grabs at Bokuto’s skin, patting him gently. “Have a hurt on your leg. Is it still ow?”

In an instant, he freezes. It’s definitely from one of the arguments he had with his parents. “I’m fine! Sora, I need you to keep it a secret. Don’t tell your mommy, okay?”

Bokuto turns on the shower and sprays himself down. Sora whines, scooting closer to him. “Whyyy? Why do I have to keep it a secret? Why?”

It goes about as well as trying to strike a deal with a four-year-old. “Because,” Bokuto points the shower at Sora full blast, cackling mischievously. “I fought a pirate at sea! It was a long, long time ago… I was attacked by an evil pirate captain!”

Sora gasps, almost slipping on the floor. “An evil pirate captain!?”

“Yup! But me, being the brave warrior I am, I screamed: ‘Stop right there, you great blooming buffoons! I, Koutarou, have come to vanquish the evil within your hearts!’” Bokuto isn’t even sure what story genre he’s trying to tell, but he thinks he’s doing a good job, as seen from Sora’s reactions.

Sora’s eyes shine. “Whoa! You’re so cool! So cool! What happens next?” He devours the story eagerly, waiting for Bokuto to continue.

“And after a long, long battle… I’m sure it lasted days, even weeks… I finally managed to defeat the pirates. But alas! Not before they nicked me in the leg with their magnificent sword. Ah, ‘tis but a flesh wound! I am alive here today to tell you the tale, young one!”

Although he’s slightly concerned that Sora won’t take his performance seriously, his story seemed to entertain him enough to not question it. “Wow! So strong! Koutarou is a strong man!”

“Indeed he is, Sora!” Bokuto ruffles his hair while holding the shower head. “Whenever you feel scared about anything at night, call my name in your heart three times. By the time you’ve called thrice, the bad things are already gone!”

“But,” Bokuto shakes his finger thoughtfully, “only if you keep it a secret. The lucky charm will melt away, if you accidentally reveal the story. Do you think you can do that?”

Sora nods enthusiastically. “I will! I promise, Koutarou-niichan! I love you!”

Bokuto dries himself and Sora off, occasionally tickling him at his sides. “Thanks for the shower, Akaashi-san!” Bokuto bows lightly, putting his t-shirt back on. “I hope I didn’t waste too much water.”
“Listen, don’t ever worry about that, okay?” Akaashi’s mother tells him firmly. “Don’t. You’re not wasting anything. You’re always welcome over. If you need a safe place to rest, you can just knock.”

Bokuto’s mouth flops into a smile. “Thank you… Akaashi-san. I think I have to go now.”

Akaashi glances at Bokuto, and quickly averts his gaze when Bokuto notices him. “Your… hair.” He mumbles, as if to provide an excuse. “It’s down.”

“Aren’t I handsome?” Bokuto flips his dampened hair, with its usual volume shrunk down.

Akaashi heaves a sigh so hard, that Bokuto thinks his soul came out with it. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Bokuto waves the Akaashi family off, and returns to his house by foot. It’s an orange, purple sky that spreads out above him. Like a gently kindled fire, the evening sky watches over him.

He wishes that weren’t the only thing watching over him kindly.

This time, Bokuto isn’t punished for going outside. Which is a relief. He sits in his room tapping at his phone, relieved that he isn’t getting screamed at today. He hasn’t had a peaceful day, in months.

If he can deal with it today, he can deal with it tomorrow. It’s not as bad as anyone makes it out to be.

Bokuto comes home the next day with an empty stomach. He makes himself some thin soup, watered down until he can barely taste the hint of corn and onions. He learns the hard way that soup is harder to eat like that. It increases in volume, and it tastes less flavourful.

“Koutarou, are you eating all that by yourself?”

His mother glares at him, poking at the bowl. Bokuto carries on drinking the soup a little faster. It tastes strange and somewhat slimy, but it’s edible. “There’s some instant soup packets on the counter,” he explains.

“You could have made some for us.” She rolls her eyes at his lack of competence. “You’re always ungrateful. If you can’t even do anything right, why don’t you just study and put yourself to use?”

Bokuto would have retorted, but instead, he stays silent. He finishes his food, and places the dish in the sink to wash it.

“Why do we even keep you around? You can’t even pay back anything. Nobody is going to like you if you’re going to act like this.”

Bokuto finishes washing up, and takes out his phone from his pocket. Akaashi has texted him a picture of Sora, and a drawing of his face in crayon. He smiles to himself. It’s a reminder that Sora is going to grow up to be a sweet kid, thanks to Akaashi and his family. Sometimes, he wishes Akaashi were his older brother, and he’s four years old again, with no responsibilities.

He’s snapped back to reality in an instant, when his phone is smacked out of his hands.

“Why don’t you listen when people are talking?! Did school teach you to disrespect your parents?” She picks up his phone, and he panics. The private conversations he had with Akaashi are in his
mother’s hands. “Who even is this person? I’m sure they don’t love you. Nobody can love you the way I do.”

Bokuto bites his cheeks, blinking out tears. “Please, give me my phone back. It’s important to me.”

And Akaashi loves him, he assures himself desperately. He loves him. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t worry over him. His family said he was welcome any time.

“Akaashi? What business does he have with your home life?” His mother bites, scrolling through the conversation. “Are you lying to him that you’re being beaten?”

“No! I haven’t said anything! Akaashi… He’s just….”

“You’re a liar!” She shouts, and he flinches, backing away. “You’re just fishing for sympathy, like usual! What, do you think you’re abused? Everyone has it worse than you!”

His phone is thrown onto the floor. It doesn’t break, thankfully, and he locks it at the speed of lightning. “I- I’m sorry.” he isn’t sure what he’s apologizing for, anymore. “Please, don’t hit me.”

Please show me you still love me.

A sharp noise echoes in the kitchen, and his chest stings. He squeezes himself against the wall, rubbing at his aching cheek. And god, he’s going to cry again. Everything is so blurry, even the sudden movements.

“You always ruin everything! You shouldn’t have been born!”

Bokuto feels something whistle in his throat.

“Why?”

His eyes leak and leak, tears like a waterfall of emotion. “Why do you always hurt me? What have I done? Why don’t you love me anymore?”

His hands instinctively protect his face, hitting off his mother’s arm by accident.

“Are you trying to fight back? Just sit there and shut up, is it really that hard?!”

Bokuto feels three different bursts of pain, one after the other. He sobs, staring at the ground between his legs. Hiccups escape his mouth, his throat closing up from the tears.

“Stop your crying! You’re just doing it so I’ll go easy on you!” His mother’s face is contorted with rage. Bokuto would trade anything to see her smile at him again, tell him he’s such a good child, she’s proud of him.

Bokuto’s face is drenched with tears. He doesn’t see it coming - the only warning he gets is something moving quickly in the corner of his vision. “Ow!” He’s hit square in the face with something, and pain spreads to his nose and teeth.

“Ow…”

Something leaks from his nose, and drips onto the floor. He bleeds profusely, and his attempts to contain the mess leave his shirt covered in blood.

“You’re disgusting! Clean it up, you’re making everything dirty!” He’s screamed at again, but he’s
too busy trying to contain the blood. It drips into his mouth, filling it with metal.

He grabs the side of the sink and takes some paper towels, shoving it up his nose to stop the bleeding. With a dampened towel, he starts wiping at the floor, tears mixing with his blood.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry.” Bokuto mumbles repeatedly, pushing streaks of blood around on the floor as he wipes and wipes. The paper towel in his nose is quickly soaked, and more blood starts dripping onto the floor tiles.

“What kind of cleaning job is that? You’re making everything filthy!”

Bokuto struggles to stop himself from sniffling the blood and tears into his throat. “Please, no more. Don’t hit me.”

His cries are unanswered, and he’s slapped on his cheek again. It adds to the pain, throwing rocks into the lake in his heart, destroying the tranquility. Like a seismic wave.

“I hate the way you look at me! I hate those eyes!”

Bokuto squeezes his eyes shut, wiping tears and blood off his face. He finally, finally manages to stand up, vision blurred with tears. With shaking legs, he shuffles out of the kitchen.

When he stares at himself in the bathroom mirror, he realises how horrible his entire face looks. Not even because of the blood. His eyes are red and dull. His cheeks are wet and streaked with a mixture of everything.

As he splashes water onto his face, he notices a bobby pin, and grips it until his palm burns. He resents the way he feels, the way he takes everything to heart. His parents only say it in a fit of rage, but he can’t bring himself to forget.

The bobby pin shatters in his hand, cutting into his skin. If his mother finds out about it, she’ll hurt him again. He shoves it into his pocket, heading over to his room to cry in peace.

Bokuto’s pillow is wet again, this time only with tears. There’s blood smeared on his arms as well, dried and caked onto his skin like patterned silk. He bites his arm to muffle his cries, and tastes the dried blood.

He wonders. Would Akaashi say something to him, if he knew this had just happened? Would he clean the blood off him, and reassure him that everything will get better soon?

But no, of course that’s just a fantasy. Akaashi isn’t his guardian. He’s a second year who just so happens to be his best friend. And he’ll surely get tired of looking after him someday. Bokuto expects it, but in the meantime, he’ll make sure to spend as much time as possible with him and his family.

The pain in Bokuto’s hand flares back. It stings with every heartbeat, throbbing and pulsing. He dims the lights and lays on his bed, without changing his clothes that are sullied with his bodily fluids.

He slowly pulls out the bobby pin fragments from his pocket, and reaches down to his stomach.

He digs into his skin, as hard as he can.

Really, the pain was to be expected. But Bokuto still winces, hissing at the burn spreading through
him. He touches the flesh, and it rises painfully into a welt, a thin red line not enough to drip blood.

Repeat, comes the instinct inside him. Paint everything over. He’s in control. Nobody else. He’s the one who chooses what happens to his body.

So Bokuto lets the pieces of his heart rip apart his skin again. Again. Again. Again. Again. Again. Again.

Bumpy. He runs his hand across his stomach, and the strange texture is what he registers. Every inch of his skin seems to hurt. The throbbing is annoying, but it takes away some of the worries on his mind. Like a drug, it takes over his thought processes. He would resist it, but he really doesn’t want to.

There’s barely any blood, but that’s no indicator of how much the little cuts sting. Like paper cuts on his stomach, they boast their presence well and truly. They remind Bokuto of what he’s done to himself.

He can still turn back.

It’s the boundary between what he’s used to, and what he will get used to, if he doesn’t drag himself away from it. One step forward, and it costs two steps’ worth of energy to go back. Three steps into the darkness, six steps to return.

Bokuto knows he’s the only one in control of himself. Nobody forces him to do the things he does. But he’s not the only one who controls how he feels. And he’s always been the kind of person to act out on his emotions.

After taking out his anger on his own self and crying his tears dry, a strange sense of calm sweeps over him. His head starts aching. His eyelids fall heavy. He wonders what Akaashi would say.

But the relief doesn’t last long. His brain pumped full of chemicals, going haywire. The relief is replaced with realization.

He’s cut himself. His mother is right. He really is sick in the head.

Bokuto can imagine his classmates, his teammates, staring at him in contempt. The one who can’t even control himself. The one who seeks attention, every day. The one who cries because his parents are too strict.

Of course. His parents have been right all this time. He is disgusting. He’s proved just that. No wonder they always yell and hit him.

The feelings all at once are dizzying. He almost feels seasick, from just the thoughts rocking inside his head. Only the truth remains. It’s night, and he’s sulking in his dirty clothes, craving the attention that he never received.


Selfishly, he still wants the titles that decorate him. They give him something to cling onto, when nothing else works. He’s strong. Captain. Ace. Japan’s almost-top-three. The proof that he’s worth something.

Everything burns. His skin, his eyes, his chest. A ball of raging fire, flames licking at him. What
has he done to himself? Surely Akaashi will be disgusted, and if his parents find out how miserable he is, he’ll be given something worse to cry about.

He misses the days when everything was right. When he was eight years old, running around in a t-shirt and shorts, holding a net to catch some beetles. When he turned seventeen, and his teammates threw a surprise party for him.

And now, he’s taken what little normalcy he had, and smashed it into millions of tiny pieces. He isn’t normal anymore. He hates himself for it, but at the same time, he hasn’t felt so relaxed in years. **Fuck,** it’s freeing.

If he can trade his status as the normal Bokuto Koutarou in exchange for the drug that keep him relieved, that’s fine by him.

**Chapter End Notes**

**kids, don't ever hurt yourself, okay?**
As someone who can relate to the experience, I was passionate about delving into Bokuto's thought process. The unhealthy self-blaming thoughts, I can remember vividly. I always wanted to write it in such a way that it's not pretty. It's not glamorous. It hurts. It's ugly. It fucks over the brain like some cursed drug.

I hope you guys felt something after reading this. It's a lot of emotions thrown together and weaved into the self indulgent fanfic that his here now. thank you for reading, as always.
I ponder of something terrifying

Chapter Summary

“Bokuto-san. What are those scratches on your stomach?”

As soon as the question is out of Akaashi’s mouth, Bokuto’s eyes look like they’re about to burst out of their sockets. Cold fear grips Akaashi’s chest.


“What do you mean?” Akaashi asks quietly.

Bokuto grips his clothes tightly. “You always ask me what’s wrong, when I get hurt. How do you always know? Why do you want to know?” He frowns at him, as if to warn him not to invade his privacy any further.

Shit. Akaashi knows he’s stepped on a landmine.

Chapter Notes

heyoooo. A bitch is back in her home country and jetlagged.
I’d say this chapter did well, considering I wrote half it in an airport.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akaashi knows something is up, when Bokuto comes to practice.

His expression isn’t made-up, but it throws him off. He’s smiling, in a way that reminds Akaashi of his grandmother when she found out that she would never walk again. It’s a smile, defeated by something he won’t try to put up a struggle against.

And it’s something that Akaashi doesn’t know how to deal with. If Bokuto says something, he can talk to him about it, get to know how he’s feeling. But he genuinely doesn’t know what’s happened to him.

“Morning, Akaashi! Toss! Toss!”

When Bokuto grips Akaashi’s side into a tackle, Akaashi feels a twinge of pain in his stomach.

But that’s not important. Bokuto is severely hurt inside. Akaashi feels his chest become heavy and painful, needles stabbing at his mental state.

“Come on!”

Bokuto makes an effort to grab at Akaashi again, resulting in the both of them tumbling over and crashing down onto the gymnasium floor like a ton of bricks.
“Ahhh, owch… Man, that was quite a fall, Akaashi!” Bokuto scratches his head, laughing his head off as Konoha yells at him and throws a volleyball in his direction.

Akaashi can’t bring himself to laugh. He’s seen under Bokuto’s shirt, and his stomach is covered in small scratches. Bokuto’s never mentioned anything about having cats or other small domestic animals.

There’s a lingering suspicion, that Akaashi can’t shake.

The possibilities are a skin condition, or scratching at a half-healed surgical scar. But they were on his left side, and he’s pretty sure that’s not where the point of incision is.

*Maybe it’s his parents,* he theorizes, and his liver goes cold. But they’ve always been bruises, not scratches. And they seem deeper than what can be made with nails.

“Bokuto-san. What are those scratches on your stomach?”

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“What do you mean?” Akaashi asks quietly.

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*Shit.* Akaashi knows he’s stepped on a landmine.

“Are you spying on me, or something?”

Akaashi shakes his head hastily. “Of course not, Bokuto-san! I was just—”

Bokuto glares at him, brows knitted together. “You don’t even know anything about anything! Stop pretending to understand!”

“Bokuto-san, trust me, I wasn’t trying to come across like that.” Akaashi’s eyes sting. Bokuto is upset, and he can’t do anything to take it away from him. “I’m sorry. I won’t bring it up again, if it made you uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable? Of course I am! What do you take me for? I’m a person, too!”

Akaashi approaches Bokuto carefully, stepping closer to him hesitantly. “I wasn’t trying to say otherwise. I’m only worried for you.”

“Just go away! Don’t talk to me!”

Bokuto swats Akaashi’s hand away violently, marching out of the club room, breathing uneven.

Akaashi’s feet stay glued to the ground, after Bokuto’s footsteps disappear.

He has to understand. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t understand anything about Bokuto. No amount of pretending will get him through it.
No crying, Akaashi tells himself. No crying. But his eyes are stinging. He’s crushed. He doesn’t want to see his best friend slip away from his grasp. He’s afraid, that Bokuto will never come back to him. That he’s aiding Bokuto’s destruction.

When Akaashi gets home, the household is in absolute chaos. Sora is screaming. Mari and Kakeru are grabbing their music sheets in a hurry, shoving them into their tote bags. He doesn’t have time to pity himself or think about his emotions.

“Keiji, Mari and Kakeru’s piano practice date changed and we all forgot about it!” Akaashi’s mother explains hastily. “Mind Sora for about half an hour until I get these two ding-dongs dropped off!”

“...I’m pretty sure I reminded you guys at the start of this week.” Akaashi mutters, but it falls on deaf ears.

“I can’t find my Chopin piece! Kakeru! Where is it?!” Mari squeals, pointing accusatory fingers at her brother.

“How should I know? I didn’t touch it!”

“It’s right here, Mari! On the table!” Akaashi’s mother grabs it and chucks it in Mari’s tote bag, grabbing her phone and car keys. “Come on, kids! We’re pushing against every speed limit there is!”

Before Akaashi can remind his mother not to crash the car, she’s halfway out the door, while his siblings rush to get their shoes on.

“Bye, mom~” Akaashi waves them all off, blinking. The car’s engine roars to life, and it rushes out the driveway with a vroooom, leaving only a trail of air behind. Akaashi lets out a sigh.

Sora sits on the floor close by, left behind alongside him. He’s chewing at the ear of his teddy bear.

“Sora, you want some food?” Akaashi offers, stomach rumbling from hours of practice.

“No.”

Sora presses his head onto the tiled wooden floor, grunting and slapping his palms on the floor. He’s having a grumpy time, for reasons Akaashi doesn’t know.

“Don’t put your face on the floor. It’s dirty. You could get sick.” Akaashi chides him, but his brother smacks his face into the floor over and over again. “Up you get.” He removes him from the ground, dangling him in his arms.

“Put me down! I don’t like you, Keiji-nii!” Sora squeals angrily, waving his tiny arms about and smacking Akaashi’s cheek. His legs jiggle in the air, kicking about wildly.

Akaashi feels it. Sora is angry and frustrated, but he doesn’t know why. God, everyone just seems to dislike him today. “Sora, don’t be rude. Your hands aren’t for hitting people, you know that.” He scolds him in a monotone voice, shaking his head disapprovingly. Even Sora is in a sour mood, and he’s just come home. He hasn’t done anything to piss the little munchkin off.

“Shut up! Shut up!”
Sora is small, but he hits hard. Akaashi registers pain in his rib, and Sora slips from his grasp in the moment he flinches with an “Ow!” Before he can stop the disaster from happening, his little brother collides with the floor in a sort of sideways body-slam. A dull thud echoes into the floor, and Sora stares up at Akaashi, eyes watering as he lets out choked snifflles.

Immediately, Sora bursts into tears, wailing loudly. “It hurts!” He screams, tears streaming down his red, flushed face. “Want mommy!”

Akaashi hurriedly picks him up, rubbing the side of the body that he landed on. “Hey, you’re okay. You’re okay.” Nothing seems to be broken, but he has a bawling Sora in his hands, who is all too keen on bringing the roof down.

“Why…?” Akaashi bites his lip, muttering to himself. A drop of sadness splashes onto Sora’s cheek. “Why is everything not working today?”

Sora stares up at him, confused. His tears turn to dry streaks on his face. He reaches up to Akaashi’s cheeks, patting him on the side of his face gently. “Keiji-nii? Hurt? Feeling owch?”

Akaashi snifflles, drying his eyes hastily with the back of his hand. “I’m fine,” he hiccups, eyes glistening with tears.

“Keiji-nii what’s wrong? Crying?” Sora tilts his head curiously. He wraps his squishy arms around Akaashi’s neck, pressing his round face into his shoulder. “Okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m okay now.” Akaashi hugs Sora with all the strength that won’t hurt a four-year-old. “Don’t worry about me.”

As Akaashi makes his way back down the hallway, he finds Sora’s favourite toy car with its wheel tossed to the side. He picks it up carefully in one hand. It’s a simple enough structure. He just needs some superglue to fix it.

“I asked mommy if she could fix it, but she was busy-busy.” Sora sticks out his lip. “It’s my favourite. I didn’t break it on purpose.”

It clicks now. Akaashi realises that Sora hasn’t had the best day, either. They’ve both gotten emotional, because of reasons only they understood. “Here, leave it to me. I’ll fix it up for you.”

Akaashi squeezes some superglue onto the toy car’s wheel, sticking it back onto the body of the car. “Here we go. Now let it sit for a while, so it hardens and sticks. I know you’ll take better care of it next time.”

Sora grins, eyes sparkling as he claps his palms. “Thank you so much, Keiji-nii! Love you!” He hugs Akaashi tight, resting his head on his leg. “Keiji-nii, okay now? Love me too? Friends again?”

“Love you too. You’re a good kid, Sora.” Akaashi peppers kisses onto Sora’s shoulder, and he giggles. “Come on, let’s go and get some food.”

Just a few hours later, Akaashi wakes up on the sofa, Sora snoozing beside him with his belly uncovered. There’s a soft blanket placed on top of them, by his mother. Akaashi pulls Sora’s top back down, making sure his stomach won’t get cold.

“Keiji, you’re a good brother to him.” His mother smiles at him, sitting beside him on the sofa. “He’ll thank you when he gets older.”
Akaashi smiles. He’s lucky to have the most understanding parents ever, and his grumpy yet likeable siblings. He doesn’t know how he would have turned out without them.

Something has been bothering Akaashi, ever since he woke up that morning.

He doesn’t feel as energetic when he wakes up and heads down to the kitchen. His family are eating breakfast as usual. It tastes good, nothing out of the ordinary. Onigiri, filled with sour pickled plum. Salty, fluffy white rice.

“Have a good day at school, Keiji.”

His mother waves him off, and he sets foot outdoors. It’s not his family. They’re all happy and friendly, as usual. The reason has to be something do to with him, because the feeling of something being off continues.

Bokuto? He hasn’t talked to him, and he’s concerned. He’s not angry at him, and he can only hope Bokuto feels the same. But not even Bokuto can make his whole skin feel like it’s standing on edge. It’s something he can’t describe.

“Morning, Akaashi!”

“Morning.”

Konoha slaps him on the back, as he makes his way down the hallway. The strange feeling inside of him intensifies, but he doesn’t know how to place it. As if a layer of him is gone, thinly stripped away.

The first class he has is classic literature. There’s a mini-test that he fills within three minutes, and uses as a pillow afterwards. When he hands up the test for it to be collected, he feels the odd sensation again.

It’s frustrating, but there’s little he can do besides mull over it. He sleeps through the first class, snoring into his textbook. He only wakes up to take notes and pretend to be studious.

He eats a snack before lunchtime, and deals with the rest of his classes. Bokuto doesn’t come to the second floor to visit his class. It’s lonely without his usual antics. He wants him to come talk to him again.

“Bokuto-san?”

Akaashi reluctantly pops his head into class 3-1, but there’s no sight of the owlish ace. Something inside of him feels like it’s been crushed into someone’s fist. If Bokuto won’t ever talk to him anymore, he can’t bear it.

Sighing, he resolves to eat lunch on his own. He doesn’t want to resort to having a bathroom lunch, so he slips back into his class and sits on his own. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t mind the glances, but he’ll have to deal with that himself.

Akaashi bites into his rice and pickled plum bento, popping some dashimakitamago into his mouth between bites. It tastes good, just as usual. It’s delicious, and yet it feels like he’s eating dust.

“Did your boyfriend dump you, at last?”
Akaashi’s head snaps back, eyes glistening with apprehension.

“See? I told you he’d react to that.” A group of second years from class four laugh at him, as he turns red. “How’s your ass doing? Want a massage?”

Akaashi continues eating. He’s pissed, but he doesn’t answer them.

“How boring. I thought you could teach us a thing or two about what gay sex is like.”

“...So, you have plans for it?” Akaashi chuckles, chewing on a mouthful of creamy cheese and prawn cup. “Perhaps you could teach me. You probably know more about it than I do.”

Akaashi is grabbed roughly by the collar. The strange feeling on his skin only increases. “Are you saying that I’m a fag?!” He’s screamed at. He thinks it’s unjustified. He’s not the one who started talking about sex.

Akaashi raises his eyebrows, instead of shrugging. “I mean, you asked me about gay sex while assuming that I’m gay. I just assumed you were asking because you were going to make use of the knowledge.” He smiles thinly. “I can’t help you. Sorry about that?”

“You guys are making a fool of yourselves.” Aisawa snorts. She shakes her head, making her way over to Akaashi. “Google it if you’re so curious. You just look like a bunch of inexperienced boys looking up to their master.”

The group from 2-4 turn their attention to Aisawa, glaring at her. “You’re really defending a filthy homo?”

“Well, I’m not close-minded. If two guys want to have a go at each other, I’m not here to beat down the door and tell them they’re being gross.” She turns her head at Akaashi, raising her brows.

Akaashi shrugs, stuffing the rest of his lunch into his mouth. Aisawa doesn’t need to defend him, but admittedly, he’s relieved someone’s there to point out the stupidity of some people.

“Come on. This is just going too far for no good reason.” Saito groans. “Akaashi hasn’t done anything to you. You guys are in the wrong here.”

Akaashi glances at the group of students, who glare at him pointedly before retreating back to their class. Saito lets out a laugh, loud enough to reach them.

“Don’t mind them, Akaashi. People are dumb.”

“I don’t.” Akaashi replies. “I’ll be fine.”

“But... you didn’t really deny the rumours.” Saito whispers. “Are you okay with that?”

Akaashi gulps. “Well... I don’t see why being gay is bad. There’s no need to deny anything.” He explains quickly, thinking of a good excuse on the spot.

“I know. You don’t have to me ashamed for who you like.” Saito smiles warmly, and returns to his seat.

Akaashi still doesn’t know what the strange feeling in his chest is.

“Akaashi!”
Bokuto is there before him, when he reaches practice.

Warm arms wrap snugly around him. “I’m sorry.” Bokuto mutters into him over and over and again. “I’m sorry, Akaashi. I was horrible to you.”

And all at once, Akaashi realizes what the strange feeling inside him has been trying to tell him.

Bokuto is sobbing into his shoulder, apologizing profusely. And yet, he can’t feel it. All he can perceive is the fact that Bokuto is upset, but anyone can see that. He’s become the ‘anyone’. He’s not special anymore.

His empathy is gone.

All his life, he’s depended on his powers to get through every situation without hurting anyone. He’s learned what makes people upset and angry. It’s not something anyone can do, he’s known for his entire life. But it’s normal for him, to touch another being and feel its pain.

Now that he’s robbed of his power, he’s not confident anymore. He’s just someone who can’t understand everything that he’s been taking in without understanding its privilege.

Akaashi’s eyes fill with tears.

“Bokuto-san, I’m sorry.”

He’s not sure if he can protect him in the same way as he did anymore.

“I wasn’t having a good day that day. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.” Bokuto explains, taking out the volleyballs from the crate. “I don’t hate you.”


Akaashi wonders if he’s somehow made Bokuto think otherwise. He likes Bokuto, more than a best friend. He’s in love with him. It’s why he hurts when Bokuto is sad. It’s why he wants to see him smile, more than anything else.

But with an important part of him gone, it’s all strange, interacting with someone he loves. He doesn’t feel the drops of happiness radiating from Bokuto. He doesn’t feel the surge of emotions when he high-fives him.

Akaashi never came to realize how lucky he was, until now. He’s without what made every interaction with somebody special.

And he misses it, painfully so.

“Hey, Keiji.” Akaashi’s mother smiles at him, setting down a plate of fried horse mackerel in front of him. “You look lost. Something wrong?”

He can tell his mother everything. He hasn’t come out as bisexual yet, but he knows she’ll support him for whatever he is. But he’s not sure his mother will even pretend to believe his story.

“If I tell you something… weird,” Akaashi mumbles, “will you believe me?”

His mother shrugs, tilting her head. “I don’t know that until you tell me. It depends on what it is, obviously!” She gives an incredibly reasonable answer, and Akaashi is stuck for words.
“But… you’re an honest kid, so I trust you. I’ll help you the best I can.”

She smiles warmly, and Akaashi opens his mouth. “I can feel someone else’s emotions, when I touch them.” He blurts out.

When he doesn’t get an immediate answer, he comes close to panicking. “It sounds stupid. But I’ve been able to do it ever since I can remember. I’m… something close to an empath?”

He definitely doesn’t expect his mother to nod at him. “You’re not alone, Keiji. It’s something unique to our family.”

“What?”

“I guess it’s been passed onto you, too.” Akaashi’s mother ruffles his hair, poking his cheek. “Every firstborn child on my side of our family has always had strange powers relating to other people.”

Akaashi blinks. His mother isn’t the first born out of his grandmother. It’s his aunt, Komachi, who works as a child psychiatrist, as far as he knows. Is that why she chose her profession?

“You could have told me… earlier.”

“I could say the same for you.” His mother points out. “But why are you telling me now, all of a sudden?”

Akaashi sighs. The revelation is like a punch to the gut, but it’s not like it matters anymore. “I’ve lost it.” He explains. “I can’t feel the emotions anymore. I’m just another average person now. I don’t know if I’ll ever get it back.”

“You will. I know it.” His mother reassures him. “Once whatever pain in your heart settles itself, you’ll feel everything again. It happened to my sister too, after all.”

Akaashi realizes that he didn’t need to be secretive of his strange power. Some people were there to provide him with all the information, had he just spoken up about it. It’s hilariously ridiculous.

“Maybe you should talk to her sometime. She might be of help, you know.”

He supposes that would be true. “Well, she’s busy. So whenever she gets to take a break from work, then.” His aunt lives in the same prefecture as him, so it shouldn’t be much hassle. He thinks about her, and his own powers. According to his mother, he’s going to regain them. But he doesn’t know what he needs to fix, to ease whatever’s bothering his mind.

“Hey, guys!” Konoha calls out, grabbing the team’s attention. “The local swimming pool’s offering some discounts for students. Who wants to come?”

“I’ll go.” Komi raises one hand. “How much is the discount?”

Konoha raises his brows. “Pretty sure it was sixty yen? Pretty good, I’d say.”

Sarukui nods. “I’m in too. What about you, Akaashi? Didn’t you wear a speedo last time?”

“I gave it away to my cousin.” Akaashi admits awkwardly. “I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. You guys have fun for me too. How about you, Bokuto-san?”

Without his powers to help him, Akaashi has to examine Bokuto’s expressions closely to make out
his thoughts.

“I’ll pass.” Bokuto declines the invite, rather quickly. “Kinda busy this week.”

There’s something else, Akaashi picks up. But it’s infinitely harder without what he’s been relying on all his life. Everyone else doesn’t think twice, and moves on to the other team members to invite them. They don’t notice subtle changes in expressions and the corners of someone’s mouth. And that’s reality for them.

But Akaashi isn’t going to question Bokuto on why he decided not to go swimming. That’s something he knows won’t get him anywhere. And in his current predicament, he’ll have to wait until Bokuto opens up to him.

A week passes. Akaashi begins to get used to life without everyone’s emotions on his back. He isn’t Atlas anymore, carrying the hearts of several people at once. He’s just himself, Akaashi Keiji.

And Bokuto is more Bokuto-like than ever. His spikes are endless, his stamina continues all the way around the world and twice over.

The way he hides things hasn’t changed too.

Unfortunately for Akaashi, he’s left with a disadvantage. He has no way to tell apart Bokuto’s lies from his truths.

A pair of thigh-high supporters catch his attention, unexpectedly.

Judging from the length, they’re definitely Bokuto’s. They’ve been left out of his bag and thrown around the club room, discarded like limp pieces of seaweed. With a soft sigh, Akaashi grabs them.

And stops, when something doesn’t add up.

There’s a strange, slightly sticky texture to it. They haven’t practiced yet, so it shouldn’t be sweat. Akaashi needs to know what it is, in order to give instructions to Bokuto on how to clean it properly.

Akaashi flips the supporters and stares at it. There are streaks of dried blood on the material, and Akaashi freezes. The distinct texture and coppery smell is definitely blood.

“Akaashi? What are you doing?” Bokuto’s voice makes him jump.

He puts the supporters down, and turns to him. “I found these on the floor. There’s some blood on them. Are you injured?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Akaashi tries not to show his surprise when Bokuto admits the truth so quickly. “Did you treat it properly? Don’t let it get infected.” He finds himself saying, out of concern.

“Hey, Akaashi.” Bokuto grabs Akaashi’s sleeve, eyes pleading silently. “Will you promise me not to say I’m disgusting?”

He doesn’t understand the meaning behind the question, but nods. “Is there a reason you think I might react that way?”
Bokuto shifts his glance to the floor. “Akaashi… you’re my best friend. I trust you.”

He pulls the hem of his shorts, and instantly, Akaashi feels nauseous. There’s so much more red than what’s pale. The blood is dried and dark, but the scabs have been scratched at. Akaashi swallows shakily.

When Akaashi inspects his thighs closely, he notices that they’re all cuts of similar shape. Some are healed more than the others. His first suspicion is abuse, but some things just don’t add up for that to be true.

“Who did this to you?” Akaashi asks quietly, meeting Bokuto’s timid gaze. “Or did you—”

“I did.” Bokuto interrupts him. “I did this to myself.”

Akaashi feels something inside of him shatter. Of course, he couldn’t notice the signs, not because he lost his powers. It's because of his lack of observancy. He couldn’t stop it from happening. If Bokuto were to do something worse- something he could never reverse- would he have noticed?

“Please, Akaashi. Don’t stop being friends with me. I know I’m disgusting.”

Akaashi cups Bokuto’s chin gently. “No, you’re not. Listen, this isn’t your fault.” He says, softly but firmly. “This isn’t something you should be bottling up on your own. We need to talk to someone about this, okay?”

“No! Don’t tell anyone!” Bokuto grabs Akaashi by the shoulders, shaking his head so hard Akaashi’s worried it’ll rip off. “I don’t want to tell anyone else about this. They’ll just tell my parents.”

“But…” Akaashi bites his tongue. Going by how Bokuto’s parents are, he won’t have a good time if he’s forced to talk to them about it. “I understand. Is there anyone you’re comfortable talking to?”

Bokuto shakes his head again. “It’s my fault. I’m sorry. You don’t have to do anything for me.” He smiles sheepishly. “Even my parents think so.”

“Well, your parents don’t appreciate you enough.” Akaashi snaps back, guilt eating at him when Bokuto stares at him, hurt. “I’m sorry. But it’s true. They’re treating you unfairly.”

Bokuto doesn’t argue. He’s strangely agreeable today. “Akaashi…” he stares into space. “I really love mom and dad. It’s true.”

He smiles, in an expression of defeat. “But liking them is really hurting me.”

“Thanks for listening to me today, Akaashi.”

Bokuto makes his way home with Akaashi, ice pop in one hand. It’s beginning to melt, and he licks it periodically to keep it from dripping. Akaashi bites into his grape-flavoured gari gari-kun.

“It’s all right. You haven’t done anything wrong, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi nods at him. “If you need somewhere safe to go to, you’re always welcome to stop by at my place.”

They approach the usual intersection where they always part ways. Akaashi crosses with Bokuto instead of heading towards his own estate.

“Wait, aren’t you that way? You running errands, or something?” Bokuto asks, visibly confused.
“I figured that… maybe I could come with you, from time to time.” He mutters an excuse. It sounds like he’s pining now, and he grows embarrassed.

Bokuto lights up, teeth stained blue with the ice pop’s artificial colours. It somehow fits him, and his goofy grin.

“Aw, Akaashi! I love you!” He hugs him with his entire torso, his bouncy energy surrounding them. Even in his current state, Akaashi knows how naturally warm Bokuto is. It’s comforting.

And there’s a spark in his heart when he hears the words come out of Bokuto’s mouth. He knows there’s only platonic affection behind it, but his stupid, childish brain takes it straight to his heart.

“Thank you.”

Akaashi steps into Bokuto’s unfamiliar estate, and Bokuto stops in front of one of the houses. There’s a medium-sized white car, shimmering in an unsettling manner.

“You… might not wanna come inside. I’ll see you tomorrow!” Bokuto waves Akaashi off, and Akaashi notices the exact moment Bokuto’s expression hardens as he turns away.

There are drops of sugary, ice pop syrup on the asphalt.

Akaashi is ready to turn back and scamper off to his own home, but he knows there’s something else he came for. He feels guilty for it, but he sticks around, pacing a few feet away from Bokuto’s house.

Not even ten minutes later, Akaashi hears a nasty thud, and a scream that follows.

“You’re---- shut---- fucker--!”

Akaashi flinches, just by hearing the screaming from afar. “Bokuto-san?” He murmurs worriedly, scurrying over to the house.

“Is he your friend?” A woman in her middle ages glances at the same house, turning to him.

Akaashi nods profusely. “Yes. He’s my friend. I need to help him!”

“It’s horrible, isn’t it?” She shakes her head. “I’ve asked him numerous times if he’d like me to call child protection services. But he tells me he’d rather live there than at a facility, and he’s pleaded to me in tears…”

“I… see.” Akaashi’s stomach drops. People know, but Bokuto’s been cutting all the ropes trying to fish him out himself.

“Try and talk to him, as a friend. He might lend an ear to you, if anyone.”

Akaashi wants to tell her that he’s tried, so many times. But the more he finds out, the more he’s pleaded not to intervene. Maybe it’s arrogant of him, to assume that he can do anything to help Bokuto. All he’s done is try to talk to him, and ease his mind in between the abuse.

“Hey, mom?” Akaashi sits at the dinner table, long after his siblings have gone to sleep. Some things, he can’t handle on his own. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

His mother sits opposite him, fingers wound tightly around each other. “What’s the matter? Did someone hurt you, for…”
“No, mom. I’m not getting bullied for being gay.” Akaashi shuts down his mother’s worries quickly. But the truth isn’t much better, really. He’d rather take another beating than witness something so disturbing again.

“...It’s about Bokuto-san.”

His mother’s face scrunches up in a strange manner. “Is he doing all right? Something come up after the surgery?”

“Oh, no. He’s been healthy in that regard.” Akaashi opens his mouth, before his mother can jump to any more conclusions. “But he’s not doing too good, overall. His parents are… quite horrible to him.”

“My god,” Akaashi’s mother shakes her head. “Do people know about this?”

“He won’t let anyone tell an adult.” As much as it’s frustrating, Akaashi understands why he wouldn’t want to be removed from his home, just as he finishes high school.

“Is he in danger? Are any of his bones broken, or anything like that?”

“I don’t think so.” Akaashi doesn’t know for sure, but he’s never seen Bokuto in that level of pain. “But… it’s affecting him really badly. He’s so upset about it, but he doesn’t want the authorities involved.”

Akaashi’s mother nods. “Your aunt Komachi’s told me about other kids in similar situations, and they all say the same thing. That they don’t want to leave their homes.”

Akaashi refuses to decide there’s nothing more he can do to help. If he can remove him from the poisonous environment, even temporarily...

“I think I’ve got an idea.”

Bokuto groans, head placed on his notebook. Akaashi’s roped him into his weekly study sessions at the library, to ensure Bokuto passes every subject, at least. He’s notorious for failing math.

“This is too hard! I quit! I’m too dumb for this, anyway!” Bokuto exclaims indignantly, and is shushed angrily by several students. “I don’t like this. It’s misleading! I think I’ve gotten it, and it’s a completely different answer!”

After he’s scolded, Bokuto drops his voice, but it’s still a loud, hissed whisper. “Bokuto-san,” Akaashi opens Bokuto’s notebook, slammed shut in a moment of frustration. “What part do you not understand? Where did you get lost?”

He’s taught his siblings that way, even when he’d forgotten all of the material himself. He’s never studied Bokuto’s coursework, but if he can get him to figure it out with some guidance, he can lift him out of his sulky mood.

“This bit with the whole substituting method! I’ve put in the numbers, but it doesn’t work! There’s fractions in the answer, and I don’t know where they even came from!”

“They’ve got to come from somewhere,” Akaashi flips through the textbook, and finds the blue box with the instructions for the equation. “Try reading this to yourself, and tell me what you’re doing each time.”
After some grumbling and swearing, Bokuto reluctantly nods and mumbles the first step of the equation to himself. “So, you put these numbers in the place of these… letters.”

Akaashi skims through Bokuto’s near-illegible scrawls, and nods. “It looks all right to me, Bokuto-san. What happens next?”

“You gotta… uh, multiply them? Wait, yeah! You gotta multiply them!” He comes to a revelation, and claps his hands. “Whoa! You’re such a good teacher, Akaashi! I can solve this problem now!”

A faint smile pulls at Akaashi’s lips. Bokuto isn’t stupid, or lazy. Orthodox teaching methods just don’t fit him, because he’s not wired for them. He’s more than capable, and Akaashi is filled with relief.

“Well done, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto nods repeatedly. “Right? Right? Praise me more, Akaashi!” He chirps, completely forgetting where he is, yet again. He’s hushed by the librarian, a scary woman with milk-bottom glasses. “Crap, sorry, sorry!”

“I have an offer to make.” Akaashi says, when they exit the library.

“And what’s that?” Bokuto perks up.

Akaashi takes a deep breath. “I want you to come over to my place on Fridays, and we can have our study session there. It’ll be easier for me to teach my younger siblings, too.”

The last part is true, but Akaashi’s only plan is to take Bokuto away from an unsafe household for as long as he can. “You can bring some clothes and sleep over, if you’re okay with it. It’s not a problem, and I’m sure Sora will appreciate your company.”

“Are you… sure?”

Akaashi internally breathes a sigh of relief. It’s not an immediate rejection, and he’s hopeful of the response Bokuto will give to him. “You’re pretty much a part of my family. Everyone’s always asking me when you’ll be coming around.”

Bokuto grins, cheeks reddening with excitement. “Really? They like having me around?”

“Yes, really.”

Bokuto’s smile widens. “Really? Really, really?”

“Really-really. Promise.” Akaashi links pinky fingers with Bokuto, patting his wild hair jokingly. “Be there this Friday evening, if you can. I’ve already discussed it with my parents, so they’re okay with it.”

“Okay! I’ll be there!” Bokuto kicks a pebble as hard as he can. It bounces off the concrete wall and flies off somewhere, clattering into the drain. “Aw, man. I lost my rock.”

Akaashi chuckles, and taps his toe against a small stone by his feet. “So did I.”

“When’s Koutarou-niichan coming!??”

Sora grabs his kiddie binoculars set, pressing against the window of the living room. He’s been
buzzing ever since he’s heard that Bokuto’s coming round, his last words before bed and his first words waking up being “Koutarou-niichan!”.

“Keiji-nii said he won’t be here for another ten minutes. Don’t panic.” Kakeru points out, sitting near the windowsill. “But I know you’ll still wait for him anyway, since you love him so much.”

“I love Koutarou-niichan!” Sora spreads his arms wide. “This much!”

A few more minutes pass, and the doorbell rings.

“It’s Koutarou-niichan!”

Akaashi makes a run for the door, before Sora can tackle Bokuto and tip him over. “Hello, Bokuto-san,” he greets him, and Sora latches himself onto Bokuto’s leg. Akaashi doesn’t miss the slight wince on Bokuto’s face.

“Nii-chan! Gonna stay with us tonight? Sleepover?” Sora pleads, and Bokuto nods. “Bathtime together again?”

“We’ll have to see about that.” Akaashi quickly interjects, remembering Bokuto’s situation and how it would break him to have Sora know. “Come on, let’s get some study done. Then we can have some snacks.”

“Look!” Mari grabs a box of papico from the freezer, three flavours inside. “There’s chocolate coffee, cream soda and purple grapes. Whoever gets their stuff done first gets to choose!”

Bokuto’s mouth waters, and he sets down his backpack beside the coffee table in the living room. He’s hungry now, his appetite almost insatiable. If anything, he’ll use the hunger to charge his brain power.

“Ah, no fair! I have more homework than you guys!” Kakeru objects to Mari’s decision, sticking his tongue out.

“We’re younger than you!” Mari grabs Sora’s hand and sticks her tongue out too, and Sora copies her, giggling obliviously.

Bokuto laughs heartily. “Rock-paper-scissors! That way, it’ll be fair!”

A series of oohs and aahs erupt from Akaashi’s younger siblings. “Good idea! That way, we can all have a chance at picking the one we want!”

Akaashi grabs the box and places it back into the freezer in the kitchen. “Put things away when you’re done with them, it could melt.”

“All right, let’s get down to business!” Bokuto whips out his textbooks, making a face at the thickness of them. “I am going to cry. There’s just… so many.”

“No cry!” Sora pats Bokuto’s head, as he pretends to wail into his hands. “Koutarou-niichan strong! Try hard!”

Akaashi grabs his phone and taps the YouTube app, setting the music to I’ll Make a Man out of You. “Good.” He smiles at Bokuto, and his own siblings. “We have music now. Get productive.”

As Akaashi witnesses his siblings finish up their workbooks and Bokuto write off his last equation, they all heave a collective sigh.
“I’m exhausted… I never want to look at another English letter ever again.”

“Fractions, decimals, I’m through with it all.”

“Finished! Finished! Ice cream!”

Only Sora is energetic enough to hop over to the freezer, taking out the box of papico gleefully. “Come on! Let’s have some!”

Mari, Kakeru and Bokuto all perk up, slowly lifting their bodies from wherever they draped themselves over.

“Ice cream…”

“Tasty…”

They mumble and groan, as if they’ve lost their abilities to be a human. Akaashi takes the grape-flavoured one and snaps it open, biting on the plastic to get the goodness out.

“Not fair! Keiji-nii!” Mari sticks out her lip. “I wanted that one too!”

Akaashi shrugs. “I taught you all how to study. It’s my payment.” He says breezily, chomping into his ice cream. “There’s still one left. Don’t fight over it.”

“Calling dibs!” Mari grabs the other grape flavoured papico and sinks her teeth into it, cringing at how cold it is.

Sora plops beside Bokuto and fishes out a chocolate-coffee papico, handing it to him. “Open! Please, Koutarou-niichan?”

Bokuto pops the plastic open and places it in Sora’s hand. “Here ya go!”

Kakeru grabs a cream soda papico, and licks the top of it. “Koutarou, you want some too? The grape ones are gone, but there’s still two left!”

“How can I…?”

“Yeah, of course!”

Bokuto takes a cream soda papico, sucking out the ice cream from the tip and slowly savoring it. “Thanks.”

Akaashi drains his own papico, tossing the plastic into the wastebasket. “If you come next week, we’ll have some crunchy almond ice cream.”

“Kids, who’s going in the bath first?”

Akaashi’s mother calls out to them, as they all huddle on the sofa watching variety quiz shows.

“I’ll go.” Akaashi hops off and turns to Bokuto. “Would you like to get in alone?” He whispers, and Bokuto whispers a ‘yeah’.

“Keiji-nii, bath time?” Sora asks, sipping calpis from his plastic superhero-print mug.

Akaashi nods, and grabs a towel. “Do you want to get in the bath with me?”
“No! Koutarou-niichan!”

Akaashi pokes his brother gently. “Bokuto-san can’t get in with you today. He’s…” he mumbles, working on an excuse on the spot. “He’s been fighting lions. He needs some alone time.”

Bokuto and Kakeru struggle to hold in their laughter, while Sora sticks out his tongue in frustration. “Aww… Okay. I’ll get in with you then, Keiji-nii.”

“The favoritism is showing, I guess.” Kakeru shrugs. Bokuto can’t be beaten, when it comes to kids taking a natural liking to him.

Akaashi tosses his clothes in the laundry basket and steps into the bathroom, hosing himself down with the shower before sinking into the tub. Sora tumbles in after him, drenched from head to toe.

