### Hurry up and Wait

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**Hurry up and Wait**

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### Summary

*This is goodbye,* he thought as he pressed a quick, selfish kiss to Kenma's hair. *This is the last time I'll let myself be in love with you.*

From the very bottom of his heart, Kuroo Tetsurou was in love with Kozume Kenma, and not even a promise he made to himself on the day of his high school graduation was enough to make him forget.

Somehow, the thought of forgetting hurt worse than his unrequited love ever had.

### Notes

Summary and tags will be subject to updates/changes as the fic goes on!

This fic is something I never knew I needed to write until I fell headfirst into Haikyuu!! and I've been working on ideas and slowly writing for a few weeks now. I've got the basic outline for most of it, and I'm very excited to write it. Updates may not be very quick because I'm working and going to school (3 studio art classes, yikes), but I'll probably be thinking about it a lot even when I'm not writing.
Anyway, I'm not going to babble too much. I just want y'all to know that this fic is very near and dear to my heart, and I'm hoping I can do it justice as we go.

See the end of the work for more notes.
If Kuroo Tetsurou had to guess, he’d probably say he met Kozume Kenma at the little playground near their homes when he was five and Kenma was four. He could ask his mother, or Kenma’s, but he preferred to remember it with the hazy nostalgia of memories clouded by new information, crowded in the corner of his mind by new memories he’d made since then, because his own fuzzy memory was somehow more real and tangible than the faded photographs from their childhood.

At first, it had been an occasional thing, but as they started school, even though they were always in different years and different classes, Tetsurou and Kenma started walking together. Their mothers thought it was cute, and when Tetsurou looked back on his childhood from where he was now, right at the beginning of his third year of high school, he understood. After all, Kenma had been a shy child—was still a shy young man, would probably always be quiet and reserved—and Tetsurou had been kind of the opposite.

It was a silly joke of Kenma’s mother’s, that Tetsurou could perhaps make Kenma open up to others more, but both women laughed over it, and as a child he didn’t understand.

Growing older, growing up, Tetsurou started to understand.

Kenma could be more outgoing. That was one thing that his mother had been right about. His friendship with Tetsurou led him to volleyball, to what was, at first, a rocky relationship with the team when Kenma shoved someone being too friendly away from himself, or drew in on himself and Tetsurou stood in to defuse the situation. But with time, the team became a group that could actually pat Kenma on the shoulder, on the back, and sometimes ruffle his hair without making him tense up.

There was always a limit.

He could be more outgoing, but it didn’t change the fact that Kenma didn’t like to be touched. Tetsurou had learned that early in their friendship, when he’d hugged him and Kenma had gone stiff as a board in his arms. His face had scrunched up, and at first Tetsurou had thought he had a stomach ache.

Their high school volleyball team, when Kenma joined them, had already heard from Tetsurou that Kenma wasn’t a touchy person. Tetsurou would never go into too much detail, because it was personal and it wasn’t his place to explain what he thought Kenma’s aversion to touching or any sort of intimacy was, but the team understood.

Taketora, loud and boisterous, had still been the first one, aside from Tetsurou, to be able to place a hand on Kenma’s back, rubbing it comfortingly as he panted after their laps, without Kenma shying away or flinching.

Tetsurou remembered things like that through the same hazy, nostalgic vignette as their childhood, even though that had just been the beginning of last year. He remembered them fondly, because it was just further proof of how much his best friend could grow, and how far he’d come.

But now it was the middle of third year, and as he watched the way Kenma was able to get along with everyone, to be comfortable being in a group for at least a small period of time and not shying away from any of the casual touches that always happened among friends, among teams, he had mixed feelings.
He wasn’t necessarily jealous. Tetsurou liked seeing Kenma happy, especially in social situations where there was potential for him to be very, very withdrawn. And he liked knowing that, even when he graduated at the end of the year, Kenma would still have someone who knew him as well as Taketora to help him with the first years that came in. Part of Tetsurou, though, wanted to always be there to protect Kenma from everyone else. From touches that might make him uncomfortable, from being poked and prodded into making conversation when he’d rather just focus on the PSP still in his hands. When he watched Kenma with the Nekoma Volleyball Club, though, his hackles lowered and he could breathe easily.

No, Tetsurou didn’t begrudge Kenma of any of that. It was good for him.

Tetsurou was frustrated with himself, more than anything, for finally realizing something he’d sure had been there for at least a year, and maybe much longer than that.

From the very bottom of his heart, Kuroo Tetsurou was in love with Kozume Kenma.

He was sure he’d skipped right over the vague sense of liking someone, the nebulous sense of doubt and worry, wondering if it was really like-like or just the fact that they were really close friends. He’d jumped the stage full of silly crushes and blushing at whatever he said or did and had gone straight into the achingly bittersweet sensation of wanting something he knew he shouldn’t. Kenma had been a part of his life for so long that Tetsurou wondered, distantly, when he’d actually started falling for his best friend, or if it had been there all along. And ever since he’d realized it, ever since Tetsurou had finally put a label on the warmth in his chest whenever he was around Kenma, he couldn’t help but analyze his own actions. The way he lightly tugged Kenma closer when other people were about to pass on the sidewalk, or the way he’d always pause to ask how Kenma was doing after prolonged social interactions.

But Kenma...Kenma who was careful, so careful about physical contact, about bonding with people, had found a new friend on his own, and Tetsurou had seen their relationship blossom. Their friendship formed quickly, more quickly than any but the friendship that Tetsurou and Kenma had, and he could see the slow but sure signs of a crush in Kenma’s actions. He could see the soft smiles Kenma gave his phone when they were texting and wondered with no small sense of longing if Kenma had ever looked that way when texting him.

He figured the answer was no.

Hinata Shouyou, it seemed, was on a higher level than Kuroo Tetsurou.

And so Tetsurou forced the feelings back, pushing them aside so that he could be the friend and companion he knew Kenma needed in his life, smiling and laughing and pushing Kenma to do more, see more, play more, just like he always had. It was easy—as easy as breathing—to love Kenma but still keep it to himself. It made Tetsurou feel like maybe, on a subconscious level, he’d known he’d be here one day all along.

He contented himself with leading Nekoma on to Nationals and playing with all their strength, watching with a tired heart as Kenma’s interest was constantly piqued by the little crow from Karasuno. Kenma wanted to corner Hinata, that much was true, but there was more to it than that. He enjoyed watching the way Hinata broke barriers, enjoyed the challenge it presented when the tiny middle blocker bested another brilliant plan to ensnare him, and Tetsurou watched on.

Kenma treated the adventure to figure Hinata out almost like one of his games; he gave the kid all of his attention and his intense and calculating stare, and rose to the challenge that Hinata provided. Tetsurou was proud of Kenma for stepping up and fighting for every single point they scored, for moving more than ever before and trying to wear Hinata down, but he also found himself so
incredibly jealous.

He didn’t think Kenma had ever treated him like one of those games. At least not like an enemy that was hard to figure out, one that he had to focus on so wholly and completely. But that’s what Hinata was to him—a boss fight.

Tetsurou never thought he’d want to be a boss fight.

But the match went on, a deuce dragging on to round out the final set which eventually ended in Karasuno’s favor with that unreal quick from those two first years. For once in his life, Kozume Kenma had lost a boss fight. But Kenma, unlike Tetsurou, would have another chance at this fight next season, and Tetsurou was there when he essentially promised Hinata another battle at the trash heap the following year.

Kenma, who had mused in the past that he would probably quit volleyball after the Interhigh to focus on university preparations, had already resigned himself to playing at the Spring High next year. Nationals were no longer just something for the rest of the team to handle when the challenge that was Hinata Shouyou rose above the rest.

A boss fight that gave Kenma a challenge was probably the kind of battle he loved the most.

Tetsurou wondered if he had ever stood a chance against Hinata, but knew it was a foolish thought. Instead, he dropped his arm around Kenma’s shoulder, lifted one corner of his mouth into a smirk that was comfortable, familiar, and perfectly crafted to hide his true emotions. He leaned forward, over Kenma, and taunted Hinata, “Kenma’ll definitely beat you next year, Chibi-chan!”

“Kuro,” Kenma hissed a little, frowning. The nickname fell easily from Kenma’s lips, and all that Tetsurou could think of was the easy way that, after their first meeting, Kenma had started calling Hinata by his given name. Shouyou.

When he regained his thoughts, he was able to analyze Kenma’s tone and understand that he wasn’t actually upset, just a little embarrassed. Tetsurou grinned and leaned even closer. “Just you wait, Chibi-chan! Next time, you won’t even be able to score a single point, he’ll have you locked down so tight.”

Hinata puffed himself up, as if he was trying to stand taller. Tetsurou found it endearing, despite the fact that he wanted to see Hinata as a gremlin that was trying to steal Kenma away.

“We’re just gonna keep getting better, so watch it!” Hinata declared boldly. “As long as I can still jump, I’ll make sure Bakayama’s tosses will score!”

“That’s my line, dumbass!” the Karasuno setter was there, smacking Hinata in the back of the head and scowling. “As long as you jump, I’ll make sure you score. I told you that before.”

Tetsurou observed the exchange, and slowly realized that maybe Kageyama was a reflection of his younger self. His language when he spoke to Hinata was certainly worse than Tetsurou’s when he talked to Kenma, but Tetsurou got the distinct feeling that Kageyama would find himself in a similar predicament when he realized he liked Hinata. Especially when Hinata and Kenma were as close as they were, already.

He wondered if Kageyama would be able to handle it with as much grace as he thought he was doing.

“As intriguing as this conversation is,” Tetsurou used a bit of his authoritative and so-called captain voice, and even the two Karasuno kids looked at him, “we’re starting to lineup. You’d better get on
back to your team, little crows!”

He waved his hands at them, teasing with a *shoo* motion, and Hinata yelped.

Kageyama called him a dumbass again, and they parted only after Hinata gave Kenma a quick hug and promised to text him later if they didn’t see each other again before Nekoma left the gymnasium.

Tetsurou tried to ignore how easy it was for Hinata to give Kenma a hug, even though they’d known each other for only a month or two. It had taken at least four months for Kenma to warm up to even a few members of the team to let their enthusiastic pats on the back linger for group photos and the like, and Hinata had busted down those barriers in less than half the time. Tetsurou had to remind himself, though, that he was happy for Kenma. Hinata was a friend-crush—that he’d found on his own, a friendship that Kenma was cultivating for himself, without the pressure of being his teammate or feeling obligated to be friends with them.

He pulled himself away from those thoughts and focused, once more, on the situation at hand. His last volleyball match, at least in high school, had come to an end in a rather bittersweet defeat.

As they bowed from the line, and then turned to thank their supporters, Tetsurou barely noticed the tears in his eyes. At least, he didn’t until the Nekoma banner behind them started to blur, even as students and spectators alike cried their support for the team. Yaku sniffled to his left, and Tetsurou cleared his throat, carefully, to raise his hand and wave at the red-clad members of the crowd before Nobuyuki dropped an arm heavily around his shoulder and pulled Tetsurou close.

“You fought well, Captain,” he managed, and Tetsurou could hear just how tight his voice was.

He pushed his friend away, forced a laugh, and clapped him on the back with perhaps a little more force than intended. “C’mon, Kai, you did all the work. And Yakkun, too!”

It was Tetsurou’s turn to feel a little sentimental, so he slung his arms around both of them, dragging Yaku closer, and turned away from the crowds. Yaku struggled, his eyes red and shining, and Nobuyuki just sighed, resigned.

“You guys helped make this season great, you know,” he said cheerfully, blinking away his own tears.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t do anything, Kuro,” Kenma’s voice sounded disgruntled, and the third years turned to see him with his arms crossed, staring directly at Tetsurou. “You played just as hard as anyone else.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Lev bounced in, dropping an arm around Kenma’s shoulders. To his credit, Kenma didn’t even flinch, just sighed and tried to shrug the half-Russian giant’s arm off.

Tetsurou couldn’t help but smile, more at Kenma and the easy way he got along with the team now than anything else, and Yaku finally managed to use the distraction to break free of his grasp and dance away, only for Lev to leave Kenma alone and bodily lift the libero into the air, congratulating him on his hard work until the coach called everyone to gather around.

As Tetsurou released his vice captain from his grip and and started to saunter over, he grinned fondly to himself. It was certainly bittersweet, to come so far and fall to the crows that he himself had helped preen and prepare for this day, but he supposed it was a potential hazard of those training camps he loved so much. And Tsukishima had definitely taken all they’d taught him to heart, as he’d proved already in that match against Shiratorizawa.