“The bath isn’t a swimming pool…”

“No!” Sora laughs, responding to Akaashi by splashing about in the water and kicking up a flood in his face. “I’m swimming!”

“You guys done?” Mari calls out from the hallway. “We’re all kind of waiting here.”

“I’m finishing up!” Akaashi wriggles out of the tub and pats himself down with the towel, dragging Sora away from the door before he can parade around in his birthday suit.

Bokuto is the last one to step into the bath, and hop back out with a grey t-shirt and shorts on him. His hair is dripping wet, and the small towel resting on his shoulders catch the drops coming from it.

“Thanks for the bath. And… letting me stay.”

“It’s no problem at all. Koutarou-kun, is it okay if you could share a bed with Keiji?” Akaashi’s mother hands Bokuto a glass of warm milk with honey stirred in.

“I’ll sleep on the floor! It’s fine, really!” Bokuto shakes his head, grinning. “I shouldn’t-”

“But you should.” Akaashi’s mother dries off his hair gently, smooth and unwaxed. “You’re our guest. You’re going to sleep somewhere warm.”

“Thanks, m-” Bokuto shuts his mouth, and opens it. “Mrs. Akaashi.”

Akaashi’s bed is wide enough to accommodate the two of them. He rolls over to the far side, rubbing his eyes. “Goodnight, Bokuto-san.”

He’s surprised when Bokuto curls up beside him, and nestles his cheek into his shoulder. “Night, Akaashi.” He mumbles something he can’t get, and sinks into the mattress.

Before Akaashi can talk to him, Bokuto’s already fast asleep. He reaches up to stroke his hair, floppy and flat. It’s not spiky, like the way he’s used to seeing it. It’s Bokuto, to himself.

“Bokuto-san.”

He carefully wraps his arm around him, and Bokuto groans in his sleep. Akaashi is in love with him. He’s in love with his third year senpai, laying beside him with a silly, relaxed expression on him. That’s the Bokuto he loves.
There’s a charming glow to him. His smooth skin shines in the moonlight, and his features are illuminated. Akaashi wonders what it would be like to date him, to move in with him and see his snoozing face every night.

Akaashi closes his eyes, his face inches away from Bokuto’s. If he could be the one to make him smile, that would be the only thing that would matter.

And it all comes back.

Akaashi feels it on his fingertips, on the very top of his skin. The emotions, the feelings, the sensations.

The empathy is bursting inside his chest. He thinks he’ll cry. The pressure is almost too much, but it’s what he’s been used to for many years. It’s something he’ll shoulder for the years to come, too.

He embraces Bokuto, glad he’s able to awaken the power inside him once again. He needs them, for his friend’s sake. Bokuto is warm, and soft in various places that aren’t toned muscle.

He wants to kiss him, in the places hidden by the shadows.

A whispered sob comes out of Bokuto, who twitches and groans against the pillow.

Akaashi sits up and watches him closely, making sure he won’t fall off the bed or knock something over by accident. Bokuto whines, his entire body stretching and curling. His hands palm around for nothing, until they grab onto Akaashi’s arm.

“Are you all right?” Akaashi whispers, but Bokuto only whimpers and cries out incoherently. “Bokuto-san? What’s the matter?”

He doesn’t want to shake him awake, but he’s distressed and in discomfort. “Bokuto-san.” He calls to him again, placing his palm on his shoulder and rubbing him. “Wake up. It’s all right.”

“I’m sorry.” Bokuto cries out, eyes snapping open. “I’m sorry, mom.”


“Aka...ashi?” Bokuto looks around, confused.

“It’s me. Akaashi. You’re at my house, and nothing will hurt you. You’re safe here.” Akaashi whispers, combing through Bokuto’s hair. “It’s only a nightmare. Nothing will harm you here. We’re all safe here.”

“Really?” Bokuto mumbles, and Akaashi turns on the lamp to a dim setting. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yes.” Akaashi nods slowly. “Everyone here is all right. We’re here for you. Go back to sleep, all right? I’ll be right beside you.”

Bokuto’s eyes glisten, before they close again. “Lov’ you, Akaashi...” He says, after snuggling close to Akaashi. He drops off to sleep not long after, leaving Akaashi burning red in the face and squishy in the chest.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading! Comments and kudos please!
Actually, funny enough, a few days ago I celebrated a year of being clean. Hooray.
“I like your head pats, so I’ll forgive you.” Bokuto giggles, snuggling into Akaashi’s touch comfortably. “You make me feel like everything’s okay.”

“I’m… glad.” Akaashi rubs Bokuto’s ears with gentle fingers. “You’re very important to me, Bokuto-san. I hope you know that.”

“So are you! Love you a lot, Akaashi!” He isn’t entirely convinced that he’s not a complete burden to Akaashi, but Akaashi’s words do mean more to him than simple phrases coming out of someone’s mouth.

When Bokuto wakes up, Akaashi is beside him.

He almost panics, until he realises that his parents aren’t there. It’s just Akaashi, and his family. They’re safe with each other. He can smell Akaashi’s scent, and their hair has the same refreshing scent of lavender shampoo.

“Akaashi?” Bokuto whispers, threading through his messy hair. He leans down, nuzzling his cheek into Akaashi’s. “Akaashiiii, wake up.”

Akaashi makes a sound that almost sounds like a mewl. His eyes are open, and he relaxes when he sees Bokuto. A split second later, he mumbles a “Wha?”, shooting up at such force that he bangs foreheads with Bokuto.

“Ow, man…”

Bokuto rubs his forehead, lips tightened into a pout. Like one of his emo modes, but without the actual sulking.

“I forgot you were staying over, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi explains hastily, wiping his eyes. Bokuto notices him hiding a laugh, and decides to wind him up a little.

“Well, don’t! My poor forehead.” Bokuto whines. But he remembers quickly, the relieved look on Akaashi’s face when he saw him as he woke up. Maybe Akaashi enjoys his presence, more than he
Akaashi pats Bokuto’s head. “Right, sorry, sorry.”

“I like your head pats, so I’ll forgive you.” Bokuto giggles, snuggling into Akaashi’s touch comfortably. “You make me feel like everything’s okay.”

“I’m… glad.” Akaashi rubs Bokuto’s ears with gentle fingers. “You’re very important to me, Bokuto-san. I hope you know that.”

“So are you! Love you a lot, Akaashi!” He isn’t entirely convinced that he’s not a complete burden to Akaashi, but Akaashi’s words do mean more to him than simple phrases coming out of someone’s mouth.

“I really do love you. I do.” Bokuto repeats, as if to drown out the dread rising in his chest at the prospect of returning home. They still have practice to attend before he has to go there, though. A few hours of freedom, for him.

After having breakfast at the Akaashi residency, Bokuto and Akaashi head out of the house with volleyball bags in their hands. Bokuto hums a few songs as he heads to school, while Akaashi rubs his eyes sleepily.

Fukurodani volleyball club goes on for weekends, too. Akaashi and Bokuto both don’t particularly mind that. For Bokuto, it’s a chance to better himself and spend more time outside his household.

“Oi.” Konoha wrinkles his nose, as soon as Bokuto and Akaashi enter.

Bokuto raises his brows, unsure of Konoha’s apparent distaste. “What’s the matter, Konoha? You have food poisoning, or somethin’?”

Konoha rolls his eyes. “You two smell of the same shampoo. How long have you been together?”

“I’ve stayed at his house overnight, so like… twelve hours?” Bokuto answers.

Akaashi and Konoha let out a sigh in unison. “Right, let’s move on from this.” Bokuto doesn’t get what they’re whining about, but when he tries to ask, they both shut him up before he can say anything.

Konoha blinks. “But seriously, are you guys not-”

“No.” Akaashi shuts him down, before he can even finish the sentence. “Now come on. We have to take out the ball crates.”

Bokuto bounces after Akaashi, blissfully unaware. “All right! Toss! Toss to me, Akaashi!” He doesn’t catch the sympathetic look Konoha gives to Akaashi.

Bokuto heads home with a heavy heart. He hasn’t left the house for this long in quite a while. Hopefully, he won’t be punished too harshly. But he shouldn’t be, at all. He hasn’t been burdening his parents by using the water or taking food.

“Home…” Bokuto mumbles, opening the door. He holds it firmly so it won’t click. His parents aren’t waiting for him downstairs, thankfully. His own home’s scent is unfamiliar. He smells like Akaashi’s shampoo.
Nobody welcomes him back home. But he thinks it’s better that way, in some tragic way. It never ends well when his parents talk to him straight after he comes home from somewhere.

He has an overwhelming itch to call Akaashi on his phone, but reluctantly decides against it. He doesn’t get the same destructive urge that he’s had after he comes home from school. Instead, he’s calm, Akaashi’s voice playing out in his head, over and over again.

It’s not your fault.

Of all people, Akaashi is the one to tell him that. He’s not being blamed for being a problem child, for once. Akaashi appreciates him for who he is. Maybe he shouldn’t be happy about it- if Akaashi knew how selfish and incompetent he really was, he wouldn’t associate with him anymore.

But he gets the happy, floating feeling in his stomach whenever Akaashi assures him that he’s not a horrible, ungrateful person. And he has something strange in his heart when he sees him.

He’s gay.

Not for Akaashi, though… right? He may be gay, but that doesn’t mean he likes any and every guy he meets. Akaashi is his best friend, not his crush. He loves him. But not in the way that lovers do.

Crap. The image of Akaashi kissing him runs through his mind, and his entire face burns. He can imagine how his chapped lips will feel against his own, how close Akaashi’s scent is to his nose. How he can hear the soft sounds come out of his mouth.

A shiver runs through Bokuto. He lays in the starfish position in his bed, and pulls the covers up to his chin. He chews on the fabric lightly, his mind working through his gay crisis.

Akaashi is physically attractive. That’s why he feels that way when he imagines him doing this and that to him. His arms would feel so warm and good around him. His frame would fit against his so perfectly.

He would fit in Akaashi’s arms so cozily. It’s comfortable, and he loves it.

“Akaashi… Akaashi Koutarou… Bokuto Keiji…”

Their names together sound funny. He’s not sure what he would do if they actually married. Join it like Bokuto-Akaashi? Merge it, like Bokuashi or Akato?

Bokuto kekkon shite kudasai- Marry me.

Bokuto almost explodes on the spot. There’s several things wrong with that- Akaashi refers to himself by ore, not boku. And the confession doesn’t sound right, either. But why would it matter? He’s not going to get proposed to anytime soon.

He crosses his arms, rubbing his bare skin. He imagines Akaashi’s hands on him. They stroke him softly, comforting him. He’d let him do anything, everything he pleased. He would be gentle. Bokuto knows it. The room feels too warm all of a sudden.

All of a sudden, there’s a knock on his door. Bokuto leaps out of his skin, assembling himself into a less suspicious position. He swallows, and murmurs “Yeah?”.

His mother steps into his room, just as Bokuto sits perched on the side of his bed. She stands near him, but doesn’t sit with him. “Koutarou, you’ve spent a lot of time at your friend’s house, haven’t you?”
“They told me I could study at their house.” Bokuto explains. “I won’t bother you during the weekends. I think that’s the best for all of us right now.”

“Do you have a problem with our household?”

Bokuto freezes. It’s not the answer he was expecting. “It’s not that, I just prefer studying with Akaashi and his siblings. They’re nice to me.” He mumbles, taken aback by the strange question.

His mother stares at him with a frown. “Are you saying we don’t treat you nicely?”

“No, I’m not, I guess I just…”

She continues. “We only do everything out of love. If I didn’t care about you, I’d throw you onto the streets. We keep a roof over your head and feed you. Are you not grateful for that? What’s making you so unhappy?”

Bokuto shakes his head. “No, I’m grateful! I just… I want some more food sometimes. There’s barely any in the fridge, and I’m hungry a lot here.”

“And you’re wasting your friend’s food?” She points an accusatory finger at him. “You’re making everyone have less food just by staying there. Do you think you’re really worth that?”

Bokuto’s eyes widen. If his own parents think of him as that much of a burden, he can only imagine what Akaashi’s mother must think of him. They’re already a big family. Bokuto doesn’t need to come along and steal their food like a disgusting pig.

“But… they love me. They won’t think that.” Bokuto argues, biting his lip and staring at the floor. “Why don’t you love me, mom?”

“I would love you more if you weren’t so difficult all the time! You always waste the things in our house, and you don’t even have good grades to make up for it!”

Bokuto can’t argue with his grades being subpar, but he still tries his best not to use more than necessary. He’s always taken care not to let the tap running for longer than necessary. He’s taken care not to use too many squares of toilet paper.

“I’d love this household more if you guys acted like you cared about me!” He retorts. “It’s not fair. I’m always hungry and miserable here. You guys are always so cold to me…”

Bokuto cuts himself off with a sniff. His eyes and nose sting. Tears spill from his eyes, and he covers himself with his hands. He doesn’t want to be seen.

“You’re crying over this? What are you, five years old?”

He’s belittled again. It’s not his fault, he wants to say. Like Akaashi told him. But slowly, he’s forgetting all the things Akaashi told him. The warm words fade in his chest, replaced with cold bitterness like an icicle.

He’s loved, but he’s not grateful enough. He always wants more, because he’s greedy.

“I don’t know why you would do this, if you really love me…” Bokuto’s voice is distorted with his sobs. His face is wet with upset and despair. His face that his parents don’t want to see.

“It’s because we love you. This is so that you won’t be a failure to society, Koutarou. You’re not good enough this way. You need some tough love.”
She leaves the room, and Bokuto is left alone, sitting on his bed. His chest heaves with every sob. He just wants to go to sleep. He wants to break himself.

He goes to sleep with the help of two insomnia pills and three fresh wounds on his arm.

“Bokuto! Come on, give it back!” His classmate Suzuki laughs, as Bokuto waves his pencil in his face and pretends to give it to him. “Here, come on! Stop being a bitch and give it back!”

“Nah, don’t wanna!” Bokuto sticks the pencil high into the air, where his shorter classmate can’t reach. He enjoys winding some of his classmates up, although he knows better than to piss off some of the quiet ones. But most of them are a good sport, and take his jokes and pranks well.

“Come on, that’s cheating! You’re way taller than me!”

“No, it’s not. Just grow!” Bokuto laughs, throwing the pencil into the air and catching it. His sleeve slips down, exposing thin red lines on his arm. They look noticeably painful, and self-inflicted.

Suzuki and two other students glance at them, before Bokuto realises what happened. “Eh? What? Why are you guys quiet all of a sudden?”

One of the other students tap on their own arm. “You’re not… What happened to your arm? What, are you self harming? Are you mentally ill or something?” They stare at him, as if there’s something seriously wrong with his mental state.

“Huh? No! Of course I’m not!” Bokuto shakes his head, but his heartbeat is way too loud inside his ribcage. He hopes they don’t notice the slight crack in his voice as he speaks. “I just got it caught in some volleyball equipment!”

The students just laugh with him. “Right. You’re probably the last person I’d expect to have those issues. You just seem so simple, like a single-celled organism!”

Bokuto ignores the words, that feel like a punch to the gut. “I know, right?” He’s betraying his own self by laughing about it. He should have spoken up, and said that there was nothing wrong with someone for having mental health problems. But that’s not who he is to them, and he is nothing without his carefully constructed shell that covers his whole body. A shell so thin and tight-fitting that it’s choking him, and only barely holding everything in.

He can’t do this to himself. It just doesn’t fit his image. He’s not meant to have those problems. He’s happy, jolly, exciting Bokuto Koutarou. That’s what people are attracted to. Not the moping, ungrateful son who is unloved and a burden. People only like him if he’s enjoyable and entertaining to be around. And that’s what he tries to be.

But no amount of pretending and showing off will change the fact that he feels miserable and down whenever he has to head home to his parents.

There’s the smell of vegetables in the kitchen, when Bokuto gets home. He isn’t appetized, because he’s already eaten with Akaashi before coming home. He’s already anticipated getting no dinner. He heads up to his room, grabbing his headphones.

He plans to listen to some new songs Kuroo’s recommended to him, but a shout that travels up the stairs interrupts what would have been a calm evening.

“Koutarou, get over here!” His mother yells, and he reluctantly pads down the stairs again. He
Bokuto reenters the kitchen, and blinks at the odd display on the table. Bokuto’s confusion only increases when he finds a bowl of strange-looking salad on the table. There are two plates with multiple food items on it. They must be his parents’.

“That’s your dinner. Don’t waste any of it.” His mother points at the salad.

“...What?” Bokuto can’t bring himself to sit down. He’s in too much shock to comprehend it. “I’m not hungry. I already ate after practice.”

His mother isn’t taking his excuses. “You want to be fed? You get fed. Take what you get, and stop being an ungrateful brat for once in your life.”

Bokuto realises what this is. He remembers pleading for food to his mother, but now, he doesn’t have any right to refuse it. Dread creeps up on his stomach. He hates himself for being so careless as to let that slip from his mouth.

He sits at the table, swallowing the burn in his chest. He sticks his chopsticks into his food and slowly carries it to his mouth, pressing the vegetables to his teeth. They’re unseasoned, and the flavours conflict and clash with one another.

“Can’t you even say thanks for the meal?”

Bokuto’s shaky hands press together. “Thanks… for the meal.”

He chews and chews. His whole mouth tastes bitter. It shouldn’t feel so unpleasant, but there’s a sinking feeling in his stomach alike to gagging. And there’s the lingering feeling that he wants to get out of here. He has to. But where will he go, after that?

Clear spit fills his mouth, and he wipes a streak off the side of his mouth, before he’s punished for being disgusting.

He stares at himself, his trembling hands. Why is he doing this to himself? Why is nobody stopping it from happening?

His whole mouth is filled with an unpleasant green taste, and he fights the urge to gag. He finishes about half of the food before he hiccups into his palm, brows creasing with discomfort.

“And if you throw up, you’ll still eat. I’m not tolerating your theatrics today. I’ve made you food, now eat it without complaining.”

Bokuto flinches. Of course, he reminds himself. He’ll only be put through something worse if he fails to eat it all. He doesn’t know what the punishment will be, and he intends to keep it that way.

He shovels mouthfuls of tasteless vegetables into his mouth, struggling not to choke on it.

There’s a heaviness in his stomach that turns into a widespread ache. Bokuto is a big eater, but even he has limits. He covers his mouth with his hand, heading upstairs when the ordeal is finally over.

He feels sick to his stomach. Everything is swirling around, like a dirty whirlpool in a flood. The pain piling onto him is already starting to break his spine.

Bokuto feels the rush of cold water on his cheek. He’s been drifting in and out of recent memories, the freezing coolness on his skin screwing with his perception of time. How long has he been in the
bathroom?

His eyes open and shut again, numerous times. He was supposed to go to sleep two hours ago. Well, he had gone to sleep- but not for long, because he was still drowsy when he was dragged out of bed, without even being allowed to change out of his night clothes.

They’re now soaking wet, with the blasts of water that the shower hits him. Droplets drip off his skin, and his body is weighed down by his sopping, drenched clothes.

“Why don’t you use this as a lesson to keep your head cool, next time?!”

Bokuto only shivers in response to his father’s words. Bad decision. A dull thud echoes inside his head. The shower head hitting his head creates a bruise, and throbs with sharp pain when he moves.

To him, to love is to endure violence.

He can’t be in love with Akaashi. He doesn’t see himself getting eventually beaten by him for being a horrible boyfriend. He doesn’t want to see it happen. But it surely will, if they end up dating. If Akaashi sees him for the useless idiot he really is.

His head hurts worse. He’s lost count of how many times he’s been hit with the shower head. The autumn weather is cold. He shivers, soaked through to the bone.

Anger makes Bokuto upset. Both his own and his parents’.

When he’s yelled at and struck at, his heart soaks everything up like a sponge, bursting and bleeding when he absorbs too much. It’s how he’s made, how he’s programmed to be. His parents don’t know or care very much.

The emo mode is timed carefully, executed like a master plan. Really, he didn’t even need to feign anything- the sleep deprivation gets to him quickly, and he misses the spikes he should have been able to hit no problem.

But instead of the crushing guilt and the horrible twist of frustration in his chest, Bokuto feels relieved.

Relieved that he can finally vent out his feelings without burdening anyone.

“Oi, Bokuto… What’s wrong this time? You’re not on your game.”

Konoha crawls on his hands and knees, to match eyes with the whining Bokuto under the desk.

“I don’t care! Everything is stupid, and I don’t like it!” Bokuto complains childishy. He doesn’t give so much away, so that none of his teammates will suspect anything.

“Bokuto… You gotta use your words. C’mon, work with us here.”

Konoha reaches down to touch his shoulder, and Bokuto flinches too hard.

In an instant, he jumps, and bangs his head on the bottom of the desk. He whimpers in pain, groaning as he holds his head in between his arms.

“Hey, you okay?”
But when Bokuto closes his eyes, the face he sees is definitely not Konoha, and he’s feeling like he’s going to faint, everything is a blur-

“Bokuto!”

His eyes snap open. “I’m sorry!” He buries his face into his arms, bracing himself tightly. “I’m sorry, I’m… sorry!”

Konoha moves the desk out of the way. He’s exposing him, peeling back all the layers he’s been hiding away at his core. He doesn’t want to be looked at. Nobody should be looking at him.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything to you. Can you stand?”

Konoha offers a hand to Bokuto. He takes it, staring hard into his eyes. He lets out an exhale. It’s Konoha. He won’t hurt him. He can breathe again. His lungs fill with air, as if he’s just started to pump on them again.

“There we go.” Konoha pats him on the head. “You see? Everything’s okay. You don’t have to apologize for anything.”

Bokuto falls into Konoha’s arms, hugging him tightly. He doesn’t do this during his usual emo modes- but then again, his usual emo modes are nowhere to be found.

“Thank you, Konoha.” Bokuto’s head is filled with warmth and comfort. “Thank you, so much.”

Another warmth joins them. It’s Sarukui, his arms wrapped around Bokuto softly. “Don’t worry about anything! You’re our ace. Whether you have bad days or not, we all still think you’re great.”

“Aw, come here! We love you!” Komi cuddles him too.

Onaga hobbles up to Bokuto too, patting his back. “I’m just a first year, but I really admire you, Bokuto-san. Please don’t be so hard on yourself.”

With Akaashi, Bokuto doesn’t even need the words. Out of everyone, he’s the one who Bokuto knows the most about. His smile is soft and gooey, like melted cotton candy.

“Bokuto-san, it’ll be your birthday soon. We’re thinking of going for yakiniku. How would you like that?”

His birthday. It’s in about a week, and he’d completely forgotten about it. But the temptation is great, and everyone is there to celebrate his eighteenth birthday. The age that unlocks many great things for him.

“I love you guys so much. I really do.”

Bokuto slips into his house, taking off his shoes.

He grabs the door handle and shuts it, without making a sound- or so he thought. The handle escapes from his grasp.

*Clang.*

Swallowing hard, Bokuto wobbles into the hallway, muttering gibberish from fear. He creeps down the hallway with silent steps, the wooden tiles creaking underneath,
“Koutarou, keep that noise down! You’re too loud! I have a goddamn headache!”

Immediately, Bokuto is filled with guilt. His mother is sick, and he’s made everything worse for her. After all she’s done for him. He’s too ungrateful. He should have known better.

“Mom? Are you okay? Do you want me to get painkillers?” Bokuto tiptoes into the kitchen, and finds his mother with her head pressed to the table. “I can go buy some if there’s none in the bathroom…”

“I’ve already taken some. What, do you want me to overdose? Is that what you want?”

“No! Of course not!” Bokuto retorts. “But you should be resting if you have a headache! I’ll do everything you need me to!”

His mother glares at him, and throws the nearest fork at him. Bokuto steps to the side, so that it only clips at his shoulder. “You’re happy that I’m suffering, aren’t you? You’re doing this, just to get at me. Just wait until your father comes home, and we’re done with you!”

“But…”

“Get out of my sight! I don’t want to see your disgusting face!”

Bokuto dashes out of the kitchen and up into his room, receiving the clear message that he was an unwanted presence. His house feels too small to get away from the fear of being hit. He wants a third storey, where only he can get into.

He wants to hide in a cosy cubbyhole under blankets and pillows, where nobody can hurt him. He doesn’t want to be here. Maybe it’s wrong to feel that way about his own home, but there’s no warmth surrounding him like it did when he was younger.

He was a good child when he was younger. Whatever caused him to be hurt by his parents, something had to be his fault. He shouldn’t be complaining about it. Abuse is what Kuroo went through, not what’s happening to him right now.

“Koutarou, can’t you even bring me a glass of water?! You’re not even good for anything!”

Bokuto hops down the stairs again, shakily pouring some water into a glass and handing it to his mother. “I’m sorry. It’s here.”

She waves him off again, once he’s finished being useful. The atmosphere turns sour, like a soda that’s gone bad. “If you’re really sorry, why don’t you write down how much you’re sorry? Your words mean nothing to me.”

Bokuto stays standing, raising his brows in confusion. “What do you…”

His mother grabs a notepad, rips out a page and slams it down on the table. “Go on! Write down how sorry you are! Until then, I don’t want to hear a peep from you! Do you hear me?!“

He’s confused beyond reason, but he picks up a pencil and sets it on the paper to write.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. And I really mean it. I won’t disappoint you guys again. I won’t eat too much like a disgusting animal. I won’t waste any water or clothes or anything else. I will do anything I can to help our household.

I’m sorry, to mom and dad. I know I’ve messed up so many times. But please believe me that I
didn’t do it to make you guys suffer. I’ve been an idiot and I know I deserve to be punished for that. I’ll work harder so you guys won’t yell at me.

I want our old family back. I remember how you guys loved each other, and me. I love you guys. I miss the old warmth our home had. I’m not trying to make this about me, and I’m sorry if it sounds that way. I want to see you guys smile at me again.

I won’t complain or cry like a baby. I promise. I’ll do better. I’m sorry for making you hit me. I’m sorry for not appreciating my privileges enough. I won’t spend so much time out of the house. I’m an idiot but I will never do anything to make you guys suffer on purpose.

I love you, mom and dad. I just want us to be smiling again and eating at the same dinner table. I really am grateful to have food in the house and a roof over my head.

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears as he writes and writes. The words come flowing out onto the page, and he’s written the apology letter faster than any essay he’s ever done for school.

The page is blotted with tears, and Bokuto bites his lip, preventing his sobs from escaping.

Thank you for teaching me about real life. I’m too soft and I expect everyone to take care of all my mistakes. I know you love me and it’s just tough love when you hit me. I’m sorry, I love you.

As soon as he stops writing, the page is taken from his hands. He retreats back to his room in a hurry, biting on his fist. He’s a horrible son, and he’s really starting to feel like one too.

He’s just so upset about having to write it into words.

Bokuto had promised himself he would try not to hurt himself, for the sake of Akaashi. Ever since he’d shown Akaashi what his legs looked like, he can’t get the horrified look he had out of his head. Every red line is like a physical manifestation of his thoughts- I hate myself, and here’s evidence I believe so.

Akaashi. Lovely, warm Akaashi.

Coldness in his own home, and Akaashi being there to pull him out of it. But he can’t see the hand anymore. He’s lost again, entangled in a deep web of hate and black goo. He’s like prey, tied up and bound so tight with white string he can barely move. He’s waiting for the inevitable, resigned.

There’s a sharp object in Bokuto’s right hand. It’s a tool meant for cutting things open and splitting paper. His spiker hand is being contaminated. His spiker arms and spiker legs are tainted with symbols of self-hatred and despair.

And it’s not like he wants to die. He just wants a distraction. From the panic, the unreasonable sense of sadness, the self-doubt. Guilt, frustration, piling up.

Because when he puts himself through pain that bleeds and burns, he can put a bandage over it and treat the wounds. It’s a much more simpler process than undoing everything in his heart.

So Bokuto presses the sharp tip to his thigh again, reminding himself not to pull away too early. The initial pain is sharp and it stings, and only worsens when he drags the blade across his skin. He winces and squeezes his eyes shut, increasing the pressure on his thigh.

When he glances down at his leg, his eyes widen.
The open wound is too wide. It looks white, until small splotches of blood start to appear. It’s too deep. His hands tremble, and the blood starts to leak out of the cut.

He squeezes the wound shut as best as he can, pinching the sides of it and praying that it’ll somehow fuse together.

“Please, please, please…” Bokuto murmurs, letting go and pinching over and over again. Everything is too hot all of a sudden, and his palms start to sweat.

No. It wasn’t part of the plan to cut himself that deep.

He can feel himself descending into panic. He paces around his room nervously, swallowing the bitter-tasting spit that rises in his mouth. He doesn’t want a huge, ugly scar on his leg. But the last thing he’ll do is go anywhere near a hospital. The corner of his vision begins to swim.

Akaashi will think of him as selfish. Or maybe he’ll be disappointed. He won’t love him anymore if he keeps adding more and more scars to his body.

The thought of Akaashi being disgusted with him almost makes Bokuto throw up. He tumbles to the ground, on all fours. His soul feels like it’ll jump out from his mouth. Thoughts accelerating. Eyes burning. Something swallowing him whole.

Bokuto averts his eyes from the injury and the tool that caused it. He hits speed dial for Akaashi. There’s no answer for five seconds. That’s what sends the tears down his cheeks. He presses dial. Again. Again.

Come on, come on, comeoncomeoncomeon. Anything but that. Locked into his mind alone. His good-for-nothing brain, causing him mayhem in the first place. He’s scared of what it tells him to do. It panics too much and tells him to cry after every minor upset.

“Bokuto-san? Did you need me?”

Bokuto opens his mouth, but the words don’t come out.

“Hello? Everything all right? Bokuto-san?”

“Akaashi!”

Bokuto doesn’t know what to tell him. It’s already late at night, and if he confesses what’s happened to Akaashi, he’ll definitely try to come to his house. He needs a cover story.

“Tell me a story. Any story. Please.”

Oh god, it’s the worst excuse he can come up with. But Akaashi somehow senses his urgency, and doesn’t hang up on the spot. “All right, Bokuto-san. Stay there and listen to me.”

Bokuto breathes again. “Thank you, Akaashi. Thank you so much.”

“Once upon a time, there was a boy who fell in love with a star.”

Akaashi whispers, and Bokuto slips under the covers, placing his phone beside him on the pillow.

“He couldn’t reach the star, because it’s so high and far up in the sky. So he studied and studied, and became an astronaut.”

Bokuto thinks Akaashi is good at telling stories. It has to be his voice, and how soft and velvety it
is. He would make for an excellent dad, reading picture books to his kid.

“And he flew his spacecraft right into the stratosphere and beyond. His lovely star shone the brightest out of all, but when he finally reached it, he couldn’t take off his spacesuit to give his star a kiss.

“So he took the star into his spacecraft and stored it in a glass jar, so he could admire it as he flew back to earth. But when he came back to earth, his family, who disapproved of his star, threw the glass jar with the star inside it away into the sea.” Akaashi pauses.

“I’m listening, Akaashi. Go on.” Bokuto mumbles.

“All right.” Akaashi resumes his talking. “The man, devastated that the star was nowhere to be seen, tripped on a bridge and fell right off. Just as his body was going to hit the water, the stars in the sky swooped down to take him to outer space once again.

“And the man transformed into a beautiful star, shining brightly beside his love for millions of years.”

Bokuto’s mouth hangs open in a pleasant shape. “I really like that story, Akaashi. Did you make it yourself?”

Akaashi clumsily clears his throat. “Yes, Bokuto-san, I did.”

“You really are amazing, Akaashi. Thanks.”

Bokuto presses the end call button, before he can say anything stupid.

Tomorrow, he has to talk to Akaashi.

“...Um, Akaishi, thanks for yesterday. You helped me a lot.”

There’s a downpour of rain outside, and he hears the continuous sound of water beating down on the ground. Practice has ended, but they had lingered for more tosses, until rain came along.

Akaashi wants to know his reasons for calling him, he can tell. There’s a sense of obligation Bokuto has, that pushes him to open his mouth.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” Akaashi assures him. “It’s all right.”

Bokuto lets out a shaky breath. “I cut myself bad last night.” Before Akaashi can say anything, he launches himself into a rant. “I know I shouldn’t have. It was stupid and it hurt and I’m an idiot. There’s something wrong with me, Akaashi. My head feels sick and it feels like it’s gonna explode. I don’t want to be disgusting, Akaashi!”

“Look at me.” Akaashi pulls him close, his voice ringing out through the rain. “There’s nothing wrong or disgusting about you.”

No. Akaashi doesn’t get it. He’s only saying that to cheer him up. He’s seen what he’s done to himself. Of course he’s disgusted. He just can’t admit it because he’s scared of what’ll happen if he does.

But Bokuto won’t blame him. The person who hates Bokuto Koutarou the most is himself.

“Bokuto-san, breathe!”
His lips tremble, and when Akaashi starts to desperately give him instructions, he realises he’s not breathing properly.

Bokuto’s mouth is dry, and his hands tremble as he grasps as his sanity. He inhales too quickly, too shallow. “It’s all right. It’s all right, don’t worry about this.” Akaashi presses his hand on Bokuto’s back, rubbing gently until Bokuto stops hyperventilating.

“You’re doing well.” Akaashi’s words caress him. Bokuto wants to tell him that he’s not, he’s sunk lower than ever. “Don’t worry about anything else. Just breathe, slowly. Match my pace.”

Bokuto is being praised, just by adjusting his breathing to his non-panic state. He doesn’t understand. He hasn’t achieved anything noteworthy.

His pants slowly become soft inhales and exhales. Akaashi nods when he meets his eye, signalling that he’s doing good. The rain rings in his ears. Akaashi is still rubbing circles on his back, and it feels good.

“Thanks… Sorry about that. I don’t know what happened…”

“It may be an anxiety attack. It can happen to anyone, and you don’t need to feel bad about it.” Akaashi explains. “Bokuto-san, I think you should really talk to a professional about this. For your own wellbeing.”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears. If he does that, he’ll be taken away and locked up somewhere and labelled dangerous to himself. He’s scared.

“You don’t have to tell them about your parents. And they won’t ask to see your cuts, either. Getting everything off your chest will feel good.”

“But…” Bokuto thinks of the school counsellor. Maybe he can just talk about how he feels, without getting into the uncomfortable details. “Will you come with me, Akaashi? I don’t really feel like I can do this on my own. I’m sorry.”

“Of course, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi nods. “Let’s go tomorrow morning, all right?”

“Okay.”

Bokuto isn’t entirely sure about it yet, but he’s already agreed to it. He won’t skip it just because he suddenly wants to back out. He can’t disappoint Akaashi, after he’s worked up the courage to speak up about it.

Bokuto’s palms are sweaty.

He’d gone to sleep confident that he would feel better in the morning, but he hardly does. He dreads getting out of bed, but he knows what the consequences of staying at home are. So he lifts himself out of the sheets, grabbing his uniform on the floor.

His shirt is blood-stained, and he’s once again reminded of how disturbed his brain’s gotten. It makes him feel sick, so he decides not to think about it anymore.

Akaashi holds his hand when he meets him, even though he knows he’s sweating too much and his hands are slippery. Bokuto is tense the entire way to the counsellor’s office, gripping Akaashi’s fingers too tightly.
“Excuse me? Is it okay to come in?”

Akaashi is the one who calls out from outside, but he doesn’t walk into the room until Bokuto shuffles in.

There’s a seat, that Bokuto is prompted to sit down at. “I needed some help with… something.” Bokuto explains vaguely, while Akaashi stands beside him. “And I’d rather have him in the room with me.”

“I don’t mind that, if that’s what you guys worked out.” The counsellor nods. He’s a young, plain-faced man, with refreshing features and neat hair. “What are you here to talk about?”

“So, I’m feeling bad and really down, and I’ve hurt myself because of it.” Bokuto struggles with the right words, and pauses for a moment. “I’m not suicidal. You won’t find me in a newspaper in a week’s time. But I know cutting isn’t normal, and I don’t want to do it anymore.”

To his immense relief, the counsellor doesn’t freak out on him. He doesn’t show any kind of strong emotion, really. “Is there something actively causing you to do this?”

“No.” Bokuto replies hastily. “I mean, yeah. I have some reasons, I guess. But they’re not… I can’t explain it.”

“That’s okay.” The counsellor doesn’t have any notebooks or clipboards, like Bokuto assumed. He simply nods and doesn’t ask for more. “Would you like ways to reduce the urge, or do you want to just talk?”

“Tell me.” Bokuto pleads. “Anything to get out of… that place.” He doesn’t know where exactly the dangerous place is, but he knows it’s not good, just by instinct.

“Talking can help, like right now. But more specifically, holding cold objects against your skin or doing distraction activities can help. It’s best to keep your hands occupied.”

Bokuto glances at the leaflets stacked on the small wooden desk, and picks one up. “Is this… a website?”

There’s information about support groups and online pages. It’s where he won’t be alone, with his screwed-up brain. There are other students his age with problems like his own.

“Ah, feel free to take one.” The counsellor offers him a few pages, and Bokuto reads through each one carefully. “I recommend Safeheart. It’s completely anonymous if you want it to be.”

Anonymous. It’s a comfortable word to hide behind. Nobody can threaten to tell his parents, if they don’t even know him. He slides the leaflet into his pocket, and stands up. The bell is about to ring.

“I’m going to go to class. Thanks. Sorry I kind of left you there, Akaashi.”

Bokuto picks up the leaflet, and types the webpage URL into his address bar.

It’s lunchtime, and Akaashi sits beside him, watching over him. “How does it look?” He asks. The page loads, and there’s a stock photo of happy teenagers sitting on grass.

“Looks like the colours are trying to drag me out of my crappy moods.” Bokuto jokes. There’s an orange ribbon at the top of the page. He taps the “Find a Friend” option.

“I’m really proud of you.” Akaashi smiles at him, and he grows red.
“Haven’t done anything for you to be proud of.” Bokuto mumbles. “I might not even get better. I might not be able to breathe properly again. I…”

“That’s okay.” Akaashi reaches for his hair, and pats him. “You made a step in the right direction. You might still have bad days, but it won’t erase the progress you’ve made.”

Bokuto’s eyes become rounded. “I never thought about it that way,” he mumbles, “I thought… I’m not normal. I can’t be fixed. I’m selfish.”

“Thanks for opening my eyes, Akaashi.”

He spreads his arms and moves in for a hug, a genuine smile blossoming on his face. Akaashi accepts it, allowing himself to be swallowed up in his chest. Bokuto holds him tightly, as if he’s going to slip away if he lets go.

“You’re amazing. Even if you think otherwise, you’ll be always amazing to me, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi whispers to him, eyes gleaming with tears. “Don’t ever forget.”

“Mmhm.” Bokuto lets Akaashi cuddle him, not questioning why Akaashi is the one about to cry. “Thanks, Akaashi. I appreciate you a lot.”

Akaashi tosses a yakisoba bread into Bokuto’s lap. “It’s my treat. Please accept it.”

Bokuto giggles, peeling the greasy plastic wrap from the noodles and bread. “You know, I shouldn’t be accepting food from you. I’m older than you.”

“Well, screw those stupid Japanese traditions. Just because it’s been there forever doesn’t make it right.” Akaashi retorts unexpectedly.

“I always thought you’d be a tradition-this-tradition-that guy, to be honest.” Bokuto laughs, taking a bite into the yakisoba bread. It’s savoury, slightly spicy, and the bread compliments it all.

Akaashi huffs. “Sure, tradition is important. But tradition and rigidity are two different things. It used to be acceptable to punish gay people. It used to be acceptable for teachers to cane students. Some traditions are fit to die out.”

“Whoa,” Bokuto blinks at Akaashi’s statement, “I think you just said something quote-worthy. You really are my smart Akaashi!”

Akaashi turns away, muttering something in his mouth. It looks like he’s slowly chewing his words, and it’s cute in such an Akaashi way. Bokuto watches him, mesmerized.

Bokuto looks through the website on his own, at home. He lays on his bed, scrolling through the terms of services and rules about posting and “Finding a Friend”.

He’d clicked through some qualities about himself and his struggles, and chosen some qualities he looked for in a friend. The website would then match him with someone, who would supposedly be a relaxing figure to talk to. Someone who he could have a mutually beneficial relationship with.

It takes longer than he expected, and the loading bar is only at 47%. Bokuto takes out his books and waits for the screen to load, flopping over and rolling in his blankets.

His phone makes a popping noise, indicating that the loading process is finished. He checks the screen, and he sees another profile with a cute doughnut as its avatar.
Hey, I’m QueenPepper! I’ll tell you my real name once I’m comfortable with you. I’m a third year in high school, gay and taken. I’m here to listen to you!

Bokuto feels a sense of togetherness when he notices that his match is gay, too. With Akaashi and Kuroo, it seems like he’s been blessed with many gay friends.

He sends an opening message to his match, nervous.

Yakinikkun

Hi. I’m Koutarou, and this website thing brought us together. I was recommended this webpage from my school counsellor.

The reply comes quickly, after Bokuto spent quite a few minutes formatting it.

QueenPepper

Hey. How are you feeling? I’ve just gotten back from chatting with my volleyball comrades.

Yakinikkun

No way!! You play volleyball too?? I’m a spiker!!

Sorry I kinda derailed. I’m feeling fine now, actually.

QueenPepper

Middle blocker. We have an amazing ace too.

Is this your first time here?

Yakinikkun

Yup!

QueenPepper

What made you want to do this, if you want to tell me?

Bokuto swallows. He’s nervous about talking to a total stranger about his problems, but there shouldn’t be any awkwardness. There’s not much that can happen over a screen, if he takes care.

Yakinikkun

My parents are giving me a hard time recently. I haven’t been feeling good, and I hurt myself because of it.

What about you? If you wanna tell me, that is.

Truthfully, Bokuto is curious. What kind of fucked-up thing has happened to his new friend? But he also doesn’t want to know about the horrible things that can happen to someone.

QueenPepper
I used to have kids bullying me. I was a weird kid, but I still don’t think I deserved it.

Here’s my LINE ID. We can chat there.

Yakinikkun

Nobody ever deserves to be bullied! You’re right!

Oh, sure!

After they switch the conversation onto another app, Bokuto begins to roll over. They talk about their schools and their volleyball positions, as well as some chat about academics and recent events.

QueenPepper

It’s late for me. Gotta get some stuff done and sleep. Rest well!

Bokuto’s eyes flap shut, after their conversation slowly ends. He has a few unread messages from Akaashi, asking him how his day was. But he doesn’t notice until the next day, sleeping soundly through the night.

Chapter End Notes

leave a comment you penis paninis
“Akaashi, I actually… If I’m being honest…” Bokuto sighs, and opens his mouth. “I don’t want to go home. I want to stay with you forever and ever. It’s so less exhausting. You don’t hit me or yell at me. I can’t ask for more.”

Akaashi takes Bokuto’s face into his hands. “Listen to me,” he whispers, maintaining eye contact. “You are allowed to ask for more. You’re not selfish for demanding basic respect. You’re allowed to say no to things you aren’t comfortable with.”

“And finally- you don’t owe them shit.”

Bokuto twitches. “But what if they stop loving me because I’m selfish?”

Chapter Notes

Hey, hey, hey!
So my update schedule quickened immensely, and it's only been 2 weeks since my last update!
I don't know exactly why, but there's not many responses on my latest works recently. Not to say that I'm complaining, I'm very grateful for each and every reader, but if there's anything I can improve with my writing, please don't hesitate to tell me!
OH!! AND THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH FOR 5000 HITS!!
I've never gotten so much reads on any of my fics ever, so this is a very big thing for me! Thank you so much for all this time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akaashi is stuck.

To pick a present for a close one is never easy. It can’t be too heartfelt, because that’s heavy, and it can’t be too practical, because there’s no emotion behind it.

Accessories are out of the question. Personalized mugs? A good idea, but there’s a fear of breakage, especially given the current circumstances. Something handmade? Akaashi’s fingertips are only ever used for volleyball.

Konoha had already called dibs on new volleyball shoes, splitting the cost between around four or five of other third years. Akaashi wants to get Bokuto something he can utilize in his everyday life, but he doesn’t know what Bokuto would want.

He walks out of the trinket shop empty-handed, sighing. Bokuto’s birthday is in six days, and he’s still stuck. His mind is totally constipated. He can’t think of what to get for him.

He starts to walk down the streets of Tokyo again. He’s in the prefecture full of opportunities, and
yet still stumped on what to do. He wants to do something nice for Bokuto.

Akaashi strolls past a planetarium, and stops. Bokuto loves the stars—gazing at them, talking about them, being one of them. Turning back, he realises that he’s thought of a perfect birthday plan.

Now, the question is, if he has enough money.

He checks the interior of the planetarium, just to know what to expect. A friendly guide greets him and hands him a pamphlet. There’s an event on a week later, where they can go on a scavenger hunt around the planetarium before heading to the observatory. There’s an amazing telescope too, with options to look into it to find the stars in the night sky. Akaashi doesn’t need to read it twice.

A gruff-looking high school student bows at him, presumably a part-timer. “We’ve done this last year, too. It might not look like much, but it’s fun. You should, uh, bring your friends with you too.” He explains, clearly not used to dealing with customers.

“I will. My best friend’s birthday is coming up, and I wanted to do something nice for him.” Akaashi says, “we’re both always so busy with club activities and school. I guess some fun once in a while won’t hurt.”

“It certainly won’t! How old is your friend going to be?” The friendly guide/owner of the planetarium nods. Akaashi realises he’s the one running the show, when he sees a photo of the man on the back of the pamphlet.

“He’ll be eighteen. I wanted to make it special for him, since we don’t have many chances to spend time like this together.”

“We’ll make sure to make it a good time for him. There’s a certain romance to gazing at the stars and making out the constellations, isn’t there?” The guide says.

Akaashi pales, and then realises that he’s not talking about romance in the literal sense. He stops himself from letting out an awkward laugh, and nods politely. “Yes, indeed there is. I think the beauty of the night sky is infinite enough to not get tired of it for decades.”

Akaashi stops by at the 100-yen shop to buy some birthday goods. He buys the traditional “Today’s Main Character” sash, some confetti crackers, and a decorated cardboard autograph board for everyone to write their messages on.

Now, he’ll have to hide all the goodies and decorations somewhere safe, until the big day.

“Happy birthday, Bokuto!”

Akaashi and the others yell, with every variation for Bokuto’s name. Crackers pop as Bokuto enters the club room, showering the confetti onto him.

The entire room is decorated with paper chains and origami shapes. Everyone has a party hat on their heads, faces laughing and awaiting Bokuto’s reaction. There are presents in their arms, wrapped in ribbons by the effort of Washio, who had surprisingly done a good job.

Bokuto stands there covered in colourful paper, blinking out the smoke from the crackers. Everyone waits for his smile, frozen in place.

With a whimper, Bokuto begins to sniffle. Tears roll down his cheeks as he cries, expression unchanging. The plan’s thrown out the window, with an unexpected outcome thrown into the
“Hey, Bokuto, you okay? Did we hurt you?” Konoha and the others crowd around Bokuto, patting him on the back and rubbing his shoulders.

“It’s all right.” Sarukui strokes his hair gently, while he lets out tearful sobs. “There, there. What happened, birthday kid?”

Bokuto only sobs harder, and Akaashi joins the crowd around Bokuto. The instant he touches him, he’s filled with disbelief and overwhelming joy. Bokuto’s tears are from happiness. He can’t take it in without crying.

“I- I didn’t… You guys are so nice to me…” Bokuto cries, sounding as if he’s laughing. Or maybe he is laughing, after all. “I don’t believe it. You guys did all this for me…”

“He, it’s your birthday. We’re all celebrating!” Komi laughs. “So, which present do you want to open, first?”

Bokuto’s eyes grow even wider. “These are all… for me? I can open them?”

“All yours.” The entire team nods at him, and the pile of presents all meant for him. Bokuto claps his hands, touching the boxes one by one. He sets about opening the one closest to him.