He remembered seeing Tsukishima’s *moment*, the one that defined how important volleyball would
be to him, in that feed when he watched it, and he’d never felt more proud of another team than he had when he watched Karasuno in that match. Bokuto had texted him about it almost immediately, a bumbling our little crow’s learned how to fly! with a sobbing emoji that Tetsurou had responded to in kind. And Tsukishima’s simple thank you text later that night had probably been sent grudgingly, but it had made him proud. Proud to have been part of what led to another player’s defining moment.

Tetsurou wondered if this match against Hinata Shouyou had been Kenma’s moment, even if it had ended in defeat, and another hole opened in his already riddled heart.

Coach Nekomata cleared his throat, and the team turned their attention to him. In the migration towards him, like clockwork, Kenma had ended up next to Tetsurou again, and Tetsurou grinned and ruffled his hair. The setter scowled up at him, exhausted and disgruntled from the match and everything else that had happened, and then turned his eyes back to the coach when he started to speak.

For Tetsurou, though, the coach’s speech passed in a bit of a post-loss haze. He knew that they were being commended for their hard work, and he and Kai were mentioned a time or two for their effort as the team captain and vice captain. Nekomata lamented the fact that, in the fated battle of the trash heap, Nekoma had fallen.

Then they were thanked for the opportunity to see his dream realized—the dream he and his best friend had hatched, all those years ago, for a battle like this at Nationals.

“We should’ve taken it all,” Lev pouted, and Yaku elbowed him and hissed for him to quiet down, but Coach Nekomata had just started to laugh. It was boisterous, loud, and exactly what the team needed. Everyone started to laugh, but it also broke down the last barrier for most of the team, Tetsurou included, and he felt the tears prickling until they rolled down his cheeks. He was probably laughing the loudest of them all, but part of him wondered if it did anything to hide the lump of disappointment lodged in his throat.

Kenma would never admit it, but he scrubbed at his eyes furiously and shook his hair down over them in order to hide.

With the team in tears, but smiling from laughter, Nekomata cleared his throat once again.

“With that said, some of you still have next year. Let’s aim for another battle at the trash heap. Next time, though, Nekoma will take home the win!” He excited a cheer, mostly from first years. “It’s up to you to take Kuroo’s job next year, Taketora, so don’t skip any more practices!”

“Me?!”

“And Kenma, you’ll have to keep him in line like you helped keep Kuroo in line, alright, vice captain?"

Tetsurou hiccuped another laugh, Kenma’s head shooting up so fast he thought it might make the setter dizzy. Kenma stared blankly for a minute, and then groaned in the back of his throat. It was more responsibility for him, and Tetsurou was kind of glad that Kenma would have more to focus on while Tetsurou was off at university.

Laughing, Coach Nekomata teased, “That’s the spirit, Kenma.”

Taketora descended on Kenma in a teary hug and Kenma let it happen, even awkwardly raising his arms to hug back, and Tetsurou stepped aside as the haze settled more firmly around him. The noise of the gym was a buzz in the back of his mind, and even as they were called upon to clean up he
only heard it faintly, as if he had cotton in his ears. The tiredness seeped into his limbs, and the bittersweet reality finally, finally set in.

This was it. This had been his very last volleyball match in high school.

He swallowed past a lump in his throat and moved to pull his weight, helping to clear away Nekoma’s presence from the court. He waved at the crowd when he needed to, laughed with his teammates when necessary, and tried his hardest to ignore the sense of dread pooling in his stomach, the sense of loss now that his season was over and the grueling college entrance exam period was upon him.

As soon as they stepped out of the building later, preparing for the bus ride back to Nekoma and then for the walk home, he didn’t quite expect the gentle hand tugging at his elbow. Kenma stared up at him, eyes just as calculating as usual, and frowned when Tetsurou offered him a wide grin.

“You can be sad too, you know,” he stated simply, and Tetsurou couldn’t help but laugh.

It irritated the lump in his throat, and his eyes started to burn. “Sad? Why should I be sad? We finally had the fated battle of the trash heap, and we fought well! And how can I be sad when that little Chibi-chan got you to promise to keep playing for next year, Kenma?”

He dropped his arm around Kenma’s shoulders and the setter sighed, glancing up at him again. “You can be sad, too,” he repeated, and Tetsurou laughed again when the tears started rolling down his cheeks.

“Don’t be silly, Kenma,” he crowed, but he raised a hand to scrub at his cheeks anyway.

Kenma didn’t say anything else, but he didn’t let go of Tetsurou’s sleeve, either. He couldn’t decide whether he was thankful that Kenma knew him so well, or bitter that Kenma didn’t at least wait until they were walking home instead of right before they clambered back onto the bus. But that was probably why he’d said something then, because he trusted the team to comfort Tetsurou better as a whole than he thought he could do it on his own.

Tetsurou’s chest ached.

In the following weeks, Tetsurou buried himself in the monotony of studying while Kenma was dragged back to practices. Taketora kept telling him it was to keep up team morale, but Kenma swore it was just to keep him exhausted so he couldn’t protest or fight back when he was dragged to another practice. But it didn’t take as much as it used to, it seemed, to get Kenma to practice.

He tried not to study in places where he could hear the solid *thwack* of a volleyball slamming into the gym floor, but it was hard when his body was used to being as near to the court as possible. And Taketora shouting *don’t mind, don’t mind* was always hard to miss. Tora didn’t exactly get the concept of the inside voice, and Tetsurou couldn’t help but smile fondly at the idea, even though he was supposed to be studying calculus.

At least he had a study session with Bokuto this weekend to look forward to. It would be the first time they’d seen each other since all the hype over Fukurodani’s victory at the Spring High, and Tetsurou had missed his friend. Since they were both planning to take the test for the same university, it made some sense to study together for it...even if Tetsurou was pretty positive that Bokuto would probably be getting an offer from their volleyball team, anyway. Admittance would probably still hinge at least a little on his test scores, after all.

But that was on Sunday, and it was just Thursday.
He ran a hand through his untamed bedhead, groaned, and turned back to contemplate his math. At least math was something Bokuto would be able to help him with, Tetsurou mused, and in return he could definitely help the spiker in his uphill battle with chemistry and physics. Science, at least, was a subject that Tetsurou rarely, if ever, had an issue with.

The distant echo of another shout, definitely Lev’s voice, made him snort softly before he lowered his pencil to his paper and started to work through an equation.

Studying with Bokuto was always an experience. The first time they’d met up to study, it had devolved into a trip from the library to Bokuto’s house, where they played games and made a general ruckus until Bokuto’s mother had finally asked them to quiet down with an exasperated sort of fondness that Tetsurou ascribed to a mother being happy that her child could make friends. It was the kind of look he’d seen on Kenma’s mother’s face a time or two when he’d sprawled across Kenma’s bed and started singing anime theme songs really loudly just to get Kenma’s attention.

This time, however, it was definitely a productive study session. Bokuto helped Tetsurou with his math like the uncanny numbers genius he was (despite that one time he failed his math exam because he had stayed up late for some reason or another, though Tetsurou couldn’t remember why now), and Tetsurou returned the favor with his meticulous notes from chemistry, over which Bokuto most definitely shed a tear or twenty, and then scrambled after Tetsurou and his phone but didn’t manage to take the phone away until after the photo had actually been sent to Akaashi and Kenma both.

“C’mon, Kuro!” Bokuto whined, but Tetsurou just grinned and dropped an arm around his shoulders.

“How is that incentive for anything?” the spiker asked incredulously. To punctuate his next sentence, his palm hit the table with a solid thunk. “You might as well call it blackmail!”

With a smirk and a shrug as he took his own seat, pulling his copy of the university’s sample entrance exam closer, Tetsurou quipped back, “Same difference.”

Bokuto groaned, but pulled his own practice test over and muttered, “If I beat your score, you owe me yakiniku.”

“Then if I do better, you owe me grilled salted mackerel pike,” Tetsurou shrugged.

“Deal.”

“Deal,” he agreed easily, and then silence fell between them, only broken by the occasional shuffle of papers and the scratch of their pencils.

Yeah, Tetsurou thought once more, lifting his eyes to smile fondly at his friend. Bokuto was biting his lip and concentrating really hard on a chemistry question. Studying with Bokuto really is an experience.

At least he’d get his favorite meal out of it, if he did better on this silly practice test.
After a while, they both leaned back and stretched, agreed to take a break, and opted to walk to the nearest convenience store, and everything was back to normal. They shook off the exam-induced stress and just...talked, for the first time in a while. They’d fallen into an easy friendship after their first training camp as first years, when they’d stumbled into Gym 3 where some of their senpai were practicing and got roped in to help out, not unlike the way he’d dragged grumpy Tsukishima of Karasuno in. And now they were on the other side, getting ready to head off to university, and it felt nice to just relax a little, before the true panic of the exams set in and managed to worm under their skin.

Tetsurou laughed freely, and Bokuto practically hooted in tandem, shoving each other back and forth on their way to procure snacks and something to drink. Tetsurou figured he’d probably been due for something like this, where he could study and hang out and maybe forget, for a while.

The Wednesday after his weekend study session with Bokuto came with surprises.

On his lunch break, he scrolled idly through his phone while he ate until it buzzed in his hand and there was a notification from Bokuto that consisted of a bunch of exclamation marks and random emojis. Tetsurou blinked, mildly surprised, and then opened the message to see what was so important that Bokuto had actually messaged him instead of bothering Akaashi. Even as he clicked, his phone buzzed a few more times in his hand.

From [Bokubro]: !!!!!!!!!!!!!

From [Bokubro]: i/\m/\o/\i\e\w :*D :O !!!! :D

From [Bokubro]: bro i can’t even!!!!!!!!!!!!

Excessive exclamation points seemed to be an excited Bokuto trademark. There were another few messages that consisted only of emojis, a few kaomojis, and more nonsensical jumbled characters, and Tetsurou snorted.

To [Bokubro]: i get that you’re excited bro

To [Bokubro]: but are you going to tell me W H Y?

He took another bite of the milk bread he’d snagged, and Kenma raised an eyebrow at him from across the desk. He’d gone to Kenma’s class to eat lunch with him, a habit he’d been completely unable to break, and Tetsurou shrugged.

“Bokuto’s really excited about something,” he explained simply.

“Tell him to get to the point,” Kenma responded, pressing a few buttons on his PSP. “That’s what you’re waiting for, right?”

Tetsurou laughed. “Yeah, yeah, I already did.”

Kenma hummed just before Tetsurou’s phone buzzed against the desk again, and he turned back to it. He navigated to the message and waited for it to load, glancing up at Kenma in the meantime. His hair hung over his eyes, his lips pursed and nose twisted in concentration, and his fingers mashed a few more buttons. Cute.

A picture message.
He enlarged it and peered at it. It was a letterhead, though only a small portion of the logo was visible in the very top right of the image. Tetsurou scrolled the image with his thumb and read the text.

Bokuto Koutarou,

We are pleased to extend you an invitation to join Tokai University’s volleyball club.

Tetsurou didn’t really have to read anything else, but he did skim through the thrumming in his veins, the excitement for his friend. He still had to take the entrance exam, but he was being offered a scholarship for his volleyball skill, and it was hard not to message Bokuto an I told you so! until Tetsurou realized that he had not, in fact, told Bokuto of his suspicions that he’d be scouted. Or at least not seriously. It had been a running joke for a year and a half, though, so maybe he could still rub it in Bokuto’s face.

When he backed out of the image, he had a few more messages from Bokuto waiting to be read.

From [Bokubro]: kuro idk what to do i’m like

From [Bokubro]: ;lsdkjfoiewajfk;asdf!??!

From [Bokubro]: the scouts were here to talk to me today and told me a bunch of stuff, but they also said it’s all in the info packet they gave me

From [Bokubro]: which is prolly a good thing bc i couldn’t pay attention after i read the first sentence bro

From [Bokubro]: send help

Tetsurou was so caught up in smiling at his phone that Kenma’s voice pulled him back to reality like a bucket of ice water over his head.

“Good news?”

He cleared his throat, laughing a little and trying to form a response. “Yeah, it is! Bo got scouted by Tokai, the lucky bastard!”

Kenma hummed a little. “Not surprising. He was one of the top five spikers in the country,” he observed, eyes still on his game. “He’ll probably get a few more offers.”

“Like I said, the lucky bastard,” Tetsurou sighed, unintentionally wistful. His palm stung with the phantom pain of a spike in the past, or a block, or any number of times he’d had a volleyball in hand. His throat tightened a little and he tried to focus, again, on his phone in order to compose a reply. Kenma had other thoughts, though.

“I thought you didn’t want to keep playing after high school,” Kenma mused slowly, and he glanced up from his game for a moment. Tetsurou figured he must have paused it to arch a delicate, calculating eyebrow at his friend. But...damn it all if Kenma wasn’t right. Tetsurou hadn’t really intended to keep playing after high school, but the ache was there in the pit of his stomach, like some kind of itch he couldn’t scratch.