When he unravels the ribbon and pops the box open, he squeals. It’s a new pair of volleyball shoes, straight from the nearest sports shop. He knows they’re far from cheap.

“We all pitched in for that, so don’t worry about the price.” Konoha adds, as Bokuto hugs the shoes close to his chest. “Do you like the design?”

“I love it so much.” Bokuto grins, placing the shoes back into the cardboard box carefully. “I’m going to take care of it really well. I won’t let any dirt get on them.”

“It’s fine. They’re shoes. They’re meant to get dirty.” Washio states matter-of-factly.

Bokuto shakes his head. “But this is a birthday present. I have to take good care of it!”

“Go on, Bokuto! Open the next one!” Konoha eggs him on, pushing him towards the small pile of presents. Bokuto looks at his teammates, and nods. He tears off the wrapping of another box, smaller than the one that contained his shoes.

It’s a fun-sized box stuffed full of sweet treats. Dried squid snacks, little pepperoni sausage sticks, umai-bo, pocky and many more. Bokuto’s mouth waters just by looking at the food. He can’t believe he’s being offered all this. He can’t eat it on his own.

“That’s my present.” Onaga pipes up. “It’s not much, but I hope you like them!”

“Like it? I love it.” Bokuto nods over and over again. “Thank you so much, Onaga!” He hugs the first year tightly, rubbing his cheeks against his.

Bokuto doesn’t hesitate before putting his hands on the third box. “Whose is this?” He asks, lifting the box into the air.

“That’s my present.” Sarukui raises his hand with a smile. “Go on, Bokuto. Open it.”

Bokuto excitedly opens the present. There’s quite a few items in there- new supporters, cold compresses, tape for his fingers. They’re all things he needed but never got the chance to buy.
“You need to take care of yourself. I thought these might help.” Sarukui explains, and Bokuto nods bashfully.

“Thanks, Saru! Am I really that worrying?” Bokuto laughs, and the entire team erupts into giggles. “Come on, guys! I’m not that bad!”

“Bokuto, you literally have to be carried off the court even if you’re sick.” Komi points out, and Bokuto freezes. “And you can’t argue with that.”

“Self care is just as important as practice.” Akaashi states calmly. Bokuto seems tempted to argue, but Akaashi simply won’t allow it. “Today, you don’t need to worry about anything. Just wholeheartedly accept your gifts and keep smiling. We all want to see you happy.”

“I will!” Bokuto nods. He opens a few more presents, mostly food or volleyball-related items. He thanks each and every one of his teammates, placing all the gifts neatly in a line.

Akaashi notices that Bokuto still hasn’t opened his gift yet. He’s most likely saving it for last, he realises.

“Bokuto-san, please.” Akaashi offers it to him by himself, placing the little navy box in his hands. “It’s just something small, but I tried my best.”

As Bokuto unwraps the box and takes off the glittery lid resembling a night sky, he gasps softly.

There’s a deep aquamarine-blue crystal inside the box, glinting in different shades of blue, purple and turquoise. It’s in the shape of a heart, and filled with glitter and a liquid dyed light blue. It’s as if he has a whole galaxy in his hands.

“It’s so pretty, Akaashi!” Bokuto hugs the box to his chest, and Akaashi breathes a sigh of fondness. Bokuto seems to love it very much. He thinks it’s the prettiest gift he’s ever gotten, although he wouldn’t admit it. “I love it. It’s so shiny, and pretty, and…”

Bokuto lets out a little squeak of happiness. “You guys are awesome. I love you guys. This is the best birthday I can ever ask for.”

“Course! We all love you, you big dumb baby.” Konoha ruffles Bokuto’s hair. “Happy eighteenth birthday. We’re all so glad you’re our captain and ace.”

“I am proud of you, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi holds Bokuto’s hand, feeling the excitement radiate off him. “You’ve come so far. Look at you now. You’re still here. You’re living.”

Bokuto instantly knows what Akaashi is talking about, and nods. “Thanks, Akaashi. I appreciate you. Thanks for always being here for me. Thank you for being such a great friend.”

“So!” Komi claps his hands together, pausing the moment building up between Akaashi and Bokuto. “Who wants yakiniku?!”

Bokuto springs up like a child, pumping the air. “Yeah! Yakiniku! All right!” He grabs Akaashi’s hand joyfully, dragging him behind. “Come on, Akaashi! Let’s go eat!”

“Sure thing.” Akaashi smiles and leaves the club room. He tries not to focus on the thought that maybe, just maybe, he could have kissed him a few moments ago.

“Hey, bro! Happy birthday!”
It’s a familiar face, one that Bokuto and Akaashi are very accustomed to.

“Geh.” Akaashi lets out a noise akin to a frog being choked.

“Kuroo! Hey hey hey!” Bokuto hugs his friend tight, climbing into his lap as if he’s his grandfather. Kuroo smirks knowingly at Akaashi.

“ Took you a while to get here, didn’t it? I was so hungry.” Kuroo rolls his eyes, sitting at the table they had all reserved at the yakiniku restaurant. Bokuto licks his lips, already picking up the menu.

“It’s meaty time!” Bokuto announces cheerfully. The rest of his team cheer, as well as Kuroo. Kenma sits beside him, clearly not as hungry as everyone else.

Akaashi starts to drool. He may not look it, but he’s an even bigger eater than Bokuto and Kuroo. He’s beaten both of them at an eating contest, just to prove that he wasn’t bragging. Hopefully, everyone has enough to cover the bill.

There’s a bunch of meat on the barbecue grill on the table. Tongue, loin, ribs… It looks delicious. Akaashi grabs his chopsticks, swiping the meat before anyone else can grab what he’s set his eyes on.

“Oh my god, this is good!” Bokuto squeals, mouth stuffed with tender meat and fluffy white rice. The soy sauce-based meat sauce is passed around, as everyone starts making small talk.

“Hey, you put the sauce on the rice?”

“Nah, man. You put it on the meat, it tastes nicer.”

“But rice soaked in the sauce is good! Don’t you get it?”

Sarukui and Komi begin to argue, as Washio takes some meat for himself and Onaga. Kuroo slaps some meat and vegetables onto Kenma’s plate, and is given a distasteful look.

“Oh hey, Bokuto, I got you a little something.” Kuroo pulls out a paper bag and places it in Bokuto’s lap. “I hope you like it.”

It’s a mug with a volleyball painted on it. It has a drawing of a kitten and an owl, perched beside each other on the grass.

“It’s so, so cute!” Bokuto gushes, bubbly from the celebration. “I love it, Tetsu. It’s so cute and I’m gonna use it every day!”

“How’s everything been lately?” Kuroo asks as nonchalantly as possible, glancing at Akaashi.

Akaashi wants to answer for him, but he knows when it’s best to let Bokuto do the talking. “I think I’m taking a step in the right direction,” Bokuto says, “I started talking to someone I came to know on a website. He’s really nice. Oh, and Akaashi helped me a lot. I was having a tough time, and he just… gave me a lot of good advice.”

Akaashi blushes, looking away. “I only did what any best friend would do.” He mutters, hiding his face into his hands. “It’s really no problem.”

“I was sad and mad at myself because I thought I was gross. But Akaashi kept telling me that it wasn’t my fault, I wasn’t disgusting, I just needed help.” Bokuto explains. “And I think he’s actually kind of right.”
Kuroo claps him on the shoulder, showing support for him. “Man, good for you. If you’re feeling healthier, that’s all that matters.”

“I think I’m better.” Bokuto nods. “And I know you would have done the same for me, too.”

“Course I would’ve!” Kuroo pops a bunch of rice into his mouth. “You’re my friend. Friends protect each other.”

“Yeah!” Bokuto pops a piece of yakiniku in his mouth, and coughs violently immediately after. Akaashi pats Bokuto’s back gently, grabbing his glass of water. “Chew slowly, Bokuto-san. You could choke, if you’re not careful.”

Bokuto downs the glass of water. His throat tickles, and the sauce is hanging on the roof of his mouth. “I’m all right,” he assures his friends, wiping his mouth. “I think it just went down the wrong way.”

“Well, don’t do that again.” Kuroo laughs. “Wouldn’t want to be burying you right after your birthday.”

“You know,” Kenma pipes up quietly, “you have a higher chance of dying on your birthday.”

Bokuto stares at Kenma in disbelief. “I really needed that info! Thanks, Kenma!” He exclaims, shaking his head incredulously.

They leave the yakiniku restaurant after splitting the bill. Bokuto rubs his stomach, his hunger thoroughly satisfied. “Man, that was good! Don’t ya think so, Akaashi?”

Akaashi nods. It takes a lot for him to feel full, but he’s absolutely stuffed. He stifles a burp in his fist, excusing himself politely.

“I hope you enjoyed your birthday celebration.” Akaashi smiles, walking Bokuto home. “We should go out to eat again sometime.”

Bokuto hums, whistling as the sun sets behind them. His sleeves bounce as he walks, and Akaashi can’t help focusing on how beautiful his arms are.

“Ugh, I’m so full. I shouldn’t have eaten so much.”

Bokuto sits on a bench, hugging his knees close to his chest. Akaashi sits close to him, leaning forward with his arms resting on either side.

“Akaashi, I actually… If I’m being honest…” Bokuto sighs, and opens his mouth. “I don’t want to go home. I want to stay with you forever and ever. It’s so less exhausting. You don’t hit me or yell at me. I can’t ask for more.”

Akaashi takes Bokuto’s face into his hands. “Listen to me,” he whispers, maintaining eye contact. “You are allowed to ask for more. You’re not selfish for demanding basic respect. You’re allowed to say no to things you aren’t comfortable with.”

“And finally- you don’t owe them shit.”

Bokuto twitches. “But what if they stop loving me because I’m selfish?”

Akaashi wishes Bokuto wasn’t such a loving, forgiving person. It would have been so much easier if Bokuto resented his parents, after being subject to the horrendous abuse for months.
“Are those people… really that important to you? After all they’ve done?”

“They’re my parents. They’ve provided for me from day one. They love me. They wouldn’t punish me if they didn’t love me.” Bokuto explains. “They love me. I have to love them back.”

Bokuto’s parents don’t love him. He wouldn’t call any of that treatment love. There’s a set of guidelines for acceptable love, and a criteria for it is not hurting people with it. If people could do anything in the name of love, the world would be an awful place.

“Koutarou-kun, happy birthday! The kids all wanted to celebrate your birthday, so I bought some cake! I hope you like it!”

Akaashi’s mother is determined to spoil Bokuto rotten. She notices the smile Bokuto gives her, and sets down the cake on the table.

“Thank you so much, Akaashi-san. You shouldn’t have.” Bokuto bows, gratitude showing on his expression. “I don’t deserve all this.”

“What are you saying? Of course you do.” Kakeru says, understanding less of the situation than his mother or older brother. “It’s your birthday, Koutarou! We all eat cake to honour it!”

From the looks of it, Bokuto definitely hasn’t gotten any cake from his parents. Akaashi wonders if his parents even remembered his birthday. Bokuto doesn’t get any celebration in his own home.

Akaashi’s mother begins to light all the individual candles on fire, while Mari keeps Sora away from the flames to ensure he won’t burn himself. Two of the candles are shaped like the numbers 1 and 8. The white wax is decorated with rainbow glitter, and a pink end at the bottom to stick into the cake.

“Now, before the cake goes into anyone’s mouth, we have to sing happy birthday! Come on, let’s sing!”

Akaashi and his family all circle around the cake, dimming the lights and opening their mouths to sing to Bokuto.

“Happy birthday to you…”

Bokuto is a part of their family. They sing to him, to remind him of that. Akaashi grabs the knife to cut the cake, after Bokuto blows out all the candles in one go. Sora claps his little munchkin hands together, yanking out the candles and licking the bottom of them covered in frosting.

“Ew, Sora, gross.” Kakeru wrinkles his nose, swatting the air.

“Tasty,” is Sora’s only retort, as he licks his lips.

Akaashi grabs the knife and gingerly slices the cake, getting frosting on the knife and some on his hand. The inside is revealed to be red velvet, one of Bokuto’s favourites but hard to buy at their nearby sweets shop.

“Whoa.” Bokuto stares at the slices, biting his lip. “It’s so beautiful. I can’t wait to eat it.”

“Me neither.” Mari pipes up. “Red velvet is one of the best cakes known to mankind.”

“It sure is.” Bokuto’s hands twitch as he’s handed the first slice on a plate. “Thank you for this, everyone.”
He waits for everyone to get a piece, before vertically cutting the edge of the cake with his fork. He places the spongy goodness on his tongue, and relishes in the sweetness. It’s been months since he’s eaten something so good.

“Koutarou, look!” Sora pops beside his chair, holding a paper bag filled with presents and cute trinkets. “Here you go! This is yours!”

Bokuto opens up the paper bag, placing each item on the table carefully. There’s a few 10-yen sweets, and a glass coaster with an owl painted onto it. At the bottom of the bag, there’s a volleyball-shaped mascot keychain.

“I bought the sweets with my pocket money I saved!” Sora proclaims proudly, grinning. Akaashi watches as Bokuto’s mouth slowly cracks into a smile.

“Thank you guys so much!” Bokuto’s grinning from ear to ear, with a blob of frosting on his lip. He licks it off, eating the last piece of his slice. “How did you know I like owls?”

“You mention it all the time at school.” Akaashi comments. “You often talk about birds, but within the last three weeks, I’ve heard you go on about owls the most.”

Bokuto stares at him with a strange expression. “Sometimes, I’m genuinely scared of you, Akaashi.”

Akaashi smirks mischievously. “Don’t be. I would never hurt you. But on the other hand, if anyone got on my bad side… They’re going to have a nasty time.” He waits a moment to let Bokuto react, before rolling his eyes with an “I’m just kidding you, by the way.”

“Oh, come on Akaashi!” Bokuto groans.

“Akaashi-san?”

Akaashi glances at Bokuto, flopped on the bed with eyes wide open. He’s pulled the covers up to his neck, but it doesn’t seem like he’ll fall asleep anytime soon.

“Are you having trouble falling asleep?” Akaashi asks quietly, and Bokuto nods. “Would you like me to get some warm milk and honey for you?”

Bokuto shrugs, rubbing his eyes. “I feel so tired, but I don’t feel sleepy at all. I feel like I can never close my eyes again, and it’s weird. Do you know what I mean, Akaashi? I mean, I’m not gonna spend my life awake, but…”

He starts to trail off, and hits himself in the head three times when he loses his train of thought. “Damn it! My brain won’t turn off, and it’s irritating!”

“Well, don’t hit yourself. It won’t solve anything.” Akaashi takes Bokuto’s arms mid-air, and slowly lets them down. “Come downstairs. I’ll get you something to help you sleep.”

Bokuto follows him down into the kitchen. He frowns as he sits down at the table, while Akaashi grabs some milk from the fridge and pours it into a mug. He microwaves the milk before placing some honey into it, stirring it in with a small wooden spoon.

“Here.” Akaashi sets down the mug in front of Bokuto. “Drink this up.”

Bokuto takes the milk carefully, pressing the rim against his mouth and wincing when the
scalding-hot milk burns his lip.

Akaashi stifles a laugh. “Careful, now. You have to blow first.”

And Bokuto giggles. “Fine, then. I’m blowing.” He lets out a noisy exhale with his lips pursed, and ripples spread across the warm liquid.

Akaashi pats Bokuto’s head as he sips the honey milk more carefully this time. Bokuto is exhausted, but comfortable. He deserves to feel warmth, and nothing else. “How about we go back to sleep, once you’re done?”

“Yeah.” Bokuto nods once, before resuming his sipping like a cautious kitten.

Akaashi watches him quietly. Bokuto downs the entire mug rather swiftly, when he realises his lip doesn’t hurt anymore. He places the cup in the sink when he’s done, and yawns, stretching himself out.

They head back into Akaashi’s bedroom soon after. Bokuto rolls onto the bed and holds onto Akaashi, pressing his head against his chest. He’s adamant on keeping him close for comfort.

Akaashi hugs Bokuto, as if to answer his silent plea for closeness. Bokuto smells nice. It’s not a scent he can describe, but it’s soft and so Bokuto-like. Not the energetic, hyper Bokuto, but the gentle, beautiful man he’s turned into.

“Uh, where are we going, Akaashi?” Bokuto asks, as they head down the street where the planetarium is. “Is this some kind of game?”

“I wanted to take you out somewhere for your birthday.” Akaashi confesses. “Just the two of us. I mean, I love our team, I love our friends… But I thought maybe we could have each other to ourselves for a day.”

“Right.” Bokuto nods uncertainly. “So, where are we going?”

Akaashi leads Bokuto to where he went a few days ago. The scavenger hunt event is starting in half an hour, but the crowd isn’t large. Nobody is aware of the existence of the planetarium, because it looks rather antique and plain. But inside, it’s eloquently decorated and has a modern build.

“Whoa.” Bokuto stepping inside, and it’s darker. “This place is so cool. Are you okay? I mean, with the cost, and everything…”

“It’s nothing too dear,” Akaashi explains. “Don’t think about it, because it’s not for you to worry about. Just enjoy yourself today.”

The guide from the other day waves at Akaashi. “You really came back!” He says, and glances at Bokuto. “He’s the best friend you were talking about, yes?”

Akaashi nods quickly, turning red. “I thought he might like this kind of stuff.”

Bokuto doesn’t notice how flustered he’s getting, and floats around to stare at the displays and signs explaining the various constellations and inventions to make astronomy easier.

A group of elementary school students enter the planetarium too, led by some teachers. Bokuto and Akaashi sit a few feet away from them, securing their own spot in the viewing hall.

There are cloud-themed sofa-beds spread around the hall. There’s room for two people in each of
the sofas, and two cushions sitting next to each other. Bokuto and Akaashi make themselves comfortable beside one another.

A deep galaxy blue spreads out on the ceiling. The projector casts a spell in the room, transporting everyone inside it into outer space. Akaashi can see the planets in the solar system, as well as countless stars and asteroids.

“Greetings, everyone. Welcome to my planetarium.”

The guide starts his talking, and Akaashi closes his eyes, listening. The comforting darkness and soothing voice is enough to lull him into a sleep.

Once the planets are all explained with the help of mystical sound effects, the constellations are shown on the ceiling. “Now, this will come in handy for the scavenger hunt, so listen up closely.”

Akaashi’s eyes crack open, and glance beside him. Bokuto is sitting up, leaning forward excitedly.

“This is Vega. It’s in the shape of a lyre. It’s also the ‘Orihime’ constellation, in the old tale of the Tanabata Festival.”

“Orihime and Hikoboshi were separated by the Milky Way, because they were so infatuated with each other they wouldn’t work properly. But on the seventh of July, there appears a bridge on the Milky Way so the two can meet again.”

The guide’s assistant begins to point to Altair, the constellation for Hikoboshi. Akaashi is familiar with the Tanabata tale, like most of the Japanese students who would have learned it at school. It’s beautiful, he thinks. The sky is filled with constellations, named by humans who saw more to them than a clump of stars.

“So, you guys have to look for the different constellations around the building, to slot into these sheets. When you solve the puzzle, you’ll get a free prize!”

Akaashi skims the worksheet. It’s meant for kids quite younger than him, but some of them are quite challenging for older elementary school children. He begins writing notes on the side of the paper, getting up from the white sofa-bed.

“Let’s go look for the first one, Akaashi! I’m sure it’s the Altair one!” Bokuto chimes in excitedly, hopping around the place and crouching down to look for some clues. “It shouldn’t be that high up, because kids are on this hunt too.”

“Ah.” Akaashi points to one of the flaps on the wall, and peels it back to reveal a round number one and the name of a constellation written on it. “Found one…”

“Whoa! You’re good, Akaashi!”

Akaashi nods. He goes on to find five more, and another one with the help of Bokuto. There are seven clues left in total, and even though he’s more or less cracked the code, he still feels like he has an obligation to complete all the clues.

The clues are in crossword format on the worksheet, and Akaashi fills them in, allowing Bokuto to copy off his answers. Some kids start flocking to them for their missing answers, and Bokuto kindly points them to where the other clues are.

“...And that’s the last one.”
Akaashi huffs a sigh of relief, as he writes the answer for the puzzle on the line. The answer reads “Starlight”, and is made up from the letters from the other clues.

“Look, Mr. Guide! We got it all done!” Bokuto shows off his worksheet to the young guide, leaving out the fact that Akaashi had helped him out on numerous occasions. “What do we get now? Man, I am such a genius!”

The elementary school children have also completed their worksheets, with the joint effort of all of them. They all flock to one place, eagerly awaiting their prize.

“What do we get now? Man, I am such a genius!”

The guide and the part-time high schooler begin to give out some star-shaped charms and stationary sets to everyone who participated. Akaashi and Bokuto let the kids go first, and wait for their turn patiently.

“And for you two.” The guide hands them both a large star-shaped glass accessory. It has pink and light blue dust and glitter inside, and a golden strap attached to it so it can hang from somewhere.

“Whoa.” Bokuto grins. “This is an amazing birthday present. Thank you for taking me here, Akaashi!”

The two stick around until night, waiting for the telescope viewing sessions to open. The children and their teachers have already gone home, and it’s just them two at the planetarium, now.

“Look inside. From here, you can see the lunar craters and the planet of Mercury.” The guide explains, and Bokuto excitedly takes the telescope into his hands, eager to observe.

“Akaashi! Look at this! I can see the moon’s bumps! It’s so cool!”

Bokuto pushes Akaashi over to the telescope beside him, urging him to observe whatever he’s just seen. Akaashi looks through the lens as prompted, and is amazed. He really can see everything, from earth, so far away.

“Isn’t it so cool?”

Akaashi realizes one thing. No matter how many planets he reads about or stares at through a telescope, it’ll never compare to having a real life star beside him. Bokuto is his galaxy, and he doesn’t need any special equipment to see just how shiny and perfect he is.

But when he looks closely, he can see all the bumps and craters of Bokuto. What makes him happy, what makes him hurt. Akaashi doesn’t think anybody else feels the way he does about Bokuto now.

He doesn’t know how to describe it in words, but maybe one day he’ll have them. He’ll get to tell Bokuto how much he means to him.

“Ah, let me have another go at it, Akaashi!”

Bokuto hops from one foot to the other, begging him for the telescope. Akaashi steps away from it, and Bokuto scrambles for it, staring at the various ornaments of the night sky.

“Akaashi, I think I see Orion! It’s so cool!” Bokuto stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans, his eye pressed against the telescope.
They leave the planetarium about an hour before midnight. Akaashi and Bokuto sit on a bench in a park, sharing one pair of earbuds between them. (Akaashi had warned him about how hygienic sharing something that goes into one’s ear was- Bokuto shrugged, saying “Couples do grosser things”.)

*Can anybody find me somebody to love?*

“Who’s singing this?” Bokuto asks, pointing to Akaashi’s phone. “Do ya know what they’re saying?”

“This? Queen. Freddie Mercury’s singing this bit.” Akaashi explains. He’s listened to their music for quite a long time, thanks to his parents. “He’s bisexual.”

“Oooh.” Bokuto hums. “I like him. He’s a Queen, just like you, Akaashi!”

Akaashi makes a long, drawn-out groan. “Please, Bokuto-san.” He laughs awkwardly. Bokuto doesn’t seem to understand how much his actions affect Akaashi.

“Someone to love, huh?” Bokuto doesn’t even regard Akaashi’s anguish, rocking back and forth on the bench. “I’d kinda like that, too.”

Akaashi swallows thickly. “I think I would, as well.” He murmurs, hugging his knees.

“Really?” Bokuto swings back, almost sending his earbud flying. “You like someone, Akaashi?”

Akaashi struggles not to choke on his breath. “I never stated such things.”

“I’d like to fall in love someday, and maybe I can get married by the time I’m thirty. People like me and you aren’t recognized here yet, but we’re not silent. And falling in love is the loudest thing I can do.”

Bokuto sighs. “I haven’t told my parents I’m gay. They’d probably kick me out the minute I finish high school. But then again, they might do that anyway. They don’t even want me around.”

“You don’t have to.” Akaashi states firmly. “They don’t have to know, ever. You can stay at my place, for as long as you need.”

“I can’t do that, Akaashi!” Bokuto shakes his head, much to Akaashi’s dismay. “I’ll gather some money and live in a cheap apartment. I’m sure I can do it!”

Akaashi wishes Bokuto wouldn’t head home.

“Ai. Akaashi, can we talk?”

A group of third years pull Akaashi aside. There’s Konoha, Komi and Sarukui, all there with the same expressions. They want to get something out of him.

“Yes, we can.” Akaashi nods. He’s slightly nervous- is he in trouble for something he hasn’t realised? But his teammates seem more concerned, than angry.

“Bokuto’s been acting weird lately.”

Akaashi blinks. He hasn’t caught onto whatever they’re talking about. “How has he been acting weird? Has something happened?”
Sarukui opens his mouth. “My class is right beside his, but whenever I peek inside, Bokuto’s always fast asleep. And his classmates say he’s been like that all through the day. His head is always on the desk.”

“Do you think he’s not getting enough sleep?” Akaashi asks. “Is that all, or is there more?”

“That’s not everything. He also sat out during gym. He’s never done that before.” Konoha explains. “Is there something going on that he’s not telling us?”

“He’s… not in the best place right now.” Akaashi answers vaguely. “He doesn’t like talking about it, but he’s been going through some things lately. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was making him exhausted.”

“Do you think he’d tell us if we asked?” Komi says.

Akaashi shakes his head. Even he’s had trouble dragging answers out of Bokuto. “It’s something he wants to keep private.”

“I don’t want to see him suffer. What is wrong with him? Is he sick? Are people bullying him?”

Konoha pushes him for an answer. He’s genuinely concerned for Bokuto, but Akaashi knows Bokuto would be upset if he broke his trust.

“He’s not sick, as far as I know. I’ll talk to him. I know you guys would never turn against him.” Akaashi’s attention switches to the footsteps clomping near the door. He recognizes them as Bokuto’s, and shuts his mouth.

“Bokuto! Don’t fall asleep during practice!” Sarukui calls out to him, as he enters the club room humming.

“Huh? I won’t!” Bokuto mutters, but no sooner than he says so, he slams into the door frame, hard. “Ow, fuck!”

The third years laugh awkwardly, not being able to bring themselves to laugh. Bokuto laughs instead, heartily. “Man, I’m such a dumbass, ahaha!”

“Be careful, dumbass. You could hurt yourself.” Komi rolls his eyes. “You seem exhausted lately. Have you been sleeping properly?”

“I have!” Bokuto sticks out his lip. “I’ve been trying my best! I’m just tired sometimes. You know how school is!”

The rest of his teammates look at each other. “None of us are passing out on the desk daily. Not even Sarukui.” The conversation is completely killed, devoid of its usual Bokuto-energy.

Bokuto sticks out his tongue childishly. “When I say I’m tired, I’m tired! There’s nothing I can do about it!”

Akaashi frowns. “You push yourself way too much. You need to be kinder to yourself. And talk to any one of us if you’re having problems. None of us here will judge you.”

“I know that!” Bokuto retorts. “I just don’t wanna focus on the depressing stuff. I don’t like being sad and brooding and boring!”

Akaashi notices the strange things that don’t add up, now that his teammates have pointed them
Bokuto closes his eyes after each spike and receive for way too long, and almost falls to the floor on multiple occasions. He presses his fist to his mouth and wears a mask to stifle a cough, but Akaashi doesn’t let it slide.

He keeps a watchful eye on Bokuto, with every toss he sends his way. It’s somewhat strange to see him spike with half his nose and mouth covered completely with a white surgical mask, but at least he’s acknowledging his less-than-perfect condition somewhat.

“Hey hey h-” Bokuto cuts himself off with a wet cough. He hacks into his palm, deep gurgly breaths coming from his throat. A wheeze sounds at the back of his throat, as he attempts to clear the mucus away.

Akaashi whips around and presses his hand to Bokuto’s forehead. He doesn’t seem to be sporting a fever, but his throat is scratchy and his chest feels swollen from the coughing.

“It might be better if you go home.” Akaashi suggests, but Bokuto shakes his head violently.

“Resting at the first sign of a cold is very important.”

“I don’t have a cold!” Bokuto whines. “It’s just allergies! I’m not feverish or achy! So, it’s not a cold!”

Konoha laughs. “Bokuto, do you really think it’s not a cold if you don’t have a fever?” He rolls his eyes. “You’re hacking up a lung. You sound like my gran.”

“I have a mask on! I’m not infecting anyone, I wanna keep playing!”

The yelling causes another bout of coughing, that Bokuto desperately tries to subdue. It ends in disaster, when the action causes the red flush in his face to deepen tenfold from the force of the coughing.

But Bokuto’s energy levels are a force to be reckoned with. He doesn’t let it get to him, his spikes as powerful as ever. Akaashi would be relieved, if Bokuto didn’t have a habit of downplaying his illnesses all the time.

A week later, Bokuto is still coughing and wheezing all the way through practice. He wears a mask and insists he’s not feverish, but his voice is raspy, and frequently gets gurgly mid-sentence.

“Here.” Akaashi presses a throat lozenge to Bokuto’s hand. “Keep this in your mouth and don’t chew on it until it’s small.”

Bokuto rolls the lozenge around his mouth, sitting down at the sidelines until it’s melted on his tongue. He bounces back immediately afterwards, not giving himself any rest.

“Akaashi! To-”

A nasty crack sounds as Bokuto leaps, and lands rolling his ankle. Akaashi’s eyes widen, and he makes a beeline over to Bokuto, staring at his foot. His heartbeat quickens, as he glances at Bokuto.

“Are you all right? Is it twisted, Bokuto?” Washio asks, and the others turn to him as well. “Let me take a look at it.”
Bokuto shakes his head violently. “I’m fine! I just landed funny, that’s all. It feels fine!”

He’s back on his feet in less than a minute, hopping back and forth energetically. But Akaashi can’t help but to notice- Bokuto had swayed on his feet a split second before the fall.

Once practice ends, Akaashi heads over to Bokuto, who seems to be struggling with his shoes. “Bokuto-san, is your foot-”

He stops. Bokuto’s foot is swollen red and purple, so much that he’s struggling to get it into his shoe. “It… it kinda got big…” He laughs nervously, letting out a squeal of pain when Akaashi touches it.

“We need to get to the nurse’s office. You need to press something cold to it. It’s too swollen.” Akaashi turns to the third years in the club room. “We need some help here! Can someone help me carry him?”

Konoha, Washio and Sarukui circle around Bokuto, taking one of his limbs and supporting his torso so the burden of walking lessens for him. As soon as they notice just how swollen his foot is, they all stare at each other in wide-eyed disbelief.

“Bokuto, your foot is purple! Holy shit, you need an ice pack!”

“You need to tell us when this happens, Bokuto. That looks painful as hell.”

Konoha and Sarukui scold him lightly, unable to say anything harsher. The pain Bokuto’s feeling is punishment enough.

Taking care not to knock against his leg, the four help Bokuto out of the gymnasium and down the hallway. Akaashi touches Bokuto, and to his relief, it’s nothing as severe as a broken ankle. He won’t be out of action for long.

“There’s ice packs in here. I’ll get some.”

Sarukui presses the chilly ice pack to Bokuto’s ankle. Bokuto immediately groans, breathing shallow from the bursts of pain and the coldness that alleviates it slightly.

“It hurts bad,” Bokuto hisses, his enthusiastic act completely dropped. The swelling goes down once they’ve used three of the ice packs, and Bokuto can fit his foot into his shoe again. “I gotta head back home…”

“Take care, Bokuto!”

Bokuto limps back home, after Akaashi and Washio finish wrapping his foot in a bandage and handing him some more if he needs to get them changed. He doesn’t let it show, but Akaashi picks up on the amount of times he spaces out while in the middle of a conversation.

“Yep! This was the joker!”

Kakeru laughs maniacally as he throws the last pair of cards into the pile in the middle of the table. They’re playing old maid, using their free time on the Friday evening to have some family bonding.

“Mommy lost!” Sora chirps. Akaashi knows everyone has been going easy on him, and decides to say nothing. He only uses his powers to help Sora avoid getting too many losses in a row, because
he’ll sulk and start whining that he’s bored. He doesn’t like winning using anything other than his brains.

Mari sips on her orange juice and gathers the cards, shuffling them for another round. “We should stop after this one. It’s already almost half ten. Sora needs to sleep.”

“You’re right.” Akaashi’s mother grabs Sora and plops him on her lap. “Are you ready for bedtime, Sora?”

“No wanna go to sleep!” Sora whimpers, but he’s no match for his mother. He screeches, as Kakeru and his mother tickle him at the same time. “Tickles! Nooooo!”

Akaashi laughs as his mother wrangles a noisy Sora upstairs after the final round of old maid, which he ended up winning. He gathers up the cards and chucks them into the case, placing them into the box of toys and playthings.

“That was fun.” Mari nods, before heading up to her room and leaving Kakeru and Akaashi in the family room. Kakeru leaves after ten minutes of studying, and Akaashi sticks around some more, attempting to finish his homework.

After another half-hour, Akaashi falls asleep on the coffee table. The clock strikes half eleven, and he’s in a peaceful state of rest. The tiredness is escaping his body, melting into his surroundings.

Bang.

Akaashi wakes up with a jolt.

The dull noise is immediately followed by several ding-dongs and buzzes. Somebody is outside, hammering on his intercom. He can hear heavy breathing too, and the hairs on his neck stand up.

In his sleep-drunk haze, fear takes over. There’s something- someone trying to get into his house.


Akaashi scrambles to his feet, bolting up to his parents’ room and slamming the door open.

“There’s someone at the door, I don’t know who it is but they keep knocking, and-” he takes a deep breath, as his mother rubs her eyes and slowly wakes up. “I don’t know what to do.”

His mother immediately shoots up, heads downstairs, and grabs an umbrella from the stand. “Keiji, stand back. You are not going to be hurt. If anything happens, I’m making sure you get somewhere safe.”

The knocking continues relentlessly, and Akaashi jumps. His mother switches on the intercom, and stares into it, squinting at the darkness. “Who is it?”

“Please, please, help me! Please-”

A static voice echoes through the house, cut off by ragged breathing and wheezing. Akaashi doesn’t want to make the connection. But it’s him. The voice is unmistakably his.

“Bokuto-san?”

“Akaashi, I… I need help, please, I…”

Bokuto sounds like he’s sobbing from outside the door. Without thinking, Akaashi dashes down
the hallway to open the front door.

“Bokuto-san, what happened? Are you in danger?” Akaashi unlocks the door, and finds blood smeared on the other side of it. “You-”

There’s blood spilling down Bokuto’s face, from his mouth and nose. His hair is dishevelled and all over the place, painting an unpleasant picture of just how much he’d struggled.

Bokuto pitches forward, coughing violently. There’s nothing but Akaashi to catch him as he collapses, and Akaashi finds that he’s boiling hot. He cries out, as the action kicks his ankle pain into action.

“Help me… Please. It hurts, Akaashi. It hurts so bad…”

Bokuto chokes out, his voice barely a whisper. He flops into Akaashi’s chest, completely drained and devoid of vigor.

Chapter End Notes

AS USUAL:
comment, all you dickbagels and penis paninis.
Love, your fav angst writer.

talk to me @kuromantic on twitter!
It's Enough for Me

Chapter Summary

There’s just no use denying it anymore.

He's in love with Akaashi. He's gay, but what matters is that it's Akaashi. He bothers him with his emotional trainwrecks and family problems. He can't add another burden onto him.

Bokuto knows he doesn't deserve Akaashi. Akaashi gives and gives, but Bokuto has nothing to give back to him. He just drains every resource like an ungrateful brat. All he does is take, take, take.

Chapter Notes

whumptober has ended, and this fic is back in action!!
woohoo, cheers.
side note that this is the chapter where a lot of abuse happens, be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Happy birthday, Bokuto!”

Bokuto clutches his gifts close to his chest. Each and every one fills him with warmth. He hasn't felt this fulfilled in ages. All his friends' love is tangible, and he can hold them close to himself.

He'd cried like a baby the moment he saw his teammates pop the crackers. He couldn't help it. They all cared for him enough to celebrate his birthday. Something his parents didn't mention that morning, he thinks for a moment.

He's selfish for thinking so. He shouldn't expect anything from his parents. He's tried everything to be liked, or even respected, but nothing had worked. He should be grateful for the food and shelter he gets.

It's only been a few hours, but Bokuto misses Akaashi already. He wants to hold his hand, kiss him gently and stay with him forever.

There’s just no use denying it anymore.

He's in love with Akaashi. He's gay, but what matters is that it's Akaashi. He bothers him with his emotional trainwrecks and family problems. He can't add another burden onto him.

Bokuto knows he doesn't deserve Akaashi. Akaashi gives and gives, but Bokuto has nothing to give back to him. He just drains every resource like an ungrateful brat. All he does is take, take, take.

"Hey..."
Bokuto creeps back home, swallowing the wetness that rises up in his mouth. He doesn't want to stay at home. His joyful memories there have already been overwritten, in each and every location. Nowhere is safe enough for him to drop his shoulders.

He squeezes the presents extra hard, shuffling inside and closing the door behind him. Sleepovers at Akaashi's are always fun and light-hearted, but there's always a price to pay- the day after it.

"...What do you have in your hands?"

His mother is suddenly in front of him, and Bokuto jumps. He shakes his head, but he knows it's no use. There's no excuse he can possibly make for the mountain of presents. Everyone's love hurts him, in the end. But as far as he knows, that's nothing out of the ordinary. It hurts to be loved by his parents.

"My teammates gave them to me." Bokuto explains. "They all love me…"

His mother laughs dryly. "Your teammates? Loving you? What, have you been taking drugs?"

She takes out all the presents, laying them out onto the kitchen table. There’s so many, and he deserves none of it. The presents, meant to bring happiness, are being turned against him.

"What, someone gave you food? Are you acting like you never get any here?"

Bokuto shakes his head. "He just gave me my favourite snacks, because he knows I like them." He doesn't know why he's being questioned about his own presents. It's not like he would know.

His mother picks up Sarukui's presents. "What kind of presents are these? You can pick all of those up at the pharmacy. Nobody likes you, Koutarou."

"No! That's not it!" Bokuto's lip wobbles. "That's not it… My teammates love me! They told me so!"

"And you believe them? What a joke. I know how you were when you were younger." His mother reaches for his hair, grabbing a fistful and dragging him over to the table. "Always asking for love and attention. You're forcing people to be fake. They know you'll whine like a baby if you don't get attention."

Bokuto tries, so hard, to tune it all out. It is true. He'll whine if nobody pays attention to him, and cling onto anyone and everyone. He's annoying. They all pretend to like him because it's the easiest option.

"Nobody will miss you if you die. You'd be doing them a favour."

It stings, harder than any slap he's ever taken. Bokuto doesn't know how to argue against that, and it's terrifying. It can all be true. Everyone would lead an easier life if he stopped existing.

Bokuto grins, covering his face with his hands. He should just die. But he knows he won't do that, because he's scared. Even now, he can't stop trembling. He doesn't want to think about leaving Akaashi without him. If he's eventually forgotten, he won't ever know.

"You're seventeen years old. Stop being such an oversensitive baby." His mother slaps the side of his head, and his eyes gloss over with tears.

Bokuto opens his mouth shakily. "I'm eighteen. It was my birthday."
His parents hadn't even gone to the trouble of wishing him a happy birthday. They didn't even remember, or they just didn’t care.

“You’re eighteen? Well, maybe you should start thinking about moving out.” His mother doesn’t even acknowledge the part that it was his birthday. “You’re especially dependent and brainless. You should be trying harder than anyone else to become independent.”

“I’m in high school. I can’t move out.” Bokuto protests, because he’d love to get a place of his own. But there’s no possible way he can play for a powerhouse school, study for his exams, and hold a job that will pay for all his living expenses.

In the end, he’s dependent on his parents to help him. He’s too stupid to survive on his own. They’re the only ones who will protect and love him.

“So? When your uncle was your age, he was working and studying at the same time! You’re just too soft. You think everything can he handed to you on a silver platter.” His mother continues the lecture, reminding him of how ungrateful he is. He has no choice in anything.

Bokuto sighs. Birthdays were fun before they meant more responsibility and less positive attention. With every passing year, his parents seem to like him less and less. He doesn’t know the reason. If he knew, maybe he could change himself so he wouldn’t be a nuisance.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t move out. I don’t have any time right now, and I’m busy with volleyball.”

“Volleyball?” His mother rolls his eyes. “You’re not going to become anything special. Why don’t you just quit that stupid club already?”

Bokuto shakes his head. “I’m not quitting! It’s my last year of high school!” He heads out into the hallway, grabbing everything and storming into his room. He slams the door behind him, wiping his tears angrily.

They want to get rid of him. He’s nothing but a pest in their home. That’s the reason why they won’t feed him or treat him gently.

He cries for the second time that week, and this time, it’s not tears of happiness.

Bokuto lays on his bed, sobbing until he can’t breathe. There’s an immense pressure on his chest, reminding him of how unloveable he is. It truly hurts, being demeaned and insulted by the people he loved. He doesn’t know if he loves his parents. He’s supposed to. But he doesn’t love the way they treat him.

He wakes up after passing out from crying, and stares at the hallway. He rubs his eyes. It doesn’t add up, because he shouldn’t be staring at the hallway. He’s certain he closed the door- slammed it, in fact.

With a harrumph, Bokuto wriggles out of the bed to close it again. His room being in open view is uncomfortable to him. It’s the only place of privacy and comfort he has. He can close himself off from the rest of the house, where he isn’t liked.

There is no door. It’s been removed at the hinges, and a large gaping hole remains. Bokuto’s stomach twists uncomfortably, as if all of his secrets have left his room from there. He can’t be safe if there’s nothing to separate his room from everything else.

Every time he thinks he can’t live with any less, something else is taken from him.
Akaashi takes him out on a birthday date.

Or so he imagines it, selfish as it is. A planetarium date with the person he’s in love with. Even if it’s one-sided, staring at the galaxy and constellations is romantic for him. He’s not articulate or knowledgeable enough to be poetic about it, but it’s something incredibly special.

“Akaashi, what was this one?”

Bokuto participates in the scavenger hunt with all his effort, but some questions trip him up anyway. And when that happens, he hops over to Akaashi, sneakily copying off his answers. He knows Akaashi lets him.

“That one was Altair.” Akaashi explains, showing him his worksheet. “We still need to fill in six across and three down.”

Bokuto hums, searching for the clues left around the planetarium. Some kids flock to him, pleading for hints for the answers they don’t have.

“This one was around at the projector. That one was pretty close to here, I think.”

Bokuto answers as best as he can, even though the kids would have better luck asking Akaashi. When he tells them so, half of them stampede over to Akaashi.

“Hey, onii-chan, help us!”

“The spiky ni-chan said that you knew the most about this quiz!”

Bokuto puts a thumbs up at Akaashi, who patiently deals with all the queries from the children. Once they’re finished, the prizes are handed out by the staff.

Bokuto and Akaashi receive matching glass accessories. It’s for his birthday, Bokuto realizes.

He keeps it safe in his pocket, as he visits the observatory. He peeks into the telescope and stares at the moon’s craters with a smile. He offers Akaashi a peek too, but he seems content on watching him enjoy himself.

“Akaashi… I’m really happy. I’m really happy you’re here with me.”

Bokuto holds hands with Akaashi as he walks, until they reach a bench and settle down to listen to some music. He exchanges some chatter about Queen and some nonsense about falling in love.

The song had prompted him to start thinking about his crush on Akaashi. When he mentions how he’d like someone to love, Akaashi agrees with him.

Despite bringing it up first, Bokuto is more concerned about Akaashi agreeing with him. Is Akaashi in love with someone? Fuck it, he really doesn’t want to know. It’ll hurt too bad if he knows about it.

It appears in his head. Akaashi with another boy or a girl, smiling and exchanging knowing glances. It makes his stomach turn.

He’s horrible. He should be happy for Akaashi, if he finds someone he loves. But he’s not confident that he can smile and congratulate him on it.

“You can stay at my place, for as long as you need.”
Akaashi’s offer confuses him. He can’t stay at his house when he’s not even in his family. Surely he’s only saying that to make him feel less scared. If he gets a significant other, he won’t want him anymore.

Bokuto rejects the offer, assuring him that he’ll get a job and rent some cheap apartment. He knows it’s not possible, without sacrificing either volleyball or schoolwork. His chest clenches at the thought of being a part of Akaashi’s household. They won’t love him, if they know how horrible he is.

There’s a sour taste in his mouth. “I’m gonna go home.” He stands up, walking off without another word. He doesn’t look back, because Akaashi shouldn’t see his expression. He feels like crying.

His parents aren’t home. Relief washes over him, then guilt. It’s as if he doesn’t appreciate their presence. Being alone is relaxing, but suffocating.

Bokuto’s phone buzzes with messages. They’re from Kuroo.

**Kuroo** 8:21

_Akaashi took you out on a date, huh? I saw you guys at the bench in the bus._

**Bokuto** 8:23

_Ya I love him_

**Kuroo** 8:26

_How long have you been together?_

**Bokuto** 8:30

_We aren’t really together yet_

**Kuroo** 8:34

_That’s a great joke bo_

**Kuroo** 8:37

..._deadass?_

Bokuto lets out a deep sigh. Contrary to Kuroo’s belief, he’s too much of a coward to tell Akaashi how he feels. He’s scared, of being considered burdensome and exhausting. Even if Akaashi dates him out of pity, he’ll become tired of him and Bokuto will pick up on it.

“Hey.”

He dials the number of his LINE friend, who he still hasn’t met. For some reason, he’s incredibly upset, all of a sudden. He loves Akaashi, but he can’t imagine a future with him. He can’t imagine any future. His mother his right. He’s going to die of stupidity once he moves out. He’s so relieved to be home alone, and yet the overwhelming lack of _something_ rips at his chest.

“What’s up?”

Bokuto doesn’t know how to answer. He notices his cheeks dampening, and he suddenly forgets
how to speak.

“I’m going to die.” He sobs, and for a moment, he really believes it.

He’ll die on the streets after being fired from every job there is. He’ll die without anyone caring for him. He’ll deserve it for being a bad son.

“Hey, what happened?” His friend whispers. “Did your parents hurt you?”

“I’m not right. There’s something wrong with me. I can’t- I can’t do this anymore.”

“Why do you think so?”

There’s so many reasons Bokuto can think of. “I love my best friend, but he won’t love me if he knows how horrible I am.”

The teen huffs. “Horrible? Did you do something to hurt him?”

“No!” Bokuto shakes his head. “But… He took me out for my birthday, and all I could think of was how lonely I felt. If he finds someone he really loves, he’ll hate me.”

“Why would he hate you?” He asks. “Even if he gets a girlfriend or something, That’s not going to take anything away from your relationship. He’s not the type of person who would treat you any different, right?”

Bokuto slowly nods. Akaashi isn’t that type of person. He treats people fairly, and he shouldn’t be any different because he’s not anything special.

“You’re right. But there’s no way he’ll like me, if he knows what I think about. He just doesn’t know me well enough to hate me.” Bokuto hates himself for everything that crosses his mind, when he’s trying to sleep. “I sometimes wonder if he’d cry if I died, because my parents say he’d be happier if I were gone”

“That’s bullshit!”

Bokuto almost jumps out of his skin. “I’m sorry,” he hastily apologizes, surprised at the outburst.

“Nobody would be happier. You can’t die because someone told you lies.” He almost screams at Bokuto. “Don’t do it. I’ve regretted it.”

“Okay.” Bokuto nods again, pushed far from the cliff edge he’d been teetering on. “Did you, um…”

“I failed. That’s why I’m here.”

Bokuto loses his words. “I’m sorry. I was insensitive.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I don’t blame you, dude.” He lets out a quiet laugh. “My name is Tendou Satori. Yeah, I know it sounds weird. But you can call me that.”

Bokuto’s eyes widen. He remembers someone called that from Shiratorizawa. “I’m Bokuto. Bokuto Koutarou. See ya.”

He hangs up quickly, burying his face in his hands. Maybe he isn’t doing so bad, after all. Tendou is wise, and helpful. He knows more about the world than Bokuto. Maybe even more than his parents.
Bokuto keeps a calendar in his room.

Beside it, there are three pens, each a different colour. He marks dots into each day, some with more dots than the others.

Most of the time, there are pink dots. Sometimes, there are blue or green. On one or two days each month, all three colours are in one day.

His stomach growls. He would give anything for the opportunity to prepare a healthy meal for himself. There’s a bag of grapes sitting in the fridge, and he swipes a few to throw them into his mouth.

The grapes are plump, green, and irresistibly juicy. Bokuto picks a few more out, biting into them and swallowing hurriedly.

That’s his dinner for the day. He hops back into his room, marking the calendar with green.

“Koutarou, what are you doing here?!”

Bokuto’s eyes snap open. Confusion sets in. He looks around, and realises he’s in the kitchen. He lifts his head off the table, but it’s slammed back down roughly.

“Were you sleeping in the kitchen?! We don’t want to see you lazing around! We pay for everything you own! Why don’t you use your time to study?”

“I’m sorry…” Bokuto whimpers at the sudden pain in his cheek. A plastic cup is thrown at his head, and he cries out.

“Stop making so much noise! You’re so annoying!” His mother screams at him again, and he bites his lip to make sure he won’t make a sound. “You’re useless!”

She hits him over and over again, with the kitchen utensils closest to them. He holds his head in his arms protectively, but the blows keep landing on the unprotected parts of him. There’s a deafening ringing in his head, and he can only hope that he isn’t concussed.

“Ow!”

Bokuto screams in pain, when a particularly painful force slams into his nose. He’s only hit harder when he cries out, in the mouth this time. His teeth rattle in his mouth, stinging from the sudden pain.

Blood pours out of his nose, dripping into his palms. He’s been having many nosebleeds recently, and they leave him light-headed and grossed out. His mouth tastes like iron, and the blood seeps into the cracks of his skin.

His mother strokes his hair, as he struggles to keep the blood off the table. He can’t act like a dirty, disgusting monster. He’ll get another round of beatings.

“We only do this because we love you. We wouldn’t have to do this, if you would just listen to us.”

Bokuto can’t stop shivering.

“We don’t do it to be mean to you. But you don’t deserve our kindness if you want to be a brat. Do you think I enjoy hitting you? Do you?” She grabs the back of his t-shirt.
“I- I don’t know.” Bokuto holds back his sobs. “I don’t even know what you think of me anymore. You said… you said that everyone would be happier if I died.”

Apparently, that was the wrong answer to give.

His mother hits his back, with something about as sharp as an elbow. “You’re a fucking liar!” She throws him off the chair, and kicks his side as he drops to the floor roughly. “You’re imagining things, like always. You just love guilt-tripping people. That’s all you’re good at.”

Bokuto shakes his head. He remembers being told that. It’s not easy to forget how painful and wrenching it was. “But I’m telling the truth.”

“Shut up! You made that up. Why are you making things up? I’ve never said that.” Another sharp pain, in his ribs. “You wouldn’t have it the nice way. You’re making me do this. You’re so selfish. I wouldn’t hurt you if you would just stay quiet.”

Bokuto doesn’t trust any of that. He’s been nothing but quiet for weeks, and yet his parents somehow have a reason to beat him. Maybe he’s just a horrible person, without even realizing it. His personality is filled with disgusting attributes and flaws. He needs to cut everything out of him.

“People like you should be locked away out of society. You bring nothing good to this house.”

Sleeping becomes harder and harder, despite the rush of exhaustion that hits him every night.

Bokuto’s body aches horribly. There are shooting pains to the left of his collarbone, and deep, throbbing aches in his chest. He sometimes wonders how heart attacks would feel in comparison, just to make sure he wouldn’t die if his parents ignore his pleas for medical assistance.

The stabbing pains that are localized around one area of him make it hard to breathe. He fiddles with his phone, looking up articles on how to sleep better. It suggests turning off phones and electronics, but he can’t do that. It’s his crutch and lifeline to sanity.

He makes the decision to sleep in class.

“Bokuto, wake up. We have to move classes.”

Bokuto only lets out a groan, as his face his prodded with a mechanical pencil. He’s slept in between every one of his classes, but he has to walk to another class for English. He rubs his eyes, almost falling from his desk.

He stares at himself in the reflective surface of someone’s pencil case. Instead of listening to the grammar lesson in front of him, he observes how pale he’s gotten.

“You okay?”

Konoha shakes him, when he attempts to go to sleep during lunch. He doesn’t even have the money to buy yakisoba bread anymore. The hunger pains are only worsened by the smell of food around him.

“I’m tired.” Bokuto plants his face back into the desk, while Sarukui pelts a tiny paper ball at him. “If you disturb my sleep, you have to offer me food.”

Sarukui offers him a bite-sized rice ball, and Bokuto accepts. It’s only enough to tease his appetite, which is physically painful. “Aren’t you going to hang out with Akaashi today?”
“No.”

Akaashi is too smart for his own good, and will catch onto the fact that he’s tired and hungry. He doesn’t want to worry him over something as stupid as that.

It’s hardly a surprise when he starts feeling even worse every day.

During his first class a few days later, he almost faints when he tries to stand up. As soon as he’d gotten up from his seat, everything had turned dark, strange colours floating in his vision.

The dizziness is uncomfortable, rocking his feet. It’s almost like he’s motion sick, and he swallows with a tremble. His fingertips can’t stop twitching. He feels like he’s going to retch.

A kind girl in his class gives him a comforter to place on his knees. She’s laughed and whistled at, but Bokuto thanks her with a smile. It’s the most anyone’s done for him today.

He blows his nose, and it starts bleeding.

“It’s dodgeball time!”

His classmates erupt into cheers, and laughter ripples through the gymnasium. Bokuto pumps his fist up, just like all the other classmates. His eyes are bagged and dark, begging for sleep.

Bokuto pelts the balls with all his might, grabbing two at once and throwing as hard as he can. It’s satisfying, feeling air rush past his cheeks. It’s around the end of September, and the summer heat has eased off. The shoe soles squeaking on the floor fills his ears.

“Aka-” Bokuto stops himself, before he can call out his name. “Taka-cchi! Go and get ‘em!”

Takacchi gets two on the other team out, and Bokuto lets out a whoop of glee. “Good job!” He slaps him on the back, attempting a victory dance with his thumbs pointed up.

While he’s caught up in his own celebration, he doesn’t notice someone firing a ball at him, full force.

A blunt object slams into him full force. The entire right half of his face aches, and he doubles over, groaning.

“You okay, Bokuto?!?”

A crowd gathers around him, and he waves them off, almost faceplanting into the ground. “I’m fine. Leave it.”

“But- you’re bleeding!” They all shout at him, throwing him packets of tissues. “You should probably-”

Bokuto opens his mouth to say that he’s fine, he doesn’t need their help. But nothing comes out. He groans, sinking into the ground like a sack of potatoes. He can’t get up all of a sudden, and his mouth is filled with liquid.

There’s something cold on his face, and a hand on his shoulder.

“Bokuto, how are you feeling?” His gym teacher asks, and Bokuto pulls the ice pack off his face. “You passed out for a moment there. Does your head hurt a lot?”
Bokuto shakes his head, wincing. His disoriented vision focuses on the bench he’s lying on. “I’m okay. I was just careless.” He lifts himself into a sitting position. “Can I go back in?”

The teacher shakes his head, placing a new ice pack back on his nose. “You don’t look well. Sit out, and keep warm.”

Bokuto looks down, and realizes there’s a blanket draped on top of him. It doesn’t do much, seeing as he’s still shivering violently. It’s worse than he assumed it to be.

He nods reluctantly, readjusting himself so that he’s lying down. His head feels swollen, like a balloon about to pop. His hands and feet tremble violently.

“Sorry.” Bokuto mumbles, falling asleep for the remainder of the class.

When Bokuto gets home, he notices a discomfort in his throat. A scratchy sensation prickles on his throat, and he scratches the itch with his tongue. It does nothing.

He grabs a bottle of water and gulps down about three quarters of it, ignoring the bloated feeling in his stomach. The water sloshes around inside him, almost as if he’s a water balloon.

When he vocalizes an “Ah”, a shooting pain travels down his throat. He coughs, clearing his throat for what seems like the fifth time within one minute.

“Medicine…” Bokuto whines, rubbing at his neck to distract himself from the uncomfortable warmth in his throat. He rifles through the cabinet in the bathroom, coughing twice before he finally fishes out a box of throat drops.

“What do you think you’re taking that for?”

Before he can pop one into his mouth, his mother grabs the box, ripping it out of his hands. Bokuto gasps, as if he’s been winded. He’s being caught for something he wasn’t supposed to do.

“I don’t feel well. My throat really hurts.” As if to illustrate his point, a painful cough forces out of him. “Please, let me have one.”

“You’re only asking because you got caught.” His mother points out, and he flinches. “You’re always wasting our supplies. What are you, an animal?!”

Bokuto grimaces, biting his lip. “It’s just one throat drop…”

“Go away. Nobody wants you here.” She grips the packet of lozenges so hard, it crumples audibly. Once Bokuto flinches and backs out of the bathroom, she throws the packet into the trash.

Somehow, by the time he’s about to go to sleep, he feels a lot worse. His chest is heavy, and his sinuses are swollen. His throat tickles painfully. Another round of coughing starts, leaving him in total misery.

As the days go by, the sore throat and coughing doesn't get better. His mouth tastes metallic, and the gymnasium flashes between hot and cold constantly. He lets out painful, phlegm-filled coughs that come from deep inside his chest, every time nobody’s looking during practice.

Bokuto hates being a bother, and so he decides to put a surgical mask on. It muffles his coughing, and eliminates the chance of infecting other people.
“...Is it possible that you have a cold, Bokuto-san?” Akaashi points out, while Konoha rolls his eyes.

“Not possible. Definite.” Konoha sighs, feeling up Bokuto’s skin. “Do you feel feverish or anything like that?”

Bokuto pulls back, grunting. “I’m not feverish so I don’t have a cold!”

It’s a bullshit line, he knows. But it’s as if it’ll come true, if he believes it enough.

His chest heaves with every concealed cough throughout practice. His throat jumps as he lets out strained groans.

He slips out into the bathrooms, coughing violently into the sink. He spits out the disgusting texture in his mouth, clearing his throat until it’s too suspicious to stay out any longer for a bathroom break.

Concealing a horrible cough isn’t really easy. It feels like something has died inside his chest, festering as it rattles his chest. His entire body radiates heat from coughing so much, and his cheeks are stained red with an unhealthy flush.

At night, the coughing worsens tenfold. His cheeks are physically painful from forcing himself to be quiet. He wakes up in the middle of the night, coughing until he’s dry heaving into his pillow.

His throat is raw from the hacking, merciless and scraping like sandpaper. The lack of sleep shows on his face, dark eye bags drawn onto his skin. He’s gotten screamed at for coughing too loud, but he can barely help it anymore.

Akaashi gives him a throat lozenge during practice, and he accepts it gratefully. It’s the most generous thing anyone’s done for him, all week.

For a while, everything seems to go on as normal. But he screws up, as usual. In the exact moment that his jump ended, a spell of dizziness hits him, and he stumbles.

He lands on his ankle, hard. It cracks loudly, and he knows he’s fucked up.

“I’m fine!”

Bokuto insists, hopping back on his feet before the pain even registers. His smile comes before his emotions, spreading like butter on his face.

“C’mon, toss for me, Akaashi!” He pleads, until Akaashi gives in and nods. “Woo!”

Bokuto continues hitting spikes, until practice ends and the coach dismisses them all.

“Thanks for having us! Have a safe journey home!”

Everyone bows, and scatters in their own separate ways. Bokuto heads to the club room to get changed and go home, before anyone else. He shimmies out of his shorts and t-shirt, grabs his jacket, and attempts to stuff his foot in his shoe.

It doesn’t even fit in. His ankle has ballooned up, tender and sensitive to touch. He loosens the laces as much as he can, attempting to ease the foot in. He almost cries out from the throbbing pain.

“Bokuto-san? What’s wrong?”
Bokuto falls silent, staring at his injured foot. It’s purple and blue, almost to a comical degree. There’s nothing okay about it. He can’t play like this.

He mumbles an excuse, that dies on his lips once Akaashi touches his ankle. “Ow!” He hisses, as Akaashi hastily shouts for help.

“It’s not a big deal, I’ll be fine.” Bokuto explains, but Akaashi isn’t even listening. The other third years make their way over to him, gasping and murmuring in disbelief as soon as they see his swollen ankle.

“Why didn’t you tell us, Bokuto? It’s purple, holy shit.”

Konoha, Washio and Sarukui join their efforts with Akaashi’s, to support Bokuto’s limbs and carry him to the nurse’s office. They scold him for not alerting them immediately, but Bokuto can only manage a nod. He’s beginning to feel light-headed.

He manages to stay quiet, while the other third years tend to his injury. Sarukui presses an ice pack to it, using up half the nurse’s supply until the swelling finally goes down.

“I gotta head back home…” Bokuto murmurs, visibly dejected as he manages to fit his foot inside his shoe. He knows he looks drained and upset because of his injury, but he’d rather take that than have to go home.

“Take care, okay?” Akaashi places his arms around his shoulder, patting him supportively. “Don’t get sick during practice. Get plenty of rest, and don’t stay up too late.”

Bokuto doesn’t choose to stay up late, but he nods anyway. “Okay! See ya tomorrow, Akaashi!”

He limps back home, twice as slow as usual. His legs walk in uneven steps, and he places more weight on his healthy ankle to prevent the injury from worsening. He lets out “oh”s and “ah”s of pain with every step, sucking in a breath to ease the pain of walking. It gets harder with every movement, and he wonders how comfortable he would be if he slept outside in a cardboard box.

Bokuto reaches home, and the exhaustion hits him all at once. He collapses after walking three steps from the doorway, breathing heavily and drenched with sweat. He definitely has a fever, he realises.

“Koutarou, get up off the floor. You’re too big. You’re in the way.”

He can barely hear his mother muttering something, and nudging him with her slipper. He groans, which she takes as refusal.

“Get up! You’re so sweaty and disgusting. If you give us whatever you have, you’re going to really get a beating.”

Before Bokuto can scramble into a sitting position, he’s dragged upwards by his mother, against the wall. His eyes are glassy and unfocused, his breath hot on his tongue.

A gurgle sounds at the back of his throat, and he barely has the time to turn sideways before a coughing fit starts. He doubles over, hacking up what sounds like his entire lung. His breath wheezes with every inhale, phlegm getting caught in his throat.

“Go to your room!” She yells, slapping his cheek with such force behind it that he stumbles. “You’re not getting any sympathy just because you’re sick. Get over yourself.”
Bokuto clings onto the rails as he makes his way up the stairs shakily. His hands are slippery and his centre of balance is way off, but he makes it to the top without collapsing. They really wouldn’t care if he died.

He flops on the bed, coughing violently. His whole diaphragm aches with exertion, tears running down his cheeks before he even knows. And they increase in flow, when he realizes he’s crying.

He slips into a fitful sleep, recalling how his mother used to dote on him when he was sick. A cold compress on his head, and whatever he wanted to eat for dinner. The taste of the jelly that masked the bitterness of the medicine.

Even a glass of water, he would have accepted with tears and gratitude.

A cough wakes him up, ripping from his throat. It comes out with so much force, he almost throws up. His stomach aches all of a sudden, a stabbing sensation spreading out to his entire middle. There’s a fireball in his brain, writhing with such speed that he can do nothing but suffer through it.

Bokuto coughs into his hands, almost suffocating. He can’t draw enough air into his lungs, before it’s all pushed out again. He needs water, but he can barely move his legs.

“Koutarou? Are you sick?”

He wonders, for a moment, if his fever-addled brain is making him hallucinate. “Dad?” He croaks out, voice whittled down by the constant hacking. “Water, please. I only want water.”

A glass is set down on the bedside table, and Bokuto pathetically attempts to grab it. His mouth is dry, and his throat is burning. He almost knocks down his lamp.

“Stop making an even bigger mess.” Bokuto’s father grabs the glass and presses it to his lips. He gulps the water down greedily, relishing the coolness that splashes against his throat. Some spills down his chest and goes up his nose, but he doesn’t care.

Some water goes down the wrong way, and he coughs and splutters until his chest rattles. His stomach contracts with every forceful cough, until the wriggling in his chest begins to subside.

“Go to sleep.” His father orders him, and leaves the room. Bokuto nods, too exhausted to even open his mouth.

Bokuto closes his eyes, trying to focus on anything but how much his joints ache. His whole face is puffy and flushed, the air of sickness hanging in the air. He’s about to pass out. The ball of fire in his head roars louder than ever. Even if it’s just a cold, he firmly believes that it’s possible for him to die right now.

He lays down, but he stays wide awake. Exhaustion weighs him down, a sharp noise ringing in his ears constantly. A twist of pain erupts in his gut, and he reaches down to gently caress his stomach.

Bokuto doesn’t feel better after lying down for hours. His stomach throbs painfully, and his entire respiratory system is ravaged from the coughing. He can barely hear himself think over his headache.

He knows his mother won’t give him any sympathy for falling ill. But his father had given him some water. Maybe, if he asks politely, he’ll get him some pain relief.

He pushes himself out of bed with all his energy, hobbling down the stairs with heavy breaths. His eyes are bloodshot and watery as he makes his way into the kitchen, looking for some water to
soothe his throat.

“Did I not tell you to go to sleep?” His father glares at him, irritated. “I don’t like it when you disobey me.”

Bokuto nods, too exhausted to apologize. He twists the tap and fills his glass with water, drenching his hands in the process.

His father groans at the amount of water that spills past the cup. “You’re being wasteful again. Be careful.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” Bokuto murmurs, his voice almost gone. He swallows down the water, coughing into his palm loudly. “I’m sorry for being a selfish brat.”

“Then do something about it.” His father sighs. “Don’t infect me. I have an important meeting tomorrow. You shouldn’t even be down here.”

Guilt stabs at Bokuto, harder than ever. “I just wanted some medicine. I wasn’t going to stay for long…”

He doesn’t know what to do anymore. Every symptom hits him at once, and he pitches forward, coughing up bitter slime violently. His fever only continues to climb, and he’s skeptical of whether he can make it back up the stairs.

“You sound like a dying animal. Get out of here.”

Bokuto scrambles out of the kitchen, only managing to get into the sitting room before crumpling into a heap. His body is too warm, heat radiating off him onto the couch. He assembles some cushions into a makeshift pillow, in his drunken haze. He lays down, trembling into the couch.

It’s unbearably cold, even after piling on everything he can find around the room. Jackets, old clothes, some blankets. He wishes he could head back to his room upstairs, but there’s no possible way he can go up the stairs without collapsing. He squeezes his eyes shut, hoping it would somehow force his body to fall asleep.

Just as Bokuto manages to slip in and out of consciousness, a strange sensation rises up in his stomach. He soon realises it’s nausea, but he can barely move the pile of blankets and miscellaneous objects before the pressure rushes to his throat.

He holds it in desperately. He needs to get to the bathroom. The large mass in his chest presses onto him so hard he can barely breathe. He clasps his hands to his mouth, warm saliva spilling past the corner of his lips. He needs to throw up so badly.

He takes in a breath, and it’s the last straw for his stomach.

It feels like a hiccup, but it winds up being so much more than that. With a burp from deep inside his chest, he brings up a splash of vomit all over himself.

Panic sets in, but he’s too ill to move himself away from the damage. He’s not even able to regain his breathing, before his stomach clenches again. A torrent of sick splatters down his front, and all over the sofa.

He tumbles onto the floor, but everything is already soiled. Wave after wave of vomit rises up to his throat, joining the mess with painful retches. His whole midsection hurts so bad, he can hardly breathe.
It’s like he’s not in control anymore. Bokuto can only sit and stare at the horrible mess he’s making, eyes glazed over and staring at nothing. He heaves so hard, he feels like he’s pulled a muscle in his abdomen.

Bokuto almost chokes on the vomit, getting chunks of it in his hair and on the clothes around him as he coughs and sprays it everywhere. It’s getting into the fabric of the couch, and the carpet. And onto the clothes that don’t belong to him.

“What the fuck have you done?!”

It’s put into words, before his head connects all the dots.

His parents stand at the doorway, gaping at the carnage in pure horror. Bokuto can only respond with a dry heave, his throat scraped raw with stomach acid.

“You’re vile. What made you do this? Haven’t you ruined our lives enough?!” His mother is screaming at him. He’s in the bathroom, getting sprayed down with the ice-cold blast from the shower. His shivers don’t stop, the painful coldness outweighing what little relief it has on his boiling skin.

“Sorry.” Bokuto sobs, unable to speak any more words. “I’m sorry.”

His mother throws a plastic basin at him, and Bokuto puts his trembling arms up instinctively to protect himself. The basin bounces off his wrist, slamming into his father’s face.

Before Bokuto can even open his mouth, the basin is hurled at his face with an insanely large force. It accelerates, and clatters on the floor after colliding with his nose and mouth.

Blood pours from his nose, splattering against the bathroom floor. It mixes in with the water, swirling down the drain. Bokuto coughs, and a glob of coagulated blood drips out the corner of his mouth.

“Why?” Bokuto cries out, as his father slams his head into the wall three consecutive times. “Why are you- doing this to me?!”

“You’re a fucking worthless cunt. You should have never been born.”

His father stops hitting him, instead pressing his head under the bathwater. Bokuto exhales sharply into the water, coughing violently as the water goes down the wrong way. He’d inhaled some of it unexpectedly.

“Please,” Bokuto whispers, in between painful, noisy hacking. “Please don’t kill me.”

His pathetic plea only earns him another slap. “I’ve been so forgiving and tolerant of your theatrics. But you’ve always taken it for granted. You’ll be sorry when we’re dead.”

“You’re trying to kill me first.” Bokuto wails, his blood staining the bath water a tainted shade of red. “You wouldn’t care if I died. It hurts, and I feel sick, and... I just want to sleep.”

Bokuto’s head rolls back, bumping into the wall. He wishes he could just pass out already. Anything would be better than this. He doesn’t want to die. He wants to run, but there’s no way he can even stand.

He doesn’t understand. He’d thought that maybe his father would take care of him. It’s his fault, for trying to avoid being punished. If he’d just taken the hit obediently, he wouldn’t be beaten.
“I loved you…”

“If you really don’t like staying here so much, then leave. Nobody loves you in this house. You’re mentally disturbed, and nobody will love you like this.”

His father leaves him alone, shaking with fever and pain. He’s right. His parents see him for who he is–a monster that nobody could ever love. The one that causes all the misery and conflict. The root cause of his parents losing their ability to love.

Bokuto shakily lifts himself off the floor, staggering across the hallway. Pain roars in his injured ankle. He can’t stay here anymore.

There’s only one place he can stay at.

He doesn’t even bring his phone. He steps out of the house, pushing the door closed. A shiver hits him, and he realises it’s pouring rain outside. He stands there for a few seconds, and he’s even more soaked than before. Nevertheless, there’s only one way he can go.

Bokuto struggles through the rain, thunder echoing in the distance. His t-shirt sticks to his skin, wetness permeating through the fabric. Large drops of water smack his face, sliding down his skin.

He holds back his tears, and continues walking.

He falls, many times. The ground is rough, scraping his knees and arms. The cuts in his nose and mouth reopen and bleed, continuously.

The dizziness is almost too much. Bokuto wants to rest, but he knows it’s the end if he lays down and never gets up on a road in Tokyo. Fear feeds into his determination, driving him forward.

After what feels like an hour later, he arrives at Akaashi’s doorway.

Without thinking, Bokuto slams his fists on the door, as hard as he can. His mouth won’t open, but he desperately wants to scream. His body is racked with violent shivers, and his lungs whistle with every breath he takes.

He locates the doorbell for the intercom, and hammers his fingertip into it as many times as he possibly can. He’s making an awful racket, but anything is better than being left outside. Even if Akaashi’s mother would be furious at him for disturbing her sleep.

Bokuto bangs on the door repeatedly, until his knuckles turn wet and red. Blood smears across the stainless steel door.

The intercom clicks on, and a voice comes through.

“Who is it?”

Bokuto opens his mouth, screaming with the last of his energy. “Please, please, help me! Please-”

His lungs give way, squeezing hard in his chest. He coughs out the air from his lungs, keeling over so suddenly he’s slamming his head into the door.

“Bokuto-san?”

Bokuto mumbles Akaashi’s name, pleading for help. The pain in his ankle erupts again, so intense that he feels faint. His entire body is hot and itchy one moment, just to start violently shivering the
Sobbing, he wraps his arms around himself shakily. The front door clicks open, and the tears start flowing like a burst tap.

“Bokuto-san, what happened?”

Bokuto blabbers something unintelligible, collapsing into Akaashi’s arms. His ankle throbs even worse, tears and blood staining the front of Akaashi’s t-shirt.

“Help me, please. It hurts so bad, Akaashi, please…”

Akaashi lifts him into the house, his arms cradling him gently. It takes a moment before he notices Bokuto’s ankle swelling, and sets him down on the floor temporarily.

“Mom! Mom, quick!”

Bokuto hears the footsteps echoing inside the floor, and instinctively curls into himself. The floor feels amazing against his sickly-warm cheek, but strong arms pull him up again.

“Oh my goodness, Koutarou-kun. What did they do to you?”

Bokuto doesn’t know how to answer. His lungs are filled with illness, and he hacks so hard he almost gags. “I- I’m sorry! Don’t be angry, please…”

Akaashi’s mother is not a large woman, but she carries him all the way up the stairs, into a room with a decently-sized bed. He hears Akaashi’s footsteps too, patting behind them as his mother sits him down on the bed, propping him up with some pillows.

Bokuto screws his eyes shut when the lights switch on, wincing as he slowly adjusts his eyesight. His breath gets caught in his throat, and he coughs into his hands until they’re wet with spit.

“You’re burning up. Let’s get you cleaned up first. Can you stand?” Akaashi’s mother asks, and Bokuto shakes his head weakly. Before he can apologize, she nods and pats his head. “That’s okay. I’ll get Keiji to bring you some towels. I’m sure you’re more comfortable if he does it.”

“I’m sorry,” Bokuto mutters through tears. “I…”

Akaashi comes back with some small towels, and a basin full of water. “This might hurt, and I’m sorry.” He dips a towel in water, and begins cleaning the dried blood off Bokuto’s face. Once he works his way down from his nose, he moves onto his arms and knees, wiping the dirt and grit away until all that’s left are minor wounds.

Bokuto hiccups constantly, swallowing the constant need to cry. Akaashi’s hands are gentle, handling him with care and love that he doesn’t deserve. He can only sit there as Akaashi bandages his ankle and places a cool washcloth on his head.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you. I wanted to be there for you, but…” Akaashi breaks, tears dripping from his eyes. “You’re safe now. Nobody will hit you anymore.”

A groan passes through Bokuto’s lips. Akaashi is crying. He wants to wipe his tears, but his arm won’t move, and he’s just so, so dizzy.

“…It hurts.”

His head, his limbs, his stomach. He feels even worse than the time he’d woken up from surgery.
His eyes glisten with continuous tears.

Akaashi lifts his t-shirt above his head, murmuring hushed apologies as Bokuto’s body is racked with shivers. He hurriedly puts a fluffy, warm jumper on Bokuto, replacing his shorts with oversized sweatpants.

“Are you warm enough? Should I get you a hot water bottle?”

Bokuto shakes his head, his finger touching the back of Akaashi’s hand. “Don’t want anything. Please, just don’t go.”

He passes out, unable to keep himself conscious.

Chapter End Notes

give me a shout in the comments or on my twitter, chances are I'll be either refreshing those two websites or playing Touhou. kudos, reviews and criticisms are appreciated!
I Found You, At Last

Chapter Summary

“Akaashi-san…” Bokuto sighs. He doesn’t say it, but Ayako seems to understand. She massages Bokuto’s hand, her smooth hands contrasting Bokuto’s. “I really care about him. He deserves to be happy.”

Ayako laughs softly. “Keiji’s said the same thing about you, you know?”

“He… did?” Bokuto blinks. Ayako is smiling at him. She nods, and cuddles Bokuto in her soft arms. She’s a huggable mother, round and warm and every soft adjective there is.

Bokuto is in the Akaashi household’s care.

Chapter Notes

YAY GUYS!! I FINALLY HIT 100K WORDS ON THIS FIC!!
And it's finally the turning point. Pretty fitting, eh?
It's still gonna take some time before Bokuto unlearns all the pain and guilt, but he'll hopefully be in a better place soon. Let's watch over him kindly.
this chapter is pretty sad/angsty tho

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bokuto blinks, and tears fall from his swollen eyes. He can't stop the abuse playing out inside his head, like a stuck record. His parents don't love him. They would kill him if they got away with it.

It hurts his nose to cry. Akaashi wipes the blood off his face, stroking his hair softly. He wants to wrap his arms around him, feel the closeness they have. But he can’t move. If his parents were to find him here, he would be helpless.

“You’re running an awful fever.” Akaashi murmurs, and Bokuto can barely nod. It would explain the constant ringing in his head, and his body wavering between hot and cold constantly. He just feels so sick.

That’s what sends him over the edge. The tears start to fall again, his shoulders heaving with sobs. He’s burdening Akaashi’s family, intruding into their house when he’s sick.

“I’m sorry, Akaashi.” Bokuto hiccups, grabbing Akaashi’s hand tightly. “I’m- so s’rry.”

His chest tightens, and suddenly he’s hacking violently again. His ribs ache from the wet, gurgly coughs that escape him. The coughing puts pressure on his stomach, increasing the discomfort bubbling inside him.
“Don’t apologize.” Akaashi rubs circles on Bokuto’s back, as rough coughs are forced out of him. “None of this is your fault. You’re safe here. I’m not letting you get hurt anymore.”

Akaashi lifts Bokuto up to lean him against the pillows, pressing the back of his hand to his flushed cheek. His skin burns with fever. Unfocused, misty eyes stare at Akaashi helplessly.

“Where does it hurt the most?” Akaashi places a hand onto Bokuto’s shoulder. His hands are so gentle, touching him delicately so as to not cause additional pain.

“My body hurts. Everywhere.”

Bokuto can barely focus on one part of his body, when everywhere else is screaming at him for attention. His head feels like a pressurised cooker, on its way to explosion. His stomach throbs painfully, as if there’s something wriggling around and chewing up his organs. His joints feel as if they’ve all been bent in the opposite directions.

The door clicks open, and Bokuto flinches. Akaashi’s mother steps inside the room, holding a basin full of water and a small white towel. Bokuto squeezes his eyes shut. He can’t defend himself if the basin hits his face again. He’ll drip blood everywhere again, and there’ll be so much trouble, he’ll be sorry he was born.

Something wet is placed on his neck. It’s soothing, and cools down the ache that travels to his shoulders. The heat sweltering inside of him halts its progress slightly.

“I’m going to take your temperature. It’s not going to take long, so bear with me, okay?”

Akaashi’s mother lifts his arm to place the thermometer under. The jumper Bokuto’s wearing is already soaked with sweat. He’s disgusting. He can’t even appreciate all the help he’s getting, without ruining it for everyone.

The thermometer beeps under his arm, and a digital display shows just how high his fever is. He can’t read it from his position, but Akaashi’s mother takes one look and shakes her head.

“We’re going to the hospital. You need medical attention.”

Bokuto jumps, hitting his head off the wall. The headache worsens tenfold, and tears gather in his eyes. “No!” He yells, twisting out of the covers. “Please, don’t… Don’t take me to the hospital. I’ll get better soon. I won’t burden you guys.”

Akaashi’s arms wrap around him, just loose enough for him to breathe comfortably. He cries and coughs violently into Akaashi’s shoulder, as Akaashi shushes him with gentle noises. He can barely focus his gaze on anything. He’s so dizzy.

“I- I don’t have my health card, I can’t go.” Bokuto cries out, as Akaashi presses a cold compress to Bokuto’s head. It helps the pain caused by slamming into the wall. “Please, no hospital, please…”

“Oh.” Akaashi’s mother exhales sharply. “I’m going to call my sister. She’ll know how to help and when to bring you to the hospital.”

Akaashi nods, setting Bokuto back down into a sitting position. Bokuto’s head slumps backwards, squishing into the soft pillows. His head pounds with every heartbeat. Sickness consumes every part of him, stuffing his chest.

Bokuto lets Akaashi tend to him, too exhausted to refuse his efforts. It’s midnight, and he’s sleepy. He just can’t drift off, without being reminded of what had happened at his house. If he can even
call it that- he’s not certain he’ll ever be able to go back.

He’d foolishly thought he had a chance with his parents again. Bokuto would imagine himself loved, getting warm meals and hugs and praise. He would stop crying under his blankets about his parents hitting him over something trivial.

Breathing hurts. Bokuto’s chest whistles with every inhale, irritating his lungs. He keeps coughing out sticky phlegm, but his throat never clears up.

“Bokuto-san, it’s okay. Try to sleep.”

Akaashi keeps at his side, patting his back rhythmically. Bokuto isn’t sure how he’s supposed to sleep with a raging headache, but for Akaashi, he’s going to try.

His eyelids fall shut, and he begins to feel drowsy enough for it to override the discomfort. Akaashi is there beside him. He won’t hit him, even if he’s sick.

There’s a floating sensation that takes over him. Bokuto wavers in between sleep and consciousness, dipping into the memories that float around him.

It’s as if he’s being dragged into a bottomless swamp. He’s sinking further and further, into something boiling hot. It’s too tiring to keep his thoughts together.

He falls into a deep sleep, losing consciousness.

When Bokuto wakes up, there’s someone unfamiliar standing nearby. He flinches, but the slap that he’s been anticipating doesn’t come. He’s not at home, and it’s not his mother beside him.

“How are you feeling?” The woman holds out her hand, allowing Bokuto to grasp it weakly. “I’m Ayako’s sister, Komachi. I’m here to help. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Bokuto screws his eyes shut at the blinding headache. He barely manages a nod, slowly realising who the person is. It’s Akaashi’s aunt, from what he gathers.

“I don’t really feel good,” Bokuto mumbles, “my head hurts and I feel really dizzy…”

Komachi uncaps something and presses it to Bokuto’s lips. “Dehydration will make it worse. Try and get a few sips.”

Bokuto really doesn’t want anything near his mouth, but he knows whatever he’ll be faced with if he refuses is worse. He opens his mouth, gulping down the rehydration solution. It’s cool against his tongue, and eases the burning in his throat.

“Good job. You’re doing really well.” Komachi reassures him, wiping off the excess liquid dripping down his chin. It’s strange, being treated like he’s younger than he really is. But he hasn’t been taken care of so tenderly in such a long time, so he takes it.

Akaashi enters the room, holding some heat packs for Bokuto. He holds Bokuto’s hand as he warms him up, and Bokuto hums in response. It doesn’t alleviate much of the sickness, but he feels significantly better from his presence alone.

“It’s a chest cold, I think. But the headache is really bad too, isn’t it?” Akaashi talks barely above a whisper, taking care not to irritate the pain any further. Bokuto nods, coughing so violently he almost pulls a muscle in his chest. Akaashi presses a tissue to his mouth, which quickly gets
splattered with thick phlegm.

Bokuto can barely talk, even though his brain is a mess of jumbled-up words. He wants to ask why. Why Akaashi is caring for him, and why he could possibly be so close to him when he’s sick. Why it hurts so much to breathe.

His stomach begins to feel bloated again, despite the lack of food in his system. The pressure in his head is too strong for him to notice it properly, but he knows it’s there. It’s as if his stomach is a cauldron, bubbling with an acidic vengeance.

As Akaashi and his aunt wipe off the sweat on his forehead and neck, Bokuto can’t help wondering if he’s going to feel sick again. It’s the last thing he needs, on top of everything else. And he’ll definitely get thrown out of the house if he behaves like a degenerate. The cold shower punishment is something he really doesn’t want to experience again.

The coughing fit starts up again, pressing down harder on Bokuto’s chest. With every forceful cough, his stomach is prodded at further, an uncomfortable warmth stirring inside of him. It sloshes in his chest, rising up at an unsettling speed.

“I-” Bokuto cuts himself off with a sob, panicking. He needs to communicate that he’s feeling sick. Nausea claws at his insides, threatening to spill out any minute. He can’t throw up. If he does, he’ll be slapped again.

“What’s wrong?” Akaashi asks him, concerned. “Does it hurt somewhere else?”

Bokuto hiccups, head pitching forward. The pressure in his stomach increases, and his mouth starts to water. As his stomach churns painfully, something seems to be trying to escape him.

It’s miserable. His stomach is queasy, and he lets out a small burp. A cough rattles through his chest, so intense he almost gags.

He shivers, curling into himself as best as he can. The motion sets off another wave of pain in his stomach. He can’t keep the pain under control anymore. Everything he does to alleviate it, worsens it.

Akaashi says something, but he doesn’t catch what it is. There’s a much stronger clench in his stomach, forcing him to close his eyes and wait until it passes. Except, it takes longer to fade away, and his actual organ seems to tense up into a coil.

“What is it?” Akaashi reaches over to him, rubbing his chest with his palm. “Do you need to cough?”

Bokuto shakes his head. He whimpers through gritted teeth, brows knitted tightly together. He hacks into a ball of tissue, throat scraped and painful.

He clamps his lips together tightly, in an attempt to get the nausea under control. His mouth is filled with wetness, dripping off the side of his lip freely. Akaashi notices the streak of spit, and wipes it away with a tissue.

“Ak- Akaashi.” Bokuto murmurs, almost pleading. “I need-”

A large, pressurised lump forms just under his throat. It wants out, and feels like a burp stuck in his chest. The sick churning in his stomach worsens exponentially. The back of his throat gurgles deeply.
“I’m gonna- hlp-” Bokuto heaves, narrowly avoiding getting sick all over himself. But he comes dangerously close to it, and he can tell he has less than twenty seconds before it happens. Akaashi seems to realize the urgency of the situation, at last.

“Are you going to be sick?” It’s not a question. Akaashi darts out of the room, while Komachi clears away the blankets to save them from whatever mess that could happen. Bokuto scrambles to press his hands against his mouth, but it’s not enough to quell the nausea.

Akaashi comes back with a plastic trash can, setting it down under Bokuto’s chin. “I know it’s really uncomfortable. It’ll be over soon, okay?” Bokuto feels more than one pair of hands around him, wrapping blankets around him and rubbing his back up and down. It’s almost too much, but he feels safer with the added comfort.

“Don’t- wanna.” Bokuto protests, squeezing out the last of his energy. “I don’t want to puke…”

Akaashi nods understandingly. “Try and take some deep breaths. It’s all right. Nobody’s angry.” He’s right there, with no intention of going elsewhere. Bokuto wants to be left alone, because he’s so disgusting and sick, but he doesn’t want Akaashi’s hand to leave his back.

Bokuto tastes something bitter against his throat, when a painful squeeze starts up in his stomach and rises to his chest. Akaashi keeps patting his back encouragingly, rubbing up to his shoulder blades. Bokuto sucks in a breath, which ends up getting pushed out with a hard cough.

“Stop-” Bokuto whimpers, a shiver of dread sending panic throughout his blood vessels. He bites his lip, holding down the burp that presses against his throat. His Adam’s apple bobs visibly from the force, that he’s trying so hard to fight against.

“Just get it all out.” Akaashi’s hand makes Bokuto hiccup again, and he keeps tasting vomit at the back of his mouth.

Bokuto continues to sob, despite what it does to his sensitive stomach. The sobs turn into hiccups halfway through, and a massive heave makes Bokuto this close to throwing up. Some spit drips into the trash can, pooling near the bottom.

A shudder jars him, and without any further warning, he brings up a large mouthful of vomit into the trash can.

Akaashi grimaces, massaging Bokuto’s back with his palm as the second wave of vomiting begins. “Okay. There we go, it’s okay…” He smooths his hand over Bokuto’s back, drenched with sweat. A heavy splatter follows, indicating just how much he’s thrown up.

Bokuto coughs, until it morphs into a retch that brings up a bitter-tasting, acidic liquid. His spine curves so much, Akaashi has to adjust the trash can in a hurry to catch the ongoing stream of vomit. The gagging is painful, guttural retches scraping his throat raw.

“H- hurts,” is all Bokuto can say, before his stomach rebels again, bringing up a thinner splash of liquid. It’s as if there’s a horrible bug inside him, and every cell in his body is focused on expelling it. The bout of vomiting seems to never end, more and more refuse dripping out of his mouth like a broken hose.

“I know, I know, shhh…” Akaashi shushes him, an arm wrapping around Bokuto’s middle to soothe his stomach. The action triggers another violent heave from Bokuto, and the trash can becomes almost a quarter full.

“My stomach,” Bokuto whines, a dry heave bringing up nothing but air. “It hurts…”
Akaashi kneads out the tension in Bokuto’s shoulders, keeping his hair out of his eyes as tears and drool drip into the trash can. “Your stomach is really upset, isn’t it? Would it help if I rubbed it?”

“Don’t know…” Bokuto sniffs, his nose clogged with a disgusting texture and smell. Akaashi slides his hand over Bokuto’s stomach, alternating between stroking it up and down and drawing loose circles around it. He lets out a moan, slowly melting into Akaashi’s kind touches.

“I’m going to clean out the trash can.” Komachi exits the room, leaving Bokuto filled with guilt. He’s forced someone he barely knows to clean his vomit. He’s awful.

Tiny sobs escape him, and Akaashi dabs away his tears with a small towel. “Hey, don’t feel bad. You’re sick.”

“I’m- sorry. I’m sorry I’m sick.” Bokuto wails like a child, wobbling in Akaashi’s arms. “I know I’m disgusting. Don’t hit me. Don’t hit me. Please.”

Akaashi wipes Bokuto’s red, swollen eyes. “Nobody is going to hit you. You haven’t done anything wrong. Being sick isn’t a bad thing, and I’m not angry at you for it.” He pries the jumper on Bokuto away to slide the thermometer under his arm, stroking his shoulder blades to calm him down.

“Koutarou-kun? Is it okay if I stay here for a bit?”

Akaashi’s mother, Ayako, enters the room with a glass of water. Bokuto lifts his head, blinking. “Are- are you angry? Do I need to go-” He hacks violently, as the thermometer begins to beep. Akaashi pats his back as he coughs, removing the thermometer and showing it to his mother.

“No, no, no. It’s okay. You can stay here.” Ayako makes a concerned noise when she reads the number on the thermometer. “Your fever is rather high. You’re coughing a lot, too. Let’s try and get you comfortable.”

Komachi comes back, glancing at the thermometer. “Koutarou-kun, I’m going to ask you some things. You don’t have to answer if you’re not comfortable.” She slowly sets her hand on top of Bokuto’s. She isn’t going to hurt him. “Have you thrown up earlier today? There seemed to be not a lot of food in your stomach.”

Bokuto nods, as Ayako hands him the glass of water for him to rinse his mouth with. “I felt sick at home and threw up in the sitting room. I couldn’t make it to the bathroom, and-” He gasps, almost dropping the glass. “They punished me.”

“How horrible…” Ayako hugs Bokuto, who lets out a high-pitched squeak. “That must have been so scary and painful. Your own parents hurting you for something you couldn’t control. You’re safe here. There won’t be any punishments like that.”

“Gentle, mom.” Akaashi murmurs, placing a bowl underneath Bokuto for him to spit out the water into. “Bokuto-san, do you want a bath or a drink? Or sleep?”

Bokuto shakes his head as hard as he can. “Nothing, ‘kaashi… Just stay. With me.”

His grip is weak, but it’s enough to make Akaashi stay. He won’t go away until he’s stopped feeling sick and exhausted. With Akaashi by his side, Bokuto can finally let go of his consciousness.

“Koutarou’s here? Is he okay?”
“He’s sick? Does he need the hospital, mom?”

“Koutarou-niichan no well? Does he get shots? Will Koutarou-niichan cry-cry?”

Bokuto can hear Akaashi’s siblings near the doorway. It’s morning, and the sunlight filters in through the curtains. He wants to respond to them, say that he’s all right. But his chest is heavy with congestion, and the brightness exacerbates his headache.

“Shh. Koutarou-kun has a headache. He needs to get a lot of sleep.” Ayako shushes her children, clearing them away from the doorway. She pops her head into the bedroom, checking up on Bokuto. “Do you still feel sick?”

Bokuto opens his mouth, burning hot with his tongue heavy. “Where- where’s ‘kaashi?”

“Keiji won’t be going to school today. He’s coming here soon, okay?” Ayako strokes Bokuto’s forehead, uncapping a bottle of water. “Try and drink some water.”

Really, Bokuto doesn’t want to drink at all. The thought of throwing it back up fills him with dread, and he can’t bear the thought of putting something near his mouth.

But he can’t refuse the kindness he’s being offered. He nods, and Ayako tilts the bottleneck towards his mouth. He gulps down the water, finishing about a quarter of the bottle. He chokes halfway, splattering some water down the blankets and all over his front.

“I- oh god, I’m sorry!” Bokuto covers his mouth, attempting to stifle the coughs that fire out of him in rapid succession. Ayako wipes up the mess with a towel, patting his back softly.

“Don’t worry about it, okay? How’s your temperature?” Ayako feels under Bokuto’s chin, and the cold hand feels good. Bokuto whines with pleasure, shifting into her touch.

Akaashi steps into the room, carrying some medicine and instant udon. “Bokuto-san, I have some udon here. Do you feel like eating?” He sets down the tray beside the bed, on the small wooden table. The mild smell of soy sauce floats through the air.

“Okay…” Bokuto swallows. He doesn’t feel well, but he doesn’t feel nauseous enough to throw up. He decides to give some food a chance.

“You can stop anytime you feel like it.” Akaashi assures him, setting the small plastic bowl full of udon onto Bokuto’s lap. “Open up.”

As Akaashi scoops up some udon with a plastic fork, Bokuto opens his mouth to accommodate the mouthful. His teeth squish against the fat doughy noodles, the savoury broth soaking into his mouth. It’s bland, but it’s still the best thing he’s tasted in days.

“It’s really good.” Bokuto cracks a faint smile, chewing on the noodles thoroughly before swallowing over and over. Ayako places a cold patch on Bokuto’s forehead to alleviate the discomfort of fever. “Thank you so much.”

He reaches over to Akaashi, taking his arms and attempting to pull him close. “Can you… hold me? Please?”

Akaashi nods, a smile cracking at his lips. “Of course.” He leans into Bokuto, arms wrapping around his middle. Bokuto lets out a happy sigh, nuzzling his cheek into Akaashi’s shoulder. He smells like home. A good home.
“Are you feeling better?” Komachi asks him, checking his temperature. “We should get you out of those clothes. It’ll feel better to have clothes you haven’t been sweating in.”

Bokuto clumsily attempts to pull the jumper over his head, letting out muffled groans as his head gets stuck. Akaashi yanks the rest of it off with a chuckle, slipping a fresh hoodie over his head.

“How about… Castle in the Sky?” Akaashi suggests quietly. “It’ll be boring just staying here all day. Only if you’re feeling up for it.”

Bokuto perks up, eyes sparkling. “Yeah! I wanna! But…” He stops, frowning. “I’m gross. I don’t want to get you guys sick because I infected the place.”

“It’s okay. Just have fun with Keiji, you deserve it.” Ayako ruffles Bokuto’s hair, floppy and down. “But bring the blankets with you. You might get cold.”

Akaashi grabs the blankets up into a bundle, heading down the stairs while supporting Bokuto’s weight. They don’t trip, luckily. Bokuto melts into Akaashi, slinking into the sofa beside him.