“I thought so too,” his voice was a lot softer than intended, and then he spared a laugh at his own expense. “Well, it is what it is, Kenma! Maybe I do want to play volleyball again, but there are always neighborhood associations for old, washed up middle blockers like me, am I right? At least I can still go cheer for Bo when he makes it big!”
“They’re only starting to contact their picks,” Kenma’s tone was low, almost monotone. “You could get scouted, too.”

He’d have been lying if he wasn’t hiding that hope somewhere deep, deep down, but of course Kenma could see through his thinly veiled attempts at ignoring it. Kenma knew Tetsurou as well as Tetsurou knew him, so it was probably obvious to him. Actually...Kenma had probably realized that he wanted to keep playing volleyball before Tetsurou himself had.

“Oho, that’s a nice thought,” he said instead, leaning back in his chair and starting to type his reply. Kenma just sighed, but the music of his game started up again and Tetsurou heard the press of buttons once more.

To [Bokubro]: i knew you’d get scouted bro!

To [Bokubro]: proud of you :3

Tetsurou couldn’t really think of anything else to say after that, so he sat back and reached for his milk bread again, temporarily discarding his phone on Kenma’s desk to keep eating. Kenma was focused on his game again, as if he hadn’t been pushing Tetsurou to admit things like foolish hopes for being scouted by university teams.

His phone buzzed a few more times while he finished his bread, but he just sighed and gazed out of Kenma’s classroom window, an elbow on the desk, until he noticed that Kenma kept stealing glances from behind his hair. When Tetsurou caught him, the setter glanced pointedly down to the phone on the desk, and he laughed but obliged, picking it back up and navigating to his conversation with Bokuto.

From [Bokubro]: hey hey hey kuro you gotta tell me when you get scouted!!

From [Bokubro]: or have you already?

From [Bokubro]: i can’t believe you’re keeping secrets from me kuro!!!!

Well, that was a bold assumption, but Tetsurou appreciated it.

To [Bokubro]: hahaha, i’ll let you know if i do bo!

“Classes will start up again soon,” Kenma observed quietly, tapping at his PSP.

“Is that your oh-so polite way of telling me to get lost?” Tetsurou teased, reaching across to ruffle his hair. Kenma ducked, scowling but never looking up from the screen. He stood, returning Kenma’s classmate’s chair to the desk it was from, and then stretched. When Kenma barely glanced his way, Tetsurou heaved a long, fake sigh and whined, “I guess I should get out of my precious kohai’s hair, then!”


“Later, Kenma!” he waved his hand haphazardly over his shoulder, knowing that even if Kenma couldn’t see it he’d know that it was happening. Kenma was eerily observant that way, and sometimes Tetsurou wondered if he hadn’t already figured out his feelings and was just keeping quiet so it wouldn’t hurt worse in the end.

His phone buzzed again, and Tetsurou checked it as he walked back to his own class, bag slung over his shoulder.
He didn’t answer, but his friend’s confidence in him helped quell his silent jealousy.

That is, until Coach Naoi stopped by during his English lesson and pulled him out of class with apologies to the teacher. Tetsurou gathered his things as quietly as he could, and once he was out in the hall he offered the coach as confused a look as he could muster.

“Nothing bad, I swear,” Naoi offered with a laugh. Tetsurou eyed him with an unamused glance but shrugged and said nothing. He wondered, briefly, what it was about, but considering there were only about twenty minutes left in his day, Tetsurou wasn’t too worried.

Part of him hoped, though, after Bokuto’s news.

He followed behind the coach, offering a few sarcastic comments that earned him a laugh or two and a light scolding through Naoi’s tight-lipped smile, and tried not to get his hopes up. Bokuto was Bokuto, after all, and of course he would get to keep playing without having to go through tryouts and anything else. And he’d get a full scholarship, to boot.

Naoi turned another corner, and finally they entered the teacher’s offices.

Coach Nekomata was there, talking with two other men Tetsurou didn’t recognize, though they all looked over when Coach Naoi led him to the group.

The next short period passed in a haze, until he stepped outside and tapped out a message on his phone.

To [Bokubro]: bro.

To [Bokubro]: [image attached]

The letter from the same university that Bokuto had been invited to play for, the one he’d taken a picture of, rested unimaginably heavy in his pocket. The same deal, and the chance to be on the same team as his best bro–Kenma excluded–weighed him down but also lifted him up. It was odd, Tetsurou thought, to have his just realized hopes so quickly reaffirmed, and he wondered if maybe he’d used up all his good luck.

He’d used up all his good luck in finding volleyball, in falling in love with volleyball, so fate had decided to help him find and fall in love with Kenma, too.

His good mood soured a little, but only momentarily. His phone buzzed in his hand, and he turned to find Bokuto’s enthusiastic responses.

From [Bokubro]: !!!!!

From [Bokubro]: what did i tell u

From [Bokubro]: WHAT DID I TELL YOU!!!!

From [Bokubro]: congrats kuro!!!

From [Bokubro]: ur gonna do it w/me right???

From [Bokubro]: accept it, i mean

From [Bokubro]: ...right??
A different fondness welled up in his chest for his best bro, and Tetsurou marvelled at the messages that Bokuto kept sending. Three more messages consisting simply of kaomojis had come through, and Tetsurou allowed himself a chuckle before getting ready to type back.

He’d be able to keep playing volleyball. If he had volleyball, there wasn’t anything he couldn’t conquer, not even university entrance exams.

Graduation rolled around. He tugged on his Nekoma school uniform one last time, actually wearing the blazer properly, and smiled at his mother while she fussed over him.

“It’s not a big deal, Mom,” he tried, but he heard Kenma snort from behind her, where he sat on the Kuroo family sofa and played his PSP. “I heard that,” Tetsurou called over her shoulder, and Kenma glanced up through his hair.

“You were supposed to,” he said simply, and if Tetsurou wasn’t a damn master at reading the many emotions of Kozume Kenma, he wouldn’t have caught the mischievous glimmer in his golden eyes.

“You’re not supposed to call me out in front of my mother,” he scolded.

“You’re the one that called yourself out,” Kenma pointed out, eyes glued to the screen once more. Tetsurou opened his mouth to argue but couldn’t, so huffed a short laugh while his mom straightened his tie one last time.

“Well, you go on ahead,” she straightened with a laugh of her own. Her eyes were shining, and Tetsurou was just glad she hadn’t actually started the official waterworks yet. His mom was cool, but she sometimes got teary-eyed at the silliest things. “I’ll head over in time for the ceremony, but you should go for the class preparations.”

“Yeah, I probably should,” he glanced at the clock. He reached out to tug her into a hug, leaning to hook his chin over his shoulder, and told her, “I’ll see you later, Mom.”

She patted his back, laughed, and pushed him away. “Yes, and we’ll have your favorite for dinner tonight to celebrate. Now go, Tetsu!”

“I’m going, I’m going!” he threw up his hands, grinning cheekily at his mother, and started by where Kenma still sat on the couch. As he drew even, Kenma lowered his feet to the ground and stood, eyes flicking up only to make sure he wasn’t going to walk into the living room coffee table. “What’s up, Kenma? Going home already?”

“I’ll walk to school with you,” he muttered, glancing up quickly before looking back down almost too quickly.

Ah.

He grinned and nudged Kenma’s shoulder with his own. “Feeling nostalgic today, are we?”

“Shut up, Kuro,” he groused.

Tetsurou let the matter drop, because somehow he knew it wouldn’t feel right if he didn’t walk to school with Kenma just one last time. With his newfound resolve—the determination to find satisfaction with whatever their relationship already was—walking alone would have left a sour taste in his mouth. At least this way, he could pretend he wasn’t actively ignoring his feelings, and then
he’d be able to move on.

The walk was silent, as usual when Tetsurou couldn’t find the words to fill it. Kenma’s PSP bleeped and blipped and beeped and played the fight music, and Tetsurou glanced down at the screen every now and then to see how Kenma was doing. He suggested attacks here and there, and Kenma nodded or explained why that would or wouldn’t be effective.

It was normal, and Tetsurou already missed it.

They parted when they reached the school gates. Kenma slinked around the small trickle already heading to the gymnasium for graduation, and Tetsurou made his way up to his classroom for the last time to meet with his classmates and line up.

And then it was over.

His mom came over and hugged him, complained about how his father was working and couldn’t make it. Kenma’s mother did mostly the same and told him how proud she was of him and how grateful she was to him for taking care of Kenma all these years. Then they both gave him one more hug and slipped over to congratulate Yaku, as well, as Kenma stepped up next to him.

“She acts like I can’t take care of myself,” he grumbled.

“Well…” he said slowly, trailing off. He laughed and ruffled Kenma's hair, like always. Tetsurou watched the way the setter’s nose crinkled, distaste written on his features but showing no actual aversion to that kind of touch, and the bittersweet warmth built in his chest again. The knot rose to his throat, and he slowly opened his arms. An invite for Kenma, this time, instead of taking, taking, taking.

When Kenma sighed and stepped into Tetsurou's embrace, allowing the new graduate to fold him in his arms, he squeezed as tight as he'd ever dared.

This is goodbye, he thought as he pressed a quick, selfish kiss to Kenma's hair. This is the last time I'll let myself be in love with you.

Somehow, the thought hurt worse than his unrequited love ever had.
second set

Chapter Summary

And then Tetsurou would catch himself thinking too fondly, remembering too much, and shut himself down.

Kenma is my best friend, he reminded himself firmly.

Chapter Notes

Hey hey! Sorry for taking so long on the update! I work 30+ hours a week and am also an art student so...yeah. It's not exactly conducive for a hobby like writing on the side.

Anyway, hope you enjoy!

I like to call this chapter "Kenma is a Little Shit".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He accepted the offer from Tokai University.

Of course he had–there hadn’t really been a question of whether or not he would take the opportunity. Tetsurou knew from the start that declining would have been one of the biggest mistakes he’d ever made. In addition to that, he’d regret it for the rest of forever.

It was a simple equation.

Tetsurou got to study biochemistry, play volleyball, and he even shared his dorm with Bokuto Koutarou. They moved in a bit before the academic students did because of volleyball practice, and each day the walked back sore and fulfilled and Tetsurou loved it. University volleyball was definitely different, but it was a nice change. Both of them were determined to prove that they had what it took to be starters, or at least on the bench and not in the crowd, and the challenge made it even more fun.

And then classes started. Tetsurou had never really had trouble, and Bokuto only occasionally struggled despite his outward demeanor, but the combination of rigorous practice and school was rough.

In the midst of all of that, Tetsurou wondered how Kenma was handling the rowdy team without him there.

They still texted, almost daily and mostly when Tetsurou sent the first message–aside from a slightly worrying i’m going to strangle lev–but it was different from being there every day. He kind of missed Nekoma and all of his teammates there, though everyone he played with at Tokai was good at the game and they were all pretty decent people. It wasn’t the same as Tora trying to start fights all
the time, especially with Karasuno’s baldy, and their setters still didn’t know him quite as well as Kenma did so their quicks were rough around the edges, but he was still playing a sport he loved. A sport with history.

And then Tetsurou would catch himself thinking too fondly, remembering too much, and shut himself down.

Kenma is my best friend, he reminded himself firmly.

About three weeks into the semester, he went on his first date. It was a cute girl from his bio lab, his lab partner in fact, and while they talked easily enough and got along great, they opted not to go on another. Lab partners were for the entire course, after all, and if something went south, their grades could potentially suffer. They discussed that with a cool clarity Tetsurou hadn’t exactly expected from two teenagers straight out of high school, but he was pleased nonetheless.

He went on more dates.

Between volleyball and homework and quality time with Bokuto, sometimes fitting in dates was hard. His first official girlfriend dumped him after a week and a half of actual dating because he’d only managed to find time for one date in the next two weeks and apparently that wasn’t enough for her. Tetsurou rubbed the back of his neck and laughed a little, sheepishly, then he apologized and moved on. He didn’t want to compromise things he already had for things he wanted to have, not right now.

He called Kenma and laughed about his misfortune just to hear the sound of his voice.

He didn’t call Kenma for almost three weeks when he realized what he’d done, though he texted constantly. Tetsurou told himself that he needed to stop falling back into the arms of his friend, stop relying on Kenma’s familiar tone and breathing patterns to bring him back to himself. But when Kenma actually called him first, he picked up nearly instantly. He rarely called first, after all, and part of Tetsurou worried that something was wrong.

Everything was fine. Or almost everything, but Kenma liked routine. The fact that Tetsurou had stopped calling suddenly and without warning, despite still texting him daily or close to, was unacceptable, and he made sure that Tetsurou knew it. Not that he needed Kenma to tell him that much–Tetsurou was self aware enough to realize that he had been selfish and, worst of all, that he had been running away.

“I was just going to wait for you to call, but Shouyou said I should call first and ask if something was wrong,” Kenma huffed, his exhale crackling across the phone line. “Kuro. You’re okay, right?”

I’m sorry, he didn’t say aloud.

“I’m fine, Kenma,” he forced a grin even though Kenma couldn’t see it and flopped back on his bed. He was freshly showered after practice and waiting for Bo to get back with the pizza he’d gone out for. Once he’d eaten and finished talking to Kenma, Tetsurou would dive into the homework waiting in his bag. “I’ve just been a little busy, but I still could have called. Thanks for worrying, though!”

“Thank Shouyou, not me.”

Tetsurou snorted. “Oh, how the times change. I’ve already been left behind now that you’ve grown up and spread your wings!”

“Stop being dramatic or I will hang up on you,” Kenma warned.
“After you were the one that called me?”

Kenma grumbled that he’d still hang up first if Tetsurou kept being like this, and Tetsurou couldn’t help laughing at it. After a moment, though, he spoke up again.

“So how’s Nekoma this year?”

Kenma hummed for a moment, and then answered slowly, “Missing a key blocker or two. And a scary libero.”

Smiling into the receiver, Tetsurou just teased, “Oya?”

“Don’t even start it, Kuro,” the other warned, and Tetsurou’s grin only grew. “Our other setters are good, though. Probably better than I am.”

“Don’t even go there, Kenma,” he snorted. “You’re the brains of the team. Y’know, we’re like the blood in our veins—”

“No this again, Kuro, I swear to—”

The door opened and Bokuto slipped inside, glancing over when he heard the sound of Tetsurou’s voice. He started to say something, spotted the phone, and then listened to the next line and snorted to himself with a knowing grin.

“We must flow without stopping—”

All sound ceased, and Tetsurou blinked.

“Hey, Kenma?” he asked, and then pulled the phone away and stared.

Call ended. Duration 5:16.

Tetsurou stared at it, flabbergasted, as Bokuto started to laugh loudly. He sat the pizza box on their small coffee table before he dropped it, and then flopped down on the lousy sofa.

“Oh, shut up, Bo, it’s not that funny,” Tetsurou huffed, but he couldn’t hide the bemused expression on his own face. He was a strange combination of appalled, confused, and amused at the situation, even as he clicked the redial button. After about four rings, it picked up and he immediately squawked indignantly, “You hung up on me!”

“I told you I would,” came the deadpan response.

“Yeah, well.”

“You know that Tora still does that before the games, don’t you?” he sounded rather put out about it. “And on the rare occasion he almost forgets, Lev makes sure it happens.”

“Good!” the warmth that bubbled up at that particular news was almost indescribable. It meant that the rest of the team was still taking good care of Kenma, even though he was a little quiet and withdrawn sometimes. “Sometimes I think you need to be reminded how important you are!”

“You’re the one that needs to be reminded how essential you are in a team, Kuro.”

Tetsurou blinked in surprise, and then felt incredibly stupid when the only thing he could utter was a delayed, “Huh?”
“You’re always helping out and giving pointers and stuff, but when it comes time to take credit or something, you’re always trying to make sure someone else gets noticed more. Or something like that. You’ve always been kind of shy, Kuro.”

Kenma’s statement brought him pause, but Tetsurou couldn’t rightfully deny it. The main reason he was as outgoing as he had become in his teenage years was because he had his friendship with Kenma to support him. He wanted to be a good role model or something, despite only being one year older.

Instead of saying any of that, he groaned, “Stop callin’ me out like that, Kenma.”

“You need to be called out sometimes.”

“Shot after shot, Kenma! Can’t you give a guy a break?”

“Stop whining and being dramatic. I’ll hang up on you again,” Kenma sounded unamused. Tetsurou snorted a little, and he saw Bokuto snicker as he slid to the floor in front of the coffee table and flicked open the pizza box.

“Really? You’d hang up on me twice in one conversation?”

“Don’t test me, Kuro.”

Tetsurou couldn’t help laughing at that. In the three weeks since he’d last called Kenma, he’d definitely missed out on a lot of laughter. Even the setter’s dryest remarks had a way of making him perk up, and the subtle threat in that tone just amused Tetsurou.

“I’m not trying to test you,” he answered, and he heard Bokuto almost choke on a piece of pizza. He made a hand gesture that Kenma’s mother would have scolded him for and then continued, “I’m just asking. I’m your best friend or something so I didn’t think you’d have the heart to hang up again. Not after it’s been so long since you’ve heard my voice.”

“I don’t have a heart,” Kenma shot back, and then the line went dead.

“You little shit!” Tetsurou shot up, his mattress bouncing a little as he stared at the Call disconnected notification on his phone. Bokuto, still coughing from before, wheezed after he took a single glance at Tetsurou. “I can’t believe—” his phone chimed, Kenma’s familiar video game text tone, and he opened the message.

From [Kenma]: Don’t test me, Kuro.

From [Kenma]: Anyway, Shouyou’s calling. Talk later.

There was a sharp stab of something, right in his chest, and Tetsurou forced himself to groan for appearances as he leaned over to plug his phone into his charger. He remained leaning over for long enough to type out, Ah, young love. How on earth will we break it to Shouyou that his bf doesn’t have a heart? and then hurriedly sent it before he lost his nerve. After that, he clambered to his feet and went to rescue some of the pizza from Bokuto’s clutches before the spiker ate it all.

“He hung up on you!” Bokuto snorted again, shoving Tetsurou’s shoulder hard when he slid to the floor next to him. “Again!”

“Hinata was calling,” Tetsurou shrugged, brushing it off, but Bokuto’s demeanor slowly changed. He cleared his throat a little and he blanched a little.
“Tough luck, bro.”

They hadn’t talked about it a whole lot, but Tetsurou had definitely had a few too many drinks once right after the semester had started and told him I think I’ve always been in love with Kenma, and followed it up with, I think I still am. It was after his girlfriend had dumped him and he’d panicked in his call with Kenma, and right before he’d avoided calling his friend for three weeks, so he had tried to forget it had happened.

I think I still am rang just as true sober as it had when he was under the influence, he just did his best not to admit it.

If he ignored it, Tetsurou told himself, he would be able to get over Kenma.

Instead, he forced a laugh and pulled his slice of pizza towards his mouth. “What d’you mean ‘tough luck’? I’ll talk to Kenma some other time. It’s no big deal.”

“You know exactly what I mean,” Bokuto frowned at him and put his third slice of pizza down to continue doing so. “You can’t keep running from your feelings forever, Kuroo. It’s not healthy, and it won’t help you forget.”

With a long sigh, Tetsurou finally answered, “Well, not everyone can fall madly in love with someone that loves them back.”

Bokuto fell silent, a pained grimace over his face, and Tetsurou felt only mildly guilty for the jab. It wasn’t like Bokuto had confessed to Akaashi yet, but it was obvious that Akaashi loved him back. Tetsurou thought they were both kind of foolish.

He supposed he wasn’t really one to talk, though, since he didn’t plan on confessing. Ever.

He went on another date.

This time, he was maybe two inches shorter than Tetsurou, with close-cropped dark hair and an overwhelmingly sense of self-confidence. Even Tetsurou had trouble believing there could be anyone, other than Ushijima Wakatoshi, who could exude such blatant confidence— but then again, Tetsurou didn’t really have much contact with the world outside of volleyball. His date was a soccer player, with iron calves and speed that Tetsurou envied. Kenta, he introduced himself, with a sly, toothy grin and warm brown eyes.

They went on a few dates. They didn’t have a whole lot in common aside from being athletes, and Tetsurou didn’t feel like they had any sort of real conversations. All he wanted was to make out with Tetsurou, which was nice in some ways but not so nice in others. Besides, he was a sloppy eater and an even sloppier kisser, so it was actually Tetsurou who broke it off.

Of course, that had been because he’d seen that Tetsurou was talking to Kenma on speaker and had hung up the phone without warning.

Tetsurou noticed because Kenma cut off mid sentence, snarking about something that Tora had done, and he turned from the stove to find Kenta turning the phone over on the counter. Even from six feet away, Tetsurou could see the Call Ended screen before the screen was face down, and he fought against the rising surge of anger as he looked up.

“Ken...what was that for?” he asked slowly, stepping away from the stove.
“We had plans, Tetsu,” he grinned, leaning across the counter. His grin faltered a little and he glanced back down at the phone on the counter. “Besides, you talk to Kenma all the time.”

“Kenma is my best friend, of course we talk a lot! But I don’t hang up on him without warning!” Tetsurou snapped, just a little, and took a slow breath to steady himself. He was an adult, and he would have composure. “I was also in the middle of cooking, so it’s not like we could start the movie right away anyway.”

Kenta blinked a little, and then frowned. “I think you talk to Kenma more than you talk to me, Tetsu.”

Tetsurou tried not to let his mouth fall open in disbelief. “Ken, I talk to you every day, even if we can’t hang out. How’s that different than texting Kenma and calling him once or twice a week?”

“You’re not dating him.”

He looked over Kenta for a moment, and then steeled himself. If there was ever something that pushed him too far, it was disrespecting Kenma like that. And it was rude to Tetsurou, as well, to just hang up on his friend. “And why should that matter?” he asked, reaching for a spatula to make sure the food didn’t burn. “I’m not dating you, either.”

There was a long silence, and then Kenta spoke up. “We’ve been seeing each other for three weeks, Tetsu.”

“We’ve gone on four dates and ate lunch together a few times,” Tetsurou turned back to Kenta after turning down the stovetop. “I never asked you for more, and you didn’t ask me. But you also disrespected both me and my best friend, Kenta, and I can’t trust that you won’t do it again because you’re jealous of him. So I can’t take it any further than this.”

Kenta sighed and stood up. He tossed a frustrated, almost hurt look at Tetsurou before he turned to the door.

“You know, Tetsu, if you were so in love with him this whole time, you shouldn’t keep leading other people on.”

Bokuto had walked in as he’d walked out, and Tetsurou, a strange combination of fuming and feeling called out, had dialed Kenma back and proceeded to apologize and rant about his asshole ex that didn’t respect certain boundaries and only wanted sex.

“I told you I didn’t like him,” Kenma pointed out. And he wasn’t wrong—he’d told Tetsurou that his boyfriend-of-sorts sounded like a bad fit, and Tetsurou had laughed it off. Mostly because it was coming from Kenma, who probably hadn’t actually noticed how Tetsurou had felt—how he still felt—and was giving him weird mixed feelings by saying he didn’t like Tetsurou’s date. It wouldn’t be stretching it to say he felt almost hopeful.

“I know! I should have listened!” Tetsurou answered, huffing as he fell onto his bed. “I can’t believe—”

“I can.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, you were right and I was wrong and he was a dick,” he groaned. “I wasted weeks with him when I could have just, I dunno, practiced late with Bo or something. Maybe I’ll actually get to be a starter if I put more work into it.”

“You’ll be a starter anyway. They specifically requested for you to be on the team, so even if it’s not
Kenma’s voice always soothed him. Whether it was just talking to him or something like tonight, where he was consoling Tetsurou in his own straightforward, rather blase way, it was always a comfort. It made it hard to ignore the warmth that built in his chest at the mere thought of Kozume Kenma. It made forgetting harder.

But he’d promised. He’d promised himself at graduation that he would stop being in love with Kenma.

“Thanks, Kenma,” his voice was a lot softer than he’d intended, and he cleared his throat to forge on. “Is it too soon to block his number, or should I just wait and see what happens?”

“How should I know?” Kenma asked, a hint of snark in his tone as Bokuto, across the room, snorted loudly. Tetsurou shot him a glare and he shrugged, not even pretending that he wasn’t listening in. “You have more dating experience than I do. That’s your call.”

“Well, I was asking for your opinion,” he quipped back. “You were right about him from the start anyway, so you’d be right about this, too.”

“Then just delete his number or something. It sounds like you kicked him out right after he hung up on me, and as mad as you were when you called back it’s probably safe to say he’s not going to come back to you.”

“Ouch, that’s harsh,” Tetsurou snorted, but rolled the idea around. It was worth considering, especially since it came from Kenma. And he wasn’t entirely sure whether he was more mad at Kenta or at himself for making Kenta feel like he’d been led on.

“You asked,” Kenma sounded bored, and Tetsurou heard the telltale beeping of his handheld game. “Anyway. Before the asshole hung up on me, what were you starting to tell me?”

He blinked and thought back. He’d been cooking, and had tried hard to convince Kenma that his skills in the kitchen had improved, though he hadn’t been sure Kenma was paying attention. Tetsurou had always been fairly decent in the kitchen anyway, though, so maybe Kenma didn’t care very much. From there, he’d gone to talking about classes, asking Kenma about his classes and what he was planning on doing for university, and then…

I’d been about to ask him about Hinata.

Tetsurou’s heart sank, but then he remembered that Kenma had been talking about Tora.