“Yeah! I like that!” Bokuto clears his throat, coughing into his fist. Akaashi’s hand is on his back, firm and comforting. “Let’s watch it.”

Akaashi switches the TV on, wrapping his arm around Bokuto. Bokuto leans into him, staring at the familiar intro to the film. He almost closes his eyes, from the comfort it brings.

The movie brings a smile to his face. It brings a bubble of nostalgia to his chest, opening up various memories and feelings he’d gotten from watching it for the first time. It’s bittersweet, but he’s not alone in his thoughts. That’s what makes it so warm and special.

“The food looks really tasty, huh?” Bokuto points to the fried egg on bread eaten by the characters, with an excited stare. “I tried to make it once, but it didn’t taste as expected.”

“We can try it out together.” Akaashi laughs, and Bokuto takes a moment to admire him. He sees Akaashi laugh occasionally, but each time he realizes, he consciously tries to take it in. The wrinkles that appear from the smile, the way his eyes move.

“Okay!” Bokuto nods, resuming paying attention to the movie. As it progresses, it lulls him into a dream-like state, as if there’s a giant fluffy blanket around him. He begins to nod off as the movie ends, slumping to one side.

By the time the credits start, he’s exhausted. His whole body is burning, but he doesn’t have the energy to peel the blankets off him. He lets out a groan, blinking out the fatigue. His body tilts sideways, until he lightly bumps into Akaashi. His breaths are heavy and too quick, and he’s red-faced, panting. The painful-sounding exhales catch Akaashi’s attention.

“Bokuto-san?” Akaashi shakes him, feeling his forehead. “You’re very warm. We’re getting you into bed.” He yells for his mother, as Bokuto lets out hot exhales into his shoulder.

Footsteps approach the room soon after, as Bokuto assumes liquid state in Akaashi’s arms. He feels like his organs and skin are melting off him, and his heartbeat is loud inside his ribcage.

“He’s boiling.” Ayako helps lift Bokuto off the sofa, carrying him up the stairs again. Bokuto doesn’t even have the energy to apologize. His chest is heavy with congestion, and he can’t stop
coughing painfully. His head feels like it’s been struck by lightning.

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice sooner.” Akaashi pulls the covers up to Bokuto’s neck, stroking his sweaty brow. “Is there anything you need? Are you too cold or too warm?”

“I- I don’t know,” Bokuto murmurs, because he truly doesn’t know. He was feeling so comfortable and warm only a few minutes ago. Now, he’s being cooked alive with fever, eyes watery and squeezed shut to minimize the growing headache.

Komachi hands him a bottle of water, with a mouthpiece for easier drinking access. “I know you’re not feeling well, but try and drink. Dehydration isn’t fun.”

Bokuto complies, sipping the water until his stomach feels full from it. His fever presses into his brain, overtaking what little thinking process he’d had going inside him. All he knows is discomfort and fear. Someone will hurt him if he does one thing wrong.

“Close your eyes for a bit, okay?” Akaashi sets him down slightly elevated, propping up his head with pillows. “You’ve done nothing wrong. Just focus on resting.”

There’s not much Bokuto can do, besides nod and hope he can sleep off the sickness.

Bokuto wakes up with a groan, the room spinning in circles around him. His vision is clouded, swaying and shaking. He’s wobbly and drowsy, and soaking with sweat.

“Bokuto-san? There’s a bath filled, would you like to get in?”

Akaashi is calling him. Bokuto wriggles out of the bed, pulling at the neck of his jumper. “Yeah…” He shivers, wrapping his arms around himself. He’s so, so cold. He would do anything to warm up his body, that’s seemingly impossible to get it to stop shivering.

Akaashi helps him out of his clothes, holding him steady as he steps into the tub. Ripples spread across the water as he soaks himself in the bath. Bruises are all over his naked body, and his ankle throbs in the water.

“A- Akaashi.” Bokuto mumbles Akaashi’s name, leaning back until his head is resting on the edge of the tub.

“Yes?”

“I… just wanted to make sure you were there.” Bokuto extends his hand weakly. Akaashi takes it, massaging his knuckles tenderly. He washes Bokuto’s skin with gentle hands, making sure not to touch the bruises and scars on him.

A pleasant, sleepy feeling washes over Bokuto. He’s comfortably warm now, soaking in the water. His cheeks flush pink, as his body temperature rises.

All of a sudden, his stomach twists itself in knots.

Bokuto doesn’t dare open his mouth, for fear of what’ll come out if he does. He attempts to wriggle out of the bath, grabbing the side of the tub. His stomach presses against the tub, forcing the contents of it up to his mouth.

His mouth fills with spit. His cheeks swell with the force of a gag, a sharpening pain travelling through his gut. It’s as if he’s being ravaged by something invisible.
“Bokuto-san?” Akaashi grabs Bokuto, only just managing to get his head out of the tub before the floodgates open. “Oh, god. You’re going to throw up.”

Bokuto nods weakly. He wants to apologize, but he doesn’t even know what to say. He’s an inconvenience. He’s a burden. He’s so gross and sick.

A guttural retch rumbles in his throat, and a splash of vomit spreads out onto the floor. He stares at the horrible mess under him, and panics. “Akaashi- I-” he sobs, stomach clenching so violently he reels. He heaves so forcefully his whole torso throbs.

“Hey, don’t push yourself. Don’t worry, just let it out.” Akaashi taps Bokuto’s spine softly with his palm, as his back ripples with the gags escaping him. “Relax your breathing. In, out.”

Bokuto tries so hard to follow Akaashi’s instructions, as he whispers to him how he should breathe. Each time he attempts to suck in a breath, he ends up burping up a stream of bitter liquid. All of the food he’d eaten comes out onto the floor, until only green-tinted bile comes up.

Akaashi turns on the shower, washing the mostly-liquid vomit down the floor drain. He places a hand on Bokuto’s stomach, rubbing it softly to ease the bubbling and growling.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” Akaashi coos, taking Bokuto’s head into his arm. “Come on. Let’s go back to bed.”

The thermometer beeps, showing a temperature even higher than before.

“This… isn’t good.” Ayako sighs, tucking way strands of Bokuto’s hair. “How long has he been sick?”

“He was coughing over a week ago.” Akaashi explains, and as if on cue, a harsh cough takes over Bokuto’s lungs. It brings up a sticky substance with it, and it lingers in Bokuto’s mouth until he coughs again.

Bokuto’s shoulders heave with a sob. “I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up. I’ll disinfect everything…” He cries, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. He tries to escape the bedsheets, but his limbs become too tangled.

“No, stay in bed.” Ayako states, pressing his chest lightly. “I’ll get some cough syrup.”

Bokuto wants to refuse. He’ll waste the cough syrup anyway. He’ll throw it back up and there’s no point in him drinking it in the first place. He whimpers, and Akaashi takes his hand into his own larger hand.

“Where’s aunt Komachi?” Akaashi asks. He’d been too busy cleaning up the bathroom disaster. Bokuto starts crying again.

“She went to get an at-home IV kit. She’s used one before several times. It’ll be all right.”

Bokuto tries again to get up from the bed. His legs kick about like some sort of dance, too uncoordinated to even do anything besides flail.

“Is there something bothering you?” Ayako reaches over to him, sitting him up against a stack of pillows. “Are you feeling sick?”

Bokuto nods. Truth be told, he doesn’t feel like he’s about to throw up yet. But he doesn’t know
when it’ll come to hit him full force. If he gets vomit on the bed, he’ll be punished severely. He knows it.

“Poor thing. You’re really not feeling well.” Ayako rubs Bokuto’s hair lovingly, helping him to his feet and walking him to the bathroom. It’s such a relief to finally be there- now he won’t make a mess even if something were to happen.

“Nothing’s coming up?”

Bokuto’s cover is starting to crumble. He doesn’t feel nauseous, just feverish and horribly heavy around his chest. He coughs thickly into a square of toilet paper, tossing it into the toilet bowl.

He flushes, and slumps his upper body onto the lid of the toilet. It’s unsanitary, but it can’t be much worse than the amount of gross things in his body right now. “I wanna just stick here…” he murmurs, arm curling around his stomach.

“You’re burning up. Wouldn’t it be better if you stayed in bed? It’s not very comfortable here.” Ayako tries to coax Bokuto out of the bathroom, to no avail. Bokuto stays glued to the one spot, whimpering pitifully.

“I can get some blankets and lay them out here.” Akaashi suggests, but he’s out of the room before Bokuto can even respond with a nod or a shake of the head. Bokuto decides against protesting Akaashi’s actions.

Akaashi returns with an armful of soft, fluffy blankets that aren’t too heavy for a sick person. He drapes them over Bokuto’s trembling frame, patting his back softly as an airy burp passes through him.

“Feeling cold?” Akaashi wraps Bokuto up, leaving only his fingertips and face uncovered. There’s sweat dripping off his face, but he can’t stop shivering.

“I’m okay…” Bokuto can’t have Akaashi doing all this for him. He’s already been given so much more than he deserves.

Ayako takes out a bottle of cough syrup. “Let’s try and have some medicine.” She pours an amount into a plastic medicine spoon, pressing it to Bokuto’s lips.

Bokuto slowly nods, opening his mouth and slowly drinking down the syrupy liquid. It’s slightly sweet, like artificial strawberries. He doesn’t really like that kind of medicinal taste, but he drinks it all.

“Good job. You’re doing amazing.” Ayako hands him a glass of water, that he downs to wash away the taste of the syrup. “Are you sure you’re comfortable here? You don’t want to lay down?”

Bokuto shakes his head. “It’s fine, I’m okay here.”

He can’t bother them more than he has to. He should be leaving soon. Maybe his parents will let him back into the house now.

Bokuto needs to stop bothering everyone.

He’d woken up from his brief nap, not even being rewarded with a few seconds of peace before he was throwing up the medicine he’d taken earlier. A weak gurgle spills past his lips, and the sound
of liquid hitting liquid echoes through the bathroom.

“Bokuto-san, open the door, please.”

Akaashi begs him from outside, knocking on the door repeatedly. Bokuto responds with a cough, that’s seemingly worsening every minute. He can barely whisper anymore. His throat burns with the force of a cough, which transforms into a gag halfway.

“Don’t- don’t come here!” Bokuto rasps out, clutching his stomach with one hand. “Please, go somewhere else!”

His shoulders rise as he heaves again, his stomach squeezing until every last drop of the medicine is out of his system. The ache in his stomach is stronger than ever, digging into his insides and burning him. He hugs a blanket against him, curling against it to soften the pain.

“Koutarou-kun, please unlock the door. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Bokuto can barely move anymore. He feels faint, and it’s not the good kind. He’s floating inside something hot, and he can’t even reach over to flush the toilet.

Something clicks in the distance, and his thoughts cut off again.

“Akaashi…?”

Bokuto wakes up on a softer surface, and there’s something connected to his arm. He still feels sick, but he’s got nothing left to be sick with. He coughs painfully instead, and Akaashi taps his arm to comfort him.

To his relief, the throwing up had evacuated everything in his stomach. He wouldn’t do it again. He feels too empty for that. But the pain in his stomach is still horrible.

“You’ve gotten dehydrated.” Komachi points to the IV connected to his arm. “This is going to help with that.”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears again. He’s made them waste something that looks so expensive. He struggles to take it out of him, but Akaashi takes his hands so he won’t succeed in doing so.

“Don’t cry.” Akaashi wipes Bokuto’s tears with the back of his hand. Bokuto clenches his mouth shut, attempting to stop the sobs from escaping. That plain fails quickly, when all the air in his lungs evacuate from a forceful cough. “How does your stomach feel? Your head?”

Bokuto frowns, shaking his head to communicate bad. Akaashi isn’t angry at him- he looks more upset, if anything. “It hurts. I don’t like this, Akaashi. It hurts…”

“Do you want me to stay with you?” Akaashi murmurs. Bokuto feels something cold on his head. Ayako had given him another fever-reducing patch.

“Please,” Bokuto grips Akaashi’s hands as tight as he can. Which really isn’t much, when the sickness had already sucked the life out of him. “I’m sorry, Akaashi… Don’t go. I don’t want to be alone again.”

Bokuto’s normally lively complexion had been replaced by an unsettling pallor, too hot to the touch and white as a sheet. Tears roll down his cheeks without stopping. He wants to go somewhere where he won’t hurt anymore. He doesn’t say home.
“Hold me closer, ‘kaashi.’ Bokuto whimpers, tugging on Akaashi’s clothes.

Akaashi pushes the covers to one side, slipping into the bed with Bokuto. Taking care not to aggravate his stomach, he wraps his arms around Bokuto loosely, with enough breathing room for both of them. “Is this better?”

Bokuto makes an affirmative noise, nuzzling his face into Akaashi’s chest. His head throbs with every moment, as he nestles against him for comfort. A low whine comes out of his throat.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Akaashi strokes the back of Bokuto’s head. Bokuto groans, sniffling into Akaashi’s shoulder.

“Everything just hurts so much.” Bokuto manages to get out. “I don’t know what’ll make it better.”

“Is it the joint pain?” Akaashi asks. Bokuto’s fever, combined with whatever sickness he has, makes his joints feel like door hinges that haven’t been oiled in decades. Bokuto nods, and Akaashi reaches over to him so he can massage him gently.

“Come and get us if you need anything, okay?” Komachi assures them, before leaving the two alone to give them some space for each other. Bokuto doesn’t feel much better physically, but Akaashi within arm’s reach comforts him immensely.

Maybe it’s just his brain playing tricks on him again, but Bokuto hears a soft *I love you* whispered into him.

“Akaashi, please. You have to go to school.”

Bokuto weakly pushes Akaashi’s hand away, but with all his energy sapped, he’s no match for Akaashi’s current strength. Akaashi refuses to leave his side, not even bothering to change out of his t-shirt and shorts.

“You still have a fever of almost 39 degrees.” Akaashi stares at Bokuto with an incredulous look. “I’m not leaving you.”

Bokuto’s lip trembles. He wants nothing more than to stay with Akaashi for the entire day, but he’s not delusional. If Akaashi misses a certain number of days or more at school, it could affect his ability to graduate. And if he’s not even sick, that’s even less days for him to take actual sick days off.

“I’ll still be there when you come home.” Bokuto hums as Akaashi rubs the back of his fingers across Akaashi’s cheek. “I’ll be okay… Your mom and aunt are nice to me…”

Akaashi’s expression doesn’t change. He gives Bokuto an extra-tight squeeze, before exiting the room to get his clothes changed for school. Bokuto manages to keep his tears at bay, until Akaashi shuts the front door.

Ayako enters the room to check up on Bokuto, and startles when she finds the tears rolling down Bokuto’s cheeks. Bokuto buries himself under the blankets hastily, drying his tears with his palms.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay to cry.” Ayako sits down beside Bokuto, gently peeling the covers away from Bokuto’s face. “You told Keiji to go to school. He would have stayed, but you didn’t want him to worry, right?”

Bokuto nods. “He- he’s not like me, Akaashi-san. He’s… smart. He’s so good to everyone, he
studies a lot. He never fails his exams. I can’t let his chances go to waste.” He talks through sobs, and Ayako rubs his back as he speaks in between shudders. “I’m sorry-”

“You have a lot of faith in Keiji.” Ayako smiles. “So do I. He’s my amazing, caring son, who has the sweetest best friend who deserves love and care. You don’t need to be sorry for needing help. You would do the same for Keiji.”

Bokuto bites his lip. His heart feels warm. It’s all true- he loves Akaashi. He’s his best friend, or even more than that. Akaashi’s mom understands. Maybe she would support him, if she knew Bokuto loved him in that way.

“Akaashi-san…” Bokuto sighs. He doesn’t say it, but Ayako seems to understand. She massages Bokuto’s hand, her smooth hands contrasting Bokuto’s. “I really care about him. He deserves to be happy.”

Ayako laughs softly. “Keiji’s said the same thing about you, you know?”

“He… did?” Bokuto blinks. Ayako is smiling at him. She nods, and cuddles Bokuto in her soft arms. She’s a huggable mother, round and warm and every soft adjective there is.

“Come here, Kou-chan.” Ayako pats Bokuto’s broad back lovingly, not letting go until Bokuto pulls back. “You’re loved. You deserve to be happy, too. You’re allowed to show how you feel.”

A smile slowly spreads over Bokuto’s face. “I’m really happy right now, Akaashi-san.”

“I can’t.”

Bokuto shakes his head at the warm cup of water apologetically.

“You don’t have to drink it all. A few swallows, and that’s it.” Komachi urges him, and Bokuto frowns. He doesn’t want to drink.

He takes a reluctant sip, cringing at how he can feel the liquid travel down his throat. He can only hope it won’t make a reappearance later. He drinks about half the cup, before setting it down.

“That’s good. Let’s try and keep it down, if you can.” Komachi makes a thumbs-up at him.

Bokuto lays back down, closing his eyes. He’s not confident he’ll be able to distract himself, so he settles on going to sleep and forgetting all about how sick he feels.

“You feeling drowsy?” Ayako whispers, patting him over the covers. “Have a bit of rest, sweetheart. Don’t worry about anything, okay?”

Bokuto fights the urge to cry. He’s never been treated with so much fondness. It’s because he doesn’t deserve it. They just don’t know him for who he is. They’ll hit him once he screws up, as usual.

But he still wants to take all the affection, for all it’s worth. He drifts off to sleep, wiping his eyes like a baby.

By the time Bokuto wakes up, it’s evening. Time feels like thick goo, and he’s knee-deep in it. It’s so hot in the room. He’s at Akaashi’s house, Akaashi’s at school, and…

“Bokuto-san, I’m home.”
Akaashi’s fingers are touching his cheek. Bokuto curls, realising that the feel of his clothes are different. Someone must have changed them, and he’d slept through it all. He needs to thank them. Show them he’s not ungrateful.

“Are you still coughing? Your fever’s gotten slightly better.” Akaashi combs through Bokuto’s messy, disheveled hair. Bokuto takes a few deep breaths, and realises the wheeze in his chest is gone.

“I guess it sucks less.”

Akaashi fans Bokuto with a piece of paper on the table. It’s not much, but the cool breeze on his cheek feels good. He can go back to sleep again.

“Hey, Akaashi?” Bokuto calls out. He’s touch-starved from the lack of Akaashi all day. “Can you give me a hug?”

Akaashi embraces Bokuto tightly, and everything feels right for a split second.

“Koutarou-kun, do you think you can try some soup?”

Bokuto sees the steaming bowl of soup Akaashi’s mother had prepared for him. She sets it down on the bedside table, with a wooden spoon inside. The smell is mild enough to be appetising, even when he’s sick.

“It’s just instant soup, but it’ll replace the salt in your body. I’ve watered it down.” Ayako scoops up a small amount, bringing the spoon to Bokuto’s lips.

Bokuto opens his mouth and lets the soup flow into his mouth. It burns slightly. It’s savoury, with a hint of corn and onions. He’s somewhat familiar with the taste.

All of a sudden, he remembers.

He doesn’t see the kind faces of Akaashi and his mother anymore. He’d made the soup for himself, and selfishly finished it on his own. His mother was angry and it was all because of the stupid bowl of soup that he’d made.

I hate the way you look at me! I hate those eyes!

Bokuto covers his face up. He can’t be seen like this. His actions will be met with anger. He can’t show his hateful eyes. He can’t bleed again and stain everything with red. He’s doing everything wrong.

“Did something happen? Are you all right?”

Akaashi pushes Bokuto’s hands away from his face. Tears run down Bokuto’s flushed cheeks, as his brain works itself into overdrive. He doesn’t want to be hated anymore. He’s tired of the pain.

“I- I’m sorry. So sorry.” Bokuto grips his hair so violently that some of it comes out at the roots. “Don’t hit me, please! I don’t want it!”

“Bokuto-san, you’re not there anymore.” Akaashi speaks to him quietly, his voice calm and soothing. “Your parents aren’t here. It’s just me.”

Bokuto grabs onto Akaashi tightly. He can’t breathe properly, every inhale he takes pushed out by a dry cough. He sobs, and Akaashi wipes at his eyes with his thumbs.
“It’s not your fault.” Akaashi hands him a glass of water to wash out the taste. “We can try something else in a few more minutes.”

Bokuto’s body trembles, completely spent. His shoulders heave with a silent retch, and tears drip out of his bloodshot eyes. The headache is crushing, and his body is too hot to the touch.

“Hey, easy. Breathe.” Akaashi has one hand on Bokuto’s back, the other holding a small basin on top of the blankets. “If you’re feeling sick, that’s okay.”

Bokuto doesn’t know how to stop the uncontrolled hiccups and sobs that escape him. His throat feels tied up with every sob and tear that comes out of him. He knows Akaashi’s trying to make him feel better, but it’s not easy at all.

Bokuto’s attempt at holding down the nausea is futile. The little water and soup he’d been able to keep in his system comes back up with a productive heave. It’s completely liquid, but the force of the retch cramps his entire torso.

He tries to be quiet about it, but holding down the coughing results in a gross, choked-up noise from the back of his throat. And when Akaashi’s hand thumps against his back in small motions, it’s impossible to even try and shut himself up.

A sigh escapes Ayako’s lips. “Poor thing. I know, it hurts.” She sweeps Bokuto’s hair out of the way, getting the bangs tucked away on his ears.

Bokuto’s headache is so bad, he scrunches his face and closes his eyes tightly. All the curtains are drawn, so that not even the faintest trace of moonlight can filter through. But even the darkened room and cold cloth on his head does little to help. The pulsing pain is constant, never faltering. He knows it’s worsened by the lack of water and food in him, but he’d rather not throw up all over again.

“I- I just wanna sleep,” Bokuto sniffles, kicked down from the pain in his stomach and head. He’s gotten to the lowest point he can get to. “Please… I’m so sleepy, I don’t want to be sick.”

Akaashi looks like he’s about to cry himself. They’re both as overwhelmed as they can be, panic seeping into every crack and flaw. “I know you want to sleep. Try and lay down. I won’t leave until you’re asleep.”

To Bokuto’s surprise, he does end up getting a bit of sleep. It’s midnight when he wakes up again. His stomach feels swollen. It’s been an agonisingly long time, and he still doesn’t feel any better.

There’s a beaker full of water on the table. Bokuto takes it with shaky hands, desperate for anything that will cool the fever. His throat is sticky and hot, and he takes a sip to cool it down.

Bad idea. The water sits too heavy inside him, and he can feel it sloshing around in his stomach. Sleeping it off isn’t an option anymore, but he’s going to try his hardest to ignore it and do just that. Sleep. Sleep is good.

“Akaashi…”

He murmurs a name that won’t come to him. Akaashi must be sleeping, too. He’s left, but that’s not something Bokuto should be upset about. He’d said he would stay until Bokuto fell asleep, and Bokuto had clearly done so.
There’s no sound of life in the house. No family members walking around, no appliances whirring and buzzing. It’s like all those times he’s stayed at home, sad yet relieved his parents aren’t home. Even if they face each other in a normal setting, it somehow always ends in sharp words and tears shed.

Bokuto takes another few sips of water, in an attempt to distract himself. Doing something, anything to take his mind off the pain growing in his stomach.

He clutches the upset organ, cringing at the wave of pain that crashes into him. A bad kind of sweat rolls down his skin. He wants someone to hold him. Anyone.

The thing nearest to him is a pillow. It’s squeezy, and Bokuto reaches for it, holding it against his torso. He hugs it tighter, when a piercing ache stabs at his insides.

“Oh, god… Ow…” Bokuto hisses, curling into a fetal position. He’s so dizzy he can barely open his eyes. The seconds go by excruciatingly slowly, every minute lasting an hour.

With each passing second, his clothes seem to grow heavier with sweat. He’s so drenched, it’s starting to seep into the bedsheets. He needs to stop that. He’ll be in trouble.

His stomach muscles throb, thoroughly strained and overworked. Every part of his body is screaming. Each time he hopes for it to stay better, he’s hit with an array of symptoms worse than ever. It can’t get any worse, he thinks. But it does, every time.

All the throwing up has done a number on his energy levels, and without the ability to keep any medicine down, his fever continues to climb. The dehydration and sickness weighs down his limbs, creaking aches spreading into his joints that worsen with movement. His stomach feels like he’s been swallowing rocks whole.

A bead of sweat runs down the side of Bokuto’s neck. He shivers, suddenly too cold even under the thick blankets. His stomach churns even worse. His teeth chatter, shudders running through his body.

He can barely reach up to his chest, rubbing it gently in an attempt to calm the nausea starting up. It’s useless. He’s on a speeding train, heading straight off a cliff with no way off. He can’t even turn around and grab the bucket beside him.

To his horror, his stomach doesn’t seem to be done emptying out its contents. Something is still bubbling angrily, pressing against his throat. He fidgets and squirms, until the actions only exacerbate the nagging, uncomfortable sensation. There’s nothing to focus on, except for the sense of impending doom.

Bokuto opens his mouth to call for Akaashi, and closes it quickly. Panic takes over instead. They’re going to punish him.

All his hair stands on edge, and bubbles appear on his skin. His lungs feel so choked-up, and his organs are squishing on top of each other. He draws in a breath, and his cheeks swell from a gag.

Bokuto coughs into his hands, sobbing from the reality of the situation. The sick feeling in his stomach won’t go away, and a quiet retch comes out of him. He desperately swallows, attempting to get the sickness at bay. His body curls up tightly, and he brings up a splash of liquid into his hands.

He shivers, fighting to keep the refuse off the bed. His hands press against his mouth, and he struggles to forcibly stop the gagging. A second wave of vomit is pushed out from his throat,
spilling between his fingers.

In a panic, Bokuto wipes his hands on the jumper he’s wearing. He realises too late that it’s not his. He’s ruined the clothes given to him. God, he needs to apologise. But he’s not even done throwing up, and his shoulders roll forward as another stream of watery vomit spills out of his lips.

There’s too much, and it’s impossible for him to contain it in his hands. It drips everywhere, and his plan is completely ruined. He has to come up with something else. What’s something else?

The bucket is too far away. A gurgle sounds at the back of Bokuto’s throat, and it sends a splash of water and stomach acid all over the bedsheets and blankets. Everything is drenched, the damage spreading with each violent heave. He’s in trouble. They’ll beat him again like they did at his house. He’ll have nowhere to go.

Bokuto shakily stares at the damage done to the clothes and bedsheets, sobbing at how much has to be cleaned. The smell makes him dry heave, and he hastily wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

He gathers the mess in one part of the bed, placing the soiled pieces of fabric in one huge lump. He can’t even see what he’s cleaning up anymore, but the smell is enough to make him gag. A small stream of vomit escapes his mouth, splashing down his chest and knees. His clothes are filthy, and there’s another mess spreading out onto the sheets and he has to clean it up-

“Koutarou-kun, what happened? Are you okay?!"

The light flickers on. Someone knows. They know he’s made such a disgusting scene. Bokuto curls into himself, arms shielding his head. He prepares himself for getting beaten.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry I made a mess,” Bokuto murmurs, slurring his words and sobbing into his arms. “I didn’t mean to. I’m trying to clean it but everything got dirty and I know I’m making excuses but I- I’m so sorry.”

He can’t stop crying. His eyes are wide with apprehension, and he flinches too hard when someone reaches for him. The painful strike never comes, and instead, a hand is caressing his cheek with gentleness.

“That’s okay. No worries, you’re not feeling well and it’s not your fault.” Ayako pulls Bokuto away from the bed, setting him down onto the floor and pulling out an oversized hoodie from the clothes drawer. “Do you still feel like you’re going to be sick?”

Bokuto shakes his head, breaths shaky and uncontrolled. “No… I’m sorry. Please, don’t hurt me. I’ll clean it up. I won’t do it again.”

“Bokuto-san.” Akaashi is there too, taking the blankets off the bed and peeling back the sheets. “Let’s get cleaned up. I know it’s uncomfortable right now. You can get changed.”

Bokuto’s breathing slowly evens out, as Akaashi touches his cheeks gently with his fingertips. He exhales slowly, a hiccup shaking him. With a small nod, Bokuto grabs onto Akaashi’s sleeve.

“Let’s get you out of those clothes. Tell me if you’re too cold.” Ayako pulls the jumper off Bokuto’s head, tossing it aside and fitting the large hooded top over his head. “It’s okay. You’re not getting punished for this.”

Bokuto isn’t sure if he can believe it. He’s made everything so dirty. They might change their minds later, and throw something at his face.
Akaashi fills the bath and grabs a new pair of sweatpants, placing it outside the bathroom. Bokuto’s mouth curls into a small smile, when Akaashi helps him into the bathtub. There’s a hum of the washing machine outside the room. The atmosphere is comfortably warm, steam reddening his cheeks.

“...You’re really not angry?” Bokuto hugs his knees, sinking down into the tub. “You’re sure you won’t throw the basin at me?”

Akaashi’s eyes widen. “Of course not. Did they…” He swallows hard, stroking Bokuto’s hair. Bokuto hums, nodding. “That’s just too horrible. How could they even do that?”

“Akaashi... I still love them.” Bokuto’s lip trembles. “They’re my parents. They gave me food and a roof over my head. I’m not homeless or starving or...”

“And yet they hurt you when you needed them the most. They shouldn’t have neglected you like that. It never should have happened.” Akaashi scoops some water up in his hands, pouring it over Bokuto’s knee. Bruises are pressed into Bokuto’s skin, up his torso and some on his face and arms.

Bokuto falls silent. “But... they...” No. They’d told him they didn’t love him. But if he tried hard enough, maybe they would be nice to him again. He doesn’t know what to say anymore. He bites the inside of his cheek, frustrated with himself.

Bokuto is still awake, sitting on the sofa swathed in blankets. His fever is still constant, not showing any signs of letting up. The pain in his stomach is still there. He’s glad there’s a small trash can within reach.

“Koutarou-kun, visiting the hospital might be a good idea.”

Bokuto shakes his head at Ayako’s suggestion. “I don’t want to. It’s too expensive, please...”

“If you can’t keep water down within the next few hours, you could feel really sick and dizzy.” Komachi explains, and Bokuto lets out a whine or protest. “Don’t worry about the money. We’ll find a way.”

“But I can’t do that!” Bokuto exclaims, coughing into his palm. He can’t let Akaashi’s family waste money on him. Not after he’s taken up so much space and resources.

“Bokuto-san, we can worry about that later.” Akaashi assures him. “For now, please focus on drinking something. It’ll hurt more if you have nothing in your stomach to be sick with.”

“I’ll waste it,” Bokuto refuses adamantly. “I’ve already taken so much. I’m sorry. I keep getting sick and I don’t mean it but I’m sorry.”

It takes a whole routine of convincing before Akaashi manages to get Bokuto to drink a cup of water. All three of them cheer when Bokuto finally takes a sip, encouraging him to get something in his system. Some water drips off the side of his chin when he coughs, and Ayako wipes it up quickly.

“You’re doing so good. Do you want to do anything to distract yourself?” Komachi asks, and Bokuto can only blink at her. “Are you interested in watching anything, or just sleeping?”

Bokuto’s head tilts over to Akaashi’s shoulder beside him. “Sleep,” he murmurs, hugging Akaashi’s torso and rocking against him. Akaashi rubs small circles into his stomach, but it doesn’t
feel as good as it should.

"Wait, stop." Bokuto grabs Akaashi’s hand weakly, cheeks swelling with a sick hiccup. "I don't feel so good."

Akaashi stops the motions, allowing Bokuto to curl up into him tighter. Bokuto swallows the sweet-tasting spit convulsively, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. A cramp in his stomach shakes his torso, and he lays a hand on it carefully.

"It's okay if you need to throw up. Do what you need to." Akaashi rubs his back lightly, and Bokuto shudders. He feels so sick and nauseous.

A sudden, strong wave of nausea punches Bokuto square in the gut. Akaashi places the trash can under his chin at just the right time, and his chest squeezes out a bitter, metallic liquid.

Bokuto coughs out another stream, and his eyes fixate on the splashes of red on the sides of the trash can. There's blood. He gasps, irritating his stomach and gagging again. More blood drips into the trash can, and he stares at Akaashi with horror-filled eyes.

"I-there’s blood, Akaashi..." Bokuto shivers, and Akaashi instantly grabs the container in his hands. “What’s gonna happen to me? Am I gonna die?”

Akaashi hops off the sofa, rushing out to get his mother and aunt into the room. Bokuto wipes his mouth, and tastes blood. There’s nothing in his stomach, but he can’t stop retching. The back of his throat tastes coppery.

“Hospital. Now.”

Komachi’s tone doesn’t allow any objections. She shakes her head when Bokuto gives a whine of protest, and murmurs something about the hospital bill.

“The bill will be sorted out later. We need to take you to a hospital, now.” Ayako holds out a hand for Bokuto, urging him to take it.

“No! I’ll get better, I promise! Don’t take me to the hospital...” Bokuto cuts himself off with a harsh cough, shoving himself into the corner of the sofa. “I don’t need to go. I’ll stop being a burden, I’m sorry, I’m...”

“Bokuto-san, please.” Akaashi reaches out a hand to Bokuto, placing it gingerly onto his shoulder. “Please come with us. I just want to make sure you’re okay. I know it hurts, and you don’t have to deal with it on your own. Please.”

Bokuto reluctantly cracks his eyes open. “...I promise I’ll get the money. Please don’t get angry.” He fumbles for Akaashi’s clothes, gripping them tightly as he’s helped onto his feet. His legs are like jelly as he walks, leaning almost his full weight onto Akaashi.

“Let’s go. We can bring some blankets into the car.”

The ride to the hospital is a miserable one. It had taken Akaashi five minutes to help Bokuto stop crying and working himself up to the point of hyperventilation. The apologies still continued every five minutes, repeating over and over like a cursed mantra.

“Try and breathe in deep. You’re doing great, you hear me?”
Komachi keeps murmuring words of encouragement, turning around to them from the passenger’s seat. Akaashi and Bokuto are huddled together, with Bokuto covered in blankets and a plastic bag in his hands for emergency use.

Bokuto looks, and feels, absolutely miserable. The nausea resurfaces periodically, but the only thing he can do is spit up red-tinted froth into the bag. It’s hard not to completely panic, and the only thing preventing him from losing it is Akaashi’s hand by his side, comforting him and ruffling his hair.

Ayako speeds through the roads, slow enough to be legal but fast enough for Bokuto feel a little dizzy. The car jumps against a speed ramp, and Bokuto becomes uncomfortably warm. His skin turns waxy and clammy, losing colour by the second. He feels like he’s about to pass out.

“Are you okay back there?” Ayako checks up on him every few minutes, making sure no additional symptoms have arrived. Bokuto coughs into his palms, hating how disgusting his mouth tastes. He should have done something about it earlier.

Bokuto only nods, even though he’s not sure he’s seen. If he starts retching again, he won’t be able to stop. His throat is damaged enough already, and dry heaving hurts his entire upper stomach region. His breaths quicken into pants, hot air pressing against his palms.

“We’ve arrived. Everything’s okay, Koutarou-kun. You’re not in trouble.”

As the bright lights in the hospitals blind him, Bokuto can only nod.

Akaashi sits beside Bokuto, while his mother fills out the form for nighttime visits. Bokuto has managed to stop apologising compulsively, but only because he’s worn himself out so much that talking takes too much out of him. He’s so exhausted, and despite that, his body refuses to let him sleep.

“There was blood in his vomit. He needs attention.”

Komachi states to the nurse calmly. She’s adamant on getting help as soon as possible, looking around for the doctor. Bokuto doesn’t recognize the interior design of the hospital, and neither does Akaashi. Their usual clinic isn’t open this early.

“Bokuto Koutarou-san?”

Thanks to Akaashi’s mother and aunt, Bokuto gets called relatively early. He doesn’t want to leave the comfort of the waiting room seats, but he gets on his feet, and follows the nurse to the doctor.

Bokuto sits down on a leather stool, with Akaashi and his mother there to stop him from toppling over. Komachi has a few words with the doctor that Bokuto doesn’t quite catch.

“-tarou… where does it hurt the most, can you tell me?”

The doctor’s words pull him back to where he is. Bokuto shakily points to his head and chest, wrapping the blanket around his body tighter.

A rather large thermometer is handed to him. “Well, let’s see how high your temperature is. It won’t take long, okay? Slide it under your arm.”

Akaashi helps him out, after his shaky hands almost drop the thermometer. It only takes around ten seconds for the thermometer to produce a reading, and Bokuto notices it’s only gotten higher.
The doctor pinches his skin lightly, and it doesn’t return to normal once she’s let go. “The dehydration is pretty bad here. We should focus on getting that under control, as well as determining the cause of the bleed.” She explains, using a tone of voice that’s patient and gentle. Bokuto wants to cry. “It’s most likely a tear in your esophagus, considering the amount of blood. It can be caused by increased pressure in the area from throwing up.”

“What- what happens now?” Bokuto stutters out, his voice raspy and thinned out from the retching and sore throat.

The doctor nods at him reassuringly. “We’re going to check some things, like weight and your blood. We’re going to take a look at where the bleeding came from then, using an endoscope.”

Bokuto fights a gag from the thought of a tube down his throat. He can’t do it. It’ll cost even more. Nobody likes a child who costs more than necessary.

“Is there any way to reduce the discomfort?” Akaashi asks, picking up on Bokuto’s apprehensiveness. “It wouldn’t be good if the tube ends up making him vomit.”

“That’s okay. We have an option to put it in through the nose, instead of the mouth. It’s less intrusive that way, and won’t stimulate the gag reflex.” The doctor is friendly, and she manages to pull a small sigh of relief out of Bokuto. Although Bokuto isn’t looking forward to being prodded around, it’s marginally better than throwing up on medical equipment and god knows what else.

The other tests are finished rather quickly, and Bokuto can only focus on how much weight he’s shed over the past few days. His muscles haven’t wasted yet, but it does feel like it.

“I’m afraid that he needs his parents with him before he can go home.”

The bomb is dropped, after the tests are completed.

“No. Don’t do this to him. We’ll pay for everything.” Ayako extends an arm protectively in front of Bokuto. “His parents are abusing him. He could get hurt even worse if he went home with them.”

The nurse sighs. “It’s not about the money. He’s a high school student without a legal guardian. I would love to let him go with you, but we can’t do that here.”

“Is there no way he can have a say?” Komachi pleads, noticing the way Bokuto shivers and cowers under the blankets. “He’s not feeling safe. I don’t want him to be scared even worse.”

Bokuto fights the urge to cry. His parents are going to be angry at the expenses he’s cost them. Akaashi’s family will see how ugly things get. They’re going to hate him too, after seeing the fighting.

“I don’t have my phone. I can’t contact my parents.” Bokuto explains. “I’m sorry.”

Akaashi takes out his phone, scrolling to Bokuto’s number. “I could try and ring your phone from mine. If they don’t pick up, we can try again in a few hours.” He sighs heavily. “It makes no sense. Just because they’re your parents…”

To everyone’s surprise, the phone is picked up.

“Bokuto-san is in the hospital. I’m sending the address.” Akaashi relays the information, hanging up without a second to waste. His brows are knitted with disgust. “They’re not going to lay a hand on you. They’ll have to get through me.”
Bokuto lets out a choked laugh. “Since when were you that cool, Akaashi?”

Akaashi grunts. “I’m being serious, Bokuto-san. I’m furious. I can’t believe they would dare to do that to you.”

“You don’t have to be.”

Akaashi’s hand is placed on top of Bokuto’s. “But I can’t help it. I feel sad when you’re hurt. I feel happy when you’re smiling. And… when you’re sick and hurt, it makes me angry that someone just let it happen.”

Bokuto lifts his head, and presses his cheeks against Akaashi’s. “I love you, Akaashi.”

A pair of familiar voices come near, and Bokuto freezes up. He’d been preparing himself, but it did little to help the worsening anxiety in his stomach. He feels sick and shaky, and Akaashi notices.

“I’m here.” Akaashi grips his hand tighter, while Ayako gives Bokuto an extra-tight hug. “If anything happens, I’ll be there to help you.”

Bokuto jumps when his parents enter the room, backing as far as he can into the corner. If only he didn’t have an IV drip attached to his arm. The door closes behind them, shutting all of them inside one room.

His mother and father look angry. Bokuto’s eyes water with fear, filling with tears. “I- I’m sorry, mom. It wasn’t on purpose.” His mouth starts running with apologies, heart beating too loudly in his chest. “I’ll pay for it, so please, don’t hit me.”

“You’re his parents?” Ayako steps over to them. She’s the shortest one in the room, but it doesn’t stop her from confronting anyone. She looks as if she’s about to punch someone in the mouth. Bokuto’s worried she will.

“We’re taking him home. He’s fine. He doesn’t need any more help.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't have anything noteworthy to say but pls leave a comment or a kudo!! thank you uwu
Ripened Apples and Drops of Honey

Chapter Summary

“Koutarou, you’re going home. You’ve already gotten the care you need.”

Bokuto tenses at his mother’s words. Akaashi stays by his side, protectively watching over him.

Bokuto finds a new home, where he can feel welcomed. But nothing is over yet.

Chapter Notes

hello!!
maaaaan last chapter was pretty rough, wasn't it? well, it's gonna get a bit better in this chapter.
as of next chapter... we'll have to see :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akaashi notices it all. How Bokuto curls up in fear as soon as his parents walk in through the door. How his parents radiate an aura of someone who enjoys abusing and hurting. How his mother can barely suppress her anger.

“Koutarou, you’re going home. You’ve already gotten the care you need.”

Bokuto tenses at his mother’s words. Akaashi stays by his side, protectively watching over him.

“But, I…” Bokuto stutters, glancing at his parents and back at Akaashi’s family. “I thought you don’t want me back. I thought you didn’t love me.”

“We never said that.” Bokuto’s mother shakes her head. Akaashi can tell she’s lying. “Come on. Stand up, or you’re walking home.”

“No, he won’t be.” Ayako has an iron glare. “You’re not taking him anywhere. Look what you’ve done to him.”

Bokuto’s father opens his mouth. “And who are you, to tell us what to do? I’m this brat’s parent. You don’t have any authority over this.”

“A parent doesn’t torment their kid into submission. Look at him, he’s terrified.” Ayako states firmly, and Bokuto grips Akaashi’s hand harder. Fear grips Akaashi’s chest. It’s enough for him to have one conviction: Bokuto’s parents have been abusing him, far worse than he’s ever dared to imagine.

Akaashi notices his aunt isn’t in the room, and can only hope that she’s contacting the appropriate people who will help them keep Bokuto away from his abusers. And that it’ll be quick.
Bokuto shivers, covering his mouth to suppress an alarmed whimper. “Are- are you still mad at me for the mess? What do I need to do?”

Akaashi gulps. He’s never seen Bokuto in such a state, cowering from the people who have hurt him so much. He’s begging for forgiveness that shouldn’t even be held over his head. He should be the one being apologized to.

“We’ve cleaned it. Now, come on. We’re heading home. You love your mother, don’t you?” Bokuto’s mother softens her voice and steps closer to Bokuto. Akaashi can tell how his heart leaps to his throat.

Bokuto’s eyes are cloudy with fear. “I… I do love you guys. But…” His heartbeat quickens exponentially, and every breath becomes uneven. “I just want things to be like the way they used to be. I don’t know what I did wrong. I don’t know why you guys never smile at me anymore. I just don’t know…”

Akaashi holds Bokuto’s shoulders firmly. “Bokuto-san, you didn’t do anything wrong. There’s not a single mean bone in your body.”

“And what do you know?” Bokuto’s mother turns her attention onto Akaashi. “You don’t know how exhausting it is to manage a child like this.”

“This is ridiculous. Koutarou, stop playing the victim and get yourself together. What time do you think it is now? You’re making everyone else suffer, because of you.” Bokuto’s father's words cut into Bokuto’s skin like blades. Bokuto can only make himself smaller, wishing to shrink into nothingness.

“You’re guilt-tripping him because he was sick?” Ayako says furiously. “He can’t help it. He didn’t ask for this. You should be taking care of him!”

Bokuto shakes his head. “It’s okay. Ayako-san… It’s my fault. I wasted so much. I’ll go away. Thank you for taking care of me.”

As Bokuto struggles to get up, Akaashi grabs his arm gently. He can’t be deceived now- they’re so close to getting Bokuto help. No, Bokuto must know his parents don’t love him. He just doesn’t want to believe it.

“There you have it. Koutarou doesn’t need any of your help. You’re just an annoyance.” Bokuto’s mother reaches forward to grab Bokuto’s arm. Bokuto instinctively flinches, jumping behind Akaashi. “Stop your antics and get over here!”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears, so much that they overflow and drip onto the bed sheets. “I’m sorry. I’ll go, please, don’t hit me.”

“God, you’re so dramatic. When have I ever hit you?” Bokuto’s mother grabs him by the hair, yanking him so hard he almost topples. Bokuto lets out a helpless cry, shivering but making no attempt to defend himself.

Ayako is quick to react. She pushes Bokuto’s mother’s hand away, creating distance between them. “That’s no way to treat him. He’s sick, and you haven’t even asked him how he’s feeling. He was vomiting blood.”

Despite Ayako’s efforts, Akaashi can tell Bokuto’s parents aren’t moved in the slightest. It’s a waste of energy to convince them they should care about their son. If they don’t feel anything looking at their son on a hospital bed, there’s not much that can be done.
"You’re such a burden. I’ve already picked you up from a hospital once. Why do you always make everything hard? Do you enjoy making our lives miserable?" Bokuto’s father berates him mercilessly, and Bokuto’s breath hitches. “You’re almost an adult, and you’re crying like a toddler. You’re disgusting.”

“This is what I mean. Why do you guys hate me so much? What did I do?!" Bokuto tries desperately to reason with his parents, to no avail. It’s gotten beyond that point long ago, and deep down, he knows. But his mouth doesn’t stop once it’s started. "I don’t want this anymore. I don’t want to go home. It hurts.” Bokuto lets slip, and a hard slap is delivered to his face.

There’s a cacophony of screaming, and Akaashi can only do his best to shield Bokuto from it. He presses Bokuto’s face to his chest, protecting his eyes from the scene unfolding.

“What the hell is wrong with you?! That’s your kid!”

“Mind your own business, you bitch!”

Akaashi can only hold Bokuto firmly, whispering words that don’t reach him. Bokuto’s lips tremble, and sobs escape him. The sobbing evolves into full bawling, and strained murmurs of Akaashi’s name. He can only watch, as the person he loves the most crumbles to dust in his arms.

“Excuse me, I need help! Someone!”

Something clatters onto the ground, and Akaashi realises it’s Bokuto’s health card. Bokuto doesn’t stop trembling in Akaashi’s arms, tears dripping onto his shoulder. “I- I don’t know what I did wrong. I’m sorry. Don’t fight anymore. Just take it out on me.”

It crushes Akaashi to feel Bokuto’s pain and sorrow. The most self-sacrificial person alive, yanking out his feathers just to please people who don’t appreciate his beauty. Just for once, Akaashi wants Bokuto to be selfish.

“You should have never been born! I shouldn’t have raised you this far!”

There’s a bunch of swear words, and Bokuto’s heart is creaking. The cracks in his heart begin to widen, and it almost splits in two. Akaashi can only rub his chest with his fingertips, to keep the pain from splitting him apart.

By the time the staff intervene, Akaashi is crying too.

“They hit him at the hospital?”

The workers at child protection question Akaashi’s parents, while Bokuto sits beside Akaashi with tear streaks down his cheeks. Every few minutes, Bokuto breaks into sobs, as if he’s remembered something horrifying.

“There was a lot of bruising on his torso. It’s most likely from abuse.” Komachi explains everything, even the things Akaashi hadn’t picked up on. His aunt is truly a professional. “And since he’s over eighteen, he can’t be put into a care centre. Is it okay if we keep him around?”

Bokuto’s dim eyes light up at the mention of being with Akaashi’s family. “Really? I can stay longer?”

Ayako nods, ruffling his hair. “Of course. You’re like family to us. Are there any other family
members you’d want to stay with?"