“Nevermind that, I don’t remember,” he laughed it off instead. “You were telling me about how Tora scared a first year girl away from Sou?”

“Oh, that.” Kenma hummed a little, and Tetsurou listened for the sound of the game Kenma was playing. He heard the sound of a sword slash and grinned to himself. “He didn’t mean to. Like usual. He just went after Sou to tell him it was time for practice and to listen to his senpai, and she panicked and threw her confession at Sou and ran. You know how Tora is.”

He needed the laugh that the mental image brought him. “I bet she was a cutie too, huh? Sou must be kicking himself for letting himself get called out right before practice!”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Kenma deadpanned. “Sou said she was really cute, but he’s not sure whether to accept her feelings or not. I guess he kind of likes someone?”
“Aw, our little first year’s a full grown second year now, isn’t he?” Tetsurou feigned wiping away a tear, even though Kenma couldn’t see it. He heard Bokuto snort from across the room and ignored it. “What did Lev think about that?”

“He’s jealous, of course.”

He snorted, listening to the steady beeping of Kenma’s game. “Good ol’ Lev. I kind of miss him, you know.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know. You’ll be too busy answering his messages to bother me, that way.”

“You wouldn’t!” Tetsurou feigned offense, even though Kenma wouldn’t see the hand clutching his chest for dramatic effect. The long sigh Kenma huffed was enough to assure Tetsurou that the mental image was there, though.

“Maybe I’d finally finish this game, that way. I’m very tempted.”

“Alright, alright, I can take a hint,” he laughed good-naturedly, warmth bubbling through his chest. Kenma still took the time to talk to him, even though he wanted to beat his game and talk to Hinata, and somehow that was enough for now. “I’ll let you go play your game and probably text your boyfriend, and I’ll force Bo into helping me eat all the food I cooked while we watch a bunch of shitty TV movies and talk about our love lives.”

Kenma snorted and Bokuto laughed and called, “I’m down for that!”

“Well, have fun then,” Kenma offered simply, but Tetsurou could feel that he meant it. And that he was kind of tired of interacting with him. “Lev will probably text you tomorrow.”

“Kenma, please, no,” Tetsurou started.

“Bye.”

The line went dead, and he groaned. Tetsurou allowed the hand clutching his phone to fall sideways, and he just stayed there and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. His heart couldn’t decide between drowning in the bittersweet tug of the feelings he was denying or basking in the warmth of the attention that Kenma still gave him and settled, slowly, for a dull ache that was a combination of the two. Warmth edged with the sharp pang of longing.

“What did you do this time?” Bokuto asked after a long pause, and Tetsurou forced himself into a sitting position. “To beg for Kenma’s mercy, I mean.”

“Bye.”

Bokuto stared, and snorted, and then he started laughing with abandon. He slapped his knee a few times for emphasis, and Tetsurou couldn’t help but crack a grin and start laughing along. When he’d composed himself, he finally started to speak. “He’s going to tell him, isn’t he? You’ll never get a free moment with him texting you! What if–” he laughed again, “–what if Lev just comes up to visit all the sudden? It’s only a train ride away, you know–”

“Don’t tempt fate, Bo!” Tetsurou whined as he recovered from his own fit. “A–anyway, if you’ll get some movies set up, I’ll reheat the food for just a minute or two and we can chill.”

“G-g-got it!” Bokuto practically wheezed, and then he coughed and was able to mostly bring his laughter under control.
They had made their way through the food that Tetsurou had prepared with his movie night with Kenta in mind and were on their second terrible TV movie--some kind of romcom, if Tetsurou had to guess--when Bokuto finally asked.

“So...Kenta left really quickly today.”

Tetsurou sighed a little and leaned back on the couch, glancing to his friend from the corner of his eye. “What about it?”

Bokuto had to have heard some of it, since Tetsurou had explained, briefly, to Kenma on the phone and hadn’t particularly bothered to watch his volume. He was the type that wanted to know everything, though, and wasn’t very good at keeping that to himself. He’d been pretty fidgety for the last half of the first movie they’d watched, after all.

“C’mon, Kuro,” Bokuto implored, his voice level and serious. “There’s more to it than just a change of plans, and I know it’s something to do with hanging up on Kenma but I want to hear it from you.”

Tetsurou stared up at the ceiling in silence for a few moments, listening to the sounds of some squabble between the TV movie heroine and her mother. After a while, he opted for, “That’s really the gist of it, Bo. He came in and the first thing he did, before he even said hi to me, was hang up on Kenma.”

“You didn’t like that.”

“Would you?” Tetsurou shot back, lifting his head to shoot Bokuto a look. “It’s disrespectful to both me and to Kenma. It wouldn’t have been so bad if he’d just said he was here. I would have ended my conversation and moved on, but for him to just hang up on Kenma on his own?”

“You’re right, I’d hate for someone to hang up while I’m talking to someone else,” Bokuto began, sounding thoughtful. “Did you ask him why?”

With a scowl, Tetsurou answered, “He was jealous of how much I talk to Kenma.”

“That’s not new.”

He raised an eyebrow at his roommate, and Bokuto elaborated. “I mean, you had a conversation about that with one of the girls you dated earlier this year, too. And you guys had kind of been seeing each other for almost a month or something, so he should have already known it. If he had a problem with it, he could have said something.”

“Exactly!”

“But,” Bokuto interjected before Tetsurou could start going. He looked a little sheepish, but continued, “you could have also taken time to talk to him about it more. I know if it were me, and if I didn’t already know that you’re in denial about your feelings, I’d probably question it some, too.”

“What do you mean, in denial about my feelings?” he felt the tension crawl up his spine, and it only got worse when Bokuto gave him a knowing, almost pitying look.

“I told you when your last girlfriend broke up with you, Kuro. You can’t keep running from your feelings for him. It’s just going to keep coming back and biting you in the ass, like it did with what’s-her-name and like it just did with Kenta.”
“Listen, Kuroo,” his voice rose, and Tetsurou swallowed back his complaint. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’ve got to face the facts. You’ve never told me outright, but you can’t hide that it’s only ever been him. And it’s not my business to tell you to say anything to him, but you need to at least admit it to yourself.”

“I have admitted it to myself!” Tetsurou snapped, his voice breaking. He watched Bokuto’s eyes widen, and then his features softened. Tetsurou looked away, back towards the TV screen, and took a few deep breaths. “I have admitted it, Bo. And I promised myself that I’d stop...whatever this is. I can’t keep pining after him forever. It’s not fair to me, and it’s not fair to Kenma either.”

“Yeah, and it’s not fair to everyone else you start seeing either.”

“I know,” Tetsurou groaned, as he dropped his head over the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling again. “I know, Bo, I just...”

He heard Bokuto sigh, and from the corner of his eye saw that he leaned forward to brace his elbows on his knees.

“It’s hard,” he supplied, stare directed ahead. Tetsurou let his gaze drift upwards once more as he grunted in agreement. “You don’t exactly get to choose who you fall in love with, though, do you?”

“At least it’s obvious that Akaashi loves you back,” he murmured quietly, though he regretted it the instant it slipped out.

Bokuto huffed, but it wasn’t an angry sound. It sounded more tired, and kind of resigned.

“I’ve been thinking of telling ‘Kaashi,” he answered softly, and Tetsurou slowly sat up to look at him. “I know this isn’t about me and ‘Kaashi but. I’ve been thinking about telling him, so that I don’t have to wonder anymore.”

“Why haven’t you?” he couldn’t help asking.

With a dry laugh, one that indicated the descent into one of his moods, Bokuto answered, “The fear of rejection, maybe? I mean, come on, Kuro. It’s Akaashi. He’s so damn pretty he could probably have anyone he wanted, so why would he pick me?”

“Bokuto–”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You never know if you don’t try and all of that. But you can’t really help what you’re afraid of, either, even if the whole world thinks your fear is unfounded.”

“That’s true,” Tetsurou found himself agreeing silently. He felt like maybe he’d been a little too hard on Bokuto and the way he and Akaashi had been dancing around each other for the last couple of years, partially as a way to forget his own dilemma.

“If I can work up the courage to tell Akaashi, though,” Bokuto started again, glancing over to Tetsurou, “can you stop trying to just...forget how you feel?”

“What are you–”

“Hear me out, Kuroo,” Bokuto sighed, reaching up to tug lightly at his dyed locks. “It’s not fair to you or Kenma to keep it to yourself, like you said but it’s also not really fair to either of you if you just forget about how you feel, either. No matter what you do, part of who you are is probably
because you’ve practically been in love with him your whole life, you know? And part of who he is comes from how close you’ve always been, too. I don’t want either of you to lose that.”

“Bo, that’s…” surprisingly deep? Not at all what I expected? Tetsurou didn’t exactly know how to answer that.

“I know it sounds kind of selfish, but please don’t force yourself to forget. That’ll only hurt you both, in the long run.”

The way he said it, it sounded as if he’d tried it himself. Tetsurou found himself wondering if that’s why it had taken Bokuto so long to start considering confessing his feelings to Akaashi, but he didn’t want to push him.

He swallowed hard past the lump in his throat and finally said, “Alright. I won’t just…try to forget. Not anymore. But I can’t really promise anything more than that, Bo.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

He hummed his answer and they both fell silent for a while, staring blankly as the heroine of the movie ran through the rain for some reason or another. Tetsurou had honestly lost track, all things considered, and he didn’t think Bokuto really had much knowledge of this movie right now either.

“Akaashi is different from Kenma though, you know,” Tetsurou mused, glancing over. “He’s hard to read, sure, but he doesn’t really hide how much he cares about you. With Kenma, sometimes he bottles things up just a little. Despite being friends with him for years, somehow I still find myself debating whether he actually sees it the same way, or if he just tolerates me sometimes.”

“You gotta see that you’re the most important person to Kenma,” Bokuto snorted, looking back at him with one brow arching into his hair. “Sure, maybe he’s seeing someone right now, but you’ve always been his most important person, even if that means something different to him than it does to you.”

“Maybe so,” he grinned weakly.

“You know, I think you’ve probably been in love with him ever since I met you.”

Bokuto spoke softly, but it struck Tetsurou in a way he hadn’t quite expected. It was strikingly similar to something that Kenta had said right before he left, and it had him falling silent for a moment trying to parse the information. He supposed, if so many people were telling him similar things in such a short time, that it was probably something he needed to hear in order to learn and grow as a person. Or something like that.

“Kenta said it too, you know,” Tetsurou finally managed, resting his elbows on his knees and allowing his arms to hang between them. “If you were so in love with him this whole time, you shouldn’t keep leading other people on,’ he said.” He drew in a shaky breath, and then it slipped out with the words, “And he was right.”

Bokuto reached over and placed a hand on Tetsurou’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything, just let the touch linger in a comforting way, and Tetsurou was glad for it. He hadn’t had to share about his feelings, about how he was considering taking the next step and telling Akaashi, but he had and it was because he thought it would help. Bokuto was a lot of things, but one that Tetsurou admittedly forgot about was that he was observant.

Tetsurou had tried to hide his feelings, after all, but Bokuto had already known from the start.
He was just happy that, at least right now, Bokuto wasn’t in the mood to say ‘I told you so’, because even though it would really piss him off, he knew he’d deserve it. And Tetsurou was kind of mad at himself already because he knew that his inability to get over Kenma would probably lead to hurting others at some point in his relationships.

After a long silence, he let out a long, low groan and flopped back yet again.

“Bo, let’s go get some cake. I feel like drowning my feelings in a sugar coma.”

“Hey hey hey, that sounds like a great plan!”

They shared matching grins and clambered off the couch. “Coach is gonna hate us if he finds out,” Tetsurou snickered, already slipping his wallet and phone into the pocket of his hoodie as he made his way to the door. Bokuto was tugging his own hoodie haphazardly over his head.

“What he doesn’t know!” came the muffled response.

Tetsurou snorted, and they bantered lightly while tugging on their shoes.

This is fine for now, he thought to himself, tying the laces. Maybe I’ll never tell Kenma how I feel, but I can’t tell myself I don’t feel that way.

There was still a distinct ache in his chest, one that throbbed with longing and emotions that he didn’t dare leave unchecked. He swallowed thickly past the lump of things best left unsaid and placed his hand on the knob, turning to wait for Bokuto.

Chapter End Notes

Will Kuroo ever not be in denial? The world may never know!
third set

Chapter Summary

Physically, yes. Everything was fine. But his chest hurt, breathing was a little difficult, his eyes were burning, and he thought he might like to drink something a little stronger than water. Why, he wondered, did emotions have to hurt so much?

Chapter Notes

Hey it's been 10 years but I'm still working on this y'all I swear. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kenma, what the hell,” Tetsurou stared at his phone and groaned, and Bokuto, across the room in the kitchen, started to snicker.