Bokuto shakes his head. “I like you guys the best.” He puts his arm around Akaashi, and Akaashi knows he truly means it.

Ayako presses a kiss to Bokuto’s forehead. “We love you too, kiddo. Now, how about we go home and get you some rest? How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Bokuto murmurs. Akaashi feels his forehead, and he can tell the worst is over. The headache and stomach cramps are still there, but he’s no longer actively throwing up or sporting a concerning fever.

“Good.” Akaashi holds him closer. “You deserve to be happy.”

Bokuto is fast asleep on the ride back to their house. Akaashi lets Bokuto’s head rest on his shoulder, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. His mother keeps an eye on him using the rearview mirror, making sure he doesn’t wake up feeling motion sick. But for the entire ride, Bokuto sleeps like a baby.

When they arrive back home, Bokuto has to be carried out by Akaashi’s parents. He doesn’t do so much as stir. His eyes remain closed, even when he’s jostled a couple of times. His body is making up for the sleepless, feverish nights.

“Keiji, what do you want to do about school tomorrow? It’s gotten very late.” Ayako asks him, and he knows she wouldn’t blame him for whatever answer he gives.

“I’ll go.”

Akaashi knows he needs to keep his absences to a minimum. He’s sure Bokuto will be excused because of his circumstances, but he’s not sure he’ll be given the same amount of leniency. Which is fair, but still makes him grind his teeth.

He slides into his bed, the same single bed in the middle of the room. But it’s somehow lonely. He’s gone to sleep in it countless times without feeling that way. He doesn’t know how to fill the growing hole in his chest.

Emptiness was never an emotion he wanted to feel before going to sleep.

Akaashi wakes up, and only feels relief for approximately thirty seconds. It all floods back to him after. Bokuto’s pain, his horrible parents, the sleep deprivation. He needs to check on Bokuto.

“He’s still asleep!”

Mari exclaims, as soon as she bumps into Akaashi in the hallway. She shushes him hard, before opening the door just a crack. Akaashi presses his eye against it, and notices Bokuto’s chest rising and falling.

"Is Koutarou okay? Feeling still yucky?” Sora asks, and Kakeru lifts him up in his arms before he can push the door open any further.

“I hope he’s okay. He looked so sick yesterday…” Kakeru murmurs worriedly. He glances at the clock, and dashes back into his room to get changed for school.
“He hasn’t been able to sleep well for the past few days.” Ayako approaches the spare room with a tray, carrying a bottle of water and some supplies a sick person might need. “Hopefully, he can rest up for a bit longer. Don’t worry, he’ll still be there when you come home from school.”

Akaashi can only hope for it to be true, as he stuffs his school books into his bag.

It’s a weird feeling, walking to school and knowing Bokuto won’t pop beside him halfway. He expects Bokuto to jump out in front of him and crack a joke. Akaashi needs Bokuto’s mouth to sing the song of their friendship.

“Hey. Bokuto’s still not coming? Do you know what’s up?” Konoha asks him, when he gets to morning practice. “He hasn’t answered anyone’s calls. Did he give you any answer?”

Akaashi struggles to keep a straight face. Konoha is genuinely worried about Bokuto- he can feel it on his fingertips. But without Bokuto, Akaashi won’t tell his story. It’s not information he should be giving without his consent.

“...He’s not feeling well, but he told me he’s getting better.” Akaashi doesn’t tell the complete truth, but it’s the best he can manage. His mind flashes back to when Bokuto was crying at the hospital, giving apologies that were unneeded.

Some of his teammates don’t look convinced. “How did you manage to contact him? He hasn’t been online for days,” Sarukui points out.

“Yeah, Akaashi.” Komi picks up on the inconsistency too, and now it’s even harder to make up something that’ll satisfy both of them.

“...I was with him yesterday for some time.” Akaashi isn’t sure how long he can keep up the lie, or how long he’s meant to be keeping it up for. He doesn’t even know if Bokuto intends on ever sharing what actually happened with his teammates, even though he’s sure they wouldn’t react badly. It took him a worrying amount of time before he even cracked his exterior in front of Akaashi.

Lunchtime isn’t the same without Bokuto, either. There’s no bubble of excitement beside him, as Bokuto tears through three yakisoba-pan. Maybe one day, they can sit together with the same bento boxes that Akaashi’s mother will make for them. But now, he’s eating alone at his desk. Nothing tastes right without Bokuto.

Apparently, that fact alone is something that’s worthy of a confrontation.

“Oh, Keiji. What are you doing here? Did your boyfriend dump you, or something?”

Someone from another class yanks at his hair from behind, and he winces. With the sports festival nearing, most of his classmates are at the gymnasium for practice. Nobody’s there to lend a rescue boat to him.

Akaashi hasn’t been harassed like this in a while, and he’s forgotten everything he’d done to prepare himself for it. He stays silent, conscious of every breath he takes.

The student sees fit to continue. “Wow, poor you. He just fucked you and went? Maybe being gay wasn’t right for him. Want me to hook you up with someone else? There’s a couple of dudes who’d be into you.” He stretches Akaashi’s cheek, knowing how uncomfortable it makes him. “They’re not homos, but I think your face is cute enough to keep their dicks hard.”
Akaashi slaps the hand away, indignant. “Shut up about Bokuto-san. Stop talking about him, as if you know anything at all.” His anger boils over, eyes focusing onto the student behind him. “Just shut the fuck up. He’s done nothing wrong to you.”

Before it can escalate any further, Akaashi notices someone enter the classroom. His eyes focus on the student’s hay-coloured hair.

“Konoha-san.”

Akaashi’s eyes focus on the third year, who strides over to them with his brows knitted closely. The tips of his ears are reddened.

“Do you have a problem with Akaashi?” Konoha extends a protective arm towards Akaashi, creating a barrier between the two. “It’s straight up creepy how you’re obsessed with him and Bokuto. Don’t associate with any of us volleyball club members, ever.”

“Have it your way and jerk each other off, if that’s what you want.” The student laughs, and Konoha grips his wrist tightly. He lets out a yelp, shaking free of his grasp and storming out of the classroom. Konoha sticks out his tongue after him.

“Asshole.” Konoha rolls his eyes. “Some people are really shitty. I’d punch them if I could.”

Akaashi sighs. “You’re not punching anyone. That could get you into trouble.”

“I know, I know, I know. I won’t do it.” Konoha promises him with a groan. “But it still makes me so mad. They could have at least said it to Bokuto’s face, if they had a problem with him.”

Akaashi nods, but he also doesn’t want Bokuto to be wrapped up into another conflict. With the wound created by his parents still fresh in his chest, Bokuto isn’t in a good place to be facing more unkindness.

“I just hope Bokuto feels better soon. It’s been too long without his dorky presence.” Konoha says, and Akaashi couldn’t agree more.

Akaashi does attend practice, but it can’t end fast enough. He’s the first one out of the gymnasium, changing his clothes and throwing on his jersey. It’s getting cold, and he wonders how Bokuto is doing without him.

“I’m home.”

A soft scent comes from the kitchen, wafting through the air. It smells like soft-boiled udon noodles, and Akaashi’s mouth begins to water. Sora runs out into the hallway, leaping into his arms.

“Nii-chan! Koutarou’s awake!” Sora squeals excitedly, nuzzling his head into Akaashi’s chest. “Come on quick, eat dinner! With everyone together!”

Together. Akaashi likes that word. Bokuto is like the missing puzzle piece, the one that was meant to be with him. He’s family now, even more so than he was already.

Bokuto is sitting at the table, and his face lights up when he sees Akaashi. “Hey. I kinda missed you…” He whispers, and it’s enough to make Akaashi’s heart feel like it’s being squeezed hard. But surprisingly, it’s a nice feeling.
Bokuto has on a huge sweater, that Akaashi’s mother had bought for him. Bokuto has a wider frame than his father, so it couldn’t have been his. He’s practically swimming in the sweater.

“Welcome home, Keiji. We thought today was a perfect day for udon. Are you hungry?”

Ayako sets down a bowl of udon in front of Akaashi. It smells heavenly. The noodles sit in the warm broth, with a hint of soy sauce. There are boiled vegetables in there too, soft enough to melt in his mouth.

Akaashi’s mouth starts watering. “Thank you for the food.” He picks up his chopsticks, and dips it into the bowl.

The warmth of the noodles and broth are comforting. Akaashi savours the first bite. The carrots and onions soften in his mouth, and the shiitake mushrooms burst flavour and broth with every bite.

“This tastes so good, Ayako-san.” Bokuto praises the cooking repeatedly, quietly slurping the noodles and swallowing the broth. His cheeks are a warm shade of red, like apples hanging from an autumn branch.

Ayako lights up noticeably. “Really? Thank you. I’m really glad you feel better enough to eat.”

Bokuto nods eagerly, gulping down the soft noodles in front of him and chewing the thinly sliced pork. It fills him like a fire kindled in a cottage, full of welcoming and mellow comfort.

“Thank you for letting me stay here.” He says quietly, and blinks slowly. He starts rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, like a small child.

“Koutarou sleepy?” Sora giggles, chewing on his ramen from a smaller bowl than everyone else. “Want some lullaby songs?”

Bokuto grins widely at him. “You gonna sing one for me?”

Sora opens his mouth, and a shrill squeak comes out. “And I will always love you—!” He bolts out, raising his arms in a performative swing. He continues his impression of Whitney Houston, which is about as impressive as the average five-year-old can get.

“Thank you, Sora.” Kakeru bows, waving his hand down slowly to get the performance to hit the beaks. “Very… original. Love the rendition of the notes.”

Ayako gives a round of applause, a smile dancing on her face. “That’s my son! I’m proud of you!”

She would be proud of me if I set the school on fire, Akaashi thinks.

Bokuto puts a thumbs-up, ticking the back of Sora’s neck. “Good kid!” His smile softens, and a yawn comes out of his mouth.

“Go to sleep, sleepyhead.” Mari teases him.

“Akaashi.” Bokuto reaches for Akaashi’s hand, brushing his teeth with the other. “Can you go to sleep with me tonight?” He’s in a pair of pajamas that look somehow even bigger than the sweater from earlier on. He hadn’t brought any clothes of his own, when he had escaped his household.

“Of course.” Akaashi rubs at his own eyes, yawning with his mouth closed. “Let’s hop onto the bed, then.”
Bokuto rolls over to the far side of the bed, beside the window. Akaashi climbs in beside him, making himself comfortable on the mattress and positioning the pillow below his head.

“I missed so many days of school,” Bokuto murmurs, burying his face into Akaashi’s shoulder. “I don’t want to get into trouble. I’m already bad at studying, and I’ve failed math…”

It breaks Akaashi’s heart to see Bokuto upset. He shouldn’t be worrying about school, when he’s just been taken out of an abusive home. He should be allowed to feel happy and comfortable.

“You’re not going to be in trouble for missing school. You’ve done the best you can, and nobody will blame you for that.”

Bokuto’s hands roam around Akaashi’s hips, gripping at the fabric of his t-shirt. “They will. I’m just not worth anything. I’m just… just a stupid kid.”

He lets out a choked sob, sadness trembling in Akaashi’s arms.

Akaashi lets out a soft exhale, rubbing Bokuto’s shoulder blades. “Bokuto-san, listen to me. Don’t talk about someone I love like that. I’m proud of you, for just holding on.”

“...Proud of me?” Bokuto repeats, disbelief clouding his eyes. “I haven’t done anything that great. Why?”

“You survived. They hurt you and tried to break you, but you’re here now. That’s enough. That alone is good enough. You don’t have to be something extraordinary to be worthy of happiness.”

Bokuto lets out a low whine, rubbing his eyes with both of his hands. His eyes water, like drops of mercury. “But…”

“And,” Akaashi continues, “you’ve always been my star. The brightest star to ever light up my sky.”

Bokuto leans up, and bumps his nose into Akaashi’s cheek. Their lips come close to touching, but they never do. Akaashi swallows his desire, and takes Bokuto’s chin into his hand.

“Can you sing for me, Akaashi? A lullaby. I like your voice.”

Akaashi lets go of Bokuto, instead turning his head sideways so that he’s face-to-face. Bokuto relaxes, hand just short of touching Akaashi’s slender neck. The night sky is full of stars, but none of them shine quite so bright as the glow in Bokuto’s eyes. They flutter shut, sealing a whole galaxy of its own inside.

He sings the first note, quiet enough to be calming. His voice velvety, caressing Bokuto’s sensitive nerves. Akaashi is a comforting presence, singing to him like the mother he never had.

Akaashi has a ball of happiness and warmth in his arms, as they both fall asleep. Their heartbeats are melodies, thrumming and conducting a peaceful harmony.

The following evening, Komachi arranges for Bokuto to get his things from his home. None of his clothes, essential forms or devices have been picked up, not even his phone. He’s sure there’s a mountain of unread messages in there. He doesn’t even want to imagine the figures.

“Akaashi, will you come with me?” Bokuto requests. “I’ve always wanted to invite you over, but I didn’t want you to see… bad things.”
Akaashi follows Bokuto to his house. There’s nobody inside, either because his parents have been removed from it or because they’re elsewhere. It feels weird, setting foot into the place that Bokuto grew up in. A place filled with conflicting emotions.

“Welcome to my humble abode.” Bokuto bows, smiling glumly. He opens the sitting room door, and his shoulders drop. “...They really cleaned the room up.”

Akaashi looks around. It’s not as clean as Bokuto makes it sound like—there’s so many things laying around, and it smells strange.

“I got in a lot of trouble for throwing up here. God, it was horrible.” Bokuto laughs, grabbing the shirts that belong to him and throwing them into his backpack. “It feels like such a long time since I’ve come home.”

Akaashi notices the distinct lack of Bokuto-sized clothing around the house. Bokuto had only thrown around six tops into his bag, and around three or four shorts. A pair of sweatpants and a hoodie too, but barely anything else.

The biggest shock to Akaashi is how minimalistic Bokuto’s room is. There’s a bed and a shelf-desk, with a chair on wheels. Not much is in his clothes drawer, save for a few socks, underwear and a cardigan. His uniform is on the bed, unwashed.

Not much is left after the clothes are all cleared away. A pair of headphones sit on the table, and every important card and document is filed away safely. There are a few books on the shelf, mostly volleyball-related.

“You should probably throw away the toothbrush, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi takes one look at the bristles, and cringes. They look like they’ve been chewed up, pointing and bending all over the place. “I have some spares at my house.”

“But…”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” Akaashi fights the urge to shake him gently. It’s one single toothbrush. He knows Bokuto’s been made to feel bad about needing things, even the smallest, most mundane things. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

Bokuto looks around his room one last time, before shoving his phone into his pocket. “I don’t have anything else to—” He stops, and digs through his drawer until he finds the object he’s looking for.

Akaashi squints. It’s a mug, somewhat crudely painted. The streaks of bright, childish paint form words—Love you mom. There’s a signature of his name in large hiragana, as well as a drawing of people and some flowers, presumably a mother’s day gift. On its own, it’s heartwarming. But the expression on Bokuto’s face makes his stomach twist.

“...I already saved it from breaking once. I don’t want it to shatter.”

Bokuto caresses the mug in his arms, and Akaashi wants to do the same for him. Keep him safe so that he won’t shatter into pieces of ceramic. Keep violent hands away from him.

Akaashi would take on any pain Bokuto would experience, if it meant that it would help in the slightest. The only thing he can do for him is to shoulder it with him.

They leave the house in Ayako’s car, and Bokuto doesn’t take his eyes off the building until it’s out of sight. His childhood home, Akaashi realises. It could be his last goodbye, to the place that
watched him grow up but also watched him get struck and lashed out at. He lets Bokuto lean his
head onto his shoulder, and silently process his emotions fighting inside him.

There are tons of unread messages on Bokuto’s phone, even just the ones shown on his lock
screen.

Bokuto sets about responding to everyone, giving them a quick update by sending a photo of
himself and Akaashi. He then messages someone Akaashi doesn’t know, presumably his online
friend.

Satori  5:34pm

Hey, you okay? You haven’t been online the past few days

Satori  8:10pm

Please text me if you’re okay I’m really worried for you

Satori  10:33am

What happened???

Koutarou  5:20pm

I’m so so so sorry for not replying!! im at my friends house, i was sick last week

Koutarou  5:22pm

My parents dont want me around anymore, I think lol

The Fukurodani VBC group chat is filled with messages, asking about Bokuto’s wellbeing.
Everyone is bombarding it with texts and questions, that get swallowed within each other.

Bokubaby 6:10pm

I’m gonna come to school tomorrow. I’ll explain everything then.

He leaves it at that, shutting off his phone. Akaashi doesn’t blame him. The last thing he wants is
for Bokuto to be overwhelmed on top of everything else.

“Bokuto!”

The moment Bokuto steps into the gym for morning practice, his teammates are all over him. He
collapses onto the floor, with his friends on top.

“H-hey. I’m back.” Bokuto gives a small wave, hugging his teammates. “I’m sorry I left for so
long…”

“You worried us to death!” Konoha elbows him lightly. “What kind of sickness did you have that
took you out for so long?”

“Did Akaashi know about this?”

“Whoa, did you lose weight?”
Akaashi clears his throat, when Bokuto’s eyes glance at him for help. “One by one, please. He won’t be going anywhere.”

Onaga’s eyes blink slowly. “I’m just afraid we might lose him again. It just felt lonely without our captain. I was scared he’d somehow not come back.”

Bokuto puts his arms around Onaga, hugging him for a good five seconds. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m here now, my precious first year!”

Tears spill out of Onaga’s eyes, and Sarukui ruffles his hair. Bokuto smiles, blessed with caring, sweet teammates. Akaashi’s relieved, to see the team together at last. It’s about time they had a heart-to-heart, all of them.

“I want to talk to you guys properly, but it’s going to be a bit long, I think. Is it okay?”

Akaashi had discussed it with Bokuto during lunchtime, what to tell and what not to tell the team. Akaashi had made sure to not let anything slip, especially sensitive information.

“Bokuto, we don’t care how long it is. We just want to know if you’re okay.” Washio states, and the rest of the team give various hums of agreement. They circle around Bokuto, sitting down with their bags cast aside.

Yukie and Suzumeda are also there, beside Akaashi and Onaga. “Bokuto, did something happen? Take it slow, talk to us.”

Akaashi gives Bokuto’s hand a supportive squeeze. Bokuto’s heart is beating in his throat, nerves on edge. “It’s all right. Just get it off your chest.”

“Okay.” Bokuto drops his shoulders, licking his chapped lips. “Um, so the part where I was sick is true. I had a, uh… bad cold, I think? Everything hurt, I couldn’t eat, it sucked.” He pauses for a few moments. “But there’s some things I still need to tell you guys, because I haven’t been totally honest.”

Everyone gives a silent nod, and Bokuto continues. “I’ve been at Akaashi’s house for almost a week now. They took care of me, because my parents got angry at me and didn’t want me around.”

There’s a few murmurs of disbelief. Most can’t hide their shock- Akaashi can’t blame them. Komi and Onaga’s eyes widen, and Washio’s mouth forms a thin frown. Sarukui covers his mouth, poorly hiding his horrified expression. Unable to hold the silence any longer, Konoha opens his mouth.

“What do you mean, didn’t want you around? Were you being abused?!”

Washio places a hand on Konoha’s shoulder, silently urging him to let Bokuto continue. Akaashi nods, and Bokuto stares at the ground.

“It was all right up until I started high school. My parents started fighting a lot. I tried to stop it, but I couldn’t get them to like each other anymore. I didn’t want to see them insult each other and throw things.” Bokuto explains, his tone solemn and gloom-filled. “And a few months ago, it just got worse. They’d keep breaking things and they wouldn’t talk to me, because they were too busy arguing.”

Akaashi remembers how he had messaged Bokuto a few times back then, asking if everything was all right. Bokuto had no choice but to lie, so that he wouldn’t have to acknowledge it.
“But then, I screwed up and made my mom angry. And I guess they stopped fighting, because they both agreed I was a bad kid. I got yelled at a lot and I tried to be good, but… it didn’t work.”

Bokuto’s lip trembles. “And, well… I got sick last week. A lot of things happened, and I walked out because it got too much. Akaashi let me stay at his place.”

Akaashi doesn’t comment on the amount of detail left out, that makes the abuse less horrible than it really is. “He’ll probably be staying at my house for quite some time. I don’t plan to let his parents hurt him again.”

A laugh escapes Bokuto’s mouth. “You’re the man, Akaashi!” He slaps Akaashi’s back, but he’s not as comfortable as he tries to pretend he is.

“And just one more thing… I felt really bad and hurt myself because of all this. I know it was a stupid decision. Sorry for making you guys worry.”

Yukie reaches out, and hugs Bokuto tight. Konoha and Sarukui join in, lumping themselves into a huge ball with them. The rest all join in, and Akaashi shuffles beside them to pat Bokuto’s head.

“Hey… You guys are crying.” Bokuto whispers, taken aback. “Don’t cry. It’s gonna make me cry too…”

“Stop apologising, idiot!” Suzumeda and Yukie exclaim. “Akaashi, Bokuto… Why did you shoulder all this without us? We should be the ones apologising.”

“I never noticed you were in pain.” Komi pats Bokuto’s back, sniffing. “I didn’t know you were going through all this. I’m sorry!”

Washio holds Bokuto’s shoulders supportively. “You’re still our strong, dependable captain. Nobody can take that away.”

“So proud of you.” Sarukui nuzzles his cheek against Bokuto’s shoulder. “It’s only going to get better. You don’t deserve to be hurt.”

Akaashi smiles widely. He can feel the air of supportiveness, the aura of kindness spread throughout the gymnasium. The coach is wiping at his eyes, and Akaashi notices there’s also tears travelling down his own cheeks. Bokuto’s come so incredibly far. No words can describe what he feels towards him.

Akaashi’s phone vibrates.

He’s sitting on the sofa with Bokuto, with his father upstairs on his desktop. His mother and siblings have gone out for some ice cream, to which he and Bokuto had declined in favour of movie night.

It’s from Kuroo. He thinks of declining the call, but the movie hasn’t kicked off yet. “Sorry, Bokuto-san. Kuroo-san is calling me.” He pauses the movie, and taps the screen to accept the call. “Hello, Kuroo-san. Is there something I can help with?”

“Hey, Akaashi! I’m in front of your house right now. Is Bokuto with you?”

Kuroo is out of breath, and Akaashi’s brows arch up. “You- you’re in front of our house?!” He yells, and Bokuto jumps up beside him.
“Can I come in?” Kuroo asks, and Akaashi stands up with a sigh.

“It’s Kuroo-san. I’m going to open the door for him.” Akaashi pinches the bridge of his nose, making his way over to the front door. “Come with me. I think he wants to see you.”

Bokuto perks up, leaping to his feet with a grin. “Kuroo?! His hands flap with excitement, arms waving around energetically. “Let’s go! Let’s go!”

As soon as Akaashi opens the front door, Kuroo flings himself at Bokuto.

“Bro, let me breathe! You’re gonna choke me!” Bokuto laughs, as Kuroo wraps his arms around him tightly. “I’m not gonna go anywhere!”

“I was so fucking scared for you.” Kuroo kicks off his shoes, stroking Bokuto’s hair and slapping his back gently. “It felt like I’d never meet you again, and it was so fucking scary…”

Akaashi is unsure of what to do, for a split second. “Well, please do come in. I’ll get something to drink.” He makes his way into the kitchen, while Kuroo and Bokuto’s footsteps head to the sitting room.

He grabs some bottled green tea, pouring some into glasses and placing them on a tray. There’s a few packets of sweets beside the kitchen utensil shelf. He grabs some pocky and chocoshrooms, and places them beside the glasses.

“I brought some snacks.” Akaashi sits down beside Bokuto and Kuroo, who are cuddling each other and pressing their heads against their clothes. Despite every logical thought he follows it up with, a pang of jealousy seeps into the cracks of his heart.

“Chocoshrooms!” Bokuto exclaims, eyes lighting up. “Is it okay if I have one? Are you sure?”

Akaashi nods, and Bokuto takes one carefully, popping it into his mouth. “Kuroo-san, is there anything you need-”

Kuroo shrugs. “A lot, actually. And I wanted to talk to you guys in person. Sorry for the abruptness.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Akaashi watches as Kuroo stuffs his mouth full of pocky, getting chocolate on the side of his lip.

“Bokuto, you’re probably tired of hearing this. But I’m so sorry this happened. It shouldn’t have happened.” Kuroo begins to talk, and Bokuto stares at the table. “I’m not saying we’re the same, but I know how much it sucks. Abusive parents are the worst.”

Instead of forming a response, Bokuto blinks curiously. “It… wasn’t that bad, Kuroo. I mean, they did probably hate me, but it wasn’t abuse. You know, sometimes parents are strict!”

Akaashi and Kuroo stare at him with wide eyes. “You’re not serious, are you?” Kuroo murmurs, unable to find the words necessary.

“I know they did some mean things, but they’re still my parents, you know?” Bokuto shrugs. “I wasn’t good enough for them. And everyone gets slapped sometimes, right?”

“No, they don’t.” Kuroo leans forward, staring at Bokuto. “Parents shouldn’t hit their kids. There’s a power difference. Violence crosses the line.”
Bokuto starts to mumble. “My parents were strict, but I did deserve it. I’m not smart, I’m loud, I wouldn’t want a kid like me. I just got punished for doing things I shouldn’t have been doing.”

Akaashi doesn’t know what to do. He can’t bear to listen to Bokuto talk about himself that way. “But still, you shouldn’t be hit. You shouldn’t be told that your birth was a mistake. You’re not an exception. You’re a person that should be respected.”

Bokuto looks lost, glancing around to see if Kuroo will take his side. “But, I... Abuse is something Kuroo went through! My parents never broke my wrist or anything! I’m not abused! Really!” His responses begin to sound more and more desperate, convincing himself the same thing over and over.

Kuroo grabs Bokuto’s shoulders, shaking him violently. “It’s not a fucking competition, Bokuto! Just because they didn’t hurt you until your bones broke, doesn’t mean you have it easy! You were sick, and they didn’t even take you to the hospital! What the fuck kind of parent does that?”

“No! Shut up!” Bokuto grabs his head with his hands, shaking. “It’s my fault. They wouldn’t punish me if they didn’t care. They still love me!” He’s talking to himself, Akaashi notices.

Tears of frustration gather at Bokuto’s eyes. “They still love me.” He repeats, breaking into sobs. He wrings his hands, knocking his forehead against his knuckles.

“I know you want to believe that, Bokuto. Believe me, I know.” Kuroo wraps his arms around Bokuto’s neck, pressing their bodies closer. “But if you can’t imagine it happening to me or Akaashi, it’s not love.”

Bokuto freezes, biting his lip. “No… Akaashi’s so smart. He should never be yelled at. He’s good.”

Akaashi strokes Bokuto’s hair. “I’ve broken my mother’s vase a few years ago, by accident. I’ve given my family food poisoning. Also, I’m definitely responsible for at least one of the scratches on the car.”

“What?! But- you’re Akaashi.” Bokuto chokes on his own spit, and Kuroo pats his back to get the coughing settled. “You still shouldn’t get yelled at. You’re good. If you ever got hit for a bad test result… I’d want to hurt whoever did it.”

Kuroo and Akaashi exchange looks of understanding. Bokuto, sweet Bokuto. Utterly convinced that he’s somehow beneath everyone else because of what his parents tell him. The lies fed to him leave a deep footprint on his ideals.

“I’m loud. I’ve had neighbours complain because I screamed at a cockroach. I once tried a gas experiment and almost damaged my eardrums.” Kuroo laughs. “Sure, I was yelled at. But I was never beaten.”

“But you’re a fun loud person!” Bokuto leaps up immediately, rebutting Kuroo. “You’re being loud because you’re happy! You shouldn’t be punished because you’re happy!”

Realisation lights up in Bokuto’s eyes, and his expression leaves him. His shoulders slowly drop, his features ghost-like. “Oh.”

“It shouldn’t have happened, Bokuto.” Kuroo places his arms around Bokuto’s frame, rubbing his back gently. “You shouldn’t have been hit or punished for being sick. Don’t blame yourself for something bad that happened to you.”
Akaashi joins the embrace. Bokuto is still uncertain, but there’s a new feeling bubbling in his chest. Doubt for the beliefs and ideals ingrained into him. Longing to understand why he was always yelled at and scared in his own home.

“Thank you.” Bokuto hiccups, tears rolling down his cheeks. “I love you both so much. I really don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Akaashi prays that even if he didn’t exist in Bokuto’s life, Bokuto would still somehow be finding happiness. He can only appreciate all the stars did in his favour, and tighten his hold on Bokuto.

Chapter End Notes

kudos and comments please! or come talk to me on my twitter, kuromantic.
Bokuto opens his mouth to scream stop, but his vocal chords refuse to cooperate with him. He strains as hard as he can, but it’s no use.

His chest is getting crushed. There’s no room for breathing. His inhales become erratic, and he’s not pushing out any of the air. His lungs swell up, and his heart beats too loudly in his chest.

Bokuto’s throat hurts, and he doesn’t know why. When his eyes crack open and awareness seeps into his brain, he realises he’s screaming. Loudly.

Chapter Notes

im sleepy. it just hit midnight where i live, in sweet old Ireland. I hit 13k words, I hope you guys will be as happy about this chapter as I am.

warnings
- self injury
- panic attacks
- bad relationship with food
- court scene written with my limited knowledge

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beads of sweat gather at Bokuto’s forehead, as he exhales irregular breaths. His eyes are shut tightly. There’s no light in the room, as the clock hits two in the morning. He’s locked into his dreams, and he squirms helplessly.

You’re a waste of space! You should have never been born!

Bokuto’s instincts tell him to cover his ears, but he can still hear the sharp voices. Everything’s flying in his direction. Words, fists, objects. They all hate him. They all chorus that he’s unworthy of love.

Tears drip down his cheeks. His muscles twitch, and the bed creaks slightly. With every breath, his chest heaves and tightens. It’s getting too hot, and his sheets become soaked with his sweat. A whine escapes his mouth.

There’s nobody to tell him that it’s okay. His eyes continue to spill tears, until the pillow is drenched. Fingers bend and grasp at nothing, desperate to be pulled away from the nightmare.

There’s no use getting away, Koutarou. You’re nothing to them. You’ll die of stupidity.

Bokuto opens his mouth to scream stop, but his vocal chords refuse to cooperate with him. He

strains as hard as he can, but it’s no use.

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“Are you okay? Did you get injured?”

The voice is Akaashi’s mother. Bokuto’s shoulders roll forward, and he almost falls off the bed.

“Koutarou! What happened? Do we need to call auntie?”

“Koutarou-niichan?”

It’s too much for him. He twitches too hard, and collides with the ground with a deafening clatter. He’s sure he’s dented the floor. He’s too heavy and eats too much. Pain spreads out through one side of his body, which he’d landed on. It’s dull, and spreads out through his muscles and bones.

“Bokuto-san.”

Akaashi steps over to him, hand gently reaching out to lift him up. Bokuto can’t react with gratitude. He doesn’t see the hand as Akaashi’s. It’s not safe.

“Don’t touch me!” Bokuto screams, pressing himself against the wall immediately. The moment someone’s shadow moves, he flinches violently, banging his arm against the wall.

He blinks out the tears, and somebody flicks the light on. There’s so many worried faces staring at him. It’s sometime a few hours after midnight. He’s waken them all up with his screaming.


Bokuto curls up further, rocking into the wall. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I did a bad thing. Please don’t hurt me.”

“We won’t hurt you.” Kakeru says, extending a hand towards him. Bokuto shakes his head, sobbing into his knees. It hurts too much to trust.

“Koutarou’s not okay! He’s hurt! Hurt!” Sora starts to bawl, running around in a frenzy. “What do we do?! Koutarou Hurt!”

Sora is a mess of tears and snot, hands waving around with nowhere to go. Bokuto stares at him, blank-faced. He’s made him cry. He needs to stop panicking. He needs to reassure him.

“Koutarou hurt! Help him! Help!” Sora screams at the top of his lungs, stamping his legs on the floor. “We have to help! Something’s wrong!”

Mari grabs Sora by the arm, dragging him backwards. “Calm down. Go and get a drink from the kitchen. You can help him if you do that.”

“Koutarou-”

Mari stares him in the eye, wiping his cheeks and nose. “You can help him. So don’t cry.” She pats him on the head gently, and Sora whimpers, blowing his nose into his sleeve.
Sora sniffles. “Okay.” He scurries out of the room, thumping down the stairs.

Akaashi leaves the room, and comes back with a soft plush dog. It has droopy brown ears and round eyes, and it’s fluffy.

“You can squeeze it. It’s okay.” Akaashi prompts him.

Bokuto’s arms shakily envelop the plush dog, stroking the fabric and enjoying the texture. It’s slightly worn, and smells like Akaashi.

He hugs it close to his chest, sobs escaping his mouth. He’s overcome with so much emotion, even though he isn’t sure what it is. Tears flow down his cheeks, rolling off his chin.

“Breathe, okay?” Akaashi’s hand touches his back. He flinches, but quickly adjusts to the contact. “It’s okay. I’m not mad. It was just a bad dream, see?”

Bokuto coughs into his palms, breath catching in his throat. “A- A dream? But, I-” Akaashi massages his shoulders, until the tension eases away. Bokuto allows himself to be touched tenderly, breathing in and out at a comfortable pace.

“Koutarou-kun, is your arm okay? Does it hurt where you bumped it?” Akaashi’s mother approaches him, taking his arm and checking for injuries. “It looks a little bruised. Poor thing.”

Bokuto hiccups, pressing himself to Akaashi’s chest. He listens to his heartbeat, and it’s calming, like watching the push and pull of the waves at sea.

“You’re not going to be hurt. I’m going to make sure you’re feeling safe, and then we’ll try and go to sleep.” Akaashi talks to him calmly, patting his back with a rhythm that makes him feel secure and loved.

“Here!” Sora comes back with a bottle of calpis water, handing it to Bokuto. “Your drink! Drink it up!”

Bokuto uncaps the drink and presses it to his lips, taking a sip of the sweet liquid. It has a refreshing aftertaste, and Bokuto empties around a quarter of the bottle.

“Thank you.” He whispers, handing the bottle back to Akaashi’s mother. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s no problem.” Ayako strokes Bokuto’s flattened hair. “You had a nightmare. But it’s just that. They’re not here, sweetheart. I won’t let them hurt you.”

Akaashi takes Bokuto’s hand, levering him up and sitting him down on the side of the bed. The mattress sinks with his weight, the shape of him dipping into it.

Bokuto sobs into Akaashi’s shoulder, hugging him tightly with the plush dog on his lap. He feels awful for waking everyone up at such an ungodly hour. All because he couldn’t control his emotions. He deserves to be beaten.

“Koutarou, are you tired? Gonna go back to sleep?”

“Feel better soon, okay?”

“Okay now?”

Akaashi’s siblings slowly approach him. Sora climbs on his lap, kneeling on him. Bokuto holds him steady, cautious to not let him slip from his grasp.
“I’m okay now.” Bokuto says, hoping that he’s reassuring enough. He’s still shaken, but he doesn’t want Sora to get upset because of him again.

Sora holds Bokuto’s thumb with his whole hand, grinning. “Koutarou feeling good! Okay!”

As Sora starts shifting in Bokuto’s lap, he reaches for Bokuto’s hair, patting his soft hair. “I’m doing pat pat to Koutarou! Good boy!”

Akaashi grabs some blankets, wrapping them around Bokuto’s shoulder. “It’s still early to be up. Let’s go back to sleep.”

“Yeah,” Mari nods, yawning. “Sleep well, Koutarou.”

“Goodnight, Koutarou!”

As Akaashi’s family leaves one by one, Akaashi tucks Bokuto into the blankets, snuggling up to him. “I’ll be with you tonight, okay?”

It’s the same routine, over and over again. At least three times this week, Bokuto’s woken up from night terrors. But this one was especially bad, enough to scream the house down.

“I’m sorry, Akaashi. You’re not getting sleep because of me.”

Bokuto can only apologize each time, as Akaashi wipes his tears away with his fingertip.

“It’s worse for you than it is for me.” Akaashi pats Bokuto’s shoulder blades, and Bokuto feels tired, all of a sudden. “Now, please try and get some sleep.”

Bokuto clutches the plush dog’s paw, before closing his eyes and dropping off.

Ever since then, Bokuto’s nightmares had decreased considerably. Something about the plush dog makes him feel secure, as well as the soft, milky scent belonging to Akaashi.

“Keiji used to always go to sleep with the dog too, you know.”

Ayako mentions, and Akaashi almost chokes on his hot cocoa.

“Really?” Bokuto perks. No wonder it had such a comforting shape and smell to it.

“This was a long time ago.” Akaashi clears his throat, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I used to get anxious and overwhelmed a lot when I was younger. It helped when I held the dog close to me.”

“You’re so cute, Akaashi!” Bokuto laughs, thumping his back. “But… isn’t it something dear to you? Are you sure I can…”

Akaashi nods. “Right now, you need it more than I do. I’d be happy if it helps.”

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itchy feeling in his chest every time he wakes up and realises where he is. It’s where he feels the most belonging, but still like an outsider.

Komachi gives an understanding nod. “Since you’re eighteen years old, you’re able to cut your parents off legally, so they don’t have custody.” Bokuto freezes up. “Of course, you don’t have to if you don’t want to. But if you could give an account of what happened, it would make it easier to settle.”

Bokuto starts to wiggle his leg. “Settle…? Isn’t everything already finished?” He almost begs. He doesn’t want to think about it, because he’ll be confronted with his fears even more. He wants to forget.

“I understand that you want to think so. But in cases of abuse-“

“It wasn’t abuse!”

Bokuto’s eyes grow big, once the statement comes out of his mouth. He’d interrupted the person who very well saved his life.

“I’m so sorry. You weren’t finished.” He shrinks and shrivels, until he can’t compress himself any smaller.

Komachi only smiles patiently. “I know it’s hard to get out of your old routines. It’s not your fault. I was thinking we could go and have a talk, somewhere private.”

Bokuto swallows. He glances at Komachi, and then at Akaashi. “Can he come too…?”

“If you want him to. There’s nothing wrong with needing some support.”

Bokuto turns to Akaashi, holding his hand. “Please, Akaashi?”

They drive to the park, where there’s little noise and distractions. There’s not many people around, and the autumn weather is mild. Reddened leaves lay scattered on the path, sitting on top of one another.

“Let’s sit down here.” Komachi lowers herself onto a bench, perfect for three people to sit. In spite of that, Bokuto makes himself even smaller, refusing to occupy any more space than necessary.

“Koutarou-kun, you said earlier that you don’t think you were abused. Can I ask why you might think that?”

Bokuto wiggles, hands restless on his knees. “Well… um, because… I wasn’t. They’re just strict. I mean, what’s abusive anyway? I’m taller and heavier than them. It wasn’t anything I couldn’t take.”

To his surprise, he isn’t met with an argument. “Okay. What was the worst thing they did to you, in your own opinion?”

“I don’t know, wait…” Bokuto mumbles, and he’s met with patience. He could just have chosen not to answer, but he really begins to think. Was it when they threw things at him? Or when his mother forced him to eat on a full stomach? No…

“They told me I shouldn’t have been born.”

Akaashi quickly shakes his head. “That’s not true, and I hope you know that.”
“I know. But you don’t see me the way they do. In their eyes, I’m just a dumb kid who can’t pay any bills. They wanted me to move out, I think.” Bokuto continues. “It’s not a big deal though! I mean, every parent gets frustrated sometimes.”

“You don’t need to pay bills or be perfect to be respected. And it’s not realistic for them to expect so much of you.” Komachi explains. Bokuto shrugs, unsure of what to say. He has been respected. He’s had a roof over his head, food and water. “And how did the expectations make you feel? Was it overwhelming?”

Bokuto finds himself agreeing. “Yeah. I’d get- I’d get punished if I did something bad. I know I deserved it but it still hurt. Sometimes I wouldn’t know what I did wrong, but it just felt like I did something bad. And I know I’m a bad kid but I know kids like me and they don’t look miserable and hurt. I don’t know-”

He buries his face into his palms, and Akaashi squeezes his arm supportively. He can’t become overwhelmed like this. He’s wasting their time.

“This might be uncomfortable to talk about, but what exactly were those punishments?” Komachi queries, occasionally writing and reading over something in her notepad. “Don’t rush. We can take a break anytime.”

Bokuto thinks. There weren’t really set punishments at all. It was more like he would do something wrong, and whatever his parents felt like doing, they would do. He had come to accept it, and resolved to protect his limbs and face as best as he could.

“Um, sometimes they’d hit me or throw things. I sometimes get nosebleeds. And they’d slam me against the wall or the ground, if I came home late or something.” Bokuto cringes at the memories. “If I cried or asked them why they did it, it’d get worse. But I wasn’t trying to be bad on purpose.”

Akaashi is staring at him with disbelief and shock. “...Bokuto-san. That’s abuse.” This time, Bokuto doesn’t deny it. The more he thinks about it, the more weird it is. He didn’t even know what he was doing wrong, half the time. He had done everything his parents asked him to, but he would get punished all the same.

“Like, I’d be really full, and they’d make me eat huge plates of unseasoned vegetables. And when I was sick, they got really angry because I… threw up and wasted so much medicine and food.”

“But it was outside of your control, wasn’t it?” Komachi acknowledges his deepest uncertainties. “You were full. You weren’t feeling well. That’s not something to be guilty about. Especially when you were the one suffering.”

“...I guess.” Bokuto lets out a long, drawn out sigh. “But I don’t have good grades and I talk too much and waste food and clothes. I deserved most of it.”

Komachi averts her eyes, for a split second. “Even if you think you deserved it… Isn’t it no way for one person to treat another person?” She clears her throat, before Bokuto can think of an answer. “Could you describe a typical day, in your household? From when you wake up to when you sleep?”

Akaashi looks upset, when Bokuto glances at him. He doesn’t understand why he’s so horrified. He knows how much he’s a pain to work with, out of everyone.

“Well, I wake up and sneak some food from the fridge, or under my bed. And I go to school for practice and studying. I get home at around nine, make some dinner if I can. I try to shower before
I sleep."

“...Do you not eat dinner every day?” Akaashi catches on immediately. “You barely eat before or after practice. You’ll get malnourished.”

“You don’t need to eat dinner every day, right? And I always eat too much in one go, anyway. I don’t want to be greedy and disgusting.”

“Have you ever felt dizzy or sick after you finished practice? Or found it hard to sleep?” Komachi asks, and it strikes a bell within Bokuto. He slowly nods. It’s been a chore trying to get himself to sleep, and he sometimes feels sick after eating.

“I guess…” Bokuto mumbles. “I sometimes feel really tired and sleepy during the day. And it’s really weird, because I’d try to sleep but my body wouldn’t let me.”

When he admits it, the look of concern on both of their faces only grow. He must have said the wrong thing.

“You just described what can happen when you’re not eating enough. It won’t be easy, but we’re going to have to work on creating a food routine.” A food routine? Bokuto wonders out loud. He’s already eating too much, isn’t he?

Bokuto forces out a laugh. “I’m fine, I swear! I’m a pretty low maintenance person! Like… It’s normal to only have a few sets of clothes, right? I don’t wear them for too long anyway, there’s less water wasted for laundry that way.”

Akaashi stares down at his clothes, that Ayako had lent him. He’d been wearing a lot of borrowed clothes, ever since he started living with Akaashi. He takes too much. He could survive with less.

Komachi’s writing is shaky in her notebook.

Out of nowhere, in the middle of their conversation, Bokuto’s stomach grumbles loud and clear.

“I’m so sorry!” Bokuto grips his stomach tightly, praying for it to stop growling so loudly. He’s not meant to be hungry. The sounds aren’t muffled one bit, surrounding them awkwardly. “I’m not hungry. I swear, I don’t need to eat. I’m sorry—”

“I’m hungry too,” Akaashi chimes in, before Bokuto can spiral into the zone of self-hate.

Komachi smiles warmly, placing her belongings into her white velvety handbag. “There’s a Saizeriya nearby. We can all get some food, how does that sound?”

Hesitantly, Bokuto nods. It’s not bad if everyone is hungry. He’s allowed to eat. His mouth begins to water, just by catching a glimpse of the restaurant’s logo.

Bokuto takes in a deep breath, looking around at the interior of the family restaurant. Komachi secures a seat for three, as Akaashi and Bokuto sniff the various scents of food around them. It’s a weekend, and the place is reasonably filled with people.

Bokuto picks up the menu, looking through the ones that look the least expensive. There’s pasta, pizza, gratin, hamburg steak, salad, and various appetizers. He’ll have to skip the appetizers, because they’re too calorie-heavy and costly. He’ll just stick to a salad, and maybe a small steak.

“Bokuto-san. I’m going to get some prawn gratin and a salad, with some extra appetizers. We
could share some.” Akaashi points to his desired items on the menu, while Bokuto flicks through what he knows he doesn’t deserve to eat. “You told me you liked hamburg steaks before. Would you like to order one?”

Bokuto wants to say no. He wants to tell Akaashi that he isn’t deserving of such a rich, delicious meal. But there’s a limit to how long he can control his hunger, and saying no would make him look rude.

“Yeah.” He points to a small steak plate, checking the price to make sure he can afford to pay them back if he needs to. “Is it okay if I have this?”

“Of course. You can have more, if you want. You’re not taking too much. It’s what you need, at your age.” Komachi presses the button on the table to call a waiter, and starts to order some food and drinks. Bokuto sips on the glass of water in front of him, quietly chewing and cracking the ice with his teeth.

When the food comes, Bokuto’s mouth waters. There’s a bunch of steaming hot plates on the table, loaded with food. There’s steak, potato wedges, vegetable soup, creamy gratin, and more. He swallows, staying absolutely still. It could be a test of his patience.

“You can eat.” Akaashi says kindly, but Bokuto doesn’t pick up his fork until everyone else takes a bite first. He slowly lifts a forkful of food up to his mouth, eating the juicy meat.

Bokuto’s eyes light up, when the flavours and sauces burst in his mouth. Delicious! He cuts a larger piece for himself, shoving it into his mouth eagerly. It tastes rich and flavourful, every bite spreading the taste in his mouth.

“Do you like meat?” Komachi asks him with a smile, watching him devour his food. “There’s some potato as well. Have anything you want.”

The word safe echoes in Bokuto’s head. He’s safe to eat anything he wants. He doesn’t know when he’ll feel like that again. It’s his cue to eat until he’s full, to give his body the nutrients it needs.

He grabs his fork and finishes his whole plate of meat and vegetables in less than five minutes, moving onto the cup of soup. It tastes faintly of carrots and onion, with a consomme base. Every savory flavour rains down on his tongue at once.

Akaashi has the same amount of food as him, but he’s eating at a much slower pace. By the time Akaashi is halfway through his piping hot gratin, Bokuto’s gulping down his salad without chewing every mouthful. Every time he almost chokes, he splashes it all down with a glass of carbonated grape juice.

“Hey, it’s okay. Slow down.” Akaashi places his fingers on the top of Bokuto’s hand. “You can take all the time you need.”

At that moment, Bokuto realises how much food he’s eaten. He hasn’t eaten so much in weeks. Eating too much is bad. He’s in trouble. His body is telling him that.

“I-” Bokuto mumbles a bunch of gibberish, standing up with a clatter and bumping his elbow into the table. He barely registers the pain, too preoccupied by the increasing pressure on his chest.
Everything is out of control.

He makes a dash for the bathrooms, locking himself into a stall. The silence amplifies the thump of his heart. It’s hard not to panic, and his own unsteady breaths upset him even more. He’s screwed up again. He’s ruined it all, when it was going so well.

A pressurized lump rises to Bokuto’s throat, and he has no time to figure out whether he’s about to cry or be sick. It ends up being both. Tears and spit drip off his skin as he gags, vomiting up the food he’d wooled down too fast.