“Did he hang up on you? Again?”

Tetsurou scowled back, and Bokuto howled with laughter.

“What did you say this time? Which part was it that made him hang up?”

“I teased him about extra practice coming up at training camp,” Tetsurou groused, shooting Kenma a quick message that just declared rude before tossing his phone on their ratty couch and going to help Bokuto with dinner. “He said I was dead to him if I gave Tora any more ideas.”

“Oh, so when you said that you could tell Tora about his other hiding place–!”

“Ugh, shut up!” he whined, shoving his hand in Bokuto’s face. His friend snorted under his palm, then started laughing when Tetsurou pulled his hand away to wash them. “All he said was, ‘if you do, I’m sending Lev your way’ and hung up. I couldn’t even tell him not to make me suffer through Lev’s spam texts again!”

The last time had not been pretty. The memory of it was enough to make him shudder, and Tetsurou would appreciate never going through that fiasco again. Bokuto, however, seemed to enjoy his suffering.

“I can’t wait to see that,” Bokuto elbowed him as he barked a laugh that barely fell short of a guffaw, then stepped aside so he could help out in the kitchen. Dinner was almost ready, sure, but help was better late than never, in Tetsurou’s humble opinion. “Unless he texts you at like, three in the morning because he can’t sleep again. That night was terrible, Kuro! Couldn’t you have at least silenced your phone?”

“It was only one,” Tetsurou corrected begrudgingly, “and I didn’t expect him to keep texting after I had already told him I was going to sleep! But he had probably texted right when Kenma messaged him, since he knows all of Lev’s bad habits.”
“Like staying up late?”

“Yup,” he popped the ‘p’ far more deliberately than intended. “That, and that once Lev gets started on a story he barrels through it even if you’re not paying attention. He did it in person, I just didn’t realize he did the same with texts.”

Bokuto snorted again, but before he could continue teasing it was time to start taking things off the stove and getting out plates, so communication dwindled to just what was necessary, like “Hey, Bo, pass me the potholder,” or “Kuro, I need the bowl from the drainer!”

Once everything was sorted, the duo took their food to the couch with them like proper college heathens and turned on the TV. It took them straight to some kind of volleyball match, and neither cared enough to change it. Bokuto, surprisingly, kept himself from heckling Tetsurou further. Instead, his attention was inevitably drawn by the match in front of them, and his eyes narrowed with that intense kind of focus he only had where volleyball, and maybe Akaashi, was concerned. After a bit, Bokuto commented on a mistake by one team’s libero, and Tetsurou finally allowed himself to focus on the game and followed suit.

“Sloppy block,” Tetsurou mumbled through a mouthful of rice. “Can’t believe that he still managed to pick that one up.”

Bokuto hummed, swallowed, and answered, “It’s ‘cuz that spike was super weak. The toss was too low to start with, though.”

The whistle blew momentarily, and the setter switched out.

“See?” Bokuto shoved more food into his mouth. “Tosh wash too low,” he forced out through his food.

“Gross,” Tetsurou nudged him, despite talking with his mouth full not a minute earlier. He got an elbow in the ribs in revenge, and wheezed a broken chuckle. “Ow, Bo!”

“Divine retribution,” he declared, as the team with the sloppy blocks lost the set and, consequently, the match.

Tetsurou wondered vaguely if, maybe, that was some kind of sign. He dismissed the thought and actively participated in the slight scuffle over the remote. He didn’t want to watch another rerun of an old anime that Bokuto liked if he could help it.

With time, and with distance, the whole self-proclaimed fiasco with his feelings didn’t quite hurt so much. Tetsurou still thought about Kenma probably a little more often than was entirely healthy, of course, and sometimes thoughts of *what if* echoed in his head as he lie in the dark listening to the sounds of Bokuto snoring across the room, but it got easier to push them aside. *What if I’d told him, when I graduated?* wasn’t a thought worth having, because he hadn’t told him, and *what if he likes me, too?* was another thought he pushed aside. It was silly to focus on the what ifs *now*, when they would only cause him pain.

He tried not to think about them, but he failed. In the end, he had to tell himself that he couldn’t miss something he’d never had, and that worked for a while.

And besides that, being friends was *enough*. 
Maybe their friendship didn’t extend as far as Tetsurou had hoped it would, and maybe Kenma’s feelings would never stretch out towards him in the same way, but that was fine.

Kenma responding to texts and emails was still as likely as one might guess—which is to say rare and unexpected—but Tetsurou always got answers faster than others did. Or he had, but maybe now there was one small exception that would get answers faster than he did.

He tried not to be jealous from afar, and it helped when Lev texted him and whined about Kenma not responding for two and a half weeks. Tetsurou could only imagine the pestering Kenma had suffered in person and with all the unanswered messages on his phone if Lev was resorting to messaging the former captain to complain. It was gratifying when Tetsurou had asked Kenma and received an instant answer of *it’s lev. why do you think i don’t answer?* And once Tora even asked him if he’d heard from Kenma, since practice had started and Kenma wasn’t there and wouldn’t answer Tora’s messages.

Later, after Tetsurou had asked if Tora had looked behind Nekoma’s maintenance shed, Kenma sent a scathing *you traitor* with no context, which felt like another victory since Kenma rarely initiated conversation.

Counting things like that as a victory probably didn’t help his situation, if he was honest with himself, and probably gave him a little something like false hope, but Tetsurou couldn’t help it. Even after all this time, even if Kenma’s feelings hadn’t grown as much as his own, he was still one of Kenma’s most important people and that counted for something.

So maybe...Kenma would bite at his attempt at smalltalk today, even just for a little while.

*How’s weekend camp going?*

Tetsurou typed out the message to Kenma before he could think better of it, then smiled to himself a little and decided send it and just wait for an answer. It was late enough that, in past years, Kenma would’ve already retired to the Nekoma rooms to play his PSP and ignore extra practice. He didn’t expect anything to be different this year. He flopped down on the couch and turned the TV on for background noise while he waited for Bokuto to finish his shower and help decide what dinner was.

After a while, he felt Bokuto flop onto the couch next to him and snag the remote. “C’mon, bro, let’s not watch soccer. I think there’s basketball on!”

“Sure,” Tetsurou shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter to me.”

“Awesome!” Bokuto laughed. “I really wanted to watch this game after ‘Kaashi told me one of the players apparently was a former volleyball player and then switched to basketball instead!”

Bokuto’s voice held a more cheerful note when he mentioned Akaashi, like usual, and Tetsurou smiled softly to himself. Bokuto wasn’t saying anything to Akaashi about his own feelings yet, but it didn’t look like it was eating him quite as bad as Tetsurou’s feelings for Kenma had done to him. He opted not to comment on it, and glanced back to the game.

“If you’re good at one sport, people think you’ll be good at another,” Tetsurou shrugged. “Sometimes it’s true, and sometimes you’re absolutely garbage at other sports. Remember, I told you about the time they had me try soccer at our school’s sports festival?”

Bokuto agreed and chuckled. “Yakkun said it was the single funniest and most embarrassing thing he ever saw you do, and knowing you—”

“Are you really going to finish that sentence?” Tetsurou groaned, and Bokuto beamed.
“Knowing you, it had to have been bad, if it was even worse than watching you try to style your hair during our video call when we were getting ready for our graduations.”

“I trusted you,” Tetsurou’s voice came out monotone, and Bokuto beamed.

“Wise, but I’m never letting you live that down.”

They stared each other down for a few minutes, and then Bokuto snorted. Tetsurou couldn’t hold it much longer after that, and Bokuto dissolved into laughter alongside him. A buzzer sounded on the television and they turned their attention back to the game, where the ball was being turned over to the other team. A calm, comfortable silence fell between them.

After about thirty points were scored between the two teams on screen, Tetsurou’s phone finally buzzed in his pocket.

He fetched it out, saw the notification of a message from Kenma, and opened it a little more quickly than he probably should have.

*I never want to set another ball again.*

That was...sudden. Sudden, and so like Kenma that Tetsurou snorted, loudly, and probably made some kind of ridiculously embarrassing face to match. He tried to figure out how to formulate a response to that, whether to tease Kenma or to be a kind friend for once and ask him why he didn’t feel like being a setter anymore, but he was interrupted.

“You’re smiling at your phone again, bro,” Bokuto announced, probably the only warning Tetsurou was getting for the way that two heavy feet fell in his lap. Tetsurou let out an undignified grunt.

“What the hell, Bo?” he whined, offering a halfhearted glare. “I see you smiling at your phone at least four times a day, so what’s new?”

“Ugh, you’re right. This dorm is too full of pining,” Bokuto dug his heel into Tetsurou’s thigh, not with too much force but enough to make Tetsurou reach over to pinch his thigh before Bokuto asked, “What did Kenma say this time?”

Tetsurou was a little ashamed at how obvious he was becoming, or maybe had always been, but then shrugged. It wasn’t a surprise, after the first time they’d talked about it. Bokuto seemed to have a sixth sense for those moments when Tetsurou was going to let his feelings get to him...or when he was just going to pine really hard for a while. “I asked him how things were going at the weekend training camp. Lev and the Karasuno shrimp must be wearing him out because he said he never wants to set another ball again.”

Bokuto snorted. “Sounds like Kenma.”

*That’s what I thought,* he thought, but was careful not to say.

“How’s Akaashi treating it?” Tetsurou redirected, glancing from the corner of his eye at his friend. “Is he doing extra practice?”

“Apparently he’s still training with Tsukki, but this year they’re also working with one of our first years, my disciple, Lev, and Kenma actually, so no wonder he doesn’t wanna set anymore. Akaashi probably took Tsukki’s team so that Kenma had to work with both Lev and Shouyou!” Bokuto snorted, stretching his arms awkwardly above him, over the arm of the couch.

“Akaashi would torture Kenma like that?” Tetsurou feigned surprise. “I thought they were friends!”
“Like we’re Tsukki’s friends, and kept badgering him until he came to us on his own?” Bokuto arched a brow, and Tetsurou snorted.

“Touché,” he nodded, grinning, and then sobered a little when he added, “though I think I really struck a nerve. I still feel kind of bad about that.”

Bokuto flapped his hand, “Don’t worry about it, Kuro! Tsukki’s probably forgotten about it by now, and if he hasn’t, he probably just thinks of it was one of the things that made him get serious about volleyball!”

Tetsurou snorted. “I hope you’re right. Tsukki’s a different story...but I’m surprised Kenma didn’t just walk away.”

“Kaashi said something about Tora threatening to tell coach Kenma’s hiding place or something if he didn’t do at least one extra practice?” Bokuto laughed, reaching for his phone and scrolling for a minute. “Yeah, something like that. He doesn’t know the details because Kenma has been hanging out with Hinata more than with ‘Kaashi.’

“Not surprised,” it slipped before Tetsurou realized it, and he realized that the ache had dulled. It still wasn’t pleasant, of course, but he was more used to it now. And so he pushed forward, finishing his thought even though actually saying it still made his tongue feel heavy and unresponsive. “They’re dating, y’know.”

“Yeah,” Bokuto agreed softly, dropping his phone on his chest. He sounded almost apologetic. “I know.”

They fell briefly into silence and stayed that way until Tetsurou groaned and dropped his head on the back of the couch. Bokuto chuckled weakly.

“A whole mood, bro.”

Tetsurou snickered, took a breath, and sat back up. “When are you going to get your giant feet out of my lap, you asshole?”

“As soon as you promise to make dinner and then come back to watch movies with me,” Bokuto shot back easily. “I don’t feel like doing homework tonight. It’s only Friday, I’ve got all weekend.”

“That’s what procrastinators say,” Tetsurou quipped, but he picked up Bo’s feet and dropped them with little resistance as he stood. “I’m just going to make instant ramen if you’re making me cook tonight, though.”

“Food is food,” he shrugged, “and I’m hungry now, so the quicker the better.”

Tetsurou rolled his eyes. “Heathen.”

“We’re in college, bro. I’m just embracing it.” He sounded incredibly nonchalant for a young man who lamented that he couldn’t get yakiniku every night because he was too broke for that, even as he slid his feet into the spot that Tetsurou had vacated. “Besides, you’re the one that said you were making instant ramen for dinner, so it’s mostly on you this time.”

“I guess,” Tetsurou heaved a sigh, reaching up in the tiny cabinets to rummage for the ramen. Then he grinned to himself and asked, “You know what’s on you, though?”

“Hmm?”
“Responsibility to go get the movie night snacks.”

Bokuto blinked owlishly back at him, and then groaned. It didn’t last long, since Bokuto knew the taste of victory. He was beaming as he hopped up from the lumpy couch. “Hey hey hey, Kuro, when did all our bad ideas start to sound so good?”

“Must be the college life, bro.”

They both shared a laugh, and Bokuto tugged on his shoes and his old Fukurodani hoodie. “Must be. The usual haul, I take it?”

Chips, soda, chocolate, and general pining materials, or something like it. Tetsurou felt himself grinning back and nodding. “Probably. Something extra, if it sounds interesting.”

“Be back in ten!” He had the door open and was halfway out already.

“Dinner should be ready by then, dear,” Tetsurou teased in his highest voice. Bokuto snorted, waved a hand, and closed the door behind him.

If he came back in about ten minutes later, true to his word, with a deeper tone than his usual and a, “Honey, I’m home!”, Tetsurou would never admit that it had cheered him up as much as it had.

He sometimes felt like he didn’t appreciate his friendship with Bokuto enough, and stupid things like this were exactly why.

Tetsurou knew, of course, but he found out just how official Kenma and the shorty from Karasuno were through a garbled message with an attached photo from Lev on the Monday after the short weekend training camp, just after his own practice had ended.

Knowing and seeing were two very different concepts, of course, but no matter how much better he was doing about not falling apart over his feelings for Kenma, the blurry picture of Hinata Shouyou dozing on Kenma’s shoulder was enough to send a pinprick of pain through his heart. And on top of that, seeing the way Kenma was playing a game one-handed on his phone while the fingers of his other hand were loosely entwined with the dozing Hinata’s was still like a shot to the heart.

Lev didn’t know what he was doing to his former captain, of course, since he was oblivious and since Tetsurou had never really told anyone at Nekoma, but Bokuto was different. He prompted for an answer to whatever question he’d just asked, and when there was no answer he glanced over and started to ask again. He cut himself off just as Tetsurou started to try and find his words and reached over to take the phone away, golden eyes flicking quickly over Lev’s garbled message–what is this asdfjkl have you seen this??? kurooooooo-senpaaaaaaaaai did u kno????–and Tetsurou couldn’t do anything to stop him.

“Hey, that’s…” Tetsurou protested weakly, but there had never been an end to that sentence, and from the way Bokuto blanched, he knew he didn’t need one for him to understand.

“What the fuck,” his friend cursed, then pressed the home button and locked the phone before handing it back. Tetsurou sighed, turned around, and leaned back against the lockers next to them.

“They look good together,” he grudgingly admitted out loud, his head hitting the locker behind it with more force than intended. “And they look happy, at least.”
“That’s true…” Bokuto frowned a little, and looked Tetsurou up and down. “But are you okay, bro?”

He paused to think about it, listening to the sounds of a few of their teammates leaving the locker rooms, and then a set of showers turning off. Tetsurou took a long, slow breath in, and then let it out equally slowly.

*Are you okay?*

Physically, yes. Everything was fine. But his chest hurt, breathing was a little difficult, his eyes were burning, and he thought he might like to drink something a little stronger than water. Why, he wondered, did emotions have to hurt so much?

He realized that Bokuto’s brow was furrowing, and he was still waiting for an answer. Tetsurou cleared his throat, a little tremulously, and managed, “Probably not?” he laughed weakly then, leaning his head to the side to look at Bokuto. His cheek brushed against the cool locker door and sent a jolt of sensation through his system, almost like waking him up. “I will be, but I’m not now, I think.”

“Shit, I bet, I should’ve guessed,” Bokuto babbled, and closed his locker after grabbing his bag from it. They’d both already showered and changed, so the next thing he did was also grab Tetsurou’s bag from his locker. “Movie night?”

It hadn’t quite been a month yet since the last movie night instigated because of Tetsurou’s pining, though they’d had two since then for Bokuto’s pining and moods. But this was, by far, the most perfect time for one of them.

Tetsurou reached over and took his bag from Bokuto, forcing himself away from the lockers to double-check that he’d gathered everything from inside his own. He closed the door with a little more force than he’d intended, took another breath, and then nodded. “Yeah, definitely.”

“Pizza and bad decisions?” Bokuto prompted, hiking his bag higher on his shoulder. Tetsurou mirrored it and grinned slightly.

“Please.”

“Ice cream?”

Tetsurou laughed and elbowed Bokuto in the side, a lot more gently than usual. “The best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, Bo,” he teased. It was his way of agreeing, and Bokuto knew it.

“I thought I was already in your heart!” Bokuto gasped, spreading his hand across his chest for the full dramatic effect. Tetsurou grinned and clasped his shoulder, giving it a shake.

“I guess you’re right, you’re already there,” he conceded, putting on the air of nonchalance. “You’re just trying really hard to keep your place, or something.”

Bokuto snorted. “You wish, bro. I just want pizza and ice cream.”

Tetsurou knew it was both a bit of truth and a bit of a lie—Bokuto would eat almost anything, of course, but they usually tried not to eat too much greasy food or sweet food in the hopes that their coach wouldn’t murder them if he ever found out. Plus, sometimes the grease just didn’t settle well after a hard practice. But pizza, ice cream, and a few assorted snacks from the nearest konbini were their cheats of choice if either of them had a bad day for whatever reason.
The fact that Tetsurou’s mood had switched so quickly from perfectly normal to a point where he wasn’t sure how he was still functioning normally, or if he was still functioning normally, was probably a testament to how unexpected Lev’s message and the subsequent fallout had been.

“We might have to get two pizzas,” he finally quipped to break the silence. “I’m not sure I can share, today…”

“Pfft, who said I was gonna share my pizza with you?” Bokuto scoffed, tapping his toe against the ground after pulling on his regular outdoor shoes. Tetsurou followed suit. “You’ll have to get your own. But I guess I’ll buy it for you, this time, since you bought mine last time.”

*It’s my treat because you’re feeling down*, Tetsurou heard, but he didn’t comment.

“A poor college student never turns down a free meal,” he said instead, and Bokuto snorted.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for tuning in again!! This is planned to be pining slow burn so...hope you're getting the idea. The chapter is shorter than I intended though, sadly.
fourth set

Chapter Summary

From [Kenma]: are you ok?
From [Kenma]: you haven’t been texting as much
From [Kenma]: or calling
From [Kenma]: not that i’m complaining
From [Kenma]: but you usually get like this when something’s bothering you and you don’t want to talk about it but you need to

Chapter Notes

HI IT'S BEEN A WHILE.

I’ve had this chapter started for a hot minute but I just kept feeling like I was getting rambly and not getting anywhere? I finally decided I needed to push through it though. THE POINT OF THIS STORY IS PINING. NO MATTER HOW HARD IT IS TO WRITE PINING. OR HOW LONG IT FEELS LIKE THEY’VE BEEN PINING. Oof.

Anyway, shorter than I wanted but longer than I thought it would be, considering I’ve been struggling with writing for a while lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tetsurou sucked it up.

Or, well, he did his best. His best, on some days, was more than adequate, but on other days was barely enough to keep Bo from suggesting another junk food movie night that their coach would kill them for. But he was definitely doing better.

The first week or so after Lev’s unfortunate text had been rough, to say the least. His classwork had been passing, but not up to his usual standard. It reached a point where one of his professors had even asked him if he was overworking himself between the list of classes he was taking and being part of the volleyball team. After that, he took a breather, maybe cried a little in the shower so Bo wouldn’t know, and decided that he had to get his shit together and face the facts.

Fact one: he had already known Kenma had feelings for Hinata. He’d known something was happening, even if Kenma never explicitly said until a little bit after Lev’s text.

Kenma had, however, sighed warily on the phone two days after the fateful picture when Tetsurou
tried bringing it up casually, tried to make it sound as if he was teasing and said, as if it was the obvious answer, “Well, I didn’t see the point in telling you something you already knew.”

Tetsurou still felt happy that he knew Kenma as well as he did, even in light of the circumstances.

Fact two: he really didn’t have the right to be upset about Kenma and Kenma’s relationship when he’d never told Kenma about his own feelings. Tetsurou knew that it was his own fault, mired in his cowardice or sense of self-preservation, or even in the desire to keep what they had between them steady and familiar. He had to accept that.

And, lastly, his fact three: Kenma was happy, and that’s all that mattered.

So he sucked it up.

It was somewhat easier, with Bokuto Koutarou’s enthusiastic assistance, and Tetsurou returned to trying to live the college life. He focused on his school work, made up for the points he’d missed the previous week, and moved on as well as a man in denial could move on.

He still thought about Kenma more than anyone thinks about people they’re just friends with, but he knew better than to think he’d be able to move on in such a short amount of time. His last relationship had taught him that much, at least. But as he turned to focus on his chemistry textbook, he sighed and ran a hand through his already messy hair.

It was different, studying without the subtle clicking of keys on Kenma’s handheld in the background. He only noticed it when he was pulling all-nighters or when he was studying without Bokuto nearby. Bo was full of energy at all times, and his stress over a difficult math problem had nearly resulted in the two of them being kicked out of the library for the evening a time or two.

Tetsurou was finally starting to understand how accustomed he was and had always been to Kenma’s presence nearby...and he staunchly continued denying how hard it was to separate it from the feelings he was trying to push back and forget about. He was doing better than he had been, but worse than he could be.

With Akaashi visiting for the afternoon and evening, Tetsurou was temporarily saved from that possibility.

A figure crossed his vision, a hand delicately resting atop the chair across from him, and a feminine voice asked him softly, “Do you mind if I sit here, Kuroo-san?”

He blinked and looked up. The girl blinked back, tucking her hair behind her ear before returning that hand to the chair. In her other arm, she held a few textbooks and had a laptop bag hanging from her shoulder. She was pretty, with dark hair and glasses and a beauty mark that stood out against her pale complexion, but more than that, she was also familiar. He couldn’t quite place where he knew her from, though.

“Oh, sure, go ahead!” he gestured openly, and then arched a brow at her. “You look familiar, and you know who I am, but I’m drawing a blank, so…” he held his hand out across the table as she settled in, “Kuroo Tetsurou.”

She smiled prettily back and grasped his hand in a surprisingly firm handshake. “Shimizu Kiyoko. I was Karasuno’s manager for the last several years.”

“Eh?!” Tetsurou nearly choked on his own saliva. “Shit, no wonder!” he glanced at her again, and the memories came back. Barbecue, the group of managers sticking together at training camp, the way most of the boys were half in love with Karasuno’s managers. One in particular came to mind,
and he grinned at her. “You really made an impression on Tora, you know.”

“I...wondered,” she said, carefully, but she was grinning back as she flipped one of her textbooks open. “He and Tanaka liked to rile each other up, too.”

He remembered the loud one from Karasuno. He looked and sounded like Tora, so it was no wonder they butted heads. He laughed, only remembering to stifle it at the last second because they were in the library.

“Bet the rest of the teams have their work cut out for them, keeping the two of them under control when Karasuno and Nekoma play each other,” he mused, trying not to laugh at the picture in his mind.

Shimizu hummed in agreement, but a fond smile stayed on her lips.

After a comfortable silence, broken only by turning pages and the scratches of pens and pencils against worksheets, the ex Karasuno manager glanced back up at him.

“You’re a lot quieter than I remember.”

Tetsurou looked up at her, then smiled. “Hey, I can’t be loud in a library, Shimizu-san.”

She let out a short laugh, more like an amused exhale than anything, and answered another question in her workbook. It looked like English. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant, but Tetsurou wondered if it was because he was more subdued. Did she have some sort of sixth-sense for heartbreak or something? That’s the only other solution that came to his mind, but he shrugged it off.

“I think everyone changes a little when they go off to college.”

“Everything does change, doesn’t it?” her tone was different, and he realized she was staring off into the distance. Wistful, he decided. Maybe a little nostalgic. He thought he understood, at least a little. He remembered hearing the steady clicking of the buttons of Kenma’s handheld as Kenma sprawled on his bed behind him while Kuroo worked on his homework at his desk, comfortable in the silence of each other’s company.

He heart ached with longing and since he thought he understood her, he asked.

“Do you miss it?”

She pulled herself back, glancing at him and arching a delicate eyebrow. He didn’t need words to know she wanted him to elaborate, and briefly wondered if he was a bit off the mark. He shrugged and then searched for the words to answer her unspoken questions.

“Y’know, Karasuno. The volleyball club. Being a club manager. Having all your friends so close by. Being in high school, where you didn’t have as many responsibilities or classes as hard as these,” he gestured at the stacks of textbooks around them. “Do you miss all that?”

“Sometimes,” she laughed again, flipping the page in her workbook. She was quick and efficient, and her penmanship, he could tell even upside down, was very neat. “I think it’s the people I miss the most, though.’’

*Kenma.*
“Yeah…” his voice nearly cracked, and Tetsurou turned his head back down to read the next passage in his textbook, hoping that she wouldn’t remark on the strain in his tone. “Yeah, I think they’re what I miss most, too.”