He’s miserable. His eyes are red and swollen, and his throat burns from the acidic liquid splashing against it. The food he’d eaten is practically undigested, and it hurts to bring it back up. It’s all gone to waste. He doesn’t even deserve food in the first place.

There’s a gentle knocking on the stall door, and Bokuto hastily flushes the toilet. He hopes he wasn’t too loud- he’s going to ruin everyone’s appetite, vomiting in a restaurant. He can’t believe what he’s just done.

He slides the lock open, cringing at the taste of what used to be delicious food. There’s Akaashi, standing in front of him.

“Let’s get some water. Try and go slower this time, it’s not a big deal. You’re not in any trouble.” Akaashi pulls out a packet of tissues, swift hands dabbing away at Bokuto’s lips and cheeks. He wets his handkerchief under the tap, wiping the tear streaks and cooling his swollen eyes.

Bokuto lets himself be cleaned by Akaashi, arms limp at his side. “You’re not mad? I acted like a disgusting savage…”

Akaashi instantly understands that he’s using the words of someone else. “No. Not at all. Aunt Komachi isn’t, either. She wanted to check up on you, but…” He glances at the bathroom door.

“Okay.” Bokuto lays his head on Akaashi’s firm shoulder, and his comforting scent immediately surrounds him. Akaashi is safe. He takes in a steady breath, immersing himself in Akaashi’s calming aura.

Akaashi places his hands on Bokuto’s back, massaging him where it relaxes his tension the most. “Let’s go. Are you feeling any better? Does it hurt anywhere?”

There is a faint headache around Bokuto’s eyes, but he shakes his head. “I’m all good now! I feel okay!”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

Akaashi leads Bokuto back to the table, sliding him a glass of cold water. Bokuto swallows it little by little, wiping his mouth when he’s done. The coolness of the water feels delicious against his scraped throat, washing the disgusting taste out of his mouth.

“Koutarou-kun, what would you like to eat now? There’s still plenty of time.”

Komachi hands him the menu, showing no sign of irritation. She has the same aura of calmness as Akaashi. Bokuto allows himself to trust the atmosphere. There’s no need to be apprehensive.

Bokuto is happy, that day. He enjoys food and the feeling of being pleasantly full, for the first time in months.
The next time Bokuto meets Komachi, it’s for a less exciting reason.

“I know you probably aren’t looking forward to this, but you need to speak in family court.” She explains as concisely as possible, so as not to rouse unnecessary fear.

But Bokuto is still terrified. He shakes his head meekly, not wanting to confront his worst fears. He’s content in shoving it all away to the back of his mind, inside a locked safe so that he won’t have to remember it ever again.

“I- I don’t… I don’t think I can.” Bokuto fiddles with his hands, biting at the skin on his lip. “Please. I’m happy right now. I really don’t need anything else.”

“You won’t be alone. And they won’t be able to hurt you. You’ve come so far, and you’re strong. You’ll be able to.”

Komachi can only offer him reassuring words. They’re already more than halfway through the journey to the court. Bokuto feels slightly carsick, but it’s more anxiety than that. His chest clenches, and his palms are slippery.

The ground spins, as Bokuto steps out from the car. Komachi extends a hand towards him, and he takes it. He’s too dizzy to be confident in walking on his own.

The inside of the building is plain, much like a hospital but without all the informative pamphlets about pregnancy, depression and kidney infections. He sits on one of the chairs, picking at his cuticles until Komachi finishes filling in some forms and confirms the time schedule. He’s prompted to sign his name sometimes too, as well as read through some papers that guide him through the process.

Truth be told, Bokuto wants nothing more than to go back home and forget everything. But if he backs out now, he’ll get into so much trouble, and possibly lose his new home and family. He would rather face his fears than have that.

“Bokuto Koutarou-san?”

He jumps, almost smacking his head into the wall.

As it turns out, Bokuto’s parents aren’t within touching distance. But he can still see their expressions, and they’re not impressed. He’s surprised he hasn’t been yelled at yet, but he supposes people aren’t really allowed to lose their temper in court.

Court. He can’t believe it. It’s as if he’s a victim of something horrible.

“Bokuto Koutarou-san.” The judge calls his name. “There has been a case of abuse going on, and you would like your parents to have loss of custody of you. Is that right?”

Bokuto nods, and squeaks out a “Yes”. He’s not sure if he would get in trouble for minimal speaking.

“Could you provide some examples of the abuse?”

He doesn’t want to speak. His parents are watching him like a hawk. They don’t want him to speak, either. Maybe if he says there’s nothing wrong, everything will go back to normal-

Bokuto locks eyes with Komachi, who nods at him encouragingly. That’s right. He has to be
honest, if he wants to live the happy life he’d wanted.

“I got hit, sometimes. Or things were thrown at me. And sometimes my head was shoved into a bathtub full of water.” He recounts the details, avoiding the death glare of his parents. “A lot of other things that hurt, too.”

He’s this close to adding But it was my fault, but the words catch in his throat.

“Okay. And I heard there was also a case of neglect, regarding the hospital visit a few weeks ago.” The judge mentions, and Bokuto shrinks in his seat.

“They got mad at me because I… I got sick and hospital visits are expensive. Does this even make sense? I’m sorry.” Bokuto desperately wants to stand up and run out of the room. He wants to be in Akaashi’s arms, comforted and warm. “And food and clothes are expensive so I don’t always get them. But it’s okay. I don’t need dinner every day. I’m really-”

He wipes his tears away. His parents are right there. He’ll be punished for crying. He’s forgetting how to breath again. It’s not supposed to happen.

“It’s all right. Get it all out, slowly.” The judge’s voice is kind, and Bokuto allows himself to make eye contact for the first time. He’s met with a trustworthy smile. His brain says safe.

“They wished I was never born. They told me I was disgusting and a waste of money. They just don’t like me anymore and I tried to fix it but it’s not working.” Bokuto’s throat hurts. He can feel how sweaty his palms are, as he locks his fingers tightly.

He glances down at his lap, to collect himself. There are too many eyes on him.

“He’s lying. I’ve never put a hand on him.”

In an instant, Bokuto’s whole world is crushed. He knows his mother is lying- why? If he deserved it, why would she lie about it? Weren’t all bad kids slapped and yelled at?

Did it even happen?

“I’ve had it with you, Koutarou.” His mother glares at him. He knows she would have thrown something at him, but there’s nothing within her reach. “You’re always lying. You just love to ruin our lives, don’t you?”

“Don’t you remember? You threw a bowl of rice at me! And you told me to eat it! I cut myself in the mouth and you got angry at me for bleeding on the kitchen floor!” Bokuto explodes, as if a dam has broken loose. “I’m not lying! I remember everything!”

His breathing becomes ragged and heavy. His chest vibrates with how fast his heart is beating. He did it. He’s answered back.

“You guys told me so many times it was for my own good. The least you could do is own up to it.”

Bokuto stops cowering and hating his situation. He’s in a position to say anything to his parents and get away with it. He’s going to make the most out of his opportunity.

The judge is seeing the situation from his point of view, too. Everyone is on his side, listening to what he’s saying. He’s not delusional. It’s not all in his head.

“It’s clear there’s been a case of very severe abuse going on. In addition to loss of custody, there
will be further discussion of sentencing.”

A wide grin appears on Bokuto’s face, for the first time since the trial started. He’s never felt this much power over the people who had tormented him.

“I hope you guys know that you had so many chances. I tried to be the best son I could be. I’m your only son, and I’m cutting you off forever. I only regret not doing this sooner.”

Bokuto wishes he could really unload the full extent of his suffering to them, and make them realise how much he’d suffered. But it’s no use. They like it when he suffers. Explaining won’t give him any satisfaction.

“You guys might have raised me, but you’re not my parents. And I’m relieved.”

His mother is indignant. “I gave you so much—”

Bokuto laughs. “So much pain and violence. I deserve better than this. I should have spent my time at home happy and relaxed. And I’m going to live a much better and fulfilling life than you guys. I’ll do it without any of your help.”

It feels good to unload it all, his chest feeling considerably lighter. His lungs expand in capacity, filling with euphoria. He’s finally out. Completely out. It can only get better, he tells himself.

It’s raining, when Bokuto arrives at home. He runs up to Akaashi with a jump start, hugging him as tightly as he can. He wants Akaashi to be proud of him. It’s as if he’s been without him for a month.

“I did it, Akaashi! I’m free now!”

They both clatter onto the floor. Akaashi is on the bottom, and he struggles to wriggle out before Bokuto lets him go.

“I’m so proud of you. You went out there and did it. You’re so strong.”

He can finally live his life without feeling guilty. He can be surrounded by the people who are gentle with him. He can eat until he’s full.

Of course, it isn’t as simple as that.

Two hours after he’s home, Bokuto sinks under the blankets, refusing to come out. The rush of adrenaline wears off, leaving him with an empty chest. It hurts too much to think about his home, and parents.

“They just didn’t care, Akaashi.” Bokuto cries into the pillow. Akaashi surrounds him in blankets and a hot water bottle, listening to him. “I don’t know what I did wrong. They hurt me, and they didn’t even admit it. They told me it was normal.”

“They were lying.” Akaashi says, and Bokuto nods. His entire life feels like a lie. He’d believed everything his parents had said. He wanted to believe that they had his best interests at heart. But today, it had become clear they didn’t love him or care for him.

“I’m not normal anymore. I don’t know anything, Akaashi.”

Even though Akaashi is an amazing listener, he can’t take away the conflicting feelings in him. He can’t hate his parents, even after all they’ve done to make him feel like nothing. He still craves
their smile, one last time.

“What you went through was horrible. And you’re still suffering, I know.” Akaashi says. “And it’s not easy to recover from it. But you won’t feel like this forever. It’s going to get less painful, Bokuto-san.”

“I just want to feel normal again. Everything is wrong.”

Questioning his worldview is terrifying. When he was living with his parents, he didn’t have to think so much. Now, he’s forced to look at his lifestyle a different way, and change it to something that won’t have him on edge the entire time.

A food routine, Bokuto had been told.

With the possibility of his parents punishing him gone, Bokuto knows he should feel safe eating. However, he finds out that it’s nothing near as simple as that. He doesn’t know when it’s safe. He knows he eats too much, even if everyone constantly asks if he wants more.

“Koutarou, food’s ready!”

Ayako calls him downstairs, but he can’t bring himself to eat. For hours at a time, his stomach cramps up. He usually manages to keep everything down, and hasn’t had any tears in his throat since, but it makes eating a lot less enjoyable.

For dinner, there’s breaded katsu and sliced cabbage with a bowl of miso soup and rice. It smells heavenly, but Bokuto doesn’t feel like he can finish it. There’s a generous-sized serving for him, though, and it’s impossibly rude to leave food on his plate.

He puts a small mouthful of rice and cabbage in his mouth. Just the tiny amount of food makes his skin crawl. There’s no way he can have anything even heavier on his stomach.

“Thanks for the meal!” Mari and Akaashi are the fastest to eat, and Bokuto’s appetite diminishes. How anyone could possibly demolish so much food is beyond him. He used to eat almost just as much as Akaashi, but he can’t remember how he’s done it.

“Koutarou, do you dislike any foods? Is there anything you can’t eat?”

Akaashi’s father asks him, and he nearly flinches. “No, um… I’m sorry.” He murmurs, biting into another clump of rice. “I just…”

He shakes his head, and carries on nibbling. Akaashi leaves the table early, to finish up the biology homework he started. Ayako glances at him, making sure he’s eating.

The katsu tastes so good, but the rich, savoury taste lingers on his tongue for too long. He hastily stuffs some cabbage into his mouth, to neutralize the strong smack it leaves. The lump in his chest only grows, though he tries to cast it away. Its presence only grows, and his throat threatens to close up.

Shaking, Bokuto finishes his plate and places the dishes by the sink. He should have offered to wash the dishes, but his stomach feels like it’s about to burst.

“Thank you for the meal.” Bokuto smiles, leaving the room. He flops down on the couch beside Akaashi, watching him study. Akaashi is a smart, good kid. He deserves so much love and care.
“Koutarou, could you mind Sora for half an hour? We all have to go out for a piano performance.”

Bokuto nods, happily accepting babysitter duty. Sora has taken to him well, almost too well. He always bursts into his room before bedtime, giving him a goodnight hug and kiss.

“We really wanted to bring you too, Koutarou. It’s a shame the ticket sales closed so quickly.” Ayako says, hugging Bokuto as she slips on her shoes. “I hope we can make it up to you soon.”

“It’s no problem at all, Ayako-san!” Bokuto blabbers hastily. He’s not even a part of their family. He’s not meant to be intruding like this. He should be glad he has a roof.

“Bye-bye, mommy!” Sora gives a cute little wave, plopping down beside Bokuto’s ankle. “Kouchan! What do you wanna play? Wanna watch some videos? You can decide!”

Bokuto gives the most energetic performance he can manage, and lifts Sora up high. “How about we have movie night? Wanna take out a DVD?”

Sora hops up and down excitedly at the suggestion, bolting through the hallway. His bare feet make pap-pap-pap noises against the wooden flooring, and he falls flat on his face once. But he bounces up before Bokuto can worry and fuss over him, giggling.

“What should we watch?” Sora asks, pulling out an old black DVD case. They’re all put away neatly in alphabetical order, and Bokuto notes to himself not to somehow mess it up.

“Oh! Kill Bill? That looks-”

Bokuto flips the page away with one swift movement. “Aaand… let’s move on from the Tarantino movies. How about Totoro?” He suggests a movie that’s kid-friendly, pulling out the DVD from the case.

“Hmm… Okay. Want popcorn?” Sora asks, running off before Bokuto can even answer. When Bokuto follows him into the kitchen, he sees Sora opening the microwave with his tiny hands, pushing in the bag of popcorn and setting it to two minutes.

“I’m not hungry. You can have the popcorn, Sora.”

Sora seems confused by Bokuto’s refusal, but ultimately decides that it’s more popcorn for him, and pushes the thought away. “Okay then!”

The movie night goes smoothly. Sora sits beside him on the sofa, crunching on the popcorn. The smell of butter sets off Bokuto’s stomach, but it’s not enough for him to stop watching the movie.

Bokuto watches Totoro with his phone in one hand, checking the time. Slowly but surely, his stomach starts hurting worse. He’s used to having cramps and pain, but now, it’s stabbing him harder than ever.

A drop of sweat slides down his back. Taking care not to get Sora’s attention, he lets out a quiet groan. His stomach gurgles, and he clutches it hard to stop the noises.

Luckily, Sora’s eyes remain glued to the screen. He doesn’t notice Bokuto whining into his palm, closing his eyes and riding out the periodic bursts of pain. Bokuto’s eyes begin to cloud. He just wants to lie down.

All of a sudden, something surges up his throat. There’s a limit to what Bokuto can conceal- if he makes a mess on the floor, with only Sora there at home, he’ll make everything so much worse.
“Sora, I gotta go for a bit-” Bokuto covers his mouth, as a heave cuts him off halfway. “Sorry. You can just keep watching.”

With that, Bokuto hightails it out of the sitting room, shoulders heaving. His steps are erratic, as he throws himself into the bathroom.

His eyes hurt, from the amount of pressure exerted on them. Reddened cheeks swell up, every second bringing him closer to losing his dinner he’d worked hard to keep down. It’s his precious nutrients. He can’t turn it into waste.

But Bokuto’s pleas are in vain. With a stab of pain that twists in his gut, the floodgates open. Bitterness fills his mouth, and he vomits. Everything comes back up. He wants to cry, and after the second round of retching, he realises that there’s tears pouring out of his eyes.

He wants Akaashi to hold him, and tell him he’s okay. He’s not there, leaving his thoughts to spiral in the wrong direction. His stomach spasms with every breath, a mess of partially-digested food spilling from his lips. He can only sit there and watch his dinner splash in front of him, miserably.

“Kou-chan? Koutarou-niichan?”

Bokuto freezes up. He’s so sure he’d locked the door, but Sora is standing a few steps away from him. With a start, Bokuto flushes the toilet before Sora can see anything. That fails, when his stomach clenches and a gush of bile splatters into the water.

“Sorry. I know I’m disgusting right now. You shouldn’t be seeing this, I’m sorry.” Bokuto wipes his eyes violently. More tears drip from his eyes instantly. He can’t stop.

Sora trods out without a word, leaving Bokuto alone. His heart is buzzing so much, he can barely breathe. Surely, Sora is grossed out. He’s just thrown up in front of him.

But first, he needs to stop crying. Working himself up isn’t a good idea. Bokuto presses his forehead against his knees, taking a moment to ground himself. He then spits into a square of toilet paper, wiping thoroughly to get the taste of puke to fade.

Bokuto forces himself to smile, flushing and turning around to wash his hands. If he comes out with a frown, he’ll upset the kid. He opens the door, and finds Sora staring at him earnestly.

Sora has a glass of water in his hands, clutching it with care. “Koutarou, drink! Water help Koutarou!” He hands it to Bokuto, smiling proudly.

A fresh stream of tears forms in Bokuto’s eyes. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

As he begins to take tentative sips from the glass, Bokuto watches Sora look at him with kindness. Sora hops behind him, rubbing his back with his tiny, squishy hands.

“Good Koutarou! All okay! Feel better!” Sora giggles, leaning his whole head into Bokuto’s broad back. “Pain in Bokuto’s tummy, go away! Fly away to that wall!”

“I feel so much better. It’s thanks to you, Sora!”

Bokuto moves away, but Sora follows him like a puppy. “Kou-chan, okay now? Not feeling yacky?”

“I’m okay.”
They both plop down on the sofa in the sitting room.

“We’re home!”

Akaashi’s mother announces cheerfully. Sora is snoring on the couch, not even stirring at the movement and noise around him. Bokuto turns around, smiling.

“Did you guys have a good time?” He asks, as Akaashi sits down beside him and exhales deeply.

“I did. I’m glad to be back home, though.” Akaashi groans. “I’m exhausted. I need a nap.”

When Akaashi leans to the side, he accidentally squishes Sora. With a ‘gweh’, Sora wakes up, smacking Akaashi lightly. “Off! Off me, Keiji-nii!” He waves his arms around erratically, and Akaashi shifts to Bokuto’s side hastily.

“...Sorry, Sora. I didn’t see you there.” Akaashi blinks, realising the lump in the blanket was more than just cotton.

Sora crawls up to his mother, nestling into her lap. “I’m in my safe spot now,” he says, curling up into a comfortable position. “Where’s Kou-chan’s safe spot?”

Akaashi drags Bokuto close to him, pressing his head into his side. “Over here.”

“Do I get no say in this?” Bokuto laughs. “Well, I’m not complaining.”

Sora starts to sing a children’s song off-tune, wobbling back and forth. In Akaashi’s arms, Bokuto begins to doze off.

“Mama! Listen!” Sora pipes up, crawling into Bokuto’s lap. “I made Koutarou feel better today!”

Bokuto remembers, in sheer horror, that he hadn’t sprayed down the bathroom. It’s too late now. Someone had to have used it, and endured the awful smell. They’ll be so angry with him, if they find out. He’s close to panicking.

“Feel better?” Akaashi’s mother immediately catches on. “Were you feeling unwell? Is everything okay now?”

Bokuto shakes his head in a hurry. “I’m sorry! I threw up in the bathroom. I didn’t mean to! My stomach was feeling sore and it just… It sometimes happens and I’m sorry. Nobody should have seen it.”

“Oh, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi nods, understanding. “It’s not your fault. Don’t apologize. Your stomach is still getting used to things. If you feel sick, tell us.”

“But it’s my fault!” Bokuto exclaims, voice loud and shaky. “I should have stopped eating. I never learn. I’m greedy-“

Ayako takes Bokuto’s face, squishing his cheeks in between her hands. “No. Don’t beat yourself up over it. Yes, maybe you could have spoken up earlier—” Bokuto’s eyes water. He’s definitely messed up, like the idiot he is. “—But you have to understand that your body is used to being treated badly. And it can give you stomach aches and other things that aren’t fun to deal with. None of that is your fault. You don’t deserve it.”

It’s as if his thoughts are being read, straight from the script that’s being fed into his brain. He expects erratic schedules, and unexpected days without food. His body hurts when he puts a normal
amount of food into it. It rejects the idea of a stable routine.

“I… don’t?” Bokuto trembles. “But my parents hit me because they…”

He can’t think of a reason. He’s bad, stupid, lazy, greedy. But Bokuto knows several people like that, and he would never wish harm on any of them. A large pressure sticks in his throat.

Sora reaches up to Bokuto, patting his spiked-up head gently. “Koutarou good boy. No hit, just pat pat!”

“He said it best.” Akaashi smiles. Sora hugs Bokuto, nuzzling his face into Bokuto’s stomach. “Bokuto-san, you can forgive yourself more. None of us are upset or angry at you.”

“Koutarou, smile! Like me!”

Sora pokes at Bokuto’s cheeks, urging him to copy his goofy, toothy smile. Bokuto slowly lets a grin spread out onto his cheek. Sora gives him a big, slightly sore kiss on his cheek.

“Spiky, spiky!” Bokuto feels soft palms smacking against his pointy hair, sending the hair pointing into all sorts of funny directions. “Spiky Koutarou-kun!”

“Did I hurt you? My hair is too spiky, I’m sorry…” Bokuto pulls away, just so that he’s out of Sora’s reach. Sora starts to wail, hands making grabbing motions. His lip trembles, and he whimpers like a kicked puppy.

“Wanna pat, Koutarou… Pat!” Sora demands, until Bokuto slowly allows himself to close the distance between them. Tiny hands are on his hair again, bopping more aggressively than ever.

Ayako chuckles. “Gentle, now. Nice and softly, okay?”

Bokuto wishes Sora were his actual brother. It’s as true as it can get, now. And a part of him is glad they don’t come from the same parents. If his parents laid a hand on Sora, he’s sure he would do something that would end up with him getting beaten black and blue.

“You have a really great family, Akaashi.” Bokuto says, leaning himself into Akaashi’s shoulder. He’s surrounded by warmth and forgiveness. Things he’d never dream of, a month ago.

“It’s better with you.” Akaashi moves his arm around Bokuto.

Adjusting back into the school routine is difficult for Bokuto. It’s hard to get used to a loving, caring environment. It’s even harder to ease into an unforgiving, bustling environment.

Ever since he got away from his home, his memory seems to have gotten worse. He misplaces his belongings and homework, always getting chewed up by his teachers. Every day confirms that he’s just a stupid idiot.

“I… I forgot.” Bokuto murmurs the same excuse for the tenth time. “I’m sorry…”

“Well, Bokuto, you’ve forgotten for three consecutive times to do your homework. It’s so simple! You can do it if you try!”

The teacher’s words echo in his head. Every day, waking up and being a functioning person is a chore. On his to-do list, the “be a good student” bullet point seems to sink lower and lower.

“I’m sorry.” He’s met with a sigh. “I really just couldn’t remember.”
The deafening wail of an alarm pierces through the entire school.

It’s an unexpected noise, and it hurts Bokuto’s ears. But more than that, it’s as if he’s been stabbed in the chest with a red-hot iron. His heart is about to jump out of his ribcage. He can hardly breathe.

“Aw, man. Did someone set off the alarm?” One of his classmates grumble, unfazed. “All right, which idiot did this?”

Bokuto can barely breathe. He can’t tell whether it’s panic or anger, but something is swelling up in his chest. Someone had set off his fight or flight instincts, for nothing. There’s no reason why he should be this scared and panicked. Everyone else is doing just fine. He’s the only one overreacting.

“Bokuto-”

Someone taps Bokuto on the shoulder. He immediately recoils, crying out helplessly. The whole class’s attention is on him. He wants to sob.

“Get away.”

“But-”

“Please, just leave me alone!” Bokuto snaps. He isn’t even sure why he’s so angry. Tears of frustration build up in his eyes. “I’m not… I…”

He starts to hyperventilate. He’s in front of the entire classroom, and he’s the only one making a fuss out of nothing. Useless, stupid, dramatic. He can feel everyone’s thoughts against his skin.

“Stop overreacting. Who pissed in your coffee this morning? God. Get over it. You won’t be able to function in society like this.” Another one of his classmates comments.

Bokuto knows. He knows better than anyone, that he won’t be able to be a normal person living life without bothering anybody. But the truth stings more than anything.

His classmates don’t know much about the abuse. They only know that he’s stopped living with his parents, because he’s nothing but a burden to them. He wants to stop existing.

“Go on, Bokuto!”

Konoha calls to him, urging him to get a good spike in. His legs aren’t the lively springs they used to be. They instead drag him down, like bags of tar. His jumps are sluggish and boring.

But without volleyball, Bokuto is well and truly useless. So he carries on, ignoring the pain in his legs. He hits Akaashi’s tosses over and over again. His landings are hard and heavy, vibrations traveling all the way up his thigh.

“Akechi-san, do I need to adjust it a little higher?”

Akaashi keeps asking him how he can improve his tosses, even though there’s nothing wrong with them. It’s a problem on Bokuto’s side. He needs to fix it.

With a flat expression, Washio approaches them. “Bokuto, you’re still adjusting. You were sick and hurt, not too long ago. You’ve grown thinner. We don’t expect you to be in top condition immediately.”
“Yeah! He’s right. Take your time, we’re all here to help. You’re not bringing the team down, so
don’t think like that.” Komi adds, patting Bokuto’s back.

Bokuto doesn’t feel any better. Even from an objective standpoint, he’s clearly in horrible shape.
He’s not even sick anymore, but he still drags his feet and lands too hard.

When he finally gets a decent spike in, everyone high-fives him. It’s as if he’s a six-year-old who’s
just learned how to spike.

“Good job, Bokuto! That was a good one!”

Konoha messes up Bokuto’s hair with one hand, bashing him lightly in the side.

“It wasn’t a good job,” Bokuto mutters, staring down at the tiled floor. His hands clench into fists.
“I’m a screw-up. I’m only useful for points, and I can’t even score any.”

“Hey!” Konoha shouts. “Stop being mean to yourself! You’re a badass spiker! And the ace!”

“But- what kind of ace brings their team down?!” Bokuto yells. “I need to be better. I need to score
more. I’m such a failure…”

Akaashi holds Bokuto’s hand. “Don’t berate the person I look up to.” His words pull Bokuto out of
his trance. “You’re our ace. Even on bad days, you’re still important to us.”

“Yeah! That’s important!” Komi chimes in. “I don’t think you understand, Bokuto! All of us care
for you, and we’re all gonna help you when you’re not feeling great!”

Someone is listening to him. They know how much he’s unsure of himself. And still, they’re
supporting him in every way they can.

“You can relax, Bokuto-san.”

Normally, Bokuto would have retorted that it wasn’t as simple as that. But Akaashi’s words are
calming, and he soothes him. He’s someone special. He’s not being ridiculed for being in a low
mood. It’s not his fault.

He’s the ace. Not just during volleyball, but to everyone each day. Especially Akaashi.

Back home, Bokuto is confronted by a pile of schoolbooks and assignments. Although no teacher
has said it to his face, he can feel the silent pressure on him, telling him to catch up on all he
missed. Sure, being hurt by his parents was awful, but he had to get over it. His future mattered
more than all that.

The fear and terror has seemed to push all of the knowledge out of his brain. Remembering things
becomes harder and harder. It hurts his head to try and shove everything back inside.

Bokuto has his own table, sitting beside the bed. It’s round with four wooden legs, a pale sort of
brown colour without any patterns. He studies there, even though it ends in failure more often than
not. Trying his best and failing upsets him, which in turn turns him off from studying.

“I’m too stupid.”

There’s no point studying for college exams. He won’t even get into a course that’s useful. His
parents were right— there’s no use paying for it. It’s a waste of money. He needs to find himself a
job, and move out of Akaashi’s house. They’ve been too kind, accommodating him.
Bokuto hasn’t even contributed to the household. He’s tried to do some of the housework, but he knows it’s not enough. It’s not cheap to feed an extra mouth, no matter how much he tries to eat less.

He can’t even study properly, without his thoughts spiralling back to the unpleasant memories. Everyone else has moved on. Why can’t he? Why is he so stupid? There’s a test in two days, and he hasn’t progressed at all. He’s going to fail, because he’s so useless, just like his parents said.

The multi-coloured pen in Bokuto’s hand slowly makes his way to his inner thigh, prodding at his skin.

He stabs himself, again and again. The ballpoint slides across his leg at first, but with more precision and power, he manages to inflict pain and injury onto himself. It throbs, as he drives the pen into the same spot his thigh deeply.

It bleeds when he breaks the skin. He keeps going at it, even when his fingertips are stained red. The pain helps to numb the stinging in his chest, so he accepts it with a grimace.

He doesn’t notice anybody stepping inside the room.

“Stop that! What are you doing to yourself?!”

The yelling snaps Bokuto out of his autopilot state. He’s angered someone. He’s going to get punished. Yelling means he’s done something wrong.

Akaashi’s mother rips the pen out of his hand. Bokuto glances at his leg, covered in pen marks and streaks of blood. No wonder she was angry. He was going to get the floor dirty.

“Why did you do that?” Ayako places her hand on Bokuto’s thigh, and he expects it to hurt. But the touches are gentle. She assesses the damage, which isn’t as severe as the bleeding makes it out to be.

Bokuto’s words stick in his throat. He truly has no idea. “I’m stupid. I’m going to fail. It’s no use for me to even be here, because I can’t give anything back.”

Ayako listens to him, but she doesn’t look satisfied with his reason. Bokuto doesn’t know why he’s talking, either. It’s not even a good reason. He’s just pouring out his thoughts, to let out some of the water he’s drowning in.

“I-I’m sorry. Please don’t hit me.” He pleads, and he’s met with a hug. He grows limp in the warmth, unsure of how he’s meant to be feeling.

Ayako exits the room, leaving him alone again. His thigh eventually stops bleeding, dark patches of blood sticking to him. When she comes back, she’s holding a basin full of water and a box full of medical equipment.

“Stay still. I’m going to clean it out.”

She soaks a piece of gauze into the water, and starts wiping away at his skin. He hisses when the coldness comes into contact with his injury, biting his lip.

“I know it stings. I’m sorry. It’ll be over soon.” She shushes him, dipping another wad of gauze into disinfectant and cleaning out the puncture wounds. Bokuto groans, fighting to keep still. It seeps into his broken skin, hurting worse than ever before.
Ayako puts a bandage on his thigh, instead of adhesive plasters that stick to the skin. “Here we go.” She puts away the leftover equipment, rubbing at his back. “Why were you doing that to yourself, sweetheart?”

Bokuto almost cries. She isn’t judgemental, or angry at him. She sounds concerned, and he’s been caught in the act. He can’t make any excuses.

“I was punishing myself,” he explains, “I couldn’t study, and I was going to be a failure. I did a bad thing, and I need to be punished if I do something like that.”

“You don’t have to. You don’t need to, okay? You haven’t done anything wrong. Even if you did, nobody would want to see you hurt.”

“But my parents hit me because I did bad things!” Bokuto sniffs. He had to have deserved some of the beatings. Nobody could be so evil as to hurt their own children, without a reason. Kuroo was just an exception.

“No. They hit you because they were bad people. They would have come up with excuses to hit you anyway. It wasn’t because you were somehow worse than everyone else.” Ayako holds him tight, like he’s her own child. “And you’re not a failure. It’s not too late, okay?”

She opens up the book, and makes a gagging noise. “Oh, god. Math? I was never good at that. But hey, let’s try this together.”

Within five seconds, they’re both glaring at the book like it’s personally offended them. They’re both stuck, muttering numbers and numeric operations. It’s a mess, but they’re in it together.

“Oh, I think I got it. You multiply this, and then use this formula to find what power it’s raised to.”

Bokuto cracks a fraction of the code. There’s still too many steps to follow. It’s going to take all night, at this rate.

He writes in the answer, and checks the back of the book. It’s still different. He was sure he’d gotten it.

“Hey, I think this is meant to be a five.” Ayako points out, and Bokuto fixes his answer accordingly. This time, it matches with the right answer. He breathes a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry for making you do this.” Bokuto mutters, ready to beat himself up all over again. “I should be doing this on my own. I’m really…”

“It’s okay. You’re like family. It’s a mother’s job to help!” Ayako flicks through the pages, patting him on the back supportively. “Oh god, what the hell is this?”

Bokuto guides her through some of the questions. They both mess up a number of times, but Bokuto feels like he’s progressing more than ever. It’s nice to have a teacher that doesn’t expect him to be a machine full of calculations and knowledge.

“Hey, give me a break. It’s been thirty years since I’ve done this stuff!”

Ayako ruffles through her own hair, eyes darting around the page. Bokuto is baffled. It’s been so long since his parents sat down with him to help with his schoolwork. They would just punish him for getting unsatisfactory grades. He wonders if that’s what it’s like, to have parents that love him.
“Akaashi, give me attention!”

Bokuto hugs Akaashi’s side, clinging onto him tightly. Recently, he finds himself relying on his comfort more often. Most of it is disguised as playful banter and teasing, but Akaashi always seems to understand his need for care and touch.

Bokuto enjoys being held tightly. He wraps himself in blankets, until he feels pressure on every inch of his body. He ties his shoes until he can feel the squeeze around his feet. He wraps his arms around himself, hugging his body tightly.

Akaashi rubs his hair wordlessly, while Bokuto grinds his chin into his shoulder. “You’re going to leave an indent, Bokuto-san.” He flicks his forehead lightly.

Just like Sora said, Akaashi is Bokuto’s safe spot. He’s someone he can trust to accept him with open arms, with the patience of his mother. Bokuto can trust him not to leave.

“What’s the matter, Bokuto-san?” Akaashi asks. Bokuto can’t pinpoint why exactly he needs the attention, but just as Akaashi says, there’s something not so right about him. There’s something stuck in the cogs and wheels that go around in his body.

Bokuto exhales deeply. The air seems to never completely leave his lungs, a small amount sticking in his chest. He tries desperately to brush it off, but the discomfort is growing stronger.

“I…” Bokuto stutters, suddenly losing all composure. He’s not in the mood for joking and laughing anymore. Something is terribly wrong. “I need… Oh, god. Can we please go somewhere quiet? I feel really weird, it’s hard to breathe…”

Akaashi picks up on his discomfort, holding his hand to guide him out. “That’s okay. Let’s go for a walk, get some air.”

There’s a few people standing in the hallway. Most of the students are sitting outside for lunch, which is a relief. Bokuto can’t stand people looking at him when he’s seconds away from losing it. If he’s going to suffer all the same, he wants to suffer behind closed doors.

Neither of them are sure about where to let Bokuto ride out the wave of panic. The bathrooms could be occupied, and the nurse’s office is two floors away.

“There’s the accessible bathroom just down a few rooms. Is that okay?” Bokuto nods at Akaashi’s suggestion, grateful to have someplace private while he gets himself under control. The accessible bathrooms are single-stall, perfect for a few minutes of quiet. Although he feels guilty about taking it away from people who need it, it’s too much of an emergency to consider other options.

Akaashi pushes the door open. Bokuto’s steps are shaky, as the door is locked behind them. He feels broken, wrong for existing. It’s too hot all of a sudden, and yet he can’t stop shaking.

“Bokuto-san, take your time. Is there anything I can do?”

Bokuto can barely breathe. His inhales are erratic, and his lungs are getting crushed by his own anxiety. His eyes fill with tears, but crying makes it even worse. He knows, but he can’t stop.

“It hurts, Akaashi. I don’t want to die, everything hurts…”

His stomach and chest begin to throb, and the room starts to sway around him. Either that, or he’s spinning around on his own. Dizziness overwhelms his senses, making him nauseous.
“Take a deep breath. Slowly.” Akaashi places a hand on Bokuto’s back. He shudders, crouching down and hugging his knees close to him. “I know it hurts. But you aren’t dying, trust me.”

It doesn’t work. Bokuto tries to breathe in time with Akaashi’s hand on his back, but he’s not in control. Every breath is pushed out of him too quickly. His heart is pumping harder and harder, and he can feel it pressing on his chest.

Akaashi unbuttons Bokuto’s shirt halfway, easing the choked-up feeling in his chest. “Focus on breathing. It’s going to be over soon.” Bokuto closes his eyes, hugging Akaashi and sobbing into his shoulder.

“You’re doing so good.” Akaashi says, and Bokuto focuses on his voice. The tone, the quietness, the depth. He likes Akaashi’s voice. It’s what manages to break some of his focus on the negative aspects of the situation.

Before he knows it, the chest pain is gone. He’s not dying, even if it felt like it. His body is slowly reverting back to calmness, his brain realising that it has no reason to go into overdrive.

“I feel better,” Bokuto assures, both to Akaashi and himself. “Thanks for being with me. I can go back outside, now.”

He fixes his posture and steps out of the stall, and is confronted by someone he doesn’t recognise. When Akaashi sees him, he instantly freezes.

“Were you guys fucking in there?”

It’s not a question. The student has already made up his mind, and nothing Bokuto says will change it. Still, he shakes his head.

“Quit bullshitting,” the student laughs, “your shirt isn’t even buttoned properly. Couldn’t you at least wait until you got home? God, you homos are so gross.”

“Shut up.” Akaashi glares, stepping right beside Bokuto. “You know nothing. You don’t know anything about us.”

Bokuto swallows. He wants to retort so badly, but the words stick in his throat. The next best option is to run away. How, he doesn’t know.

The student sneers. “I know you, all right. You’re the kid who was abused. What, did your parents find out that you’re a gay slut?”

Bokuto’s blood freezes up. His cheeks burn. He wants to hide in the bathroom stall again. He should be defending himself and Akaashi, but all energy has been sapped from his body.

“Say one more word, and you’ll regret it.” Akaashi steps forward, squaring his shoulders. “Nobody deserves the abuse he went through. I wouldn’t even wish it on you.” His eyebrows draw close to his eyes, and his closed fists tremble.

“Poor guy. Is Akaashi dating you because he pities your poor abused ass?”

Bokuto gulps. He isn’t able to retort that it isn’t abuse. “We’re not dating. And it… it wasn’t that bad. I’m fine. Leave us alone.”

The student raises his brows. “You’re clearly not fine. You sounded like you were being rawed. You were either having a panic attack, or sex.”
Bokuto finds himself growing redder. Was he really breathing so loudly? Did it sound like… oh god. He doesn’t want to think about it.

“If you don’t get over it fast, you’re not going to blend into society. Imagine, a gay and mentally disturbed guy. You’ll have to find other gay and mentally disabled guys to make your pathetic life less miserable.”

“Leave him alone!” Akaashi yells, but Bokuto shrugs. It’s not like he can retort. He’s undeniably gay, and he’s not deluded enough to claim that he’s completely stable. He self-harms, for crying out loud. And he’s quite addicted to it.

A hand grabs Bokuto’s chest. “Anyone could hear you from a mile away. How pathetic are you, whining like a pig in heat? The disabled bathrooms suit you pretty well.”

There’s a whistle in Bokuto’s chest, and then a Crack.

Akaashi had leapt at the student, but he was on the ground. Bokuto screams, grabbing at him desperately. Blood trickles from the side of Akaashi’s head. His eyes crack open, as a group of people start to gather around them.

“…What’s going on?”

The deputy principal’s voice hangs in the air.

To put the conclusion first, the students that had bullied Akaashi were suspended from school.

Bokuto only learned afterwards that they had been picking on numerous younger students, who were threatened with violence and worse. It annoys him to no end that Akaashi had to be injured for justice to be served. It shouldn’t have taken that long.

“…It really is okay, Bokuto-san. I just hit my head off the corner of the bulletin board.” Akaashi explains, pointing to the band-aid on his temple. “See? I didn’t even need a bandage. It’s just a scrape.”

Kuroo, sitting opposite him, rolls his eyes. “You guys are both dumb sometimes. But look, it’s over. And if it’s not bothering you massively, that’s all that matters.”

Bokuto shrugs. “He told me I was pretty much not a functioning member of society. Yeah, he shouldn’t have said that, but it’s not a total lie.”

“Just because you’re not perfect, it doesn’t determine your worth.” Akaashi tells him, for the fifth time that day. “You're struggling. I’m not going to dismiss your feelings or your pain. But what I don’t like… is seeing you be unkind to yourself. Recovering from abuse isn’t a one-way ticket to happiness. You’re going to feel worse, sometimes. But it’s never going to last forever.”

Kuroo points to himself, and grins. “Bokuto, I’ve been there. It sucks for a long time. But it’ll get better, and we’re going to support you every step of the way.”

A long time. Even after he’s gotten away from his parents, he’s only started the road to recovery. He’s walking down thorny bushes and hidden pitfalls, while everyone else is skipping along a trail of flowers. It’s just not fair.

Of course, he had to have done something to deserve it.
He doesn’t notice he’s said it out loud, until Akaashi and Kuroo are both yelling separate things in his ear. They stop instantly, when his face shows the signs of being overwhelmed.

“It wasn’t fair of them, to beat you and hold you to impossible standards. They would have still hurt you, even if you had done everything they wanted you to.” Akaashi explains, with a sad look on his face. “Nobody deserves that. You were abused, and it was unfair.”

“But I… I could have fought them off if I wanted to. And…”

Not everyone with his kind of personality gets abused. They don’t have the same look of fear in their eyes. The boisterous kids in 3-4 don’t flinch when someone smacks their back playfully.

Then, what is so special about him?

“They made you terrified to even answer back to them.” Kuroo says. “It’s no different to when my mom beat me and told me all these bad things.”

“No, that’s different!”

“Why?” Is Kuroo’s reply. And Bokuto glances at the floor, sighing.

He isn’t even thinking. “It’s just different. You could have done nothing wrong. You were six or something. I’m eighteen. I should have known better.”

“But… Bokuto. Think of yourself as a baby. You wouldn’t cut your baby. You wouldn’t hit him, or take away his food. You wouldn’t force his head underwater. Your parents did all that shit to you.” Kuroo grabs Bokuto’s shoulders, eyes desperate and pleading.

Thinking about it is terrifying. Bokuto’s parents have known him since he came out of the womb, and he’s certain they treated him like the world’s greatest treasure. But their minds had changed, clearly. Knowing their baby son, they still chose to beat him and torment him.

“Even if you were defiant and rebellious… what they did was inexcusable. And the fact that they made you believe it was your fault hurts me.” Akaashi sinks down on the sofa, rubbing his temple on the non-injured side. “Making a kid feel defective and not good enough is just horrible.”

Bokuto clings onto the idea of his parents being loving and having his best interests at heart. What breaks him, is that they’re only just that— an idea, that he should have cast aside long ago.

“They could have talked to you. They could have helped you understand. But they abused you and turned everything around to make you out to be the crazy one.” Akaashi continues. Bokuto swallows, unsure of himself. All the words are hitting him in the tender, painful spots.

“Bokuto-san, when was the last time they hugged you? Praised you? Smiled at you?”

Stop that, Koutarou. You’re too old for that, you’re not a baby.

>You got a 70 on your test? If it gets any lower, I’m taking away your door. I don’t care if you’ve improved. This is what happens when you slack off.

>You really like adding onto my pile of work, don’t you?

Bokuto starts to cry.

He can’t remember. Not on a single occasion has his parents smiled at him, over the past few months. He can’t remember being happy. He can’t remember being relieved in his own home.
Akaashi’s place has always felt more like home than his own house ever did.

“None of what happened was okay.” Kuroo hugs him tight, rubbing his eyes gently with his thumbs.

Akaashi holds Bokuto’s hand. “Some punishments are just abuse. Nothing you ever did could possibly excuse any of what they did to you.”

“So…” Bokuto’s voice is quiet, hardly above a whisper. “Not everyone gets no dinner when they screw up?”

When Akaashi shakes his head, the tears start to fall. His parents hate him. He wishes he knew the reason why. It’s too late to make amends, and he’s stuck in the loop of asking himself what he had done wrong. His parents of “good enough” is “not Koutarou”.

“Why don’t they love me?”

His voice is so small, so weak. He’s reduced to a meek whimper, a weak flame on a shortened candle. His shoulders tremble with each sob, wetness trailing down his cheeks and dripping down his chin.

Akaashi can only hold him gently, rocking him with motions full of affection. As if to make up for the unconditional love and kindness the two people in Bokuto’s life should have given to him.

“Why? Why don’t they love me?” Bokuto cries, over and over. He can’t take it anymore. He’s forced to acknowledge that his parents don’t love him, despite him trying better than his best. No matter from which perspective he looked from, he couldn’t find the logical reasons for the way they treated him.


He’s crying so hard, he can barely suck in a breath in between the sobbing and blubbering. Strong arms keep him from falling forwards, stroking his hair and caressing his cheek. Kuroo and Akaashi’s touches are filled with warmth, reminding him that he’s not wrong, or broken.

And Bokuto is angry for himself, for the first time in forever.

“I was good! I was so good! I did all I could to be the perfect son! I did everything they wanted me to!” He screams, frustration erupting out of him like lava. “It hurt so bad, so bad! And they didn’t even care! They just kept punishing me, like I was some kind of—”

He punctuates each sentence by beating his fists down onto his knees. Tears rain down onto the floor, onto his knuckles. He’s the only one in the room screaming his lungs out.

He screams and yells. About how he was hungry all the time, how he was guilt-tripped for using the shower after a sweaty day of practice. How he rationed out toilet paper. The soups he’d watered down, until he could barely taste the ingredients in it. The food he’d hoarded in his room. The calendar, that marked the days he ate breakfast, lunch and dinner. That marked the number of beatings and crying sessions under his pillow.

About the punishments. Flying cups and bowls, kitchen equipment. Bruises in the shape of a palm. His skin, rotting green and yellow, beaten blue and black and purple and red— every colour imaginable. Feeling like he was going to die, when he would get nosebleeds out of nowhere and be dragged out of bed at midnight to be punished in the bathroom. Not even remembering what he was being punished for, to begin with.
He had tried so hard. So hard. Coming home early, preparing dinner that ended up in the trash, studying hard to bring up his grades. If he studied until late at night, he was wasting electricity using his lamp. If he passed out early, he was going to end up on the streets with no job and a paper cup in his hands.

Nothing was good enough for them. Bokuto hates himself for not realising sooner. Everything was there in front of him, all along. He chose to look on the nonexistent bright side, to turn the sky upside down for any silver lining. Everywhere, it was storming. Lightning bolts were crashing down constantly, burning his cosy cottage to a crisp each time.

But most of all, he hates his parents, for twisting his worldview into something horrifying and painful. For making him expect punishment and discipline for the things he shouldn’t even have to spare a second thought to. He hates how he’s been treated, and how long it took to realise it was wrong. High school is meant to be the most carefree and fun days of his lifetime, and yet he’s shivering in fear, marinating in his misery.

“They should have been nicer to me. So much nicer! I deserved none of this! They broke me, they broke me and whittled me down to nothing! I can’t ever look at anything the same way again! And they don’t even care about how much I’m still suffering!”

Once Bokuto starts, it all comes tumbling out. There’s no way to stop it. Tears, words, everything else in solid and liquid form. He doesn’t wipe anything away, letting it freefall down his face.

“They shouldn’t have punished me. They should have… They should have loved me.”

His voice cracks. His last sentence escapes like a balloon being let go. It floats out of his hoarse throat, like a raindrop splattering into a lake.

“Yes, Bokuto-san. They should have loved you.” Akaashi sobs, embracing him in his long, sturdy arms. “They didn’t see the good in you. You’re the best son anyone could ever ask for. I’m so sorry they couldn’t see that.”

“It hurt so much, everything they said! I’m not useless! I’m not weak! I was trying the best I could! I just can’t do this anymore!”

Bokuto shares his pain, wanting nothing more than to become a star in the sky. Glowing brightly, without a care for the world. It’s too much of a heavy load to carry, for the rest of his life. The sadness is too much, it’s unbearable. But for the first time, the little boy inside of him feels relief. The tiny whisper in his head is louder than ever, denying any blame he felt obliged to take.

It’s not his fault. It's the first time he's really felt the message sink into him.

Chapter End Notes

please leave a comment and tell me your thoughts, it would make me so happy!
Bokuto and Akaashi live under one roof, eating and bathing in the same living quarters.

A familiar voice shows up, and Akaashi receives some insight.

Chapter Notes

there is VERY minor character death mentioned here, as in "a 10 year old's death was reported on a news channel". there is also non-graphic self harm.

HEY GUYS IT'S ME, AWFUL EMI. I truly loathe myself for doing this to you guys. I really do. This quarantine has been messing with my creative muscles, and I just kinda hit a brick wall.

But really, it might be fate. As some of you might know, a bokuto chapter came out TODAY and I am in shambles over it. This chapter fits well, seeing as it's kinda bitter but also sweet.

Spending time with Bokuto, Akaashi discovers more and more about him each day.

Most of them aren't good things, unfortunately. It only reminds him of how much pain he’s in, each day. He can feel it off him, without even initiating contact. It scares him.

He’d hidden everything sharp and dangerous in the house, but it wasn’t much use. There is no way to eliminate everything that can cause injury, and he can’t cover the entire house in soft furnishings. He knows he can’t protect Bokuto forever.

“You can have anything in the fridge if you’re hungry, sweetie. There’s no need to ask.”

It’s statements like these that trouble Bokuto the most. Each day, he never touches the fridge door, even when the family eats separately due to schedule issues. As a matter of fact, Akaashi notices Bokuto may be getting thinner than ever.

“Are you hungry?” Akaashi opens up the fridge, taking out a bottle of tea and a couple of jelly snacks. “There’s a few bites on the fridge, would you like to share?”

Bokuto shakes his head immediately. It’s a trained reaction. “No! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be greedy. I don’t need—”

“Bokuto-san, I’m not saying this because I’m angry. You need some food, and that’s okay.”

Akaashi sets down the food onto the table, but Bokuto merely circles around it like a lost puppy.
He reaches for one of the snacks, staring at Akaashi’s face to make sure his expression won’t change to one of disapproval.

“It’s fine. You can have it.” Akaashi nods to him, signalling to peel the wrapper off.

“...God, I’m sorry. I just, uh…” Bokuto picks at the jelly, but it’s clear that it’s not enough to satisfy his hunger. Akaashi holds his hand, and notices hunger cramps in his stomach.

Akaashi remembers a better way to get Bokuto to be honest.

“Would you like curry or some tuna salad?”

“Salad.” Bokuto chooses, relief evident on his face. Akaashi slides him a plate full of tuna salad, and watches him as he eats bite by bite. He never takes more than a nibble, chewing so slowly that he resembles a small herbivore.

Akaashi glances at Bokuto. “Hey, is your stomach bothering you? Because I can—”

Bokuto shakes his head immediately, chewing on another mouthful of his salad. Despite his quick reaction, he doesn’t increase his eating speed. He must be afraid of eating too fast and getting an upset stomach.

“No, really! I’m totally fine!” Bokuto laughs, wriggling in his seat. From what Akaashi sees, he doesn’t intend to talk about anything in depth.

“If you say so.” Akaashi huffs, resolving to find something else to talk about. “The plan is to get your weight up slowly, not forcing you to eat. So you can tell us if anything feels wrong.”

“Mm-hm.” Bokuto keeps the fork in his mouth, as if to let all the dressing soak into his tongue. “Hey, Akaashi?”

“Yes, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto stares into space. “I wanna go out with just us, again. You and me, the two of us. Nobody else.” His cheeks begin to redden, as he turns to Akaashi for a response. “You’re just really special. I want to be with you more.”

Akaashi knows not to get his hopes up, but all he can hear in his head are the words Date. Date. Date. With Bokuto-san. Holy shit. He wants to kiss him. Not just after the date, right here and now.

What he does, instead, is clear his throat. “Of course. Is there any place that you want to go, in particular?”

Bokuto merely shrugs. “Nope… Not really. I don’t mind where we go. It only matters that I’m with you!”

Akaashi’s cheeks feel hot. It’s as if Bokuto is doing this on purpose, just to torture him. He’s not sure how much more he can take, before his overwhelming emotions slip out of him carelessly.

“That sounds amazing, Bokuto-san.”

“Akashi?”

Ayako has a huge pile of clothes in her hands, holding hoodies, sweaters and oversized
sweatshirts.

“I found some of my husband’s old clothes. If you need any, you can have them. I was going to donate them, anyway.”

Bokuto’s eyes widen, as he takes one of the grey hoodies and spreads it out against his chest. “Are you sure about this?”

Akaashi looks through them. They’re all a few sizes too big for them to be his father’s. Bokuto has wider shoulders than any of them.

“Of course. You didn’t bring much clothes, so it’s to make sure you have enough.” As Akaashi’s mother says, Akaashi notices a price tag on one of the shirts, and hurriedly rips it off.

Bokuto hardly had enough clothing when he went to pick up his clothes back at home. Akaashi had been taken aback at how little he owned in general. His parents must have punished him for the bare necessities, and made little luxuries seem like things he didn’t deserve.

“Whoa. This one is huge.” Bokuto puts on one of the hoodies, which drapes over his body with excess clothing hanging off him. The sleeves are too big, even when he rolls them up. It reaches all the way to his knees, like his school jacket.

“...It looks a little big on you, doesn’t it?”

“A little.” Akaashi deadpans. “I think you’re meant to be the one wearing the hoodie, not the other way around.”

“Hey!” Bokuto pouts, making a childish expression at him. “It’s comfy and I like it! I’ve never gotten anything like this in a long time.”

Akaashi buries himself in Bokuto’s hoodie, allowing the soft fabric to envelop the both of them. “I’m glad. You’re right here beside me.” Bokuto’s scent surrounds him, and happiness vibrates inside Bokuto.

“Ah! No fair!”

Akaashi turns around, wondering what the sudden exclamation was about. It’s Sora, standing at the doorway with jealousy on his face.

Akaashi raises his brows, smirking. “What’s not fair? Me having Bokuto-san to myself?”

Sora nods aggressively. “No fair, Keiji-nii! Koutarou not yours!”

Bokuto laughs, hugging Akaashi closer. “Don’t be jealous! There won’t be any less of me after this.”

Sora goes red in the face, squeaking out something before leaping at the both of them. “Koutarou mine too! Fair now!”

Sora ends up with his head pressed against Bokuto’s thigh, clinging onto his leg like a koala. Bokuto shoots a half-desperate look towards Akaashi, but he merely shrugs. He’s not taking any more responsibility than Bokuto is.

“Mine, mine! Ehhe!” Sora’s voice is muffled in the fabric of Bokuto’s sweatpants. Akaashi can’t help but to giggle, but at the same time, he desires Bokuto to be his one and only special person.
Akaashi’s mother puts a bowl of fruit on the table, and sets up one cupboard specifically for snacks. It’s one of the ways they can be sure Bokuto will eat, given that he point blank refuses to take a single grape from a fridge. Whether he’s conscious of it or not, the guilt follows him around.

Bokuto rarely takes anything from there, but at this point, anything is better than nothing. He gets appropriate-sized meal portions for his age, but not quite enough to nourish him. If he eats too much, he’ll throw up.

So they decide to let him join in with the cooking.

“Do you do this often, Akaashi?” Bokuto chops the carrots and leeks up, taking care not to let the blade slide off its path.

Akaashi shrugs. “Sometimes, I guess. It’s nice to help out, and cooking is a good skill to have. Do you know how to cook?”

“No many things. But I can try!” Bokuto grins, rolling up his sleeves. “I didn’t really eat much back home. It was just… easier.”

Akaashi internally curses himself out. His attempt at conversation had definitely brought back an unpleasant memory. “Could you put the stock cube into the boiling water? That yellow one there.” He steers away, giving some instructions for Bokuto to follow and busy himself with.

“Sure.” Bokuto doesn’t comment on Akaashi’s lack of acknowledgement, and looks around for the right ingredient. He picks up the little box of stock cubes, glancing at the illustration of vegetables on it. “This one?”

Akaashi squints. “I think so…” He glances at it, and realises it’s a slightly different flavour type. “Wait, no. Not that one.”

Just as he says the words of refutation, Bokuto’s hand slips.

Three cubes of the wrong stock go into the boiling water, and Akaashi almost hears Bokuto’s stomach drop. He opens his mouth to reassure him, but it’s all too late. Bokuto’s nerves start splitting into pieces, as he stares at the cubes dissolving in the water.

“I… I’m so sorry. I’ll fix this.”

As soon as he mumbles that, Bokuto reaches into the pan full of scalding hot water. He doesn’t consider the pain that would accompany it, shoving his hand in to retrieve the half-melted stock cube. Akaashi can only watch in horror, as the unexpected happens right in front of him.

But Akaashi doesn’t stay horrified for long. “Out, hand out, now!” He grabs Bokuto and holds him back, ripping the pan away and turning off the stove. He can feel the burning in Bokuto’s fingers and the panic echoing inside his chest.

“Akaashi, I’m so sorry.” Bokuto sobs, as Akaashi shoves his hand under a cold tap and runs the water close to full blast. “I’m sorry I screwed up again. I just wanted to help.”

Akaashi stares at Bokuto’s reddening hands, too shocked to say anything. They’re not second-degree, thank god, but they’re painful and holding heat.

Bokuto is choking on his own sobs, so much so that he doesn’t even notice Akaashi’s mother walking into the kitchen. His chest rises and falls rapidly, overriding the pain in his hands.
“Oh, dear. What happened, Koutarou-kun? Did you burn your hand?” Akaashi’s mother takes a look at him, concerned at the amount of crying he’s doing. “Let me take a look. Does it hurt really bad, hm?”

Akaashi knows that’s not why Bokuto is crying. He’s scared of being punished. Because of putting the wrong damn stock cube into the pan. Fear is gripping him, chasing out all forms of rational thought.

“I messed up!” He wails, glancing at the gradually cooling pan. “I put the wrong cubes in. I wasted three of them. I know they cost money and I need to pay it back, and I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Akaashi’s mother fails to recognize the situation. “Don’t worry about that, baby. Is your hand okay?”

Bokuto slowly holds out his hands to her, trembling. “I tried to take it out, but I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

Akaashi can only sigh and place an arm around Bokuto, allowing him to let out all his sobs before he calms down. “It’s a little mistake. You don’t have to beat yourself up for it, Bokuto-san. You’re human. It can happen.”

“Hey, look.” Akaashi’s mother places the pan back on the stovetop, turning the heat on. “We can still make the food with this. It’ll taste different, but we can make it work! Okay?”

Bokuto manages a shaky nod. He takes care not to irritate his burnt hand any further, and Akaashi wraps a bandage around it with care. “You’re really not mad? I ruined dinner…”

“Why do you think it’s ruined? It’ll still taste really good when we’re finished. You’ll barely notice the change in flavour!” Akaashi’s mother reassures him, with a smile. “I trust you guys to make the rest of it. I’m sure it’ll turn out fine!”

“That’s how it is. Let’s continue.” Akaashi says, as his mother walks back out of the kitchen. Bokuto helps as best as he can, more cautious now that he’s protecting one of his hands.

Akaashi turns on the heat again, as Bokuto carefully adds each vegetable with meticulous precision. It’s as if he’s scared the food will splash boiling water going in.

After letting the vegetables cook and cool, Akaashi blends the mixture together with a hand blender. It’s a dark yellow-brown colour, with a few herbs floating inside and seasoned lightly. It starts to smell of warm soup in the kitchen.

“How about we call the others that dinner is ready?” Akaashi says, ladling the soup into each bowl. They’re all about the same size, except for Sora’s kid-sized blue bowl.

“I can do that!” Bokuto jumps up, and shoots out of the room. The remnants of his guilt and fear are gone, Akaashi notices as Bokuto passes by him. “Guys! Dinner is ready! We made some soup!”

Akaashi realises he hasn’t heard Bokuto yell like this in weeks. His voice is back, stronger than ever. He sounds alive again. He doesn’t need to make himself quiet and unseen.

“Wow, you guys did a great job! Well done!” Akaashi’s mother gushes over the two of them, patting their heads and knocking their shoulders together. Bokuto grows flustered, glancing at Akaashi and diving behind his back.
“I… I didn’t do a great job. It was all Akaashi, really.” Bokuto admits shyly. “I even got the wrong stock into it…”

Kakeru shrugs, spooning the soup into his mouth. “Hey, it tastes really good! Don’t worry about it!”

“Really? It’s not bad?”

“Really!” Mari grabs the bowl and slurps it down directly, ignoring the poke Akaashi gives her on the side. “You did a good job, Koutarou-kun!”

“I once spilled a whole bag of flour on the floor.” Kakeru mentions casually. “It got everywhere. It was like it snowed in our kitchen.”

Akaashi snorts at the memory. Bokuto gasps, his expression genuinely horrified. “…How many days did you go without food?” He asks timidly.

Akaashi’s mother turns to him, blinking. None of the other children understand the meaning behind Bokuto’s words, but Akaashi gets it immediately.

“I would never make my children starve.” His mother’s expression tightens into a frown, almost indignant. Bokuto sinks into Akaashi, uneasiness evident in his eyes.

“What do you mean? I eat every day.” Kakeru answers innocently, not realising what Bokuto meant. “You do too, right?”

Akaashi swallows his mouthful of soup nervously. Bokuto trembles, hit in his soft spot. His bottom lip wobbles, as he stares into his bowl. “I didn’t.”

“Well, you can now.” Kakeru assures him. “Just enjoy your food, dude!” He pats him on the head gently.

Sora climbs into Bokuto’s lap, squeezing his cheeks. “Koutarou-niichan smile! Smile looks best for Koutarou!”

Bokuto rubs his eyes, the back of his hand slightly tear-stained. “Thank you. I’m smiling. See?” He grins, and Sora nods, hopping back off and plopping down onto his own chair.

After Bokuto leaves the table to finish his homework, Akaashi is left with his family as they finish washing up. His sister tugs on his sleeve, standing beside him.

“Nii-chan, do some kids not eat every day? What happened to Koutarou?” She asks, curious. Akaashi sighs, and reckons his sister is old enough to know.

He turns to her, patting her head. “Bokuto-san’s parents were neglectful. He was abused at home. You know what that means, right?”

“Mm-hm…” Mari stares at the floor, fiddling with her fingers. “And they didn’t give him food? Why would they do that?”

Akaashi wants to ask the same question himself. “They were very bad people. Bokuto-san was always trying his best. But they didn’t treat him with any respect or kindness. They just hurt him over and over. He didn’t deserve any of it.”

Mari looks upset, and Akaashi can’t blame her, really. “Did they hit him? Is that why he’s always
“scared?”

“Yeah.” Akaashi acknowledges. “But even if he didn’t get hit, what happened was still abuse. They kept calling him awful things and saying he doesn't deserve love or patience or basic necessities. So if you ever hear him talk about himself badly, tell him it’s not true.”

“Of course!” Mari nods. “It’s horrible. I don’t know why they would say that to him… He’s such a nice person! I don’t want Koutarou sad!”

“Neither do I.” Akaashi nods. Anyone can see that Bokuto wasn’t in the wrong, except for Bokuto himself. He always falls into a pattern of self-blame, beating himself up for the things he did, or didn’t do.

“It’s not fair, he didn’t get enough to eat.” Kakeru pipes up. “I won’t eat, either. I have to support him!” He says, convinced of his own plan. Akaashi and his mother immediately voice their disapproval.

“Don’t, Kakeru. None of you guys deserve to starve. We shouldn’t be making you suffer like he did. We need to make sure there’s less empty stomachs, not more.”

Akaashi’s mother explains, heartbroken at the suggestion. She can’t even imagine her own kids going hungry, and knowing how hurt and starving Bokuto was hurts her.

“Do some parents not give their kids food?” Mari asks, and her mother nods. “...But that’s not fair. They should be the ones who don’t get food!”

Akaashi knows that not everyone has the same happy family he does. He’s so lucky, with a caring mother and a supportive father. Some people don’t even get that. If he had different parents, he could be beaten for being attracted to boys. He could be screamed at for getting a 98 instead of a 100. If Bokuto had decent parents, his smile wouldn’t hold fear. He wouldn’t be scared of his happiness disappearing at the drop of a hat.

“Koutarou-niichan have meanie mom and dad?” Sora asks, not understanding much of the conversation but getting the primary message. “I beat up baddies! Kou-chan no cry-cry! I protect him!”

Sora spreads his arms out in an attempt to look bigger and bulkier, and Akaashi finds himself chuckling a little. “I’m sure Bokuto-san will be happy to have a personal guard.”

Sora starts to giggle, striking poses and yelling out battle cries. “Sora is strong! Look! Muscle!” He rolls up his sleeve, and Akaashi squishes his arm with two fingers. “I’m so muscular! Beefy!!”

“...Who even taught you that word?” Kakeru rolls his eyes at the youngest, blinking.

“Keiji-nii! Said Koutarou-niichan was muscular and handsome! I heard him!”

Akaashi almost screams. “I think you misheard. Maybe I said ‘popular’?” He tries to explain away the embarrassment. It doesn’t work. His entire family are in fits of laughter, while he goes an embarrassing shade of red.

Still, Akaashi isn’t worried about his family catching onto how he feels about Bokuto. He’s hidden it so well for a long time. Until there’s the one-in-a-million chance that Bokuto will like him back, he’ll keep his mouth shut.
“...Bokuto-san. What happened?”

Akaashi knows Bokuto isn’t in a good place. His eyes show pain and distrust. His body is covered in bruises and scars. But still, he doesn’t want to let it all happen without doing anything about it. And especially because he knows the scars are increasing.

There’s a red line on his leg, wobbling on the surface of his skin. “...I broke my ruler,” Bokuto says, and that’s all the explanation Akaashi needs.

“You didn’t have anything to hurt yourself with.” Akaashi understands, but it doesn’t make it better. He’s come to realise that it’s useless to take away the means to self harm, because there will always be a way. He needs to dig deeper.

“I didn’t make you proud. I promised I’d try to stop.” Bokuto sighs, his other hand gripping his injured leg. “I’m sorry I keep messing up, Akaashi.”

Akaashi turns to him, and he hugs him, painfully. He can sense it. Bokuto is feeling awful about himself. It’s crushing him from the inside, spreading from his chest to his throat and the pit of his stomach.

“Why, Bokuto-san? Why do you feel like hurting yourself?” Akaashi finds himself asking. “What is making you hurt so much, that you want to do this?”

“I don’t know.” Bokuto whispers. “I really don’t know, Akaashi. I don’t feel like I’m me anymore. It always hurts. And I’d rather hurt on my skin than deep inside me.”

Akaashi holds Bokuto’s hand, pressing it to his chest gently. “There’s no right way to be you, Bokuto-san. You don’t need to set standards for your own self. Feel your heart in there. It’s proof that you’re you.”

Bokuto stares into the wall. His weight slumps into Akaashi, as the bed creaks under them. “I’m not the me that I want to be. I can’t even love me.”

“I love you, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi says, without thinking.

Bokuto slowly turns to him, surprise lighting up in his eyes. It dawns on Akaashi, what he’s ended up blurtting out. His ears turn red.

He all but splutters and chokes on his own words. “I love you, for who you are inside. Look at my jersey. I wouldn’t have that in my room, if I didn't meet you. You changed my life, Bokuto-san. Ever since I met you, you’ve always been my star.”

Tears begin to stain Bokuto’s cheeks. “I’m not that version of me, Akaashi. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t be who you want me to be.”

“You’re not any version of yourself. You’re just Bokuto-san. The most important person in my whole galaxy.”

“I’ll disappoint you again, Akaashi.”

“And I don’t care if you do. Just stay with me, and continue to be here by my side.”

Bokuto nods, through sobs that jerk his shoulders up. He murmurs Akaashi’s name through tears, eyes blinking out droplets of his emotions. “You don’t think I’m a lost cause? A hopeless case?”
Akaashi shakes his head. “I’ve never thought that about you, Bokuto-san. You’re a lot of things to me. My captain. My best friend. My ace. But even if you were to be none of those things, you’re still Bokuto-san.”

“You won’t throw me away, even if I’m not who you think I am?”

Akaashi smiles, wrapping his arm around Bokuto’s shoulder. “People who get angry at you for not conforming to their own perception of you, are the people whose opinions shouldn’t matter.”

Bokuto looks at Akaashi with round eyes. “...Wow. I never really thought about that. You’re right.”

He wipes at his eyes, adjusting the sleeves of his too-big shirt. “You’re right, Akaashi. I’m not anything special. I’m just a high school student. Nobody should decide what I should be like. They’re not me. They don’t know me.”

Bokuto lays down on the bed, tossing to the side to meet Akaashi’s gaze. “I’m just me. And I get to choose what I’m like. I want to be someone who can make you smile, Akaashi.”

Bokuto doesn’t know. Akaashi has never stopped wanting to smile, ever since he met him for the first time. His heart hasn’t stopped jumping and stuttering, alerting him of Bokuto’s presence. He can’t get him out of his head if he tried.

It’s only after Bokuto falls asleep, when Akaashi realizes his words could have been taken as a confession. No matter what his intentions were, he said the words I love you to Bokuto’s face. It sounded like he was trying to court him.

Bokuto is curled up on the bed, a low whine escaping his mouth. He doesn’t take up any space at all. He always, always presses himself to the wall or the corner if he can. On the sofa, he squeezes into one corner, trying to make himself smaller and smaller. When he walks along the hall, he flattens himself against the corner. Akaashi isn’t sure how to bring it up, without feeling like he’s going to make Bokuto feel worse about it.

“I’m sorry,” Bokuto murmurs in his sleep, rolling over and almost hitting his head against the wall. Akaashi moves him to the centre of the bed, pressing his palm against his forehead. There’s traces of pain in his chest, from whatever nightmare he’s having.

Akaashi pulls the covers over Bokuto’s body, patting him over the soft fabric. The bed isn’t too small, enough room for both of them. But Bokuto never dares to utilize the full space, instead squeezing himself right against the wall as if to accommodate three other people.

Although he’s only ever seen it in training camp, Akaashi misses how sprawled out Bokuto used to be when he sleeps. He’s just a high school student who wanted to feel comfortable in his own home. He shouldn’t be sleeping with fear in his veins.

He wants to see Bokuto in the starfish position again, arms and legs taking up all the space there is to offer. He deserves all of it, and more. His comfort is the only thing that matters to Akaashi.

Sora sits in Bokuto’s lap, as they squish together in the sitting room to watch the news. He’s too young to understand everything that Bokuto is going through, but he doesn’t say anything to hurt him on purpose. He’s like another older brother to him.

“Nii-chan, not spiky?”
He pats Bokuto’s hair, flat and damp from the bath he’d taken earlier. Akaashi wants to touch it, too. Bokuto would probably let him if he asked, but he feels awkward saying anything about it. And it’s because of his own stupid brain, unable to cut his feelings away from his heart.

“Not spiky.” Bokuto shakes his head, acknowledging the lack of pointy edges in his hair. The black streaks mix well with his white hair, partially hidden and occasionally sticking out. Akaashi wants to run his hands through it.

“Hmmm.” Sora hums, knocking his head against Bokuto’s chest. “Wah. Lots of muscle!”

Bokuto chuckles. “You wanna see how ripped I am, Sora?”

Akaashi nudges him with his elbow, letting out a short exhale. “Not now, Bokuto-san. You can show off as much as you want, later.” Really, he’s not sure he could contain himself in front of his family, if he saw Bokuto display his pecs and abs in front of him.

“Want a feel of this, Akaashi?” Bokuto jokes, making a muscle and inching his bicep closer to him. Akaashi slaps it lightly, and his eyes widen. It’s even harder than he thought. He curiously squishes it with his whole hand.

“Yah! That tickles!” Bokuto laughs, when Akaashi starts to massage his arm as fast as he can. He squirms, and Akaashi wonders what he would do if he gently bit on his arm.

A small smirk creeps on his face. “Akaashi, you’re doing this on purpose!”

_A ten-year-old girl was found dead in her home, yesterday at night. Upon videos of her abuse being discovered on her mother’s social media, her parents have been arrested._

“Oh, no. This is horrible.” Akaashi’s mother changes the channel in a hurry, but the damage is already done. Bokuto is staring into the wall, eyes unfocused and clouded over. “Nobody deserves that.”

“It’s not fair. It wasn’t her fault.” Bokuto trembles, burying his face into his hands. “She couldn’t have done anything wrong. It’s so unfair. Why didn’t anyone help her?”

Akaashi doesn’t understand why it had to end like this. Surely, someone on the internet would have reported it to the authorities. There was no way hundreds of people turned a blind eye to the abuse. She could have been any of his family members or classmates. She was _someone_.

“She shouldn’t have died. She was only ten. There’s no way she could have fought back.” Bokuto starts to ramble, and not in a good way. “I should have been the one to take her place. She deserved to live.”

“No. Don’t say that.” Akaashi finds it hard not to raise his voice. Bokuto dying, actually _dying_, could have happened realistically. If his illness was just a little worse. If his body started to shut down from malnutrition. If one act of violence was a little too much.

“Koutarou-kun.” Akaashi’s mother says gently. “The way you said that is really worrying. We need to let you talk to someone properly. This isn’t your fault, and it’s not good how you’re hurting yourself over this.”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with tears. “...But I’m getting better. I don’t need it. I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll feel better if I forget.”

“You’ll burst if you keep all of it in.” Akaashi hugs him tightly. Bokuto _wants_ to get better, so
much so that he denies every ugly feeling rising up. “You need to talk to a therapist. You need help, and that’s normal.”

“A… therapist? Am I getting bad?” Bokuto asks, with a voice completely devoid of hope. He stares at his hands. Akaashi holds them. “I don’t want these thoughts. I want to forget about everything. I just want to stop thinking. I don’t want to be anywhere.”

His fingers start to shake. He almost loses balance and collapses onto the floor. Akaashi catches his trembling frame, caressing his arm. Bokuto doesn’t say anything. He writhes helplessly in his arms, biting his lip.

“It’s all right. I’m here, Bokuto-san.”

Akaashi stays with him for twenty minutes, until Bokuto stops shaking and his eyes slowly begin to focus. And then they begin to squint, blinking shut tiredly.

“Akaashi… ’m sleepy. Dunno what’s goin’ on.” Bokuto slurs his words, pressing his face to Akaashi’s breastbone. “Want to stay like this. Don’t like it when my head’s full. I’m sorry I keep being a bother.”

“What’s wrong, Koutarou-niichan?” Sora asks him quizzically. “Sick? Hurt? Need sleepy time? I’ll make you better now!” He approaches Bokuto and leans up, kissing his cheek. He rubs on it with his palm afterwards, smiling.

"Koutarou-niichan is tired. Really tired." Ayako says.

Bokuto does end up talking to aunt Komachi, seeing as she’s the only one he’s comfortable enough to talk to. Akaashi sticks with him throughout, per his request. He watches Bokuto talk himself down. Even if the issue has seemingly diminished, it’s still there.

“I don’t know why I feel the way I feel.” Bokuto says, frustrated. “I’m an outsider. Not just at home or at school. I don’t feel like a person at all.”

“None of that is your fault. You were put through trauma, and your brain’s defense mechanisms went crazy trying to protect you.” Komachi explains to him, but Bokuto doesn’t like hearing the words describing what happened. When someone professional like her is there to convince him, he doesn’t have anywhere to hide it behind. “But it won’t stay like this forever. Every time you go through it again, there’s less of the pain inside you.”

“But…” Bokuto sighs. “I don’t want to. It makes people uncomfortable. I can’t let anyone see when I’m hurt. That’s selfish, because they never signed up to taking care of me.”

Akaashi doesn’t know how anyone could think Bokuto is selfish. “But you didn’t sign up to being abused. It’s much worse for you, than it is for anyone else to watch you go through something like that.” He wants to scream at him, that being scared and hurt isn’t anything to feel guilty about. As long as he’s alive and safe, that’s enough.

“If you want attention, don’t deprive yourself of it. It’s okay to seek attention when you need to. It’s not always a bad thing.” Komachi assures Bokuto. “I know it’s a lot, but remember that you don’t need to feel guilty. Be a little more forgiving to yourself.”

It’s certainly easier said than done, in Bokuto’s case. The anger comes back in waves, followed by immense guilt for feeling that way. Forgiving himself for feeling bad emotions isn’t easy.
And Akaashi can’t do anything about it. Bokuto hasn’t changed as a person, but so much of him
has been distorted. It’s as if he’s looking into a cracked mirror version of him, who will go
somewhere far away if he doesn’t take care.

He knows Bokuto won’t disappear from his life all of a sudden. But no matter what he tells
himself, he’s scared of the happy Bokuto completely wiped from existence. There’s no denying
how different he is, after being abused for so long.

Selfish as it is, Akaashi misses Bokuto’s carefree smile.

“Oh? You guys are going out?”

Ayako stops the two, as they prepare to head out the door. Akaashi hesitates to call it a date, but it
feels like one to him. A little frustrated at being held back, he answers with a “Yeah, we’re leaving
soon”.

She presses two notes of money in Akaashi’s palm. “Have fun. It’s rare for you to go out with
anyone.”

The door closes, and Akaashi stares at the amount of money he’s been given.

“I’ll pay it back! I can’t just spend all this.” Bokuto shakes his head, eyes widening. “She’s giving
us too much.”

Akaashi chuckles, shoving the money into his wallet. “It’s all right. She wants us to have fun. It’s
not like we have to spend it all, either. Just think of it as an emergency lifesaver.” He smiles at
Bokuto, who remains unconvinced.

“But it’s not my money, Akaashi. I’ve wasted enough, using your room and resources and…
everything. You’re not ob- obligated to do this. That's what the word means, right?’’

And Akaashi wants to hold him close, tell him that he’s not any different from one of his siblings.
He’s just as deserving of food and shelter, and his parents had made the decision to take him in.
He’s just as important as everyone else under the same roof.

“We’re not doing this out of obligation, Bokuto-san. You’re a part of our family. You deserve more
than the bare minimum,” Akaashi says. While that’s his primary reason, his other reason is simply
wanting to go on a date with Bokuto.

Bokuto nods, although he’s still uncertain. Akaashi wants to believe he’ll show less of that emotion
soon. He would give anything for Bokuto to smile when a gift is presented to him, without
worrying about whether he deserves it.

“So, where are we going? What are we doing?”

Akaashi grips Bokuto’s hand. “I’ll show you. Don’t get lost, all right?”

Really, he knows that Bokuto isn’t the type to get lost. But the warmth of Bokuto’s hand feels nice
against his palm, and he wants to stay like this.

He makes his way to the nearby cat cafe, with a wooden interior and a bunch of kitten photos on
the walls outside. From the glass door, they can see a grey cat trotting along the hallway, tail
flicked up happily.
“A cat cafe? I mean, it does kinda suit you!” Bokuto points at Akaashi’s face. “You kinda look like a cat sometimes! When you’re concentrating or looking at something interesting!”

“Do you like cats, Bokuto-san?” Akaashi asks. He isn’t worried about whether Bokuto is afraid, or not. He just wants to talk to him, about how adorable kittens are. That’ll surely make Bokuto smile.

Bokuto nods. “I like any kind of cats! The calico cats, the grey cats, the cats with no hair! They look cool. They wrinkle when you touch them in a certain place!”

They enter the cafe. Akaashi had researched about the place beforehand. The cats are all strays or adopted from homes where a cat had a litter. About ten cats are there altogether, playing around in the cafe.

“It’s two thousand yen an hour, for the both of us. It’s a pretty good deal.” Akaashi comments, taking care of the payment while Bokuto sits on the couch nervously. “What drink would you like?”

Bokuto twiddles the menu in his hands, as if to look for a secret item. "Uhh… lemonade!” He says, and a small white cat hops on his knees. "Hello there, kitty! What's your name?"

Akaashi approaches Bokuto after ordering some drinks and snacks, with a tabby cat rubbing against his legs. He picks the cat up, placing it on his lap. It starts to knead on his thighs, as if to make bread out of him.

“Aww, he likes you!” Bokuto snickers, scratching under the white cat’s neck. It lets out a relaxed purr, licking at his fingers. “Ah! His tongue is so rough! It tickles!”

Akaashi watches Bokuto giggle and squirm, and a light warmth sweeps over his cheeks. “…A cat’s tongue is rather rough, Bokuto-san. I thought you would know.” He strokes the cat’s fur, allowing it to explore around the couch and his legs.

A few other cats play around on the wooden bridge, suspended from the ceiling. There are soft mews coming from all directions, filling Akaashi’s ears. He sips on his strawberry milk, while Bokuto pushes his glass of lemonade out of a kitten’s reach.

Other cats begin to surround them, begging for belly rubs and head scratches. Akaashi can’t help but to chuckle. Two huge high school students, being clambered on and pawed at by numerous meowing cats.

“I really wanna bring them all home!” Bokuto squeals, as an orange cat climbs on his shoulder and trots down his arm. “They’re so cute and fluffy and I wanna protect them!”

Akaashi smooths his hand over a maine coon’s coat. It tosses and turns in his lap, showing off its belly to him. He massages the cat gently, squashing its face and paw beans.

“Akaashi, when I grow older… I want to adopt a cat. And a dog! We can all live together!” Bokuto says, and for a split second, Akaashi is gullible enough to think that he’s in the equation, too. “I already know which dog I want! I want a golden retriever!”

“But you haven’t decided which cat you want, hm?” Akaashi teases, and Bokuto retaliates by sipping on Akaashi’s drink.

Bokuto shrugs overdramatically, and finally, he’s acting like a high school student. He’s happy. He’s dramatic. He’s overenthusiastic. Just the way Akaashi wants him to be.
“Well, I don’t know much about different cats! They’re all cute. I just like golden retrievers because their smiles are cute and they’re big and cuddly! Ah wait, but that goes for samoyeds too, they’re also adorable…”

Akaashi nods. “Samoyeds are very friendly. They’re like giant fluffy polar bears. I heard they’re so friendly, that’s what makes them unable to be guard dogs.” He imagines himself and Bokuto, living together in a small house with their pets. And maybe a few succulents, too. Bokuto would be a professional volleyball player, and Akaashi would…

A tabby cat knocks against Akaashi’s hand, reminding him he’s letting his imagination take him a little too far. “Oh, Bokuto-san. It’s starting to rain.”

Looking out the window covered in felt kitten stickers, Akaashi watches the raindrops fall on the ground and make little puddles. The forecast had only told them it would be overcast. Neither of them have umbrellas.

“Ah, man!” Bokuto gently sets down the three cats crawling over him, which takes some effort considering how much the kittens like him. “It’s raining? Should we take cover somewhere?”

There’s not much time left in their stay. Akaashi finishes his drink, popping the straw back in. “Sure, Bokuto-san. We can take shelter from the rain.”

They exit the cat cafe, jogging through the street while splashing on the small puddles. Water sloshes beneath them, until they manage to dash into a department store. Akaashi attempts to dry off, running a hand through his hair.

“There’s droplets in your hair.” Akaashi points out to Bokuto, reaching up to ruffle his hair. He massages his scalp with his fingers, until Bokuto squirms and elbows him lightly.

“Stop that, Akaashi! It’s making me feel all weird!” Bokuto grumbles, flicking water into Akaashi’s face with his fingertips. “Take that!”

Akaashi rolls his eyes, smile dancing at his lips. He can’t help it. He’s so whipped for Bokuto. Bokuto doesn’t even know how he’s Akaashi’s ultimate weakness.

Akaashi’s weakness number one: Bokuto Koutarou, his high school crush among many other things.

Even if he has all of Bokuto’s weaknesses filed away in a mental binder, he’s no better in terms of how big his own is. If Bokuto were to take advantage of his one weakness, he would be on the floor. Just like that, completely boneless.

“Oh, holy shit.”

Akaashi catches someone in the corner of his eye, swearing. He’s pretty hard to miss, with his red hair all spiked up. He’s a bit like Bokuto, in that sense. He turns away, taking Bokuto’s hand to lead him to somewhere with seats.

“Hey, you’re Bokuto, right? Bokuto Koutarou. You play volleyball.”

To Akaashi’s surprise, the man with the red hair approaches them. Instinctively, he steps in front of Bokuto to protect him. He doesn’t know if he’s a threat, or a friend. He feels like a guard dog, of some sorts.

Bokuto squints at the man, equally confused. “…Do I know you from somewhere?”
So Bokuto doesn’t know him either. Does he know him from a volleyball match? But he doesn’t look familiar at all. He can’t be from one of the Tokyo teams.

“Sure ya do! It’s me. Well, we haven’t really met, per se. So, nice to meetcha!” The man extends a hand towards Bokuto, who stares at him cautiously. He takes the hand skeptically, as if to anticipate a shock device hidden in his palm.

Akaashi debates on whether to speak up. He doesn’t seem to be a bad person. Bokuto seems quite dumbstruck, unsure of how to continue the rather one-sided interaction.

“Uh…” Bokuto hums. “Wait, are you Satori?”

The redhead makes a peace sign with both hands. “Right you are! It’s me, Tendou Satori!”

Bokuto lights up immediately. “Oh my god! What are you doing in Tokyo? Isn’t it far away? Did you take the bullet train?”

"Do you know him, Bokuto-san?" Akaashi queries. He can’t help the slight jealousy prickling in his chest. It’s a side of Bokuto he doesn’t know. Ever since he’d shared a roof with Bokuto, he’d been under the assumption that he knew everything about him. How utterly presumptuous.

“I guess you could say we’re friends. We text.” Tendou says, waving his hand at Akaashi, not even knowing the thoughts running through his head. “Are you Akaashi-kun?”

Akaashi squints. Why does this person know him?

Bokuto giggles. “Akaashi, he’s my friend I met through the… thing. What was it called? That one forum where you talk about your feelings and stuff.”

From Bokuto’s sloppy explanation, Akaashi’s brain puts together the full story. “Ah, yes. I understand.” He lowers his guards, bowing slightly. “I’m Akaashi Keiji. Nice to meet you.”

Another figure pops up behind Tendou. He’s taller, and noticeably more stoic than him. “Tendou, who are you talking to?”

“This is my online friend, Koutarou-kun. Guys, this is Ushijima Wakatoshi-kun.” Tendou goes about introducing everyone to each other. “And you’re Akaashi-kun, right? Koutarou-kun’s…”

“Friend.” Akaashi finishes off the sentence for him, with a smile.

Tendou raises his brows at Akaashi. “I see. Koutarou-kun’s been telling me a lot about you.”

Akaashi doesn’t know whether to feel honoured or jealous. He hasn’t even managed to get on a first name basis with Bokuto, despite being his so-called best friend. On the other hand, he’s dying to know what Bokuto said about him.

Ushijima looks just as confused as Akaashi, and Akaashi takes slight comfort in that. “Ushijima-san, you’re one of the top three spikers in Japan, right?” He asks.

“Yes. I plan to continue after high school. I look forward to playing against Bokuto someday.”

Akaashi smiles, nodding. The conversation is flowing just as well as a blocked toilet. He needs to pretend it’s not awkward. Tendou grabs Ushijima’s shoulder, suddenly.

“So, how have things been?” Tendou asks, whispering something in Bokuto’s ear. Akaashi doesn’t know what it is, but Bokuto blushes bright red. “You can ask me anything, you know. My
boyfriend and I are here to help!"

Akaashi blinks. “You have a boyfriend?” He isn’t too surprised, but he wonders if that boyfriend is someone Bokuto knows too. He fights off a fresh wave of jealousy.

“Sure I do.” Tendou smirks at Akaashi, almost teasingly. “He’s great. He also plays volleyball. He’s one of the top three spikers in Japan.”

It takes a moment before Akaashi gets it. He glances at Ushijima, then at Bokuto. It appears he’s the only one who had to figure it out. “Oh. I see. Wait, you and Ushijima-san are dating?”

“Yeah. But you’re fine with it, right? Ya know…” Tendou glances at Bokuto, who isn’t paying attention as of now. “Right? You two?”

Akaashi almost chokes. “Bokuto-san and I are not dating.” He wishes Bokuto likes him back, so they could touch each other in different ways. He wants to be close, but not in the way everyone thinks. He wants to feel him, up close.

“Uh, no. Yeah. We’re single. Not dating.” Bokuto sputters over his words, going a funny shade of pink. “What made you think we’re…”

Ushijima glances at Akaashi, and takes a step towards him. Instinctively, Akaashi lets out a noise. “…You remind me of when I was younger, that’s all.” He pats Akaashi’s shoulder, and walks back over to Tendou.

Akaashi’s mind is blank. Is Ushijima trying to tell him that he’s obviously gay? Clearly he’s not going to be a national-class spiker anytime soon. So of course, it’s the first option.

“Good luck, Akaashi.” Ushijima nods at him, without changing his expression. Akaashi is about to turn into smoke. He’s having his crush encouraged by an amazing spiker, who he didn’t even know was gay until a few minutes ago.

“You look like you’ve gotten happier, Koutarou-kun. I’m glad.” Tendou gives Bokuto a hug, patting him on the back. “I’ll make sure to watch your matches someday.”

Which reminds Akaashi, it’s almost prelims. If they get through, they can go to nationals. With Bokuto’s talent and power, Akaashi knows there’s a good chance they can achieve it. It’s Bokuto’s last tournament in high school. Akaashi can’t screw it up for him.

They’re not here to make memories, but that’s what Akaashi tells himself. Every moment spent with Bokuto is a dear memory, sometimes leaving his mind but never forgotten. Being in love makes his heart squeeze all the time, but also calms him. He’s full of contradictions.

“I’ll make sure to win every match! I’ll impress you both! We’re not gonna let them score at all!” Bokuto exclaims confidently, and that’s usually when Akaashi chimes in with his “it’s not possible to prevent them from scoring anything” logic, but he stays silent.

“I would like that very much. But I need your help for that, Bokuto-san. Will you keep hitting my tosses, forever?”

Even if it means following him to the other side of the earth, Akaashi will stay with Bokuto for as long as he can. He wants to keep him within arm’s reach, so he won’t accidentally slip from his grasp and become one of the stars in the galaxy. He’s his star.

When Bokuto had called him in a panic one night, Akaashi had told him a story. A story about a
man who fell in love with a star. A man who chased the star into the stratosphere and beyond.

Nobody except Bokuto will ever hear this story. It’s a secret confession. He’ll follow Bokuto into the darkness. Even if the people around Bokuto disappear, Akaashi will continue to stay by his side.

“We’re home.” Akaashi opens the front door, taking off his shoes and jacket. His brother dashes up to him, but instead of hugging him, he goes straight for Bokuto.

“Welcome home, Koutarou!”

Sora hangs off one of Bokuto’s biceps, jumping off before Bokuto’s strength gives way. Bokuto gives him a reassuring smile. “We’re back! I had so much fun!”

As soon as Bokuto sees Akaashi’s mother, he hesitates a little.

“Um… Sorry for using your money. I know I’m not cheap to feed and keep under your roof.” Bokuto murmurs, staring at the floor. “I had a lot of fun. But if this is going to hurt the household in any way, I…”

Ayako hugs Bokuto tightly. “You don’t need to worry about that. As long as you had fun.” She kisses his forehead, stroking his hair and allowing him to relax in her arms. “Okay? It’s fine to use some money to have fun.”

Akaashi wanders into the kitchen, in search of food. They had picked up a bite to eat before coming home, but that doesn’t count. And Bokuto could do with some more food that will fill him up.

“Mom? Is there any dinner left for us?”

He calls out, opening the fridge to look for leftovers. He stops, when he realizes that Bokuto isn’t with him. The stairs creak, and he heads out of the room to follow Bokuto up.

“Koutarou-kun, you don’t want any food?” Akaashi’s mother calls out to him from downstairs. Akaashi heads up with Bokuto, who replies “No, thank you,” quietly.

Something feels off. Akaashi feels it in his stomach, the discomfort of Bokuto. “Bokuto-san, what’s wrong?” He enters the spare room, which is now Bokuto’s. Bokuto is flopped out on the bed, staring into the ceiling.

“What happened?” Akaashi whispers, laying himself down beside Bokuto. When Bokuto grabs his sleeve, Akaashi snuggles up right next to him, until they’re sharing their body heat.

There’s a deep, painful loneliness in Bokuto’s heart. Something Akaashi can’t solve. Bokuto is painfully alone, no matter what Akaashi does to make him feel like he’s someone worthy of love.

“I love you all, Akaashi. But I feel empty. I just don’t feel like I’m loved. My parents kept hurting me and telling me they love me. I can’t imagine you doing that to me.”

Akaashi reaches for Bokuto’s hand, gripping it softly. “I want you to feel loved, without being hurt. Whatever that takes, I’ll do it.” He wishes he could kiss his pain better, but there’s no way he can relieve what Bokuto is feeling. After all, Bokuto is his one-sided crush.

“Then…” Bokuto murmurs, turning his head to Akaashi’s side. “Will you show me?” He stares
into Akaashi’s eyes innocently, and Akaashi is overwhelmed with the urge to kiss him. He wants to ask for his permission, but his heart is beating so hard he can barely breathe.

“That sounded weird. Oh god, sorry.” Bokuto’s eyes widen, as he begins to panic. “Forget it, Akaashi. God, what am I saying to you?”

Akaashi can barely bring himself to process Bokuto’s words. His entire face is flushed, right up to the tips of his ears. His brain slips over words, until he forgets how sentences are formed.

“I love you. Everyone here loves you, but I’m the one who loves you the most.” Akaashi says, a fond smile sitting on his lips.

Bokuto puffs out his cheeks, and Akaashi notices the slight reddening on them. “Akaashi, you can’t just say things like that! You’re gonna make me cocky, and… think about things I shouldn’t.” Good, Akaashi thinks.

“Tell me, Bokuto-san. What are you thinking about?” Akaashi somehow has it in him to be mean, even though Bokuto’s the one who has all the control over him. If he were not lying down, he would be weak at the knees. He is useless around Bokuto. “I wanna be close to you. Forever. Even after I graduate, and start living as an adult. And I always think about you when I think about my future. As long as you’re in it, I think I can carry on.”

Akaashi bites his lip. He’s trying, so hard, to keep everything from rushing past his throat. “Is there anything else?”

Bokuto nods. “One more thing. Akaashi, I want to be with you. Until we’re old geezers waving our walking sticks at people. And I don’t think anyone else is feeling this way about you.”

He’s so vulnerable. Akaashi knows he could hurt Bokuto so easily, when he’s exposed such a delicate part of himself. If only he knew how much he’s in love with him. Oh, of course. Akaashi can tell him, and he would know.

“Bokuto-san. I just want you to know, I’ve always been drawn to you. And I felt so many things in your presence. You taught me more about love, dedication and laughter than anyone else ever could.” Akaashi gulps. He’s setting himself up for a long, drawn-out talk. He needs to be concise. But how could he, when his feelings for Bokuto could never be explained with the use of words in a dictionary?

Akaashi sits up, blanket hanging off the bed and exposing one of his legs. Bokuto mimics him quietly, not daring to interrupt his speech. “You make me act like I’m not myself. I shouldn’t be getting jealous of people calling you Koutarou. I shouldn’t be planning our future apartment with succulents and a king-sized bed. I shouldn’t… feel this way. But I do.”

Bokuto’s eyes turn round, but Akaashi isn’t done yet. “I think… I’d like that, Akaashi. I want us to live in a nice place with some dogs and a nice view of the outside. It might be hard in Tokyo, but I’m sure we can do this. Together.”

Clearing his throat, Akaashi places a hand on Bokuto’s arm. “What I’m saying is,” he murmurs, eyes meeting with Bokuto’s. He sees the entire galaxy burst in his golden eyes. “I like you. Please, be my boyfriend.”

Chapter End Notes
aaaaand scene!

please leave a comment screaming at me. I deserve it.

End Notes

my twitter is @/kuromatic. I angst there a lot too, so come and join the fun!

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