A lie. He knew that the people were what he missed the most about Nekoma. Or rather, he knew that they lapsed into silence again, but he didn’t feel compelled to break it. It was actually kind of nice to sit with someone he was mildly acquainted with without feeling like he had to fill the air with sound. The scratch of writing and the soft crinkling of turning pages was more than adequate, a fact that Bokuto, though Tetsurou loved him dearly, never seemed to understand.

And studying with Shimizu was different in a pleasant way he hadn’t quite expected.

Shimizu wasn’t just a pretty face. When he struggled briefly on his own English worksheets, she helped him rearrange the sentence properly and even explained where he’d messed up, quickly and concisely. He paused after that and went back over what he’d already completed and made corrections, and realized that Shimizu had probably saved the entire assignment for him.

In turn, she asked him if he was familiar with her own chemistry assignment, even though she had a different professor, and he was happy to help. His own class had covered the same chapter two weeks ago, and they were lucky that their classes used the same textbook.

They talked briefly here and there—he asked how her classes were going so far, she asked how the volleyball team was going. Tetsurou gave her a story or two about Bokuto’s antics and she hid a smile behind her hand before telling him something that the Karasuno first years, now second years, had done the previous year.

Hinata’s name didn’t make him flinch, and it felt like progress.

“See you around, Shimizu!” he called as he left the table, quite a bit later than he’d intended. She smiled back.

“You as well, Kuroo-san!”

“Just Kuroo, or Kuro, or whatever you want!” he laughed, earning a look or two from people studying nearby. Shimizu kept her composure, as he’d come to expect, and just kept smiling. She raised a hand to cover her mouth again, so he suspected her grin had widened, and then she nodded.

“Alright then, Kuroo.”

“Wait, you ran into the old Karasuno manager?!” Bokuto gasped, a few days later when Tetsurou finally recounted his night at the library. Bokuto and Akaashi, he’d heard about eight times, had basically sat together super close and watched some movie that Akaashi had wanted to see. Practically cuddling, Tetsurou teased him, and Bokuto had turned bright red.

“Yeah, Shimizu-san and I studied together while you were hanging out with Akaashi,” he answered casually, shrugging a little. “She’s really good at English and she basically saved that last assignment I had to turn in. I checked the online grades yesterday and I got a 96, all because she helped me out.”

“Dude, seriously?” Bokuto pointed his chopsticks at him, mouth agape. “You mean she’s not just super pretty, but she’s also super smart?”
Tetsurou snorted. “Yeah, man, I just told you that.”

Bokuto pouted at him and Tetsurou just shrugged, taking a bite of his lunch while Bokuto went on about how they should all study together sometime.

“C’mon, bro!” he beamed. “It’ll be great!”

“Some of us like to actually get some studying done,” Tetsurou drawled, teasing again, and Bokuto spluttered indignantly.

“We get studying done!” he exclaimed. “Are you saying we don’t??”

He couldn’t help but laugh at the look on Bokuto’s face, and he reached across the table to squeeze his friend’s shoulder. “I’m teasing, Bo, I know we get stuff done. Just not usually as much as we need to when we’re studying together.”

“Not everyone can be a genius like you,” Bokuto sniffed, and Tetsurou shook his shoulder a bit.

“I’m not a genius,” he snorted, releasing Bokuto and returning to his food. “When I was in elementary and middle school, my dad always made me study before I could actually play volleyball with Kenma, and when my grades dropped below whatever ridiculously high standards he made for that year, he threatened to ground me if I didn’t get better marks for the next tests.”

“I studied when I was younger too!”

“Yeah, because you have to get a certain mark to be able to play volleyball.”

“It’s still studying!” Bokuto whined, shoving a bite of his food in his mouth and then speaking around it like the heathen he was. “And I got better when ‘Kaashi started helping me out! And then when we study together, I feel like I always get a lot done too!”

He’d teased Bokuto enough, he decided, so he opted out of mentioning that it he was the one that never finished as much of his own work as he needed to when they studied together. He wouldn’t trade helping his best bro out for anything, but it was still rough waiting until after practice to stay up late in their dorm at his desk to finish it all.

At least Bokuto had dropped the genius thing and was focusing on just whether or not they studied.

“As long as all of our classwork gets done, there’s no harm in doing it slower,” Tetsurou chose to say instead, picking another bite to eat. “It was pretty quiet, studying with Shimizu-san.”

“She did always seem like the quiet type,” Bokuto muttered, nodding sagely. As if he hadn’t been on the verge of yelling about studying just moments before. “I remember everyone being so jealous that Karasuno had not only a super pretty manager, but also the cute one too! The little first year.”

“Yeah, Tora was beside himself,” Tetsurou snorted, remembering his friend’s rage over Karasuno’s fortune at having not one but two female managers. That had been entertaining from a distance, but annoying when he wouldn’t stop going on about it even weeks later. “Wonder how he’ll take it when Karasuno shows up to training camp this year if they have a cute new first year manager along with the second year.”

Bokuto snorted, and added, “Can you imagine if she’s as cute as the others? All the teams will be jealous of them.”

“At least they’ll train harder to show off,” Tetsurou mused. “This year’s gonna be Nekoma’s win at
“Don’t count Fukurodani out just yet, Kuro!” Bokuto wailed, flailing his chopsticks around again. They were getting looks from a few other people in the cafeteria, but Tetsurou didn’t really care. “Akaashi’s team captain now and he’s the best! He’ll definitely take them all the way this year!”

“Is that based on the team or just because you want to kiss Akaashi?”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t done teasing his friend just yet. Bokuto made it really easy.

“Kuro!” Bokuto’s face went red, and Tetsurou started snickering. And then he muttered, “Then I can say the same about you and saying that Nekoma is going to win this year, since Kenma’s there.”

It only took him a split second to inhale sharply and then look up at Tetsurou, who hoped that he didn’t look as much like he’d been slapped as he felt. Instead he forced a chuckle and shrugged.

“I deserved that, I guess,” he kept his tone light, but Bokuto’s shoulders sagged.

“Kuro—” Bokuto started, but Tetsurou shook his head, pushing his food around and contemplating taking another bite.

“It’s true though, isn’t it?” he said, offering his friend a small smile. “It’s fine, Bo, really. And who knows? Maybe it’ll be Nekoma and Fukurodani in the finals this year. Then we’ll duke it out like proper rivals, eh? Now finish your lunch so we can actually get some studying done before class like we’d planned!”

Bokuto yelped a little and dug into his meal once more, and Tetsurou did the same.

From [Kenma]: are you ok?

From [Kenma]: you haven’t been texting as much

From [Kenma]: or calling

From [Kenma]: not that i’m complaining

From [Kenma]: but you usually get like this when something’s bothering you and you don’t want to talk about it but you need to

The messages startled Tetsurou on a Thursday night, when he was studying by himself in the dorm room while Bokuto was out working on a group project for one of his classes. He blinked at the phone, and then realized that, three weeks ago, he would have been chatting away at Kenma.

But...he didn’t do it last week, and Kenma had been dragged shopping with his mother the week before.

How long has it been since I’ve actually talked to him? Tetsurou realized, a pang deep in his chest. They texted still, of course, but...it was probably since the picture.

Tetsurou hadn’t talked to Kenma since Lev sent him the picture that solidified all the things he already knew but just hadn’t seen yet. And it wasn’t Kenma’s fault at all—this was all on Tetsurou.

He could do it. He could call Kenma right now, and talk about how busy he’d been, regale him with some of Bokuto’s latest exploits and the tiny developments with his crush on Akaashi, and he
wouldn’t be lying. He had been busy, and it was hard to find breathing room between studying and homework and volleyball, but Kenma would sense there was something there that Tetsurou wasn’t telling him. He wasn’t sure he was ready for that, for the if you say so he could hear hanging in the air when he assured Kenma that everything was fine—

—the phone rang, and Kenma’s name flashed on his screen.

Kenma never calls first.

Answering the phone was a reflex.

“Hey, Kenma.”

“Well, at least I know you’re still alive,” the snarky tone was sharp, and the sharper it was the more worried he knew Kenma had been. He’d messed up. “Are you okay, Kuro?”

No, he thought to himself, I’m pining harder than Bokuto’s pining for Akaashi.

Instead, he laughed a little dryly. “Maybe not doing the greatest, but I’ll be okay, Kenma. Sorry for worrying you.”

“Who said I was worried?” he sniffed, and Tetsurou grinned. “I just wanted to make sure you knew which new games I had in case you decided to try to surprise me again with a copy of one I already got.”

“Sure you did,” Tetsurou teased, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes as Kenma snorted on the other end.

“Do you need to talk about it?” he asked after a moment, and Tetsurou heard the steady clicking of a handheld pause on Kenma’s end. “I can’t guarantee I’m the best listener. I’ll probably miss something while I’m playing my game. But at least you’d get to talk about it out loud? Or something? Shouyou says that always helps with Tobio, when he’s upset.” Kenma paused, and Tetsurou tried to even his breathing out once more at the mention of the small spiker. “Though Tobio yells it, usually. If you yell in my ear I’ll hang up on you.”

He didn’t have to fake the laugh.

“Nah, I’m fine. Thanks though, Kenma. I’ll remember that if I ever need someone to just vent my frustrations to.”

“Please don’t.”

“I’ll tell you all about how my chemistry teacher’s an ass—” even though he wasn’t —

“Please don’t.”

“Or about how Bokuto got tangled up in the net at practice last week because he’s still not fully synced up with one of our setters—”

Kenma snorted.

“Oh! I could tell you about how I studied with Karasuno’s manager from last year!”

The clicking on Kenma’s end slowed, and then Kenma asked, “The one that Tora was crazy over for the longest time? And jealous of Shouyou and the others, because they had a pretty manager?”
“That’s the one! Shimizu-san goes here, too!”

He hummed, and sounded vaguely intrigued, so Tetsurou shrugged and decided to go down this road, and further away from his own feelings.

“I ran into her in the library when Akaashi was visiting last weekend. He and Bo were watching movies together or something, and Bo was pining just as much as ever all week, Kenma, I swear,” he paused here for dramatic effect, and Kenma muttered that he wasn’t surprised. Tetsurou grinned. “Anyway, we studied together and Shimizu-san basically saved my most recent English assignment. I’d messed up on something with the sentence structure and everything was wrong, but she helped me on one part and I was able to go back and catch most of my mistakes.”

“So basically, studying with Shimizu is the opposite of when you’re studying with Koutarou?”

Tetsurou blinked. “What do you mean by that?”

Kenma made a sound in his throat that sounded kind of like a scoff, but Tetsurou wasn’t positive. “I mean that she’s the one that didn’t get much done, because she spent her time helping you out. Like you usually do when you help Bokuto with his math.”

“Hey! I resent that!” Tetsurou sat forward, bracing his elbows on his desk. “After she helped me with my English work, I helped her with chemistry! It was an equivalent exchange of knowledge, Kenma!”

“If you say so,” he sounded dubious, but Tetsurou laughed.

“I hope I get to study with her again sometime,” he admitted breezily. “It was nice.”

Kenma hummed a little in response. “Sounds like it. For you, at least.”

“Kenma, I swear—”

He snorted, and Tetsurou groaned.

“Kuro...” Kenma started, then paused briefly. The intensity of the clicking sounds from his handheld grew for a moment and Tetsurou waited patiently for the difficult part to pass so Kenma would speak again. “You really can talk to me or at me if you need someone to talk to. Or something. I’m not good at that kind of thing, you know that. But you always bottle shit up, and you need an outlet.”

He swallowed. “Thanks, Kenma.”

“I mean it.”

“I know,” Tetsurou couldn’t help the slight smile that crawled across his lips.

“Shouyou’s calling soon, so I’m going to have to get off. But if you need to, call me any time, Tetsurou.”

Whatever words he’d planned to say lodged in his throat at Kenma’s serious tone and at his name on Kenma’s lips. It wasn’t the first time Kenma had used his first name instead of his nickname, but it still gave him a shock each time.

He cleared his throat after a long pause, and when he did answer his tone was slightly hoarse.

“Thanks, Kenma. It means a lot. I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”
“You’d better,” he shot back, hardly missing a beat. If Tetsurou read into it a little, he could almost interpret that as an *I missed you*, but doing so seemed kind of dangerous. “Bye, Kuro.”

“Later, Kenma.”

The line went dead, and Tetsurou slowly placed his phone on his desk and leaned back in his chair again, digging the heel of his palm into his eyes. They burned, but not enough to lead to tears.

*That didn’t hurt as much this time*, he thought as he took a few deep breaths. *I’m making some progress.*

Chapter End Notes

hope this didn't bore y'all too much!!! Thanks again, if you're still reading!

WHEN I SAY THIS IS GOING TO BE A SLOW BURN, I MEAN IT. You've been warned.

End Notes

And here we are!

Thanks so much for reading, and as usual you can hit me up on my HQ tumblr sideblog karasun013 or on my main multifandom/personal blog at panda013!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!